Forged In Fire
by MaverickSawyer

Summary

A sweeping story set after the events of the movie, Forged in Fire is to be the first of four major stories set in the Pacific Rim universe. Originally posted over at FanFiction.net, and now being co-posted here.

My first foray into Fanfiction of any sort, so please do review!

Notes

Please, bear with me the first few chapters as I figured out my writing style and the major plot points. THings do start to improve, I promise.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 1

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Gipsy Danger Repair Bay

April 27, 2025

0300

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

"Can't sleep?"

Mako set the hammer down and stuck the block of metal back into the furnace before turning around to face Raleigh.

"No. I'm still jet lagged. You too?"

"Yep. I was headed down to the helipad to look out over Hong Kong when I heard you working on something, so I came to take a look."

At that, Raleigh took a few steps forward, closing in on the furnace's yellow glow. He crouched down to take a look inside. The block of metal Mako had just been hammering glowed a bright orange in the intense heat. He turned back to Mako, one eyebrow quirked up. "What is it?"

Mako grinned. "The beginnings of a katana, like my family has made for twenty generations. It's for sensei's memorial."

Raleigh smiled as Mako turned back to the furnace and pulled out the block, picked up the hammer, and began to work the metal once more.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

-.--.

Mako enjoyed the simple pleasure of the forging work. It allowed her to work through her feelings and emotions while having a place to vent her energy. The therapist she had seen shortly after Operation Pitfall's completion had suggested it. Now that she and Raleigh had returned "home" to the Shatterdome, she had finally gotten the opportunity to work on the sword for sensei she had
been planning during their whirlwind tour of the world.

Redirecting her attention to the block of metal, Mako returned it to the furnace before it became too cool. It was good to be able to practice her traditional swordsmith skills, something she had not had time to do in the last few years. Yes, she had made two swords, some of the largest ever conceived and the largest built (as far as she knew), but Gipsy's Chain Swords were far from traditional. _Gipsy Danger. My creative outlet for the last few years. Gone. Along with Sensei and Chuck and Striker Eureka._

A tear crept down her face as she remembered the losses of the Kaiju War. She pulled the block of steel from the furnace, and began to work it again…

_Ting._

_Ting._

_Ting._

_Ting._

_-.--._

_Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean_

_January 12, 2025_

_Two hours after surfacing_

_WHOPWHOPWHOPWHOP…_

Mako and Raleigh sat beside each other in the fold-down seats of the rescue helicopter, holding hands as the medics checked them over. No words were spoken between them; they didn't need to. The "hangover" from the Drift was still powerful enough to convey emotions.

Elation, awe, sorrow, pain.

One of the medics looked at them quizzically. "Didn't you two just literally save the world? Why aren't you excited?"

Raleigh sighed, thinking of some way to redirect the conversation. "We're exhausted. Driving a Jaeger isn't easy in the best of times, and when you're in pain from a wrecked leg and a torn off arm, you're fighting off THREE Kaiju, and you're running out of hope, it's REALLY tough. Cut us a break."

The medic blinked in surprise at the snappish response, shook his head, packed up his kit, and made his way across the cargo bay of the helicopter. "Sorry."

Mako leaned against Raleigh as they cruised back to the Shatterdome, still two hours away. It was too much to take in at once. _Sensei, Chuck, Striker Eureka, and Gipsy Danger all gone. But the Breach was closed. Had it been worth it? All the loss? Mako's head spun._

_Beedlebeedle. Beedlebeedle._

One of the medics pulled out a tablet, looked at the incoming call source, then promptly handed it to Raleigh and Mako. "It's the Marshall."
Mako’s heart jumped briefly before her brain realized that the medic had meant Herc Hansen, not Stacker Pentecost. She gulped, nodded, and took the tablet. "Thank you." She hit the "Accept call?" button, and the screen changed to a view from the Hong Kong LOCCENT. The noise came through a second later, loud enough to make even Raleigh flinch. Herc, Tendo, Newt and Hermann were all crowded around the camera, grinning like idiots. In the background, the beginnings of a party was clearly visible.

Herc started the conversation. "Well done, both of you. You're a credit to the PPDC, and to humanity. Pentecost would be proud of you. The rabble behind me, not so much."

Raleigh chuckled. "Hell of a party starting already, I see. Tendo, my man, make sure they don't blow through all the booze before we get back."

"No promises, but I'll do my best," Tendo replied before ducking out of the camera's field of view and yelling something unintelligible.

Herc motioned for Newt to go next. "I'm sure both of you have some truly interesting tales to tell once you get back, but we need to get certain details now while they're fresh in your mind. Raleigh, what was it like in the AnteOW? HERMANN, WHAT THE HELL?"

Hermann put his cane down and tried, without success, to wipe the grin from his face. "Newton, those details can wait until the debriefing back at the Shatterdome. You are an insufferable Kaiju Groupie, even after they're gone."

"Shut up, Hermann. We've been over this already, like, a thousand times."

Herc intervened before the argument started going over well-worn ground. "Gents, knock it off. Go have a few drinks on me." He then turned back to the camera as Newt and Hermann left. "Mako, Raleigh, I'll see you back here in a few hours. I'm going to go back up Tendo on protecting some of that booze."

Raleigh laughed. "Thanks, Marshall. See you on the flight deck."

Mako put the tablet down, grabbed Raleigh's hand, and looked out the viewport at the ocean going by beneath the helicopter. *Sensei, I'll miss you...*

"-.-. -.
*Ting.*
*Ting.*
*Tink.*

Mako shook her head to clear the memories, looked at the block of steel, and gave a startled "eep!" as she realized it had gotten dangerously close to being ruined by becoming too cold during the forging process. She shoved it back into the furnace, breathing a sigh of relief.

Raleigh came over and massaged her shoulders, a worried look on his face. "You okay? You kinda zoned out there for a bit."

Mako nodded, grabbing a nearby towel to wipe off the sweat on her face. "I'm fine, Raleigh. Just... remembering. And I almost ruined the steel. Another thirty seconds, and it would have gotten cold enough to ruin the whole process."
Raleigh let her go, looking puzzled. "It's that sensitive to temperature changes? Then what if you need to, I dunno, go get something to eat?"

Mako's musical laugh filled the now-empty repair bay. "Not *that* sensitive, but yes, it can make a remarkable difference. Here let me show you how you work the steel." She pulled the steel block back out of the furnace as it glowed yellow, set it on the anvil, and grabbed Raleigh's hands with hers. "Pick up the hammer, then strike the steel as if you were driving a nail into wood. But not as hard as if you were trying to break concrete with a sledgehammer. Start at the center, then work in a spiral outwards and clockwise."

Raleigh did as he had been instructed, and the sound of hammer on steel once again filled the air.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

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Mako watched Raleigh work the metal. *Not bad for a first time. My father would have liked him. He's already found the balance between force and finesse.* "Good. Now apply a little bit of a forward motion to it as you repeat the pattern, but go from the outside to the center."

Raleigh started the new pattern, and the now-orange steel bathed them in a warm glow. *I see why she likes this. It's actually kind of fun!* "How long until we need to reheat it?"

"Soon. See how it's getting darker in color and intensity?"

"Yeah."

"Once it turns as red as the morning sun, we'll put it back in the furnace."

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Raleigh stopped hammering as he recognized the color Mako had spoken of. He placed the steel, now looking more like a bar than a block, back into the furnace. Then he paused as a confused look spread across his face. "Wait, how did I know…?"

Mako grinned. "It must have been something that bled through from a Drift. Well done, by the way. You're learning quickly."

Raleigh shrugged. "I have a good teacher."

They both stood together, silent for a few moments, watching the steel heat up again.

Mako leaned on Raleigh, sighing. "I'm finally getting tired. What time is it, anyways?" She grabbed her watch. "Nearly four in the morning. Want to pick this up later?"
Raleigh stretched. "Sure. Meet for lunch first?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Mako shut off the furnace, turned off the lights, and headed back towards her room with Raleigh. They walked silently for a few minutes, enjoying the eerie quiet of the nearly-abandoned Shatterdome. She looked around as they neared the elevator. "Do you think they'll turn this into a museum?"

Raleigh was silent for a bit. "Maybe," he replied. "God knows we need somewhere to show the world our story. What better place than here, where we made our last stand?"

They entered the elevator and headed up to the living areas, now nearly empty. With the Jaegers gone and the PPDC being stood down, it was to be expected. Only a few people remained. Some of the techs had been busy mothballing certain areas: unused repair bays, empty quarters, Scramble Alley. Other techs worked on emplacing new sensors at the Breach. It was still only a fraction of the force present four months earlier, though. They soon reached their rooms. They looked at each other, knowing what the other was thinking. Not tonight.

Mako peeled off her tank top, fingerling the still-healing scars around her right shoulder from where the circuitry suit had overloaded when Raiju tore Gipsy's right arm off. And to think I once wanted these and was jealous of Raleigh for having them... Now I wouldn't wish them on anyone else.

She also still felt the phantom pains of the feedback from Gipsy from time to time, something Raleigh told her would fade with time. Mako hoped so. It could be irritating when they occurred while she was working on a project. Or when I'm carrying a tray of food in the cafeteria... That was a mess. Poor Herc had Jello in his hair! Mako giggled at the memory. Oh well, today was a good day. Let's hope tomorrow goes just as well.

She stretched her arms, changed into some pajamas, and climbed into bed, staring into space in the direction of Raleigh's quarters across the hall. Soon, she was asleep.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 2

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Crew quarters, corridor 47B

April 27, 2025

0930

Raleigh awoke to a feeling of dread and fear. His head whipped around taking in his surroundings for a second before he became fully awake. *Ok, it's not me, so... Crud.* Raleigh pulled on a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt, left his room, and walked across the hall to Mako's room.

Knockknockknock.

The door opened slowly from the force Raleigh's knocks, revealing Mako in the middle of another nightmare. He sat down on the edge of the bed, waiting patiently for Mako to awaken. He didn't have to wait long.

"AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" Mako sat bolt upright, her arm flashing through the motion to deploy Gipsy Danger's Chain Sword... right into the side of Raleigh's head.

"OW!"

Mako snapped out of the nightmare, reality settling back in. "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Raleigh rubbed his head, grinning. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Just try not to drive the Chain Sword through my head again, okay?"

Mako blushed. "Did I wake you again? I'm so sorry." She looked at the clock. She sighed. "Oh well, might as well get up. I'm not going to be able to sleep after that."

"How bad was it?"

"Bad."

"If you want to talk about it, remember that I'm always here for you."

"Thank you, Raleigh." Mako hugged him.

"So, want to change that lunch date to a late breakfast?"

"Sure. Meet you there at 1015?"

"Sounds like a plan."

-.--.

Mess hall

1015
Mako and Raleigh arrived in the mess hall together. It was still a shock to see the place so empty. They had their choice of tables, something that took some getting used to. Still, they sat at the old Gipsy Danger table.

As they sat down, Mako paused for a moment, a confused look on her face. She reached into her pants and pulled out a piece of confetti. Her eyes bulged. Raleigh looked at it and laughed.

"Yeah, I'm still pulling bits of confetti from the clothes I wore in New York. That was one hell of a parade."

Both of them sit silent for a moment, remembering their recent trip to New York…

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February 15, 2025

New York City

The confetti fell so thick they could barely see to the next block. The crowd was deafening. Mako and Raleigh sat on the top of a HMMWV from the PPDC, flown in to New York just for this occasion, as it rolled through Manhattan on their way to the UN.

Raleigh leaned over to yell in Mako's ear so she could hear what he was about to say. "ARE YOU GETTING CONFETTI INSIDE YOUR CLOTHES TOO?"

Mako nodded slowly, then spat out a piece of paper that had drifted into her mouth. "WHY DO THEY DO THIS, ANYWAYS?"

Raleigh smiled. "LONG TRADITION. ROMEO BLUE GOT ONE AFTER THEIR FIRST KILL. WHEN WORLD WAR TWO ENDED, THE RETURNING SOLDIERS AND SAILORS WERE GREETED WITH THESE. WE SAVED THE WORLD, SO WE GET THE BIGGEST ONE EVER."

Mako rolled her eyes at the American logic, but went along with it. When Herc told us we were going to New York, I didn't expect THIS! But he is the Marshall, so we have to do this.

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Both Mako and Raleigh looked at each other as they returned to the present.

"Were you…?"

"New York?"

"Yeah."

Mako got up and walked to the garbage can, seemingly intent on throwing away the little scrap of paper. But when she got to the point of throwing it away, she hesitated. Why can't I bring myself to throw away this little tiny piece of paper? Instead, she stuck it into her pocket and returned to the table. I'm sure I'll figure it out. Besides, there's still probably one or two more lurking in my laundry…

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15 minutes later
As Mako started the furnace, Raleigh looked around the impromptu sworsmithing shop Mako had set up. There were several different hammers, a wedge-like tool that reminded Raleigh of the wedge used to split logs, an anvil, and a large trough of water. Scattered around were several pieces of scrap steel, including one that seemed oddly familiar…

Mako saw him staring at the piece of metal. "Yes, that's a piece of hull plate from Coyote Tango. It's low in carbon, so it's perfect for forming the heart of the blade."

Raleigh looked at her, curious. "I always thought that katanas were made from a single piece of steel. They're made from more than one?"

"Correct. A simple katana, like the one we're working on, has a harder steel on the outside, and a heart of softer, more flexible steel. This allows it to be remarkably strong."


Mako paused for a moment, thinking. He's right. I never thought about it that way before. "I guess you're right."

"So, the steel we worked on last night… where'd it come from?"

"Herc gave me a scrap piece of Striker Eureka."

Raleigh nodded. "So the sword will be made from the two Jaegers that he rode in. I like it."

A sad smile crossed Mako's face. "Yes. I thought it would be fitting." She looked at the furnace, saw it was ready, then stuck the steel bar from earlier into the furnace.

Behind a tool chest, Raleigh spied a little bit of red. "What the…" Getting down low, he found out what it was: a Dixie cup. He pulled it out its hiding spot, chuckling. "Mako, look what I found!"

Mako turned around, saw Raleigh holding the cup, and burst into a fit of giggles. "That was one crazy party, wasn't it?"

"Man, my head hurts from just THINKING about that hangover…"

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Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

January 13, 2025

0100

The party had been raging for hours, and showed no signs of slowing down anytime soon. The sound of fireworks filling the skies over Hong Kong managed to leak through from time to time. The main floor of the Shatterdome was a sea of people celebrating the success of Operation Pitfall. The LOCCENT, however, was much more somber. Raleigh turned away from the window overlooking the main floor, and walked back towards the senior staff. Newt was passed out in a rolling chair, a Dixie cup of schnapps not far from his left hand. Hermann was singing some German song, terribly off-key, and wandering out the door into the hall beyond. Tendo was on the phone with his wife Angela and his year-old son, cup of coffee in hand. Mako and Herc were both
drowning their sorrows, Mako with her fourth beer and Herc with what appeared to be a bottle of rotgut vodka from the crew of Cherno Alpha. Man, Pentecost wasn't kidding. Those guys CAN get anything.

Tendo hung up the call, put the coffee cup down, and grabbed a bottle of beer from the nearby cooler. He walked to the window overlooking the floor of the Shatterdome, took a pull from his beer, and stared into space. "Raleigh, what do you think we do next?"

Raleigh walked over next to Tendo and took a sip of his beer before responding. "The usual media circus at first. I mean, how often do two people save the world? The media's gonna be all over me and Mako."

Herc sauntered over as only a thoroughly drunk Australian could. "Yep. You're going to be in high demand for media appearances for the next few MONTHS, or until something else comes along. After that? Who knows? We nearly bankrupted several major economic powers fighting this war, there's the bloody Wall that now needs to be dealt with, and the Church of the Breach is going to be PISSED. I wouldn't be surprised if they started a holy war against us for what we did today."

Raleigh paused for a moment. "You really think they'd try to kill us?"

Tendo sighed. "Who knows, man? No one has any experience in this." He looked down at the floor. "Makes me miss Pentecost a lot now. He'd know what to do."

Herc chuckled. "Starting with busting some heads over the mess downstairs."

The three of them laughed, then went back to sit with Mako.

Raleigh held up his beer. "To Stacker Pentecost."

Herc and Tendo echoed Raleigh. "To Stacker Pentecost."

Mako paused for a moment, then replied, "To sensei."

Clink.

-.-.-

Raleigh shook his head to clear the memories away. He crushed the cup and threw it at a nearby trashcan. It bounced off the rim and into the can. Three from downtown, he thought.

Mako was watching the steel intently, so Raleigh headed over to join her. As soon as he arrived, she handed him the hammer and pulled the steel from the furnace. "Ready?" Raleigh nodded. Mako set the steel on the anvil, then looked at Raleigh. "Just like last time. Focus on stretching the bar out."

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 3

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Gipsy Danger Repair Bay

April 27, 2025

1417

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Raleigh set the hammer down, and Mako put the steel back into the furnace. She looked at it as it reheated, going from the color of the morning sunrise to a bright yellow. "We're close. Just one more round and it should be ready."

"So, should I get that wedge tool yet?"

"Not yet… But soon."

Raleigh nodded, grabbed his water bottle, and took a long drink from it. This was proving to be a time-intensive process. He then put the bottle back down, picked up the hammer again, and stood at the anvil. "Ready when you are."

Mako nodded once, removed the steel bar from the furnace, and quickly placed it on the anvil. Raleigh began to hammer away at it again, drawing it out a little bit longer. Finally, Mako saw it reach the desired length. "That's good." She grabbed the bar and stuck it back into the furnace. "Want to go get some lunch?"

"Sounds good."

The two Rangers walked back to the mess hall. Mako realized that she still had that piece of confetti in her pocket. And now I know just what to do with it…

Raleigh and Mako grabbed some food and headed out to the helipad to enjoy the spring afternoon. With the reduced helicopter traffic in and out of the Shatterdome, several helipad landing spaces had been turned into either Kwoon areas or, in the case of the one Mako and Raleigh headed towards, an outdoor dining area. They sat down and watched the ship traffic in the harbor as they ate.

After a while of silently eating and enjoying each other's company, Raleigh decided it was time to ask a question that had been nagging him for weeks. "Mako?"

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about this for a few weeks now, and I have a question for you."

Mako looked at Raleigh, her face a mix of curiosity and confusion.
Raleigh paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Where do you think you'll go, now that the PPDC is being stood down?"

Mako blinked, not sure what to make of the surprise question. *For a moment there, I was positive he was going to ask something else. Something more… Hollywood. "I… I haven't really given it any thought."* She stared out at the seagulls wheeling around in the sky near the spot where they had killed Leatherback over four months prior. The bones were still being broken down and removed. "I guess I hadn't expected to ever make it this far. Closing the Breach."

Raleigh looked out over Hong Kong, remembering the fight with Otachi. "I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do in the future. Going back to Alaska is certainly on my to-do list. Beyond that, I'm not sure." He paused for a moment, then looked at Mako. "Maybe get back in touch with my sister."

Mako continued to stare out over the harbor. Raleigh could almost hear the gears turning in her head. *Hell, I can almost hear her thoughts. Ghost-Drifting is weird like that.* He scooted around the table and sat next to her. She leaned on him, seemingly from habit. Her mind was clearly elsewhere. Raleigh sat and waited.

A few minutes passed before Mako shook her head slightly as if to clear away a mosquito. "Sorry about that. I was thinking about what I should do with my future."

"No worries. I figured that's what was going on."

Mako stood up from the table and grabbed her tray. "Want to go work on making the first fold?"

"Sure."

They walked back to the hangar, unconsciously holding hands.

-.-.-

*Hong Kong Shatterdome*

*LOCCENT*

*April 27, 2025*

*1614*

Max trundled up to Herc, dropped his ball, and whined. The message was clear: *Boss, let's go play!*

Herc looked up from his work, then down at Max. "You silly dog. Let's go." He stood up, grabbed the Chuckit (A gift from Tendo to make it easier to throw the ball for Max while his collarbone healed), and whistled at Max as he headed out the door of the LOCCENT. "Come on, boy." Max trotted along at Herc's heels.

Herc and Max entered the elevator, and Herc hit the button for the Shatterdome floor. Max sat down and looked at Herc, expectant. Herc stooped down and scratched Max between the ears. "Who's a good boy?" Max barked once. "Yes you are!"

*Ding.*

The doors of the elevator opened up, and Max sauntered out onto the floor, looking around for all the people that he was used to seeing. Confused, he turned back to Herc, whining.
"I know, they're all gone, aren't they, boy. Here, GO FETCH!"

Max tore down Scramble Alley after the ball. Herc chuckled as Max skidded on the polished floor trying to turn around at speed. After a quick jog to the ball, Max came galumphing back happily towards Herc. Herc picked up the slobbery ball with the Chuckit, wound up, and once again launched the ball down Scramble Alley. Max tore off after it.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Max and Herc both stopped, seeking the source of the sound. *It seems like it's coming from Gipsy's bay... What's going on?* Herc and Max both converged on the source of the sound, curious. Still, the sound continued.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Max waited for Herc, then they both rounded the corner to see Mako stabilizing a wedge of hardened steel, while Raleigh took what looked like a sledgehammer to it, driving it into a bar of yellow-hot steel. Herc and Max looked at each other for a moment, then observed the two Rangers at work.

Mako spoke first. "Ok, that's good. Get ready to bend it."

Raleigh took the proffered wedge, set it aside, then took position with the sledge. "Ready."

Mako slid the bar of steel, now a bright orange, away from her until the notch they had just driven into it was aligned with the side of the anvil. "Go."

Raleigh wound up, then in a shower of sparks, delivered a powerful blow to the end of the bar off of the anvil, bending it at a right angle to the remaining piece. Mako expertly flipped the bar over, and Raleigh drove the tag end flat with two more precise blows. Mako then slipped it back into the furnace. "One down, three more to go for this piece."

Herc stepped into the work space. "Impressive work, you two."

Raleigh and Mako looked like they had been hit with cattle prods as the snapped to attention. "Sir."

"At ease, Rangers. You've earned some downtime." At this, Max happily swaggered over to Mako and offered her his ball, which she promptly tossed out into Scramble Alley. As expected, Max tore off after it, barking happily. Herc grinned at his beloved dog, then grimly turned to business. "As you know well, the Jaeger Program cost trillions of dollars. Yes, it did save the human race, but at the cost of nearly bankrupting several major economies." Herc paused for a moment to let that sink in. "The Secretary General has asked me to find some way to demonstrate that at least some of the R&D that was put into making the Jaegers has applications in the post-Kaiju world."

Max came back, dropped the ball at Raleigh's feet, and whimpered at him. "Okay, go get it!" The ball disappeared into Crimson Typhoon's old home, Max in hot pursuit. Raleigh thought for a moment. "Wasn't the Pons first intended to be a man-machine interface for a single operator, before
Herc nodded. "Yes, and Pentecost was actually one of the first to try out a basic version of it. A single arm, mind you, but yes. What's the point?"

Raleigh smiled. "Better prosthetic limbs for amputees, sir. Ones that respond to the thoughts of their users. I'm sure there are plenty of people who could use them."

Mako chimed in as well. "What about the power supply systems for the Mark IV and V Jaegers? They're far more safe and stable than a nuclear reactor. Baseline power generation at nuclear power plant levels without the meltdown risk or the stigma of nuclear power."

Herc grinned. "See, that's why I keep you around. Both of you have brought up some good points. I'll take them to Tendo and see what he can come up with. Ah, there you are, Max. C'mere, you rascal." Max flopped down at Herc's feet, worn out and happy. "I see the sword is coming along well?"

Mako nodded. "Thank you much for the steel. It means a lot to me."
"Least I could do for you."

Raleigh nodded at Herc's shoulder. "How's the collarbone doing?"

Herc sighed. "Taking its sweet time to knit itself back together. Downside of gettin' old. Bit of advice for you youngsters: Don't get old. It's no fun." He winked at them and turned to leave. "C'mon, Max, want some food?"

At the mention of food, Max got off the floor and tore off towards the elevator. Herc shook his head. "That dog has a second stomach instead of a brain, I swear." He walked off after Max.

Mako and Raleigh laughed heartily as they pulled the block of steel out of the furnace. Without a word, they looked at each other and nodded.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*
Mako awoke with a start, recognizing the feelings bleeding through the Ghost Drift. Raleigh's having another nightmare. I should check on him. Mako pulled on some sweatpants and a tank top, and padded silently across the hall. As usual, Raleigh's door was unlocked. It feels like another Alaska nightmare. He's cold, alone, and in pain. Mako quietly eased the door open, stepped into the room, and eased the door shut behind her.

Raleigh was wound up in his sheets, tossing and turning, muttering something in his sleep. Mako debated whether or not to touch him for a few moments. What could it hurt? If it reassures him, he'll calm down and go back to sleep. If it wakes him up, the nightmare stops. Either way, he can calm down and maybe go back to sleep. It's the least I can do.

Mako sat down on the side of Raleigh's bed, grasping his right hand between both of hers. "It's okay, Raleigh," she whispered, "it's just a memory." She thought back to their first Drift, and with a smile, whispered in his ear, "It's just a memory. Don't chase the rabbit." Raleigh stopped thrashing about, but still muttered something unintelligible. The emotions she felt emanating from him became less intense, but were still there. She stayed at his side and looked at Raleigh's rather Spartan room. Even mine is more ornate than his. And I though my room was simple!

His desk had several stacks of photos on it, presumably ones that he had decided to discard. Mako let go of Raleigh's hand, and walked over to the desk. Many of the photos were of his brother Yancy. He's letting go. Moving on... Mako looked around some more, and saw a small strip of photos stuck to the wall. She walked over to get a better look. Some were obviously years old, from Raleigh's childhood. Others were from his time with Gipsy Danger in Los Angeles, Lima, and Anchorage. Raleigh and Yancy posed in front of the Hollywood sign; in some ruins, probably Incan; and having a snowball fight with some techs. But sitting in the place of honor, in the center of all the photos, was one printed just a few weeks ago.

The celebration photo they took as we stepped off the chopper, Mako realized. Soaked from head to toe in champagne, grinning like idiots, on top of the world. Happy. Whole.

Raleigh stirred, and Mako turned to check on him. Not surprisingly, he was now awake. Mako blushed, bowed deeply, and turned to leave. "I'm sorry to have woken you, Raleigh."

Raleigh reached out and caught her hand. "Don't be." He looked her in the eye. She looked back. "Thank you."

Mako didn't know she could blush more than she was already, but apparently it was possible, since she was doing so now. Raleigh let her hand go, and she bolted out the door and across the hall. I know I have feelings for him, and he for me. We both felt it in that last Drift... So why am I so nervous about this? Mako rolled over and tried to sleep, but her mind kept coming back to the
photo on Raleigh's wall. Why was she so fixated on it? Yes, they had been kissing, but that was out of joy, not an expression of love, wasn't it? Or was it? Mako’s head reeled. Her mind drifted back to that afternoon, trying to make sense of it all…

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Hong Kong Shatterdome

Helicopter landing pads

January 12, 2025

Mid-afternoon

The door of the helicopter opened, and Mako and Raleigh were nearly drowned under a veritable tidal wave of champagne and noise. Through the crowds of cheering techs and soldiers, Mako could see the senior staff approaching, a photographer in tow. They HAD to bring a photographer… Well, I would have too, if I were in Herc's shoes. Tendo got to them first, and wrapped both of them in bear hugs, being mindful of the bandages on their shoulders that covered their fresh circuitry suit burns. Newt and Hermann stood off to the side, looking proud and smug, respectively. Finally, Herc and the photographer worked their way through the crowds. Herc motioned the crews to quiet down. Then, he cleared his throat, stood in the doorway of the helicopter, and began to speak.

"Well done, all of you. Yes, it's a bittersweet victory, but a victory nonetheless. And I'll take a victory any damn day of the week." A cheer rose from the crowds, and Herc waited for it to die down. "We've lost many people over the last twelve years. Friends, family, coworkers." Herc paused to choke back the emotion in his voice. "But they'd tell us now, Marshall Pentecost excluded, to go have one HELL of a party. After all, it's not every day you help save the world." Another roar from the crowds. "Right now, don't mourn the lives lost; celebrate the lives yet to be lived. Celebrate the lives SAVED!"

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other and kissed. The camera flash went off, the crowds cheered themselves hoarse, and they were once again doused in champagne.

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Mako smiled at the memories. And Raleigh is asleep without any further nightmares. She laid back and closed her eyes, and finally sleep came to her.

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Crew Quarters, Corridor 47B

April 28, 2025

0930

Mako was getting dressed after her shower when a knock came from the door. "One moment, please."

Newt's voice came from the other side. "No worries. I'll go talk to Raleigh first."

Mako paused half of the way through lacing up her right boot. What does Newt want with both of us? Some sort of Drift experiment with his new Geizler Array? More questions about Operation
Pitfall? Someone to test his new musical ideas on? She finished lacing her boots and stepped outside. Raleigh and Newt turned to face her. The look on Raleigh's face spoke volumes. *It's a Drift test. Oh well, best get it out of the way. "What is it, Newt?"

Newt looked at his feet for a moment, as if he was working up the courage to ask the pretty girl at school out on a date. "I... kinda need some baseline data for the experiments with the new Pons variant I'm working on. The one I used to Drift with the Kaiju. I'm calling it the Geizler Array because, you know, I kinda made it, and if it works..." Newt trailed off as he realized he was rambling. He looked at Raleigh for backup.

Raleigh sighed, and took over the explanation. "We need to perform a lab Drift to help calibrate the interface for future experiments. We're the only remaining confirmed Drift-compatible team on hand right now." He shrugged. "It's one of Herc's Return On Investment projects."

Mako looked at Raleigh, then Newt. *There isn't any escaping this. It's now, or later. Might as well do it now.* "Okay, when do you want to start?"

Newt hesitated for a moment. "See, uh, that's the thing: the test isn't ready yet. I just wanted to make sure that you would be okay with it before I started making preparations. Because I didn't want to waste time..."

Mako held her hand up to hush Newt. "I understand. Just let us know when you're ready."

Visibly relieved, Newt headed towards the elevator. Raleigh and Mako watched him go, then headed towards the mess hall. They walked for a few minutes in silence before Raleigh spoke.

"So, about last night... Thank you for being there for me. It's been a huge relief having someone who understands what I've been through to be there for me."

Mako stopped, looking confused.

Raleigh turned around to face her. "You okay?"

Mako sighed. "Let's talk about it over breakfast, okay?"

Raleigh nodded his agreement, and started walking again, as Mako instinctively grabbed his right hand with her left. They continued to the mess hall without a word. It had become a habit while on their media blitz, going all around the world. It was also part game, as they tried to push the limits of the Ghost Drift and see if they could pick up anything from the other. Usually, there wasn't even an emotion to be felt. Today, however, Raleigh was feeling a storm of emotions coming from Mako. He said nothing about it, since they had already agreed to talk about it over breakfast.

As they entered the mess hall, the smell of fresh pancakes and waffles washed over them, bringing back fond memories of childhood to Raleigh. Mako felt some of the emotions that it triggered. Comfort, love, family. *Something I wish to have in the future.* Raleigh and Mako loaded up their trays with food, then hit the "patio" overlooking the harbor. They settled onto the same bench as yesterday.

Raleigh looked at Leatherback's bones, still towering over the port. "Looks like they finished the scaffolding on that rib. It's going to be interesting to see them demolish the skeleton."

Mako looked over to the port as well, remembering the fight like it was yesterday. She grinned as she said, in her best imitation of Raleigh, "I think this guy's dead, but, let's check for a pulse."

Raleigh roared with laughter at her impression, as she had done a fantastic job of it. Mako laughed
along with him for a while, before digging into their breakfasts for a few minutes. Soon, however, it was time for the promised talk.

Mako set her dishes aside, and Raleigh followed suit. "Ok, you said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

Mako gathered her thoughts for a moment. "Yes. About last night… I'm sorry I ran out on you. It's just that… My mind was all over the place."

Raleigh nodded silently.

Mako gulped and continued. "You know I've never had a real romantic relationship before…" She stopped, blushing.

Raleigh sighed.

The Talk. He'd heard the stories about how the Kaidanovskies Talk had gone. But that was the only example he had to go off of, and his relationship with Mako was very different from the late Russian couple. "Yeah, I kinda gathered that in our Drifts. What's the point?"

Mako looked at her feet, embarrassed. "I… I looked at the picture on your wall of us after we landed…"

Raleigh nodded. So that's the problem. "Look, that's the official photo…"

"It's not that… it's the feelings behind it. We were on top of the world. We'd survived. I was living in the moment." She froze up, choking on the emotions threatening to overwhelm her again.

Raleigh took her hands in his. "So was I. You know that better than anyone else."

Mako nodded. "It's just… I'm not sure if there was anything deeper behind it." She looked at Raleigh. "And that's what scares me. What if there is something more than just the Drift that's bringing us together?"

Raleigh wasn't quite sure how to respond. This was new ground for him, too.

Mako continued. "I know I have feelings for you that I can't sort out. Friendship, certainly. Respect, sure. But there's something that I can't quite figure out that's bothering me." She looked out onto the Pacific Ocean, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I wish sensei were here. He'd know what to do."

Raleigh laughed. "He'd probably give me a kick in the ass for leaving his daughter an emotional wreck." Mako laughed. Then, a light went on in his head. "Hey."

Mako looked at him.

"There is someone who you can turn to: Dr. Lightcap."

Mako's face brightened. "You're right. Or I could kick your ass for sensei. Care to dance?"

Raleigh got up and grabbed their dishes. "Of course. Can't have you getting rusty, now can we? OW!"

Mako giggled as she dodged a playful return swipe from Raleigh. "Now, now, Mr. Beckett. Only on the mats in the Kwoon."

"You're the one who threw the first punch."
"Point."

They reentered the Mess Hall, once again holding hands.
Mako and Raleigh put the *hanbo* staffs back into the storage racks and put their boots back on. Both were grinning, and flushed from their recent workout.

Mako worked her right shoulder a little to try to drive away the phantom pain of Gipsy's lost arm. "That was mean of you to take advantage of the phantom pains."

Raleigh bowed his head, looking regretful and sheepish. "Yeah, it was. I'm sorry, but it was instinctual. I saw an opening and I took it." He stepped behind Mako and began to gently massage her shoulder. "Feeling any better?"

"Yes. Thank you." Mako began to walk back towards the entrance to the Shatterdome, then stopped and turned to face Raleigh. "I've been thinking about the question you asked me yesterday…"

"And?"

"I…" She choked up, not sure how to express the thoughts she had had not long ago while waiting for their pancakes to be finished. *I want to have a family at some point. With who, though?* "Never mind. Later."

Raleigh shrugged. "Okay. It's not a time-critical question. I still haven't figured out what I want to do in the future either."

Mako nodded, focused inward. *Yes, I have feeling for Raleigh, and I know he has them for me. But are they love, or something else? This is so hard.* Her hand drifted into her pocket, where she found the little piece of confetti still waiting. She made a decision. "You know that piece of confetti I found yesterday morning?"

Raleigh smiled. "The one you didn't throw away? What about it?"

"I want to make it a part of the sword."

"How?"

"The two halves of the steel we folded haven't been welded together yet. I'll slip it in and let it become a part of the steel. Sensei should have been a part of the parade, and this way, he can still have a memento from it."

Raleigh nodded, understanding where she was going with this. *It's like the pictures were for me: A way to cope with the loss, and a way to help let go of some of the sorrow and grief.* He followed Mako back towards Gipsy's repair bay. However they didn't make it all the way back before
Raleigh's cell phone rang.

"I come from a land down under..."

Raleigh sighed and took the call. "Sir."

Mako stopped, giggling inwardly at Raleigh's choice of ringtone to represent Herc Hanson. I wonder what mine is. Shibuya Pop? She smiled for a moment.

Raleigh's face changed to one of surprise. "Now? Uh-huh. Hang on, I'll be there in about three minutes. Do you want Mako there too? Ok, on my way." He hung up. "Herc has a project for me to work on. You going to be okay alone for a while?"

Mako nodded, curious. "What kind of project?"

"He didn't say."

"Go, I'll be fine."

Raleigh scooped her up in a hug, then kissed her on the forehead. "Don't have too much fun without me!" He then took off jogging down the hall.

Mako stood there, rooted to the spot as surely as if Raleigh had put superglue on her boots. He kissed me. Not in the heat of the moment or as celebration. He loves me...

And I love him. It all makes sense now. That feeling I get around him, when he's there for me when I wake up in a nightmare... or when I'm watching over him like this morning... It's love.

I'm in love.

Mako practically skipped down the hallway to her workspace, head in the clouds.

-.-.-

Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

April 28, 2025

1045

Raleigh knocked on the doorframe. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Herc looked up from the computer. "Come in, Raleigh. I know I was a little vague about the project, but it's still being pieced together." Herc pulled up a computer diagram of what appeared to be the Shatterdome, but several changes were clearly visible. "We're going to turn the Shatterdome into a museum."

Raleigh came in closer to the image. "Is that...?"

"Crimson Typhoon? Yeah. We're going to put her on display to show what a Kaiju could do to even the toughest Jaegers." Herc slewed the image around a bit. "But this is what I want your help with."

Raleigh saw the item Herc was talking about. Gipsy's left arm. "What about it, sir?"
Herc turned to Raleigh. "I'm sending you to Alaska to oversee the recovery. Once you and the arm get back, Tendo will lead a team in cleaning the arm and making it ready to display." The holographic display changed to a map of Gipsy's engagement with Knifehead. A point of light pulsed, with a label that Raleigh couldn't read from the angle he was at. "We know where the arm is. We're just waiting for a patch of decent weather to go perform the salvage."

Raleigh stopped and thought for a bit. *It would be a fantastic piece to have on display. Nothing like that and Crimson Typhoon's wrecked chassis to attest to the power of a Kaiju. What's the expected window to head out and recover the arm?"

Herc grimaced. "It's still more than a month out. We have to wait for the weather to wind down and the seas to calm. After all, the arm weighs a lot, and recovering it in the best of circumstances would be tricky. The weather out in the Gulf of Alaska right now is just too dangerous." He paused to scratch Max between the ears. "I only need you there for PR. All the actual planning and management will be handled by the salvage team. So, what do you say?"

Raleigh pondered the task. *It's an easy job, and I get a chance to go back to Alaska. No brainer. "Sure."

"Outstanding. I'll make sure to give you a little more heads-up once the job gets closer."

"Anything else, sir?"

Herc stood up, and looked out over the Jaeger bays. "I'm going to be blunt about this, Raleigh. I've seen how you and Mako get along. And since Stacker isn't here anymore, I see it as my place to keep an eye on his daughter for him."

"Sir?"

"I know that you have feelings for her, and her for you."

"Yes, sir."

Herc turned around to face Raleigh. "You break her heart, and you'll have to answer to me."

Raleigh gulped. "Yes sir."

Herc grinned. "Relax. Unlike Stacker, I'm not going to kill you. Just give you a good bollocking. Now, go work on that sword. The memorial isn't going to wait."

Raleigh relaxed and exited the LOCCENT. *Great. Now I've got Herc watching me and Mako as I try to sort this out. He reached the elevator, paused for a moment, and then decided to take the stairs in order to give himself more time to think. 

-.-.-

*Gipsy Danger Repair Bay

1055

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*
Mako hammered the metal together, trapping the ashes of the parade confetti inside the block of steel. She hummed happily along to the Shibuya Pop song playing in her earbuds. *I wonder what the project Raleigh will be working on is about...*

"Hey."

Mako pulled out an earbud, put the hammer down, and put the steel back into the fire. Turning to Raleigh, she grinned and pushed some of her hair out of her face. "What's the project?"

Raleigh sat down on a nearby toolbox, hands in his pockets. Mako came to join him. "I'm going to Alaska for a few days sometime next month. We're fishing Gipsy's old left arm from the Gulf of Alaska and bringing it back here."

Mako cocked her head in confusion. "Why? Gipsy's gone. What use is the arm?"

Raleigh turned around and gestured at the Shatterdome. "This is all going to be turned into a museum. Some of the Jaegers are going to be pulled from Oblivion Bay and brought here for display. Crimson Typhoon is at the top of the list, since she's one of the least contaminated."

Mako looked around. *There's space for a LOT of museum displays. Maybe they'll put the skeleton from Leatherback over in one of the old Jaeger bays, and used the service gantries to allow visitors to get up close...* Ideas swirled in Mako's head for the museum.

Raleigh once again could feel the gears turning in Mako's mind, so he stood up, grabbed the hammer, pulled the steel from the furnace, and set to work.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Mako snapped out of her reverie and watched Raleigh working the steel. *Perhaps sensei would have approved of him under more fortunate circumstances.* On a whim, she decided to ask a question that was bothering her. "Raleigh, I have to ask you something."

Raleigh kept working the steel. "Anything."

"Do you love me?"

*CLANG!*

Raleigh completely missed the steel block and hit the anvil instead. In his surprise, he dropped the hammer, which then fell to the floor. He paused for a moment to look at her, confusion written on his face. "What?"

Mako figured that he would be rather surprised. After all, it was an unusual question. "Do you love me?"

Raleigh put the steel back in the furnace and picked up the hammer. *I did NOT see that coming.* *What brought that on?* He looked at the face of the hammer, inspecting it for damage. "I've never put it that way to myself before. I've always considered it a very close friendship. But, yeah, I guess I do." He blushed. "Do you?"

Mako got off the toolbox and walked over to Raleigh. She looked him in the eyes, pausing for a
"Okay… So now that we've both admitted that, I have to ask: What the heck brought that on?" Wait… I kissed her on the forehead before I went to see Herc. Was that it?

Mako saw the light go on in his head and grinned. "Did you figure it out?"

"Yeah… I do. I didn't even think about giving you that kiss. It just… felt right." He scooped her up into a hug. "Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"So that's the reason you've been so wound up lately. You weren't sure about… us."

Mako looked up at Raleigh and nodded. "This is new to me."

"To be honest, this is the first serious relationship I've ever been in, too."

"I know." Mako sighed. "Let's just take it one step at a time and see where it goes."

"Sounds good to me."

They held each other for a few moments more before stepping back. Raleigh then blanched as he realized something. "Oh no… Pentecost must be rolling in his grave."

Mako slugged him in the shoulder, hard. "You know he doesn't actually have a grave."

"It's a figure of speech, Mako."

"Well, I think he would have accepted it with time."

Suddenly, Mako's cell phone went off, the ring tone some sort of techno music. She sighed as she pulled it out to answer. "Hello, Newt. Yes. Yes. Slow down, I can't understand…" She sighed again. "Hang on, Raleigh and I can be in the lab in a few minutes. No, just explain it when we get there. Okay… Newton, take a breath, or else you will pass out. We're coming, I promise." She hung up.

Raleigh turned off the furnace and put the hammer back where he had grabbed it from. "Time for Newt's test?"

"Yes."

"Well, no sense in putting it off." Raleigh grabbed Mako's hand, and the two of them turned out into Scramble Alley, and walked toward the door leading back towards Kaiju Science. 

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High above, looking down from the windows of LOCCENT, Herc Hansen smiled and took a sip from his coffee. He could see the signs, even through the armored windows and from more than 150 meters away. Good for them.

Tendo walked over with a tablet of documents. "Sir…"

"One moment, Tendo."

Tendo followed Herc's gaze. "Look at that… They make a cute couple."
"Yeah." Another sip from the coffee cup. "So, what am I signing away today, Tendo?"

"Couple of older SAR helicopters. They're going to Micronesia."

Herc walked back to his improvised office with the tablet. "Good. Hate to see them go to waste." He signed the documents, handed the tablet back to Tendo, and sat back down at his computer. *What I wouldn't give to be young and in love once more...*

Herc took another sip of his coffee, and turned back to his work.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 6

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Former Kaiju Science labs

April 28, 2025

1100

Mako and Raleigh walked through the door of the Kaiju Science lab and froze, surprise and confusion clearly written on their faces. Hermann's side of the lab was as spotless as ever, but Newt's side... Mako was tongue tied. *It was clean.* No Kaiju bits sitting all over the tables. No mad-scientist experiments running under the fume hood. Even the papers were stacked neatly on Newt's desk. "Wow."

Raleigh scratched his head. "Either Hermann finally snapped, or someone has hired a housekeeper for Newt." His gaze settled on a pair of recliners on Newt's side of the room. Each had a squid cap resting on the headrest and numerous sensor leads draped over the arms. Before he could take a step in the direction of the chairs, a voice came from behind them.

"Neither."

Mako and Raleigh whirled around, instinctively dropping into mirrored ready stances.

"Wow, I didn't realize I'd scared you that bad." Newt smirked and took a sip from his coffee cup. "Before you ask, yes, I cleaned up my side. There's no Kaiju anymore, so why study them or fantasize about them? After all, I'm not so fond of them after that encounter with Otachi. Thanks for the save, by the way. Anyways, you have no idea how elated Hermann was to see me cleaning up my side. If he could have danced, he would have been dancing all over the Shatterdome. Really, though, I think some of his cleanliness rubbed off in that Drift with Baby Otachi, 'cause it really started after we closed the Breach." He paused to take another sip of coffee, and Raleigh took the opportunity to jam a word in edgewise.

"So, the Drift experiment?"

"Oh, right, yeah." Newt darted over to the chairs and gestured to them. "Whichever side you're comfortable with."

Mako and Raleigh instinctively took the same sides as they had in Gipsy Danger. They slipped on the squid caps and laid back. Newt attached the leads to them. "These are to monitor vitals. I doubt anything unusual will happen, but it's better to be safe than sorry, right?" The two Rangers looked at him, concerned. "Okay. Here's how it's going to go. It's going to start out like a normal Drift. Once you get synched and the handshake is strong, I'm going to ask one of you to chase the RABIT."

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other, clearly not liking where this was headed. Raleigh spoke up. "You do recall what happened last time one of us chased the RABIT."

"I do. Which is why I've configured the interface slightly differently than it had been in Gipsy. This time, you're not blindly chasing the RABIT. It's more like you're a hawk, hunting it, *herding it* to a
particular point. You'll be totally in control."

"You don't herd rabbits."

"Just bear with me, okay? Unlike last time, you can pull out at any time. Just say, 'I want out', and I'll end the handshake."

Raleigh looked at Mako. She shrugged. "No sense in not trying it." She turned to Newt. "Ready."

Raleigh laid his head back. Might as well get it over with. "Ready."

Newt picked up the remote, thumb poised over the button to start the handshake. What did Tendo always say? Ah, yes. "Prepare for Neural Handshake in 15… 14… 13…"

Raleigh spoke up. "Ready to step into my head, kid?"

Mako grinned. "Please, you first. Age before beauty, old man."

Raleigh laughed with Mako, then let his mind go blank.

"5… 4… 3… 2… 1…"

The universe imploded around the Rangers as the Drift took hold.

-.-.-

Driftspace

Raleigh cast the line out over the river-like curves in the metallic booming sound as the Conn Pod had been compromised water was spraying everywhere are we going Mori, Mako please step forward and face the camera flash as Jasmine took a photograph this moment let me get the camera wait, what are those alarms are going off, brace for impact Mako, watch me work the two pieces of steel together they will make a sword deploying will it be fast enough yes, it is let's get this son I love her just as much as if she were a son why is it so important no rationing we'd the two steels together we are whole…

-.-.-

Kaiju Sciences lab

Reality reasserted itself and both the Rangers eyes snapped open. Newt watched the neural handshake on a haptic monitor. Wow, their neural activity is even higher than Baby Otachi’s was! How can they withstand that and still drive a Jaeger? Incredible. "Okay, handshake is strong and holding at 100%." He hit the "record" button on the Geizler Array, then looked back to Mako and Raleigh. "Alright. Who wants to chase the RABIT?"

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other. I'll do it, Mako.

Okay.

Raleigh closed his eyes and dragged up a memory from a recent TV interview.

-.-.-

Driftspace
Mako and Raleigh looked around at the hustle and bustle of the studio. It was so much like the LOCCENT during a drop, with people running around checking monitors, talking into headsets, and wires everywhere. Raleigh was nervous. He looked at Mako. She looked beautiful, with the blue tips framing her face. Her uniform, however, was clearly uncomfortable for her. *I've never seen her wear one before. It doesn't look as good as the Drivesuit does.*

Embarrassment radiated from Mako… *wait, not from her.* Raleigh turned around to see Mako behind him. This one was in her more usual cargo pants and t-shirt, not a uniform. *Right, this is a Drift. Wait, Did I just chase the RABIT?* "Sorry, let me get back in control. I lost focus. I chased the RABIT."

_No you didn't lose focus. Remember, we're supposed to chase the RABIT this time._ A sly grin spread across the real Mako's face.

Newt's voice sounded like God, coming from everywhere, yet nowhere. "No, don't reign it in, Raleigh. Chase the rabbit to your heart's content. Just remember, if you want to stop, just say, 'I want out'."

