and miles to go before i sleep

by yuchi

Summary

Mark Lee is, in theory, the perfect candidate to pilot a Jaeger. He's at the top of his class, his drop scores are second to none, and he can recite fifty ways to take down a kaiju with his eyes closed. There's only one problem: he can't Drift with anyone.

All of that changes when a washed-up pilot from Hong Kong knocks on the doors of the Jeju Shatterdome.
whose woods these are

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

------------- SECURED NETWORK -------------

Yixing Zhang <yxzhang@ppdc.cn> 15 October 2021, 1:45 PM
to tylee@ppdc.kr
Subject: INFO - Project 82125 Update

Marshal Lee:

Dr. Suh's initial Drift compatibility assessment has been deemed promising. However, you and I are in agreement that test results will best reflect the in-field compatibility of the chosen pilots. In light of this, Ranger Wong's transfer has been officially approved by PPDC. Please expect arrival within 48 hours.

Wong has been briefed; I trust you and Officer Jung will do the same with your cadet. All pertinent information regarding Wong's personal history and records within the HK Shatterdome have been forwarded to your system.

Respectfully,
Marshal Zhang

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Taeyong Lee <tylee@ppdc.kr> 15 October 2021, 2:00 PM
to yxzhang@ppdc.cn
Subject: INFO - Project 82125 Update

Marshal Zhang:

Ranger Wong's personal files have been reviewed and approved. My officers will carry out the tests with the cadet immediately after Wong's arrival. All results will be forwarded to you and the PPDC once carried out.

May this endeavor bear fruit for us all.

For Earth and humanity,
Marshal Lee
Mark wakes up to the sound of torrential rain slamming angrily against his dorm room window. Sighing, he stretches languidly to the rhythm of raindrops hitting glass. Mid-October wasn't treating the Jeju Shatterdome well -- everyone who worked near the bays would get drenched one way or another, either from the ocean water or the rain, and their footsteps would lead wet trails as they traipsed busily across the halls connecting the compounds.

No matter. Mark loved the Shatterdome, rainy weather or no. What was supposed to be the Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port was seized by the Pan Pacific Defence Corps in late 2015 in response to the Breach's proximity to Asian territory, and the Jeju Shatterdome officially opened its doors in January of 2016, promoting a massive campaign for the enlistment of future Jaeger pilots, engineers, and scientists. Mark's brother enlisted immediately. He followed suit six months later.

Mark has been in the Jaeger Pilot training program for exactly four years, ten months, and twelve days. He's not the oldest cadet in the Jeju Shatterdome, no, but he's been here the longest. He's seen Jaegers come and go, pilots get promoted and put out of commission, Shatterdome officers change one by one. Through all this, he's never gotten an opportunity to pilot a Jaeger of his own, despite his comparatively extensive knowledge and experience in the Dome.

The fact of the matter was that no one could Drift with Mark. God knows the officers tried their hardest -- anyone with two eyes could see he was a prime candidate for piloting a Jaeger, it was just a matter of finding the right person who could share that burden. They had tried every test possible with every cadet he was possibly compatible with. At first, Mark was excited, finally thinking his day would come: that his skills would be put to good use in an actual Jaeger, out in the water fighting kaiju.
But the tests kept turning up unsatisfactory. Sync rates were low, and even runs with his friends proved fruitless; Mark simply couldn’t find that one-of-a-kind connection that every pilot would talk about when they Drifted with their partner. Every failed test Drift drained hope from him until there was no one left he could try with.

And so life in the Shatterdome went on.

He tips his feet off the edge of his bed -- the top bunk, since Jaemin insisted on claiming the bottom for himself. Mark has retaliated by physically dragging him out of his cocoon of sheets whenever they start running late. Jaemin is a slow mover, and he'll be damned if the teachers start giving him earfuls for being late just because Jaemin was chewing his kaktugi too thoroughly.

"Morning, Mark hyung," Jeno mumbles groggily from the other bottom bunk. Renjun is snoring, undisturbed, on the bed above Jeno's. Mark smiles, dropping to the floor as quietly as he can. It's barely 0700. He'll have plenty of time to terrorize Jaemin later.

"Morning, Jeno," he answers, voice still scratchy from sleep. "Wake Renjun up, will you? The showers are gonna start filling up soon, you know he hates when they're crowded."

"Will do," Jeno answers with a yawn that threatens to dislocate his jaw.

The four of them bathe and get ready with no fuss. Renjun impatiently helps Jeno with buttoning up his fatigues, and Mark gets another opportunity to jostle Jaemin awake. By the time they're done it's almost 0800, and the rush to the mess hall is underway. Predictably, the hallways are wet, and more than a few cadets slip and fall onto their asses much to the senior officers' delight.

The mess hall is teeming with residents of the Dome, the din of conversation even louder than the rain beating against the large windows that overlook the bay. The few pets that the officers were allowed to have circle the room, pawing at people's at legs for scraps; Jeno scratches one cat under its chin and promptly erupts into a sneezing fit. The cadets on serving duty spoon galbitang, bean sprouts, and rice into their trays, and they make their way to their usual table right by the doors.

All of them tuck in to their breakfast without incident until Mark catches Renjun looking furtively around the hall. "Injun, is there something wrong?" he asks in concern.

Renjun shakes his head. "It's probably nothing," Renjun signs, hands flying quick as lightning.
"But... I dunno. Haven't you noticed the staff acting weird?"

"How do you mean?" Jaemin peers at their roommate curiously.

"I mean, the engineers have been busier than usual," Renjun explains. "Look -- they're huddled over something at that table."

Jaemin hums. "Come to think of it, we haven't seen Haechan in a while."

"The other officers have been acting weird, too," Mark adds. "Officer Jung has been missing a lot of lessons lately."

"Oh, that's because they're building a new Jaeger," Jeno answers nonchalantly, poking at his bean sprouts as though he hadn't just told everyone a state secret.

Mark leans closer so no other cadets can listen in, and the others follow suit. "How did you know?" he whispers urgently.

"Chenle told me, of course," Jeno answers, puzzled.

"Boyfriend privileges," Jaemin snorts. Mark begrudgingly concurs. Chenle was one of the only two pilots left in the Jeju Shatterdome. He -- along with Jisung -- piloted Pink Slip, the Dome's newest Jaeger. "What else did he tell you?"

"That's basically it," Jeno shrugs. "He said the Marshal would 'beat his ass' if word got round before it was publicly announced."

Renjun is smirking. "Sounds about right."

"Who do you think will be piloting it, though?" Jaemin prods excitedly. "I mean, four of the top candidates are sitting right here, you know."

"Your modesty does you credit," Renjun returns, rolling his eyes. "It's probably Mark, though, we all
know that."

This time, it's Mark's turn to snort. "If they find someone for me to Drift with, that is."

"We could try again," Jeno suggests kindly. Mark finds himself returning that smile despite himself. Leave it to Jeno to be infallibly optimistic.

"I don't think my sync scores will change, Jeno," Mark says softly.

"Even so," Jaemin interjects, clapping a hand on Mark's shoulder, "The Jaeger is only as good as it's pilot. And you're the best choice."

Mark smiles and puts a hand over Jaemin's. "Thanks, Jaem."

The revelation of the new Jaeger does little to affect their day, right until it almost ends. They still go to advanced classes from 0900 to 1200, have lunch at 1200 to 1300, and self-train from 1300 onwards, which all of them agree to spend in the Kwoon room. Mark knows Officer Bae is thrilled to see them, even if it doesn't show; they're her best students, after all. The Kwoon fightmaster wastes no time ushering Mark and Renjun to the mats after all of them stretch under her instruction.

The match goes on for a good fifteen minutes, Mark landing more than a few hits on Renjun as Jeno and Jaemin cheer them on. Eventually Irene sighs and presses a button on her stopwatch. "Alright, cadets, that's enough." Her eyes are tired, but amused. "50 to 37, Lee. Good effort, Huang."

Renjun stands up from the mats with a sniff. "With all due respect, Ma'am," he signs, "If we already know we're not Drift compatible, why put him in the Kwoon room with us?"

"Because your form could always improve, cadet," she quips. Mark can't hide his smile when Renjun throws him a dirty look. "Alright. You, you." Irene points at Mark and Jeno, who's pouting. "Up. Let's see if you can block now, Lee."

Jeno, as it turns out, can block with a little more success, but Mark still takes him out with a devastating 48 to 25. He's smirking at Jeno lying facedown on the exercise mats when there's a knock on the door.
"Sir!" Mark straightens immediately, kicking at Jeno to do the same, and Renjun and Jaemin snap to attention across the room. Officer Jung laughs and waves a hand.

"At ease, boys. Good afternoon, Miss Bae." Jaehyun smiles at them, surveying the disarrayed state of the Kwoon room. "Made a right mess, I see. Good job." Here he sends a wink towards Jaemin, who uncharacteristically colors a deep red. Renjun snorts.

Jaehyun turns to Irene with a glint in his eye. "Irene, can I borrow Cadet Lee for a second? Mark, I mean." The cadet in question throws an alarmed look at his friends, to which all of them shrug their shoulders. "Don't worry, it's nothing bad," Jaehyun reassures.

Irene nods her assent, and Mark follows Jaehyun out the door, wiping his sweat and patting his hair into some semblance of order before he speaks. "What's this about, sir?"

Jaehyun smiles kindly, clasping his hands behind his back. "You're one of the cadets with the longest training experience, correct?"

Mark stiffens. "Sir, if you're here to remind me --"

"I'm sorry, cadet, I mean no offense," Jaehyun apologizes, reaching out to put a hand on Mark's shoulder. "What I meant was -- you've trained extensively, am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're confident in your skills?" Jaehyun prods intently.

"Well, I'd like to think so, sir," Mark replies, a little bewildered.

Jaehyun smiles again, squeezing Mark's shoulder before releasing it. "Just making sure. We have a meeting with the Marshal at 1700. I suggest you finish up your training early."

"We -- sir -- the Marshal?" Mark sputters. "What for?"
"You'll find out soon enough. Now go back in and continue your training." Jaehyun dismisses him with a wave, as though he hadn't just dropped a bomb.

More than a little confused, Mark watches him turn the corner before he returns to the Kwoon room.

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Mark doesn't tell anyone about his conversation with Jaehyun. He'd like to think he acted well enough when he avoided Jaemin's questioning, only stating that Jaehyun wanted to check up on him; one disbelieving look from Renjun was enough to let him know he isn't hiding anything from them. Nevertheless, he's thankful when they don't press him further, even when they can tell he's distracted for the rest of the day.

He's never been called to the Marshal's offices. Taeyong Lee is a busy man, up early and asleep even earlier in the morning. He only ever sees the Marshal in passing, in the hallways on the way to the Shatterdome or when he talks to the officers. Never the JA students, not even pilot trainees. What if his friends are right and he's going to be the pilot for the new Jaeger? That definitely warranted a meeting with the Marshal and his second-in-command. But oh, Mark doesn't dare hope. Even if it were the case, there was still no one he could Drift with.

It's with much apprehension and anxiety that Mark makes his way to the oft-deserted building at the end of the compound that contained both offices and living spaces for the higher-ups. At the heart of the circular building is an elevator that the guards usher him into; before he knows it, he's shooting up the building. A brass door engraved with the Marshal's name and rank is what greets him at the topmost floor. He knocks, heart racing a mile a minute, and is told to enter.

The Marshal is sitting at his desk with Jaehyun at his side, poring over a breadth of holoscreens projecting plans that Mark can't make heads nor tails of. Marshal Lee looks up, austere in the way he straightens and laces his fingers together when Mark enters. "Good afternoon, cadet."

"You called, sir?" Mark asks timidly.

"Yes, I did. Please, have a seat."

Mark settles stiffly into a leather chair. Jaehyun gives Mark a comforting smile, at least. He's moved behind and to the left of the Marshal's desk. Passive, but could be spurred into action if needed.
"You've been called here because we found someone that might be Drift compatible with you," Marshal Lee explains. "The two of you are the top picks for the new Mark 4 model. Dr. Kim will have you tested tomorrow."

Mark shoots up straight in his seat. So they were right -- the Jaeger could be his. "Really, sir? That's - - " He clears his throat, leaning back to maintain some semblance of professionalism. "That's great, sir. But -- just who am I testing with? We already tried everyone in the academy."

The Marshal nods. "Indeed. You won't be testing with any cadet from here, no. You'll be testing with a transferee from the Hong Kong Shatterdome."

"A transferee? Why would one of the priority stations send us their recruits?" Mark wonders.

"Not a recruit, Lee. A Jaeger pilot. He lost his Drift partner a few months back during a Category 3 attack."

A pilot from the Hong Kong Shatterdome who lost his Drift partner... "I'm test Drifting with Tunnel Vision's pilot?"

"Affirmative, cadet."

Mark frowns. Tunnel Vision was the Hong Kong Shatterdome's primary strike team -- until one of the pilots died of unknown circumstances while in the Drift. If Mark was to believe anything the teachers told him, it was that losing your Drift partner is an unspeakably horrifying loss. Half your identity, ripped from you while you share your hearts and minds... Mark can't imagine how much pain Tunnel Vision's remaining co-pilot must have been in. "But isn't he -- With all due respect, sir. Is he ready to Drift again?"

"I'm going to be honest with you, recruit: our lead team is out of commission." A very vivid memory of Jaehyun getting a migraine in the middle of lessons appears in his mind's eye. "In the past, we were able to get away with less than the three Jaeger minimum solely because our area of jurisdiction doesn't get targeted that often. But now -- the kaiju are getting bigger and more aggressive. Zhong and Park can't possibly hold down the fort with just Pink Slip." The Marshal looks him directly in the eye. "You are our best bet."

"But sir," Mark protests. "He's a veteran. I'm just a cadet."
"I wouldn't count you out just yet, Lee," Jaehyun interjects. Mark turns to him, puzzled. "Your drop test scores are impeccable, probably on par with an actual pilot. Every teacher we have couldn't possibly recommend you enough, including me." He smiles encouragingly at Mark. "You're the only one in this base who has the potential to keep up with him in the Drift. Higher ups in the corps seem to think it's worth a try."

"It's a risky venture," the Marshal adds. "But a risk we're willing to take."

Of course it's risky -- Drifting with anyone that damaged is bound to be. But any apprehension in him is overpowered by his desire, his itch to get out there and pilot his own Jaeger. Four years, ten months, twelve days. It could end there. "I understand, sir."

"I'm glad we're on the same page." The Marshal leans back in his chair, clearly relieved. "Do you have any questions?"

"Why send him here? If he's that good a pilot that the PPDC doesn't want to waste him, why send him to a secondary base? No offense, sir," Mark tacks on for good measure.

"He specifically requested to be transferred to a base with a lower attack frequency," the Marshal explains. "The corps is lucky that he's even still willing to pilot. His first idea was retirement."

"I see."

"If that's all, Cadet?" the Marshal prompts.

"That's all, sir."

"Good." Marshal Lee rises, Mark following suit. "We'll see you tomorrow at the receiving bay 0800 sharp. Dismissed."

Jaehyun gives him one last warm smile and extricates himself into the adjacent office. Mark nods at the Marshal, turning to show himself out, when --

"Minhyung."
Mark stiffens, clenching his fists at his sides. He turns back around to face the Marshal, careful to school his face into the professionalism required of a subordinate. "Yes, sir?"

Taeyong sighs, loosening his tie a fraction. "None of that," he says in Korean. "I just want to warn you -- this will be nothing like the other test Drifts."

The other test Drifts. Mark feels his cheeks flush with shame. Taeyong's story couldn't be more different from his: they both excelled in the Academy, yes, but he immediately found his Drift partner and from then on it was basically a red carpet to their own Jaeger. What does he know of the persistent failure Mark's been through?

"How do you know that it will be different?" Mark asks instead. The syllables are clunky, unfamiliar to his tongue from disuse.

"It's not you that I mean," Taeyong explains. "Tunnel Vision's pilot... he's suffered a great loss. I want you to know that this might not go as smoothly as you want. Don't get your hopes up too high."

"I know that, hyung," Mark replies. "But can you blame me? I've been waiting for so long."

"I know, Mark. You were always so eager to learn and get out there..." Taeyong rests his hands on his desk, back hunched over seemingly dozens of holoscreens. For a millisecond, Mark catches a glimpse of the weight on his shoulders -- the Shatterdome, the PPDC, the Jaeger Academy. This new, risky project that Mark himself is involved in. "Whatever happens, understand that this won't be anything like you've done before."

Mark feels himself deflate under the weight of Taeyong's stare. Commanding officer or no, Taeyong was still his brother, and he's never led Mark astray. "I understand."

Taeyong nods. "Good." His eyes are warm, but his posture is stiff, movements unsure as he claps Mark on the shoulder. "Best of luck tomorrow."

Mark salutes. "I won't disappoint you, sir."
Taeyong smiles wanly. "I'm not the one to impress, cadet. Save your enthusiasm for Ranger Wong."

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Of course he'd be the first choice for the new Jaeger.

The Marshal is finally showing his true colors.

Isn't this blatant favoritism?

For a compound so large, it's really a wonder how quickly news spreads. Silence was what met him when Mark entered the dorm hall, followed by an incessant flurry of whispers and furtive glances as he made his way towards his room.

If I were Taeyong's favorite, he would have had me pilot Pink Slip instead, Mark thinks bitterly. But he keeps his head down and ambles forward, the sounds of gossip fading into the background as he pushes the door marked HUANG, LEE, J., LEE, M., NA. He's promptly greeted with two shrill voices and Renjun waving his hands around.

"Everyone fuck off," Jaemin yells into the hall, and the other cadets flinch. "I'm fucking serious. Anyone who bothers us, I'm telling Miss Bae to test with me in the Kwoon room."

The other recruits scurry off into their rooms on threat of Jaemin bludgeoning them in front of the Kwoon room master. Mark smiles widely at his roommates, allowing himself to be pulled into their room. "The hell is this?" he laughs.