One of the techs came over to Memory Mako and Raleigh. "You're on in five minutes. Remember, you don't have to answer everything. If it's too uncomfortable, just… kind of shift in your seat and redirect the conversation." He looked over his shoulder. "Come on, let's get you seated."

Raleigh's form suddenly split in two: One in uniform, walking with Memory Mako, the other standing there in the t-shirt and cargo pants he was wearing in real life. Real Mako walked over to Real Raleigh.

"Well, this is new."

Newt's voice rang out in its God-like fashion. "Tell me what's going on. Remember, I can't see inside the Drift."

Real Raleigh looked around. Everything had was not in the line of sight of his Memory self began to blur and fade to black. "It seems like I can't see anything that I couldn't see when the memory took place."

"Where are you?"

"New York, at that morning show interview. January 23."

"Great details. Those will help me interpret the recordings later. Keep going."

Mako chimed in. "Raleigh and I have been duplicated. One set is us, in the Drift. The other set is Raleigh's memory of the event. Although… Raleigh's face is blurred, and the back of his head doesn't exist." Mako walked around. "I'm walking over towards myself… We're on the… well, the interview couch." *What the…* "The side of my face away from Raleigh is still there, though."

"Probably because he has it fixed in his memory from elsewhere."
The hosts of the TV show came over. One of them, a woman, came over and shook both of their hands. "Before we go on the air, I just want to say thank you for your service… and sacrifices." She looked at Mako as she said the last. Memory Mako's face darkened in sorrow. Memory Raleigh's anger flared. Leave her alone. She's reminded of that every time we do an interview.

Real Mako was surprised by this, and turned to Real Raleigh with wide eyes. I didn't realize you were so protective of me.

You're the closest thing I have to a family now.

What about Jazmine?

Real Raleigh got a pained expression on his face. "I Want Out."

Raleigh, I'm sorr…

The Drift faded away.

-.-.-

Kaiju Sciences lab

"...rry."

Newt looked at Mako. "What?"

Raleigh pulled the leads off and yanked off the squid cap, and stormed out of the lab.

Mako, who had begun to sit up, flopped back in the chair, fighting back tears. Raleigh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. It just slipped out.

Newt gently removed the leads and squid cap. "You okay?"

Mako nodded, dazed. "I said something I shouldn't have. It really upset Raleigh."

Newt gave her a puzzled look. "Anything I can do?"

"No, Newt. But thank you for the offer."

Mako forced herself to get up from the chair and follow Raleigh, even though she just wanted to go run to her room and curl up. Why did I say that? Is that even the right term in the Drift? "Saying" something? And how did I know about Jazmine? He's never spoken of her. Did I get a tiny fragment from him in the Drift? Whoever she is, there must be some seriously bad blood between Raleigh and this Jazmine to cause that reaction.

-.-.-

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Security walkway above Scramble Alley exit

5 minutes after Drift termination

Raleigh sighed as he sat with his feet over the edge of the walkway. Why did Mako have to bring up Jazmine? How did she know about her at all? My files, or the Drift?
"Raleigh?"

Raleigh would recognize Mako's voice anywhere. He could also tell that she was really upset. He didn't care.

Mako walked closer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. It just… slipped out."

"Leave me alone."

"Okay."

Mako turned around and walked a few meters down the walkway, then sat down with her feet over the edge.

Raleigh sighed again. That's not what I meant by "leave me alone," Mako. But you knew that already. You know me better than anyone else in the world now. Better than Yancy, even.

They sat in silence, watching the traffic in Victoria Harbor.

Mako got up and walked towards Raleigh. He didn't protest. What's the point? I'm going to have to explain this eventually. He continued to stare out over the harbor.

Mako leaned down to whisper in his ear. "No pulse."

Raleigh's head whipped around. "What?"

Mako laughed as she stood back up.

Raleigh groaned. Dang it, why is it so hard to be mad at her for long?

She leaned back against the Shatterdome's structure. "Who's Jazmine?"

"My sister."

"Why is she such a sore point for you?"

"What is this, an interrogation?"

"Only if you make it into one. Which you seem intent on doing."


"But you still consider her family, which is why I got that snippet in the Drift."

Raleigh sighed. "Yes, she's still family."

Mako shrugged. "So, why haven't you contacted her?"

Raleigh opened his mouth to say that he didn't care for her either, then stopped. Mako's right. Why haven't I tried to reach out to her?

Mako saw the shame creep across Raleigh's face. I've done enough damage today. She turned to leave.

"Wait."
She did.

"I'm sorry for being so rude after you brought up Jazmine. That was wrong of me."

Mako turned around. Raleigh looked sheepish. "Apology accepted."

Suddenly, the Kaiju sirens began to howl all across the Shatterdome. The two Rangers looked at each other in fear. *No, this can't be happening. Not possible.* They tore off towards the LOCCENT, afraid of what they would see when they got there.

All the while, the sirens continued to howl.
Chapter 7

Author's note: I've found that I can write for Mako easily, so I'm going to challenge myself to try and write more from Raleigh's POV. Also, you can expect to start to see some time skips in the near future as the sword progresses. Speaking of which, I need to drag Mako and Raleigh back to working on that soon.

Forged in Fire, Chapter 7

Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

April 28, 2025

1130

The Kaiju alarms continued to howl as Mako and Raleigh rushed into the room. The two Rangers looked at the displays, then at Tendo.

Tendo was clearly in a panic, trying to figure out what was going on. "You two!" He pointed at the Rangers. "Check every sensor you can. We need to find out what's going on."

Mako and Raleigh bolted to separate stations and pulled up feeds from the new sensor network. They began to go through them.

Herc stormed in, face dark with rage. "WHAT THE BLODDY HELL IS GOING ON?!"

Tendo paled. "I don't know, sir. The alarm system seems to think that there's a Kaiju emerging from the Breach."

"I thought the Breach was closed."

"I did too."

Mako then saw something that made her flop back in her chair, scoot across the LOCCENT, and kill the alarm.

Everyone turned to look at her.

"It was seismic activity in Challenger's Deep. An earthquake."

Raleigh put a camera feed up on the main display. It was grey.

Tendo sat down in a chair. "That camera is basically right on top of the Breach… or at least where it used to be."

Newt dashed in. "What's going on? Is there another Kaiju? Did the Breach reopen?"

Herc stared at the screen. "If it is an earthquake, would it stir up the silt on the bottom?"

Raleigh and Mako looked at each other, concerned. The nuke might have glassed it all.

Tendo was scrambling to find something on the computer. "Aha! Samples taken from the site of
the Breach revealed that, despite the nuclear detonation, there was still significant amounts of silt and sediment in the area. It was described as being a grey color." He hit a few buttons, and the camera feed went black. "If the Breach was open, that feed would now be an orange color." He slicked back his hair, calmer by the second.

Herc relaxed. "Well, good to know that the sensors work… and that it was a false alarm."

Raleigh thought for a second. "What if it hadn't been a false alarm?"

Everyone froze.

Herc slowly turned to face Raleigh, his gaze like ice. "Mr. Beckett. You had better pray that never happens, because that would be the end of the world… and all the sacrifices made over the last twelve years would have been for nothing."

Raleigh gulped.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir."

Herc smiled. "Good! Now, can you take Max for a walk? I have a phone call to make. Several, actually."

Raleigh and Mako both looked at each other and shrugged. Max sauntered over with his ball. His expression was easy to read. Play!?

Raleigh grabbed the ball from Max. "Come on, Max. Let's go play fetch in Scramble Alley."

-.-.-

Scramble Alley

5 minutes later

Raleigh wound up and threw the ball down Scramble Alley, and Max tore off in hot pursuit, barking joyfully the whole while. Sometimes I wish I was a dog. Life seems simpler, and a heck of a lot more joyful.

Mako walked past, headed towards the workspace where she had been spending many of her waking hours the last few days. Me too, I guess.

A whine at his feet snapped him out of his daze. Max sat at Raleigh's feet, ball in his mouth. "Who's a good boy?" He took the ball from Max and threw it down into Cherno Alpha's old repair bay. Max raced after it.

Mako reappeared in the corner of Raleigh's vision, bathed in a yellow glow. She looks beautiful like that. Really makes her blue tips stand out, too.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.
Raleigh looked back down Scramble Alley to see Max swagger up to him, clearly worn out. "Alright, let's take you back to Herc."

Max laid down and gave Raleigh a pitiful look. But I'm tired!

Raleigh sighed. Hate to do this to Herc, but this is the only way other than carrying him... "Food?"

Max predictably tore off towards the door, happily barking and once again full of energy. Raleigh shook his head and followed him. After all, bulldogs can't operate elevators.

--.--

Herc was still on the phone with someone when Raleigh walked into the LOCCENT. "Yeah, I hear you on that one. I know we weren't as expensive as that bloody Wall. It's just that the Wall didn't get wrecked as often as a Jaeger did." A pause. "I was there, remember? Who put down Mutavore?" Another pause. "Uh-huh. Look, all I'm asking is just look at the specs for these. They're the future of your field, mate. I'm offering you guys first crack at the tech because I trust you." Herc saw Raleigh and Max and held up a finger. One moment. "If you don't want it, fine. I've got three others lined up to talk to about this. It'll be your loss." Herc's eyes rolled and he groaned. "Whatever, mate. Just don't come crying to me when your company gets bit by this decision to turn down Jaeger Tech." He hung up. Max, sensing his master was upset, sauntered over, whining. "C'mere, you silly dog. You're at least smarter than those guys in Europe."

Raleigh turned to leave.

"Hang on, Raleigh. I need your opinion." Herc pulled out a chair and a dog biscuit, which he gave to Raleigh and Max, respectively.

Raleigh sat down. "About what, sir?"

Herc put his head in the palm of his left hand and rubbed his face. "I'm trying to pitch some of the Jaeger tech for use in the civilian market. The Pons, the digital plasma batteries... Hell, even some of the proprietary alloys we used to make the Jaegers strong enough to support their own weight."

"And?"

Herc sighed. "Not many companies are interested. Seems that the PR war we lost to the Wall has still left us with a stigma. Even after we closed the Breach."

"I didn't know it was that bad."

"Yeah. Me neither... until today."

"What can I do?"

"Actually, it's not your help I need... It's Mako's. She's familiar with the human-machine interface used to drive a Jaeger. That's one of the technologies that I'm trying to pitch. We've got a few interested parties, but no takers yet. They want a demo first."

Raleigh got up and walked to the windows of the LOCCENT. He looked down on Mako, still bathed in the yellow glow of the furnace and steel. He watched her work for a moment. Then, an idea came to him. "Sir, I have just the thing..."

--.--
"You sure about this?"

"Yes. It is the only way."

"You positoOW!"

"Newt, you are a pest some times. Now, Dr. Gottlieb, can you help me get this steel ready?"

"Hermann, stay back. She'll…"

"Newton, we've had this discussion… Don't call me…"

"By your first name, ten years of experience, blah blah blah. Yeah, I know."

Raleigh walked around the corner to see Mako wearing a squid cap and a circuitry sleeve on her right arm, which were both connected to a small, waist-mounted computer. This then fed to a robot arm about a meter away. Newt was hopping up and down, holding his right foot in his hands, and Hermann was sticking a bar of steel into the furnace. Raleigh could piece together what had gone down. He sighed, shook his head, and walked over to Mako. "You look good."

Mako blushed. "You're just saying that to make me relax."

Raleigh leaned in as if to kiss her, but Newt tripped over a loose cable and fell to the floor before he could.

"I could use a hand up… and a roll of duct tape." Newt looked at Mako and Raleigh, doubled over with laughter. *Gee, they're no help.* "Hermann?"

"Hmph."

"Guys? Please?"

Raleigh walked over and hoisted Newt off the floor.

"Thanks."

"No problem. And next time, stay away from her when she's stressed and wearing combat boots."

"No need to tell me that again."

Hermann has started to walk towards the door leading to the elevators. "Come along, Raleigh. We're going to be late."

Raleigh walked to Mako, hugged her, then kissed her on the forehead briefly. "I love you."

Mako looked up at him. "Go, or you'll be late."

Raleigh raced after Hermann.
Newt sat down on a toolbox. "You know, you two make a cute couple."

Mako sighed. *He's out of reach. He learns quickly.* "Do we now."

Newt grinned wide. "Yep."

Mako gave a feral grin. "Good. Because you don't want to see us when we're angry."

Newt scrambled backwards. "Uh, yeah." He looked at his watch. "Right, checklist time. Let's get ready to demo that arm interface."

Mako grabbed a tablet with her left hand. "Item number one…"

---

*Shatterdome Helipad*

*1100*

The executive helicopter settled to the pad as the rotors whined to a stop. Onboard were the Chief Technology Officers of a half-dozen firms specializing in prosthetics and bionics. Herc had invited them to see the technology that the Jaeger program had used to interface man and machine.

Raleigh waited for them with Herc, Hermann, and Tendo. *We've had this tech for a decade. Why haven't we done this sooner? It would have been a PR coup for us. "Jaeger Tech allows boy with missing legs to walk again."*

The CTOs stepped out and onto the helipad. One of them was visibly green. Raleigh made a mental note to check on him later. Herc stepped forward to meet them. "Welcome to Hong Kong, and welcome to the Shatterdome. I know you want to see the Pons in action as soon as possible, so if you'll follow me…” He headed towards the doors. The CTOs followed.

Raleigh was about to step through the door when his phone rang out with a bit of Shibuya Pop. *Oh no… Please, don't be your shoulder having an episode. Not now… "What's up?"

"Raleigh… I'm nervous."

*Come on, not the shoulder…*

"My right shoulder… I'm getting the warning signs of another episode."

*Damn. "Do you think you can do the demo?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Hang on a sec. I'm on my way." He hung up, and sprinted after Herc. He reached him a few moments later.

"Raleigh, you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Raleigh leaned over to whisper in Herc's ear. "We all might be seeing them if I can't get Mako's shoulder to relax."

Herc paled.

The CTOs began to mutter to themselves.
Raleigh needed some way to buy him and Mako a few minutes. *Wait... Mr. Green Face...* "Sir, one of the VIPs doesn't look so hot."

Herc nodded slowly. "Go. You've got five minutes, tops."

"Thank you."

Raleigh slid to the back of the group, while Herc approached the airsick CTO.

"Hey, mate. You don't like helicopters, do you?"

"No. I hate them. They make me air sick."

"Tendo, don't we have something to help with nausea in the med bay?"

Tendo thought for a moment. "Yeah, but it's normally used to help treat more severe cases... like from a botched Drift."

The CTO turned to face Tendo. "I'll take it."

Herc winked at Raleigh, then led the group down a different corridor. "See, we've got a number of other things you might be able to market. Anti-radiation, anti-nausea, really powerful headache treatments..."

Raleigh ran to the hangar as if his life depended on it. *It kinda does, in a way. We can't fail this demo...*

And for the first time in years, Raleigh found himself praying.
Mako grimaced. *I can't have it happen now. Not during the demonstration! "Gaaaaahhhhhrrrrgggg..."

"MAKO!" Raleigh came running into the work space. "Please tell me you're okay."

"Raleigh, I don't know if I can do this without triggering an episode."

"I know you can, Mako. Focus on your movements, okay? Just roll your shoulder a little."

Mako did so, despite the feeling of pins and needles in her arm. "Is the arm moving?"

Newt, who had been standing *well* back from Mako, confirmed it. "Yeah, it's moving. Just like you are."

"Good." She clenched her hand, then looked over at the prototype. Its hand was clenched too. She rolled her wrist, and the robotic wrist followed. "Okay, Good so far..."

"I come from a land down under..."

Raleigh answered his phone while Newt snickered in the background, out of reach of Raleigh and Mako. "Sir?"

Mako realized that he was in reach of the arm, though... *Let's see...*

"Sir, we need a few more minutes... Uhm... Yeah, we'll do our best." He hung up.

Newt burst out laughing. "That's your ringtone for Herc? OW! Mako, not funny."

Mako giggled as she let go of Newt's arm.

Raleigh turned to her. "We've got one minute or less. Can you do this?"

Mako bit her lip. "Yes."

He walked over and hugged her again. "Anata wa, Mako o okonau koto ga dekimasu. Watashi wa, anata ga suru koto ga dekimasu shitte iru." *You can do this, Mako. I know you can."

Mako straightened up and squared her shoulders. "Anata wa tadashī. Soredewa, kore o yatte mimashou." *You’re right. Let's do this."

Just as Raleigh backed away, Herc, Tendo, and the CTOs walked in, followed by a clearly tired
"Gentlemen, as you well know, Jaegers were commanded by the thoughts and movements of their pilots. The technology that drives this connection was derived from the work of Dr. Caitlin Lightcap. However, the Pons enables more than just the connection of man to machine: It allows the connection of machine to man." Mako proceeded to pick up a block of wood with the prosthetic prototype… even though the arm was behind her and unable to be seen. A respectful murmur rose from the CTOs. "As I just demonstrated, not only do I drive the arm and give it commands, it sends back information about its position and its environment. In particular, it gives haptic and force feedback, allowing me to do this." Mako then set the block of wood down… then reached over and picked up an egg. Without cracking it.

One of the CTOs spoke up. "We've been able to do that for years now."

Mako nodded. "Yes, but only with an invasive series of surgeries to redirect nerves and implant interfaces." She peeled off the circuitry sleeve. "This is now powered by brainwaves alone. No sensing muscle movements, no rerouted nerves. If you lose a limb, you never forget how to use it. It's all still in your brain. That is the beauty of the Pons."

Mako then proceeded to set the egg back into the cup she had pulled it from, then grabbed a rose. "I can't get textured from it yet, but I can get pressure and sharp points. So I'm still avoiding the thorns, even though they won't damage the arm."

Another CTO stepped forward. "Those are great examples, but I want to see something more… everyday."

Raleigh walked forward with two bowls of rice, each with a pair of chopsticks. He placed one in front of the arm, and the other in front of Mako. Mako expertly picked up the chopsticks with both arms at once, then proceeded to grab a bite-sized chunk of the rice. This drew a respectful murmur from the gathered CTOs.

The skeptical CTO had a gleeful look on his face. "That's impressive. No one has done that before with a prosthetic. Even Walter Reed Medical Center's experimental arms can't deal with chopstick like that." He turned to Herc. "I'm convinced. Thank you. You'll be hearing from the CEO soon-"

"AARGH!"

"MAKO!"

Raleigh raced to Mako's side as she fell over, grabbing her right shoulder. Raleigh caught her and eased her to the floor. "Newt, power it down!"

The CTOs were shocked. "What's happening?" "What's wrong with her?"

Herc sighed. "It's not an effect of the Pons, I promise. Mako and Raleigh were the pilots of Gipsy Danger during the mission to close the Breach. During that mission, Gipsy's right arm was torn off." He looked at Mako and Raleigh as Mako pulled her dress shirt off to reveal scars around Mako's right arm and shoulder. Raleigh began to work her shoulder carefully, helping restore the feeling to it. The CTOs gasped as they saw the scars. Herc continued. "This is one of the side effects. In a Jaeger, you feel any damage you take as pain. It makes you respond more quickly, I assure you. Imagine having your arm torn off. How painful would that be?" He paused to let it sink in. "Despite the lost arm being on Raleigh's side of the Jaeger, Mako seems to have taken the brunt of the physical and neurological damage from the loss of the arm. Our experts still can't figure out why."
Raleigh helped Mako to her feet. "You okay?"

"Yes, I am now." She turned to face the CTOs, bowed, pulled off the squid cap, and darted off, clearly embarrassed.

Raleigh shook his head in dismay, then took off after her. "Mako, come on. It's not that bad!"

Herc decided it was time to talk business again. "Gentlemen, if you'll follow me, we'll go to the LOCCENT to talk about some of the areas we're still improving on for this technology. Newt, come with us, please."

"-.-."

_Crew Quarters, Corridor 47B_

1121

"Mako! Please, wait up for just a moment!"

_She had failed. She'd seized up during the demo. In front of the Chief Technology Officers of several major firms. She'd never live it down. The shame of it!_

"Mako! Please!"

She reached their rooms and began to open a door. "I failed, Raleigh."

"No you didn't. You did a wonderful job."

"I appreciate the gesture, but I had an episode in front of all of those people." She turned to face him. "I failed." She hung her head.

"Hey." Raleigh put a hand under her chin and lifted it. She didn't fight it. "Look at me."

Mako had tears in her eyes.

"You didn't fail, Mako. You knew that there was a risk that might happen, but you went ahead and performed the demo. Not only that, but you completed it too." Raleigh smiled. "Also, you forgot your shirt."

Mako blushed as she realized that she had just run through the Shatterdome in a sports bra and slacks. "Thank you, Raleigh." She turned back to the door. _Why won't it open?_

"Uh, Mako…"

"Yes?"

_Not again… "Remember after the first time we sparred in the Kwoon?"

Mako's face went pale. _The day just keeps getting worse. "Excuse me…"

Raleigh felt sorry for Mako. _She's having a really tough day._ Raleigh decided to leave her alone for a while. "If you need me, I'll be up in the LOCCENT. Just call me."

Mako nodded, then closed the door.

"-.-."
Mako's quarters

Mako powered up her computer, then went to Facebook. Raleigh hasn't contacted Jazmine yet. I caught that through the Drift during the last test of the Geizler Array yesterday. So, let's see what I can find on her…

Mako input Jazmine's name into the search bar. Can't be too hard…

Half a dozen results came back.

Mako browsed through the results, looking for hints at an Alaskan childhood. One stood out. Sacramento, California? Isn't that where the Gold Rush started?

Mako wanted to send her a message, but that would be… awkward. Hrm… not many friends. Mako sent a friend request.

Less than a minute later, Jazmine accepted the request… and sent her a message.

Jazmine: OMG! Are you THE Mako Mori?

Mako sighed. Off to a great start, Mako.

Mako: Yes, I am.

Jazmine: So you know my brother?

Mako: You might say that.

Jazmine: Can you slap him for me, please? I've been trying to contact him for a year now, but he's not responded.

Mako stopped. How much about Raleigh's time after Yancy's death should she reveal?

Mako: He's been… busy.

Jazmine: I get him being busy after you guys sealed the Breach and all, but before? Where was he?

Mako: Alaska, working on the Wall.

Jazmine: Do they not have internet there?

Mako: You'll have to ask him.

Jazmine: Can you convince him to at least check his Facebook?

Mako: That, I can do.

Jazmine: Thank you so much.

Mako: No problem.

Mako logged off of Facebook, put on a t-shirt, then went hunting for Raleigh, a tablet in her hand and a grin smeared across her face. I am going to get him in touch with his sister, even if I have to physically drag him all the way to Sacramento.
Chapter 9

Author's note: Why Sacramento for Jazmine's new home? Simple. I can add a lot of depth to the story there, as I live in Sacramento. It's also a logical spot for people to have moved from San Francisco after Trespasser and K-day. Plus, it allows... Wait, can't spoil some of the plot elements I have in mind. ^_^

Forged in Fire, Chapter 9

Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

May 7, 2025

1145

"Thank you all for coming to see the demonstration, gentlemen. I'm sorry I can't go with you to the helipad, but I have an important conference call to make."

Mr. Airsick was still a little green around the gills, but looking better. "No, thank you for having us. And please pass along my appreciation to Miss Mori for her demonstration, even when she knew it could trigger the flare-up of her injury."

Herc nodded. "I will, don't worry."

Tendo guided them towards the door, gesturing at his watch behind his back. Watch the time, sir.

Might as well get on with it...

Herc hated dealing with the Ranger Memorial Board of Directors, especially since Operation Pitfall. "We're so sorry for your loss, Marshall Hansen." Yeah, right. I'm a grown man, I can take the loss of family and friends. Even if it is my only son and my best friend that were taken from me...

Herc put the phone on speaker as he dialed into the conference call. "Sorry about the delay. Had some VIPs looking at some of our tech."

"No worries, Marshall. We're glad you can join us. Now, we've narrowed down the main memorial statue design to 10 candidates. You each received the email containing the designs, yes?" Murmurs of consensus rumbled from the speaker as Herc pulled up the images in 3D on the LOCCENT display normally used to monitor Jaeger systems. Some of these are absolute bullpocky, but that's one man's opinion, and he has no say in the matter. I'm just here to "advise" the decision process.

"Okay, we're going to narrow it down to the top three designs today. Anybody have any last comments before we begin that process?"

Herc bit his tongue. I'm the Marshall of the PPDC. Can't come across as a sergeant, even if that is what I truly am...

"Okay, let's begin..."

Raleigh walked into the LOCCENT, saw Herc at work, and started to leave.
Herc gestured for him to stay. *Someone to keep me from flying off the handle at these guys.*

Raleigh sat down at a terminal and started checking news feeds and sensor reports from the Breach Zone… Until Mako walked in, a predatory gleam in her eye and a tablet in her hand.

Raleigh took one look at Mako and apparently decided he should make a run for it.

Herc decided to put one of Tendo's headsets to continue the conversation, and took the phone off of speaker mode. Just in time, because a yelp from a surprised Mako filled the LOCCENT. Herc covered the mic for a moment. Without looking behind him, Herc put on his NCO voice. "OUT, BOTH OF YOU!"

Raleigh tore off down the hall, yelling something about jasmine and blackmail. Mako was close on his heels, shouting something in Japanese.

Herc shook his head. *Dang kids. I'll deal with it later. But what does a flower have to do with blackmail?*

"Marshall, are you still there?"

"Sorry, had to deal with something real quick. Where were we?"

---

Raleigh felt Mako's arrival more than he saw or heard it. *Uh-oh... She's hell bent on something with me.* He looked in her direction… and immediately decided it was time to run. Unfortunately, Mako was in his only path for escape.

Unfortunately for Mako, that is.

Raleigh ran right at Mako and scooped her up as he ran out the door.

Mako let out a yelp of surprise as Raleigh ran out the door with her slung over his shoulder, then stopped long enough to set her down. "Raleigh, we need to talk about Jazmine…"

"Jazmine? What? No, not now… Wait, what's that… You wouldn't blackmail me, MaAAAAHHHHH!" Raleigh tore off down the hall as Mako took chase.

"Koko ni modotte shutoku shi, anata!" *Get back here, you!*

"Gonna have to catch me first!"

"Ā, watashi wa anata o buji ni kyatchi shimasu. Shite kara – YAAAI!" *Oh, I'll catch you alright. And then -*

Raleigh had just run around a turn, barely missing a passing technician. Mako had had to slip between the bewildered man and the near wall, making it with inches to spare. She started to gain on Raleigh again, spitting curses the whole way.

Suddenly, Mako was in striking range. She leapt onto Raleigh's back.

"OOOOOFFFFF!"

Both Rangers fell to the ground, Mako atop Raleigh. "Gotcha!" She wrapped her arms around him, making sure to hold on tight.
Raleigh stood up, taking Mako with him. "Leggo, Mako."

"Nope." She stuck the tablet in his face. "Now, look at the pretty tablet, Raleigh…"

Raleigh looked at the tablet, then looked over his shoulder at Mako's face. "Mako… Facebook? Really?"

"Yes, Raleigh… And I'm not letting go of you until you log in to your account."

"Then you're going to be hanging on for a while."

"That's fine. You're strong. You can take it."

"Carrying you around all day, or logging in?"

"Either way, I win."

"How do you win from being carried around all day?"

"Because eventually you'll get tired and log in, and I get to pester you all day."


Mako started to hand him the tablet… then stopped. "Promise me you won't just drop it when I hand it to you?"

"Drat, there goes my plan."

"I'm not letting go of you or the tablet until I can see you're logged into your account. And yes, I know which one is yours."

Raleigh hung his head in defeat. "Okay, I yield to the master of annoyance." Raleigh grabbed the tablet and logged into Facebook. "Happy, Mak-oh…"

"Yes. Now you see the problem. Why won't your sister contact you? Because you shut her out."

Mako let go of Raleigh and walked around in front of him, arms crossed in dismay. "Why?"

Raleigh leaned against the corridor hall and ran his fingers through his hair. "I… just did. I guess because I wanted to be alone. After Yancy…" He stopped. "I need to make things right. But how do I make up for five years of not talking to her?"

Mako grinned. "By picking up the phone and calling her."

Raleigh was not convinced. "I don't have her number."

"Lucky for you, I do. Here, I wrote it down for you."

Raleigh took the piece of paper. "Mako…"

"Hush. Call her tonight. Come find me afterwards."

"Mako."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."
Mako bowed slightly. "You are very welcome, Raleigh." She turned to leave.

"Oh, and one other thing, Mako…"

Mako stopped. "Yes?"

"Anata ga hoka no dare sono gazō o hyōji shita baai wa… Watashi wa anata ga shawā-chū ni Bon Jovi ni utau no watashi no kiroku o shutoku suru hitsuyō ga arimasu." If you ever show anyone else that picture… I'll have to get out my recording of you singing to Bon Jovi in the showers.

Mako turned around, her face bright red in embarrassment. "You wouldn't…"

Raleigh howled with laughter as he started running away, a very angry Mako in hot pursuit.

-.-.

Hong Kong

Kowloon Boneslum

May 7, 2025

1700

Newt had not wanted to go out of the Shatterdome for some time. Shortly after the victory party, actually. So, today he had forced himself to go. Shortly after leaving the Shatterdome, he found himself wandering aimlessly. Since he had no particular destination in mind, he continued to wander, taking in the sights of the city while not under the threat of a Kaiju attack.

I used to love Kaiju. I've got the tattoos to prove it, something that I will have to deal with for the rest of my life. Newt looked at a wrecked building still being repaired. Otachi changed that for me. Now I don't love them. Respect them? Yes. Admire the work that was put into their creation? Most certainly. Fear them? Oh hell yes.

But not love.

Newt looked around again. He was near where Otachi had shoved Gipsy Danger through a building. The amount of force that required… remarkable. All that remained of that building was a pile of debris. After all, Otachi had gutted the building while she pushed the Jaeger through. Newt remembered the after-action reports mentioning a spray of acid. He turned around, seeking the spot. Aha. There it is. Still being repaired. And down below… Yes! Scraps of melted steel and glass. Let's see what I can take back to the lab. Newt loved how he could still learn from the Kaiju months after the Breach had been sealed. This was a chance to study the potent acid Otachi had used, and figure out how to safely harness its destructive potential for the betterment of mankind. What could you use that for? Hmmm… Search and rescue operations in urban wreckage. Carefully apply it to a slab of concrete, and watch it be eaten away… No, too risky. Don't want to spill it on a survivor. Newt realized he was at the pile of debris. He casually pulled out a bag and a pair of gloves, donned the gloves, and collected a few samples. Now I can reverse engineer that acid! I hope. Putting away the gloves and samples, Newt began to wander again.

I love this city. It just bounces back from everything that gets thrown its way. A testament to the human spirit? Or to making a buck where a buck can be found? Either way, it's impressive… and a little scary. Newt looked around again. Fong and Tull? Huh. Time to go visit ol' Hannibal Chau. Can't wait to see what he's gotten into now. Newt retraced the route he had used almost four months earlier when he had sought out a Kaiju brain. He's one tough dude, cutting his way out of
Baby Otachi with a knife. Newt stopped in front of the apothecary. The guards were there, so Chau was still in business doing something. Newt entered the store.

"Pssst."

Newt looked at the clerk behind the counter. "No, no bone powder. The last guy who offered me some got killed by a baby Kaiju."

The clerk recoiled in horror.

Newt smiles sweetly. "Can you tell Mr. Chau that an old friend is here to pay a visit?"

The terrified clerk nodded and picked up a phone. "Mr. Chau? An old friend is here to visit." A pause. "He wants to know which old friend."

Newt continued to smile. "Tell him 'Otachi.'"

The clerk was confused, but did as he was told. "He says 'Otachi'."

The shelves behind Newt ground open. Score. He turned around… and there stood Hannibal Chau.

Chau looked at Newt. "Give me one reason I shouldn't just kill you where you stand."

Newt panicked. Uhoh, should have thought this through. I am in deep trouble now, and no Jaeger is going to distract the monster this time. "Uh, I'd make a mess of your pretty shop?"

Chau thought for a moment. "You've got a point. Come on in here."

Newt walked into Chau's lair, and the shelves slid shut behind him. "I was glad to hear you survived. Not many others can say the same thing."

Chau turned around to face Newt again. "You're not here on a social call, are you?"

"Maybe. Depends on what you want to talk about."

"How about we talk about how MY ENTIRE EMPIRE IS ABOUT TO CRUMBLE BENEATH MY FEET? NO NEW KAIJU MEANS THAT NOW I'M OUT OF FRESH SUPPLIES, AND MY BUSINESS WILL FOLD IN LESS THAN A YEAR!"

"You're welcome."

"Cocky little bastard, aren't you."

"Yup. Helping save the world tends to do that."

"Huh."

"Look, if you're running out of Kaiju stuff… why stay in the market? Use your money to launch another business. One that's a little more… legitimate."

Chau leaned in towards Newt. "What do you have in mind?"

Uhoh… I'm still stuck. Where's Gipsy Danger when you need her?! Stall for time Newt. Think! "I'm a scientist, not a businessman."

"If you were, you'd be a terrible one."
"No argument from me."

Chau stood up straight, and walked to the window. "Most Kaiju dealers are running towards drugs or arms. I, however, agree with your idea of becoming more… legitimate. The trouble is, what to become?" He rounded on Newt. "You, Dr. Geizler, have some wonderful technologies at your disposal."

"Like?"

"Don't play dumb with me. The Drift. The Pons."

"So?"

"I want them."

*I am SOOOO dead…*
Forged in Fire, Chapter 10

Hong Kong

Hannibal Chau's apothecary

May 7, 2025

1745

Newt was panicking. He wants the Pons and the Drift technology. Herc's going to kill me… "Wh-why? What could you use them for?"

Chau's smiled wide, baring his gold-plated teeth. "The civilian market for the Drift… Can you imagine what it could be?"

"No, because you have to be compatible in order to Drift with someone…"

"Says the man who Drifted with two separate Kaiju brains. So obviously, you've got something new and improved up your sleeves. I want in on it. I'll even offer you a position with the new company I build. How does Chief Technology Officer sound? Huge R&D budget. Freedom to pursue any idea that comes to mind." Chau reached into his desk and pulled out a bottle of liquor and a pair of glasses. "So what do you say, Dr. Geizler?"

"What happens if I say no?"

Chau shrugged. "I let you leave and I find someone else."

"Can I think about it?"

"Yes, but the moment you leave, the offer is off the table."

Oh god. "Can I call someone?"

"No."

Newt's mind spun. "What direction did you want to take the company?"

Chau turned to the window. "To be honest, I'm kinda figuring this out as I go. I hadn't expected you to drop in like this." He turned to Newt. "Makes me wonder if the PPDC is still watching me."

"N-n-not that I-I'm aware of, no. Why would we?"

"Maybe because I funded you for the last days of the war. Maybe because I'm a war profiteer who make his bucks off of your enemies."

Newt walked to the window and looked out over the boneslum. I need to decide.

"So, what's the deal, Dr. Geizler? Yes or no?"

Newt turned to Chau and stuck out his hand. "Deal."
Chau grinned and took Newt's hand. They shook on it. "Well, then. Welcome aboard."

-.-.-

Hong Kong Shatterdome
Helipad
May 7, 2025
1800

Raleigh pulled out the slip of paper Mako had given him earlier. *I know it's early in the morning in California... But Mako said do it tonight.*

He dialed the number and hit the call button.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Click.*

"RALEIGH BECKETT, YOU MISERABLE IDIOT! WHY DID YOU CUT ME OUT?"

Raleigh pulled the phone away from his ear as Jazmine continued to scream.

"I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO GET IN TOUCH WITH YOU FOR OVER A YEAR!"

Raleigh waited. No more screaming came from the speaker. He slowly put the phone back to his ear. "Jazmine, I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorr-"

"I heard you Raleigh, it's just taking a little bit of time to process."

Raleigh waited.

"Okay, you were saying?"

Raleigh sighed. "Look, I'm sorry for not getting in touch with you. After Yancy died..."

Jazmine started to yell again. "THAT'S YOUR EXCUSE? I THOUGHT RANGERS LIVED OR DIED TOGETHER! YOU MADE IT HOME, AND HE DIDN'T! WHY DID YOU LET HIM DIE?!"

*How do I explain this? You done yelling for the moment, so I can explain?"

"... Yes. Doesn't mean I won't yell at you if I don't like the reason."

"Fair enough."

"So... How come only one of you came back?"
Raleigh's mind went back to that night in the Gulf of Alaska… "Jazmine, do you remember when the war started to take a turn for the worse?"

"Yeah. It was… After Yancy died. Why?"

"That night was the first signs that the Kaiju were aware that there was a far more delicate part to the Jaeger tucked inside the "head": The Rangers. Us." Raleigh fought back tears. The hull! It went through the hull! Raleigh, listen to me! You need AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH! NOOOOOOOOO!

"Raleigh, are you okay?"

"Yeah… I just… flashed back to that night. When he was taken."

"Taken?" Jazmine's voice broke. "Taken how?"

"The Kaiju… it managed to get one of its claws through the Conn Pod armor on Yancy's side. Hooked it in there real good. Then it tore part of the Conn Pod away… and it took Yancy with it."

"Oh my God… They never told me…"

"It's not the sort of thing they liked to share."

"How did you make it?"

"I nearly didn't. Jaegers are designed to be operated by two pilots, not one. I barely made it back to shore."

"But you killed the Kaiju?"

Raleigh grinned. "Did you hear about a Category III Kaiju making landfall in Anchorage?"

"No."

"Then yes, I killed it."

"I… I didn't know. I thought that you'd left him behind. When you crashed."

"Jazmine… I would never a family member behind. You know that."

Her voice hardened. "You left me behind. You disappeared from the face of the earth FOR FIVE YEARS!"

"I left the Ranger Corps and worked on the Wall."

"NOT AN EXCUSE! THERE WERE PLENTY OF WAYS TO CONTACT ME!"

"There were. I just wanted to be alone. You don't know what it's like. To be connected to someone on a deeper level than you could imagine… and then have them taken from you." He paused. "Jazmine, when Knifehead took Yancy… I could feel it. His fear, his pain, his helplessness… then he was gone." Raleigh, listen to me! You need AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH! "He was trying to tell me something when the Kaiju took him. I never found out what it was."

Sobs began to come from the phone. "I… I'm sorry. I didn't know…"

"Not many do. Two people in the world have seen it. Myself… And my copilot, Mako."
Jazmine sniffled for a moment. "The Drift?"

"Yeah… She's seen it."

"Do you think… No, that's too much to ask."

"What is?"

Jazmine sighed. "Do you think you and I are Drift compatible? Could you take me back to that night in the Drift? It might help me get some closure… and forgive you."

That is a very good question. "I don't know. I can ask."

"Could you, please?"

"I'll ask. But keep this in mind: Drifting the way you ask to is rough. Ask Mako about our first Drift."

"About Mako…"

Raleigh groaned. Not another relationship question… I'm tired of those. "What about her?"

"Are you two… you know…"

"No, Jazmine, we are not sleeping together."

"Uhm… that's not what I was going to ask."

Whoops. Raleigh grabbed the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. We get asked that a lot, so it's an automatic response. So, what was your question?"

"Are you two in a relationship?"

"Yes, we are."

"Is it serious?"

Raleigh paused. "Yeah, now that I think about it. It is."

"My big brother has finally settled down with a girl? Now I have to meet her."

"Whoawhoawhoa… No, not like that."

"Then it's not serious."

Raleigh groaned. "Jazmine…"

"Yes or no: Would you want to spend the rest of your life together with her?"

Good question… "Uhm… Yeah. Yeah, I would."

"Then it's serious. Thus, I need to get to know my potential sister-in-law."

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself, Jazmine? We're not engaged yet, and we're still getting the relationship started."

"Define 'Just getting started.'"
"About a week since we both admitted to the other that we love them."

"Aww… How sweet."

Raleigh turned as red as Crimson Typhoon's armor. "Shut up, Jazmine. It's different for copilots."

"Why, because it's a relationship with a coworker?"

"Because there are no secrets in the Drift. You lay your heart and mind bare to the other."

"Oh. Maybe I don't want to do the Drift, then."

"I'll still ask if you can… But you may not like what you find out if you do. It took me five years and a few more Drifts with a new copilot to get over Anchorage."

"Oh, crud."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, there's an accident that just happened on the route to my work. Looks bad. It'll take longer to get to work this morning. I'm going to have to let you go if I want to make it on time."

"Okay. I don't want to make you late. Talk to you soon?"

"Count on it, big brother."

*Click.*

Raleigh looked out over Victoria Harbor for a few minutes. *Why did I block her out? She's so much fun sometimes.* He turned back to the entrance to the Shatterdome. Mako was waiting right behind him. "Gyah! How long have you been there?"

Mako grinned. "Not long. You've been staring into space the whole time I was here. How'd it go?"

Raleigh dug a finger into his ear. "She yelled at me a bit."

"I wouldn't blame her. Five years is a long time to not talk to your family."

*Well, if we're going to tear the bandage off of my old wounds, hers are fair game too. You're one to talk.*

Mako went pale, her gaze furious.

Raleigh instantly regretted the comment. *Oops.*

Mako ground her teeth. "My family is dead. All of them."

Raleigh blanched. "I'm sorry, Mako. I didn't know."

Mako's expression softened as she realized that Raleigh was being honest.

Mako's phone rang. She took the call. "Sir? … Yes, I'll be right there." She hung up. "Here wants to see me in the LOCCENT."

"Go. I'll save you a seat in the mess hall."

"Thanks."
"Oh, and Mako?"

She turned around.

"Thank you for pushing me to talk to Jazmine."

Mako smiled, then started off towards LOCCENT.

Raleigh headed towards the mess hall. *I wonder what they're offering tonight?*

-.-.-

**LOCCENT**

1815

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Herc turned around to see Mako in the doorway. "Yeah. Come in."

Mako came and took a seat beside him. "What is it?"

Herc powered up the holodisplay. On it were three images, one of each contender for the Ranger Memorial. He gestured at them. "These are the final three candidates for the Ranger Memorial. I want your opinion."

"Do you have a favorite?"

"Yes, but I want your opinion, too."

"Okay." Mako scooted forward and "grabbed" one of them.

The image was centered Gipsy Danger with her Chain Swords deployed, closing in on Otachi. To the left of Gipsy, Cherno Alpha was stomping Leatherback into the ground. Striker Eureka was to the right, Sting Blades extended and dug into Trespasser's shoulders. Finally, Crimson Typhoon was digging into Onibaba with the saws of the Thundercloud Formation. Behind them stood a city with an unfinished Wall. It was titled "Guardians at the Gate".

"Not accurate, but impressive." Mako pushed it back, causing it to shrink back to its original size. She grabbed the next one.

A tiny figure stood in the streets behind Gipsy Danger, which had its Chain Swords dug into a Kaiju. It was titled, "For the Lady".

Mako sighed as she pushed it back. "Simple, poignant, but not a good fit." She grabbed the last one. It was titled "VICTORY." She pulled it forward… and her jaw dropped.

Three vignettes made up the primary part of the memorial. They were wrapped equidistant around a globe.

First was Brawler Yukon battling Karloff through Vancouver. The Kaiju was bleeding, clearly about to fall. At the Jaeger's feet was a sign. "HOPE".

Second was Striker Eureka. The bomb from Operation Pitfall was tucked between the Angel Wings. Striker was clearly badly damaged. His chest was caved in, and there were swirls of fluids and parts around him. Despite the damage, he still stood his ground against the Kaiju Slattern. It
was more of an artistic impression based off of Tendo's scans, but it was still close. At Striker's feet was another sign. "SACRIFICE".

What had taken Mako's breath away was the third set. It was the inside of a Conn Pod. A very particular one. Mako would know, having killed four Kaiju while strapped into the motion capture rig. The displays showed a missing arm and a crippled knee, and the Self-Destruct countdown timer counting down. One Ranger was being loaded into the escape pod, unconscious. The other stood firm, continuing the fight as he watched his copilot was being encapsulated. Mako wiped tears from her eyes as she saw the sign.

The sign read "LOVE".

"It's perfect."
"You wanted to see us, sir?"

Herc turned around in his swivel chair to see Mako and Raleigh standing in the LOCCENT doorway. "Yeah, come in and take a seat. I'm waiting for Tendo to get here as well."

Mako and Raleigh settled into some chairs and waited. Mako leaned over to Raleigh. "Subete no aidea koreha ni tsuite wa nanidesu ka?" Any idea what this is about?

"Anata no suisoku wa watashi to onaji kurai yoidesu." Your guess is as good as mine.

Tendo rushed in, papers in hand. "Sorry about the delay. Here's everyone's packets."

Raleigh took the offered papers. "Packets for what?"

Herc leaned forward. I'm sure glad my collarbone is mostly healed. The next few weeks are going to have a lot of travel. "Travel papers, plans, agendas for meetings, hotel reservations." He looked at the three senior staffers present. "The four of us are going to be doing a lot of travel over the next two months. Raleigh already knows about the plans for Alaska. Tendo, you'll be going with him. Mako and I are headed to the PPDC Cemetery in Hawaii to help break ground on the Memorial. After that, we'll meet up back here, then head for Sacramento."

Raleigh and Mako both looked at each other, then at Herc. Raleigh spoke for the two of them. "Sir, what's in Sacramento?"

Herc smiled. He knew that Jazmine Beckett lived there, but that wasn't the point of going there. It was just a happy coincidence. "That's the area we'll be staging from while we begin to choose artifacts for the museum. It's also the headquarters for the United States Coast Guard's Bay Area Ecological Monitoring unit. They're responsible for decontaminating the area and keeping folks out of the Exclusion Zones. We'll be in Sacramento for about three to four weeks total." He made a point of looking at Mako and Raleigh. "We'll have the weekends off, so you two can go have fun. I understand Raleigh's sister is a resident of the area. Perhaps she can point us in the direction of some good restaurants." Herc then looked at the Tendo. "You can bring your family with you to Sacramento, if you want."

"Thank you, sir, but they're still getting settled in here."

Herc nodded. "No problem, Tendo. Alright, the Alaska operation begins in two weeks. You're scheduled to leave on the 17th."

"Got it, sir."
"Anything else?"

The staff were quiet.

"Okay, people. We're done for now."

Raleigh and Tendo left, headed to the mess hall. Mako, however, stayed.

"Sir… Requesting permission to go to Tokyo from the 14th through the 16th."

Here paused for a moment. Ah, yes. Onibaba's attack was on the 15th. "Permission granted, Miss Mori. I'll arrange for two tickets, round trip."

"Sir… two?"

"Just make sure Raleigh is back here at the Shatterdome before 2200 on the 16th."

"Thank you, sir."

Mako walked out of the room. I appreciate the gesture by Herc, but I was going to ask Raleigh if he wanted to go first. Herc seems to expect that we're going to be inseparable. She walked into the mess hall.

"Mako, I already got you some lunch."

"Thanks, Raleigh." She sat down, still thinking about her upcoming trip.

"You okay? You're awfully quiet."

"I've got a lot on my mind right now."

"Want to talk about it?"

"…Sure."

"If you don't want to…"

"No, you're not forcing me. It's better to talk about it."

"Okay, I'm all ears."

Where to start? "You saw how I met sensei."

"Yeah. Kinda hard to forget that."

"Do you know what day it was?"

"No."

"May 15th."

"Okay…"

Mako paused for a moment before continuing. "I… requested some leave time to go to Tokyo… and I was wondering if you'd like to join me."

"Mako, I would love to. When do we leave?"
"Wednesday."
"Sounds like a plan."

The two Rangers sat quietly as they ate their lunches, just enjoying each other's company.

-.-.-

*Hong Kong Shatterdome*

*J-tech machine shop, electrical department*

*1400*

Newt waited nervously as the machine worked. *I hate waiting.*

"Newton, what are you doing down here?"

"Waiting for the printer to finish the new Drift headset I've been working on, Hermann. Why?"

"You're supposed to be meeting with Marshall Hansen in 15 minutes."

"Oops, forgot about that. Can you make sure that these get done without any issues? They're important."

Hermann grumbled. He'd been planning on calling his wife, Vanessa, but that could wait if Newton hurried. "Yes, I'll keep an eye on them. Go, or else you'll be late."

"Thanks, dude. I owe you one… again."

-.-.-

*LOCCENT*

*1415*

"Dr. Geizler, you're almost late."

"Sorry, sir. I was wrapped up in a project."

Here smiled. Newt did tend to get buried in his work. "No worries. I'd have called you if you hadn't shown up within 10 minutes. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Newt sat down and started wringing his hands. "You're familiar with the… arrangement… between Pentecost and Hannibal Chau, right?"

"I am. Interesting piece of work, isn't he?"

"Yeah. He cut his way out of a Kaiju with a butterfly knife."

"Makes me want to call the Australian Embassy and offer him an honorary Australian citizenship."

"They have those?"

"No. I was joking. Back on point. What about the deal?"

Newt paused. *How do I explain this?* "Last Wednesday, I went wandering through Kowloon and
found myself at his shop…"
"Go on."
"I… wound up talking with him about where he wanted to go with his business now that the Breach was closed and there were no more Kaiju to harvest from."
"Spit it out, mate."
"I… kinda agreed to come on board as Chief Technology Officer of his new company. It's all above board, I promise."
Herc turned to look out over the Shatterdome. Well, this is a sticky situation. "What's the catch?"
"He wants the Pons and the Drift technologies."
Herc rounded on Newt. Newt cowered, afraid of what would come next.
"What? He thinks that they're just free to be given away?"
"Or maybe I was supposed to steal it if you said no. I… Kinda freaked out and said I'd find a way to get them. You'd do that if someone had stuck a butterfly knife up your nose… wouldn't you?"
Herc backed off. "Lucky for you, I'm not going to kick your ass." He returned to the windows. "Tell him I want to talk. Someplace private. Soon, as I'm leaving next Tuesday."
Newt blinked. "I'm not sure that he'll take kindly to me going back empty handed…"
Herc turned to face Newt, a sly grin on his face. "And you won't have to. I'll have Tendo print off some of the specs for the Pons. Not all of them. Just enough to know that it's legit."
Newt relaxed. This is going to be interesting. Herc is just as clever and sly as Pentecost, but with it wrapped in a gruff Australian exterior. Chau's going to be in for a surprise… "Thank you, sir."
Newt got up and turned to leave.
"Oh, Newt, one last thing…"
Newt stopped and faced Herc.
"Don't go into the Boneslums again without telling me. You're too valuable to wind up dead from being stabbed or shot."
Newt paled. "Yes, sir."
"Good. I'll have Tendo come by the labs with the packet once it's ready."
"Thanks." Newt left LOCCENT and ran back to the J-tech areas.
-.-.-
Kaiju Sciences labs
1430
Newt came into the lab to find the two headsets he'd been working on waiting on his side of the lab. Hermann was nowhere to be found. Newt walked over to inspect the new headsets. They look
good. Now, combine that with the new computer system… Newt picked up a small box and pulled out a pair of connecting cables, which he plugged into the headsets. He then plugged a power cord into the box and the wall, then pushed the power button. A single yellow light came on, indicating it was booting up. Good so far. Now it's time for the test.

Newt picked up his phone and dialed Raleigh. "Hey, Raleigh, you busy right now? I've got another Drift test I need you guys to run. It's nothing complicated, just checking some new hardware. You'll do it? Great, can you pass the message along to Mako for me, please? Thanks."

He hung up, and checked the box again. A single green button had popped up, faintly pulsing with light. Good to go. Newt sat down and waited for the Rangers to arrive.

---

Gipsy Danger repair bay

1435

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Mako was glad to have a little time to herself. Time to focus on the memories, both happy and sad. Time to work on the katana without interruptions.

"Cause I'm a cowboy… On a steel horse I ride!"

Mako's heart jumped a little. Raleigh. She picked up the phone. "Hello, Raleigh."

"I have to ask, what's my ringtone?"

Mako smiled. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

"You're no fun."

"I can be lots of fun. You just have to catch me in the right mood."

"Funny. Anyways, Newt has some new Drift hardware he wants us to try out right away."

Mako put the hammer away and shut off the furnace. "Okay, I'll be there shortly."

"Cool. Meet you there."

Mako hung up and looked at the two pieces of steel she had spent the last few weeks working on. Almost ready to bring them together… but that will have to wait. Let's go see what Newt has in store for us today.

---

Kaiju Sciences labs

1445
Mako and Raleigh settled into their chairs as Newt walked over with a duffle bag.

"Okay, guys. I've made some changes to the standard squid cap to make it more low-profile... and I've made a much more compact Drift computer." Newt looked excited. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Mako and Raleigh just looked at him.

"Right, let's just get the test under way. Mako, here's yours. Raleigh, for you." He handed them their respective headsets. Each was little more than a few plastic coated wires with a small plug at the base of the skull. Mako put hers on and fiddled with her hair for a few seconds, and the black plastic seemed to disappear.

Raleigh wasn't so lucky. Even though the wires were nearly the same color as his hair, they were easily visible. He sighed. "I guess that's a downside to shorter hair."

Newt then pulled the computer from the duffle bag. It was the size of a tissue box. "This is the new computer. Totally self-contained power supply, like a laptop. The battery should last a few hours of Drifting, or a few days on standby." He then set it on a small table between the Rangers and popped open a door on the top, revealing the connection wires. "Here, take these cords." He handed them the wires. "Plug them into that node at the base of your skull. When you're ready, hit the green button on the top of the box. That will initiate the Drift. To shut down the Drift, simply hit the button again." Newt stood back. "Whenever you're ready."

Mako took Raleigh's hand in hers and looked at him. He nodded, then laid his head back and closed his eyes. Mako put their hands on the button, laid her head back, and closed her eyes. Then, she pressed the button, and the universe imploded.

"--.--

Driftspace

Mako ran through the snowball hit Raleigh in the head not fair Jazmine you know we're not supposed to be a happy day her parents had taken from me Raleigh listen to me you need aaaaaaaahhhh it's a monster it can't be real it can't be papa said don't chase the rabbit you'll wind up in wonderful day outside sensei can I go play no Mako it's too danger looks beautiful after all this time to become a Ranger...

"--.--

The Rangers snapped back to reality. It works.

Newt looked at them, waiting.

Mako looked at Newt and gave a warm smile. "It works."

"YES!"

Raleigh hit the button, and the handshake broke off. "Anything else, Newt?"

"Oh, yeah... the charger. Where's I stick it? Ah, here it is!" Newt put it into the duffle. "This is for you guys to keep. Consider it a gift."

Mako turned to Raleigh. "Your room or mine?"

Raleigh shrugged, and put his headset aside. "Either works."
"Okay, I'll take it for now." Mako pulled off the headset and began to help Newt pack up the components. "Is this one of your designs?"

Newt looked offended. "Duh." He zipped the duffle bag and handed it to Mako with a little more force than needed. "Why would I use anyone else's design?"

Mako rolled her eyes. *He can be so stuck up sometimes.*

Raleigh turned to face Newt. "Thank you. This means a lot."

"No problem."

Mako walked over to Raleigh. "So, want to do some more work on the sword? It's almost ready to be welded together."

Raleigh walked out the door with Mako. "Actually, I was wondering if I could use it for a bit. I have a project in mind that I would like to do a little practice for."

"What kind of project?"

"A surprise."

Mako walked around in front of Raleigh, forcing him to stop. "You know my birthday was a few weeks ago. You helped plan that surprise party."

"And if I tell you anything, it'll ruin the surprise." Raleigh gave Mako a sly grin. "And I know it's going to drive you crazy, which is half the fun of a surprise."

Mako thought about it for a moment. *If I let him, maybe I can figure out what he's working on from whatever he leaves behind.* "Okay."

"Thank you, Mako." He turned and started to walk to the hangar. "Oh, do you have any stainless steel wire in your supplies?"

*Stainless steel wire?* "Yeah, blue toolbox, second drawer down."

"Thanks. See you for dinner?"

"Sure!"

Raleigh disappeared around the corner.

Mako turned towards her quarters. *Raleigh Beckett, what are you working on? He's right, this is going to drive me crazy.*
Forged in Fire, Chapter 12

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Gipsy Danger repair bay

May 12, 2025

1600

Raleigh swore fluently in several languages as he realized that the loop of wire was badly misshapen. I can't seem to get this right. Maybe I need to rethink my approach. What other materials could I choose from? He rummaged through the drawers of supplies and tools. Wait a second, what's this? Raleigh picked up the item and walked over to the workbench. He put it down gently and pulled up a chair. Looks like it's the right size, but I'll need some way to be sure...

"Whatcha workin' on, Becket boy?"

Raleigh jumped. "Jesus, Tendo. You scared me." He looked at the Chief Technician. "I'm working on a secret project to surprise Mako with."

Tendo looked at the mystery object. "Uh-huh. I've seen your handiwork. That's not yours."

"You're right. I just found it in one of the toolboxes." The Ranger looked back at the little object. "It looks like it's a good fit for my project… but I need some way to be sure it's the right size."

Tendo leaned in closer. "I hope you're not planning on actually using that in your project."

"No, but I can sure use it as a reference for some of the tools I'll need to make for the project."

"Ah. I see some of Mako's mechanical aptitude has rubbed off."

"Yeah, and I'm going to need every bit of it to make this work." Raleigh looked back up at Tendo. "And I'm going to need your help."

"Whoa, no. If Mako finds out I'm involved in even the slightest manner, she'll pressure me for details. And you know how well I hold up under duress from her."

Raleigh laughed as he remembered Mako's hunt for clues about her upcoming birthday surprise. Poor Tendo was cornered for half an hour before I rescued him. "No worries. I just need you to borrow something real quick."

"What do you want me to borrow?"

Raleigh leaned over to whisper in Tendo's ear.

Tendo grinned. "I think I can do that. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

---
Mako walked into the hangar. *It's quiet... So he's not forging something right now. Let's go take a look.* "Raleigh?"

Her voice echoing in the cavernous space of the hangar was her only reply.

Mako walked into the workspace. She checked a particular drawer. *It hasn't moved. Good.* She closed the drawer. *What was he working on?*

Raleigh popped out of a nearby empty garbage can. "BOO!"

"YAAAAAAIIIII!" Mako seemed to levitate about a foot in the air as she looked for Raleigh, terror clearly evident on her face.

Raleigh began to laugh so hard that he fell over, gasping for breath.

*"Omoshirokunai, Raleigh!" Not funny, Raleigh!"

"Your face... Oh, that was priceless..."

Mako walked over to him, hands planted firmly on her hips. "I will have to get you back for this, you know."

Raleigh rolled so he could see her. "Oh, I'm counting on it." He kicked the trashcan away. "So, about dinner..."

Mako looked at him, waiting.

"How about we go out on the town tonight?"

"I... No, I'm not comfortable with it right now. We're still fresh in people's minds... and there's a significant Church of the Breach presence in town. We'd be spotted instantly."

"Point. Okay, how about a picnic atop the Shatterdome?"

"That sounds like a plan. I'll get the food if you'll get the blanket."

Raleigh stood up. "I'll meet you at the stairs in... 20 minutes?"

"I'll be there."

-.-.-

1800

Mako and Raleigh sat atop the Shatterdome, enjoying the relatively clear skies and fresh air. Off to their left, on Stonecutter's Island, they could see Leatherback's skeleton, now missing a few ribs due to the demolition. They looked at it, remembering the fight.

"Mako... why do you want to go back to Tokyo?"

She looked at Raleigh. "Closure."

He nodded. *I know that feeling. We'll both get it soon.*

They ate silently for a while, simply enjoying the company of the other.
After they finished eating Raleigh spoke. "Mako, I have something for you…"

"Oh?"

Raleigh smiled as he pulled a bomber jacket from his duffle bag. "Yancy would have wanted you to have it."

Mako took it from Raleigh and held it up. The Gipsy Danger crest was splashed across the back. Four kill markings were printed on the right breast, and the nose art from Gipsy was on the left. Mako's name was now in place of Yancy's on the name tag. "Raleigh…"

"Try it on. It's probably going to be a little big on you."

Mako slipped into it. It was indeed too large, but she wouldn't have it any other way. "It's perfect." She reached over and hugged him. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome, Mako."

She let go of Raleigh. "I've caught bits and pieces of Yancy through the Drift…"

Raleigh reached into the duffle and pulled out a bundle of pictures, a grin on his face. "I come prepared."

Joy lit up Mako's face. "I thought you were going to throw those away when I first saw them off the wall!"

"Nah. I was going to box them up and store them, but with Jazmine and me back in contact, I decided I would make a photo album from them to give to her. But before I do, I wanted to let you get to know Yancy." He looked at her. "He would have liked you."

Mako smiled.

Raleigh pulled out a photo. "Ah, Budapest. Yancy and I …"

-.-.-

Airspace above Tokyo, Japan

May 14, 2025

1545 JST

Mako stirred as the engine pitch changed. We're descending. She looked out the window as the Boeing 777-300ER began its descent into the airport. Raleigh held her hand gently as he continued to sleep.

Mako had always loved to watch the wings of airliners during the climb and descent. There's so many mechanical systems operating in harmony. The flaps, the engines, the gear, the spoilers and thrust reversers… I love it. It all has to work together to take 250 tons of metal, composites, and passengers from zero speed and altitude to cruise and back. As Mako thought about this, the plane banked and began to lower its massive flaps, slowing the plane from its headlong rush through the air to a more sedate speed suitable for landing. Gradually, other systems came into play as they slowed further and descended towards the runway. It's a symphony of machinery, conducted by the pilots… Much like a Jaeger.

Raleigh awoke to the whine of hydraulics shoving the landing gear into the airstream. We're
here. He looked at Mako, and smiled at her fixation on the wing. *I love that look. She's so happy around machines.* He looked across the aisles at a passenger in the middle seats who was clearly terrified. *Others, not so much.* His attention returned to Mako as she closed her eyes, waiting for somethi-

The tires chirped gently onto the pavement of the runway, and the plane settled back to earth.

Mako's eyes flew open, a childlike glee visible in them as she looked at Raleigh. "We're here! I'm finally…" Her face fell. "I was going to say 'home,' but… I don't know what home means to me anymore."

Raleigh held Mako's right hand in both of his. "For me, it's wherever you are." He smiled.

They were still holding hands as they retrieved their luggage, walked out of the airport, and hailed a cab.

---

*Low-cost hotel near Tokyo Boneslum*

*1700 JST*

Mako and Raleigh walked into the lobby of the small hotel, setting off a small bell. The host came to greet them.

Mako and Raleigh both bowed to the host, and Mako started the conversation. "*Kon'nichiwa, watashitachi wa 2 no tame no heya o sagashiteimasu. Futatsu no betsubetsu no beddo.* Hello, we're looking for a room for two. Two separate beds.

The host paused for a moment before replying. "*Sumimasen ga, watashitachiha ima, riyō kanōna shingurubeddorūmu ga arimasu. Sore wa ukeire rareru ka dō ka?* I'm sorry, but we only have single bed rooms available right now. Is that acceptable?

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other and shrugged. Mako turned to the host. "*Hai, soreha kyoyō sa reru.*" Yes, it is acceptable.

"*Yūshū. Watashi ni shitagatte kudasai.* Excellent. Please follow me. He grabbed a pair of electronic keycards and handed them to the Rangers, then headed down the hall to the elevator. He hit the button for the seventh floor, and they stepped in. "*Anata wa dono kurai taizai shite iru?*" How long are you staying?

"*Ni-paku.* Two nights.

The host looked at Raleigh. "Come to see Kaiju Festival with girlfriend, yes?"

Raleigh stared the little man in the eye. "*Kanojo wa watashi no yoki yūjindashi, watashi wa kanojo o sapōto suru tame ni koko ni iru. Kanojo wa kōgeki de kanojo no kazoku o ushinatta.* She's my good friend, and I'm here to support her. She lost her family in the attack.

The host bowed deeply in embarrassment. "*Gomen'nasai. Anata wa eigo matawa nihongo o konomudeshou ka?* My apologies. Would you prefer English or Japanese?

Mako glared at Raleigh, remembering how she felt when Raleigh had pulled that trick on her. "English is fine."
"Good."

*Ding!*

They left the elevator and headed down the hallway. They reached the door, and the host opened it for them. Mako walked in first, with Raleigh close behind. The host bowed and left. The Rangers surveyed the room. A single king-sized bed, two alarm clocks, and a bathroom. Raleigh looked at Mako. "Cozy."

Mako flopped out on her side, the same side she had been on with Gispy. "Isn't it odd how we keep taking the same sides we had been on in Gipsy Danger?"

Raleigh looked around. "You can have the bed, of you want. I'll grab some spare blankets from downstairs and make a spot for myself on the floorOOOF! Mako, leggo."

Mako dragged Raleigh onto the bed, then rolled him over and sat on his legs. "Mr. Becket, you are going to be sharing the bed tonight. I insist."

"And I insist on letting you have the bed."

"I appreciate the gesture, Raleigh. That willingness to let me have the bed to myself is proof enough that you won't want to do anything other than sleep in it. It means a lot to me."

"You're my friend, Mako. You're not someone I would sleep with lightly. We've got a good thing going, and I don't want to ruin it by thinking between my legs."

Mako leaned forward and kissed Raleigh on the forehead. "Thank you." She climbed off Raleigh. "Want to go get some dinner?"

Raleigh didn't have a chance to respond before his stomach rumbled. "Does that count as an answer?"

Mako laughed, and they both walked out of the hotel room hand in hand.

"-.--."

*Mako and Raleigh's hotel room*

2145 JST

The two Rangers sat on the bed, watching the news coverage of the upcoming Kaiju festival. Raleigh looked at Mako. "Newt would be in heaven there."

Mako nodded, causing her blue highlights to swing out into the light.

"Mako, ever since we met, I've always wondered about your hair. Why the blue tips?"

She sighed and laid back against the pillows, playing with the dyed hair. "It's been a reminder of Onibaba's attack. The blue Kaiju blood, Coyote Tango's blue Conn Pod window, the blue dress I was wearing…" She trailed off, lost in the memories.

Raleigh wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, still playing with her hair.

"I've been thinking about getting rid of it, though. What do you think?"

"Mako, you could have a full head of electric blue hair, and I wouldn't care." He put his hand over
her heart, then touched her head. "It's what's in here, and here, that I love so dearly, and that I was willing to give my life for. Still am, as a matter of fact."

"That's sweet, Raleigh." She scooted over onto Raleigh's lap, then dragged his arms around her.

"So, what's the plan for tomorrow?"

"I want to head out to where I rode out the attack."

"Sounds like a plan. What time do you want to leave?"

"Whenever we're ready." She rolled over to look Raleigh in the eyes. "Thank you for coming, Raleigh. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, Ma-mmmphh"

Mako kissed him.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 13

Mako and Raleigh's hotel room

May 15, 2025 (9 years after Onibaba's attack)

0700 JST

Mako woke up to find herself in Raleigh's arms, refreshed. *That was actually the best night of sleep I've had since Operation Pitfall.* She lay there, enjoying the close contact with Raleigh.

He stirred. "Good morning, Mako."

She rolled over to face him, a grin on her face. "Good morning, Raleigh. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, actually. Best night of sleep I've had in more than five years. You?"

"Since we nuked the Breach."

"Lucky you." He smiled. "You want the shower first?"

"Sure!" She practically skipped into the small bathroom.

Raleigh thought back to the night before. They had kissed. Passionately. It had felt good for both of them. Then, they had gone to bed, Mako in his arms. Just like they had woken up. Raleigh attributed the good night's rest to his proximity to Mako. Feeling her warm, athletic body so close to his had banished all the memories that usually kept him up at night. And he could have sworn that she had been taking part in his dreams.

The sound of the shower starting dragged Raleigh back to reality. *Mako didn't take any fresh clothes into the bathroom.* He got out of bed and went to her luggage. "Mako, what do you want me to bring into the bathroom for you?"

"The blue shirt and pants, please."

Raleigh opened her suitcase and grabbed the requested articles of clothing, along with a bra and panties to match. *Sometimes the Ghost Drift is amazingly useful.* He was about to head to the bathroom when he saw them. THE dress, and THE pair of shoes. Set next to them were a pair of small scissors. Mako's plan for the day clicked together in Raleigh's head. *So that's what she wanted to do today. Why it was so important to come.* He set the items next to his small backpack.

Mako started to sing in the shower, and Raleigh sat on the bed and listened. It was one of Raleigh's favorite songs, despite having been written by George Harrison and not Paul McCartney.

"Here comes the sun... Here comes the sun... I say... It's all right."

Raleigh smiled. *It's all right indeed. Today is going to be a good day.*

-.-.-

*Tokyo Boneslum*
Mako looked up from the photo and froze. "Here. This is it."

Raleigh stood by silently, waiting.

Mako had gone through the PPDC archives to make sure she had the spot right. *I want to do this right. For my family's honor.* She and Raleigh now stood at the site of one of the most iconic photos of the Kaiju war.

Raleigh knew the significance of this spot to Mako, and swung the backpack off his shoulders. He handed it to her.

Mako opened the backpack and pulled out the red shoes and blue dress, and set it down on the ground. She knelt to the ground, crying.

People stopped to watch. After all, it wasn't every day that someone knelt down in the middle of a street, even if it was a pedestrian zone now. It was especially rare when they then pulled out some children's clothing and set it on the ground. This, however, was no ordinary set of clothing. These were the clothes a scared 13 year old girl had worn when a Category II Kaiju had thrashed Tokyo. The same little captured by a photographer's lens as she held a small red shoe in her hands, tears streaking her face as she walked away from a dead Kaiju towards a towering Jaeger.

Everyone knew that image. It had graced the covers of magazines, newspapers, and webpages for weeks. And now that scared little girl was all grown up. The same young woman who had helped close the Breach had come back to the spot that had shaped her future in ways she couldn't have imagined. She had come back to celebrate… and remember.

Mako picked up the scissors, and grabbed the streak of blue hair on the left side of her face. "Watashinochichi no tame ni." *For my father.*

*Snip.*

Cameras were out, and flashes were going off all around Mako.

She didn't care.

Mako set the blue hair down, then grabbed the streak on the right. "Watashinohaha no tame ni." *For my mother.*

*Snip.*

Mako set the hair down next to the first bit. Tears welled in her eyes. *I wish you could see me now. I have done the family name proud.* She smiled.

Mako slipped the hair into envelopes, then packed up the clothing. "Let's go, Raleigh."

They left the Boneslum and the swirling crowds behind them, wrapped in their small personal universe of memories.

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*Hong Kong Boneslums*

*Unnamed back alley*
Herc leaned against the side of a building, waiting. He didn't have long.

"Marshall Hansen, I presume."

"That'd be me, mate. You must be Hannibal Chau."

"I am."

"Okay, lemme make this short and to the point: I don't trust you. I don't know what your end game is, or what you plan to do with the Pons and the Drift. Frankly, I don't care, as long as it's not illegal. But let me make myself clear: I am not going to simply give it away. To anyone, let alone a former black market dealer and war profiteer."

Chau crossed his arms and looked at Herc. "You come all this way in person to tell me this?"

"No. To give you something that you can use to get access to the tech." Herc handed Chau an envelope. "Inside that is an invitation to the meeting where we will be licensing the tech for public use. If you want the tech, you'll have to pay for the license, just like everyone else." Herc turned to leave.

"I have a personal question for you, Mr. Hansen."

Herc stopped and turned to face Chau. "I'll listen to it, but I may not answer it."

"Fair enough."

"What's the question?"

"Where are you going to go after they finally dismantle the PPDC?"

"Go back to Australia, find a nice place on the outskirts of Melbourne, and retire." He turned and walked off.

---

Tokyo

1845 JST

Mako and Raleigh had played tourist the rest of the day, enjoying their time away from the Shatterdome. Now, however, they were back at the hotel. Mako turned on the TV to the local news channel.

"We've all seen the iconic photo of the Girl in the Blue Dress. Today, we finally found out who she was."

Mako groaned and flopped onto the bed. "They're never going to leave me alone after this."

The news anchored continued, and the footage switched to a video shot from a cell phone camera. It showed Mako and Raleigh in the street that morning. "Shown here is Mako Mori, one of the two pilots of the now-destroyed Mk III Jaeger Gipsy Danger. In front of her are the same shoes and dress that were worn in the famous photo..."
Raleigh set down the remote. "Why get yourself wound up over it, Mako? Why watch the news when you knew you'd be on it?"

"I thought there'd be more on the festival."

"Mako, the media is going to go crazy over that. You and I both knew that. Was it still worth it?"

Mako sat up. "Yes. It feels like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders." She looked at the dress, shoes, and envelopes of hair. "It feels good."

"So, the trip was worth the trouble?"

"Yes."

---

*Hong Kong Shatterdome*

*Raleigh's quarters, Corridor 47B*

*May 17, 2025*

*0200*

**BOOM!**

*Popopopopopopopop*

Raleigh sat bolt upright at the explosion, with Mako a fraction of a second behind him. "What the hell?"

"**GO GO GO GO!**"

BAMBAMBAM.

Raleigh and Mako got off of the bed and opened the door. A PPDC strike team stood watch outside the door. "We need to move you to a more secure location now."

Raleigh rubbed his eyes. "What the hell is going on?"

"We're under attack by Kaiju worshippers."

"Why? What do they think they'll gain from attacking the Shatterdome now?"

"They're here to kill you two, or die trying."

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other. *Not good.*

"We need to get you to the nearest armory now."

The two Rangers were promptly surrounded by the strike troopers, who hustled them to the armory. One got on the phone. "Sir, the Rangers are in Armory 18. We're going to suit them up and arm them now."

Here's voice growled back. "Good. You two, stay with the Strike Troopers until I come get you. To
the rest of you: remember, NON-LETHAL only unless it's a "kill or be killed" situation. They are not heavily armed, but they are fanatical. Do not hesitate to use bean bag rounds, sponge grenades, Tasers, pepper spray, tear gas, even hanbo staffs if you have to. Just try not to do too much damage to the attackers. Oh, and arrest them once they're subdued." The roar of a 12-gauge shotgun came from the speaker. "Bugger, they found us. Herc out."

Mako and Raleigh were soon wearing body armor, and were being outfitted and armed. Raleigh took a 12-gauge pump action shotgun loaded with PPDC's custom Taser rounds (similar to the now-discontinued XREP round), a number of reloads with both rock salt and bean bag rounds, and a package of zip ties. Mako had chosen to take a hanbo, as she wasn't familiar with the shotguns. I'll have to ask Raleigh for lessons.

Raleigh racked the slide of the shotgun, then nodded at Mako. She took cover behind him. Come on, Ghost Drift. Now is the best time for you to go into overdrive... "Okay, let's wait it out here."

Herc zip tied the wrists of yet another cultist. "Stay down, you bloody idiot, or else you'll get hit by a stray round. You don't want that, do you?" The cultist shook her head. "Smart girl." Herc ducked into a doorway and waited. Sure enough, another cult member saw the downed girl, and came to her aid. And the Yanks say chivalry's dead. Herc stepped from the shadows and aimed the Taser at the young man. "You know, Australia's home to a lot of poisonous creatures, but none are more venomous than an Aussie whose home you've broken into... while he's still there. So I'd advise you to get down on the ground, real slowly." The fanatic did as he was told. Herc zip tied him as well. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I have someone I need to find first." Herc opened a nearby storage closet and dragged them inside. "Now, before I lock you away in here for your own safety, can you tell me who the bloody idiot who planned this mess is? I want to have a word with them."

The cultists looked at each other. The young man spoke up. "You'll never catch our priest."

Herc sighed. "Right. Hold still." He put a strip of duct tape over each of their mouths. "This will keep you quiet, so that the Strike Teams roaming the halls performing cleanup won't think you're trying to ambush them and come in with lethal force." He closed the door and put a small mark on the door frame with chalk, indicating two prisoners inside.

Now, to find this Priest...

Mako and Raleigh had barricaded themselves back in Raleigh's room. The Strike Troopers had arranged themselves nearby to watch over them. Everything was alright until…

BANG.

Mako jumped slightly. "What was that?"

Raleigh never had a chance to answer, as the roar of a shotgun firing in the hall drowned out his response. A thud came from the hall a second later.

"Must have gotten someone."

A creepy voice wafted through the door. "Indeed we did, Raleigh. Your guard is now our prisoner. Open the door, and he will live. Lock it, and he will die." The sound of a pistol being cocked came next. "Your choice."

"DON'T DO IT, SIR!"

"He's so protective of you, Rangers. But, now you have to protect him, just like you "protected" the Earth from the Kaiju, our Gods."
Raleigh clicked the safety off of the shotgun. "With all due respect to whoever you are, go to hell."

"I'm sorry it had to be like this, Raleigh. This innocent man's blood will be on your hands."

Raleigh stood and crept to the door.

Mako looked at him. "Raleigh, don't."

He handed her the shotgun. "Just don't shoot me with it, please." He unlocked the door. "Go under the desk, Mako."

Tears were in her eyes. "Raleigh, no."

"I can't have his blood on my conscience, Mako."

Raleigh opened the door... and was promptly grabbed and held at gunpoint. The Priest took Raleigh backwards into the room, never looking in Mako's direction. He held a pistol in his right hand, aimed at Raleigh's head. His left hand held a PPDC radio. "Marshall Hercules Hansen, I have Raleigh Beckett as my hostage. Come to his quarters now."

The radio crackled to life with the gruff Australian's voice, a dangerously low growl. "Let him go, and you may live to see the sunrise."

"Come to Raleigh's quarters, or he won't have the same chance."

A few tense moments passed before Herc apparently arrived.

"Marshall... I have heard so much about you. I'm so sorry I couldn't do this at a more... polite hour, but this was the best time to perform such an act."

"Go to hell, mate."

"Such hatred. Why?"

"You're a bloody lunatic. You should be in a mental hospital."

"I was, for many years. However, the Kaiju freed me from my bonds. Released my spiritual side, so I could..."

Mako got tired of his monologue, and fired the shotgun. The beanbag round hit the Priest square in the head, knocking him out cold. Raleigh jumped free of the now-unconscious man.

Herc bolted into the room. "The hell?"

Mako dropped the gun, shaking. She kicked it away.

Raleigh rushed over to her. "You okay?"

Mako shook her head. "I think I'm going to be sick...." She allowed Raleigh to pull her out from under the desk.

Herc shook his head. "Mako, that was one hell of a shot."

She looked at the Priest. "I was aiming for his kidneys." She then bolted for the bathrooms, her face green.
Raleigh sighed, grabbed the shotgun, and took off after her, cycling the slide.

-.-.

LOCCENT

0400

"All clear, sir. We have the last of the intruders captured."

Herc nodded. "Good. Now to try and catch a nap before going and asking this "Priest" character some questions. Call me only if there's a Kaiju or a bomb."

"Yes sir."

Herc returned to his room and turned out the light.
Author's note: I pictured Tom Hiddleston's performance as Loki as I created the character of the Priest. Loki is perfectly stable and logical, but totally bughouse nuts. Just like how I wanted the Priest character.

To be honest, this chapter was a pain to write. I went through three major versions and countless minor changes over how to approach the interrogation. Should Herc give in to a darker side he hid from everyone, including Chuck? Should Herc hand him over to Hannibal Chau for a more hands-off and dirty interrogation? Should he hand him over to the Hong Kong police? It took me nearly a day of literary head-bashing before finally getting something I was happy with.

Enjoy!

Forged in Fire, Chapter 14

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Brig

May 17, 2025

0900

Herc sat in a chair and watched the Kaiju cult leader wake up. "G'day, mate. You took a decent hit to the head. Frankly, you're lucky to be alive. A little further towards your face, and it could have cracked your temple like an eggshell and killed you on the spot."

"Who shot me?"

"Rule one when fighting with paired Rangers: ALWAYS keep an eye on the other Ranger."

"What?"

Herc shook his head. "Your other target, Mako Mori, was hunkered under Raleigh's desk with a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with beanbag rounds. You have the tactical skills of a sea slug, mate."

"Sea slugs can be lethal."

"If you're stupid enough to try and eat one, yeah. But they're not hunters by any means." Herc pulled out a tablet and paged through some of the records he had put on it for the interrogation. "Quite the record you have, Charles Peterson. Numerous charges for narcotics possession, petty theft, fraud, trespassing, public indecency, possession of stolen goods, tax evasion... The list is extensive. And that's just in the US. I have warrants for your arrest from 10 Pacific Rim nations, many of them related to your "pilgrimages" to Kaiju corpses." He set the tablet down. "I could hand you over to the local authorities and be rid of you forever. However... I have some questions first."

"Let me guess: Why attack the two 'Saviors of Humanity'?"

Herc glared at Peterson. "No, that is beyond my ability to comprehend, and I don't want to hear your religious bull about it. The big question I have for you is this: How'd you get two hundred of your followers to perform a bloody foolish raid on a military base?"
Charles Peterson smiled. "They drank the Kool Aid."

"What did you spike it with?"

"A mix of drugs and chemicals. I apparently didn't put enough painkillers in the mix, though. They obviously felt the pain of being hit."

"Says the man who was hit in the side of the head by a beanbag round."

"I feel no pain. Why shouldn't I grant that gift to my followers?"

"Where'd you get the breaching charge?"

"I have… sources."

"The fact that you used that makes you a terrorist to the US. I'm highly inclined to hand you over to them, if the Peruvians don't get hold of you first."

"Ah, yes. Peru. I had such a wonderful time there."

"They want your head. Preferably on a pike."

"That was 8 years ago. I have… matured in my methods since then."

"Like your tribute for Yamarashi to, how'd you put it?" Herc picked up the tablet again. "Ah, 'ease the passage of the noble Kaiju's spirit back through the Breach'?"

"My first encounter with Raleigh Beckett's handiwork. Quite brutal. And inhumane."

"The same could be said for you. You have the blood of three dozen people on your hands from your 'tributes' to the Kaiju."

"A necessary evil."

Herc rubbed his temples. "To be honest, mate, I'm half tempted to strangle you on the spot. But that's not the example I want to set. It would make me no better than you."

"Oh, but you would so like to do it. It would feel so good!"

"Instead, I'm going to let the local authorities take care of you."

"I have friends in very high places. How else do you think I've been able to continue my ministry?"

"So that's what you call it." Herc shook his head. "The charges. Who gave them to you? Who trained you?"

"Friends in high places, remember?"

"Was it China?"

"Perhaps."

"North Korea?"

"Possible."

"Russia? I've heard that Putin is still alive, and escaped the prison camp he was being held in."
"That is an option."

I'm getting nowhere with this guy. Herc stood to leave.

"Done so soon? I expected more from you. You're not worthy of the title of Marshall."

Herc walked out. He turned to face the next interrogator with a smile. "Newt, your turn."

"With pleasure. I had wanted to meet with this guy for a while… Then I found out about his darker aspects. Now I want to make him squirm."

"Good luck, and don't let him get under your skin."

-.-.-

Newt walked into the room and sat down, pulled out his tablet, and rolled up his sleeves to show his tattoos. He began to doodle.

After a few minutes of silence, Peterson began to fidget against his restraints. Newt continued to doodle. More silent minutes passed. Finally, Peterson ran out of patience. "Why did they send you in here, to keep an eye on me? I'm not going anywhere." He rattled his restraints as proof.

Newt continued to doodle, apparently ignoring Peterson.

"Why are you here with the PPDC? I can see that you're a fan of the Kaiju."

"Hmm?"

"Your tattoos. You're a Kaiju fan."

Newt paused in his doodling, looking at Peterson, his face carefully neutral. "I grew up idolizing Kaiju, yes. I loved to go watch Tokosatsu movies. So when Trespasser attacked San Francisco, I was excited. Then I saw the death toll. I've been conflicted about them ever since."

"So, why the PPDC?"

Newt paused for a moment. "Because then I could study them to my heart's content, while helping save innocent people in the path of the Kaiju. However, once I realized that the Kaiju were grown as clones, and the pace of attacks picked up, I realized something had to be done."

"And what was that?"

"Drift with a Kaiju."

Peterson looked as if he'd been hit with a cattle prod. "No… that's not possible. You couldn't possibly do that. Our brains are so different…"

"That's what the brass here thought, too. But I did it."

Peterson's will was obviously crumbling. "What was it like?"

"The first time was weird. It was only part of a brain, and it was nearly dead. But I managed to Drift with it. What I saw…" Newt shook his head.

"Tell me. Please."
"It wasn't like I was able to gather whole thoughts or memories. More like a series of emotions and impressions." He looked at Peterson. "It was… awesome."

Outside the room, Herc listened to the feed from the mic. *Keep him going, Newt. You're cracking him.*

Newt looked at Peterson. *Time to lay on a question.*

Peterson was staring at Newt in adoration. "What did you see?"

"Now, I can't just sit here and answer your questions all day. I do need to get some answers for myself. But I'll make you a deal: If you answer one of mine, I'll answer one of yours. Two if you provide some really useful info."

Peterson was clearly conflicted. On one hand, he wanted to keep his secrets. But the other side of him, the Kaiju worshipper, wanted to learn from the man who had melded minds with a *god*. After much struggle, the cultist side of his personality won. "Deal"

"Awesome. Okay, first of my questions: Where did you get the breaching charge from?"

Peterson paused. "There was this Chinese guy, maybe part of their internal security? He gave me the charge. What were the Kaiju's makers like?"

"Creepy. Sorry, but your response is vague, so mine is too. The more detailed your response, the more detailed mine are."

Peterson sighed. "Okay, his name was…"

Herc grinned. *Gotcha.*

An exhausted but elated Newt left the cell where Peterson was being held. He turned to Herc. "Did you get all that?"

Herc gave a wide grin. "Every last word. Well done, Newt. That was an impressive bit of work."

"Aw, it was nothing. In fact, it wasn't fair to him. He wanted to learn about the Kaiju so badly, he'd probably sell his first, second and third child for an opportunity to Drift with a Kaiju."

Herc looked at Newt.

"I mean, not literally, but…"

"I get the picture, Newt. Go get something to eat while I figure out what the bloody hell to do with this guy."

"Okay."
Newt felt good. He'd been worried about his former fascination... Okay, Newt, admit it. Hermann was right, I loved them. His former love of the Kaiju had been a liability to Newt. Now, however, he had turned it into an advantage.

Newt walked into the mess hall and saw Mako and Raleigh sitting across the table from each other. Raleigh was fixated on Mako. Mako was avoiding looking at Raleigh. Raleigh had apparently been waiting a while, because he said something and reached out and put his hand under Mako's chin. Mako jumped at the touch.

Wow... Normally they're really big on the gentle, subtle contact. Wonder what the story is behind that. Probably something this morning. Newt moved on to get himself some lunch. He was planning on running some sims that afternoon of Mako and Raleigh's brains as part of his ongoing effort to find out a few vital things. Why was their handshake so strong? Why did Mako take the brunt of the neural damage from Raiju's attack? How come Raleigh was able to pilot a Jaeger solo for brief periods of time? And were all of these somehow connected? Food for thought... but food first, thought second.

Mako had refused to look at Raleigh all morning. She hadn't spoken, and she wasn't eating. Ever since the early morning raid, she'd been... distant. Unreachable. "Mako, what's wrong?" He put his hand under her chin in an attempt to lift her gaze off her plate. She jumped as if he'd touched her with a cattle prod.

Mako looked at Raleigh, her eyes bloodshot from her crying. She barely spoke up above a whisper. "Can we talk about it somewhere more... private? Please?"

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

Mako looked around. "Anywhere but here for starters."

Raleigh walked around the table and put his arm around her shoulders. "Come on, let's go to the spot where we ate after our first Drift."

Mako smiled slightly. "Okay."

1200

Mako sat down looking at Raleigh. How can I tell him? How can he understand what I'm going through?

Raleigh sat down next to her. "Whenever you're ready, I'm here."

Mako looked at her feet. "Raleigh... I can't begin to explain my feelings and thoughts."

"Do you best anyways. You leave the feelings bottled up, they'll build pressure until you snap. And I'd hate for anyone to be on the receiving end of that."

"Raleigh..." She paused and looked at him. "What if I'd missed?"

"Huh?"
"What. If. I. Missed." She looked at her feet in shame.

"Mako… that was one hell of a shot."

"I just pointed the shotgun in his direction and pulled the trigger hard."

"So?"

"I nearly killed you this morning. If I had hit you in the temples, or if I hadn't knocked him out, or it had been loaded with a Taser round, or if it hadn't been ready to fire, or…"

Raleigh put his index finger on her mouth, silencing her. "Mako, don't beat yourself up over could haves or what ifs. Trust me, it's not healthy. I did it for five years. Besides, I did make sure it had beanbags in the magazine."

"Raleigh, I'm so sorry."

"Why? You saved my life. It's good to know I have someone who would do that for me." He drew her close to him. "Besides, I now owe you some shooting lessons. Just so you will know what to do the next time."

"Will there be a next time?"

"Would you rather be prepared for it and be pleased when it doesn't happen, or scared out of your mind when it does happen and you're not ready?"

"Point."

They sat together for a while, totally silent. Eventually, they noticed that their breathing was perfectly synchronized. They laughed and got up, looking down at the work space on the floor below. Without a word, they made their way down to the workshop and began to heat the skin and heart steel for the *katana*. Both had been folded, and were now ready to be joined into a single piece. Soon, they were ready. Mako took the pieces of steel and fitted them together.

*Perfect*, they both thought, perfectly in unison. They looked at each other and smiled.

Raleigh took up the hammer and began the process of welding them together, guided by Mako's feelings flowing through the Ghost Drift.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*
Herc walked into the repair bay, correctly guessing that the two Rangers would be present. "Raleigh, Mako. Got a minute?"

They put the steel into the furnace and looked at Herc. Raleigh spoke for them. "Sure, sir. What's up?"

"By now you've probably figured out that you were supposed to be on your way to Alaska."

"Yeah. But with this morning, I figured priorities had changed."

"That's part of it. Another part is that there's a major storm brewing and the recovery is being pushed back 48 hours. Finally, Tendo's at home caring for his son and wife, both of whom just came down with a nasty stomach flu."

"Ouch. Triple threat."

"Yeah, which is why I came to talk to Mako as well." Herc turned to look at her. "You're going in Tendo's place."

Mako looked puzzled for a moment. "This is because of this morning, isn't it?"

"Partially. But you're also the best qualified person to take Tendo's slot. So both of you need to start packing for Alaska." Herc looked at the steel. "Coming along nicely, I see. Right, you go get packed. You're wheels up tomorrow morning at 0900."

Mess hall

Mako and Raleigh were grabbing dinner when Newt rushed up to them. "GUYS! I GOT IT!"

"Got what, Newt?"

"I figured out why Mako took the neural scarring from Raiju's attack, but Raleigh didn't!"

Mako looked at Newt. "Does that help you figure out a treatment?"

Newt's enthusiasm waned. "Not yet, but it's a step in the right direction."

Raleigh handed Newt his tray. "Here, come eat with us and tell us more." He looked at Mako. "I'll
be right back." He headed over to the food line to get some more to eat.

Mako and Newt sat down at the old Gipsy Danger table. "So, what's so different about our brains?"

Raleigh sat down next to Mako. Newt looked at them. "It's because Raleigh's brain is wired slightly differently than most humans. It allows him to operate a Jaeger solo for short periods and protects him from neural trauma better than most people. It's why he also didn't take neural scarring from Knifehead's attack." Newt paused to take a bite of his hamburger.

"So, you're saying that Mako has to deal with the phantom injuries for the rest of her life?"

Newt swallowed. "No, I'm still working on that. I promise. I'm getting closer to finding out how to treat it. But it may be a few months, or it could be years. It's too early to tell."

Mako's face fell. "Thank you, Newt. For pushing on with the research. It means a lot to me."

"Hey, you guys saved my life. I owe you guys. It's the least I can do."

Raleigh grinned. "No problem. Hey, have they removed that ship from between the buildings yet?"

"Oh, man, I need to check. That was cool to see stuck up there, hanging in the air."

Mako finished eating. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go pack for Alaska."

Raleigh held her hand briefly. "I'll be along soon. Make sure to pack the Array."

"Will do."

Mako left the mess hall and headed to her quarters.

Raleigh waited until she had left, then turned to Newt. "I need your help with something."

"If it's a secret project for Mako, and she gets wind I helped you..."

"No, nothing like that. I'm wondering if there's any way to get a recording from the Drift. In particular, from a particular RABIT."

"Maybe. Depends on what you want to use it for."

"My sister never got to say goodbye to my brother, and I think it'd help her get some closure if she could see the Anchorage engagement from my perspective."

"I'll see what I can do. Sometime after you get back from Alaska?"

"Sure."

"Cool. Have fun in Alaska!"

---

Anchorage, Alaska

May 18, 2025

0240 Alaska Daylight Time

(May 18, 2025, 1740 Hong Kong time)
Mako and Raleigh walked down the jetway, yawning. Mako leaned on Raleigh. "I hate international air travel, especially with the International Date Line thrown into the mix."

"Yeah... Might as well get a little sleep once we get to the hotel."

The two Rangers walked towards the baggage claim. Waiting for them just outside the security zone was a man holding a sign that simply read "PPDC." They approached him.

The man looked at Raleigh. "Raleigh Beckett?"

"That'd be me, sir. And this is Mako Mori."

"A pleasure to meet you, ma'am. Let's get your luggage, and we'll be off for the hotel."

"You probably don't recognize me, Raleigh, but I was there when your brother died."

Raleigh looked at the man. "No, I don't. Were you on the Saltchuck?"

Their driver smiled. "Indeed I was. I wish Captain Merrit could be here, but he left Alaska about four years ago."

Mako looked at the driver. "Why?"

"Market tanked. Merrit went somewhere else. Saltchuck remains in service, fishing for crab."

Raleigh nodded. He'd grown up in the area and understood the fishing economy. "Sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. Ah, here's the hotel. Let's get you two squared away for the rest of the morning, shall we?"

--.--

Anchorage Harbor

1000

Mako pulled her new-old bomber jacket tighter around her shoulders. "It's cold here, even in May!" She looked at Raleigh, who was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. "How are you not cold?"

Raleigh laughed. "Mako, I'm used to the cold. I can't stand the heat, though." He looked around and held his arms out. "This is a nice day to me."

Mako shook her head in amusement. "I'll always like the heat. Having grown up on Tanegashima, so much closer to the equator, I can't imagine living here."

The lead engineer on the salvage team came to meet them. "Welcome aboard, Rangers. We're about ready to cast off, so if you'll follow me, we'll get started." He walked to a gangplank and walked up it to board the ship. Mako and Raleigh followed, eager to get started on the project.

--.--

1400
Mako stood on the aft deck of the command ship, walking around the ROVs that would be used to prepare Gipsy Danger's left arm for salvage. They're so cleverly designed. And to think some of these were designed and built more than a decade ago... Mako looked at the faded logo on the side. UHD. She cocked her head, trying to decide what it meant.

A voice came from behind her. "Ultra Heavy Duty."

Mako whirled around, nearly losing her balance on the slick deck.

The crewmember caught her and held her steady. "Whoa, there. Easy does it, ma'am. It gets slick back here." She looked at Mako. "Hey, I know you. You're Mako Mori!"

Mako blushed. She hated being recognized in public. "Yes, I am. I was just admiring the ROV."

"Ah. Yeah, they don't make them quite as often as they used to. The Breach kinda dampened deep-sea work in the Pacific. This one's a FMC Technologies UHD. She was fitted with a pair of Titan 4 manipulators at the time of her assembly in late 2012. They're good arms, and have a remarkable track record of reliability and precision." The crewmember walked around the front of the ROV. "I help keep this particular ROV maintained. She's one of a kind now, given all the repairs she's had over the last 12 years."

"Just like Gipsy Danger was after I finished her upgrades."

The crewmember looked at Mako. "Wait, you were a tech first, then became a Ranger?"

Mako smiled. "Other way around. Ranger first, but didn't have a Jaeger to ride in... or a suitable co-pilot. So I was put in charge of restoring Gipsy Danger from the damage suffered in the fight here, more than five years ago."

"What's it like to pilot a Jaeger?"

"Incredible. There's nothing like it. You have to share your darkest secrets, your deepest desires... everything. And that's just so that you can make it move. Combat? It's intense." LET'S GET THIS SON OF A B...

"I've served in combat. Two tours in the Rockpile. Had a couple of firefights... but we always got air cover. You never had any backup other than another Jaeger, right?"

"My two drops? We were the backup."

"Oh."

Mako looked at the Titan 4 arm with a practiced eye. "Where are the hydraulic lines?"

The tech brightened, happy to continue with the shop talk. "Oh, they're integrated into the sides of the arms. The sides of the arms are made from four plates of precision machined titanium. The outer two are solid, the inner two have a network of grooves milled into them."

Mako ran her hand over the arm skins. "Welded or brazed?"

"Neither. Diffusion bonded."

"Brilliant."

"Yeah, it's part of the reason that the arms can be rated for ops at up to 7 kilometers beneath the surface. Only specially designed, one-off arms can work at greater depths and pressures."
Mako smiled. She was in her element. "And this? Some sort of pressure vessel…"

"Electronics compartment." The tech walked over to her and began to point other items out. "And this is…"

"-.-."

Raleigh watched Mako from the rear of the bridge superstructure. She's happily meeting new people outside of the Shatterdome. Yes, she talking shop, but still…

"Mr. Beckett, we're ready."

"Be right there." *Come into the briefing room when you're ready, Mako. Enjoy yourself first.* He turned around and walked through the hatch.

"Will Ms. Mori be joining us?"

"No, she's talking shop with one of the ROV techs."

"Is that good?"

"She's been a little reclusive since Pitfall, sir."