"Heard you were gonna test Drift for the new Mark 4 model," Jaemin grins. "Congrats!"

Renjun is smiling as he signs, "Who is it?"

"He's not a recruit in the Jeju base," Mark explains, sitting beside Jeno on his bunk. "Lucas Wong, do you know him?"
"Tunnel Vision's co-pilot?" Jeno says, baffled. "I thought he would have retired after that."

"Me too," Mark sighs. "Apparently the corps thinks he's too good to waste, so..."

Renjun's eyebrows knit together in concern. "Poor guy."

"Yeah. I hope I make it worth it for him."

Jeno rolls his eyes, enveloping Mark in a tight hug. "Seriously, Mark, ignore them. There's no way you won't do great."

"Everyone knows you're the top cadet in this Shatterdome," Jaemin adds seriously. "They're stupid if they think this was all just the Marshal's idea."

"Thanks, you guys." Mark's smile is soft, genuine. What would he do without them? "Really. I appreciate it."

"Of course," Renjun replies, not missing a beat. "Don't worry, Mark. You'll do great tomorrow."

They turn down for the evening with the usual chatter, tossing their one tube of toothpaste around and scrabbling for the expensive facial wash Jeno's sister was able to sneak him. Renjun reviews his physics workbook with Mark, Jeno does his nightly calisthenics, and Jaemin reads his manhwa upside down.

At 2200, Jaemin turns the lights off and they say their good nights. Mark lies down on his bunk, but his mind is racing far too fast for him to fall asleep; he would be test Drifting for the first time in a long while, with a seasoned pilot that ran point for the first and largest Shatterdome in the world. He'll have to concentrate extra hard not to embarrass himself or the Marshal, but Jaehyun said it himself: he's probably on par with an actual pilot. Hell, he was most of the way there. Only two things were left to seal the deal.

The first time he had been in a simulation Conn-Pod, it had felt so right -- the mesh of the Drivesuit against his skin, the cold from the spinal clamp, control panels appearing in front of him in no semblance of order. Even the slight headache he got after every drop test was rewarding. He was meant to be in a Jaeger. For the hundredth time, he wonders what it would be like to share that strain with a partner. How would they communicate in the Drift? Would they need to use words, or would
the headspace be enough for them to know what the other thought?

Then there was the matter of Lucas Wong's... circumstances. What if the PPDC is wrong, that he's too damaged to Drift with ever again? Mark will be plugged into the Conn-Pod, hoping against hope that he'll finally be able to pilot, to prove that he can do it, only to be faced with yet another failure. Another day of being just another cadet in the Jeju Shatterdome.

Four years, ten months, twelve days. He hopes it will end tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

everybody stop jopping and listen to the gospel aka lumark, markhei, dog and kitty, big boy and small boy, two bros sitting in a hot tub,

in all seriousness: WOW! a multi-chapter fic that's NOT a social media au! who would have thought! this is my most ambitious project yet so i cannot guarantee consistent upload times, but i will try to churn chapters out as quickly as i can. it's what lumark deserves.

please leave a comment! do you love it? do you hate it? (i personally hate this one, but it's necessary to set up all the juicy things later!) what do you think will happen? i want to know!!!

thank you so much for reading! see y'all next time uwu
cradle him warmly, nature

Chapter Notes

some notes before we begin:
- they're technically of the same rank, but lucas calls jaehyun sir because he became a pilot first; in the same way, chenle and jisung call jaehyun that too
- i altered the naming conventions of jaegers. now, if you like how the jaegers were named in the movie, i am terribly sorry. yes, they are badass. no, i can't think of badass names like those. hard yes, i love inserting idioms into everything.
- just in case it wasn't clear in the first chapter, renjun is mute and uses ASL to communicate with the others. they all speak english in the shatterdome because it's technically a UN project and all of them are from different backgrounds, e.g. mark is from canada, renjun is from china, etc etc

the chapter title is from the sleeper in the valley by arthur rimbaud.

without further ado, here is chapter 2!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PAN PACIFIC DEFENCE CORPS
HONG KONG SHATTERDOME
HONG KONG, TSING YI, SAI TSO WAN

Personnel Dossier: Lucas Wong

Name: Lucas Wong (Native name: 黃旭熙)
Assigned Team: Rangers, ID R-LWON_238.25-J
Date of Active Service: January 26, 2018
Current Service Status: Inactive

Biography:
During engagement with kaiju JT-12 "Manohara" February 6, 2021, co-pilot Kun Qian KIA. Survived and extracted by Strike team Hero Apocalypse. Temporarily assigned with Jaeger tech team shortly after. Currently receiving psychotherapy along with daily dose of Metharocin.

Notes:
Displayed exemplary piloting skill early within enlistment period. Official qualification for ranger program is technically January 2017, but delayed deployment due to young age.

Addendum:
Consult with Jeju HQ for possibility of resuming active service. -YZ 9/19

It's still raining on the day that Lucas Wong is set to arrive at the Jeju Shatterdome.

Mark is wide awake by 0600, unable to keep the unruly mix of excitement and anxiety that had been brewing in his gut at bay any longer. He spends most of that extra energy running a lap around the indoor jogging track, and what's left over to sneak into the Kwoon room and practice his stances. Jeno, Jaemin, and Renjun send him off after breakfast with well wishes, Jaemin planting a soppy kiss on his cheek for "good luck", and they usher him off to the receiving bay with no small amount of hooting and hollering, much to his embarrassment.

The rain did little to deter the flurry of activity in the Shatterdome -- scientists and engineers meander about with black umbrellas in their hands, accompanying workers that drove carts containing machine parts and harvested kaiju organs preserved in ammonia. Bundled up in a rain coat, Mark arrives at Bay 04 a little before 0800, stomach churning with unease. Jaehyun finds him loitering around the bay doors, and Mark throws up a shaky salute before concentrating all his efforts into preventing his kimchi bokkeumbap from being acquainted with the pavement.

"Calm down, cadet," Jaehyun reassures, taking stock of his face getting greener and greener by the second. "I'm sure Ranger Wong won't bite."

"I'm sure Ranger Wong would be insulted at being partnered with a cadet, sir," Mark returns.

"It's either that or Zhong or Park," Jaehyun points out. "And we both know I can't get out there yet." Mark resents the fact that the senior officer makes quite a lot of sense. Logic notwithstanding, his
breakfast is still steadily making its way up his esophagus, his ears are starting to buzz, not to mention the way his heart rate must be off the charts --

His nervous breakdown is cut short by a head of lime green hair bounding up to him and enveloping him in a bone-crushing hug. "Mark hyung!"

"Speak of the devil," Jaehyun laughs.

"Chenle," Mark gasps amidst a shock of dyed hair. "Let me breathe!"

Chenle lets go with a high-pitched laugh. "Congratulations, Mark!" The younger man is bouncing up and down, excitement practically bouncing off of him in waves, and Mark can't help but be swept up in it. "Finally!"

Jisung appears behind him, armed with an umbrella and an expression that spoke of long years of suffering. "Excuse him," Jisung sighs. "He's been excited ever since Jaehyun told him yesterday."

"How could I not be?" Chenle cries. "We could be in the field with Mark! Tell me you're not excited, Jisung. Just tell me."

Jisung smiles. "Maybe I am a little excited."

"I'm thrilled," Mark deadpans, but he's grinning as well. "Thanks, kiddos."

"'Kiddo?'" Chenle exaggeratedly puffs up his chest. "Oh, I can't wait to boss you around. Primary Strike team, and all that."

"Only Strike team," Jaehyun corrects.

"Don't rain on my parade, sir!"

"Just trying to keep you humble."
"But really, Mark, I'm so proud of you!" Chenle moves over to give Mark another hug that makes him laugh and wheeze. "I have a really good feeling about this one! And if you see your Jaeger, gosh, it's practically meant for you."

"It's not mine yet," Mark reminds him. "There's the Kwoon room, the sim-pod, the test Drift..."

"Oh, shh," Chenle hushes him. "I'm telling you, he's gonna be the one."

Their conversation is interrupted by the whirring of helicopter blades, quickly morphing into a deafening roar; Jisung cringes, adjusting his in-ear audio filter to attenuate the noise. Aircraft marshals rush out onto the bay just as a PPDC chopper slowly comes into view, frantically directing the vehicle to a helipad. Wave after wave of cold air washes over all of them as the helicopter lowers itself right into the middle of the bay.

"And there it is," Jaehyun mutters under his breath. "Look sharp, boys."

"Yes, sir." Even Chenle sobers up, adopting a military propriety that looks out of place on his usually jovial features.

Jaehyun opens his umbrella and leads the charge, the two pilots and cadet following suit. Two men step down from the chopper: the Marshal, and another man who Mark can only assume is his potential co-pilot. His kimchi bokkeumbap threatens to make a reappearance.

"Good morning, boys," the Marshal greets, taking an umbrella from Jaehyun and housing their new arrival within it. "Ranger Wong, let me introduce you to the gentlemen you'll be working with."

"Delighted, I'm sure." The other man smiles, eyes passing over the four of them to finally land on Mark and -- oh.