The project leader nodded. "Reminds me of my son when he came back from Iraq for the third time. Hard to get him to engage with the civilian world. He just wanted to talk shop at first, but that slowly led to him opening up."

"How's he doing now?"

"Good. Runs a motorcycle shop in Iowa now."

They entered into the briefing room. A large holodisplay was located in the center of the room. The senior staff for the recovery effort were gathered around it. On the display was an image of the seabed with the arm laying on its side. Raleigh thought it might be a still, until he saw a shark swim past the tip of the now-dead plasma cannon. *Very cool.*

"Okay, we're almost to the site. Here's the arm as it lies now. It's in about 25 meters of water, which is shallow enough that we can use divers. However, we've come with the ROVs as a backup in case the divers aren't able to complete the task safely. Mr. Beckett, any serious hazards to be aware of?"

Raleigh leaned in to look at the image of the arm. He circled the shoulder. "Obviously, there's a lot of sharp metal here. The arm weighs a couple hundred tons, so there are a lot of crush hazards. I'm not sure how the arm will react to being moved, so steer clear of all joints and moving parts, especially around here." Raleigh circled the plasma cannon muzzle. "This may retract back into a hand under the right circumstances. The panels alongside the arm, here, here, and here, will retract with the hand." He paused looking for more hazards.

Mako walked into the room, alerted by the powerful Ghost Drift the two Rangers shared. "The arm is not likely to switch back to being a hand, but it is a concern nonetheless. Be mindful of the shoulder panel, as it is likely loose from the damage. Other than that, there shouldn't be any more serious hazards."

The project leader looked at the two Rangers. He'd heard of the Ghost drift, but hadn't seen it in action before. "Where do you suggest we tie off to?"
Mako looked at the display. "I'd attach just below the shoulder, just below the elbow, and just above the wrist. There's a couple of structural elements there for you to grab onto."

"Perfect. Alright, people, let's get cracking. We've got about 20 minutes before we arrive on site, and a lot to do before we get our feet wet."
Mako and Raleigh stood watching the cables slowly climb from the water, drawing Gipsy Danger's severed left arm from its watery home of the last five years. They looked down into the water, and were greeted by the red and white stripe of the shoulder pauldron becoming visible. Shortly thereafter, the rest of the arm appeared in the frigid seas.

Mako looked to Raleigh, who was clearly lost in thought. I know what he's thinking about... I've seen it before. Mako's mind went back to their first Drift. The hull! It went through the hull! Raleigh, listen to me! You need – AAAAAHHHHHHH! NOOOOOOOOO! She silently put her right hand atop Raleigh's left.

Slowly, the arm breached the surface, drawing gasps from the members of the crew who had never been around a Jaeger's wreckage before. Everything about a Jaeger was huge... except for the pilots in the Conn Pod. Even the project leader whistled in respect as he walked up to the Rangers. "I knew Jaegers were big, but that puts it into perspective." He looked at Raleigh and Mako. "You guys drove the thing that came off?"

Raleigh was still lost in his memories, but Mako turned to face the man. "Yes. And Raleigh lost his brother in the attack. He's one of only two pilots to have survived the loss of a copilot and still finished the fight." She looked at the arm. "AFTER having that cut off by a Kaiju."

"I... I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay. Not many people outside the PPDC know. All most people care about is whether or not the Jaeger stopped the Kaiju."

"We saw the skeleton not far from here. Looks like parts of it were melted. That thing did it?"

"No, the other arm, actually. The one now in pieces at the bottom of the Marianas Trench, if any of it survived the nuke."

Raleigh snapped out of his funk. "Yeah, this one was almost ready to fire when Knifehead severed it. Never fired a shot that night." He looked out over the water. "Do you happen to have any scans of the area?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Mako gasped. Yancy.

"My brother was still tied into about five tons of metal when he was taken from me. If we can find his remains..."
"I'll get them pulled up."

One last thing: My phone has no coverage here. Can I use one of yours? I need to make a call…”

-.--.

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Marshall Hansen's quarters

May 20, 2025

0615 (May 19, 2025 1215 Alaska time)

Beedlebeedle.

Beedlebeedle.

Herc slowly rolled over and picked up the phone. "'lo?"

"Sorry to have woken you, Herc, but I have a favor to ask."

"No worries, Raleigh. I needed to get up anyhow. What's up?"

"The recovery team here thinks that they might be able to locate Yancy's remains."

Herc paused. It had been five years since Yancy had been lost. "Raleigh, there's not going to be much left of him…"

"I know, sir. But he deserves more than to be left here."

"I'll dispatch an honor guard and a casket."

"Thank you, sir."

"No worries, mate."

Click.

Herc looked over at Max. "C'mere, you big baby. Let's get some breakfast."

Max perked up at the mention of food.

Herc shook his head. *I swear he has a second stomach tucked between those ears. Reminds me a lot of Chuck in that regard.*

-.--.

1400 Alaska Daylight Time

Raleigh and Mako pored over the sonar scans, looking for the telltale shape of the right side of the Conn Pod. It had been nearly two hours, and they had not had much luck. Mako decided to go for a walk on the deck of the command ship. Raleigh stayed, fixated on finding his brother and bringing him home for the last time.

Mako looked back at Raleigh as she stepped through the hatch. *He looks so sad, but I need a breath of fresh air.* She headed over to the gangplank that lead to the barge they had placed the
"You look a little lost in thought, ma'am."

Mako slowly turned to see who it was. It was the ROV tech. "Yes. Raleigh is looking for his brother's remains."

"I heard. I cried so much when I heard he had died. I was a big fan of them, and of Gipsy."

Mako started to walk across to the arm. "If you would like, I can show you some of the intricate details of the arm, and the I19 Plasmacaster that makes up a large portion of it."

"I'd love to. I'm Emily, by the way. Emily Baxter."

"Call me Mako, please."

"No problem. So, Mako, what's this do?"

"That's one of the focal arrays. See, plasma..."

-.-.-

Raleigh hung his head in disappointment. *I failed you again, Yancy. You've been gone five years, and I still can't manage to bring you back home.* He looked outside. The skies were clear, the winds were calm, and the seas were flat. *So different from that night.* He saw Mako giving the ROV tech a guided tour of the arm. *Maybe she has the right idea. I need to get away from this for a bit.* Raleigh went outside to meet Mako and her new friend.

As he approached, he could here Mako in full-on tech mode. *I love it when she does that, even when it goes over my head. She's so cute like that.* He moved up closer to see what they were looking at. *Ah, the markings on the knuckles.*

Mako felt Raleigh's approach more than she heard it. The maelstrom of emotions emanating from him diminished slightly as he approached, replaced by the feelings Mako had come to interpret as his adoration for her. *Hello, Raleigh.*

Emily jumped, surprised both by Mako's uncanny ability to tell that Raleigh was behind them, and also due to her proximity to her childhood crush. *Uhhh... Hi.*

Raleigh laughed. *I'm Raleigh. What's your name?"

"I'm Emily."

"Lemme guess, you were a big Gipsy fan."

"Yeah... Mako, thanks for the tour, I just remembers I have some stuff I want to do."

"No, you are staying, Emily." Mako grabbed the fleeing tech's wrist. *Come on, don't be shy!*

"I'm not shy! I've got work to do!"

"It's not important enough that it kept you from coming with me."

At that, Emily gave up struggling.

Raleigh laughed harder. *Who are you, and what have you done with Mako?"*
Mako punched him in the shoulder.

"Okay, that's the Mako I know." He turned to Emily. "Okay, I have a question for you, Emily. How long did you cry after I left the Ranger Corps?"

"Buhhh…." Emily's mind had been melted by Raleigh's question. "Huh?"

"Come on, I can tell when a girl had a crush on me back in my glory days. So, how long did you cry when I left the Corps?"

"Uhm…" Emily grabbed her ponytail and started playing with it. "A few days, I guess."

"Don't be embarrassed, Emily. That's pretty common. Believe me, I heard it all."

"Whaaa?"

"Emily, we were like rock stars. Hero worship was something that got to even our heads from time to time." Raleigh crouched down, laying a hand on Gipsy's arm. "But that night five years ago… When this happened, when Yancy died…" He looked at Emily. "It all changed. It wasn't a game anymore. I was still connected to him when he died. When Knifehead tore his side of the Conn Pod apart and dragged him into the hurricane we were fighting in." Raleigh, listen to me! You need – AAAAAAHHHHH! "He's still here somewhere. His remains, anyways."

"I'm so sorry. I knew he died, but I didn't know how."

"They kept it pretty quiet. Morale and all, you know."

Emily slowly stood up. "I… I…"

Mako looked at her. "Lots of people lost loved ones to the Kaiju. I lost my adoptive father to two at once."

Emily looked at Mako. "Two? Hong Kong?"

"No, the assault on the Breach. He was copiloting Striker Eureka." Mako drifted into her memories briefly before snapping back to reality.

"I'm so sorry for both of your losses. I… I'll leave you alone for now."

Mako stood. "No, I'll go with you for a bit, but then I'm going to go back to searching the sonar scans."

"Can I help?"

Mako looked at Raleigh, lost in his memories. "Sure, Emily. Maybe a fresh set of eyes will spot something we missed."

-.-.-

Raleigh knelt by the arm, remembering the times with Yancy. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Mako and Emily, waiting for them to disappear into the superstructure of the command ship. Finally, they vanished from sight. Okay, Raleigh. Let's do this.

Raleigh moved to a particular spot on the wrecked arm, right by the emitter for the plasma cannon. He was looking for one particular piece of stainless steel… Aha. There it is. Raleigh borrowed a set of pliers and gently teased the 15 centimeter rod of metal out of its resting place. Perfect for my
secret project. He quickly returned the pliers to their place and slipped the metal rod into his jacket. *Now to hide this until I get back to the Shatterdome…*

---

**1430**

Raleigh came back to the holotable and began to search the display. As usual, nothing stood out. *Next.*

Mako flipped to the next sector… and Raleigh froze. Mako followed his sightline. It was the missing piece of the Conn Pod. She walked over to Raleigh and hugged him, then looked into his eyes.

He was crying. *"It's him, Mako. He's finally going home."*

Mako smiled, not saying a word. There was nothing to say.

---

**May 20, 2025**

**1200**

The divers were carefully removing Yancy's remains from the tangled mess of the Con Pod wreckage. As expected, there wasn't much left.

Raleigh didn't care. Yancy's casket would no longer be empty. He would be going home a hero, instead of being forgotten and left at sea.

Mako had stayed with Raleigh the entire time since the discovery. He had done the same for her during their trip to Tokyo. *At last he has some closure.*

A radio nearby crackled to life. "*We're done with retrieving Yancy. Do you want to retrieve the Conn Pod wreckage too?*"

Raleigh thought about it for a while. "Not all of it, no. Bring up a few chunks of the hull, though." He looked at Mako. "I might have a use for them."

Mako squeezed Raleigh's hand. "*Anatanokokoroni ken nōdo no yōna mono ga arimasu ka?* What kind of sword do you have in mind?"

Raleigh smiled at her. "*De wanai ken... Shikashi, watashi wa watashi ga nanika o kangaerudarou to kakushin shite imasu."* Not a sword... But I'm sure I'll think of something.

"*We've got a couple of hefty pieces. Probably about 20 pounds. That sound good?*

"*Yeah, that's plenty. Thanks, guys."

"*No problem."

The divers would be needing another half hour for decompression, but the casket and steel could be sent straight to the surface. As such, Raleigh waited for the casket to arrive via crane. He watched it rise from the depths, and walked over to it once it arrived on the barge. Raleigh knelt down next to the casket. Mako followed suit.
Raleigh put his hand on the casket. He waited a moment, gathering his thoughts. Finally, he spoke, barely above a whisper.

"Yancy… We won. It took a lot longer than we'd thought, and it was harder than we'd hoped. We lost a lot of good people. All the Jaegers are gone. But we won." He hung his head. "We won."

Mako laid her right hand on Raleigh's back. "Yancy, I know I never met you. But from what your brother says, I would have really liked you." She paused, fighting back tears for a man she'd never met, or ever would. "I…" She hung her head, unable to find the words to express her emotions.

Raleigh spoke again. "I'm sorry it took me so long to come find you. But I did, and you're going home at last. I hope you can forgive me, both for taking so long to come back for you, and for not being able to bring Gipsy back home at the end of the war. She's gone, old man. I used her self-destruct to close the Breach. But without her, I'd have never met Mako. And without your death, I probably wouldn't have been Drift compatible with her. So if you're up there somewhere, watching me…"

A single tear splashed across the casket.

"Thank you."
Forged in Fire, Chapter 17

Anchorage, Alaska

May 20, 2025

1800 Alaska Daylight Time

"Hello?"

"Jazmine, its Raleigh."

"Hey, Rals. What's up?"

"You sitting down right now?"

"Should I be?"

"Yes."

"One second…"

Raleigh waited.

"Okay, shoot."

"Bang."

"Haha, very funny. What's so important? You and Mako engaged?"

Raleigh looked at Mako, who was watching the waves go past as the command ship returned to port. "No, not yet."

"Then why'd you ask me to sit down?"

"We just recovered Yancy's body today."

---

Jazmine froze. Did he just say that they are only now recovering the body? "WHAT THE HELL TOOK YOU SO LONG?"

---

Mako heard Jazmine clearly, even though she was several feet from the phone, which was not on speakerphone mode. She walked over to Raleigh, ready to provide backup if needed.

Raleigh eased the phone back to his ear. "Jaz, we couldn't recover the body for a while due to the fact that there was a freshly dead and still decomposing Kaiju nearby, the brass were trying to figure out whether to try and retain me or kick me out of the program, and they were trying to figure out what to do with Gipsy Danger. By the time the PPDC was done with those, the attacks were ramping up again, and there just wasn't enough time to do an extensive survey to search for
Yancy. The only reason we found him was because we were in the area recovering Gipsy's left arm for the museum.

Jazmine was silent for a while, fuming. Finally, she replied, much calmer. "Well, at least you found him. Any plans for his burial/funeral?"

"I was hoping you would like to come to the PPDC Cemetery in Hawaii for the ceremony."

"Hmph. I'm tempted to say no to make a point… but he's family. I'll be there. When?"

"I know its short notice, but… Friday."

"FRIDAY? Ohmigod, I need to call the office and tell them I'm not going to be able to make it in! Wait, airfare? Hotel?"

"We'll cover the expenses. You'll be flying on Hawaiian Airlines Flight 19 on Friday morning. It departs at 9 AM. You'll arrive at about 11 AM local time. The ceremony will be at sundown. You'll leave on Flight 20 at about 2 PM the next day and be back in Sacramento by 11 PM."

"No time to play tourist…"

"Next time, Jaz. I promise."

"I'm gonna hold you to that, mister." She sighed. "Alright, lemme call the office and tell them I'm not going to be in on Friday."

"See you Friday."

"Okay."

Click.

Raleigh looked up and saw the docks approaching swiftly. *Time to get ready.*

---

1830

Raleigh and Mako were met by six Strike Troopers in full dress uniform. *The Honor Guard.* Mako had interacted with them before, when Tamsin had died. Now, however, Mako was old enough to be a part of it, if she so chose. However, she felt her place was alongside Raleigh as he prepared to finally lay his brother to rest.

The six troopers walked in unison to the casket, picked it up, and began to walk back up the gangplank. Raleigh and Mako followed, silently holding hands. Waiting on the dock was a hearse, chartered to take the casket to the airport, and a small sedan, which was waiting for Mako and Raleigh. They climbed in and headed to their hotel to collect their bags.

Halfway to the hotel, Mako looked over at Raleigh. *I haven't seen him like this since the day after Pitfall.* "You okay, Raleigh?"

"Yeah… Just lost in thought."

Mako closed her eyes and focused on the little tickle at the back of her brain she associated with the Ghost Drift. She'd been trying to feel out its limits, and if she focused enough, she could pick out semi-coherent thoughts from Raleigh. And it got stronger with every Drift they shared. Let's
Raleigh, listen to me!

Mako slowly opened her eyes, unsurprised. "Remember what you told me right before that last drop?"

Raleigh continued to look out the window. "Yeah, I do. 'All those years I spent living in the past, I never really thought about the future…'"

"Then think about the future. The past is unchangeable now. The future is what you make it to be."

Raleigh continued to look out the window, pensive.

Mako closed her eyes and laid her head back again. *Then again, perhaps I should follow my own advice. What do I want to do with my life after the PPDC closes?*

--

2130

The Boeing 737 roared aloft, carrying Mako and Raleigh on their way to Seattle, where they would spend a few hours of downtime before catching another flight to Hawaii. Mako has the window seat, as had become their habit during their world tour following the closure of the Breach. Mako looked outside, watching the night sky. Several minutes passed as Raleigh watched Mako looking out the window like a child, utterly delighted. *She always does that. I wonder why?* Eventually, Raleigh laid his chair back as far as he could take it, and closed his eyes.

Raleigh was just about to fall asleep into a nap when Mako grabbed his shoulder and gently shook it. "Raleigh, look!" She pointed out the window. "The Northern Lights." He leaned across her lap to look.

All around the aircraft, high above in the upper atmosphere, the skies came alive in ribbons of color. It started off in an unusual red, before becoming the more typical green. Mako was entranced. *I've read about them, but I've never seen them before. They're beautiful.* The cabin crew turned down the lights so that the passengers could enjoy the lightshow from above. Mako looked as high above as she could. *They climb upwards for what seems like forever!*

Slowly, the lights began to fade away as the plane moved south. Raleigh smiled at Mako. "Beautiful, weren't they?"

Mako nodded, eyes bright.

"I remember the first time I saw them, when I was out camping with my dad and Yancy."

"I'd like to go someday."

"Camping?"

Mako nodded.

"Well, I'll see what I can find around Sacramento while we're there. Herc said we wouldn't be spending all of our time working, and to enjoy ourselves."

"I'm sure Jazmine knows where to look, at least."
Raleigh lay back in his chair again. "She was always more of the big city girl. Wanted to go to the fancy college, go shopping, that kind of thing."

Mako rolled her eyes. She hated the mall.

"She'll probably drag you out to one, you know."

"She'll try, I have no doubt. But she shall not succeed."

"Mako, she's just as stubborn as I am."

"We'll see. There are days when I swear we could have used your skull as armor for Gipsy Danger."

"Ha ha."

"I thought it was funny!"

"Don't quit your day job."

"What is my day job, anyways? Ever since we finished up the tour, you and I have been without real jobs."

"Well… Huh, you have a point." Raleigh opened his eyes again. "Never thought about that."

"What would you want to do once we're done in Hong Kong?"

"What can I do? I never technically graduated high school after my mom died. I just went straight to the Academy. Then I spent a few years as a Ranger, then almost five being a construction worker on the Wall. Not a very good resume. You've got it better off, right?"

"Let's see… I never even made it to high school. I learned all I needed to in the Shatterdome or at the Academy. My life the last nine years has revolved around the Kaiju war. I think you have it better than I do."

"You've got the practical experience of rebuilding Gipsy. I'm sure that you've got plenty of engineering skills you can market."

"And you did steelwork, right? There's going to be a lot of rebuilding and fresh construction."

"Yeah, me and a half million others who worked the Wall. Face it, Mako. You have the better job prospects."

Mako looked back out the window. "I guess you're right. Still, what would your dream job be?"

Raleigh sighed and closed his eyes. "I've got no idea. I think I'm going to try a couple of different jobs and find out what I'm good at. You?"

"I think that's a good idea. I might try that. Although I might try college."

Raleigh cracked an eye and looked at her. "College?"

"Why not? I missed high school, so I want the experience of public school of some sort. Besides, I should be able to fly through any engineering program."

He put his head back on the head rest and closed his eye. "Heh. True."
"Would you go to college?"

Raleigh opened his mouth, about to scoff at the idea… then closed it. That's actually a good idea. "You know, I just might. If you want to go, I'll go with you. I'm sure there's something for me to study."

"Well, we've still got a few months to figure it all out."

"Yeah. Hard to believe that we're going to be civilians come September 1st."

"The severance package is nice, though. $7500 a month for life? We could both lead comfortable lives on that alone."

"Or pay for college tuition and a nice apartment for each of us."

"Raleigh, you say that like we'd be living apart. We've shared a bed, an apartment is well within reason. Even if it's in separate rooms." Mako paused. "Actually, I don't think I'd trust anyone else to be my roommate."

Raleigh smiled. "Mako, we've shared our minds with each other. Our deepest secrets and desires. There's no deeper trust than that." He opened his eyes and looked Mako in the eyes. "And no deeper bond. And I'm happy to share that with you." He kissed her on the forehead. "Now get a little shuteye, we've got a crazy week ahead. Yancy’s funeral, checking out the memorial site, back to Hong Kong, then to California."

"Raleigh… would you stay in California?"

"A little warm for my tastes, but I guess I can adapt."

"Raleigh, I'm trying to have a serious conversation."

"And I'm trying to rest. Come on, Mako. We've got the layover in Seattle and the flight to Hawaii to talk."

Mako punched him in the shoulder. Hard.

"OW! Alright, alright. I'm awake now." He sat up and opened his eyes.

She gave him an inquiring look.

"Gah… I guess it depends on what there is to offer there." He rubbed his face. "Look, we can take a look when we're there, but we've got a lot to deal with first. Yancy, the memorial, the katana, the museum…"

Mako shook her head in dismay. "Raleigh Becket, you are avoiding the question."

"Mako, it depends on what's there for me."

"Try to think ahead, Raleigh."

"Mako, I don't know what I want to do for the rest of my life. And right now, I'm too tired to start doing so effectively." He laid back and rolled away from Mako. "Goodnight, Mako."

Mako stared at Raleigh. Did he just blow me off? Grrrrrrrrr…

-.--.
Raleigh looked at Mako, concern visible on his face. She hasn't spoken to me since last night on the flight to Seattle... I really messed up. "Mako?"

Mako just looked out over the cemetery, seemingly ignoring Raleigh.

"Mako, I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to…"

Mako finally faced Raleigh. "Didn't mean to what? Blow me off in the middle of a conversation? Over a little sleep? While I was trying to have a serious conversation?"

"I didn't mean to cut the conversation off totally. I just wanted a break to think. It's hard to break habit five years entrenched of not thinking ahead."

Mako was about to reply, but bit her tongue instead. He's got a point. "Sorry, Raleigh. I'm just excited and nervous. I spent much of my formative years with the PPDC, and I don't know what life holds for me. But I'm going to take charge of my future. I'm done with having someone or something dictate my future. Not a Kaiju, not a Marshall, and especially not my past." She took Raleigh's hand.

"Mako, I wish I knew where my future lay."

"Who says I know where mine is? I'm going to find out, though."

"Care for some company on that journey?"
Forged in Fire, Chapter 18: Laid to Rest

PPDC Memorial Cemetery

Oahu, Hawaii

May 22, 2025

0800

Herc and Max had both flown out to Hawaii for the pre-arranged meeting about the Ranger Memorial. Now, there was a funeral to attend as well. Second, more proper funeral, not some rushed wartime empty-casket job. Herc looked out over the tombstones. Chuck wasn't so lucky… I had to put some scrap pieces of Striker into the casket as a substitute.

No father should outlive their son.

Raleigh walked over to Herc. "Sir, we're ready when you are."

"I'll be there in a moment."

Raleigh looked at what Herc stood in front of. Ah. "I'll give you some space, sir." He walked back to the main group.

Herc knelt down. "Chuck, I know you're not here. But this is all I have left of you. A tombstone marking an empty coffin…" He paused to wipe away a tear. "It should have been me and Pentecost in Striker. Last stand of the old guard, and all that." Another tear, another pause. "You should be the one here alongside Raleigh and Mako, planning the Memorial. I know you hated Raleigh, but I also know you had a thing for Mako. You never showed it, probably didn't even realize it yourself, but the signs were there. Yeah, you two really struck sparks. But I suspect that you two would have been one hell of a team. You both had a big chip on your shoulders. You both had issues with your father. You both were perfectionists. And I saw that one time you two sparred in the Kwoon. My god, the moves you had. Not quite like that last round with Mako and Raleigh, but close. You two would have been compatible, I'm sure." Herc looked out towards the sea, and sighed. "I know you never forgave me for rescuing you instead of your mother, but she would have felt the same. I thought that by saving you, you'd eventually have kids of your own and understand why I did what I did that day. Guess it didn't matter in the long run." Herc looked back at the group. "Of course, without any Kaiju to fight, you'd probably have gone crazy by now. Mako and Raleigh… well, they're trying to figure out what they're going to do, now that the war is over. At least I know what I'm going to do: Find a nice house on the outskirts of Melbourne, retire… maybe write a memoir."

Whine…

"Max says hello. He's really missing you. He still can't quite get used to the Shatterdome being so quiet. On that note, we're turning it into a museum. Gipsy's left arm from Anchorage, Crimson Typhoon's body… Maybe some other stuff, if we can decontaminate it and retrieve it from Oblivion Bay. Anyways, enough of my rambling. I need to go to the meeting about the Ranger Memorial. You'd hate it. 'Hope, Sacrifice, Love.' You're 'Sacrifice,' by the way. You and Pentecost.
You can probably guess who 'Love' is. Herc smiled. "Mako and Raleigh are inseparable these days."

"Marshall Hansen, are you okay?"

"Anyways, duty calls." Herc stood up, turning to face the assembled group. "Yeah, I'm fine." He stepped aside, allowing the VIPs to see whose grave he'd been at.

"Oh, sorry to have disturbed you."

"No worries, mate. Let's get this over with."

---

*Mako and Raleigh's hotel room*

**1100**

Mako and Raleigh had found a relatively secluded beach on the eastern side of the island of Oahu to unwind for a while, and had been preparing to go spend the afternoon doing just that. However, a snag had arisen over wardrobe. Raleigh had packed some shorts and swim trunks. Mako, on the other hand, didn't have anything other than her usual cargo pants.

"Mako… It's Hawaii. Tropical island paradise in real life. Why didn't you bring anything for the beach?"

Mako looked at the floor, embarrassed. "I… I thought we'd be going back home first."

"Mako, it's okay. We can swing by a mall or something…"

Mako's head snapped up at the mention of a mall, eyes dark with determination. "No. We're not going to the mall, and that's final."

"Then let me go in and buy it."

"How will you know if it fits me?"

Raleigh smiled and produced a small tape measure.

Mako's eyes bugged. "On second thought, I'll be fine in the cargo pants." She grabbed the cooler of food. "Let's go, Raleigh."

Raleigh roared with laughter. "Okay, Mako. You win. But I bet my sister drags you kicking and screaming to a mall. Or worse, gives you a makeover."

"Fifty bucks says she fails to get me there."

"Double or nothing on the makeover."

"You're on, Raleigh."

The two Rangers shook hands, then headed for their rental car.

---

*Waimanalo Beach, Hawaii*
Beedlebeedle.

Beedlebeedle.

Raleigh looked at the number for the incoming call and groaned.

Mako looked at him in dismay. "I thought you turned that off?"

"Herc said to leave it on in case of an emergency."

"Is it an emergency?"

"What does my sister qualify as?"

"Take the call."

"Hey, sis. What's up?"

"Calling to double check that you're picking me up at the airport, right?"

"Yes, we are."

"In person?"

"Yes. Both of us will be there."

"Great! I- wait, is that the ocean I hear in the background? Are you on the beach?"

"We are. We were enjoying some much earned peace and quiet."

"What's Mako wearing? I've heard she's a bit of a tomboy…"

Mako's gonna kill me for this but… "Tank top, cargo pants, and combat boots."

Mako could clearly hear the laughs from where she lay, almost a meter from the phone.

"Oh, my dear brother. I'm going to take her shopping someday… You'll barely recognize her when I'm done!"

"I'd pay good money to watch you try. She avoids malls like they're infested with zombies."

"Even better. Too bad I can't take her in Hawaii."

"You don't want to. It's really expensive here."

"True… but you guys got a really nice reward for saving the planet, right?"

"Not as much as you're thinking… but yeah, there's a healthy income waiting for us once we're mustered out."

"I know you, Raleigh. You're not going to just sit back and enjoy a very early retirement."

"Yeah, I just don't know what I want to do."

"You'll find something. Mako too. I know it."
"Thanks, Jaz."

"Okay, I'll let you get back to your beach date. Oh, and tell Mako that when I have my mind set on going to the mall, even Slatter doesn't stand a chance of stopping me."

Raleigh roared with laughter. "Yeah, that's about right." He held the phone away from him for a moment. "Mako, you'd better have a Jaeger or two behind you if you don't want to go to the mall with Jazmine. She says, and I do quote, 'When I have my mind set on going to the mall, even Slatter doesn't stand a chance of stopping me.'"

Mako got a smug look on her face. "Give me the phone quickly."

"Okay." Raleigh grinned as he handed his phone over.

"Jazmine, remember who killed Slatter? Me and your brother."

"Oh, right."
Raleigh began to laugh even harder.

"Mako, punch him for me, please?"

"With pleasure."

"No! NonononoAAAAAAAHAAAAHHHHH!" Raleigh tore down the beach, Mako in hot pursuit.

"Get back here, you baby!"

-.--

Honolulu International Airport
Terminal Z
May 23, 2025
1115 Hawaiian Daylight Time

Mako and Raleigh were wearing their dress uniforms, waiting for Jazmine to arrive. Raleigh paced nervously, which was irritating Mako.

"Raleigh, knock it off."

"Huh? Oh, the pacing. Sorry."

Suddenly, a large influx of passengers came towards Mako and Raleigh's location. Raleigh relaxed. "About time…"

Jazmine wound her way through the crowds towards her big brother and his copilot. "RALS!" She wrapped her brother in a bear hug.

"Jaz! How was the flight?"

"Movie was okay, but those Pau Hana macadamia shortbread cookies were awesome!" Jazmine let go of Raleigh and turned to Mako. "Nice to finally meet you in person, Mako."

"Same here."
Raleigh looked over at the mass of bags on the carousel. "I hope you don't have any checked luggage…"

"No, just a carryon. Oh, did you know they don't hand load your bags on the big jets? They stick'em into these big metal boxes and then put those into the plane. I guess it's faster than stacking them by hand…"

Raleigh sighed. "Jaz, remember why we're here?"

"Oh. Right." Jazmine's face fell. "Killjoy."

"Come on, we need to get back to the cemetery for some last minute stuff. And you need to get changed."

"True. Lead on, Raleigh."

---

**PPDC Cemetery**

1400

Mako and Jazmine looked at Raleigh in concern. He'd been silent for a while now as they began the final preparations for the ceremony. Jazmine dragged Mako over to the side.

"What's he thinking right now?"

"Jazmine, the Ghost Drift is different from a regular Drift. It sometimes can reveal coherent thoughts, but more often it simply conveys emotions and feelings."

"Oh. I'd heard rumors about the bond between Rangers being so strong that they were able to finish each other's sentences, grab a bandage when the other cut themselves, that sort of thing."

"We're not like that. At least, not yet. We don't have enough time together in the Drift."

"Wait, you're still Drifting? I thought the Jaegers were the only place you could Drift!"

"No, that's just the most common application of the technology. We have a private-use one. We haven't used it since the day we found Yancy."

"Oh. Well, what do you feel from him?"


Jazmine ran to Raleigh and hugged him. "Let it go, Raleigh. You can't change the past."

"Jaz…"

"Raleigh, listen to me! You need to let it go."

Raleigh looked like he'd been hit with an electric shock.

Mako's eyes bugged.

"What did I say?"
Mako walked over to her. "Yancy's last words were eerily similar to your statement."

"What?"

Raleigh quoted Yancy. "Raleigh, listen to me! You need…"

"You need what?"

"I never found out, because that's when Knifehead tore away his half of the Conn Pod." Raleigh smiled. "You just filled in the blank that's kept me guessing for the last five years." He scooped his sister up in a crushing hug. "Thank you."

---

1900

The Marines stationed National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific had been kind enough to train the PPDC troops who manned the PPDC Cemetery. Their training showed.

A brief nod from Herc set the ceremony in motion. A senior Sergeant from the Shatterdome, a former Marine himself, began the calls.

"READY!"

A rattle as the seven PPDC Strike Troopers cycled the actions on the loaned M-1 rifles.

"AIM!"

The soldiers aimed skyward.

"FIRE!"

CRACK. The rifles fired in perfect unison.

"READY!"

Rattle.

"AIM!"

Swish.

"FIRE!"

CRACK.

"READY!"

Rattle.

"AIM!"

Swish.

"FIRE!"

CRACK.
The bugler began to play "Taps" slowly, and the honor guard folded the American flag draped on Yancy's coffin.

Mako looked at Yancy's coffin. Goodbye, Yancy. I wish I could have met you. A tear crept down her face.

Jazmine wiped away a tear of her own. Goodbye, Yance. I wish I could have said goodbye.

Raleigh stood at attention, tears crawling down his face. Goodbye, brother. It's been hard to let go of you. But it's time. Time to let go; to move on.

The bugler ended "Taps," and Herc accepted the flag from the honor guard. With a precision befitting his prior military service, he walked over to Jazmine, and handed her the folded flag.

"I know you probably already know this, but I wanted to make sure you knew. Your brother died in the line of duty defending a city of two million people from a Kaiju. I'm sorry it took so long to have his remains located and properly interred. But now we have. It's the least we could do for one of our heroes."

Jazmine accepted the flag, weeping. "Thank you."

Herc strode back to his spot. Facing the casket, he put his NCO voice on.

"ATTEN-HUT!"

Raleigh and Mako snapped to attention, as did every current or retired military person on scene.

Here slowly saluted the coffin. Even Jazmine joined in, placing her hand over her heart.

The coffin slid downward just as the sun dipped beneath the Pacific Ocean.

Raleigh silently wept. This time, it was tears of relief. He's finally at peace.

Goodbye, Yancy. I'll miss you.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'll admit it: I cried as I wrote that last section. Playing Taps in the background probably didn't help the matter, but it put me in the mindset for the ceremony. And for me, getting that right was one of the most important parts of the whole story up to this point.

Taps: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WChTqYlDjtI
Chapter 19

Forged in Fire, Chapter 19

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Crew Quarters, Corridor 47B

May 25, 2025

2300

Mako put her clothes away in her room. *That was a crazy trip. Alaska, Hawaii, and then home.* Mako looked around. *If I can call this home anymore.*

Raleigh knocked on her door. "Mako… yours or mine?"

"Uhhh… yours."

"Okay."

Ever since their trip to Japan, Mako and Raleigh had shared a bed. *I didn't think the proximity would drive away the nightmares. But I'm happy it does.* She pulled on a light tank top and a pair of gym shorts (her only pair of shorts, actually) and padded across the hallway to Raleigh's room. Raleigh opened the door right as she arrived.

As they settled onto the much smaller bed, they simply enjoyed the physical contact. No words were spoken; they didn't need to. Finally, Raleigh turned off the lights. Their breathing synchronized, and their hearts began to beat as one.

They slept.

-.-.-

May 26, 2025

0700

Mako slowly woke up. Raleigh was still sleeping, his arms around her slender frame. *I'm in no hurry. We've got nothing going on-*

Raleigh stirred. "Morning, Mako."

"Good morning, Raleigh. Did I wake you?"

"No." He removed his arms from her, and traced his fingers across the circuitry suit burns on her shoulder. "Healed nicely. Faster than mine did, anyways."

Mako shivered slightly at the odd feeling of Raleigh's fingers tracing her scars.

"Sorry, didn't know that they were so sensitive to touch."

"It's not that; you're the only person other than the doctor to touch them like that."
Raleigh nodded. "So, how close are we to finishing the *katana*?"

"Very close. A few more hours of work."

"Well, then. What are we waiting for?"

-.-.-

*Gipsy Danger repair bay*

1100

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Mako put the steel back into the furnace. "Okay, last round. Then we need to let it cool so I can apply the insulation layer for the final phase."

Raleigh wiped his brow. "But the blade is straight. Isn't a *katana* curved?"

Mako grinned. "The last phase is what gives the blade that curve. You'll see."

Raleigh shrugged. "Okay."

Mako removed the glowing blade from the furnace and set it on the anvil.

Raleigh began to hammer the metal for the last time.

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

*Ting.*

Mako watched the steel slowly achieve the desired shape. Finally, it was ready. *Perfect.*

Raleigh stopped hammering. "It's beautiful already."

"It'll be much better once it's tempered and polished."

"Are you going to polish it?"

"No. I'm a swordsman. Others polish it and make the *saya.*"

Raleigh quirked an eyebrow at the last word.

Mako sighed. "You would likely call it a scabbard. It's the sheath for the blade when it's not in use."

"Okay. Learn something new every day."
"So, lunch?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to dance before we eat."

"I'd love to." Mako put down the tools and set the still-hot blade in a safe location. "Outside or inside?"

"Outside. Weather's nice and there's a slight breeze."

"Wonderful. Let's go!"

The two Rangers set off for the Kwoon mats.

-.-.-

LOCCENT

1125

Herc's phone rang. "Hansen."

Tendo's excited voice came through. "Sir, Mako and Raleigh are preparing to spar outside on the mats."

Herc smiled and grabbed his video camera. "This should be good. I'm on my way." He hung up the phone and jogged towards the elevator.

-.-.-

Outdoor Kwoon mats

1130

Mako and Raleigh picked up their hanbos and bowed to each other. Then, they took ready stances.

Mako delivered a formal first strike to begin the match. As she expected, Raleigh easily deflected it and wound up with a powerful overhead strike. She angled her hanbo ever so slightly to redirect the incoming strike to her right.

Through the Ghost Drift, Raleigh sensed Mako's defensive move, and instinctively adjusted his strike to provide more energy for a follow-up hit instead. His hanbo scraped along Mako's and swung down towards the ground. He pulled it through an arc that was parallel to his left side, coming back towards Mako.

Mako knew from a combination of experience and the Ghost Drift what Raleigh was planning. She stayed in a defensive posture and prepared to redirect Raleigh's much more powerful blow while leaving her in a position to deliver a strike of her own.

And so the "dance" began. Mako and Raleigh sparred as often as many other couples danced. However, it was far more demanding and intimate than even the most challenging dance styles. With the sparring, they had to know their opponent's moves well enough to anticipate the next strike and parry it, while also thinking about how to land a blow of their own. With the Ghost Drift thrown in, Mako and Raleigh were only able to land a strike if the other made a grave error. As such, instead of the usual "four strikes marks a win" rule, Mako and Raleigh used an "Any strike marks a win" rule.
Today was no exception, and the two Rangers danced all over the mat as they traded blows in a flurry of movement that even the Kwoon Fightmasters could barely keep track of. It was awe inspiring, and it drew a crowd. This time, Herc was there, and he had brought a camera with him to record the match.

Mako and Raleigh tuned out everything but the mat and each other. After a minute, Raleigh slipped up, and Mako gave him no mercy. She used her speed and agility to dart inside of Raleigh's strike zone and began to deliver a furious series of blows, driving Raleigh backwards… until she slipped ever so slightly on a sweaty spot on the mat. Now Raleigh began to push the offensive again, and Mako expertly deflected his blows.

The match continued like that for almost seven minutes, before Mako and Raleigh somehow wound up with their hanbos locked together… on the opposite side of their opponent's staff. They looked each other in the eyes for a moment, their hearts pounding as one, their breathing perfectly coordinated.

Then, they kissed.

-.-.-

Herc laughed long and loud as the crowds cheered, and Mako and Raleigh snapped back to reality, clearly embarrassed. He stopped the recording, and walked out to them. "In all my time in the military and the PPDC… I've never seen a sparring match like that." He smiled at them. "THAT is what two paired Rangers should fight like. Unable to touch the other for minutes at a time, despite being hell-bent on landing a blow." He then took Mako's hanbo. "And from the looks of all these dents in the wood, you're not holding back any power either. If you landed a solid hit, you could injure the other. But you never touch the other, because you can't. They stop the strike, or dodge it." He handed back the hanbo. "You two move with a grace and speed that Chuck and I could never match. I'm impressed." He walked off the mat. "Thank you for the fantastic show, by the way."

Mako blushed. "Thank you sir."

Herc grinned and walked off towards LOCCENT, and the crowds dispersed.

Raleigh put the hanbos aside, as both were thoroughly beaten from the intense match. He then turned to look at Mako, who was staring out over the harbor. Perfect. He snuck up behind her and scooped her off her feet and into his arms.

Mako, caught off-guard, yelped in surprise. However, she let Raleigh hold her for a bit. The physical contact feels really good. I don't know why. It's not just the love, though. Sometimes I'll wake up wrapped in my sheets despite it being warm. It just feels good that way.

Raleigh began to walk back into the Shatterdome with Mako still in his arms. "You and I both need a shower before we go into the mess hall."

Mako nodded.

Raleigh had planned on carrying Mako back to their rooms as a joke, but she seemed to be enjoying it a lot. Need to remember to do this more often.

Too soon, they reached their rooms, and Raleigh set Mako down. "Meet you in the mess hall at noon?"

"Deal."
Mako grabbed a clean change of clothes, and headed off to the women's showers. Raleigh, however, hesitated until Mako was gone before pulling out his cell phone and calling Herc.

"Sir, I have a favor to ask… Can you call Mako off for about two hours later this afternoon? I need her workshop to myself for a secret project. … Yeah, it's going to be a gift to her. … Yep. Just don't tell her. That's why we haven't Drifted lately: I want to keep it a surprise. … You can? Great. I owe you big time, sir. Thanks." Raleigh ended the call and put the phone away, then grabbed some clean clothes and headed to the showers.

-.-.-

Gipsy Danger repair bay

1300

Mako sat cross-legged on the floor as she worked, the tip of her tongue sticking out of the right corner of her mouth. Raleigh watched her, entranced. I love it when she is deeply fixated on her work like that. She looks so cute and harmless.

Mako carefully applied the clay/ash mixture to the blade with a sliver of wood. The slurry varied in thickness from the front of the blade to the back, and from tip to hilt. Finally, it was ready to dry this first layer. She put it into the oven she'd made just for this task, and left it for a few minutes. She moved over and sat in Raleigh's lap, facing him.

"Okay, Mako, what sort of magic is this mud going to do with the blade?"

"It's a complicated process, but the two different types of steel will contract differently as they cool. This is helped by the varying thickness of the clay causing it to cool at different rates. This difference in contraction is what causes the katana to take on its classic shape."

"Wow. There's a lot going on in such a seemingly simple process."

"Yes, there is. Now, I need to take the blade out to let it cool before I apply the detail layer." She got off of Raleigh's lap and carefully removed the blade and set it on a stand to cool.

Raleigh stood up and sauntered over to look at the other new piece of equipment Mako had set up. "Mako, why do you need the water trough?"

"That's where I'll put the blade to cool."

Raleigh watched as Mako took the sliver of wood and applied a wavering line of darker slurry to the blade. She finished it with a PPDC logo just above where the blade would enter the handle.

"Time to dry it once more, then it's time for the magic." She was grinning.

Raleigh watched the clay dry in the oven. "It's like pancake batter."

"But with this, it's much more important that everything be exactly the right mixture and temperature."

"Point."

"Okay, time to heat the blade."

Mako pulled it from the oven and stuck it into the furnace, and slowly turned up the throttle on the furnace until it glowed a faint red. She watched the edge of the blade intently, seeking
a very particular color... There. It's time.

"Raleigh, you ready to see some magic?"

"Sure!"

Mako pulled the blade from the furnace and stood over the end of the trough. Then, in a smooth motion, she plunged the blade into the water. Steam rose as the water nearest the blade boiled, but Mako held steady. Raleigh waited patiently off to the side.

After a minute had passed, Mako slowly pulled the blade from the water... and Raleigh's jaw dropped. "That was straight less than a minute ago, and now it's curved. The cooling did that?"

"Yes. One of the beautiful elements of classical swordsmiting."

Mako took the blade over to the work bench and slowly picked away the clay, revealing the metal beneath.

Raleigh observed closely. "Not much different."

"The polishing will take care of that."

Mako's phone rang with Herc's ringtone. "Yes, sir?"

Raleigh feigned curiosity.

"On my way." She ended the call and put the phone back into her pocket. "Herc wants to see me. I'll be back soon."

Raleigh kissed Mako on the forehead. "Don't have too much fun without me!"

"No promises."

Raleigh laughed, and Mako walked out of the workspace. Once he heard the doors close, Raleigh retrieved the small bit of stainless steel he had recovered from Gipsy's left arm, and the tool he'd made before the trip to Alaska. Now, let's make this happen. I still need to find the three other smaller, but much more expensive, elements of this, but I can get the hard part done now. He smiled. Mako's going to love this when it's done.

**Author's note:** I've wanted to do a sparring match for a while, and decided that I should just knuckle down and do it. So I did. It was fun trying to visualize the whole fight, then boil it down to a much more concise description.

And what is Raleigh's secret project? You'll have to wait until the very last chapter to find out. The revelation of it is my intended climax for the whole story.
Mako and Raleigh were back in Gipsy Danger's Conn Pod, gearing up to drop into a fight with yet another Kaiju. This time, they were going into downtown Tokyo to fight a Category III that tipped the scales at 2700 tons.

Raleigh toggled the radio. "Disengaging transport."

Mako flipped the switch, and the eight Jumphawks surged thousands of feet in altitude in mere seconds as the 1980 tons of Jaeger were cut loose. Gipsy slammed to the ground not far from the rampaging Kaiju. Mako hit the rescue horn, grabbing the Kaiju's attention. It roared at them, and Mako answered with another blast from the horn.

The Kaiju charged them, and drove its bladed skull through Gipsy's left shoulder. Mako screamed in agony as electrical discharges coursed through her suit, burning her left arm and shoulder.

Raleigh groaned as the pain blasted through the Drift, and channeled the pain and anger into a single voice command. "PLASMA CANNON!"

The Kaiju twisted its head, tearing off the arm entirely. Mako nearly passed out from the pain. However, she clung to the Drift with everything she had, keeping her awake. She followed Raleigh's moves as he began to fire the plasma cannon…

Suddenly, the Kaiju lashed out with its arm and a claw pierced the Conn Pod on Raleigh's side. Raleigh and Mako stared at it for a moment in fear. No, not again…

Raleigh looked at Mako. "Mako, I love you. Take care of…"

He never finished his sentence, as the Kaiju tore away the Conn Pod hull, dragging him with it.

Mako screamed.

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Raleigh's quarters, Corridor 47B

May 27, 2025

0159

Raleigh awoke to a blood chilling scream from Mako. He was instantly awake, seeking the source her terror. "Mako! What's wrong?"

Mako stopped screaming as she realized she was not in a badly battle-damaged Jaeger. Instead, she was in Raleigh's room. She curled into a ball and began to cry.

Raleigh's mind finally put everything together. Nightmare. One of mine, but she was the one having it. "Mako, it was just a dream." He pulled her into his lap and hugged her.

"You saw it too, right?"

"Yes. I know that nightmare well. It's one of mine that you somehow picked up on. Your mind
changed it slightly, though. I've never had it with you in the Conn Pod and us using Jumphawks to drop into Tokyo."

"I'm sorry…"

"Don't be, Mako. We don't control our dreams, and we don't let our nightmares control us." He reached over to his nightstand, pulled open a drawer, and removed a battered old iPod. He booted it up and scrolled through the menu, seeking a particular song. All the while, he held Mako tightly. "Relax, Mako. It's over now."

Mako just buried her face in her knees and cried. "Raleigh… you died. Just like Yancy."

Raleigh found the song, and put one earbud into Mako's right ear, and the other into his right ear. "I know." He hit play.

The song started slowly with only a piano, slowly joined by a bass and a guitar. Then, the vocals came.

"Come on, come on, put your hands into the fire. Explain, explain, as I turn and meet the power…"

Mako slowly relaxed and almost melted into Raleigh's arms as the song continued.

-.-.-

Finally, the music slowly wound down, and Mako smiled sadly.

Raleigh removed the earbuds and turned off the iPod. "I found that song after I lost Yancy. It's been a part of me ever since." He put the iPod away. "Does that help?"

"Yes. Thank you." Mako yawned and pulled the blanket over the two Rangers. She fell asleep moments later, still curled up in Raleigh's lap.

Raleigh waited a few minutes until he was sure Mako was asleep, then slowly shifted until he could lay down. However, sleep proved elusive as his mind raced. He gently toyed with Mako's hair, suddenly missing the blue highlights. Why did our first shared dream have to be that particular nightmare?

Finally, after several minutes of musing, Raleigh drifted off into a fitful, light sleep.

-.-.-

0800

Mako slowly woke, uncurling and stretching like a cat. Raleigh was already awake.

"Glad to see you slept better this time around." Raleigh yawned.

"You didn't?"

"No. I was restless all night, and kept waking up."

Mako's eyes fell.

"Mako, it wasn't your fault I couldn't sleep. It was mine. I kept thinking about the dream."

Mako looked at Raleigh. "What about it?"
"I'm sure you've heard of other Rangers sharing their dreams before."

"Yes."