Ranger Wong is... unlike anyone Mark has met before. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks look more hollow than they should, but both do little to discredit what undoubtedly is still a handsome face. The disagreeable weather miraculously doesn't wash out the burnished bronze of his skin, and somehow the PPDC regulation fatigues aren't unflattering on his figure. And he's tall -- much taller than any of them here, probably of a height with Dr. Suh down in the Academy.
Far too absorbed in his own thoughts, Mark doesn't realize that the two of them have been staring at each other until the Marshal speaks up again, forcing Ranger Wong to break his gaze.

Marshal Lee gestures to Jaehyun. "Officer Jung is helping me run this facility."

Jaehyun smiles warmly, extending his free hand for Ranger Wong to shake. "We did a drop together, if I'm not wrong."

"Yes, sir. 2017, I believe."

"I'm sorry about your partner."

Ranger Wong's smile is razor thin. "Thank you, sir."

"Zhong and Park here pilot our only Jaeger," the Marshal continues. "Doing a bang-up job of it as well." Chenle flushes deeply at the praise, smiling widely as both he and Jisung shake hands with the senior pilot.

"And this is Cadet Lee," the Marshal finishes, gesturing for Mark to step forward. "He'll be test Drifting with you today."

"Mark Lee." He tries his hardest not to trip over himself as he extends a hand to shake. Ranger Wong's hand is much larger, he notes, all but dwarfing his. "Welcome to the Jeju Shatterdome."

"Lucas Wong. Nice to meet you, Mark." The taller man is all smiles as he speaks, his British accent curling over every letter. Mark almost forgets to respond.

"Likewise, Ranger Wong."

"Please, it's Lucas. Ranger Wong is my alter ego." Gorgeous and witty. Mark is losing focus very quickly.

"If you'll excuse me -- Officer Jung and I have some business to attend to. Zhong, Park, you can
show our two recruits around the Jaeger station, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," Jisung replies with the solemnity of a person given an all-important task.

"Good. And behave." The latter instruction is directed more to Chenle than anyone else. "I believe Engineer Lee will be meeting you. Ranger Wong, we will meet after your tour as planned. Gentlemen."

The four of them give the senior officers a salute as they disappear into the station, and Chenle, seemingly reanimating in the absence of the Marshal, turns to them with a wide grin.

"The Shatterdome is busier than usual, brand new Jaeger and all," Chenle says all in one breath as he leads them through the waterlogged hallways of the bay. Jisung begrudgingly takes the rear, rolling his eyes when Mark smirks, amused, at his exasperation. "Engineer Lee is in charge of Project 82125 -- your Mark IV, of course. Pink Slip himself is still being repaired from a very nasty bout from a week ago."

"We could have minimized the damage if we had just disengaged like I wanted to," Jisung grumbles.

"Ah, but that's what the taxpayer money is for, Jisungie," Chenle responds pragmatically. "And that fight could have lasted more than an hour if we didn't overclock the systems, like I wanted to."

This statement makes Jisung erupt into a rapid-fire defense of his stance, bypassing Mark and Lucas to argue with Chenle up front as they continue to lead the way. Mark finds himself shaking his head at the two pilots' antics. How they were found to be Drift compatible, he'll never know.

"Are those two always like that?" Lucas murmurs to Mark.

"Sadly," Mark answers. He pointedly ignores the way goosebumps rise on his skin at the sound of the other man's deep voice. "But our area has been kaiju-free for ten months. I'm in no position to judge them."

"Indeed," the ranger says, lopsided smile on his face. Well, at least Lucas seems to be enjoying himself.
Chenle and Jisung, still bickering, come to a stop before two large metal doors. Someone with bright orange hair is nonchalantly leaning on them, intently browsing through a holoscreen, and Mark has to squint until he recognizes them.

"Donghyuck!" Mark says in delight.

Haechan looks up from their holoscreen, grins, and flounces over to give Mark an enthusiastic hug. "Cadet Lee! Haven't seen you in a while. Chenle, Jisung, 'sup."

"Hey," the two say in unison before returning to their heated discussion.

Mark steps back from Haechan and gestures lamely to Lucas, blushing at his display of impropriety. "Haechan, this is Ranger Lucas Wong from the Hong Kong Shatterdome."

Haechan turns to Ranger Wong, smiling impishly. "Ah, you must be our new pilot," they say, extending a hand. "Everyone's been dying to meet you."

Lucas raises an eyebrow and shakes Haechan's hand. "Is that so? Lucas Wong."

"Engineer Haechan Lee. Charmed." Haechan claps their hands, beaming radiantly at all of them. "So! Let's introduce you boys to our base of operations, shall we?" They quickly punch in a code on a nearby comms unit, and the doors of the Jaeger station slowly come to life, groaning and creaking until they finally start to come apart. What lies beyond makes Mark's jaw drop.

Chenle and Jisung are pilots, and Haechan practically lives in the Jaeger station. But it's Mark's first time seeing this part of the Shatterdome -- the true Shatterdome, where everything happened, the real center of operations on the Jeju compound. It's even busier in the station than in the receiving bay: several driven carts containing fuel tanks, circuitry boards, and sheets of aluminum milled around, along with technicians and mechanics all walking with purpose towards their next task. Workers perched on platforms several stories high hover around a Jaeger, welding sparks falling to the floor as they work; a pallet the size of a skating rink is moving what Mark can only assume is a dismembered Jaeger arm. The sharp scent of metal intermingled with petroleum slices through the air. All around them the thrum of machinery, drilling, hammering, and soldering creates a harmony of sound that Mark has never heard before.

This is where he could be -- if today went well. He hazards a look at the taller man beside him. It's probably nothing like the Hong Kong Shatterdome, which Mark knows can house triple the amount
of Jaegers, but Lucas looks overwhelmed all the same; for what reason in particular, Mark doesn't know.

"Wel-come, to the Jeju Shatterdome grand tour!" Haechan exclaims as vivaciously as they can manage. "Exclusive to special guests only." Here they wink at Lucas, to which the taller coughs and wisely looks away.

"What am I, stale bread?" Mark mutters. But he follows Haechan into the Jaeger station anyway, Lucas at his heels.

Haechan cuts a path through the throng of people and vehicles wandering around the staging area, beckoning for them to follow. "We house a total of five Jaegers as of now. One out of commission, one being upgraded, two in repairs, and one in construction," they explain. "That's yours, of course. But we're gonna save her for last."

The engineer halts in front of a Jaeger that occupies the center of the Shatterdome. Its dented bubblegum pink shell is barely visible beneath the complicated patchwork of platforms and cranes attached to it; despite its relatively shorter height, the workers milling around it still look like ants. "This is Pink Slip, currently the only active Jaeger in the Shatterdome."

"There's our baby," Chenle says proudly, puffing his chest out.

Jisung simply rolls his eyes. "Lele's more than mine. Yerim had him painted like that as a joke, but the first time Chenle laid eyes on Pink, he fell in love."

"How could I not?" Chenle cries. "He's perfect! Find another Jaeger that has a more advanced weaponry system."

"It's true," Haechan concurs. "Yerim, our weapons specialist, was the lead engineer for Pink Slip here. If anyone loves their rocket blasters, it's that girl."

They move onto the next bay where a hulking green mass of a Jaeger has taken residence, paint scuffed and damaged from years of exposure to saltwater. It's bulkier than Pink Slip, and substantially taller -- this Jaeger, however, seems to have sustained much more damage than its fellow Mark III model. The entire front half of the Conn-Pod is being reconstructed, and its left arm is missing, the right supported by a crane to prevent the Jaeger from toppling over.
"Over here is Miss Dead Eye, still in the middle of repairs," Haechan informs them. "Jaehyun and Sicheng's."

"So this is Sicheng gē's Jaeger," Lucas says, finally breaking his silence. He looks over Dead Eye with newfound appreciation. "We -- I had a drop with them in Shanghai."

"Oh, that's right!" Chenle perks up, rounding onto Lucas with curious eyes. If he noticed the other pilot's slip of the tongue, he doesn't let on. "Sicheng gē transferred to your Shatterdome. How is he?"

"Doing well enough for himself." Lucas smiles indulgently. "The technicians say he's invaluable."

"Ah, the woes of a second priority Dome," Haechan sighs. "Why did they have to ship Sicheng away? He loved me so much."

"You just miss terrorizing him," Chenle scoffs. "And besides, we all know that I'm Sicheng gē's favorite.

"Dream on, Lele."

Lucas turns to Mark and Jisung, wisely ignoring the brewing argument for Ranger Dong's affection. "I understand that Sicheng was transferred because Dead Eye was too damaged to pilot."

"That's part of the story, yes," Mark explains. "Both of them got injured this January during a fight, some problem with their Pons circuitry. Officer Jung is still on his way to recovery, so for the meantime the Marshal's promoted him."

"I see. Sicheng speaks very highly of him."

"They're our longest running Strike team," Jisung chimes in. "Dead Eye ran point for us when they were still active."

"And now they're out of commission, which is where I come in," Lucas completes.
Jisung is looking up at the older pilot pensively. "Fingers crossed."