"It's just odd. That was my nightmare for years, but with me in your spot and Yancy in mine. I haven't had it since our first Drift, though."

Mako's face fell. "It's been a recurring one for me since Hong Kong."

"Mako… why didn't you tell me?"

"I…" She sat up, pulling the blanket around her. How to explain this?

"Mako, it's okay. I want to help. " Raleigh laid his arm around Mako's shoulder and pulled her in closer.

"It's… hard to explain."

"Try me."

Mako sighed and gathered her thoughts. "I can't," she finally blurted out.

Raleigh hugged her tightly. "Mako, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Have you ever gotten further than that, though?"

"No."

"And it's always the same?"

"Yes, it is. Why?"

Raleigh thought for a moment. "Let's go see if Tendo has any spare Drive Suits left for the simulator."

Mako looked at Raleigh, surprise and confusion written on her face. "What good will that do?"

"If we can change the outcome of the nightmare, then perhaps it will go away."

"Do you think that will help?"

"It's worth a shot. Besides, I miss the Jaegers. This seems to be the closest we're going to get for the foreseeable future."

Mako hopped out of the bed and stretched some more. "True."

Raleigh pulled his cell phone off its charger and dialed Tendo. "Tendo, my man. I have a favor to ask…"

-.-.-

Gipsy Danger drive suit room

1000

Tendo had pulled through for the two Rangers, drawing up the scenario that Mako and Raleigh had described in record time. Now, it was time to suit up, possibly for the last time. Mako and Raleigh stood beside each other as the techs attached the armor panels to them, just like they did before
Operation Pitfall. Slowly, the suits came together, wrapping the pilots in the now-familiar layers of armor and circuitry.

Finally, they slid their helmets on in perfect sync. Raleigh looked at Mako. "You look good."

"You should look in the mirror, Raleigh."

They walked down the hall to the simulator and strapped in. As the techs bolted them to the motion capture rig, Tendo's voice filtered through their com systems. "Looking sharp, you two."

Raleigh reached up and to his left to toggle the coms. "Tendo, my man. Thanks for this."

Mako reached up and right to toggle her side. "Thank you, Tendo."

"No problem-o, Gipsy. Ready to start?"

"Yes."

"Gipsy Danger, ready for the Big Drop."

Tendo laughed. "Just like old times. Okay, get ready. Neural handshake in ten seconds."


Raleigh simply nodded.

Mako and Raleigh both relaxed and let the Drift wash over them…

-.-.-

Driftspace

Mako and Raleigh were dancing, actually dancing, in a ballroom in London. They had come to give an interview on BBC, and had stayed for a party being held in their honor. So they had decided to try a slow dance at the party. They moved perfectly together, thanks to the Ghost Drift, and they tuned out all but each other…

-.-.-

Reality reasserted itself, and the Rangers smiled. They looked at each other and nodded. Solid.

Raleigh reached out and toggled the comms. "Ready when you are, Tendo."

Tendo was silent for a moment, trying to understand what had just happened. "You guys do realize that your handshake took less than a second to initiate and stabilize, right? That beats Cherno Alpha's record by nearly half a second!"

Mako toggled her coms. "Yes, Tendo. Now, the simulation?"

"Right. Going in in three, two, one…"

-.-.-

Tokyo

Gispy Danger hung under the Jumphawks as they flew over Tokyo, closing in on the Kaiju
rampaging through the city. Below them, Onibaba's skeleton rose above the Boneslums. Ahead of them, a 2700 ton Kaiju smashed through a building.

Raleigh and Mako, now totally comfortable with each other in the Drift, never spoke aloud as they planned their attack.

Mako judged the distance to the Kaiju, the ground, and their speed, and came to a conclusion. We need to keep flying, and cut loose on the go. Gipsy can take it.

Okay. You call it.

"Gispy Danger, disengaging transport… NOW!"

Raleigh toggled the release mechanism, and the Jumphawks hurtled skyward. Mako kept Gipsy steady as they fell to the ground with an earth-shaking impact, bending the Jaeger's legs to absorb the impact. Mako toggled the rescue horn, grabbing the attention of the Kaiju.

As they had expected, the Kaiju took the horn as a challenge and roared at them. Mako toggled the horn again in reply. The Kaiju charged at Gipsy.

Mako and Raleigh smoothly dodged the Kaiju as it tried to impale them with its bladed head.

See, Mako? Already different from the dream.

Mako smiled. Yes, but it's not over yet. "PLASMA CANNON!"

Gipsy's left hand transformed into the barrel of the plasma cannon, glowing with furious energy.

Raleigh let Mako take the lead, and followed along as she pumped two shots into the Kaiju in quick succession. The Kaiju, however, was having none of it, and barreled through a building to escape the Jaeger. Gipsy ran after the Kaiju, left cannon still armed and ready.

Mako swore in in Japanese as the Kaiju nimbly darted out of the line of fire once again, and they continued the chase. He's fast and smart. Scary combination.

Yeah. Let's hope he pulls an Otachi and comes to us.

Raleigh had just finished that thought when the Kaiju burst from a building to Gipsy's right, and attempted to land a blow to the Conn Pod. Mako, however, had already rolled the Jaeger's shoulder to take the blow, which glanced off the shoulder guard and down their back.

I'll hold him!

Okay.

Raleigh grabbed the bladed skull of the Kaiju as Gipsy spun to face their attacker, and Mako angled the plasma cannon towards the Kaiju's neck. Then, she fired. Repeatedly.

The Kaiju screamed after the first shot, but the plasma burned away its vocal chords on the second shot, leaving it mute. The third shot burned halfway through the spine, and the fourth shot decapitated the Kaiju outright. Raleigh heaved the head down the street, and Mako emptied the plasma reservoirs into the carcass. Finally, it ran dry and ceased firing.

Mako smiled as she stowed the plasma cannon. "No pulse."

Mako and Raleigh smiled as Tokyo disappeared.

*Feel better, Mako?*

*Much. Thank you, Raleigh.*

-.-.-

The Drift dissolved, and the Rangers unstrapped from their harnesses. Behind them, the door hissed open, and they made their way out, holding hands.

-.-.-

**LOCCENT**

*1100*

"Tendo, this had better be good. I was about to have an important meeting…"

"Sir, Mako and Raleigh wanted to do a simulator run to help Mako get over a recurring nightmare. They just left the suit room and are headed to the mess hall."

"Did it work?"

"Yes. Mako says it should clear up the nightmare."

"Then why did you call me in?"

Tendo replied by playing back the initialization of the neural handshake.

Herc watched the readings and the cameras in the simulator… then gasped as he saw the speed and strength of the Drift. "My God… I've never seen anything like that before."

"Sir, that is the strongest Drift and the fastest handshake on record."

"Even more so than Cherno." Herc didn't even bother with a rhetorical question. This was a statement of fact. "Sad as it sounds, I'm wishing for a Kaiju and a Jaeger now, just to see them in action for real again."

Suddenly, a deep, raspy voice boomed from the back of the room. "I might be able to arrange for the Jaeger…"
Chapter 21

Forged in Fire, Chapter 21

Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

May 27, 2025

1105

Tendo whipped around, seeking the unfamiliar voice. Herc, however, slowly turned around, arms crossed over his chest. He leaned against a desk in LOCCENT as he looked at the new arrival. "Hannibal Chau… Took you long enough to find me here."

Chau shrugged. "Had to stop to ask for directions a number of times. I knew Shatterdomes were big, but this really puts it into perspective."

"Sorry, but Mr. Choi called me up here to review a recording from a simulator run. It's impressive, to say the least."

"I've always wanted to see what the Jaeger pilots went through. Can I watch?"

Herc thought for a moment, then came to a decision. "Yeah, but keep in mind that the neural handshake at the start is far from typical. It's actually the fastest and strongest one we've ever seen."

Tendo started the playback, bringing the LOCCENT to life as if it were actually in use again. "This simulation was run less than three hours ago with the crew of Gipsy Danger. The simulation was set up to mimic a persistent nightmare from one of the crew, so that they could try to rewrite the nightmare into a happier ending."

Hannibal Chau watched as Gipsy dropped into Tokyo and began to take on the simulated Kaiju. "What happened in the nightmare?"

Herc paused the playback right as the Kaiju charged at Gipsy. "Right here is where the events diverged. In the nightmare, Ms. Mori's side of the Jaeger is badly damaged when the Kaiju drives the bladed protrusion through the left shoulder. The damage leaves the Rangers badly dazed and unable to defend themselves properly. Mr. Beckett tried to deploy the right-hand plasma cannon, but was unable to before the Kaiju breached the hull of the Conn Pod and tore him away, leaving Gipsy crippled and unable to fight. That's as far as the nightmare went. So, they did it differently this time."

Chau watched as Herc unpause the playback and Gipsy began to engage the Kaiju... then watched the Kaiju dart off into the city after being hit with the plasma cannon. "Huh… rather similar to Otachi in intelligence and speed, Knifehead in stature, and Onibaba in behavior before Gipsy arrived."

Gipsy had just grabbed the Kaiju's head and was preparing to fire again when Newt burst into LOCCENT. "GUYS! I don't care what you're doing, but drop it now, we've got bigger problems!"

Herc groaned. "Newt, what are you talking about?"
"Th-th-the Breach…. It's not going to stay closed."

Herc paused the playback as Hannibal Chau turned around slowly and Tendo dropped his favorite coffee mug to the ground. "What did you say," Herc growled darkly.

"The Breach will reopen. More Kaiju will come."

Chau glared at Newt. "And you know this how?"

"The Ghost Drift. I… I was at some sort of meeting in the Anteverse. They were discussing the outcome of the war. It was fascinating, really, getting to see their culture…"

Herc held up his hands. "Hold up, mate. Details. Lots of them. NOW."

Newt paused and swallowed. "Okay. We all know Jaegers are incredibly expensive, right? Well, we never really asked ourselves what the Kaiju cost to make. Not money, but resources. I finally have an answer."

"And?"

"The answer is complicated, but I'll try to condense it as best I can. The Kaiju were classed by the Precursors, their makers and masters, on a generational system. Generation 1 Kaiju were the first ones to come out. They weren't intended to face any serious resistance. The last Gen 1 Kaiju was Karloff, in Vancouver. Gen 2 Kaiju were the trial-and-error phase, trying to find out what would work against the Jaegers. They were replaced by Gen 3 Kaiju, which were designed to refine the techniques and systems that would be needed later. The first Gen 3? Knifehead. Gen 4 Kaiju were the final, refined versions. Otachi, Leatherback, Scunner, and Raiju were the only ones to come through."

Chau's curiosity was piqued. "What about Slattern?"

"Exterminator-class. Not tied to a generational mark."

Herc, though curious himself, wanted to get back on track. "Right, you said something about costs?"

"Oh, yeah, right. The figure I overheard was that each fourth-gen Kaiju took enough resources to feed one of their Hives, which are supercities that house about a billion Precursors, for a month." He paused to let that sink in. "That's more than the cost of Striker Eureka, if you translate it into human terms."

"And Slattern?"

"Five Hives, more than three months."

Silence hung in the LOCCENT for a few moments.

Herc finally spoke his mind. "So, what you're telling me is that bout sides of the Breach are suffering from an economic downturn from the war?"

"We're actually in better shape. We haven't invested as much into this as they have."

Chau has been thinking about something, and finally spoke up again. "So, why are they coming back here?"

"They don't have a choice. They've invested too much time, effort and resources to try to find a
world to terraform. It's here, or nothing."

"And the Kaiju?"

"Smaller and cheaper, but smarter and better equipped. And in larger numbers."

Herc looked out over Scramble Alley. "And the Breach?"

"It'll take them a while to clean up the mess Gipsy left. Apparently, the Precursors aren't resistant to radiation poisoning."

"But the Kaiju are?"

"No, they aren't any better than the Precursors. Remember, each time we've nuked them, they've gone down. It probably didn't take three to take out Trespasser; that's just what was on the Minuteman III missile that was used to perform the final strike, and they wanted to be sure it went down and stayed down."

Herc continued to stare out over the empty Jaeger bays. "So, how long do you think it will be until they reopen the Breach?"

"Two, maybe three years? They have to regrow everything and test it. No guarantees it'll be in the same spot, though. Ask Hermann about it."

"I will. In the meantime, write all this down. I want all of this on record."

Newt raced back to his lab to write the report. Tendo looked at Herc. "Sir, what do we do now? Are we still going to disband at the start of September?"

"The U.N. gave me no choice. We're a Private Military Contractor now, and we bought a nuke on the black market from Russia. It was either stand down, or be arrested. All of us, from you and I to the janitors. I couldn't let that happen." He looked at Chau. "Which is why I wanted to meet with you."

"I'm all ears, Marshall."

"Before Newt's bombshell, I had been planning to ask if you wanted to have a highly-trained PMC. Now? I'd be a fool to let the PPDC be broken up."

"Will you tell the U.N.?"

Herc's gaze darkened. "They cut and ran at our darkest hour," he growled. "I will NEVER forgive them for that. Pentecost might have, but I won't. As my son would have said, 'Screw'em.' We closed the Breach on our own. We can do it again." Herc's gaze suddenly became more distant. "We WILL do it again." He turned to Hannibal Chau. "However, we'll need some serious financial backing."

"Which I can't provide up front… yet. That said… If you were to bring some of the more complex Jaeger tech to market for military and humanitarian work, we'd have much more funding." Chau looked out over the hangar at Gipsy's arm being brought in on a Jaeger Launch Platform. "Something much smaller than that. Something smaller and lighter than a tank, actually."

Tendo perked up. "Like Iron Monger from the 2008 "Iron Man" movie?"

"Exactly. Now that there's a lull in the Kaiju war, I highly expect that old rivalries will rise up
again. And the U.S. military has always wanted exosuits. Why not make some for them?"

Herc smiled. "And if you remove the armor and weapons, you've got an agile, fast, and strong construction or rescue mech. I like it. I'll turn Mako loose on it after she and Raleigh get back from California."

Tendo turned to Herc. "I thought you were going too?"

"Something personal came up in Australia. I need to go take care of it sooner, rather than later. I'll go from there to the U.S. after it's dealt with."

Chau turned around and walked over to Tendo's station. "Where in California?"

"Sacramento will be our temporary home, but we're actually going to be working in Oblivion Bay. We're retrieving Brawler Yukon and Crimson Typhoon for sure. Beyond that, it's going to require a hand-on look at them to determine which Mark II and III Jaeger are brought here for display."

"Sacramento's become a vital hub on the West Coast. It's somewhat replaced San Francisco, Oakland, and the Silicon Valley, all at the same time. I had it on my short list of places to look at before picking a place to set up shop. So, where would you want to put a revamped HQ?"

"Depends on where you set up shop."

"Hmm. Mind if I tag along?"

Herc grinned and handed Hannibal a PPDC I.D. card. "Welcome to the Senior Staff. We're leaving on Friday. Hong Kong to Seattle, then to Sacramento. We'll be there for a month or more."

"Sounds good."

Tendo leaned back in his chair. "So, any idea what you're going to call your business?"

Chau thought for a moment. "Now that it seems that we're joining forces and staff, how about… Pan Pacific Industries?"

Herc smiled. "Perfect. Let's go talk this out in more detail over lunch."

Hannibal gestured towards the door. "I know this place downtown that survived the battle in January that does a fantastic steak."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

The two men left the LOCCENT, already talking over the proposed new business.

Tendo, however, was deep in thought. *What kind of personal matter does Herc have to deal with? His brother died in a drunk driving accident two years ago. Chuck's tombstone is in Hawaii. His wife's birthday is in October, their anniversary is in February, and she died in September. He's got no surviving family… What could it be? Whatever the reason, he's earned a vacation.*

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*Corridor 5C, just outside Kwoon combat training room 7*

1300

Herc and Chau were walking along, discussing the details of the museum, when the sound of
Mako’s laugh drifted out of the Kwoon. Herc gestured for silence and pulled out a camera, then slipped his head around the doorframe. He then gestured Chau into the room.

Mako and Raleigh bowed formally just as the two older men entered, the proceeded to circle the mats for a few moments. Then, in a blur of motion that left Chau astounded, Mako lunged at Raleigh, raining down blows. Raleigh nimbly parried each and every strike before beginning his own flurry of attacks, driving Mako backwards. They danced around the mat for several minutes, wrapped in their own little world of each other and their hanbo staves. Finally, Mako darted inside of Raleigh's striking range, and Raleigh simply pulled her into him with his hanbo. They stood there for a moment, chest to chest, looking at each other and ignoring everything else.

At that moment, however, Herc sneezed, causing both Rangers to jump in surprise.

Hannibal Chau began to clap. "Ah, to be young again."

Raleigh and Mako looked at each other, thoughts flowing through their freshly-renewed Ghost Drift at incredible speed. Raleigh spoke for them. "Sir, who's the VIP?"

Herc put the camera away. "Rangers, meet Hannibal Chau. He provided financial backing for us after the U.N. cut bait and ran. He's also going to be the CEO of Pan Pacific Industries. As you're aware, we're going to be closing down the PPDC at midnight on August 31st. Starting September 1st, there's a job waiting for both of you with PPI. I've already accepted an offer to be the head of the Security branch."

Chau stepped in. "PPI will be taking over the Jaeger Program entirely. I was hoping that you'd come on board to provide your piloting expertise… and your engineering skills. We will be building smaller mechs and exosuits, as well as next generation prosthetic limbs."

Mako and Raleigh were silent for a bit. Chau shuffled, uncomfortable.

Herc coughed gently and leaned over to Chau. "Don't mind it. They're communicating through the Ghost Drift and the Drift Hangover from this morning. It takes some getting used to, even for a Ranger like myself."

Mako finally nodded her head once. "Sounds like a plan. Where are you thinking of setting up?"

Hannibal Chau shrugged. "Not sure yet, but I'm thinking Sacramento, California. Lots of tech companies there, lots of transportation connections, relatively close to the San Francisco Exclusion Zone, which I want to help rebuild… It's also a nice city, from what I've heard."

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other and shrugged, then Mako looked at Herc. "Well, we might as well pack up our meager belongings and prepare to move to Sacramento. There's not much point in coming back for just two months."

Herc smiled. "Sounds like everything's coming together. Raleigh, what'd your sister major in again?"

"Business." He paused. "Oh. I see."

Chau smiled politely. Raleigh noticed little flecks of something stuck to his teeth. "Any chance you could get me in contact with her before we depart on Friday?"

"We, sir?"

Herc sighed. "I need to go down to Australia for a week on a personal task that just came up, so
Chau's going to take my seat. He's part of what I'm calling the Senior Staff: Me, Chau, Tendo, Gottlieb and Geizler… and you two. If we're going to get PPI off the ground in a hurry, having someone on the ground already will help immensely."

Mako and Raleigh nodded their understanding in unison, clearly doing so intentionally. Chau laughed. "You two are a hoot to watch. I wish I could have that level of a connection to someone again."

"Chau, shall we? There's still a lot talk about and visit…"

"Catch you two later. Oh, and thanks for what you did in Hong Kong. I never did like that stadium."

Here and Chau walked out as Mako and Raleigh put their shoes on to head back to their quarters to begin packing for their upcoming trip to the U.S.

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Author's note: Herc's little holiday was originally going to be doctor mandated from exhaustion, but I decided to have him take it of his own free will. He's going to need some rest if he's going to be rebuilding the Jaeger Program. ;) However, expect a side story to detail not only the vacation, but the reason for it as well. Let's just say that Chuck's line of "I want to come back from this mission, because I quite like… my life" is going to be explored in more detail. Stay tuned!
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Chapter 22

Forged in Fire, Chapter 22

Hong Kong Shatterdome

LOCCENT

May 28, 2025

0937

Mako walked up to Herc's impromptu office and knocked on the doorframe.

Herc looked up from the paperwork he'd been filling out. "Mako, what can I do for you?"

"Sir, is there any way I can swing by Tanegashima before we head to the U.S.? I need to drop off the katana blade at an old family friend for final polishing and for fitting of the handle and housing."

"Do you have to go, or can we have someone deliver it?"

"It'd be better if I go. That way, I can ensure that they understand what I'm looking for in the finished product."

"I'll see what we can do."

Mako bowed slightly, then started to walk out of the office.

"Mako, one other thing… There's been some interest in keeping your workspace set up and actually making it a museum exhibit."

Mako paused. "Why?"

"All of the Jaegers will be given a bay here in which we will display memorabilia and artifacts associated with them. Included in that is displays about their pilots." Herc paused. "Raleigh's welding gear from the Wall, his and Yancy's flight suits, your and Raleigh's Drive Suits…"

"Yes. I'll also give you the clothes I wore when Onibaba attacked. If I want to see them again, I can always come visit."

"You sure? That's a big step for you. Pentecost told me about the importance of that little red shoe."

"Sir… I have finally gotten closure for my parents. I'm fine."

"Okay. Just checking."

"And yes, you can add the workspace to the exhibit. But I need to get some things from it first."

"Outstanding. Next time you see Raleigh, can you ask him to come talk to me? I want to see if there's anything he wants to be a part of his exhibit."

"I will, sir."
"Thanks, Mako."

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Mako walked out of the LOCCENT, mind elsewhere. *I know that our Ghost Drift has been getting stronger each time we Drift… Let's see what I can do this time.*

Mako focused on a single message. *Raleigh, Herc wants to talk with you.*

A moment later, surprise radiated through the two Ranger's shared bond. After a brief pause, Raleigh replied. *Mako, how'd you know that'd work?*

*I didn't.*

Wow. Okay, let me finish what I'm working on…

*Which is?*

You made a katana for Pentecost. I'm planning on making a smaller blade from some of the wreckage of Gipsy as a memorial to Yancy.

*Can I help?*

*Please do. I'm not as skilled as you!*

Mako laughed and began to head to the hangar. *On my way. What have you completed so far?*

Raleigh's pride radiated through the Ghost Drift. *I've decided that I'm not going to fold the steels, since they're already pretty uniform, so I've been working the two blanks into smaller versions of what we had before we welded the pieces together before.*

*That's a good start. I'm almost there.*

Mako walked around the corner of the bay and into the workshop. She put her hands on her hips and turned around, taking it in.

"Mako, something wrong?"

"Trying to decide what I don't want to be on permanent display…"

Raleigh reached over to a particular drawer and pulled it open. Hiding at the back was the same item he had been looking at as he had started his secret project. He grabbed Mako's Jaeger Academy graduation ring and handed it to her. "Don't want to lose that right now, do you?"

Mako eyed him suspiciously. "How'd you know that was there?" She slipped the ring on. "And where's yours?"

Raleigh looked down at his feet. "Somewhere along the Pacific coast of Alaska. I… kinda threw it to the ocean after Yancy died and I left the PPDC. I didn't want to have any reminders."

Mako walked over and slapped Raleigh in the back of his head. "Idiot." She grinned. "I guess we'll have to have a new one made for you. And you didn't answer my question about how you knew that's where I kept it…"

"I was browsing through the drawers looking for some supplies for my still-secret project and saw it. I also saw it in our last Drift."
"Speaking of that project, how's it coming?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Raleigh Becket, I will find out what that project is one way or another."

"Of course you will. When it's done, you'll find out what it is." He gave her an evil grin. "Until then, you'll get nothing from me."

Mako picked up Raleigh's current, non-secret project. "What size are you aiming for?"

Raleigh, relieved at Mako's redirected focus, turned to the smaller block of metal she held. "My research showed that many katana were often paired with a smaller blade, typically a wakizashi. I'm making that smaller blade to be paired with sensei's katana. If… that's okay with you?"

Mako smiled, fighting back tears. "Yes, it's wonderful."

Raleigh put the steel into the furnace to heat up. "Well, we've got a lot of work, and not a lot of time to do it in. Shall we?"

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	Tanegashima

	May 29, 2025

1430

Mako and Raleigh were exhausted. They hadn't been able to get the wakizashi far enough along to be polished. Thankfully, Mako had found someone to finish it for them in her old hometown. They had just delivered it and were now meeting with an old family friend of her father. He was a master sword polisher, and Mako didn't trust anyone else to finish sensei's katana.

He walked out of his work room and froze. "Mako! Watashi wa anata ga saigo mite irai, sore ga nagaai sa rete iru! Ogenkidesuka?" Mako! It's been so long since I saw you last! How are you?

Mako smiled broadly and hugged the old man. "Tsukareta. Sore wa koko ni Honkon kara nagai furaitodeshita." Tired. It was a long flight from Hong Kong to here.

The old man looked at Raleigh and switched to flawless English. "You must be Raleigh Becket. Welcome to Tanegashima. I'm Jurou Himura. I knew Mako back when she was a little girl watching her father forge swords."

Raleigh bowed his head respectfully, then replied. "Watashitachi, sensei o motte itadaki arigatōgozaimasu. Watashitachi wa nani mo chūdan sa rete imasen negatte imasu." Thank you for having us, sir. I hope we aren't interrupting anything.

Jurou smiled and looked at Mako. "He is fairly good. A little bit of error in intonation, but close enough for everyday use."

Raleigh and Mako laughed.

"Now, I know you did not come all this way to pay a social visit. What brings you here on such a short visit?"

Mako produced the katana blade, wrapped in cloth. "I'm making it in honor of Marshall
Jurou smiled sadly. "Ah, your adoptive father. I am deeply sorry for your loss, Mako."

Raleigh sensed Mako's repressed frustration. *Mako, it's going to be a while before everyone stops doing that. Trust me.*

Mako gave no outward response, but she did calm down. "I wasn't able to acquire *tamahagane* for the sword, so I improvised with materials from the Shatterdome. A piece of each of *sensei*'s Jaegers was used to make the blade."

Jurou gently took the blade and inspected it. "Hmm... Not the usual number of folds. Three, maybe four, correct?"

"Four. I didn't actually need to fold the steel, but I did so a few times just for tradition."

"That is fine. It makes it unique, and personal." He looked at the *hamon*. "The blade is beautiful. Your father would have been so proud. Not just because of your skill with the forge, but also with the sword... even if it's the height of our water tower." Jurou chuckled.

Mako blushed. "Thank you."

"I've seen many swords in my seventy years... but none can compare to your Chain Swords. Elegant, deadly, precise... Just like a *katana*." He wrapped the blade in the cloth again and set it aside. "Just like you."

"Thank you, Jurou."

"Now, about the price..."

"I'm aware I'm offering more than is normal..."

"Mako. I won't take your money."

She stopped. "Why?"

"I will do this for free, on one condition."

"Anything."

"I want you to do one more *katana*, as traditionally as you can. Sixteen folds. I know I can't get you any true *tamahagane*, but I've been in touch with some master metallurgists in the United States who can get you a very close match. I'll have them give you some of their best materials."

Mako thought it over.

"Just one, Mako. I want to polish one last traditional Mori sword before I die."

Mako nodded once, a tear creeping down her cheek. "I will. I'll let you know where I settle."

"Thank you." Jurou picked up the sword again. "If this is any indicator of your skill, you have the makings of being the greatest sword smith in the history of the Mori name. Your father did well in his short time with you. I can only imagine what you would be able to make if..."

"If he hadn't died?" Mako smiled sadly. "Me, too."
Jurou turned to Raleigh. "Mr. Becket, May I have a moment with you in private?"

Without waiting for a response, Jurou walked out into the small Zen garden out back. Raleigh followed, and Mako politely distanced herself in the Ghost Drift.

"Sir, we're Rangers. There are no secrets between copilots."

"I know. I still wish to tell you some things away from Mako, even if only physically." Jurou looked out over the garden. "I can tell you two love each other deeply."

"We do, sir."

"Then do me a favor."

Raleigh waited.

"Marry her, you fool!" Jurou laughed.

Raleigh smiled. "It's on the to-do list once things have calmed down."

Jurou's laughs stopped. "As if they haven't now? It's been months since you two closed the Breach. What are you waiting for?"

"We're moving to the U.S., dissolving the PPDC, setting up a museum, and starting a new company... all at the same time. We're a little busy to have a wedding right now." Raleigh left out the bombshell Herc had dropped in the last-minute briefing before he headed to Australia.

"Well, don't wait too long, Mr. Becket."

"Don't worry, sir. I'll make sure Mako sends you an invitation when it does happen."

"That's fine. Now, I'm sure Mako's extremely curious as to what we were talking about. Let's put her out of her misery."

Raleigh laughed. *We're coming back in, Mako.*

*Phew. I was about to come after you and make sure Jurou hadn't been beating on you.*

Jurou walked in and turned to Mako. "Before you leave, anything else I can do for you?"

Mako smiled. "Actually, there's a *wakizashi* Raleigh and I started, but don't have time to finish..."

"Did you leave it at Haneda's?"

"Yes, we did."

"Excellent. I'll make sure to have him come look at your *katana* and make a good match."

"Also, can you arrange for a mounting and case for both blades?"

"I know someone who only does a few a year, and only for the most exquisite blades. I think he'll jump at the chance to work with your blade. He loved your father's work. Anything in particular you're looking for?"

"Not really. *Sensei* was deeply into Zen."

"I'll pass that along."
Raleigh looked at his watch. "Mako, you ready?"

"Yes. Jurou, thank you so much."

"Thank you, Mako. Oh, before you leave, can you sign my granddaughter's shirt?" Jurou picked up a folded shirt and held it up, revealing it to be a Gipsy Danger shirt with Mako and Raleigh's faces displayed on their respective sides of the Conn Pod. "She's a huge fan of you."

Raleigh laughed and took out a Sharpie. "I'll sign it too, Jurou. But tell her to take very good care of the shirt. It's going to be worth a lot someday."

Mako sighed, and accepted the offered Sharpie. She signed it and handed the Sharpie back to Raleigh. He signed the shirt as well.

"Thank you for the hospitality, sir."

"Please, call me Jurou."

Mako smiled. "Sorry we couldn't stay longer, but we need to get going if we're going to catch the flight to Seattle."

"I understand. Just make sure to come back with that blade."

"I will, Jurou."

Mako and Raleigh left Jurou's house… right as his six-year-old granddaughter walked up the walkway.

Raleigh felt Mako panic. She'd never dealt well with the sudden rise in fame and arrival of fans that her brief stint as a Jaeger pilot had brought. He tried to send peace and patience across the Ghost Drift… But then the little girl realized who was standing just outside her grandfather's house.

"Mako Mori? Raleigh Becket?"

_Mako, I know you're gonna beat on me in the Kwoon for this…_

*DONT YOU DARE, RALEIGH!*

_Sorry, Mako. I have to make her day._ Raleigh grinned. "Yeah, that's us."

Mako groaned and plugged her ears, knowing what came next.

*EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!*

"Whoa… calm down. We're actually just leaving."

"Awwwww…. Can't you stay?"

"Sadly, no. We have a big meeting to go to, and we need to leave now if we want to catch the plane out. However, we left you a present with your grandfather…"

"Why are you here, if you're not here to say hi to me? I'm Mako's biggest fan!"

Raleigh chuckled. "I'm sure you are. However, Mako knew your grandfather a long time ago, and came to him for help with something."
She turned to Mako. "You needed his help? With what?"

Mako smiled sweetly. "I made a very special sword for my *sensei*, and your grandfather is the best sword polisher in the world. I needed the best to finish the sword."

The little girl grew quiet. "Really? Can I help him?"

"Ask him. But remember this: When I was your age, I helped my father with his swords, not far from here."

"You grew up here?"

Mako's smile went from sweet to sad. "For a while, yes. But my parents were killed by a Kaiju in Tokyo. I was adopted by someone in the PPDC and moved from 'Dome to 'Dome for a while with him, until I got into the Academy."

"Do you think I can go to the Academy?"

"I don't know if it'll be open once you're old enough. But if you work really hard and do well in school, I think that you could."

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEE! THANKYOU!" The little girl raced into the house. "GRANDFATHER! MAKO TOLD ME I CAN GO TO THE ACADEMY!"

Raleigh chuckled. "Come on, Mako. Let's go catch that plane before Jurou catches you."

Mako shuddered. "What have I done?"

"You've unleashed a monster worse than any Kaiju… an overeager six-year-old with big dreams being told that they might just come true."

"Jurou's going to kill me. And you're right, I'm going to have to beat you on the mats for that."

Raleigh roared with laughter as they got into the car and drove to the airport.

-.-.-
Mako woke with a start as the flaps extended on the Southwest Airlines 737-800. She looked out the window at her new hometown. From what she had read, Sacramento had changed a lot since K-Day. When the San Francisco Bay area had been devastated, many of the survivors had moved the 100 miles inland to Sacramento. As a result, there had been a boom in construction during the first few years, and apartment complexes had replaced master planned communities as the primary form of housing in the region. All around the city, however, farms had risen up in areas once doomed to being turned into more suburban sprawl. As the plane descended towards the airport, Mako's superb eyesight could pick out numerous gardens in backyards. *Once Raleigh and I get settled, I think I'll try my hand at a garden.*

The captain came on the overhead PA system. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're about five minutes from landing. The temperature is a warm 102° Fahrenheit today, and the air quality is fairly good for this time of year. Winds are out of the north at 5 miles an hour."

Mako felt Raleigh stir from his nap. *Hey, just in time. We're about to land.*

*Like what you see out the window?*

*It's not bad. I'm going to need some time to adjust, though.*

Raleigh smiled. *Me too. Seven years of having my housing being provided for me... It'll feel good to have someplace to call... well, it's ours, isn't it?*

Mako froze. *I guess so. That is going to take some getting used to...*

The gear deployed, and Mako watched the farmland rush under the plane as they approached the airport. Mako couldn't tell what it was, but it was apparently growing well.

Raleigh looked across the aisle at Hannibal Chau, who was apparently sleeping... until the tires chirped on the runway as the plane smoothly settled back to earth. At that point, Hannibal sat up straight in his seat, tugged at his collar, and folded his hands in his lap.

Raleigh and Mako laced their fingers together as the plane taxied to the gate. *Time to go meet Jazmine.*

-.-.-

*Terminal B arrival area*

*Ten minutes later*

Jazmine waited for Mako, Raleigh, and Hannibal at the base of the escalator, not far from the infamous red rabbit sculpture Mako had read about. Raleigh let go of Mako and scooped Jaz up in
a hug as Hannibal looked around for the proper baggage claim. "Hey, little sis. How are you?"

"Doing well. You?"

Mako smiled. "A little overwhelmed. It's been a while since I called a place other than a PPDC facility home."

"Who's the character that came with you?"

Raleigh grinned. "That is Hannibal Chau."

"THE Hannibal Chau? Of the Asian Kaiju black market fame?"

Raleigh, to his credit, didn't let the panic he felt reach his face. "Yeah. Why?"

"I read all about him in my MBA course last semester."

Raleigh relaxed. "Ah. Yeah, he's the one who's been really funding the PPDC for almost nine months now."

"Did he really cut his way out of a baby Kaiju?"

Raleigh smiled and crossed his arms, gaze fixed over Jazmine's left shoulder. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Jazmine blushed and slowly turned around. Hannibal Chau was standing there, watching her with a smug look of approval. "Oh. Sorry."

Chau smiled sweetly. "Looks like Carousel 1 has our bags."

Mako and Raleigh both darted over to grab their stuff, leaving Jazmine and Chau together for a moment.

"Yes, I did. Not my favorite thing I've ever done."

"How did you survive? I thought Kaiju blood was toxic?"

"Apparently, not when they're young. I got lucky."

Raleigh and Mako returned with the baggage. "Alright, Jaz, where'd you park?"

Jazmine led the way out the door towards the parking lot. "Pretty close. Borrowed a friend's SUV. Ah, there it is. Come on, let's get going."

-.-.-

Mako pulled out her tablet and began to sketch something on it. Raleigh looked at Jazmine and Hannibal already talking business in the front seat and opted to use the Ghost Drift to talk with Mako. *What are you working on?*

*You have your secret project, and I have mine.*

*Fair enough.* Raleigh looked out the window as they drove along a freeway, headed east. "Jaz, where are we going? I thought that you were taking us to the hotel. All I'm seeing is a bunch of housing and businesses…"
"Relax, Raleigh. Herc asked me to pick one close to where you'll be working." She pointed out the window at something. "See?"

Raleigh and Mako both followed her cue and looked out the window just in time to see a United States Coast Guard HC-130H growl into the air, headed out for a mission. Raleigh smiled. He'd always had the utmost respect for the Coast Guard after their search for Raleigh five years earlier.

Mako instinctively laced her fingers through Raleigh's, dragging him back to the present. "Is the weather normally this hot?"

Jazmine laughed. "Yeah, it's going to be like this for most of the summer. Those who can afford to get out of town often do so and head to the mountains in the summer for weekend getaways. If you can't, there's two swim parks, the lakes, the rivers, and a number of community pools to escape the heat in."

Mako squirmed at the mention of the public swimming.

Raleigh noticed her discomfort. "It's okay, Mako. We don't have to do those yet. Besides, we can go find a backwoods spot to beat the heat."

No, I need to get out and face my fears head on. The mall, though, is more of an outlook on life. She smiled.

Jazmine looked at Mako in the mirror. "You know, I've seen the videos of you two sparring. Do you think you could teach me to do that?"

The two Rangers looked as if Jazmine had just grown a second head.

Raleigh's face darkened. "What video?"

"You haven't seen it? I think it was Herc Hansen who filmed it. You guys were outside, there was crowd, and you were sparring for six, seven minutes. It was awesome! There's a huge debate going on about whether you two rehearsed that, or if it was all instinctive."

Mako blushed as she recalled how the sparring match had ended. "I didn't know that Herc had recorded it. I wonder how many others he's filmed."

"So, could you teach me how you do it?"

Hannibal decided to step in. "Miss Becket, it's not as simple as you think. The Ghost Drift is critical in allowing the Rangers to deliver that performance. If you were to move with such speed and power, you might wind up seriously injuring or killing your partner when you slip up. When, not if."

Mako nodded. "Plus, Raleigh and I have found that our Ghost Drift gets stronger when the adrenaline kicks in, which enables us to fight at that level without ever landing a hit on the other."

Raleigh smiled. "That said… I'd be happy to teach you the moves at a much slower speed. With time, practice, and a strong Drift partner, perhaps you could fight at that level."

Jazmine nodded in understanding as she pulled off the freeway at their exit. "Ah, there it is. The local La Quinta Inns and Suites. There's basic cable and satellite available, and there's a pool in the courtyard."

Raleigh looked at the fast food joint next door to their hotel. "In'N'Out? Never heard of them."
"It's a SoCal-based company…"

"Whoa, Jaz, hang on. SoCal? You've gone native, sis."

Jazmine sighed. "Yeah, I guess I have. SoCal is short for Southern California."

"Ah. Anyways, SoCal based?"

"Right, they're a fast-food chain that has a HUGE following. I don't see the point. Yeah, their fries are better than say, McDonalds, but I just don't see the attraction. I prefer SmashBurger myself."

"Jaz, remember that Mako and I have been kinda… disconnected from the civilian world for a number of years now."

Chau seemed to be lost in thought. "I've been to one… It was a lifetime ago, though. Before the War."

Jazmine looked at him as they pulled into a parking space. "What did you do before the War? Before you became… well, you?"

"I don't talk about it. I like having that air of mystery about me."

"Works for me."

They piled out of the SUV, and Mako and Hannibal went to the reception to retrieve their respective room keys. Jazmine and Raleigh grabbed the luggage.

Jazmine looked at Mako and Raleigh's combined luggage. "That's all you guys own?"

"Yeah. Mine fits into one bag, Mako's into two. Rangers always tended to live light."

Jazmine looked at Mako's bags. "Do you know if she has any swimsuits?"

"I know she doesn't. She's got some body modesty issues she's trying to work out. It's a side effect of going through her teenage years in the PPDC."

Jazmine's face lit up with a light Raleigh remembered from childhood, one that only appeared when she set herself on a difficult task and expected to succeed. "Well, I know what Mako and I are doing soon. She is going to be getting some swimsuits, even if I have to drag her by the ear into the stores."

Raleigh laughed. "Good luck with that. Mako's very much a tomboy."

"Are you sure that's all that's behind it?"

Raleigh's laughs stopped cold, and he stared at Jazmine. "You have no right to pry for information through me. If you want to find out, talk to her yourself."

"Just tell me this, Raleigh. Would the events of Onibaba's attack have an effect on her response to malls?"

"I know the answer already, Jazmine. It was part of our first Drift."

"I know you had a rough one, compared with the first Drift with Yancy…"

"Jaz… the real first Drift was done in private, in the J-Tech labs with a lab-grade Pons, not in a
Jaeger. The one you and Mom watched was actually the second Drift. First Drifts are always rough, no matter how compatible you are. That's why they're usually private: so much can go wrong."

"And what went wrong with you and Mako?"

Raleigh looked back over Jazmine's shoulder. "Ask Mako."

"Ask me what?"

Jaz shoved Raleigh's bag at him. "Nothing."

"I know it's not nothing, Jazmine. Remember, I'm connected to Raleigh through the Ghost Drift."

Jazmine ground her teeth as she walked back to grab one of Hannibal's bags.

Mr. Chau, would you like a hand with your luggage?"

Hannibal smiled. "If you would like to, then yes."

"Lead the way, then."

Chau swept his hand towards a stairway. "This way, Miss Becket."

"Please, call me Jazmine."

"Jazmine it is."

The two disappeared up the stairs, and Raleigh and Mako walked to their room, carrying all their luggage with ease.

Mako looked at the pool in the courtyard, then at Raleigh. "I wish I had a swimsuit, just to get out of the heat."

"Well, if you wore a dark shirt and that pair of blue gym shorts, I think you'd be fine. It'd also hide most of the scars."

"It's not the scars alone, Raleigh."

"I know, Mako. I know what the problem is." Raleigh sighed as he slid the keycard into the reader, and their door unlocked. "It's something that's up to you to fix. Just remember that I'm always here for you."

Mako opened the door and stepped into the much cooler room. "Oh, that feels good."

Raleigh smiled. "So would the pool. Or going to get some ice cream."

"We'd need a car first."

"True." He grabbed Mako's tablet and pulled up Craigslist. "If we're staying here in Sacramento with PPI, we're going to need a lot of stuff. Like a place to stay other than a hotel."

Mako looked at what Raleigh was doing. "Craigslist? What's that?"

Raleigh grinned. "The internet version of the classified ads in the newspaper."

Mako looked skeptical. "If was classified, then why was it in the newspaper?"
Raleigh howled in laughter.

"What? What did I say?"

"Oh, Mako… Sometimes you surprise me in the strangest ways." He wiped away a tear. "Classified ads aren't called that because they're secrets. I honestly don't know why they're called that. But it's something that physical newspapers used to run, where you could post job openings, cars for sale, that sort of stuff." He handed her the tablet. "Craigslist is the Internet version of that."

Mako went to the Apartments section, and her eyebrows shot up. "Whoa… There's a lot to choose from!" She showed Raleigh.

"Yeah, but since we don't have any idea where PPI will set up shop, and we don't have wheels…"

"Wait… I just remembered something, Raleigh."

"What's that?"

"You said 'we' when you were talking about finding a place to live."

Raleigh thought for a second. "You're right. It just slipped out that way…"

Mako looked at him. "Did you mean it? Us, together?"

"I guess so. If it's okay with you, anyways."

"Raleigh, I would love nothing more. After all, we've been sharing a bed for a while now."

They smiled at the thought. Mako rolled over and moved to kiss Raleigh.

Knock knock knock.

Mako rolled her eyes as she got off the bed and went to the door. Jazmine was waiting with an excited grin on her face. Mako opened the door. "What's up, Jazmine?"

Jazmine grabbed Mako by the wrist. "Come on, Mako. We're going shopping."

Mako tried to dig in her heels and fight back, but the bullheaded determination that Raleigh had when he set his mind on something was apparently a family thing, and since Jazmine was stronger than Mako, she simply dragged the Ranger along like a child pulling a balloon. Raleigh, help me! Jazmine's taking me shopping!

Sorry, but I'm not going to get in the path of Jazmine once she's gotten her mind set on something. I'd rather face down Knifehead again.

Mako scowled. Surely you're exaggerating.

Mako, just go along with it, and maybe she won't bother you about it again. But the more you struggle, the more of a challenge it becomes for her, and she loves nothing more than a challenge.

"Come on, Mako. It'll be fun!"

"Fun like Kaiju Blue is fun."

"Oh, come on, Mako. It's not that bad. You'll see!"
Mako could hear Raleigh's howls of laughter from the parking lot. *Raleigh Becket, you are so dead…*

-.-.-

**Author's note:** The La Quinta that Mako, Raleigh, and Hannibal are staying at is real, as is the nearby In'N'Out. And yes, SmashBurger is better. SqueezeInn is even better, if the stories are to be believed, but I'm not driving 20 miles each way just to find out.

As for the red rabbit sculpture, yes, it's also real. It remains a source of much debate in the community.

And why is Mako so scared of malls? My headcanon is that the Mori family was at the mall when Onibaba began its attack. Let's just say that Mako's going to be in for a rough time, no matter what happens. Jazmine's personality is based off of my sisters, condensed into a single spirited and highly independent woman who won't take "no" for an answer unless it's for a *very* good reason. Mako won't know what hit her. :P
Mako looked out the window as Jazmine drove towards the Roseville Galleria. She tried to ignore the other woman, but Jazmine was insistent on talking to Mako.

"Come on, Mako. It'll be fun."

"Fun like the stomach flu."

"Mako… Relax. It's not the end of the world."

"It sure seemed like it the last time I went."

"I know you and Raleigh have a good thing going… When I'm done with you, he's going to become a quivering puddle when he sees you."

"Jazmine… I just need a swimsuit. That's all I need."

"No, you need some shorts, and some more comfortable clothing… Ah, here we are." Jazmine left the freeway and headed towards a parking garage. "Lots of shops to choose from. Let's see what looks good on you and work from there."

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Ten minutes later

Jazmine opened the door to the dressing room, dragged Mako into it, then closed the door… with Jazmine still inside. "Right, strip."

Mako froze. "What?"

"Off with the shirt, pants, socks, and shoes. I need to see what I'm working with."

Raleigh… Please help me.

Mako… I can’t come help you. I literally can't, as I have no car to drive… Or a license to drive with if we did have wheels. Need to work on that.

Jazmine cocked an eyebrow. "Done talking to Raleigh yet?"

Mako sighed and pulled off her shirt, making sure that her right shoulder faced Jazmine. "Yes, I am."

Jazmine smiled as Mako finally conceded and removed her shirt. However, the smile disappeared as the circuitry suit burn scars appeared. "Mako… what happened to you? What are those scars from? They look like…"
"Like electrical circuits?"

"Yeah, they do. What are they from?"

Mako folded up the shirt she had been wearing. "The drivesuit. When Raiju tore off Gipsy's right arm, the damage caused the drivesuit feedback to overload. That's where the burns came from."

"Does Raleigh have them, too?"

"On both sides."

"Knifehead?"

Mako simply nodded as she sat down to pull off her shoes. "However, not all of our scars are physical. I have some neurological scarring that can cause me to feel like my arm's been torn off again."

"Does Raleigh have the same problem?"

"Thankfully, no. It's also why he was able to pilot Gipsy solo for six hours when Yancy…" Mako stopped, not wanting to reopen old wounds for Jazmine.

Jazmine was thoughtful for a while. "No matter what you wear for a swimsuit, the scars are going to show."

Mako smiled shyly. "I'm not worried about the scars. Quite the opposite, actually. I'm rather proud of them."

"Then why don't you have any swimsuits?"

The Ranger blushed. "I have… modesty issues."

Jazmine's face lit up as she realized what Mako was talking about. "Ahhhh… Yeah, I can see that being an issue."

"Okay, Jazmine… Let's see what you think." Mako slid her pants off and did a slow spin.

"Mako, I wish I was built like you. So lithe and athletic."

Mako blushed even more.

"You'd look good in anything that you feel comfortable with."

"Thank you, Jazmine."

"Now, get dressed. It's time to raid the racks and find some candidates!"

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20 minutes later
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Jazmine held up a bikini, looking at it, then Mako. "Nope, too skimpy." She hung it back up, then grabbed a one-piece. "This shows promise…"

Mako shook her head in disagreement. "Not quite what I'm looking for."

Jazmine raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Then what are you looking for?"
Mako appraised the selection of swimwear, then grabbed a plain blue bikini with red trim.

Jazmine looked at Mako, then the bikini. "Try it on, Mako. Let's see how it fits."

Mako entered the dressing room and stripped bare, then put on the bikini.

"How's it look, Mako?"

Mako opened the door and stepped out. "You tell me."

Jazmine paused, fighting the urge to drop her mouth open. *I wish I could pull that off. She looks like a model.* Instead, she broke out in a huge grin. "We have a winner. Raleigh will never know what hit him." She paused, clearly thinking something over. "Actually, let's get you another one just like that. I have a friend who owes me a favor, and I know just what I want to do with it. In the meantime…" She tossed Mako a skirt and shirt. "Try these on!"

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1615
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Mako looked at the stack of clothing Jazmine had picked out for her. *Four shirts, two skirts, two pair of shorts, a pair of flats, and two swimsuits.* She picked it up and walked to the checkout counter. *Let's hope it goes better than last time I went to pay for something myself…*

Mako set the stack down at the counter and brushed her hair out of her face as she pulled out her credit card and paid for the new clothes.

The clerk looked at Mako for a few seconds before it clicked. "Thank you for what you did, ma'am."

Mako smiled at her with ease born of long practice. "You're welcome."

The clerk bagged Mako's new clothing, then handed the bag and receipt to Mako. "Enjoy the new clothing, Miss Mori."

"I will." Mako forced herself to walk calmly to the door, where Jazmine waited for her.

"See? That wasn't so bad…"

"Before we leave… are there any tool stores nearby?"

"What, like Sears?"

Mako thought for a moment before stopping. "Perfect. I've always preferred Craftsman hand tools." She smiled. "Lead the way!"

Jazmine grumbled, but set out for Sears anyways. "Fifteen minutes, Mako. Then I'm headed back to the car."

Mako grinned. *More than enough time.*

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1635
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Mako sat in the passenger seat, a new set of tools tucked beneath her feet and her new clothes in
her lap. Smiling, she closed her eyes. Raleigh, we're on our way back.

How'd it go?

I got a new toolkit out of it, so I'm content with the trip.

Raleigh's bemusement traveled across the 10-mile gap between the Rangers. And who needs the first aid more, you or Jaz?

I think we're about equal.

Now... Remember our bet in Hawaii?

Mako scowled. Yes, I do. I have the money with me.

Actually, I was wondering of you'd be willing to alter the deal we had...

No, you're not going to get more money, Raleigh...

How does dinner at a fancy restaurant sound to you?

Mako blinked in surprise. Wait, what? What does that have to do with the bet?

You'd pay.

Mako pondered it for a moment. Sounds fair. What did you have in mind?

Ask Jaz. She'd know what's best.

I'll have something in mind when we get back.

Cool.

"Jazmine, what's a good place to go out to dinner around here?"

The youngest Becket thought for a while. "I know of this fantastic place in Old Fair Oaks. Don't recall the name, but it's on the south side of the town square."

"Do you think you could give us a lift?"

"It'd be my pleasure. However, does Raleigh have any clothes like what you'd where to church?"

Mako was about to ask Raleigh when he responded. Yeah, I've got something. You, however... Unless you picked up something today, you don't have anything..

"What's Rals say?"

"Yes, he has something nice to wear."

Jazmine thought for a moment, then focused on driving as they exited the freeway. "For you, I think if you were to wear that long blue skirt, the flats and that new blouse, you'd look phenomenal. Simple, but elegant." Jazmine pulled into the parking lot of the hotel. "Your hair, however..."

Mako had been letting it grow out ever since Pitfall, and it now hung halfway down her back in a loose ponytail. "What about it?"
They got out of the SUV. "I've got an idea. You'll look good, I promise."

Mako reached the room and swiped her keycard, then ducked into the cooler air-conditioned interior. Raleigh was still on the tablet, doing some sort of research project. "Whatcha up to, Raleigh?"

"You're really starting to have some of my speech patterns, aren't you?"

She lay down next to Raleigh. "I guess so."

"Anyways, I'm looking at what it would take for you and me to get drivers licenses here in California."

"And?"

"Shouldn't be hard. We just need to pass the written and driving tests." He set the tablet down. "So, what'd Jaz get you to buy?"

"Couple of shirts, skirts, and shorts."

"Nice! So, you have a place in mind for tonight?"

"I do."


The two Rangers looked at each other and shrugged.

Raleigh got up and let Jazmine in. "Behave yourself, Jazmine."

"No worries, Rals. I'm just going to work on Mako's hair."

Raleigh raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Mako sighed and got up to face her fate at Jazmine's hands.

"Relax, Mako. I'm not going to torture you by doing something really involved."

Raleigh grabbed his keycard and quietly left the room, intending to start hunting for a car for him and Mako.

*Stay close in case I need you to rescue me.*

Raleigh chuckled. *Chill, Mako. She's probably just going to braid it.*

*Well that's not so bad.*

*I'll be outside. Let me know when you're ready.*

*Okay.*

-.--.

1700

Raleigh was browsing through Craigslist for a car or small truck when Jazmine came out of the hotel room. "Ready to come see Mako?"
Raleigh walked into the room… then stopped dead in his tracks. He'd seen Mako in everything from burnt drivesuits to ballroom gowns, but the simple ensemble she wore was far more beautiful than anything he'd seen her wear before. Raleigh looked her over from head to foot, taking it all in. Her hair had been put into a simple braid, running down her back. She wore a light blue blouse and a white shirt underneath, and a long blue skirt flowed down to the ground where her red flats just barely peeked out. A simple but elegant watch replaced her more typical Timex Ironman on her left wrist, and her Jaeger Academy class ring was on her right ring finger. "Wow, Mako. You look good."

Mako blushed deeply at the compliment. "Thanks, Raleigh."

"Jaz, the watch… I know that watch."

It was Jazmine's turn to blush. "It was Mom's watch. I never wear it, because my wrists are too large. It fits Mako perfectly, though. I figured she'd be able to use it more."

Raleigh walked over and hugged his sister. "Thank you, Jazmine," he whispered.

"You're welcome, Raleigh. Now, get dressed. You two have a dinner date."

Mako frowned as a thought occurred to her. "Uhm… How are we going to get there?"

Jazmine smiled sweetly. "I'll drive you two this time. Besides, Mr. Chau and I are going to go have a working dinner as we lay some of the groundwork for Pan Pacific Industries, starting with finding us a physical location to set up offices and a small workshop."

Raleigh ducked into the bathroom to change, still listening to the conversation via Mako. "Well, Raleigh, Herc, and I still need to get the museum sorted out first… But as soon as the PPDC stands down and PPI is formed, I've got a few ideas to try out."

"First things first, though Mako. We need to get you a driver's license, a car, and a place of your own, too."

"Raleigh's been looking into cars… But I'll need lessons. I never learned to drive."

Raleigh smiled and walked out of the bathroom, dressed in a button-up shirt and slacks. "We'll deal with that once the time comes, Mako." He hugged her and kissed her atop her head. "In the meantime, let's go get some dinner."

Mako looked up at Raleigh and smiled. "Sounds like a plan. Jazmine, you ready?"

Jazmine headed towards the door. "I've been ready for a while. Come on, you two. Time to have some time as just another couple enjoying an early summer night, instead of being the world saving crew of Gipsy Danger."

Mako and Raleigh held hands and walked out after Jazmine, smiling and happy in their own little universe.
Mako and Raleigh's hotel room

June 5, 2025

0937

Mako rummaged through her new clothes, concerned. "Raleigh, did you see a second blue bikini floating around somewhere?"

Raleigh shook his head. "Nope. I've only seen the one. Why?"

"I can't find it. Where did it go?"

As if on cue, a knock came from the door.

Mako sighed and walked over to the door and looked out. Jazmine was waiting there with a bag in her hand. Mako let her in, unsure of what was going on.

"Mako, I'm guessing you're looking for this…" Jazmine handed Mako the bag. Inside was the missing bikini.

"Why did you take it, Jazmine? It's too small for you."

"Look at it closely."

Mako did as she had been advised, and discovered some subtle alterations. "Jazmine… It's perfect."

Four tiny white Kaiju kill marks traced along the edge of the bikini top on the left side next to Mako's name, and a small Gipsy Danger logo graced the right.

Jazmine smiled broadly as Raleigh walked over to look.

Mako, however, snatched the bikini away from Jazmine and raced off to the bathroom, leaving a very confused Raleigh standing next to his sister.

"Okay, sis. What's this all about?"

"We're going to the water park."

"Uh, you sure Mako's going to agree to this?"

"Oh, I'm positive. You saw the weather forecast for today, right?"

Raleigh shuddered as he remembered. "42°C, and no cooling breeze tonight."

"Yep. So, time to head to the pools and water slides. Beside, you've never been. Mako hasn't either, right?"

"True."

"Then pack your towel and some sunblock. We're going to Sunsplash."
30 minutes later

Mako gaped as she saw all the slides and pools. "We can use all of this?"

Jazmine laughed. "Yes. They actually added some slides and pools during the war. More people to serve, I guess."

Raleigh smiled as Mako's excitement got the better of her. She grabbed Raleigh's hand and practically dragged him to the entrance like a child dragging their parent into a toy store. "Come on, Raleigh! I want to try that halfpipe slide!"

2 minutes later

Storage lockers

Mako pulled off the shirt she had worn over the bikini top, making sure Raleigh was in sight. She was rewarded by Raleigh stopping dead in his tracks as surely as if he'd run into a wall. The stupefied look on his face, however, was the icing on the cake. Jazmine was right. This did leave him stunned. Now, what else to do to poor Raleigh? This is fun! Mako looked up at the sun, and remembered that she had "forgotten" to put on sunblock. Hmm... "Raleigh, can you help me with the sunblock?"

"Sure. Let me put some stuff in the locker first, though."

"Okay."

Raleigh stored Mako's backpack, then retrieved the bottle of sunblock. "Where do you need help with?"

Hmm... "I didn't get any on before we left the hotel, actually."

"No worries. I'm sure you can get your face by yourself, though." Raleigh winked at her.

Mako blushed and mentally berated herself for forgetting that she and Raleigh shared their thoughts more and more as time went by. "Sorry... I forgot about..."

"Hush. Not here. There's already a couple of people eyeing your scars."

"Let them. I've earned it."

Raleigh laid out his towel on the bench, then gestured to Mako. *Come on, it'll be easier to do your back if you sit or lay down.*

Mako chose the former, and sat down, back facing her copilot. *Make sure to get everything, Raleigh.* She closed her eyes as Raleigh began to work the sunblock into her skin. "Mmmmm... Feels good."

"The chance to have a vacation, or me with the sunblock?"

"Can't it be both?"

Raleigh didn't respond, instead focusing on the task at hand. He gently worked the sunblock into
Mako's shoulders, teasingly tracing her circuitry suit scars. "They look good on you, Mako."

Mako opened her mouth to respond, but a young voice interrupted her. "Whoa… Cool tattoos, miss!"

Mako had been looking the other way, but she made sure to look at the child, a boy wearing a Gipsy Danger shirt and a pair of Romeo Blue swim trunks. "They're not tattoos. They're scars."

The boy's eyes bugged out as he realized just who he was talking to. "No. Way. The guys won't believe this." He eyed the burn scars again. "So, that's from Gipsy? During Pitfall?"

Raleigh stepped in by simply pulling off his own shirt, revealing his own scars. "Yeah. Circuitry suits aren't meant to relay the agony of having an arm ripped off of your Jaeger."

The boy gulped. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you…"

Mako smiled. "It's okay."

The boy's mom walked up. "Matthew, where have you… Oh. Hello. I hope my son has been polite."

"No worries, ma'am. He's been a gentleman."

Matthew mother smiled. "I'm glad to hear that."

Raleigh looked at Matthew. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Yeah. What brought you guys here to Sacramento? I thought that there weren't any PPDC facilities here?"

"We're on a bit of a vacation, and my sister lives here. So we decided to pay a visit. She wanted to go swimming today, so we came with her."

"Come on, Matthew. We're meeting Alex, remember?"

"Oh yeah! See you guys, and enjoy your vacation!"

Mako and Raleigh both waved and smiled as the boy and his mother walked off towards the far side of the water park.

"Okay, Mako. Your turn to do my back."

-.-.-

Mako and Raleigh finished with their sunblock, then decided on the first ride to take. Mako insisted on the halfpipe, so Raleigh grabbed a two-seat tube and they went to the start of the line.

-.-.-

5 minutes later

Splashdown pool for Stealth halfpipe slide

Raleigh looked at Mako, laughing as she slowly released her death grip on the handles of the two-seat tube. "What'd you think?"
Mako, to her credit, had managed to keep her screams to a tolerable level. "Watashi wa futatabi sono jigoku no sōzō ni notta koto ga nai shite imasu." *I am never riding that infernal creation again.*

Raleigh just laughed harder.

Mako scowled. "Glad to see someone enjoyed the ride."

"I didn't enjoy the ride. I just enjoyed your reaction."

Mako didn't have any response to that, so she flipped the tube, dumping Raleigh into the water with a yelp.

Raleigh came up spluttering, but with a grin plastered across his face. "Okay, I earned that one."

"That you did. Let's try something a little more… sedate. Like the wave pool."

Raleigh simply scooped up the raft and gave it to a little girl and her friend. "Enjoy your run, but don't go on Stealth."

"Why not?"

"It scares a Ranger who's fought Kaiju."

The little girl paled, clutched the raft closer, and nodded. "Stay off Stealth. Got it."

*Raleigh, you're terrible.*

*You know you love it.*

Mako rolled her eyes and waded into the wave pool and began to swim towards the deep end.

Raleigh followed closely behind her, matching her stroke for stroke… until the waves started. Raleigh dove under a wave, then accelerated towards Mako while underwater.

Mako sensed him coming as she rode out another wave. *You know I know you're coming.*

Raleigh surfaced next to her. "Spoilsport."

Both Rangers looked up at the sound of a shriek of delight. *Jazmine.* They looked at each other, then swam towards the exit from the wave pool, intent on riding whatever Jazmine had been riding.

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1830
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Mako, Raleigh, and Jazmine walked out the gates, headed back to Jazmine's car. Mako was sunburned and tired, and happily leaned into Raleigh. "Jazmine?"

"What's up, Mako?"

"How do I treat a sunburn?"

"Ride it out. Wait for it to heal."

Mako looked at her arms, frowning at them. "I thought that the sunblock would keep me from getting burnt."
"Not quite. You'll still get fried, just nowhere near as bad."

Raleigh decided to make Mako's life a little easier. "Mako, I know of something that will help with the sunburn, no matter what Jazmine says."

His copilot turned to him. Please, tell me more.

"You ever heard of Aloe Vera extract?"

"No… Why?"

Jazmine scoffed. "Aloe? It's not going to remove the sunburn."

Raleigh laughed. "No, it won't. But it will make it more tolerable. Especially if it's been refrigerated first."

Mako looked at Jazmine, her eyes begging.

"Okay, we'll stop by the store and pick some up."

"Thank you, Jazmine!"

-.-.-

2000

Mako and Raleigh's hotel room

Raleigh pulled the bottle of gel from the hotel room's minifridge. "Ready, Mako?"

Mako nodded and pulled her t-shirt off.

Raleigh squirted a little bit of the aloe gel into his hand. "It's nice and cold. Should feel real good."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Raleigh smeared it across Mako's shoulders.

Mako gasped as Raleigh slathered on the clear, cold gel. "It feels so good."

"Not used to sunburns, are you?"

"Not really, no. How'd you find out about this?"

"Lima Shatterdome medical team. Yancy and I spent an afternoon on the beach and got fried. We looked like lobsters."

Mako sighed as the heat of the burns ebbed away. "Wow… that stuff works."

"Well, the cold takes the heat off, but the Aloe allows the skin to rehydrate some. Helps it heal."

"I could care less how it works. The fact is…” Mako trailed off as the Aloe dried up. "Okay… that feels weird." She shivered.

Raleigh chuckled. "Yeah, it does feel kinda strange, doesn't it? Just move around a bit, and wear a shirt. It'll wear off."
Mako grabbed the first shirt she saw and slipped it on. It was only after she found out she was practically swimming in it that she realized that it wasn't hers. She opened her mouth to make a joke about it, but shut it as Raleigh's phone rang with a familiar ring tone.

"I come from a land down under…"

Raleigh took the call and put it on speakerphone. "Good morning, Herc. How's Australia?"

"Great, considering its winter here."

Mako sat on the bed and lay in Raleigh's lap. "How'd that personal task go?"

"Wonderful. I'll go into more detail later, but we're going to be picking up another person for the Senior Staff. Now, Raleigh, did you tell Mako about that briefing I gave you before you left?"

"No, sir. I wanted to relax for a bit."

"Fair enough. Mako, be nice to Raleigh. I totally understand where he's coming from."

Mako scowled as she looked at Raleigh. "No promises."

Raleigh smiled. "So, when will you be here?"

"Sunday. We'll spend Monday getting settled, then go to Oblivion Bay on Tuesday."

"Sounds like a plan. Anything else, sir?"

"No, that's it. And Mako? I'm sorry in advance for not telling you what Raleigh's going to share, but I also wanted to make sure you had a chance to relax. And I want a promise, on sensei's honor, that you won't jump straight into designing a solution to the problem."

Mako gritted her teeth. Raleigh, you know how much I hate being left in the dark.

Sorry, Mako. I wanted you to relax first.

"Okay, Herc. I promise."

A female voice rang out in the background on Herc's end. "Right, I'll see you guys Sunday."

"See you soon, sir." Raleigh ended the call.

"Okay, Raleigh. What's the big issue?"

"Mako… the Kaiju aren't gone for good."

"I would have been surprised if they did stay gone. How soon do we need to have a new fleet of Jaegers?"

"Two years."

"No problem. We just need… oh. We need a place to stage them and build them."

"And we need to know where to stage them. No one knows where the next Breach will open. For all we know, it could open in Central Park."

Mako's face fell. "So how do we keep them from coming back?"
As Raleigh began to explain the revelations that Newt had received from his Ghost Drift, he could feel Mako's brain jump into a creative overdrive. *Mako… We need to get Pan Pacific Industries up and running first. Jot down your ideas, and come back to them later.*

Mako responded by doing just that. *Sorry, it's just that when the ideas start to flow… It's hard to stop them.*

"Then perhaps this will help." Raleigh pulled out his new tablet. "Apartment hunting?"

Mako finished jotting down her thoughts, then lay back down next to Raleigh. "I was thinking a studio apartment."

"Sounds good. Let's see what we can find…"
Chapter 26

Author's notes: This chapter has some… darker elements to it. So, if thoughts of self-harm or suicide are a turnoff, I'm sorry in advance. It's a topic I've been trying to avoid, but I felt I should touch on it. Again, I'm sorry if you're not comfortable with the subject. Just… skip over the flashback.

Also, if you've never heard of Miranda Schaeffer, I strongly advise that you read "Herc's Holiday" to get a better understanding of who she is.

Forged in Fire, Chapter 26

Mako and Raleigh's hotel room

Sacramento, CA

Sunday, June 8, 2025

0657

Raleigh woke up to Mako twitching in her sleep, caught in another nightmare. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. She stilled, and then slowly woke up.

"Hey, you okay, Mako?"

She closed her eyes and sighed. "I was dreaming of that first day after Pitfall again…"

Raleigh didn't say anything, instead hugging his copilot close. "Those were tough days for her… just like it had been for me after Knifehead."

Mako just grabbed her pillow and wrapped her arms around it, crushing it against her chest as she recalled that first day of the rest of her life… and how she almost threw it away.

---

High above Gipsy Danger Repair Bay

Hong Kong Shatterdome

January 13, 2025

0721

Beedlebeedle.

Beedlebeedle.

Mako looked down at the floor of the Shatterdome, so far below. She took another step towards the end of the girder she stood on.

"MAKO!"

Raleigh… "Please, Raleigh. Go back to the party."
The girder wiggled a little. "No." His voice was firm, and closer. "If you go, I go too. We're in this together, Mako. I didn't give you my oxygen and eject you from Gipsy just to let you throw it all away."

Mako slowly turned back to face Raleigh. Tears streaked down his face, and he was clearly upset.

"Mako… I've been in your shoes. You know this better than anyone."

"Raleigh… Sensei was the only family I had left. He and Gipsy were my life. I just want to go be with them again."

"Mako… this isn't the way to do that. Do you think Pentecost would be proud of this?"

Mako didn't respond.

"Come on, Mako. Let's just talk for a bit like adults. If you still want to take that jump afterwards, then I will respect that."

She looked up at him. "Okay."

Raleigh sat down on the edge of the girder, feet hanging into the abyss below. Mako sat down next to him. "You saw this in the Drift, didn't you? Me, in the Icebox, on a beam over Gipsy's old home."

Mako nodded.

"Do you know what pushed me back from the edge?"

"No."

"Pentecost came out on the beam with me. He had me sit down, just like you are now. And we talked it out."

Mako looked Raleigh in the eyes. "I didn't know. It wasn't in the records…"

"Because he insisted that it not be recorded."

Raleigh pulled out a battered old iPod, scrolled through the tracks, and selected a song. He put one of his earbuds into Mako's ear, and the other into his. Then, he hit play. It started with a little bit of piano, then other instruments began to play.

Then, the lyrics began, and Mako began to cry.

Well, I know the feeling
Of finding yourself stuck out on the ledge
And there ain't no healing
From cutting yourself with the jagged edge
I'm telling you that, it's never that bad
Take it from someone who's been where you're at
Laid out on the floor
And you're not sure you can take this anymore
Raleigh took her hand in his.

So just give it one more try to a lullaby
And turn this up on the radio
If you can hear me now
I'm reaching out
To let you know that you're not alone
And if you can't tell, I'm scared as hell
'Cause I can't get you on the telephone
So just close your eyes
Oh, honey here comes a lullaby
Your very own lullaby.

Raleigh began to sing along, his voice cracking with emotion.

"Please let me take you
"Out of the darkness and into the light
"'Cause I have faith in you
"That you're gonna make it through another night
"Stop thinking about the easy way out
"There's no need to go and blow the candle out
"Because you're not done
"You're far too young
"And the best is yet to come"

Mako looked at Raleigh, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"So just give it one more try to a lullaby
"And turn this up on the radio
"If you can hear me now
"I'm reaching out
"To let you know that you're not alone
"And if you can't tell, I'm scared as hell
"'Cause I can't get you on the telephone
"So just close your eyes
"Oh, honey here comes a lullaby
"Your very own lullaby"
Raleigh stopped singing, but he let the song continue.

Well, everybody's hit the bottom
Everybody's been forgotten
When everybody's tired of being alone
Yeah, everybody's been abandoned
And left a little empty handed
So if you're out there barely hanging on...

Just give it one more try to a lullaby
And turn this up on the radio
If you can hear me now
I'm reaching out
To let you know that you're not alone
And if you can't tell, I'm scared as hell
'Cause I can't get you on the telephone

So just close your eyes
Oh, honey here comes a lullaby
Your very own lullaby
Oh, honey here comes a lullaby

Your very own lullaby
Raleigh shut down the iPod, wiping away tears of his own. "Mako, I'm not going to let you do this. Think about everyone here that cares for you. Tendo. Herc. Max."

Mako giggled at the mention of the Hansen's bulldog.

Raleigh gently held Mako's chin in his hand and lifted her face to look at his. "Me."

Mako's body tensed as if hit by lightning. "You do?"

"Mako… You and I fought Kaiju side by side. We know each other's deepest secrets. How could I not care for you?"
Mako looked down at her feet as Raleigh stood up and walked off the girder. He turned to face her.

"Besides, both of us have been given a second chance at life. How many people these days can say that they've been so lucky?"

Mako smiled as she looked at Raleigh. "Quit using the guilt card, Raleigh."

"Why? Because it's so effective?"

"No… because I don't need any more convincing." Mako stood up, brushed herself off and walked to the end of the beam, looking down. "The singer was right. This was the easy way out."

Raleigh's heart jumped into his throat. Please... no...

Mako turned around and walked back to Raleigh, smiling. "And I never back down from a challenge."

Raleigh broke out in tears as he hugged her tight. "Don't ever scare me like that again, Mako."

-.--.

Mako shook her head as she returned to the present. "Raleigh, do you still have that song you played on the girder?"

Raleigh pulled out his iPod. "I've made sure to have it with me ever since that day."

"Can you play it again?"

"You okay?"

"Yes. I… I just want to hear it again."

Raleigh offered her an earbud, then hit play.

-.--.

Kaiju Sciences Labs
Hong Kong Shatterdome
Monday, June 9, 2025
0048
(0948, June 8, 2025, Pacific Daylight Time)

Hermann awoke to a chime from his computer. "About time." He activated the display… then immediately reached for the phone and dialed Herc's number. I don't care if he's in flight... it'll go to voicemail and he needs to know this as soon as possible.

Newt walked in right as Hermann began to speak. "Marshall, this is Dr. Gottlieb. I've been running an analysis for that project you wanted me to do… call me back when you get a secure line. It's urgent." He hung up, then turned to face Newt.

"Okay, Hermann. How bad is it?"

Hermann spun the holographic globe around to display the Pacific Ocean. More than two dozen
slashes of red blinked around the Pacific Rim. "These are areas that could support the formation of a Breach."

Newt looked closely. "I see that you've still got Challenger Deep marked."

"Yes. It's still the best spot to create the Breach, from both an energy and security standpoint."

"Hmmm… Wait, just off Seattle? I didn't know that there was Trench there!"

"There isn't a Trench. It's the Cascadia Subduction Zone."

Newt expertly "grabbed" the highlighted area and blew it up for a closer look. "Wait a second… The most stable spot for a Breach is miles underground, right in the heart of the fault line." He looked at Hermann. "There's no way a Kaiju could get through that."

"Who says they have to release a Kaiju through the Breach? If my math is right…"

"Which it almost always is the first time 'round…"

"The formation of a Breach there would be enough to trigger a catastrophic earthquake there."

Newt, for once, was totally silent as the gravity of the situation sank in.

Hermann then pulled the view back to a global scale and pointed at the Atlantic. "Then there's this…"

Newt looked closely… and saw a red slash appear near Puerto Rico. "No… We don't have any defenses there. No shelters, no evacuation drills…"

"Indeed."

"So… what do we do?"

Hermann shut down the projector. "I don't know. We can't build a Wall on the Atlantic coast. It's not effective."

"Then I guess we need to set up sensor nets all around the world, watching for the Breach."

"It's a good place to start."

Hermann's phone rang, and he looked at the number. "Shoo, Newton. It's Vanessa."

To his credit, Newt didn't protest. Instead, he decided to go for a walk while Hermann talked with his wife and infant daughter, both of whom were in Europe, where he had thought they would be safe.

Now, with the revelation of the Puerto Rico Trench being a viable point to open a Second Breach… nowhere is safe.

Newt snapped out of his reverie and found himself in his quarters, holding his phone and about to dial. Wait… why was I about to call that number? She's never answered before. Never even responded. So what could I possibly get from trying to contact Dr. D'onofrio now?

Still, Newt put the call through. It rang a few times before a tired male voice came through. "Hello?"
"H-h-hi. I'm Dr. Newton Geizler. With the PPDC."

The man on the other end perked up. "PPDC?"

"You know, the Pan Pacific…"

"I know what the PPDC is, son. I was in it for a while… until my Jaeger fell."

_Oh… snap. It's Sergio._ "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't recognize your voice."

A rough chuckle came from the other end. "The chemo hasn't been nice to me, I'm afraid. At least Caitlin is still cancer-free. Thank God for small miracles."

"Actually, she's the reason I called."

"Well, it'll have to wait a few days. She's currently taking part in a technical conference in Washington, D.C."

"When she gets back, can you have her call the Hong Kong Shatterdome? We'd like her expertise on some systems."

"From what I've heard from her, Dr. Geizler, you've got a pretty good grasp on the systems she's an expert at."

"Well…"

"I'll have her call you."

"Thank you, sir."

_Click._

_--_

The song Raleigh played was "Lullaby" by Nickleback, if you're wondering.
Chapter 27

Forged in Fire, Chapter 27

Sacramento International Airport

June 8, 2025

1945

Mako and Raleigh watched through the windows as the airliner touched down on Runway 16L, brief spurts of smoke erupting as the tires went from being still to spinning at several hundred RPM in under a second. It slowed down swiftly, courtesy of the stiff breeze from the south which marked the return of cooler weather for the next few days. Mako grabbed the simple sign they had made and headed to the exit of the people mover, waiting for Herc and the new arrival to the Senior Staff.

Raleigh, however, waited and watched the plane taxi over to Gate B5, slowly approaching under the guidance of the ground crew. He'd always wondered what the hand signals meant, but had never had a chance to find out before the War had come.

Finally, the plane eased to a stop and shut down its engines. As soon as the engines powered down, a number of people wearing Day-Glo green vests with white stripes swarmed the airplane, chocking the tires, hooking up umbilical cables, guiding the Jetway into place, and opening the cargo hold. Belt loaders and baggage carts arrived, and four people scrambled into the hold, and soon the bags were flowing down the belts to the carts, where they were speedily stacked.

Raleigh shook his head in amazement at the seemingly haphazard hustle and bustle, all around a multi-million dollar piece of hardware. "It all seems so chaotic," he muttered.

To Raleigh's surprise, a voice behind him responded to his comment. "You'd be surprised how well coordinated it is. It's not ballet, but its close. Much more physically demanding, though."

Raleigh turned to face the newcomer. He wore an orange safety vest, kneepads, and gloves, and had a pair of yellow earmuffs draped around his neck and some sunglasses parked atop his head. He gestured at the Alaska Airlines plane. "That Boeing 737 has 1.5 tons of luggage under her cabin floor, split between a forward and aft hold, along with an assortment of cargo and possibly mail. The fun part? Those guys have 15 minutes from wheel stop to get the last bag onto the claim belt. Probably Carousel 2, since Jet Blue just dropped their last load about a minute ago."

"You work with them?"

"Ah, no. I work with Delta, Jet Blue, and Hawaiian. Contractor."

Raleigh nodded. "Then you probably handled my sister's baggage a few weeks back. She went to Hawaii and back."

"What for?"

Raleigh looked back out the window. "Much-belated funeral. Our brother, who died back on Leap Year Day in 2020, up by Anchorage."

"I'm sorry for your loss. Yancy was a good pilot."
Raleigh whirled around. "How'd you know?"

"Your face is kinda hard to miss these days." The ramp worker gestured over his shoulder with a thumb at the news stand behind them. Raleigh and Mako's faces still graced the covers of a half-dozen magazines on display.

Raleigh laughed. "True."

"Anyways, I need to get back over to Terminal A and clock back in. Lunch breaks only last so long, you know?"

Raleigh's stomach grumbled. "Tell me about it."

With a laugh, the worker turned and walked around a corner.

Raleigh looked back out the window and saw a nearly full people mover car approaching, and headed over to stand with Mako.

----

Herc and Miranda stepped out of the people mover, carry-on baggage in hand. They instantly spotted Mako and Raleigh, courtesy of the bulldog clipart sign. Herc pulled Mako into a bear hug, and shook Raleigh's hand. However, he could sense their unease at Miranda's presence. *Time to defuse the situation.* "Come on, Raleigh. Let's go get the luggage."

----

Mako watched Herc and Raleigh go down the escalator to get the luggage, unsure of what to do next. She was surprised by Miranda. *She's so much like Tamsin, but just a little bit more... compact.*

"Mako... Hello? Earth to Mako."

Mako snapped back to reality. "Sorry. You remind me of someone I used to know."

Miranda smiled sadly. "Which Kaiju got them?"

"It wasn't a Kaiju. It was a Jaeger."

Miranda raised an eyebrow, clearly curious.

"You know how the Mark I Jaegers weren't very well shielded, right?"

"Yeah. Chuck told me that Herc can't have kids anymore. The radiation..." She trailed off.

"Every crew of a Mark I suffered some ill effect."

"So... cancer?"

Mako nodded. "Tamsin fought it to the bitter end, hoping to live long enough to see the end of the war. She almost made it, too. Another three months, and she could have been there in Hong Kong with us with a little time to spare."

Miranda put a hand on Mako's shoulder. "Come on, let's go bug the boys. Just because I'm five months along doesn't mean I can't carry some of my own luggage."
Mako laughed. "True. Any idea if it's a boy or a girl?"

"Nope. I want it to be a surprise." Miranda winced. "They're really active, though. Seems to enjoy kicking me in odd places."

Mako turned to Miranda, full of questions but unsure whether this was the right time to ask. Some of her curiosity must have leaked through to her face, however, as Miranda smiled sweetly. "Don't worry. When it's your turn, I'll answer all your questions, Mako."

Mako relaxed as the two women walked off the escalator to see Herc and Raleigh juggling five bags of luggage… with four hands. Miranda stood there, dumbfounded, as the two men carefully balanced the fifth bag atop the one in Herc's right hand and Raleigh's left.

Mako, however, darted up and caught it right as it began to tumble. She used her free hand to gently smack her copilot upside the head. "Dork. Let me grab it from the get-go next time."

"Why didn't you smack Here, too? It was his idea."

"It was?"

Miranda walked over. "Sure seems like it would be one of his ideas."

Mako turned to face Raleigh again. "No, I know it was your idea, Raleigh."

Raleigh hung his head, defeated, as Herc howled with laughter.

Now, however, it was Miranda's turn to be confused. "Mako… How? How can you possibly know?"

Raleigh trudged off to the car, as this was a key part of the explanation Mako was about to give.

"Okay, you know how Rangers think and act as one in the Drift?"

"Yeah."

"Well… the connection between copilots doesn't end when the Drift is terminated. Especially with a Drift as strong as the one I share with Raleigh."

"So… you can hear his thoughts?"

"Only if he really fixates on one in particular, or if I'm focused on listening. For example, if Raleigh's out at the car, where I can't see or hear him, and he talks to someone, I can hear his conversation as if he were a few meters away behind us. Unless I focus on it, I can't make out everything he says or hears. However, if he focuses on a single message, like 'Come on, Mako. Quit talking to Miranda. The van's unlocked.'… I can hear it clearly."

"Wait… did he just do that?"

"Yes." Mako started towards the door, and Herc and Miranda followed.

"Whoa…" Miranda turned to Herc. "Can all paired Rangers do that?"

A pained look crossed Herc's face. "No. Only a really strong Ghost Drift can allow that. Chuck and I would sometimes get it just after a combat Drift, but not all the time like Raleigh and Mako. Theirs is unusually strong."
"Oh."

The three came upon Raleigh leaned against the back hatch of the van, with Jazmine behind the wheel. "About time."

Miranda smiled. "Sorry, Rahh-leigh. But I'm sure you knew just about when we'd get here."

Raleigh stiffened at the incredibly accurate impression of Chuck.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to spook you like that."

"It's okay. Everyone ready?"

Herc closed the back hatch. "Yup. All the bags are squared away now."

They clambered into the van and started off to the hotel, eager to get a good night's sleep.

---

Hong Kong Shatterdome

Wednesday, June 11, 2025

0845

Newt jumped as his computer pinged at him. He looked at the screen to see that his Skype account had an incoming call from an unknown caller. Curious, he accepted the call.

The image on the screen showed a petite blond woman fiddling with something mechanical. She pushed her glasses back up her nose, then noticed that the call had gone through. "Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Geizler. I hadn't expected you to take the call so quickly."

"And you are?"

The woman smiled. "Do you really not recognize me with the longer hair?"

Newt paused, trying to place her face… then his jaw dropped. "Dr. D'onofrio!"

"Please, call me Caitlin." She finished fiddling with the device, then snapped a skin-like covering over it. Suddenly, Newt realized what it was. It's a prosthetic leg. Hers, probably.

She saw the look of surprise on Newt's face and smiled. "They still hiding the fact that I lost a good part of my right leg during that last fight?"

"Yeah… I guess so."

"Hmph. I told them it was okay to let that out to the public years ago."

"Probably for morale purposes."

"True. Now, you said you had something you wanted to discuss regarding the Ghost Drift?"

"Yeah. You're THE expert on the Drift, so I wanted to talk with you about the bond between Mako and Raleigh."

"I've heard the stories. I'm quite curious to hear just how strong it is."
"Did you ever meet the Kaidonovskies?"

"Yes. They had long been the benchmark for compatibility and stability in the Drift. Spent a week watching them and studying their bond. Why?"

"I think Mako and Raleigh's connection might be even stronger. Did you hear about their first Drift?"

"Yes, I did. Rather unusual to do a first Drift in a combat ready Jaeger. Usually it's done in the labs."

"We were… pressed for time."

"So I heard."

"Well, I've talked with Tendo…"

Caitlin cut him off. "How is he, by the way?"

"Good. He's been serving as Marshall Hansen's aide de camp for a while now, but he's taking a few much-deserved days off now."

"Good for him. I'll make sure to call him soon. Anyways, what did Tendo have to say?"

"Oh, yeah. He said that Gipsy's plasma cannon deployed… in response to Mako's RABIT."

Caitlin froze. "That shouldn't be possible."

"Yet it happened. Mako and Raleigh's Drift was somehow able to override all the safeguards other than pulling the main power bus into LOCCENT."

"My God."

"Yeah. I wasn't there for that, though. I was still kinda shaken by the Drift with the frontal lobe from Mutavore."

"A remarkable feat, I might add. One that even I didn't think would be possible."

"Even I had doubts it would work. But the possible rewards far outweighed the risks."

"And they were. We do have you to thank for saving the world."

"Aw, shucks. I think that Mako and Raleigh deserve much more credit than I do."

"Point. Speaking of whom… You said that you're concerned for them?"

"Yeah. I've been using them to provide a baseline figure for the new Drift matrix I'm making. But it's hard to get a baseline, because their neural activity in the Drift is higher than anything I've ever heard of. It's not off the charts, but it's still extremely high. And their Ghost Drift is equally strong."

"So what's your concern?"

"Well, will their personalities fuse, or something like that?"

Caitlin was quiet.

"Oh, god. They will, won't they?"
"Not quite like that. Yes, certain aspects will bleed across to the other. But they're not going to become one mind in two bodies. That's just crazy."

"Phew."

"However… Have they been keeping physical proximity to each other?"

"They've been practically inseparable since Pitfall."

"Not surprising. It took a long time for Sergio and I to be able to go out and do things alone. It'll be hard for them if they want to."

"That's the thing, though. I don't think they want to."

"Then let them be together. I saw the video of them sparring. There's more to their bond than just the Ghost Drift."

Newt's eyes lit up. "Oh, I know. There's a pool going on as to how long until Raleigh asks her… Want in?"

"By all means. But only on one condition."

"Name it."

"Have them get in touch with me. I'd very much like to have a chat with them."

"I'll arrange it as soon as I can."

"Alright, then. What's the going bet right now?"

"-.-.-"

Author's notes: The scene about the Ghost Drift was in response to a question I was asked. I'd had a whole logic behind it already set up, and this just gave me the ability to reveal that. I hope it makes some sense.

As for the last fight of Brawler Yukon, where Caitlin lost her leg, I'm planning on doing that as a one-shot some point down the line. Her recovery will also be a part of that story. You can also expect to see her and Sergio appear as guests from time to time as well.

And the guy from the airport talking to Raleigh? That was me about two years ago. (No, we don't throw your bags. And if they pop open, that's not our fault: That's what happens when you try to stuff 40 pounds of clothes into a bag meant to carry 25-30 pounds.)
Chapter 28

Forged in Fire, Chapter 28

Mako and Raleigh's hotel room

June 10, 2025

1845

Mako flopped onto the bed, exhausted and emotionally spent from the trip to Oblivion Bay. "That was hard, seeing all those Jaegers again."

Raleigh walked out of the bathroom, still wiping grime from his face after an impromptu scramble into the Conn Pod of Tacit Ronin. "Yeah. It's like walking through a graveyard with all the bodies on display. Kinda creepy."

Mako sat up slightly to look at Raleigh. "Says the man who went sliding into a Conn Pod, whooping in delight."

Raleigh opened his mouth to protest, paused, and then closed it. "Good point."

There was a knock at the door, and Raleigh padded over to answer it. He opened the door to find Herc and Miranda standing there, and Miranda held up a six-pack of beer.

Herc's face was sad, but determined. "Raleigh… can we come in? We need to talk about Manila."

Raleigh stiffened and nodded, then allowed the two Australians into the room.

Mako sat up, every muscle tensed as she felt Raleigh's unease about the situation.

I hate it when one of us gets a fight-or-flight reaction. It affects both of us.

Herc sat down at the small table and cracked open a bottle. "C'mere, you two. I'm not going to bite."

The two Rangers looked at each other and shrugged. Raleigh grabbed a nearby t-shirt and pulled it on, then joined the others at the table.

Herc handed a beer to Mako and Raleigh before he began. "Right, Raleigh was there for this, so if I forget something, make sure it gets covered, okay?"

"Sure."

Herc took another hit from the bottle. "So… Manila, 2019. Last drop of both Horizon Brave and Lucky Seven. First time we lost two Jaegers in a single fight."

Mako nodded, remembering the enormous controversy over the decision to classify the mission, especially the situation that had erupted after the mission had ended… and the rumors about what had really happened afterwards.

"It was a three Jaeger drop. My brother Scott and I jockeyed Lucky Seven, Raleigh and Yancy were in Gipsy, and Lo Hi Shin and Xichi Po in Horizon Brave. We were tasked with stopping the first Category IV Kaiju."

"Raleigh… can we come in? We need to talk about Manila."
Raleigh took a swig from his bottle and picked up from his viewpoint. "Yance and I were standing on the left flank, watching this thing come out of the water. We'd never seen a Kaiju that big before. No one had. And it had this barbed tail, kinda like a giant porcupine out on the end of a tentacle. And we all just… stood there for a minute, staring at it."

"I remember that. Scott took one look at that tail and just went, 'Well, that's pleasant. How do we deal with that'?"

Mako could feel the storm of emotions swirling inside of Raleigh. Fear, excitement, surprise, panic… everything she had felt during the fight with Otachi.

Miranda took a drink from her iced tea and looked at Raleigh. "Then what happened?"

"Well, Horizon Brave was the senior team on site, so they got overall command. So when they just waded into the water to engage the Kaiju without talking with us first, Yance and I just… froze. We were not expecting that at all."

Here's gaze grew distant as he recalled the fight. "Scott and I looked at Gipsy, then at Brave, and just waded into the fight. We figured that the Beckets were planning something."

Mako turned to Raleigh. "So… were you?"

"No." Raleigh hung his head. "We kinda just… stared. Horizon and Lucky were notoriously slow Jaegers, so we were blown away at the thought of them trying to take on the Kaiju alone. It wasn't until the tail arched over and just… crushed… the left side Cryo Cannon of Horizon Brave that we jumped into the fight. But by then, it was too late for them."

Herc nodded slowly, gaze distant. "Yeah, when the Cannon let go, it sprayed liquid nitrogen everywhere, especially all over the Conn Pod. The crew just… froze. Instantly."

Mako shivered at the thought of dying that way.

"Then, the Pod was shattered as the Kaiju hit the frozen area. There was just nothing left."

Raleigh looked at the ground. "That's about when Lucky Seven entered the fight. Fists flying, cannons firing, feet smashing… it was a sight to behold."

Herc grinned. "That was a fun fight while it lasted."

Miranda's left eyebrow quirked up as she sipped her iced tea.

Raleigh's smile vanished. "The tail had lost its spines at this point, courtesy of the combination of the liquid nitrogen bath they'd received and an impact into the wreckage of Horizon during the fight. That didn't keep it from being a highly effective club. Yance and I were just warming up the plasma cannons to try and get a good shot when the tail came around and smashed into the groin area of Lucky, sending them reeling."

Here's gaze returned to the room as the ball once again rolled his way. "For some reason, the guys who built Lucky added some damage sensors there. So Scott and I felt it as a kick in the crotch. Painful in the extreme… but it triggered a RABIT in Scott that I've never spoken of to anyone other than Stacker and the Marshall of the Sydney Shatterdome at the time."

Herc took a long pull from his beer bottle, draining it. "You have all seen the official report. Scott RABITed from the pain, and we couldn't get out until LOCCENT pulled the plug. He paused to crack open a fresh bottle of beer, then took another long pull from the new bottle. "What really
happened was that what I saw forced me to kill the Drift. I couldn't understand why Scott would do what he did… and be proud of it."

The three others looked at Herc, profoundly curious, and a little afraid.

Herc looked at them, tears in his eyes. "Scott had raped a woman. I know it was a rape because of how she fought back. Eventually, she'd delivered a powerful kick to Scott in the family jewels, and he'd been knocked back much the same way we had in Lucky. The similarities were so strong that he'd RABITed, and I couldn't shake him."

Raleigh watched the blood drain from the faces of the two women. "Sir… If we'd known…"

"Raleigh, we were in no position to fight at that point. I'd lost every ounce of trust in him. I was horrified to call that man my brother. Afterwards, the test showed that we were no longer Drift compatible, the first time that had ever been documented. So far, it's also the only time it's been documented."

Shaken, Mako looked at Raleigh. "We've seen what happened for the rest of the fight."

Raleigh nodded, glad to be able to change the topic.

Herc drained his second beer before continuing. "After I killed the Drift, Scott was furious. He knew I'd seen it, and he knew that I was going to report him for what he'd done. So he was going to try to do something even more heinous: he was going to try to kill me. Thankfully, that was about the time that the Kaiju fell dead onto the legs of Lucky Seven, throwing Scott across the Conn Pod, knocking him out cold so I didn't have to."

Raleigh and Mako looked at each other, then Mako handed her second beer across to Herc.

"Thanks." Herc cracked it open and took a pull, then continued. "After I was cleared by medical, I went straight to the Marshall and told him everything. I expected him to question if it had been real, if it was a fragment of the Drift. But he didn't. He simply called the law enforcement and told them to run Scott's DNA against the rape database. Got three hits right off the bat." Another sip. "I never even bothered to say goodbye. I just ignored him as they marched him to the helicopter for the flight back to Sydney."

Miranda finished her iced tea and chimed in. "Chuck told me the rest."

Herc nodded at his daughter-in-law to continue.

"Chuck also told me that he watched the fight in Manila with great interest, and was extremely upset that Gipsy froze up during the engagement. He always interpreted it as the Becketts stalling so that the Kaiju would be worn out enough that they could finish it off with ease and look like the heroes." Miranda nodded at Raleigh. "I knew that there had to be some other reason, and I told Chuck as much. He still refused to accept the fact that maybe Raleigh and Yancy just froze up. After all, you guys didn't have the same experience as the two older crews. But Chuck insisted on saying that you two weren't rookies on a first Drop, so you shouldn't have frozen. That you hadn't frozen on that Drop against Yamarashi, so you shouldn't have frozen at all when it went south."

Raleigh took Mako's hand. "But then we saved him in the Battle of Hong Kong."

Miranda nodded. "And then he realized that you weren't a glory hound. You actually did freeze up… just like he did right after watching Crimson get taken out so quickly. He didn't freeze for long, but then neither did you. Just a few seconds is all it takes, right?"
Mako nodded. "It's amazing just how fast it goes."

Raleigh smiled. "I figured that I had done more than just go onto the Wall for five years to piss Chuck off that bad."

Miranda laughed. "Oh, you have no idea just how hard it was for him to change his opinion of you, Raleigh. Mako, however… He'd always had a soft spot for you."

Mako's eyes bugged and she nearly choked on the beer she'd been drinking. A few moments of coughing and sputtering later, she turned to Miranda, clearly confused. "Say that again? I swore you just said that Chuck had a soft spot for me…"

"I did. You remember that sweater that showed up on your doorstep from 'A friend in the 'Dome'?'"

Mako's jaw hung open. "No…"

Miranda grinned. "Uh-huh."

Mako looked at the particular bag that held the sweater in question. "Wow."

Raleigh and Herc burst out laughing at the exchange… until Raleigh's phone rang with the tone Mako had come to understand indicated a call from an unknown number.

Raleigh walked away from the table and took the call. "Hello?... Speaking… Uh huh… Darn… Really? Hmm… one sec." Raleigh covered the mic of his phone and looked at Mako. "Hey, one of the places we called yesterday just called back. All the studio apartments are waitlisted, but there's a two bed, one bath available."

Mako looked at the petite Australian woman. "Want a room for cheap?"

Miranda looked at them, thinking. "Well, as long as you two keep it down…"

Mako blushed.

Raleigh grinned. "No promises on the nightmares, but otherwise, sure."

"Then count me in."

Raleigh uncovered the mic. "Yeah. We'll take it… and we've got someone in mind for the other room." A pause. "Yeah, we can be by tomorrow. What time?... Sounds good. We'll be by then… Okay, thanks."

Raleigh hung up and tucked his phone away. "We've got an appointment tomorrow at 10am with the landlord."

Mako ran over and hugged Raleigh. "That's great!"

Miranda, however, looked thoughtful for a moment. "Wait… what about once the baby comes?"

Mako and Raleigh looked at her. "Well cross that bridge when we come to it."

Herc smiled. "What about furniture? All three of you need some."

A knock came from the door, and Mako walked over to open it and let Jazmine in. "You know, you have the most uncanny sense of timing."
Jazmine cocked her head, intrigued. "How so?"

"We need to go get some supplies for an apartment."

Jazmine jaw dropped. "An apartment."

"Yes."

"You two got an apartment."

Miranda spoke up, grinning. "Four."

Jazmine's face worked for a moment, trying to process the sudden shift. "Well, then. One trip to the West Sacramento Ikea coming up."

Raleigh froze, remembering the last time he'd been in one of the famed furniture stores.