"You'll love this one, Markie," Haechan is calling out just as they round the corner. Another Jaeger comes into view, and for a moment, Mark is floored -- this one is familiar to him despite its mutilation, from its launch to its fights to its decommissioning.

"Blue Blood," he says in awe. Mark has studied Blue Blood more hours than he can count, watched all its fights as they were happening. He knows all of its weaponry, specifications, fighting styles and tactics -- but he's never seen it in the flesh, much less up close. Its damaged cobalt shell tells the story of seven successful kaiju takedowns, the last of which disintegrated the entire right half of its upper body and put its pilots out of commission.

He's been with this Jaeger, rooted for it, feared for the people within it. Blue Blood is a myth come to life.

"Blue Blood?" Lucas echoes.

"This used to be the Marshal's Jaeger," Jisung informs him. "The third of this Shatterdome."

"And what a beautiful one he is. It's too bad that Conn-Pod is beyond repair, though. Maybe if we get funds for a Mark II restoration initiative..." Haechan trails off, eyes distant, as though they're already putting together a project proposal in their head.

"Donghyuck," Mark coughs.

"Right!" Haechan snaps out of their stupor, spurred into motion once again. Mark shares a knowing smile with Chenle and Jisung as they rush to follow the engineer. "Now, I would have shown you Second Wind, but he's still being upgraded. He's a Mark I, and that reactor is downright cancerous, as you know. The hazmat officers have to wear lead-lined suits just to decontaminate the reactor chamber, so we won't be seeing him anytime soon. Good news, though -- we can go see your Jaeger now! She's just in Bay 02."

"Your Jaeger." A giddy, inexorable excitement comes over Mark, like he's a child that's been told to patiently wait before opening a Christmas gift. They take a sharp right to a secluded corner of the staging area, hidden from the rest of the Shatterdome by a veritable legion of catwalks and platforms, all busily transporting an even larger number of people that were working on Pink Slip. Haechan takes them underneath a walkway that leads to the inside of the alcove.
Haechan steps aside and gestures to the Jaeger with a flourish. "May I present to you: Black Widow."

Simply put, Black Widow is a beauty. It's onyx in color, still polished and shining from lack of use, and about 80 meters tall. Slender limbs outfitted with vambraces and greaves that narrow to a point at the joints hang from its frame. A dome-shaped Conn-Pod rests on its shoulders, clear cut glass arranged to look like a spider web allowing a glimpse of the inside. And its most distinguishing feature -- an intricate red insignia in the shape of an hourglass in the middle of its chest.

"You really outdid yourself," Mark says dumbly, unable to take his eyes off the Jaeger.

Haechan beams. "I know, my dear. And she can be all yours."

Indeed she can. Mark imagines himself in the Conn-Pod, completely in command of this war machine. Thousands of tons of steel and hardware linked to his consciousness, becoming him. Being deployed in the middle of the ocean, the middle of the action, trying to find weaknesses in kaiju that he can exploit. And his co-pilot --

Lucas is still staring up at Black Widow, a myriad of indiscernible emotions overcoming him. Above all, a particular brand of longing that Mark can't quite place.

"Ranger Wong," he says quietly, so as to not let the others hear them. "Are you alright?"

The pilot turns to him as though only just noticing his presence. Lucas smiles down at Mark, more for assurance than any sincerity. "Quite." He turns to Haechan, who's waiting eagerly for his input. "She's remarkable. Job well done, Engineer Lee." His words, at least, are earnest.

Haechan is practically glowing under the praise. "Thank you very much. On behalf of the construction team, of course."

"No kidding," Jisung snorts. "Haechan's been breathing down their necks for the past six months."

"Hey, I'm not lead engineer for nothing." Haechan grins at the two prospective pilots. "Want me to take you boys upstairs?" they offer.
"Yes," Mark answers immediately. "If it's no trouble," is Lucas's more restrained reply.

Haechan waves a well-manicured hand. "Of course not, she could very well be your Jaeger soon. It's just right that I show you the ropes."

"We'll wait for you down here!" Chenle informs them, cheerful.

With that, the three of them climb up onto a rickety platform that serves as a lift, dodging the mechanics and engineers traipsing through the area. "Black Widow here is a Mark IV, so you don't have to worry about getting radiation cancer or whatever," Haechan explains as they shoot upwards. "She has fifty diesel engines per muscle strand, specially fitted hyper-torque drives, and a brand-new shock absorber so you can barely feel a thing when a kaiju fucks you up. But what really makes her special is the AI programmed in."

"AI?" Ranger Wong raises his eyebrows in curiosity. "Your Marshal allowed you to install artificial intelligence on a Jaeger?"

"The Marshal knows when to take risks," Haechan replies coolly. "And this project, Ranger Wong, is a gamble. We're doing everything we can to make sure we win."

They alight onto a catwalk leading into the back of the Conn-Pod. Haechan gracefully slides into the room and fiddles with one of the HUDs as Lucas clammers in, extending a hand to Mark in assistance. He has a brief crisis before accepting it, letting himself be helped into the Conn-Pod.

"Aha!" Haechan turns around and braces their hands on their waist. "Wendy, say hi to your possible new pilots."

"Good morning, Ranger Wong," a female voice pipes up from the command console. "Cadet Lee."

"Wendy?" Mark questions.

"Weaponized Electronic Navigation Dyad," Haechan recites. "She doubles as an AI and an OS. Had her imported all the way from Canada. Just like you, Mark."
"It's, er, nice to meet you, Wendy," Lucas says hesitantly.

"Likewise, Ranger Wong. I believe you will find my integration with Black Widow seamless."

It feels strange talking to a program like it's a person, but Mark decides to give it a try anyway. "Um, Wendy, what exactly can you do?"

"My functions include facilitating the neural handshake between you and your Jaeger, ensuring power is equally distributed within your life support and weapons systems, and providing geographical information during kaiju drops," Wendy rattles off without pause. "I also learn with every mission so I can further optimize our running processes."

Lucas nods and crosses his arms. "This is an admirable operation you have here, Engineer Lee."

"Please, it's Haechan. Goodbye, Wendy." The engineer powers down the command console with a flourish. "So, Mark? What do you think?"

"They definitely didn't cover AI in Conn-Pod control class," Mark manages to blurt out. He thinks he catches Lucas stifle a laugh. "But, yeah. I didn't think this could get any more impressive, but you did it." He can definitely imagine himself in here, seeing the world through the eyes of the Jaeger. Control panels within reach, HUDs straight ahead, motion rig emulating every move he makes.

They return to the lift, Lucas helping both of them out of the Conn-Pod. "Black Widow is one of the first Mark IV models," Haechan continues. "If everything goes well, we could consider installing AI into every Jaeger we make or upgrade! So, you know. No pressure or anything."

Haechan pats Mark on the back, who's decidedly unimpressed. "Yeah, definitely."

As discussed, Chenle and Jisung are waiting eagerly by Black Widow's feet. "Did you have fun?" Chenle yells even though they're still ten feet in the air.

Haechan jumps off to ruffle the two pilots' hair. "'Course they had fun. They were with me."
"It's definitely been... enlightening," Lucas concurs. Mark barely manages to rein in a snort. "If you'll excuse me, I believe I have a meeting with the Marshal. It was a pleasure to have you show me around, gentlemen." Here he nods at Haechan. "Engineer Lee." Lucas gives Mark one last smile, and the four of them watch as he strides away.

"You're so lucky, Mark," Jisung sighs once Lucas is out of earshot. "I can't believe you get to pilot with an actual pilot."

"Yeah, but, you know." Mark shrugs. "Doesn't matter if he's a pilot or not-- if we're not Drift compatible, then that's that."

"I told you, I have a good feeling about this!" Chenle exclaims indignantly. "You could be our next Strike team!"

"Oh, yeah?" Mark snorts, ruffling Chenle's hair. "Either that or it's back to the academy for me."

Jisung scrunches his nose up adorably. "His loss."

"Of course, it would be fabulous if you get to pilot the Jaeger your best friend made," Haechan remarks. "But if you can't Drift with Lucas Wong, so what? I bet your co-pilot is just out there somewhere, waiting for you to find them." Haechan reaches out and takes hold of his hand, squeezing it tight. "You will pilot a Jaeger, Mark. It's what you were meant to do."

Mark smiles at Haechan and squeezes back. He hopes that they're right.

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"Is that him? He's hot," is the first thing Mark hears when he enters the Kwoon room. Jaemin is eyeing Lucas appreciatively, who is in deep conversation with Officer Jung and the Marshal across the room.

"Astute as always, Na," Renjun signs, no small amount of displeasure on his face.

"He is, though," Jaemin defends. "Markie, I cannot believe you snagged that supermodel of a pilot."
Leave some for the rest of us.”

"I have not snagged him yet," Mark replies as he does his stretches. "Which is why we're here. It's so embarrassing that we have to do this in the middle of intermediate class.” It's a little past 1300, barely enough time for his lunch to make it down his gullet. Everything would be packed into this afternoon -- the sim-pod, the test Drift, and sparring in the Kwoon room, which, to Mark's chagrin, is taking place in front of the younger cadets.