Mako, Herc, and Miranda all looked at Jazmine, confused. Herc spoke the question on all of their minds…

"What's Ikea?"

--.--

**Author's notes:** I usually don't do a whole chapter as a single scene, but that's how this wound up playing out. And yes, I'm going to briefly touch on the visit to Ikea later, with comedic results.

I'd also been planning on doing a chapter dedicated to the visit to Oblivion Bay, but just couldn't make it work out. So, I decided to skip that over, and possibly come back later as the museum opens as a flashback to remember them choosing the Jaegers.
Mako slowly awoke to find herself wrapped in Raleigh's arms. *If I were a cat, I think I'd be purring right now…*

Raleigh stirred, then opened his eyes. "Mornin', Mako."

Mako turned over to face him. "Good morning, Raleigh."

"You want first crack at the shower?"

"Please."

Raleigh let go of Mako, and she headed over to the bathroom.

Mako closed the door most of the way, but didn't latch it. Raleigh didn't even notice it, and picked up his tablet to check the morning headlines…

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!"

Raleigh dropped his tablet and ran to the bathroom, not sure what to expect as he shoved the door open to reveal Mako staring at her shoulders in the mirror. "Mako! What's wrong?"

Mako saw Raleigh come in, panic evident on his face. "My shoulders are peeling!"

Raleigh leaned his head against the doorframe, sighing. "You scared me. It sounded like you'd hurt yourself badly." He looked at Mako. "It's from the sunburn."

Mako proceeded to try to pick at the skin, only to have her hands swatted away by Raleigh.

"Don't pick at it. It'll flake off all by itself."

Mako sighed. "It's going to be a long day…"

Raleigh just shook his head in dismay, then went back to his tablet as Mako got into the shower.

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Dining area
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0800

Mako watched Miranda plow through her breakfast with awe. *I know she's pregnant, but that metabolism of hers is still incredible.* Mako looked down at her breakfast, which consisted of some eggs, bacon, and coffee. *Got to talk to Raleigh about sparring again. Can't afford to get soft!*

Herc, Jaz, and Chau were in the corner, talking business over a pair of tablets and a laptop, all
while eating breakfast. *Looks like they're trying to find a place to set up business, based off the maps on the tablets.*

Raleigh sipped his coffee, then gave it a surprised look. "Whoa… That's real coffee. Not the stuff we had in the Dome."

Miranda growled, upset by the news. "God, why do they have to get the shipment now? I swore the stuff off back in January…"

Raleigh looked at the diminutive Australian woman with whom he would soon be sharing an apartment. "So… Mako and I need to learn how to cook."

Mako froze. *Raleigh, that's not true. You just need a refresher course.*

Miranda nodded. "So I've heard. Other than the microwave, what do you know how to do?"

Mako hung her head in shame. "I spent my time learning how to fix and pilot Jaegers, not learning how to cook."

"And I'm not going to hold that against you. You'll have no bad habits." Miranda turned to face Raleigh. "You, however, have some experience, yes?"

"A little. Not much to practice with on the Wall…"

"Hmm… Well, that's something we'll work on."

Jazmine walked over to join them. "Herc and Hannibal will be going downtown to try and sort out some of the business aspects of the whole deal while we go to the apartments and then to Ikea."

Mako smiled and took a deep sip of her coffee before responding. "Sounds like a plan."

"Oh, Herc was messing with me when he said he didn't know what Ikea was."

Miranda laughed. "Yeah, he has a bit of a sense of humor once you get to know him better."

Raleigh shrugged and looked at the news on his tablet… then promptly spit his coffee out back into the cup at the sight of the headline. *U.S. Representative to the Pan Pacific Working Group Found Dead. *"Herc? Check the news."

A brief pause, then the sheer size of Herc's mastery of foul language became evident to everyone in earshot.

Mako leaned over to see the headline on Raleigh's tablet, then succinctly responded in Japanese. *Kuso.* She tapped on the article to read more, and quickly read it all. Concern crossed her face as she read.

*AP, New York.*

Liam Taylor, US Representative to the Pan Pacific Working Group, was found dead in his office this morning by aides. Police refuse to comment on the incident, stating that the investigation had only just begun and that more information would become available as the inquiry progressed.

Taylor had been a longtime supporter of the Wall of Life program, to the detriment of the Pan Pacific Defense Corp and their Jaegers. Taylor's place on the Working Group is widely expected to be given to Senator Samuel Baxter (R, CA), a staunch supporter of the Jaegers and inveterate critic of Taylor's actions in the Group. The Senator had the following to say about his late
"He was always a hard worker, especially when it was for a cause he believed in. My thoughts and prayers are with his family in the days and weeks to come."

Jazmine whistled in surprise. "Bad timing if I ever saw it. If that had happened a year a-
MMMMPH!"

Mako grinned and sat back down, wiping powdered sugar off her fingers. "Watch your tongue, Miss Becket. Else I'll find another donut to stuff into your mouth instead of your foot."

Jazmine paused, then bit through the donut like Leatherback had bit through the cargo container Mako had shoved into his mouth back in Hong Kong months before. "You win… this time." Then, she winked at Mako and headed over to the table where Herc and Hannibal waited.

Miranda looked at the exchange and shook her head, then looked at the time. "Come on, let's go get ready, Mako. You're not going to go meet the landlord looking like that…"

Mako flushed. "This is fine, Miranda."

"Cargo capris and a grease-resistant T-shirt are not okay." The Australian grabbed Mako by the wrist and dragged the still-protesting Ranger to her room for a change of attire.

Raleigh simply sat back and sipped his coffee. This is going to be interesting. Mako's got strength, speed, and reach on Miranda. But Miranda's got spirit.

Herc walked over. "Five bucks Miranda gets Mako to wear a dress."

"No way, sir. Mako doesn't have a dress. An ankle length skirt, however…"

"You're on."

-.-.-

Apartment complex

0955

Miranda looked at the apartment complex, sizing it up. Pool, laundry, small gym… Nice place. She looked at the Rangers, who were also sizing up the complex, but with different criteria.

Mako darted over to a shaded patch of lawn, an oasis of green compared to the brown of dead lawns common in Sacramento in the summer. She briefly went through a few stances, minus the hanbo, and bounced from foot to foot. She sadly looked at Raleigh and shook her head. Nope, not suitable for sparring.

"I'll go look for someplace tomorrow, Mako."

"Okay, Raleigh."

Miranda coughed to remind the Rangers that they had an appointment.

"Right. Come on, Raleigh."

The three walked into the main office and were greeted by the landlord. "Hello, and welcome to… Oh."
Miranda realized that the landlord was somewhat stunned by his prospective new tenants, and decided to defuse the situation. "Oi! Just because I'm from Oz and I'm short doesn't make me a Munchkin."

The landlord roared with laughter. "Oh, it's not that, ma'am. It's the Rangers."

Raleigh politely inclined his head. "Sorry about not warning you, sir. We've been trying to keep a low profile lately."

Mako nodded, her braided hair bobbing behind her. "We were attacked in the Shatterdome in Hong Kong before we came here. We've been trying to stay off the radar ever since."

The landlord nodded. "I understand. I'll try to do what I can to help." He turned to Miranda. "My apologies, but I don't think I ever got your name."

"Miranda Schaeffer."

"And if I may be so bold… what brings you with Ms. Mori and Mr. Becket?"

The pain of the question was evident on Miranda's face.

"I'm sorry if I pried too much…"

"No, no. I need to get used to it." She sighed. "My fiancée was in the PPDC and worked alongside Mako and Raleigh."

The landlord thought for a moment, then guessed at who she referred to. "Chuck Hansen?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am truly sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

The landlord finally gestured to the door. "Now, I'm sure that you three are eager to see the apartment, correct?"

They nodded.

"Then let's get started, shall we?"

---

Mark and Monica's Pizza

Carmichael, CA (suburb of Sacramento)

1217

Jazmine walked over to meet Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda. "How'd it go?"

Mako laughed. "Miranda just gave herself a nickname at the beginning of the meet."

"Oh? Do tell."

Raleigh looked at the blushing Australian. "Munchkin."
Jazmine looked confused. "Huh?"

Mako and Raleigh roared with laughter as Miranda sighed. "The landlord, Mr. Roberts, saw Mako and Raleigh and kinda froze up. So I tried to break the ice by saying that despite the fact that I was from Oz and short, I wasn't a Munchkin."

Jazmine chuckled. "Well, that nickname is going to stick now, I'm sure. It's just such a perfect fit for you."

Miranda hung her head. "Great."

Mako elbowed the Australian as their pizza arrived. "Come on, food's here." Mako took a bite of the pepperoni pizza… and instantly broke out in sweat. "Atsui atsui atsui!" Hot hot hot!

Raleigh looked at Mako, then at the pizza, and grabbed a slice and bit into it. "Mmmm… the good 'ronis. Been a while."

Jaz nodded as she bit into her slice.

Miranda looked at the pizza like it was from Mars. "What's the big deal about pizza, anyways?"

Raleigh looked at her like she was from Mars. "It's pizza, Munchkin."

Miranda sighed and bit into her slice… and her eyes bulged in surprise. "Mmmmm…"

Mako washed her slice down and wiped her forehead. "Is it normally that spicy? That has a nasty kick to it."

Jazmine laughed. "Not normally, no. This's the good stuff, though. I haven't had any in years."

Raleigh turned to his sister. "Jaz, do you know of any good places to spar around here?"

"Actually, I do. There's one not far from here that is more about karate, but might be interested in having you two come in. There's been a lot of interest in the sparring you guys train in after that video hit YouTube and went viral."

Mako thought for a moment. "Hmm… maybe we should start teaching classes on weekends." She looked around for people watching them, but most were focused on the sports commentators on the TV. "At least until we're back on war footing."

Raleigh shrugged. "We're probably going to wind up teaching the next batch of Rangers ourselves, anyways."

Miranda perked up at that remark. "New Rangers? Can I join after, well, you know…"

Mako and Raleigh looked at each other, knowing looks on their faces. Mako turned back to the shorter woman and quoted Pentecost. "'Vengeance is like an open wound. You cannot carry that level of emotion into the Drift.'"

"That's bullshit and you know it. You took it in, and you two handled it just fine… Right?"

Raleigh's pained expression spoke volumes, none of it good for Miranda's argument.

Mako took Miranda's hands in her own. "We almost lost it on the first Drift. Not just us, but all of humanity."
"How?"

Mako sighed. "I chased the RABIT so strongly, Gipsy responded to my fear and armed my plasma cannon. We nearly took out the Shatterdome as I relived Tokyo."

Miranda's jaw fell. "I…"

Mako just braced herself and took another bite of pizza. "You know, once you get past the heat, it's actually pretty good!"

Jazmine laughed. "We'll make an American of you yet, Mako."

The four laughed, and dug into their pizza slices again.

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Author's notes: I wanted to touch on the food shortages that Raleigh referenced in the movie as he sat down to eat with Herc, and how that would affect things most people in the U.S. take for granted. Also, Mako's sunburn coming back to haunt her was something I'd been planning for a bit.

Speaking of food, Mako's lessons in cooking are going to be a recurring source of humor, I promise.

Also on the topic of food: Yes, Mark and Monica's is a real place.

Senator Baxter is going to become a recurring character, along with his daughter, whom we've already met. Kudos to you if you can find her.

Oh, and expect some other familiar faces to start to return to the story. The big move across the Pacific is about to start. ;)

Finally, shout out to AsianVegetablesLLC for pointing out that Herc would have known what an Ikea was. Good catch!
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Forged in Fire, Chapter 30

Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda's apartment

June 18, 2025

0700

Mako shuffled into the kitchen and started the stove, then put a tea kettle onto the "burner" of the electric stove. She yawned, stretched, and moved to the cupboard to retrieve some dishes for breakfast.

Sadie sauntered in, looking for food. "Mrow?"

"Hey, Sadie. Want some food?"

The long-haired cat wound her way between Mako's ankles, purring. I'll take that as a yes. Mako got out the box of dry food and poured some out onto a plate, then set it down. "There you go."

"She's a pest when she's hungry, isn't she?"

Mako smiled as she turned around to face Miranda. "Sounds like someone else I know."

"I resemble that remark." Miranda sat down at the table, hands on her stomach. "Will you quit kicking?"

Mako chuckled. "Well, being active's always a good sign, right?"

Miranda yawned. "Not if it keeps me up at night."

Mako was about to respond when Raleigh came in the door, bag of produce from the local farmer's market in hand. "Morning, you two."

Miranda pounced on Raleigh, grabbing a fresh nectarine from the bag and promptly biting into it. "Mmmm… Fresh off the tree. Gotta love it."

The three settled in for breakfast, with Raleigh making scrambled eggs and hash browns. Mako just stuck with making the coffee and tea, something that she knew she could do without making it into a burnt disaster. *I really need to learn how to cook. I don't want to let Raleigh have to do it all… even if he doesn't mind it.*

Miranda seemed to notice Mako's preoccupation. "Don't worry. Jaz and I will teach you, Mako."

Mako nodded and enjoyed the wonderful smell coming from the stove as Raleigh finished up. *Today's going to be a good day.*

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Pan Pacific Industries R&D Offices

McClellan Airport
Sacramento, CA

0800

Raleigh had never had an office before, so it had taken some getting used to. Thankfully, Mako's office was across the hall, so it wasn't all bad. He booted up his new computer and logged in, then settled into the task of setting up a course for training Rangers. *Like I'm the best choice for that.* Mako's reassurance flowed across the Ghost Drift, and Raleigh sighed and set to work.

Raleigh had just gotten into his groove and was flowing nicely when Max's barks and the door chime distracted him. *Great, who is coming in now? We're still getting started...*

Miranda's voice snapped Raleigh back to reality. "Hello, sir. How can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak with Marshall Hansen, please."

"And you are?"

"Representative Baxter, Pan Pacific Working Group."

Raleigh's heart stopped. *Uh-oh.*

"Right this way, sir." Miranda's chair rolled backwards and she walked the politician down the hall. "Sorry about the state of affairs here, sir, but we're just getting started."

"That's why I'm here, Ms. Schaeffer." Baxter poked his head into Raleigh's office. "Mr. Becket, it's a pleasure to meet you. My daughter spoke highly of you."

Raleigh's mind spun. *Daughter?* "She did?"

"Yes. She was on the team helping salvage Gipsy's left arm from the Gulf of Alaska."

Suddenly, it clicked. "Emily, right?"

Baxter nodded. "That's her."

Mako spoke up behind the former Senator. "We didn't know she was your daughter, sir."

"Just like you, she likes to keep a low profile. Come on, I want to speak with all of you."

They headed into Herc's office, and Samuel Baxter began. "I've heard a lot of rumors that the Breach will reopen. So I want to know, up front, what we're getting into here."

Herc's face remained emotionless. "Sir, the Breach will likely reopen. Where and precisely when is still unknown at this time. However, courtesy of the Kaiju Sciences department in Hong Kong, the PPDC has narrowed down the timetable and possible locations."

Baxter nodded. "So I've heard. I've also heard that at least one possible location is in the Atlantic."

Herc nodded. "The Puerto Rico Trench, yes. We're hoping that's not where it opens up, but we are starting on contingency plans for if it does."

Baxter nodded, intending to press that topic later. "However, given that more than a third of the world's population is within the 'traditional' Kaiju range, I suspect that's where your focus is going to be, correct?"
"Yes, sir."

"And what is your defense, given that there aren't any Jaegers left?"

Herc, Mako, and Raleigh shifted uneasily.

"Well?"

Mako grimaced. "It depends on what the threat is. And we're not quite sure what we're going to face. We have had only one intelligence breakthrough since we closed the Breach."

Baxter rounded on Mako. "So you're trying to design Jaegers for Kaiju you've never seen?"

Raleigh smiled as Mako firmly stood her ground. "I've roughed out a half dozen designs, ranging from being not much more than a powered exoskeleton all the way up to a new Mark VI Jaeger."

"But you'll need to build them in time to face the threat when it emerges, yes?"

Raleigh nodded. "And that's the rub, sir. We might need to build several of each size to be ready."

The phone rang, and Miranda ducked out to take the call… only to come running back moments later. "It's Tendo. He says it's urgent."

Herc nodded and put the call on speaker. "Go ahead, Tendo."

"Sir, it's not me with the news… It's Dr. Geizler. He… he Ghost Drifted with the Hivemind again."

Everyone fell silent as Newt took the phone in Hong Kong.

"Okay, so, you remember what I saw last time, right? The Precursors were planning on making the Kaiju smaller and faster. Well, I... I saw how much smaller. About a 25% decrease in size. That will yield a Kaiju that is less than half the weight of the ones we're used to fighting. So we can expect to see more flying Kaiju."

Herc decided to interrupt in order to get more info. "What kinds of attacks are we facing? Acid? EMP? Fire breath?"

"Well, the fire breath is kinda ludicrous. Awesome, but unlikely. Acidic 'venom' was being tested on the one I saw. I don't know if we'll see EMPS, but I'd figure that the Precursors realized just how effective it'd be against anything we field."

Raleigh could feel Mako's mind working on something. "Pipes? No... Fangs. "How was that acid being brought into play?"

"Fangs and claws, primarily. Oh, I also saw what looked like a clone of Otachi, but with Leatherback's EMP organ attached at the shoulders. I think they realized that they hit a winning combo there."

The three Rangers paled at the news that Otachi had been improved upon and prepared for another fight. Mako fielded the thought they all shared. "Full sized Otachi? Category IV?"

"Seems like it, yeah."

Herc slammed a fist against his desk. "I thought you said they were working on smaller Kaiju!"

"They are! But they also have Otachi II to send in if the going gets tough."
The Rangers looked at each other in dismay. This was unwelcome news.

"However, I do bear good news, so don't say I never do anything for you. The Precursors are targeting a new location for the Breach, and with the help of Hermann, we've got a location. But you're not going to like it."

Baxter spoke up. "Please don't tell me it's the Puerto Rico Trench."

"Good thing it's not, because I'm reportedly terrible at lying. No, it's both better and worse: The Cascadia Subduction Zone."

Raleigh frowned as he realized what the "worse" part was. "So what's the better part of that choice?"

"According to Hermann's math, which is always right in my experience, no Kaiju big or small will be able to exit the Breach safely."

A muffled argument followed by a loud "OW!" emanated from the speaker. Hermann's voice came next. "Forgive my… overeager… colleague, Rangers. Marshall, do you remember the old TV series 'Stargate SG-1'?"

"I do. What does that have to do with this discussion?"

"Remember the Iris they used to keep out unwanted 'guests'?"

Herc's face lit up. "Heh. Splat. Why, do you think we can set one up?"

"No need: the Breach will open up two kilometers underground, right in the fault's heart. The Kaiju would go, as you so simply put it, 'splat', against the North American Plate. However, should that fail, there is a second safeguard in our favor. The Breach will only remain stable for 37 milliseconds. This brief window will not allow a Kaiju to emerge safely unless kicked through at incredibly high speed."

Raleigh smiled. "Anything else on the good side?"

"Actually, there's a small chance that the sudden collapse of the Breach will significantly damage the apparatus on the Anteverse end."

Mako frowned. "Define 'small chance', Dr. Gottlieb."

"My math states that the probability of such an occurrence is on the order of 10%."

Baxter was clearly lost. "Wait, how could that happen? It would take a nuke going off… Oh. Shit."

Raleigh nodded sadly. "Cascadia's a major fault line, and it's primed to release. Dr. Gottlieb, that's the bad news, isn't it? Depending on where in the fault line the Breach opens, it could set off a magnitude 8 or higher earthquake?"

"Not could, Mr. Becket. Will. The chance of the backblast depends on where in the fault it opens, and just how much of a power surge it creates in the structure of the Breach."

Herc gulped, visibly concerned. "We can't nail down a more precise time, can we?"

"Not right now, no. Perhaps as we get closer, more information will become available and allow me to refine my timeline."
Another scuffle, then Newt took back over the phone in Hong Kong. "Right, so now that we know what we're up against, we can begin to build new Jaegers. Just... don't let me see them. Matter of fact, keep me as far away as possible from any information about them."

Mako tilted her head to the side in a gesture that Raleigh had come to realize was a sign she was seriously confused. "Why would we need to do that?"

"Mako... I'm Ghost Drifting with the enemy Hivemind. You know what that means, right? Anything I see or hear can be accessed by the Precursors. And as much as I love the Kaiju, I can't stand to let them win. I'm rather fond of humanity, you know? Seeing as I'm a member of it and all. So, for everyone's sake, keep me away from the intel that could help them win."

"But now that you know about the new Breach's location, won't they change it?"

"Doubtful. They're out to kill us all, remember? Causing a massive earthquake/tsunami event instead of creating a stable Breach is still acceptable to them. Matter of fact... might topple segments of the Wall around the epicenter. You need to be prepared for that."

A longer scuffle ensued, resulting in chuckles from the assembled senior staff. Finally Tendo's voice came on. "Alright, now that y'all have heard the good doctors... I have a dinner date with my wife that's waiting for me, so I'm going to go now." A protest in the background briefly was heard, followed by a click as Tendo hung up.

Herc chuckled as he put the phone back on regular mode and hung up. "Well, Mako... your turn. Let's see your pick for the new threat we're going to face."

Mako nodded once and headed to her office, where she powered up the holomonitor and adjusted it so everyone could see it clearly. "Once we set out on the media whirlwind, I started... not quite doodling, more like roughly designing new suits and mechs to deal with whatever might come back." She called up a half dozen different designs, displaying them for everyone to see.

"However, the one I suspect we'll need is the Mark VI Jaeger line." She drew a single design to the front. "Previously, each Jaeger Mark indicated year of rollout, not commonality. Each Jaeger was as unique as the Rangers who drove them. That drove up costs enormously, but provided a wide range of techniques to fight the Kaiju, which eventually worked well enough to get us to today. However, if we are to fight these new Kaiju, we need more Jaegers, and fast. So instead of each Jaeger being unique to a nuts-and-bolts level..."

The Mark VI plans exploded outwards to fill the small office.

"They'd be made from common sub-assemblies. We don't need to reinvent the wheel for, say, a power supply. We know what works, and what doesn't. So, the Mark VIs are semi-modular. It'd take a few weeks to, say, swap the right arm of one Jaeger to being a twinned setup like Crimson Typhoon... but it could be done. This will also allow us to adapt as fast as the Kaiju do, a major problem in the past."

Samuel Baxter nodded, impressed. "That's really nice. However, the problem is cost, isn't it?"

"Another benefit of the production line style assembly. Just doing an actually assembly line would nearly halve the costs of production, and cut maintenance costs by a third."

Herc inspected a random floating part image. "Mako... these are the same size as a 'traditional' Jaeger. How much is it going to weigh?"

"All-up weight should be around 1400 tons."
Raleigh whistled. "Gotta be a lot of composites in the design for that kind of weight savings."

Herc nodded. "We used composites on about 10% of Striker and saw a 100 ton savings. Granted, it was on simple stuff, like the doors over the missile launcher and the Angel Wings… but still, Raleigh's right. That's over 75% composites to see that kind of savings, right?"

Mako nodded. "The only parts that are metal are ones that have to carry a magnetic field. Even the wiring is going to be carbon nanotubes."

Raleigh smiled. "So, other than the power supply and the plasma cannons, it's all either carbon fiber or Nanotube composites for the structure? Nice. Impregnate the resin with something acid resistant, and Otachi II's in for a rude surprise."

Mako smiled. "Yes, she is. Especially after the upgrades I made to the Chain Sword designs."

Raleigh's face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning as he walked around to look at the mentioned weapon. "Is that…?"

"Yes, that's a thermal diversion gate like Striker used on his Sting Blades… only larger. Should peak at over twice the temperature of Striker's blades."

Raleigh's delighted expression made Herc laugh. "Raleigh, you look like you just won the jackpot at a slot machine!"

"Mako, please please PLEASE make sure our Jaeger has those."

Mako laughed. "Of course it'll have them, Raleigh. As well as an upgraded plasma cannon and better rear jets, for starters. But since I've figured out how to protect the digital power supply from EMPs, we don't need to have a nuclear reactor."

"But, the turbine…"

"I'm working on a way to incorporate one, Raleigh. I know you loved the turbine. I did too, actually."

The representative coughed, dragging the Rangers back to the task at hand. "Sorry, sir," they said in unison with a smile.

"I'm glad to see you're excited to rebuild your beloved Jaeger, Rangers. However, you'll need funding for that. How much is it going to cost per unit?"

Mako squirmed, knowing the figure was higher than she would have liked. "Depends on the production run length."

"I know how these programs run. I was one of the guys who crossed party lines to kill the F-35 acquisition, if you didn't remember. I know how the costs rise as production runs fall. Now, for a minimum length run, how much per Jaeger?"

Mako looked at the floor. "$20 billion, sir."

"And other than the lighter weight, what benefits do you bring to the table with the Mark VI?"

"Higher speed, greater agility, and the highest strength-to-weight ratio of any Jaeger."

Baxter smiled. "But now that the Kaiju are smaller, why do we need the Jaegers? Why not finish the Wall?"
Raleigh stepped in. "Sir, I suggest that you watch the footage from Hong Kong again. Unless you plan on putting a roof up, there's no stopping Kaiju from just flying over it."

"So arm the wall with turreted plasma cannons."

Mako shook her head. "Won't work, sir. They'd be taken out swiftly because of their fixed placement and high power demands. You can run one on less than a nuclear reactor per cannon... it just takes a while to charge up for the next shot. A flying Kaiju with an acid spray could take it out in under a minute. Far less than the recharge time of the turreted cannons."

Baxter nodded. "Good, you guys are on the same page I am."

Herc was unmoved. "How so?"

"The Wall is a delaying tactic to allow a Jaeger to get in close enough to finish the job. You demonstrated that in Sydney nearly six months ago."

Mako and Raleigh smiled. "So, we have funding?"

Baxter nodded. "If I can convince the Group, yes. And your arguments are going to be the cornerstone of my case."

The representative turned to leave, but stopped. "Oh, by the way... what are your thoughts about the death of Liam?"

Herc sighed. "I know he was an outspoken proponent of the Wall... but he was also the one who fought hardest to keep any funding for the Jaeger Program after we were declared 'dead'. He was also the one who fought hardest to get us the pensions we have now. I just wish he'd have been more in favor of the Jaegers instead of the Wall."

Baxter nodded. "Well, I hope that I can be more support for the Jaegers now that I have a spot on the Group."

Mako had been pondering something for a while, ad decided to ask one last question. "Sir... why are you so strongly in favor of the Jaegers?"

Baxter chuckled. "I was there when Gipsy scored first blood with Romeo Blue. Yamarashi, 2017." He checked his watch. "Gotta go... my office is probably beginning to worry that you've kidnapped me to be Herc's new copilot. See you around, guys."

Mako looked at Raleigh. "I hope that this isn't a sign of how mornings around here are going to go on a regular basis..."

-.--.

*High on the American River Bluffs*

*Fair Oaks, CA*

*Later that day*

Jazmine looked at the figure waiting for her, sitting against a tree. "You wanted to see me in private. This is the best I can do for now. What's up?"

Hannibal Chau coughed before beginning. "I got a call from my old doctor in Hong Kong... It's not good, and I don't know who else to trust here."
"I'm glad to know you hold me in such high regard, Chau."

Hannibal looked out over the river. "You know, that's not my real name."

"I do. I've always wondered what your true name is."

"David. David Ashburn."

Jazmine's eyes narrowed. "So, why are you telling me this?"

"I have a year to live, maybe a year and a half. I need someone to take over for me when I… move on."

"Whoa… No, I'm not taking over your black market operation."

David laughed. "No, not that. Pan Pacific Industries. When I die, you'll become the boss. The one in charge of my legacy."

"You're scaring me, David." Jazmine paused. "You know, I like that name better. It suits you."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Huh. Might have to start using it again. Anyways, my legacy. I know I'm famous for my black market operation… but being eaten by a baby Kaiju had a way of reorganizing one's priorities."

Jazmine nodded. "So you've said. The big question now is, what do you want your legacy to be?"

David sat there, looking out over the river and the urban forest that was the American River Parkway, thinking.

-.--.

**Author's notes:** What do you think of the Mark VI? I'll be honest: Mako and Raleigh will get to name theirs Gipsy Danger II. All the other Jaegers will be new names. So if you are familiar with the canonical naming convention for Jaegers and want to suggest a name, feel free to suggest one to me!

Also, I'm going to be introducing yet another OC soon, along with a rather lengthy one-shot to develop his background. So keep an eye peeled for **Even Pilots need Heroes**, which should be coming in the next week or so.
Chapter 31

Forged in Fire, Chapter 31

High above Northern California

The pilot whipped her head around, seeking her quarry as she banked her F-22 Raptor to the right. A sudden flicker of movement caught her attention, and a gentle flick of her right wrist caused the massive fighter to snap around to face the target. *Gotcha!*

Tearing the air asunder with nearly 35 tons of thrust, the 5th Generation jet fighter closed on the target… which suddenly bolted for the mountainous terrain below.

The Raptor accelerated like the bird of prey it was named for and stooped towards the ground, hell-bent on catching the intruder. Finally, the jet got close enough to see the target: Another F-22 Raptor, currently disappearing around a bend in the canyon ahead.

The two fighters wove through the Shasta County forests at just under the speed of sound for several minutes, the lead plane never escaping, the trailing one never getting a missile lock, leading to a truly ear-melting string of obscenities from both pilots.

Suddenly, the lead plane pitched skyward, riding on a pillar of fire as the afterburners kicked in full-blast, hurling the fighter upwards like a rocket.

The trailing pilot smiled at her good fortune and armed an AIM-9X Sidewinder missile and waited for the growl that indicated a lock.

"Vrrrrrrrrr….."

The lethal missile flashed off the rail and raced towards its target…

Only to have the world go black right before the missile could impact.

-.-.-

Aerospace Museum of California

Hardie Seltzer Pavilion

June 21, 2025

1145

Mako slammed her fist against the padding of the simulator chair. "I almost had him!" She pulled the Oculus Rift III headset off and sighed as the full-motion simulator returned to the "parked" position.

The red-vested docent opened the cockpit. "How was it?"

"Frustrating. I almost had him. The Sidewinder was a second away!"

Not far away, Raleigh's smug face stared back at her. "Nicely done, Mako. You almost had me."

"Yeah, if the timer hadn't run out, I would have shot you down."
Herc chuckled. "Now now, children, play nice. We're in public, remember?"

The two Rangers hopped out of the cockpits and walked out into the air park.

Mako was instantly drawn to one plane in particular: The F-14D Tomcat that lived near the back fence. "It's so powerful, but sleek. Just like Gipsy."

Herc chuckled. "I'm more fond of the Pig, over here." He patted his hand against the fuselage of the next plane over, a hulking F-111 Aardvark. "Wanted to fly one of these when I was younger. Still do, as a matter of fact. But they were retired before the Kaiju War, and I wound up being sent to helicopters. Faster than anything else out there at sea level, and had a huge bomb load that it could put down on a target with pinpoint accuracy." He looked around. "Where's Raleigh?"

Mako looked around and spottet her copilot over at the far side of the park, looking over an A-10A Warthog. "Herc, this way."

Raleigh walked around the plane, admiring the deceptively brilliant design. He spotted Mako approaching, a curious look on her face. "Come look at this thing, Mako. It's brilliant."

Mako came over to look, and found herself staring at the business end of the A-10's primary weapon: The GAU-8 Avenger 30mm rotary cannon. "Don't we use these for anti-missile defense at the Shatterdomes?"

Raleigh nodded. "Yeah, but this is what it was designed for: shredding enemy tanks." He looked wistfully at the massive gun assembly. "I wonder if we can use these on mechs against small Kaiju… should they emerge."

Mako's lack of verbal response was more than made up for by the feeling Raleigh had come to associate with Mako's brain going into overdrive as she worked on a problem. He'd also learned that if he was quiet and just sat there, not thinking about much at all… she seemed to be able to work the problem faster. Whether that was due to fewer distractions, or if she somehow tapped into his brain's spare processing power, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that she wouldn't come out of her trance-like state until she'd put a big dent in the problem.

Herc looked at the Rangers as Raleigh sat down next to Mako on the ground beneath the wing of the Warthog. Mako's distant gaze told Herc all he needed to know. Her mind was elsewhere, working on something. So Herc walked around the airpark taking in all the sights before heading inside to look at the rocket engines again. He stared at the LR-87-11 engines hanging from the ceiling and whistled as the sheer power they packed sank in.

"Can I answer any questions, sir?"

Herc turned to look at the docent. "Nah, not for this. The Warthog, however…"

"By all means. What do you want to know?"

Herc walked outside and pointed at the gun. "I've always wondered, ever since K Day, why these things weren't used more often against the Kaiju."

"Well, they didn't do much more than piss off the Kaiju. It was like being hit with a bunch of splinters, I guess. Besides, once the Jaegers came online, we didn't really need to have much air support. The Jaegers usually got to the Kaiju fast enough to avoid demolishing a whole city."

"I know. I took out 15 in two Jaegers."
The docent's eyes bugged out as he recognized Herc.

"I was just wondering if the USAF had any left in service. They… might be due for some upgrades."

"Yes, Marshall. They're based in Tuscon, Arizona."

"Hmm." Herc noticed Mako gently shake her head and stand up, Raleigh right beside her. "Thanks for the information."

Mako and Raleigh began to head into the building once again, catching the docent's gaze. "That's Gipsy's crew, isn't it."

Herc nodded.

"Tell them I said thanks."

"Count on it."

-=.-=

Mako and Raleigh's bedroom

June 22, 2025

0600

Raleigh woke up moments before his alarm and shut it off, then slipped out of bed. Mako murmured in her sleep before falling silent again. Good… Raleigh was getting dressed when he realized what day it was. More importantly, what day of the month it was tomorrow. Crud… I need to get that set up today. He scrapped his plans for a morning workout and opted for a jog instead. Got to find a place now!

He hit the pavement and started jogging towards the nearest major shopping center, remembering the storefront he'd seen a few days prior. As he jogged, he spotted something he hadn't seen before that made him rethink some other plans he had for later that week. Finally, someone to help me with that project of mine. He pressed on and found the dojo open, even so early on a Sunday. Once he saw who ran the classes, though, it instantly made sense.

Raleigh stepped through the door, causing a small bell to jingle overhead. A small Japanese man arrived and looked at Raleigh, shock evident on his face. "Becket-san?"

Raleigh bowed to his former fightmaster from the Ranger Academy. "Sensei."

"What brings you to Sacramento?"

"Many things."

"Well, make sure to bring Mori-san along next time."

"That's… kinda why I'm here this morning. Do you remember if Mako's fighting became more… aggressive… towards the last week of the month?"

The older man nodded. "It did. Often with frightening results for anyone on the receiving end of it. Why do you ask?"
"We need a spot for Mako to safely blow off some steam, and I'm the only person we know of that she can spar with safely."

"I know. The video of you two sparring in Hong Kong has finally surpassed the Gage twins doing the Macarena in Romeo Blue."

Raleigh stumbled for a moment in shock. "What? That was the most viewed video on all time for years!"

"Well, now you two hold the top two spots. 'Boatswording a Kaiju' has become the most viewed, and your sparring session is hot in pursuit. We've had a lot of people coming in wanting to learn how to spar with hanbos."

Raleigh shook his head in awe. "I didn't realize that it was that popular."

"It is now. Now, when did you want to come by with Mori-san?"

"Uhm…" Raleigh did some quick math in his head. "Lunchtime tomorrow."

"Then I shall see you then."

Raleigh once again bowed in respect, then headed to the farmer's market, hoping to find some strawberries.

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PPI R&D Offices

June 23, 2025

1107

Mako had been trying to design a new Conn Pod component for three hours when she finally decided to just scrap the idea. She "grabbed" the holographic part, slammed it to the desk to flatten it out, then wadded it up like a sheet of paper and threw it at the wall, where it bounced and fell into a holographic garbage can before promptly dissolving.

Raleigh poked his head into her office. "Hey, everything okay?"

"No… I can't focus." Mako rubbed her temples, trying to get back on track.

"I've got an idea. Come on, let's go take a lunch break."

Curious, Mako followed Raleigh out to the parking lot where their new self-driving car awaited. "What's your idea?"

Raleigh grinned as he got into the car. "You'll see."

Mako scowled at him.

"Relax, Mako. You'll enjoy it, I promise."

---

10 minutes later
Mako got out of the car and looked at Raleigh. "Really?"

Raleigh laughed. "No, next one down." He pointed.

Mako followed the gesture… and smiled. "Okay, that's better."

Raleigh put his hand on Mako's shoulder. "Come on, there's someone inside I want you to meet."

The small bell over the door chimed, and Mako gasped as she spotted her fightmaster from the Academy. She bowed in respect. "Sensei."

"Mori-san, it is good to see you again."

"Likewise."

Raleigh and Mako headed onto the mat and accepted their hanbos from the fightmaster, then bowed to each other.

Then, the fight was on, and the Rangers fell into their adrenaline-boosted Ghost Drift, ignoring everything except each other as they danced across the mat. Their skilled and lightning-fast blows attracted the attention of others in the dojo, and they once again drew a large crowd as they sparred for nearly 10 minutes.

Mako felt the frustration and anger leave her as she hammered away at Raleigh, who simply blocked or redirected every strike without counterattacking. Finally she backed off and the Rangers fell into their more typical give-and-take style, the same fighting style that had been filmed four weeks earlier and had skyrocketed to the top of the YouTube most-viewed list.

Finally, Mako and Raleigh stopped with hanbos crossed, breathing in unison, hearts pounding as one, as cheers and applause came from all around them. The Rangers just stood there for a moment, enjoying the moment, before Mako's stomach grumbled, reminding them that it was lunchtime, after all.

Raleigh smiled. "Want to go back to the apartment and get some lunch?"

Mako smiled, feeling much better. "Yes, but only if I get the shower first."

"Deal."

-.--.

30 minutes later

Raleigh stepped out of the bathroom to the smell of something… well, he wasn't quite sure what was going on, but it seemed to be originating from the kitchen. "Mako? Everything okay?"

No response.

Raleigh rushed into the kitchen to find Mako staring at the rice cooker that Jaz had left for them. "Mako? What's going on?"

Mako just gestured at the rice cooker, her embarrassment too great to even speak.

Raleigh lifted the lid off and stared at the burnt mess inside. "Mako… it's a rice cooker."

"So?"
Raleigh closed the lid, fighting back laughter. "How the hell do you burn rice in a rice cooker?!

"I don't know." Mako was clearly mortified by her failed experiment at cooking. "Obviously, I have a lot to learn about cooking."

Raleigh just shook his head in amusement as he headed back to their bedroom to get dressed. "Alright, we'll go out for lunch. You pick this time, though."

Mako just stared at the culinary disaster she had made. *I just need to set aside some time with the girls to learn how to cook. And soon.*

-.-.-

**Author's notes:** Thanks to Jocelyn's outstanding story "Aurora Borealis" for the idea of the Jaegers dancing. (sorry, forgot to put thanks in the first time round.)

The scene with Mako burning the rice is based off one that reportedly happened to a coworker of mine.

The scene with the simulators was inspired by Legendary's announcement that they would be bringing a Jaeger Simulator to San Diego Comic Con this year.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 32

Mako and Raleigh's apartment

June 27, 2025

0655

Mako pulled up her email on her tablet to find a message from Jurou Himura. She rolled over to wake Raleigh. "Raleigh! Jurou sent an update."

Raleigh was instantly awake. "Well, let's take a look!"

Mako opened the email to find a video. "Hello, Mako. Just wanted to touch base with you and let you know that the preliminary polishing is done. Also, the wakizashi blade that Raleigh made has been finished." Jurou held up the smaller blade with a smile. "A few other things. You've sparked my granddaughter's interest in school again. She says it's because she needs to do well in school to get into the Academy. I hope that you have an academy by the time she's eligible in about, what, ten years?

"Anyways, let me know when you want the contact information for the metallurgists I know. You still owe me that sword."

Mako grinned. "I guess I need to find some stuff to start a new sword forge."

Raleigh smiled. "That you do."

"And you need to get ready for work."

"That I do." And with an impish grin Raleigh headed into the bathroom to shower.

-.--.

Lima, Peru

1223 local

(1023 PDT)

Colin "Crunch" O'Malley heaved on the massive wrench with everything he had, trying to untorque the massive bolt that held the access panel in place. "Aki, a little help?"

Aki Otani came over to look at Crunch. "And you used to work on Jaegers."

"So did you, so quit staring and gimme a hand."

The younger Japanese woman also grabbed onto the wrench and pulled on it. "Not moving. God I miss the impact wrenches we had."

"I know, right? Grab that section of pipe. We'll use it as a cheater bar."

Aki handed the pipe to Crunch. "I have to admit, though, it's nice to be outside for a change, instead
of being stuck inside a Shatterdome overseeing the repairs on Striker Eureka."

Crunch gratefully accepted the steel tube and slipped it over the handle of the wrench, then grabbed hold of the end of the longer handle. He leaned back, groaning with the load. "Come on, you stubborn piece of Taiwanese-"

With a screech of yielding steel, the bolt finally came loose, and Crunch flopped to the deck of the cargo ship. "Gah."

Aki laughed. "You do realize that you flopped down into a fresh pile of seagull crap?"

Crunch opened his mouth to reply when his cell phone rang with the distinctive opening riff of AC/DC's "War Machine." He whipped it out and answered immediately. "O'Malley."

Aki immediately worried. That's the ring tone for the PPDC. Why are they calling us?

Crunch's face lit up. "Raleigh! Good to hear from you. What's up with you and Mako? ... Sacramento? ... Wait… You're building what? ... Why do you need to do that?"

Aki watched the color drain from Crunch's face. The Breach must not be sealed forever!

Crunch was still listening to Raleigh. "Two years? Gimme the space to build her in, and I'll have her done in six months… Wait. COMPOSITES? You're building a Jaeger out of plastics? Why the hell do you want to do that? What can composites do that steel and titanium can't?" A long pause. "Okay, okay, I get it. Just tell us where and when, and Aki and I will get the Crews together. … Yeah, she's here too. We're in Lima right now. … Nah, we don't have much. We can be packed up and gone in a day or two. Anything you want us to grab before we leave?" A chuckle. "No, not gonna happen. You need to appreciate a good Scotch, my friend. I've seen you after a round of tequila. … Yeah, you went 'one tequila, two tequila, three tequila, floor,' Raleigh. It wasn't pretty. … Don't worry. We'll be on our way tomorrow, if possible. … Okay, say hi to Mako for me… and to Herc and Max for Aki. … Yeah, see ya soon." Crunch hung up and turned to face Aki. "You wanted to have the impact wrenches back… Now you get to have them. The Jaegers are back."

Aki grinned and hugged the former Marine. "Well, then, let's give notice and boogie. We've got a world to save again!"

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PPI R&D Offices

June 30, 2025

0930

Herc stuck his head into Raleigh's office. "Hey, you got a moment?"

Raleigh looked at Herc. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Come into my office real quick."

Raleigh followed Herc to his office, where Herc sat down and gestured to Raleigh to close the door. "I had Mako help me pick this out a while back… and now it's time to follow up with a visit to the artist behind it." Herc pulled up a render of the new Ranger Memorial. Raleigh looked closely at it and whistled. "Hell of a lot of detail, sir."
"Yeah. But I need you to hop on over to visit the artist. They're in Salt Lake City, so you'll be taking a flight late next week to go visit the artist, then fly home in time for dinner."

Raleigh became visibly nervous. "Sir… That's a hell of a day."

"Says the man who helped kill two Kaiju in one Drop."

"Point."

"Make sure you get to bed early, though; your flight leaves at 0630."

Raleigh whistled. "Okay, will do."

Herc and Raleigh both paused as the main door chimed as someone entered. Miranda's cheerful greeting drifted down the hall. "Welcome. How can I help you?"

Raleigh poked his head out the doorway to see Crunch and Aki standing there, looking around to make sure it was the right spot. Raleigh gestured to Herc to come see.

Herc's head poked out just in time for both of the Crew Chiefs to spot him. "Marshall!"

Aki raced back to greet Herc, while Raleigh and Mako went out to meet Crunch. Mako just wrapped the former Crew Chief of Gipsy Danger in a hug, while Raleigh waited for his copilot to let go. "How was the trip, Crunch?"

"Long, but relaxing."

Aki glared at the former Marine. "Hey, you slept on the plane."

"Anytime, anywhere. Basic teaches you that."

Striker's Crew Chief just shook her head as Herc laughed. "So, ready to get back to work?"

Crunch nodded. "Let's see what Mako's come up with this time, shall we?"

--

Pittsburg, PA

That same time

"I'm sorry, Sergio, but I wish I had better news." The oncologist looked at the former Ranger, sorrow written on his face. "But the cancer's back, and it's beyond our ability to halt it this time."

Sergio D'Onofrio nodded. "Is there anyone who can treat it this time?"

"Maybe. There's a trial about to start at Stanford's new center, out in California. They might be able to take you, but there's no guarantees. Your case is… unique."

"Hell, even if it doesn't beat the cancer back again, if they can learn something from it, it's worth it to me. Get me in touch with them."

The doctor handed Sergio a card with the contact information. " Might want to hurry, though. They're about to stop taking subjects."

Sergio smiled. "Doc, I might not be an active Ranger, but Cait and I still don't have much in the
way of possessions. Rangers tend to live light. We'll be packed by tomorrow night if needed."

The doctor nodded. "Then good luck, sir. And thank you for your service with both the Air Force and the PPDC."

Sergio nodded his head once. "Thanks for the treatments, Doc. I just wish they'd taken better."

---

30 minutes later

Sergio walked through the door of the small duplex he shared with Caitlin. She was waiting for him, a concerned look on her face. "It's back, isn't it."

"Yeah."

Caitlin hugged her copilot and husband. "Anything the doctors can do?"

"Not here in Pittsburg. They want me to go to California to take part in a trial for a new treatment."

"How odd. That's where the Jaeger Program's setting up shop now."

"What, you want to get back into one?"

Caitlin smiled. "If they'd let us, yeah. But with my leg and your cancer…"

"Hey. Just because we're not in our prime anymore doesn't mean we can't help out. I suspect they'll need instructors for teaching new Rangers. And who better to teach Rangers than other Rangers? It'll be just like old times, back in Anchorage." Sergio grinned. "Besides, your job here's done now, right?"

"Just wrapped up yesterday." Caitlin looked around, remembering the times both good and bad they had shared here. "I'm going to miss this place, but you need to go to California for treatment, and I can help with the Jaeger Program full time."

"Or you could laze about. God knows we're never going to hurt for money."

Caitlin gently punched her husband in the shoulder. "Me, sit about doing nothing? I'd go crazy."

They were silent for a minute before Sergio spoke up again. "I'll start finding us a spot to stay."

"I'll get the tickets."

---

Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda's apartment

1835

Mako carefully stirred the vegetables in the fry pan as Miranda watched. "Doing good so far, Mako."

Mako was about to reply when a flicker of movement outside the window caught her eye. She looked out to see a little green bird perched on a nearby tree branch, seemingly looking back at her. "Miranda… Look! It's a hummingbird!"
The Australian walked and stood on her toes. "Wow! I knew they were small, but I didn't know they were *that* small."

With a whistling hum, the little bird took off for parts unknown, leaving the two women delighted. However, the sizzle of the fry pan brought them back to the task at hand, and Mako stirred the onions and bell peppers again.

Miranda looked at the onions and decided they were almost done. "See how they're getting translucent? That means that-

*Chuff.*

Mako's head whirled to look out the window. "What the…"

*WHAM!*

Mako dove to the floor, tacking Miranda on the way down as gently as she could. "STAY DOWN!"

Raleigh chose that moment to walk in. "Why are you two on the ground? It's just a firework. Illegal, but not lethal."

Mako blushed. "Sorry. Sounded like a mortar."

Raleigh gave Miranda hand up. "Well, you're not too far off the truth. They're illegal in California, but Yancy and I got to set some off up in Alaska before the War. Might want to check on Sadie, though."

*Chuff.*

Mako covered her ears and counted to two.

*WHAM!*

A fuzzy grey blur tore through the kitchen area, headed for the gap between the sofa and the wall.

Raleigh laughed. "Never mind, we know what she thinks of fireworks now."

Mako looked at Raleigh. "Why the fireworks, though? Independence Day isn't for a few more days!"

Raleigh looked at Miranda, then at his copilot. "Girls, this is America. We'll celebrate anything at the drop of a hat if it means we get to do at least two of the following: Barbeque, blow stuff up, set stuff on fire, drink, and/or cause general mayhem. Fourth of July ticks off all those boxes, so the celebrations tend to span a few days… just so that things don't all happen at once and cause LOTS of problems."

Miranda just shook her head and went back to cooking. "Sounds like Australia at times."

Mako stared out the window. "So… we have to listen to this for, what, a week?"

"Bout that, yeah."