It was all moving far too fast, sure, but Mark had no qualms with that. Better that they determine their true Drift compatibility today so they can start training as soon as possible. And if they're not, well.

Jeno smiles beatifically, leaning on his own staff. "I overheard Miss Bae saying she wanted the cadets to see a 'real' demonstration."

"I'd love for Ranger Wong to demonstrate those biceps," Jaemin quips.

"God, you're horrible," Mark groans. "And why are you here, anyway? Last time I checked, we were in the advanced class."

Jaemin melodramatically puts a hand to his chest. "Moral support, Mark, how dare you," he gasps.

"Plus, no way we'd miss this," Renjun adds. "Miss Bae's right. This isn't exactly your run of the mill sparring test."

"If anything, I'd love to see you get your ass kicked in the Kwoon room for once," Jaemin continues.

"Thank you so much for your support."

They all snap to attention when Irene enters the room, bowing at the waist. The fightmaster returns the gesture and assumes her position at the front of the room, Jaehyun nodding as she lines up beside him. "Good afternoon, boys," she says in a clear voice. "Before we begin our lessons, there's something we have to do. You -- " Irene gestures to a cadet who scrambles up from his seat. "Score the match. I want everyone to pay attention."
Mark takes this as his cue to step onto the mat. He chooses a staff that's just his height, light enough for him to use in one hand with no trouble. Lucas chooses one much shorter than Mark's but made of heavy-looking wood. He can't help but commend the choice -- the other man has longer limbs, which doesn't warrant the need to compensate with a longer staff, and he'll be able to take advantage of his bulkier build by landing harder hits.

He looks past Lucas, straight at the Marshal, standing regally with his hands behind his back. Mark is rewarded with an almost imperceptible nod.

"Lee, Wong, at the ready."

Mark takes a deep, calming breath, and does the customary bow. Lucas does the same, not breaking eye contact for one second.

"Remember, the goal isn't to win." Irene's words aren't directed to them so much as the entire room. "Land as many hits as you can and get to know your partner's fighting style."

Mark didn't need a reminder. He ruled the Kwoon room -- Jeno favored his right side, Renjun didn't move across the floor enough, Jaemin was too flashy. But Lucas... he's in uncharted territory. Irene's advice is nothing new, but it doesn't make it any less right: Mark would have to get to know Lucas during the fifteen minutes they were allowed on the mat. He positions himself in a starting stance, watching his sparring partner carefully as he does the same.

"Start!"

Mark lunges forward, but Lucas dodges the strike with ease. Mark recoils immediately, and before he knows it their staves are colliding with a loud snap! They trade a few blocks until Lucas easily lands one on Mark's shoulder.

"1-0." Polite applause from the room. Lucas, however, doesn't betray any expression even after drawing first blood. Instead he resumes his previous starting stance, gaze steady. Mark begrudgingly gives him that. Of course he'd be good at sparring; he's got years of experience on Mark. But the goal isn't to win.

The fight resumes. The hollow sound of wood hitting wood and their labored breathing fills the room. Mark gets a few hits in by chance, but not enough -- he just can't predict what the ranger will do next. Lucas is a blank slate. He has no tells, no twitches, and his eyes remain firmly on Mark's.
His reflexes are faster than Mark thought, too. But if he had learned anything after several six hour sessions in the same damn room, it's that instinct is faster than anything else, and it's instinct -- not chance -- that makes him win nine times out of ten.

Lucas Wong is a challenge. Mark likes that.

Breathing deeply, Mark holds his staff in front of him with both hands. Lucas draws back to a defensive position, staff at an angle to Mark's, ready to block. He drops into a roll, hooking his staff behind the ranger's knee to bring him down onto the mats with a loud thump. Lucas doesn't even have time to react before Mark taps his chest lightly with his staff.

"4-9," the cadet calls out.

Lucas is smiling. "Nice hit."

"Thank you." Mark smirks, reaching out a hand to help Lucas up. There's barely a second of reprieve and they're at it again.

There's no use in looking for weaknesses or tells, Mark realizes. He's far too good to give something like that away. Sparring with Lucas is a game of chess -- following his opponent's thoughts, mapping out what he'll do step by step based on what he knows, that's how Mark will land a hit. He stops paying attention to his own technique, opting to run variables through his mind: based on Lucas's previous moves, what's the next logical step to take?

It's with this newfound understanding that Mark starts catching up to the other man's lead. Lucas's fighting style is distinct from his own or any others that he knows. Mark is fast, landing hits when Lucas least expects it. Lucas is strong, often depending on his brute strength to strong-arm Mark into submission. But they're similar in that they both know to anticipate the other's next move.

The two of them are trading hits and blocks faster than Mark's brain can keep up with. Eventually he stops thinking, just starts doing, both of them moving in perfect synergy across the floor mats. He sees his sparring partner's smile grow with each successful hit -- not a taunt, but of genuine budding respect. This recognition eggs Mark on to push harder, move faster, and shift from one position to another with a grace that he didn't even know he had.

Everything and everyone disappears. He forgets the pain of bruises forming on his skin, the cadet calling out their scores, the Marshal's gaze trained intently on the match. It's just him, Lucas, and the
electricity he feels every time their bodies touch.

Lucas has him in a body lock on the floor when the timer goes off. The other man helps him up, beaming even as they try to catch their breaths. Mark returns his exhilarated grin with one of his own.

Irene herself looks pleased, as do the two officers beside her. The Marshal's eyes are shining. "Cadet. What's the score?"

"36-37 with Ranger Wong in the lead, Ma'am."

The fightmaster nods, satisfied. "And that, cadets, is how you test for physical compatibility."

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There's at least some respite before the next thing on Mark's hectic schedule. The Marshal and Jaehyun had departed to settle Lucas into a guest room, Jaehyun with a promise to drop by Mark's dorm room to escort him to the sim-pods. Mark was able to catch an extremely gratifying peek of Jeno, Jaemin, and Renjun getting their punishment for loitering in intermediate class: cleaning duty. Serves Jaemin right. "I bet you have physical compatibility outside the Kwoon room, too," was his ever-ready wisecrack. Mark was a hair away from chucking his staff.

Jaemin wasn't entirely wrong, though; the match was certainly different from every other Kwoon room assessment he'd done. Whether he could chalk it up to the pilot's extensive experience or just him being overly familiar with everyone else he had sparred with, he wasn't sure. But there was definitely something else. An undeniable pull, a magnetism between the two of them that Mark knew Lucas could feel, too. He can't explain it -- it's beyond words, what just happened back there.

Mark wonders if this is it, what Chenle went on and on about when he and Jisung first sparred, what inevitably led to them becoming co-pilots. Sure, they got into petty little spats more often that not, but anyone with two eyes could see that those two worked best together. The same went for Jaehyun and Sicheng, the Marshal and his partner, every other Strike team Mark saw form within the Jeju Shatterdome. Was he like that with Lucas? Was their compatibility as obvious, enough for them to be able to pilot Black Widow?

He supposes only the sim-pod will tell. It's not Mark's first rodeo, so to speak, but it's certainly the most daunting one yet -- the last test he has to face before qualifying for the ranger program. One that
he's failed to pass countless times before.

It's with this depressing thought that he drags his feet to the blessedly deserted showers in the dorms. The pitter-patter of water on tile calms his racing thoughts to some degree, but not enough; by the time he's dressed and ready to go, he's reverted back to full meltdown mode, unable to concentrate on anything but the 500 scenarios running through his head all involving him failing to Drift again.

Jaehyun comes to get him at around 1500 as promised, and they start the long trek across the compound to the J-Tech division.

"Alright, cadet. Spit it out," Jaehyun says by the time they pass the hospital wards.

Mark looks up at him in confusion. "Sir?"

"You're fidgeting," the officer explains. "You always do that when you want to ask a question in class."

"I do?" Mark asks dumbly. "Anyways, that's not the point -- I was just wondering."

"About?"

He takes a deep breath. "Sir, do you think this'll work?"

"That's why we're doing a simulation first, aren't we?" Jaehyun answers reasonably.

"I mean your personal opinion, sir," Mark clarifies. "If Ranger Wong and I will be able to Drift. I just don't want to fail again and disappoint the Marshal."

Jaehyun gives him another of his kind, patient smiles. "If that's what you're worried about, then I should tell you that the Marshal was very impressed with your performance."

Mark narrows his eyes skeptically. "Really?"
"He said it was 'quite a display,'" Jaehyun quotes, rolling his eyes. "I said that was the understatement of the year."

"So you think we can Drift, sir?"

"Listen, cadet." Jaehyun stops him in front of the K-science division, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Compatibility is measured through a lot of things-- brain scans, personality screenings, training and fighting styles. But all of that is useless if you don't understand each in the Drift. What you did in the Kwoon room was an excellent example of mutual understanding." Jaehyun squeezes his shoulder in assurance. "So, to answer your question: I believe so, yes."

Mark smiles. "I hope so too, sir."

They finally reach the J-Tech division, a seemingly vacated section of the Shatterdome. It only looks that way, Mark realizes, because most of the engineers and mechanics have set up shop in the Jaeger staging area, and from Haechan's offhand comments, he knows that the laboratories are deep underground.

"Oh, speaking of," Jaehyun pipes up. "Someone's missed you, you know."

"Sir?"

A blonde man in a white coat emerges from an office, grinning widely at the two of them. "Forgotten about me already, Mark?"

"Jungwoo!" he exclaims, laughing as Jungwoo drapes himself over Mark's shorter frame. "My god. I barely get to see you."

"I never get a break!" Jungwoo laments into his shoulder. "Between earning this PhD and Johnny showing me the ropes, I can't even come visit my favorite cadet."

Mark pulls away, still smiling. He's slightly consoled by Jungwoo's presence -- they'd entered the Jaeger Academy at the same time, albeit in very different programs. Jungwoo would come and find him after their lessons, spot Mark when he practiced in the Kwoon room, and pore over their
mechanics workbooks together, even if the older student's homework was far more advanced than his. Even then, Jungwoo had proven extremely talented when it came to Drift technology. His promotion last January, in Mark's opinion, was long overdue.

"I trust you know why Mark is here today, Dr. Kim?" Jaehyun interjects almost coquettishly. Mark pulls a face, glancing between the two of them.

Jungwoo smiles, coy. "Of course, Officer Jung."

Oh, wow. Now *that* was a development Mark didn't know of. "Sim-pod," Mark interjects before he can get any more uncomfortable. "I'm here for the sim-pod tests."

"I know!" Jungwoo grips him by the arms, practically shaking with enthusiasm. "I'm so excited! You and Ranger Wong will be my first subjects."

Mark raises his eyebrows in appreciation. "Neural bridge operator, huh? You're rising through the ranks fast."

"Johnny knows talent when he sees it," Jungwoo says cheerily, motioning for the two of them to follow him down the corridor. "He can't meet us right now, though -- so I'll be facilitating your test today."

"Sounds good to me."

Jungwoo leads him into the all too familiar waiting room for the sim-pod. It's just as impeccably white as Mark remembers, with a simple steel bench positioned across a two-way mirror. Two test suits encased in a cabinet lie beyond the glass, along with a machine that Mark knows will facilitate the Drift.

The Marshal arrives ten minutes later with Lucas in tow. Jungwoo immediately erupts into a flurry of activity, briefly explaining to Mark and Lucas what the sim-pod is even though the two of them are familiar with the thing. They're then ushered into the room beyond the glass, technicians coming out of nowhere to help them into their test suits. Mark has done this enough times to be familiar with the techs -- the one that puts on his helmet smiles kindly before she pumps it full of relay gel. He vaguely feels the sharp click of the spinal clamp being attached to his suit, and the relay gel is absorbed into it shortly after.
Jungwoo and the techs disappear into the adjacent room. Mark catches one last glimpse of himself in the two-way mirror before the lights dim.

"Clear your mind." Jungwoo's voice washes over him soothingly. It's the same speech the previous neural bridge operator gave him, but it sounds much better coming from a friend. "Bring nothing into the Drift."

Mark steadies his breathing, tries his best to do just as Jungwoo says. He vaguely registers the scientist's voice in his ear -- "Neural interface Drift initiated," -- and it starts.

He's floating, detached from his body, merely watching, waiting. He's in the middle of nothing, no sights, smells, or sounds. It's always been like this: they would initiate the Drift, and he would wait and wait for any kind of sensation to arise from the nothingness -- but nothingness would be the only answer. It would be another failed test Drift, another crossed out prospect, another thing to add to Mark's long list of failures.

He waits for what seems like an eternity, and he's close to shaking it off, pulling out of the Drift. Then he hears it -- music, off to the distance, chaotic and dissonant but somehow beautiful. Enraptured, he tries to reach out, and the music seems to grow louder and louder in response -- and when it finally makes contact --

A burst of images flashes by faster than light, burning themselves into Mark's mind. What he can only assume to be a young Lucas being chased around an apartment by his mother and father. Lucas, slightly older now, boarding an airplane and crying quietly into his mother's sleeve as he watches Hong Kong get smaller and smaller. His father ruffling his hair as he's being dropped off at the steps of what seems to be a boarding school. Another boy, slightly older, Kun gè, smiling as he shows Lucas around the campus.

A white and gray kitten being deposited into his arms for Christmas. Reckoner wreaking devastation on Hong Kong. Lucas, now a teenager, making a pact with Kun to enlist in the Jaeger Academy. His mother and father bidding him a tearful goodbye at Heathrow. Kun in PPDC fatigues, laughing as he jogs next to Lucas on Victoria Bay. Their first mission. Their last mission -- the kaiju clawing a hole right into Tunnel Vision's Conn-Pod and Kun collapsing onto the floor.

By the time the last image has seared itself into Mark's vision, the music is louder than ever, even more jarring, to the point that it makes Mark retreat from it in dismay. But it grows slower, softer, almost an apology; Mark edges closer, and the music turns into an invitation. Mark accepts, and to his utter surprise, the music falls silent.
He's pulled out of the Drift abruptly -- with a tug behind his bellybutton, he's back in the sim-pod, out of the almost-nothingness. The lights are coming back on, and he barely registers Jungwoo rushing into the room before he falls to his hands and knees.

His head is somehow spinning and throbbing at the same time, an intense pain that he's never felt before boring into his skull. Jungwoo is right beside him, propping Mark upright as he tries his best not to hurl all over the tile. "You did well," Jungwoo reports, stroking Mark's back in comfort. "Your sync rates are high."

"Oh, great." It doesn't feel like much of a victory when you're having the child of a migraine and a hangover. He vaguely registers the spinal clamp being removed from his back; Jungwoo helps him up, and the techs swarm over him again to help him out of his suit. To his right, Lucas is slipping out of his own test suit with ease, looking none the worse for wear.

His headache still hasn't dissipated by the time he, Lucas, and Jungwoo file into the waiting room. Both Jaehyun and the Marshal look proud despite the pathetic meltdown Mark just had. "Excellent job, boys," the Marshal praises. "You have your first successful Drift. You two can rest for a while, and we'll see you in Bay 02."

"Sir." He and Lucas throw a salute up as the two officers exit. Mark is sure he's swaying on his feet and he missed his eyebrow completely, but fuck, this has got to be the worst torture known to man, and as soon as the door closes he slumps onto the unforgiving steel bench against the wall. Lucas seats himself on the opposite end, peering at him in concern.

"Would you two like a moment alone?" Jungwoo suggests warmly.

Lucas nods. "Please." He waits until the door clicks closed to turn to Mark, hunched over with his head in his hands. "Are you alright?"

"Jesus," Mark wheezes out.

"The name's Lucas, actually."

"Oh, ha-ha," he responds sardonically, but the attempt at humor does make him feel slightly better. "I'm fine, but... God. My head fucking hurts."
"Of course, it's only your first Drift," Lucas says in understanding. Mark registers a hand on his back, splayed wide right in the middle. "Here, sitting up will make you feel better."

Mark complies, letting Lucas guide him into a proper sitting position. He inhales deeply, trying to calm himself. "Is it always like that?" he breathes out. "Your head hurting like there's a million tiny drills inside?"

"Honestly? It's unusual for you to feel that much pain," the pilot responds. "But I suppose it varies from person to person. Someone is sharing the entirety of their memories with you -- of course it's a lot to take in. It gets easier the more you do it."

"I sure hope it does," Mark answers. Once again, he's struck by how different the two of them are. It's his first Drift -- his first successful Drift after years of trying and waiting and studying. But for Lucas, it's the nth time that he's letting someone into his thoughts. He looks completely at ease, unflappable, even though he's seen some of the most private moments of Mark's life, and Mark has seen some of his.

And yet -- Lucas is twisting at the rings on his hand.

He should be happier. He should be thrilled -- he's finally succeeded at Drifting, he can finally pilot. But Mark can't shake the vision of Kun, his bright smile, the years he and Lucas spent together. Kun, nothing but a memory now, a spectre that haunts Lucas. How strange it must be for him, Mark thinks, to Drift with an absolute stranger.

"Are you... alright with this?" Mark speaks up at length, his heart beating two-time. "Drifting again?"

"Does it matter?" is the pilot's reply.

"It does to me."

Lucas gives him the smallest of smiles. "We're here to do our job, Mark."

How can he argue with that? "Yes, we are."
"I'm glad you understand." Lucas leans against the wall with a sigh, languid lines of his body laid bare. "The Marshal said we could rest, right? How about we sit here and do nothing?"

Mark's head is still pounding. It's as good a suggestion as any. "Agreed."

It takes them a while to leave the waiting room.

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PAN PACIFIC DEFENCE CORPS
JEJU SHATTERDOME
SOUTH KOREA, JEJU-DO, SEOGWIPO-SI

TEST DRIFT ASSESSMENT FORM

Section A. Test Subject Information

Subject 1
Wong, Lucas
22 / M
1999-01-25

Subject 2
Lee, Mark
22 / M
1999-08-02

Section B. Test Results
95.49% sync rate
No anomalies found

Section C. Remarks
As postulated by Dr. Suh, Subjects Wong and Lee were able to Drift with success. Sync rates are unusually high, near a perfect 100%, possibly the highest the PPDC has ever seen. Lee suffered a headache (rated 8 out of 10 on the pain scale), but no other undesirable side effects of the Drifting process were found in both subjects. Painkillers were given upon request of Marshal Lee.
Further counseling for Wong is needed in order to ensure success with actual piloting inside a Jaeger.
They're back at the Jaeger station at around 1700, Jaehyun guiding them to Bay 02. Mark's headache has subsided somewhat, thanks to the few minutes of respite spent in Lucas's company and the small handful of aspirin Jungwoo had dropped into his hand.

There's no preamble, no introduction from the officers -- they're propelled directly to the uppermost floor of the Shatterdome. Haechan drops by just before they board the elevator, wishing him a very energetic "Good luck!" and giving Mark a decidedly unprofessional cheek kiss right in front of Lucas. He makes a point of avoiding the ranger's amused gaze the entire ride as he plots Haechan's untimely death.

Both of them sober up very quickly as they're led into the Drivesuit room, a circular nook with a low ceiling that connects directly to Black Widow's Conn-Pod. A roster of equipment resting in sterilized boxes is arrayed on the far wall, the most notable of which are their Drivesuits.

The bodysuit itself is black polymer, with circuitry sewn into it that creeps up and down the limbs. Nodes that will allow them to feel what the Jaeger does are attached at key points like the spine and major afferent neurons. The armor is a polished black chrome, brand spanking new, with the same red hourglass insignia as the Jaeger emblazoned on the chestpiece and the PPDC logo embossed on both shoulders.

There's no modesty in the corps; he and Lucas strip down to their underwear, Drivesuit technicians hovering over them immediately and extricating the circuitry suits from their containers. They're zipped up in under one minute and outfitted with their armor within five, topped off with a sleek helmet that fits Mark perfectly. The process is exactly like getting tested in a sim-pod, but more authentic, legitimate. He's no longer wearing a threadbare test suit that countless other cadets have worn -- this Drivesuit, this armor is his.

"It suits you," Lucas comments. Mark flushes, pleased.
He feels like cast-iron, a force of nature. You need to feel like one, Mark supposes, if you're about to man a 80 meter tall mech. A force of nature and nothing less.

They step into the Conn-Pod. Lucas naturally takes the right hemisphere, Mark gravitating to the left. The techs right at their heels, attaching spinal clamps and arm sensors from their suits to the motion rig that hangs above their heads. Black gauntlets with glowing red circuitry are fitted onto their hands, and they're prompted to stand on the platforms in front of them, geared locks snaking up to latch onto their boots. Relay gel is pumped into their helmets and absorbed into their suits, and they're ready to go.

The mic in Mark's ear crackles to life, Lucas's deep voice filling the silence in the Conn-Pod. "You ready, partner?" he asks.

Mark can't help but smile. It sounds ridiculous, straight out of a Wild West movie and out of place in the gigantic fucking robot they're about to pilot. "Absolutely."

"Welcome aboard, pilots," a female voice pipes up from the command console. "I'm Sooyoung Park, LOCCENT Mission Controller. I'll be guiding you through your neural bridge exercise today."

"Yes, ma'am." Digital HUDs spring up at eye level, displaying their vitals and the status of the Jaeger's various running systems.

"This is just a test to see if you can maneuver your Jaeger," Sooyoung continues. "Nothing flashy, please. Wendy, are the pilots ready?"

"Pilots are on board and ready to connect," Wendy responds.

"Perfect. Prepare for neural handshake."

Lucas gives him one last reassuring smile before closing his eyes. Mark does the same, inhales, regulates his breathing. He clears his mind of all thoughts, all sensations -- "Neural Drift interface initiated," Sooyoung recites -- and he's floating within nothingness once again.

The same piece of music reaches out, and Mark accepts. Lucas's memories flood his mind, just like
they had in the sim-pod, but with one last addition: Mark in the receiving bay, black umbrella against
the dull gray of stone, his eyes the only point of light in the oppressive torrent of rain.

Mark is yanked out of the memory, Black Widow’s HUDs and control panels materializing in front
of him. Right at the base of his skull, the Drift is humming, excited, rearing to go. He flexes his
hands experimentally. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Lucas doing the same, as though there
were a mirror between them.

"Right hemisphere calibrated," Wendy reports. "Left hemisphere calibrated."

Both of them position themselves into a fighting stance, and Black Widow follows within a
nanosecond, as though she were prepping for a Kwoon room fight. Mark cranes his head towards
Lucas and smiles, earning a matching grin in return.

"Calibration complete. Proofed and transmitting. Ready to activate the Jaeger."

"Black Widow is syncing up," Sooyoung confirms. "Congratulations, boys."

"Pilot to Jaeger connection complete."

So this is how it feels, Mark ponders, being connected to another human being with the sole purpose
of piloting a Jaeger. His head no longer aches -- oddly, he feels lighter, unencumbered. Powerful,
even. To Mark, the kaiju had always seemed near indestructible; in a Jaeger, he stood a chance.

He turns to look at Lucas, perfectly at ease and in his element. His eyes are alert and his stance
steady, a product of experience and expertise. His confidence, the way he moves like he was made to
be in a Jaeger, reminds Mark of his brother.

A picture of Taeyong flashes across his vision, standing tall in his cobalt blue armor. Taeyong on a
television screen, fresh from his first kaiju fight, smiling in triumph as the press congratulates him and
his partner. Taeyong in a hospital bed, recovering, permanently out of commission. Taeyong, now
the Marshal, farther from Mark than ever.

The memory passes by as quickly as it comes. Mark blinks in confusion, the Drift ringing in alarm,
his surroundings taking shape once again.
"Lee?" Sooyoung is saying. "Lee, you were out of alignment. Are you alright?"

"Yes, yeah, I'm fine." Mark shakes his head. "Lucas, you good?"

No response. Lucas is staring into the distance, staring at nothing. He might as well be catatonic. "Pilot out of alignment," Wendy informs them.

"Lucas?" he tries. "Lucas, snap out of it!" Mark turns to the control panel. "Sooyoung, what's going on here?"

"He's chasing the rabbit -- random access brain impulse triggers," Sooyoung explains, voice calm. "He's latched onto a memory, he's way out."

"Can we pull him out?" Mark asks frantically.

"You can try, but -- "

Sooyoung's voice fades away, getting more and more distant until it gives way to the sound of waves crashing against each other. The Conn-Pod dims, yellow and red lights giving way to darkness, then afternoon light. He's still in a Jaeger, but not Black Widow -- this Conn-Pod is far from new, bronze panels scratched and dented. The right side of the hull has fallen apart, exposed circuitry raining sparks into the cockpit. Hundreds of feet below him, the ocean churns angrily, drowning out all sound.

It's only until he sees the two pilots that it clicks. Tunnel Vision.

*We need to evacuate!* Kun is saying, reaching out for one of the control panels in front of him.

*No!* Lucas seizes Kun's arm. *We can still do this! We just need to --*

Lucas is cut off by an ear-splitting screech. A kaiju, injured and bleeding, angrily swipes at Tunnel Vision. They swerve to dodge the hit, straighten up, and break out into a run to ram the kaiju with
Tunnel Vision's head like a bull. Both Jaeger and kaiju fall to the ocean floor.

*Initiate plasma cannon!* Kun shouts, and the palm of the Jaeger's right hand glows white hot. Lucas and Kun raise their own hands, preparing for the kill, then --

The kaiju latches onto the Conn-Pod with an appendage, and Lucas and Kun curl up, screaming, clapping their hands to their ears. Both look like they're in excruciating pain, bordering on torture -- Mark tries yelling at Lucas to "snap out of it, it's just a memory, it's not real!" -- but Lucas can't hear him.

Neither of the pilots notice as the kaiju tears off the face of the Conn-Pod, glass showering onto the platform. Kun falls to his knees, nose bleeding, screaming his head off; Lucas is groaning, taking small, pained steps in an attempt to reach for the control panel. Barely a second passes after he presses the button when Kun collapses.

*Kun gê!* Lucas screams, kneeling to turn Kun over onto his back. His co-pilot's face is ashen, still. Lifeless. *Kun gê! Wake up!*

"Lucas! It's just a memory!" Mark cries. "None of this is real!" He reaches out to touch Lucas's shoulder and immediately recoils, white-hot pain searing through him. His ears are ringing, every nerve in his body feels like it's on fire -- he can't see, can't think, forgets about everything else except the absolute agony coursing through his veins -- he almost wishes for death, for this torment to end, when --

The pain stops, and he's in nothingness once again.

Chapter End Notes

nooo kun dont die youre so sexy aha

haechan is nonbinary, period. i will not accept misgendering of this character in the comments. yes, this is fictional, but i believe fictional characters deserve to be called by their pronouns just as much as real people do.

re update schedule... there isn't one. i can try, but writing hard, and sometimes the big old Sad just catches up with you, yanno? so i will try my best to spit chapters out asap, but there will be no promises of regular intervals between them. mianhae... i mean, i'm sorry

all of you have been sooo nice in the comments! pls tell me what u think this time too
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!