Mako groaned. "Could be worse."

Raleigh didn't even get a chance to reply before a high-pitched shriek split the air. Mako clapped
her hands over her ears. *This is going to be a looooong week.*

---

**Author's Notes:** Yes, Mako and Miranda are in for a long week. Sacramentans tend to be… enthusiastic about our Fourth of July celebrations. ;)

Side note: Yes, non-professional aerial fireworks are illegal in California. That includes bottle rockets, skyrockets, mortars, Roman Candles, and anything else that launches a flaming projectile into the air. Does it stop people from buying them out of state or in Chinatown and setting them off anyways? Hell no. Half the fireworks you see on the night of July 4 are aerial, some of which are quite large. Do they get arrested? Not likely unless they injure someone or start a fire. The police are typically busy spending the night chasing drunks and druggies anyways.
Chapter 33: Name Games

PPI R&D Offices

July 2, 2025

1030

Miranda was busily going through documents sent to her from the Hong Kong Shatterdome, figuring out the ones that Herc really needed to see. Thus, when the door chime rang, she didn't look up right away. "Hello, welcome to... Oh. Hello."

Representative Baxter was back, along with the rest of the Pan Pacific Working Group. "Hello, Ms. Schaeffer. Is the Marshall in?"

Miranda quickly nodded. "Let me go get everyone." With that, she walked down the hall. "Guys, we've got company. PPWG's here."

Raleigh and Mako stopped their fiddling with the designs for the control interfaces on Gipsy Danger II and froze. "Now? We're not ready!"

Crunch and Aki poked their heads out of their offices just down the hall. "Doesn't matter if we're ready or not. Brass says jump, we jump."

Herc sighed. "Chau's downtown talking to people about the San Francisco Shatterdome. Really bad timing..."

Jazmine smiled and stepped out of her office. "Doesn't matter. Time to face the music, folks." The younger Becket led the way down the hall, where she then greeted the Group. "Sorry about the small offices, but we don't have a main office yet."

Baxter nodded. "However, you have the hangar across the way, yes?"

Jazmine nodded. "Yes. Mako, you get the holodisplay set up there?"

The younger Ranger nodded, relieved that something was going according to plan this morning. "Ready to go and sync'd to the server here."

The Japanese representative gestured towards the door. "Then let us begin."

-.--.

Herc started off with recap of the final days of the War, despite the fact that most of the representatives had seen the official reports. "Operation Pitfall was a plan that Pentecost had created back in 2022. We updated it to work with the Jaegers we had on hand: Cherno, Gipsy, Crimson, and Striker. However, if it had not been for the timely breakthrough of Dr. Newton Geizler, we would not have realized the gravity of the situation, nor would we have been able to penetrate the defenses around the Breach. Long story short, we made it to the Breach and closed it.

"However... The closure of the Breach is not permanent."

Herc waited for the uproar from the representatives to die down before continuing. "I know it's a
bitter pill to swallow, everyone, but I don't like it any more than you. So we're not sitting back and enjoying our pensions. Instead, we're already preparing for the next attack."

Herc walked over to a nearby computer terminal and powered up the holoemitters that could turn the entire hangar into a 3D display, then displayed an image of the planet with the potential Breach sites in red. "Gentlemen, these are the areas we believe that the Breach could reopen. Yes, there's one in the Atlantic in the Puerto Rico Trench. However, our intelligence indicates that the Kaiju's masters, the Precursors, are still aiming for the Pacific."

The Japanese representative frowned. "And what is your intel source?"

The Rangers looked at each other nervously before Raleigh continued. "It turns out that Dr. Geizler's Drifts with the two Kaiju brains also unlocked a Ghost Drift with the Precursor Hivemind. He's had two lucid Ghost Drifts so far, and both times he's brought back vital information."

"What kind of information?"

"What kind of Kaiju we'll be facing, and their timeline for the next attack."

Before the Japanese representative could respond, Herc jumped in. "They'll be back in two years, two and a half tops. So it's crunch time, people. We need Shatterdomes and Jaegers as soon as we can get them built."

The Chinese rep spoke up next. "Can we see the Jaegers you have planned so far?"

Mako nodded enthusiastically and took over the controls of the holoemitters. "All the Jaegers are going to have common features, as well as a semi-modular approach to speed up repairs and overhauls, as well as cutting construction times and costs."

A lineup of more than a dozen basic Mk VI Jaeger silhouettes spawned at ground level for the Working Group to inspect. Each one had an ID above their head indicating production order. A few had names as well. The one at the front of the line had a familiar name. "Gipsy Danger II?"

Raleigh shuffled his feet a little. "Well, it's just a working title… We don't have an official name yet."

The Canadian representative smiled. "I understand the logic of it. I think we can make an exception to the naming conventions for now." He continued down the line to the second one to be produced. It was named Sierra Guardian. "I'm guessing he's going to stay at the San Francisco Shatterdome?"

Herc nodded. "That's the idea. Part training Jaeger, part permanent defender."

The third one was named Sigma Thunder. "And where's this one planned to be based?"

Mako shrugged. "Depends on where the next Shatterdome is."

"Can't you use the Hong Kong Shatterdome?"

Herc frowned. "Depends on if we can get the museum board to settle for only a part of the hangars for the duration of the war."

The Canadian smiled. "That can be arranged. Just ask nicely and explain why."

Baxter got down to business. "Now, how much is this going to set us back per copy?"
Mako looked a little sheepish. "$10 billion U.S. each if we do a run of 20 or more."

The representatives all gathered into a cluster and began to talk for a while, while Crunch and Aki disappeared across the street to do something.

Finally the representatives broke up their mingle session, and the big four players came forward. "Will the price go down further if we run a few more units?"

Mako frowned. "Not by much. Couple tens of millions."

"Then we have a deal. Twenty solid orders, ten options."

Herc's jaw dropped at that. "We're going to be funded?"

Baxter wandered over. "Marshall, we just need to speak to Mr. Chau to nail down details." He looked at Jazmine. "Unless you're authorized to deal on his behalf."

"I am."

Then let's get to business. Charles, Liang, and Belov? Pick a Jaeger and name it, then let's go to the office. America calls Gipsy Danger and Sierra Guardian."

Crunch smiled and held out a hat with a large collection of words that could be used to make a Jaeger name, and Aki held out another hat with numbers in it. Belov Valintin, the Russian representative, grabbed two words and a number. "Number 7…" He shuffled the words back and forth for a few moments. "Nitro Glow."

A round of applause filled the hangar, then Liang Zhilan, the Chinese representative, stepped forward.

"Number 5… Cobra Sentinel."

Another round of applause.


Crunch nodded. "Gimme one, then draw another."

A brief swap later, the representative smiled. "Much better. Quantum Colt for Australia."

The Japanese representative stepped forth. "Number 4… Zephyr Angel."

And so it went until all twenty of the confirmed Jaegers were claimed and named.

---

1230

Hannibal walked into the office to find a large crowd of PPWG reps waiting behind a sheepish Jazmine Becket. "What in the name of God is going on here?"

Jaz looked at the floor. "We… kinda got caught off guard. The Working Group came by for a visit."

"And?"
Herc poked his head up over the shoulders of the back row of politicians. "We're funded. We just need 'Domes ad we're good to go."

Chau looked at his intended protégé with an inquisitive look. "What's the deal, then?"

"They want to see what the 'Domes will look like before they fund them."

"So show them."

"I… wanted to make sure that we would be able to build one in San Francisco first. After all, that's going to be the cornerstone of the network, right?"

"It is. So, let's pull up the plans on the big display." He headed out across the street to the hangar.

---

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming all the way out here. I hope that your visit so far has been enjoyable. However, we're not in the business of having a good time, now are we? No, we're here to save our planet from an alien invasion. And for that, we need a base, right?"

Hannibal fired up the holoprojector and the hangar was once again filled with the image of the Earth. The view tightened in on the San Francisco Bay Area, showing it as it was now as it settled to the floor, with a ghost of the pre-K-Day city overlaying it. "This is the Bay Area. Now an Exclusion Zone due to long-term contamination from both the radiation from the triple nuclear strike and the Kaiju Blue. Both of these issues are fixable now, thanks to more than a decade of research. However, the ruins of San Francisco remain as a reminder of what we have lost.

"That said, we need to move forward. We can't afford to dwell on what once was. Instead, we need to focus in what can be. And, with your help, what will be. I ask you to direct your attention to the Marin Headlands, and Kirby Cove in particular." Hannibal zoomed in on the area in question. "As you can see, Highway 101 and the surrounding area are largely uncontaminated, despite Trespasser's passage just to the south as he destroyed the Golden Gate Bridge. Now, I know that there have been calls to rebuild the bridge rivet for rivet. I say that those who want a faithful reproduction can go build one elsewhere. We need a Shatterdome, and the Los Angeles one just isn't going to cut it anymore. So, we build it here."

A model of the proposed Shatterdome complex appeared in the display. It was a traditional Shatterdome design for the most part: the Scramble Alleys opening out onto the water to the south; large helipad located above the hangars; and an extensive lodging and administrative center placed back from the pads. That was where the similarities ended, however.

The most noticeable part of the design was the new Golden Gate Bridge that was anchored on the north end by the Shatterdome. The heritage of the iconic (and now long-destroyed) bridge was clearly evident, but it was not a precise replica. Perched atop each of the towers was a turret-mounted ID-25 Plasma Cannon, straight off of a Mark VI Jaeger. Alongside those were paired, turret mounted Anti-Kaiju Missile launchers derived from the ones used by Striker Eureka.

"Yeah, we armed the Bridge. Because if the Kaiju gets past the Jaeger, this setup will stop it cold before it hits the city. Again."

Samuel Baxter frowned. "What are you planning on powering the cannons with?"

"Very good question." Chau blew up the base and showed them a large complex at the back of the base. "This is a Gen IV pebble bed nuclear reactor. Triple core, shock isolated, EMP hardened. Also meltdown proof. Not resistant, proof. No other reactor design boasts such a capability, due to
the completely encapsulated fuel elements. It also runs hot enough that we can use the heat of the reactor coolant to directly desalinize seawater for use not only in the 'Dome, but in a rebuilt San Francisco as well. Provides a city's worth of excess power, too, even when the cannons are running full tilt. Both of those are carried through conduits along the bottom of the bay, by the way. So even if the bridge goes down, the water and power still flow."

"But what about earthquakes?"

"See these here?" Chau circled a set of absolutely massive shock absorbers that carried the entire reactor complex. "These are taken straight off the Jaeger designs. Best shock absorbers out there. The whole base will move around these reactors, which will stay rock steady even in the worst of earthquakes. The base itself is armored against the effects of the quakes, too, so it'll remain up and running."

The Japanese representative frowned. "Tsunami?"

"Scramble Alley doors have always been heavily armored and watertight, so we'll just lock it down and ride it out. Plus, with the immense amounts of water and space available, we'd be a perfect hub for Search and Rescue and disaster recovery."

The representatives milled about for a while, taking in the plans and talking. Finally, they reached a decision, and Baxter spoke for the group. "Give us the bill, and we'll fund it."

Jaz ran over and hugged Chau. "Well done, David."

Everyone froze, staring at Jazmine, who was mortified at her gaffe.

Herc rounded on the younger Becket. "Who?"

Chau coughed. "You all knew that my name of Hannibal Chau was a chosen name, right?"

Herc nodded. "Favorite historical character and second favorite Sichuan restaurant in Brooklyn, if I remember correctly."

Chau nodded. "Well, Jaz used my real name… David Ashburn. I was a businessman here in San Francisco on K-Day. After we killed Trespasser, I realized that there was a business opportunity even in the death of a Kaiju. And once the Jaegers started doing their jobs so well, the market for Kaiju black market goods exploded. I… saw an opportunity and I took it. Made me insanely wealthy, too."

Raleigh walked forwards. "Hey. You didn't need to hide your past from us. We're in this together, right? We're all a team here."

Ashburn looked down. "No… you are. I'm just the man with a plan to get it started. Jaz here will see it through."

Baxter looked at Ashburn, concerned. "Kaiju Blue, isn't it."

David nodded. "A particularly slow-burning version, yeah. Serves me right for being so damned cocky around Baby Otachi. Docs give me a year, tops."

A respectful murmur fluttered around the group.

"And I will not let that year go to waste. I might not live to see the end of the Kaiju threat, but I'll be damned if I don't pitch in to help while I can."
Mako and Raleigh nodded, understanding the feeling.

Suddenly, a familiar but unexpected voice rang out. "Then let's get started."

Everyone whirled around to see the D'Onofrio's standing in the freight door of the hangar.

Caitlin smiled broadly and continued. "We've got a hell of a lot to do, and not a lot of time to do it in."

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**Author's notes:** Whew! that was a hell of a case of writer's block. Thankfully it's been broken, and we're back in action.

I'm going to start naming my chapters from here on out, and might even go back and add names to the others already published.

Also, BIG news for you all... Forged In Fire is NOT going to be the only major story I do: Instead, it's the first of four major story arcs.

That's right. FOUR:

Forged in Fire (aftermath of the First Kaiju War)

Calm Before the Storm (preparations for the Second Kaiju War)

Once More Unto the Breach (Second Kaiju War proper)

Reap the Whirlwind (Aftermath of the Second Kaiju War)

Anyways, now that I have that bombshell out of the way, want the Jaeger names, in order of production, with funding nation? No problem! I need to line them up for head canon usage anyways.

Solid orders:

1. Gipsy Danger II (GD-601) (USA)
2. Sierra Guardian (SG-602) (USA)
3. Sigma Thunder (ST-603) (Australia/New Zealand) (given to relieve the delay in coverage due to Quantum Colt being #14 in production.) (Kudos to CSM101 for the name idea.)
4. Zephyr Angel (ZA-604) (Japan)
5. Cobra Sentinel (CS-605) (China)
6. Python Exile (PE-606) (Mexico)
7. Nitro Glow (NG-607) (Russia)
8. Amber Herald (AH-608) (Philippines)
9. Shotgun Blackout (SB-609) (Central American Coalition)
10. Nebula Vixen (NV-610) (South-East Asia Alliance)
11. Castle Ember (CE-611) (South American Conference)
12. Maple Tiger (MT-612) (Canada)
13. Shockwave Harpoon (SH-613) (China)
14. Quantum Colt (QC-614) (Australia/New Zealand)
15. Sparrow Dynamo (SD-615) (Japan)
16. Eagle Shadow (ES-616) (South-East Asia Alliance)
17. Prometheus Dawn (PD-617) (Canada)
18. Phoenix Enforcer (PE-618) (Russia)
19. Ivory Dragon (ID-619) (China)
20. Ruby Canyon (RD-620) (USA)

Options:
USA: 2
Japan: 2
Russia: 2
China: 1
Australia/New Zealand: 1
Canada: 1
South-East Asia Alliance: 1

Each nation or group of nations gets at least one Jaeger, though it might not be based in their country: Even small Shatterdomes are expensive.

The two letter, three digit code is inspired by a scene from the Anchorage fight, where the Gipsy shows up on Tendo's display with the code GD-34. I'm assuming its Mark and production order, but I'm not positive that's the numbering in official canon. But that's my head canon, so it applies here.

Central American Coalition refers to a fictitious alliance between Guatemala, Belize, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama. They don't have enough funding to field a Jaeger each, so they pool their resources to field Jaegers.

South-East Asia Alliance is similar to the Central American Coalition, but is comprised of Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.

The South American Conference is comprised of Chile, Columbia, Ecuador, and Peru.

If you have any suggestions as to weaponry loadouts, body language, crews, logos, etc., feel free to let me know via review or PM. I'm gonna need some help with that. ^_^
Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda's apartment

July 5, 2025

1657

Mako and Raleigh rarely turned on the TV for news, but Herc had insisted that they watch tonight for some reason. As such, they were waiting as the news anchors made a brief statement about an impending speech from the President of the United States, then promptly switched their feed to the White House.

The President was already waiting to speak, and began right away. "Before I begin, I ask my speechwriters for forgiveness for not using their wonderful speech. I do appreciate their efforts over the last day to write the speech that is waiting for me on the Teleprompters... but I feel it's more important tonight to be candid."

The President paused briefly, gathering his thoughts. "Six months ago, we were staring the end of days in the face. The Kaiju were coming faster, they were bigger each time, and the Sydney Wall had just been breached. There was seemingly no hope for mankind's survival. Then, the Battle of Hong Kong cost us two of the four remaining Jaegers, and even I was terrified. I could see the writing on the wall. I remember thinking, 'There's no way we're going to make it out of this one.'

"Then, the remains of the PPDC blitzed the Breach and closed it. They paid a heavy price to do so, but it has been worth it so far. Not a single Kaiju has emerged for nearly six months, giving us a much needed breather and a chance to repair the damages and reopen trade.

"Yesterday evening, however, I received word from the Pan Pacific Working Group that this is just a lull in the Kaiju War. The Breach, though closed, is not sealed. And reputable sources give us two years before the Kaiju return. Now, I know that doesn't seem like a long time, but plans have already been put into motion to not only rebuild our defenses, but to improve them dramatically. As we speak, the PPDC is preparing a new line of Jaegers, the Mark VI, to defend the Pacific Rim once again. New Shatterdomes are slated for construction, as well.

"Now, I'm sure many of you are panicking right now. Deep inside, I am too. Trust me, I was terrified when I heard the news last night. I still have trouble believing it. But the mere possibility of the Kaiju's return cannot be taken lightly. As such, I call upon not just the Pacific Rim nations, but the whole world to pitch in again in a bid to not only beat back the Kaiju once more, but to take the fight to them, on their turf, on our own terms.

"I now give you the speech that Marshall Stacker Pentecost gave in the Shatterdome before the launch of Operation Pitfall, the attack that closed the Breach. I have found it to be an inspiring, moving speech, and I hope it carries the same power and emotion as it did when he gave it...

"Today… today. At the edge of our hope, at the end of our time, we have chosen to believe not only in ourselves but in EACH OTHER. Today there is not a man nor woman in here that shall stand alone. Not today.

"Today we face the monsters that are at our doors, and bring the fight to them! Today, we are
Mako wiped tears from her eyes as she heard a cheer rise up from the whole apartment complex.

Raleigh hugged her, remembering that speech in person nearly six months earlier.

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**PPI R&D Offices**

**July 7, 2025**

**0811**

Mako opened her email and saw her inbox was flooded with messages from PPWG representatives. Half of them were asking for what kinds of weapons they could put on their Jaegers. The other half were wondering what styling options were available. Mako just marked everything to be read later, then settled back to work on the Jaeger systems.

Raleigh felt her frustration from across the hall and came over to see what was wrong. "Hey, need help?"

"Yes. Give me an idea off the top of your head for a new Jaeger weapon."

Raleigh thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Got it: chemical weapon."

Mako didn't even look up to show her skepticism, instead letting the Ghost Drift carry the emotion.

Raleigh carried on, undeterred. "Well, think about it… The Kaiju are acidic, right? So we inject something basic into them and disrupt their biochemistry."

Mako looked at Raleigh, delight flashing across her face. "That's brilliant!" She hugged Raleigh and gave him a quick kiss. "Thank you!"

"Hmm… another idea…"

"Go for it."

"One of the issues with Cherno Alpha's Spark Fist was maintaining enough contact to deliver a solid shock. What if we were to use some sort of spike coming off of the gauntlet area, in the same spot as the Chain Sword? We've got the power conduits there from the cannons, right?"

Mako smiled. "Yes. That could certainly work…"

Raleigh smiled and ducked out of Mako's office as he felt the gears start to churn in her head. *Go get 'em.*

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**1104**

Aki looked out the door of her office to see if Mako had gone out yet. She had, so the Crew Chief pulled up a particular website and looked at the products offered. "Hmm… not big enough… not enough options…"

Crunch came in. "Find it yet?"
"No, I'm still… wait. This it?"

Crunch looked at the page she pulled up. "Mori Seiki? Any relation to her family?"

"Not that I know of, no. But… look at this unit here. JUST what we need."

"Hmmm…” Crunch muttered under his breath as he read the specs before finally speaking up. "Yeah, that's the ticket. Let's see what we have to do to get one in the hangar, shall we?"

-.-.-

1457

Caitlin D'Onofrio stuck her head into Mako's office. "Hey, you got some time to talk?"

"About?"

"You're the only Ranger I've never talked to about their Drift experiences."

"Oh. Uhm…"

"It'd be you, me, and Raleigh."

Raleigh walked out of his office. "What about me?"

Mako flushed. "Caitlin wants to talk about our Drift."

Raleigh scowled. "Doc, we're doing fine with the Drift. It's stronger than it was between Yancy and myself."

The older woman smiled. "I know. That's why I want to talk with you two."

Confusion clouded the faces of the younger Rangers.

"Come on, let's go for a walk."

-.-.-

The three Rangers walked along the sidewalk in silence for a while before Raleigh finally spoke out. "Okay, Doc, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Raleigh, you have much more practical experience in the Drift than Mako. Your time in the Academy saw to that, right?"

Mako nodded. "I… I never Drifted with anyone before Raleigh. No one was compatible."

"So I'd heard. And yet your compatibility with Raleigh is basically off the charts. Even the Gages, who were identical twins, weren't as compatible as you two are. I can't figure out why."

Raleigh stared at the ground for a while before responding. "I… No. I can't…"

Mako held Raleigh's hands in her own. "It's okay."

Caitlin waited patiently for them to finish.

Raleigh took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then spoke again. "I… I think it's because of some of the shared elements of our PTSD. Losing the ones who mean the most to us to Kaiju, despite the
best efforts of the Jaegers…” Raleigh trailed off again, and Mako squeezed his hand in reassurance. Raleigh shook his head. "I can't explain it, Doc. There's just some stuff I can't put into words. We just… click."

Caitlin chuckled. "I understand. Really, I do. With so few examples of Drift compatibility, we're not sure what the mechanism is. It just is."

Mako's phone beeped at her, and she tapped her earpiece. "Sir? … I'll be right there." Another tap and Mako nodded to Caitlin and turned to Raleigh.

"Go. I'll stay out of trouble."

Mako grinned and began to jog back to the offices.

Raleigh watched his copilot/girlfriend hustle down the sidewalk.

"So, when you going to ask her?"

Raleigh smirked and shook his head as he turned to face the First Lady of the Ranger Corps. "When the time is right."

"Ah." She was silent for a bit.

They walked along for a few blocks before turning back towards the offices. Finally, Caitlin couldn't hold back a question she'd been trying to wrap her head around. "Raleigh… you know how bad Sergio's cancer is."

"Yeah… I hope that they can get it into remission again so that you two can jockey again."

Caitlin stiffened.

"Sorry. Didn't realize that was such a raw nerve."

"It's not that, Raleigh… Sergio's cancer is into his pancreas. There's no stopping it now. All they can do is buy him two, maybe three more months." Caitlin stopped walking and looked at Raleigh. "I'm scared, Raleigh. I mean, I've seen people die before. Good friends, colleagues… fellow Rangers." She sighed and looked down. "It's just that I don't know how I'm going to deal with losing Sergio. He's been such a part of my life for the last decade… I can't imagine life without him."

Raleigh guided the older Ranger to a park bench and sat down next to her. "I don't know what's worse, having your partner taken mid-Drift, or knowing its coming and being unable to do anything about it." He looked at the sky, seeking answers he knew weren't there. "I hope I don't have to experience the latter. Not with Mako."

Caitlin nodded absently. "I just hope I don't get dragged with him. It's happened before."

Raleigh paled as he recalled the way Tacit's crew had gone down. Duc got fatally wounded by in the Conn Pod and died after being rescued from the wreckage. When he died, Kaori crashed too and died a few hours later. That was a hard loss. "But Herc's survived two copilot deaths out of combat…"

"But both of them were sudden onset, and both times there was a third Ranger involved."

"Sensei did…” Raleigh trailed off as he realized what he had just said, eyes wide.
Caitlin stared at the younger Ranger. "Who?"

"Pentecost." Good point, though, Mako.

Mako's wry smile flitted across the Ghost Drift. You're welcome.

"Hrm… yeah, he did outlive Tam. But it was only for a few months."

"Exactly. Everyone else who got dragged along died within hours, not months later. Doc, if you make it past the first few days, you'll be fine."

Caitlin was about to respond when Raleigh's face went white as a sheet. "Mako…" Raleigh tore off down the street towards the office and their hangar-come-workshop across the street.

Caitlin ran after him as fast as she could, which was surprisingly fast given her prosthetic right leg. "What's wrong?"

"Mako's in trouble!" was the only response she got before Raleigh rushed into the hangar…

5 minutes prior

Mako walked into David's office. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes. I have something I need you to do for me."

Mako took a seat. "What can I do?"

"Who do you want to make the elbow rockets for the Jaegers?"

Mako answered without hesitation. "Aerojet Rocketdyne. They did a fantastic job on Gipsy's set, and were very helpful during the overhaul. I have literally trusted them with my life, and I have the utmost respect for their work."

"Then you'll be taking them this contract for the engines on Thursday morning." He handed her a packet of papers. "They also offered you a tour, if you want it."

Mako's eyes lit up at the mention of the offer. She'd grown up watching the Japanese H-II rockets lift off from the southern tip of her home island, and still harbored a deep love of spaceflight. To go to the hallowed halls that made the engines that brought the Apollo astronauts home from the Moon? Of course I'm in! "Thank you, sir."

David grinned at her. "Try not to drool all over their workshops. Ms. Mori."

Mako laughed. "No promises."

David laughed, and Mako headed out the door to go clear out the wasp nest she had noted earlier in the hangar. She found Jazmine staring at it from a respectable distance. "What, afraid of a few wasps?"

"Deathly so. I'm allergic to the venom in their stingers."

"Ouch. Well, stand back. I'm going to get rid of that nest."

"Thanks."
Mako grabbed a broom and waved it at the nest to drive off the wasps, then proceeded to knock it off of the I-beam it was attached to.

However, Mako failed to notice the wasp that settled on her right arm… until it stung her. "YAI! Orokana suzumebachi wa watashi o sasa..." Stupid wasp stung me… Mako's eyes bugged out as the spot she'd been stung began to swell before her eyes… as did her airway. "Jaz… is this normal?"

Jazmine's eyes bugged out too, as she saw Mako's reaction to the sting. "No, definitely not!" Jaz began to scramble through her purse. "De tous les temps à égarer cette chose maudite, il devait être quand j'en ai le plus besoin!" Of all the times to misplace that damned thing, it had to be when I need it most!

Mako began to panic as her airway closed entirely.

"AHA! Mako, hold still. This is going to hurt like hell at first, but it'll open your airway, okay? Just hold still for a minute, please." Jazmine helped Mako lay down, then pulled the safety cap off the Epipen and slammed the tip into Mako's thigh, hard.

Mako's eyes bulged as she felt the inch-long needle slam though her pants and into her leg.

Jazmine quietly muttered something under her breath for a few seconds before removing the autoinjector. "Stay with me, Mako." She pulled out her cell phone and dialed the paramedics.

Raleigh raced into the hangar. "MAKO!" He saw her on the ground, the Epipen, and the crushed wasp nest and put it all together. He ran over and cradled her in his arms. "Shhh… Hang on, Mako."

Mako relaxed at the sound of his voice, but her eyes were still wide with panic.

"How long since Jaz hit you with the Epipen?"

Not long.

Raleigh blinked at the incredibly clear thought in his mind. Must be the adrenaline… "Give it a few more seconds…"

Suddenly, Mako gasped slightly as her airway opened enough to allow her to breathe. "Ahhhh…"

"Shhhh… save your breath. JAZ! How long until…"

"Two, maybe three minutes."

"Grrrrrr….."

"Oh my god… Mako? What happened?"

Raleigh turned to see Caitlin behind him, with the rest of the staff hustling across the street. "Apparently, Mako's allergic to bee and wasp stings. Didn't know until now."

"I… I was stung once as a kid. Didn't do this, though."

The whoop of a siren broke up the group, as the medics arrived to pick her up for a mandatory trip to the hospital.

"How long ago?"
Jaz looked at her watch. "Five, maybe six minutes. Hit her with my own Epipen about four minutes ago."

Raleigh let go of Mako and let the paramedics pick her up and put her on the stretcher.

"Does she have any family?"

Herc spoke up. "We're the closest thing she has to a family, but Raleigh here's her copilot."

"Sorry, rules are…"

Herc stepped up and stared down the 5'8" paramedic. "Rules be damned. These are paired Rangers. He's going with you, end of story."

"And if he doesn't?"

Herc's voice turned ice cold and totally level. "Then you're going to be getting a phone call from, at the very least, the U.S., Japanese, and Australian representatives to the Pan Pacific Working Group, and possibly the heads of state for those nations, too. And all of them will be asking, very politely, for your head on a pike."

The paramedic backed down. "Fine. Get in."

Raleigh wasted no time getting in and sitting out of the way of the other medic, who hooked up a few monitoring leads to Mako and gave her oxygen as a precaution.

Herc watched the ambulance leave for the hospital, then walked to his car. "Right, everyone get your stuff. It's gonna be a long night."

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**Author's notes:** I'm not a medic by any means, so I'm not sure if the timeline given here for Mako's reaction is realistic or not. However, that response time is, given the proximity of the nearest fire station to the office and hangar that I've picked to be the ones used in the story. The trip to the hospital is also realistic, especially with cases like this one where the airway closes. Had one happen at a summer camp I worked at one year. Let's just say that I've never seen anyone move as fast as that camp medic did, before or since.

Also, I don't know if Mako's allergy is canonical, but developing a severe reaction after being stung even once is not uncommon. Let's just hope it doesn't happen to me!

Finally, I don't remember where I saw or heard something about paired Rangers dying in quick succession. All I know is, it's not my original concept. Sorry if it was someone around here, but it's a valid concern in the case of the D'Onofrios for reasons to be expounded upon later.
Chapter 35: Long days

Mercy San Juan Hospital

July 8, 2025

0802

Mako woke slowly to the sound of the beeping of her heart rate monitor. *I have not missed that sound.* She rubbed her eyes and stretched with a slight moan as her right arm protested the movement. "Mmmhhhhnnn…"

At her side, Raleigh sat bolt upright in his chair, instantly awake. "Easy there…"

"Mmm?"

"You're still wired up six ways to Sunday. Let me go get a nurse."

"Nuhhh…"

Raleigh stopped. "You gonna be okay for a few minutes?"

Mako just nodded and waved at the door.

Raleigh went out and grabbed a passing nurse. "Hey, who do I talk to in order to get some non-emergency help?"

There was a reply, but Mako couldn't hear it. Instead she focused on trying to sit upright. However, before she could finish the task, a nurse darted in. "Hold on, ma'am. Let me unhook you from the monitors first…"

Raleigh put his hand out to stop the nurse. "Can you get her some water first? I know she's been on an IV overnight, but that doesn't mean your mouth doesn't feel like it's been stuffed with cotton once you wake up."

The nurse bristled, but she did go grab a cup of water for Mako, who eagerly drank it. "Oh, that feels so much better."

"Now can I unhook you?" The nurse scowled at Raleigh.

"Please."

The nurse was apparently fresh on shift, because her reaction upon seeing the circuitry suit burn scars was pure shock. "Ma'am, what happened to you to cause those scars?"

Mako sighed. *Every damn time. I'll never get used to that.* "Drive suit overload. Tends to happen when your Jaeger takes heavy damage."

"Wait…" The nurse actually paid attention to Mako and Raleigh. "No. Way. You two? Here?!"

Raleigh grinned. "Yep. Planning the return of the Jaegers."
"I watched the President on Saturday. It's really going to happen?"

Raleigh nodded sadly. "Yeah. They'll be back."

"Where do I sign up? To be a medic, that is."

Raleigh opened his mouth to respond, paused, closed it. "I don't know, honestly. I'm laying out the Ranger Academy coursework, not arranging recruitment of the other spots. God knows we'll need nurses and medics, though."

Mako yelped as the nurse removed the IV needle.

"Sorry! Didn't mean to hurt you." The nurse applied a bandage to the spot where she had removed the IV and handed Mako her clothes. "I'll be back in five minutes with the release paperwork and a prescription for some Epipens."

"Thanks."

The nurse nodded and headed out.

Raleigh headed towards the door. "I'll be outside."

"Stay. Please."

Raleigh stumbled for a moment. "What?"

"Raleigh, we've seen each other's most intimate memories and deepest secrets. And you're nervous about being in the same room as me when I'm changing?"

"No, it's not that…"

"Then hush." Mako peeled off the hospital gown and pulled on her pants. Raleigh let his eyes wander over Mako's back, taking in the extent of the circuitry suit burns. "I didn't realize they made it down to the small of your back…"

Mako grimaced. "Remember Slattern's last attack? That's when my suit really started to let go. The burns go all the way down on the right side… just like yours. Something to work on for the next set of suits. Along with backup oxygen systems." She pulled her shirt on. "Not going to let that happen again."

*Knockknock.*

"Come in."

"Here we are… release forms and the prescription for the Epipens."

"Thanks." Mako quickly filled out the forms and handed them back.

"Thank you for your service… both past and future."

Mako bowed slightly and followed Raleigh out to the waiting room where everyone else waited.

Miranda ran up to hug Mako. "You had us all so worried! Thank god you're okay."

Sergio came over. "Tough break about the allergy. Good thing the Kaiju haven't figured out how to unleash bee venom."
Caitlin smiled. "Glad you're feeling better."

Jaz handed Mako a piece of paper with a list of pharmacies that carried Epipens all the time. "Keep those things handy, Mako. Never know when you'll need it."

Crunch and Aki handed Mako a belt pouch they'd gone out to find last night. Aki smiled as Mako eyed it curiously. "Should fit two injectors in it and protect them from damage."

Mako smiled. "Thanks, everyone."

Herc grinned back. "Next time, let me or Raleigh take out the nest." He then handed her an electric flyswatter. "And hit the damn things with this before they land on you. 10 kilovolts ought to kill 'em on the spot."

Mako accepted the flyswatter and toggled the power, resulting in a distinctive hum as it charged the grid elements. "Thank you very much, Herc."

"Just don't hit anyone with it. It hurts."

Raleigh laughed. "Speaking from experience, Herc?"

Herc shuffled slightly. "Maybe."

A round of laughter rippled through the group as they headed out to the parking lot. Mako looked at them all. *Most of them look a little haggard, but they seem to have gone home to sleep last night. Raleigh, though...* Mako leaned on Raleigh to whisper in his ear. "You stayed in that chair last night, didn't you?"

"Barely slept."

"I appreciate the concern, but you've got a flight to catch at 0630 tomorrow morning."

"Mako... you know how I lived on the Wall. The insomnia that kept me up for two days straight on a regular basis." He hung his head. "I just can't bear the thought of losing you, Mako. I've lost one copilot. I won't lose you."

"I know." Mako hugged her copilot. "And I won't lose you."

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*Outskirts of Salt Lake City*

*July 9, 2025*

*1045 Mountain Daylight Time*

Raleigh had spent the trip to Salt Lake catching up on emails from the people he had tapped for becoming instructors at the new Academy. *It's finally coming together. We're ahead of the curve this time, so we stand a chance of winning for good. He put the tablet away as the car pulled up to the foundry where the Ranger Memorial was being produced. The shop foreman was waiting. "Mr. Becket, I presume?"

"That'd be me."

"Right this way, please."
Raleigh followed the foreman into the shop, where the massive four-part statue was being cleaned and final details were being touched up. "Wow."

"That was my response when I saw the wax copy the artist presented us. Thankfully it turned out okay. Only a few flaws that the artist is working on right now. YO, JOHNNY!"

Johnny's voice floated up from behind the scene of Brawler Yukon beating Karloff into submission. "What's wrong, Deke? I'm trying to finish patching Brawler's knee."

"Customer's here."

A mumbled curse was followed by a squat man walking around the statue. "Mr. Becket? Johnny Magsam. Sorry the statue's not done yet. I kinda went too detailed on the wax positive, and the bronze didn't flow into some of the areas like it should have."

"No worries." Raleigh looked at Striker Eureka as he stood his ground against Slattern. "Hmm… Striker doesn't look quite right."

A flash of panic crossed the face of the artist. "Oh? What's wrong?"

"Here." Raleigh circled the elements of Striker in question with his hands. "I never did learn what these were for, but they glowed blue and red. I distinctly remember seeing them hanging loose, torn from their mountings. Left side one in particular was knocked clean off, and was only attached by the cables." He turned to the artist. "But only Mako and I know that, so don't sweat that too hard." Raleigh regarded Slattern next. "Okay, bone structure's spot on, especially on his ugly-ass face. At that point in the fight, though, Chuck and Pentecost had slashed Slattern across the throat here and had dug the Sting Blades into the armpits. Did a scary amount of damage to the joints."

"Hang on… you said here?" Johnny pulled out a grease pencil and drew a line across the area in question.

Raleigh grabbed a rag and rubbed off the mark, then proceeded to draw the appropriate slash. "Here. Based off the angle, it had to have been Chuck delivering the blow. Arms were cut into here, and here." Raleigh then dragged the pencil across the Kaiju's arms to mark the slashes he'd seen deep beneath the waves all those months ago.

"Huh. And what were those cuts like?"

"Ever sliced yourself with a knife?"

"Yeah, a few times more than I'd like to admit."

"Like that. Maybe tape a bowie knife to your wrist and then slash the throat of a pig carcass to get a better feel. That's the closest way I can describe it."

"No worries. That's actually perfect. I can work with that. Now, I need some help with this next scene here… After all, you were there."

Raleigh gawked as he saw the Conn Pod scene. I knew it would be large, but this is life size! "What about it?"

"I won't show your faces, I promise. But that make it hard to convey the emotion of the scene…"

Raleigh nodded. "Well, the circuitry suits we were wearing were well and truly overloading by that point. I can show you the scars so you can trace the electrical discharges that you could have seen."
"You can?"

Raleigh replied by simply unbuttoning his shirt and showing Johnny the burns.

"Oh… Deke, get the camera!"

"Here." The foreman handed the camera to the artist.

"Thanks. I promise that this won't go online."

Raleigh looked at the old Minolta and gave a delighted laugh. "No, I suppose it won't!"

"Great. Now just stand like you would have in Gipsy's Conn Pod."

Raleigh checked the stance of the figure in the Pod. *Oh, yeah. I can do that.*

"Great!"

*Click.*

"That's it for that, Mr. Becket."

"No prob."

"Now, as for Ms. Mori… Would her circuits be the same?"

"Yeah. Drive suits use the same circuit patterns."

"Excellent. No need to fly her out here, then."

Raleigh nodded. "Now, about the location…"

"Ah, yes. I heard there was some controversy about placing it in Hawaii…"

"We're thinking of putting it in the Bay Area."

"What? That's an Exclusion Zone!"

"For now. We're putting a Shatterdome in on the Marin Headlands and rebuilding San Francisco."

Johnny looked at Raleigh like Raleigh looked at Kaiju Cultists. "In the middle of a war, you're rebuilding a city?"

"Why not? We can't just sit back and mourn forever."

"Hmmm…. Where did you have in mind for the new site?"

"We're eyeing the remains of Golden Gate Park, overlooking the Pacific, with Brawler Yukon looking out over the ocean."

Johnny's eyes widened. "That's perfect! When do you want it ready?"

"K Day."

"Can do. It'll be in place by August 5th."

"Excellent."
Johnny shook Raleigh's hand. "Anything else?"

"Didn't expect it to go so quick. My flight doesn't leave for a few hours."

"There's this hole in the wall hamburger joint downtown with the best onion rings I've ever tasted and a decent cheeseburger. I'll get you directions."

"Thanks."

-.--.

**Author's notes:** Phew. Another bad case of writer's block. Cutting this one a little short because I still haven't totally cleared the block. However, I need to press onwards, so some of the stuff I had planned will have to be set aside.

That said, I am planning the final major plot points for Forged in Fire. Lots of loose ends to tie up and new ones to lay out for the next story.

Also, I'm beginning to create a sort of "story bible" for the remaining stories. Lots of new characters, new locations, and new events to take into account. If I'm lucky, maybe even some schematics for the new facilities. I'll be starting to put some of it out on Tumblr soon.

Finally, let me know if you have any ideas for crews for Jaegers. Backstories are welcomed, so long as they are canon-compliant. I'll post something later with more specifics, probably on my Tumblr alongside some of the story bible I have ready to go now.
Mako stared at the crowds as they approached the entrance of the fairgrounds. "I knew the economy was turning around, but I didn't think this many people would come to the fair."

Raleigh smiled at his copilot. "It's the State Fair, Mako. Jaz said that they haven't had one for two years, so it's a cause for celebration." They reached the ticket booths. "Two adults, please."

The attendant didn't even look up. "Are you active duty?"

"Does the PPDC count?"

"Only if you have I.D."

Raleigh shrugged and handed their badges over.

The attendant still didn't react, instead briefly checking to make sure that the badges were genuine before handing them back. "That'll be $50 total."

Raleigh smiled as he handed over the money. "Thank you much."

"Have a nice day, sir."

Mako looked at Raleigh, curious. "What is a State Fair about, anyways?"

"It's been a while since I was at one, and that was the Alaska State Fair. But if this one is similar, it's about showing off the foods, farms, and attractions of your state, enjoying artery-clogging and/or tooth-rotting culinary creations, and going for rides on the midway until you hurl."

"Seriously? We're Rangers. We don't get motion sick easily."

"Most of the food here is deep-fried."

Mako stared at Raleigh. "Deep-fried."

"Yep. Name a food, and someone, somewhere, at some state fair in the last quarter century has deep fried it." Raleigh stopped dead in his tracks as a familiar scent wafted past. "And some foods are ONLY found in their deep fried form, because it doesn't work otherwise," He grabbed Mako's hands and took off in search of the source of the scent. "For example…"

Mako let the memories from Raleigh wash past her. The fair in Alaska. His family would go out for the whole day, and there was a small trailer that sold only… "Funnel cake?"

Raleigh's face lit up as he spotted a vendor. "Yep. Right there. Come on!"

The two Rangers got into line for the deep fried pastry. Mako killed time by looking around the
food court. "Raleigh… is that…?"

Raleigh followed Mako's sightline to see a small kiosk selling chocolate covered bacon. "Sadly, yes. Many people think that's an awesome food."

"I love chocolate, and I… not love, but… respect? Accept?… bacon. But the thought of putting those together makes my stomach flip."

"Agreed. We'll skip that. I tried it once." Raleigh whipped off his sunglasses in a respectable imitation of David's explanation for having his own private Kaiju shelter. "Once."

Mako burst out laughing as they got up to the vendor.

Raleigh slipped his glasses back on and turned to the cashier. "One large funnel cake, please."

"Seven bucks."

Raleigh happily shelled out the cash for the deep-fried confection, then promptly broke off a piece and handed it to Mako. "Here, just try this first."

Mako shrugged, then accepted the morsel. Her eyes widened as she tasted it. "Mmm! That's… Wow."

Raleigh chuckled. "See, that's why I got a large."

Mako's only response was to reach over and tear off a large chunk.

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1352

Raleigh and Mako were walking though the animal barns when a familiar voice they had last heard in Hong Kong reached their ears. "I still don't understand why you want to bring Anna here, Vanessa."

"Relax, Hermann. It'll help make sure that she has a strong immune system. Besides, it's…"

Mako and Raleigh came around the corner, grinning. "Didn't expect to find you here, Dr. Gottlieb."

"No, I suspect not, as I only arrived yesterday. I have to admit, making the run from Hong Kong to Germany and then to the U.S. was easier than going across the Pacific. I don't know how you two did that so often."

Vanessa Gottlieb came over to stand beside her husband. "Probably because they're used to odd hours and random awakenings. After all, Kaiju don't keep business hours."

Raleigh bowed his head slightly in respect to Vanessa. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Becket. After all, you did save my husband's life in Hong Kong." The older woman turned to face Mako. " Mori-san wa, soreha kojin-teki ni o ai dekite kôeidesu." Ms. Mori, it is an honor to meet you in person."

Mako blushed. "Thank you, Mrs. Gottlieb."

Hermann beamed with pride as he pushed the stroller over. "And this is my daughter, Anna."
Mako, grateful for the distraction, crouched down to greet the baby. "Hello, Anna."

Anna simply gurgled in delight.

Raleigh smiled as Mako's face lit up and she turned to Vanessa. "She's adorable."

"Thank you."

Mako looked at her watch, then the schedule. "Raleigh, we're going to miss that demo!"

Raleigh nodded to Hermann and Vanessa. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. Good seeing you again, Doctor."

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1426

Mako gaped as she and Raleigh walked into the building, which was packed with vendors. "What the…"

Raleigh chuckled at Mako's awe. "Yeah, this is part of the fair too. Lots of products and services being pitched. Not much of what you'd enjoy, though."

"And you would know that because?"

"Do you want things like truck bed liners, microfiber mops, whole house fans, or a half dozen portable speaker designs?"

Mako grinned. "No, but I'm sure there's something interesting lurking out there."

Raleigh shrugged and wrapped an arm around Mako's shoulders. "Then let's go see what kind of trouble we can cause."

They browsed through the kiosks and stalls, filled with kitchen gadgets, wallets and purses, artwork, and dozens of others, before Mako stopped with a gasp.

Raleigh followed her focus to see a booth full of DVDs. Sitting in the center of the front display was a boxed set of Studio Ghibli DVDs. "Ah… Studio Ghibli. I was rather fond of "The Wind Rises" and "Porco Rosso" myself."

Mako's smile went from ear to ear. "Well, I'm going to get that, and we'll have a few movie nights so you can watch the rest." She grabbed the box and walked over to the booth owner. "How much for the Miyazaki Collection?"

The owner looked up. "$75 cash." He paused, clearly trying to place her face. "Wait… Miss Mori, isn't it?"

Mako nodded.

"For you, I have something very special. Only seventeen copies of this DVD exist, and they were never marketed. They were intended to be gifts to the cast of the film… but seeing as it never went to theaters, it's become a collector's item."

Mako's eyebrow quirked. "Oh? What movie?"

"Godzilla. The Gareth Edwards version that was supposed to be released in 2014, but was canned
Mako and Raleigh gasped in unison as they looked at each other. "Newt."

"Pardon me?"

Raleigh smiled. "Someone we know is a huge fan of the genre."

"But he worked at the PPDC?"

Mako nodded. "Kaiju Sciences."

"Well, I suspect he would very much enjoy it. I heard it was an awesome movie, and that Gojira was bigger than he'd ever been. I wish I had been able to see it. But, the packaging seal is a part of the proof that this is indeed what the box proclaims, so I haven't watched it."

Mako pulled out her wallet. "How much for both?"

"I won't charge you for "Godzilla". Consider it a gift."

Mako bowed deeply and pulled a quartet of $20 bills from her wallet. "Dōmo arigatō sensei ni kansha shimasu." Thank you very much, sir.

The owner of the booth handed Mako back a $5, and the two Rangers carried on with their loot.

"-.-.-

1644

Raleigh looked at Mako, concerned. She's been awfully quiet and subdued since we ran into the Gottliebs. "Hey, you okay?"

Mako sighed. "Yes. It's just that… My mind's elsewhere."

"Want to talk about it?"

Mako took a deep breath before slowly nodding.

Raleigh spotted an empty bench not far away and guided her to it. "What's wrong?"

Mako leaned against her copilot, savoring the physical contact. "I… I don't know how to say this aloud without it coming across really weirdly."

Raleigh waited patiently, knowing well that Mako would continue when she was ready.

Mako finally swallowed hard and spoke her mind. "I want to have a family with you, Raleigh. I really do. But part of me says to wait until after the war so that I can focus on being a Ranger again, another says to start now so that I'd be ready to jockey when the Kaiju return, and the rest wonders if I'm just envious of Miranda and Vanessa and just overreacting." Mako rubbed her face with her hands. "I just don't know what the right answer is."

Raleigh sat there, thunderstruck and totally unsure how to respond. "Mako… you're 22, and I'm 26. We've got plenty of time to think this through calmly and clearly."

Mako nodded, her gaze unfocused. "It's just that my mind's been wandering a lot lately. The Mark VIs are almost ready to contract out, the Shatterdome in San Francisco broke ground yesterday,
"the katana's still being polished…" Mako turned to her boyfriend. "I'm bored, Raleigh. For the first time in over seven years, I'm bored." A wry grin graced her face. "I don't do bored. Stuff tends to get disassembled."

"Then I guess we need to take some of your vacation time and go do something."

Mako became pensive for a moment. "Go where, though? We got a pretty decent chance to play tourist during the Victory Tour. Our 'family' is split between here and Hong Kong. Hawaii holds nothing but sad memories and tombstones for us… Where could we go?"

Raleigh simply pointed towards the mountains to the east. "Up there. Spend a few nights camping, away from everything and everyone."

Mako slowly nodded. "I've always wanted to go camping. Sensei was always too busy, though. And survival training at the Academy doesn't count."

Raleigh laughed. "True. That's more of torture than relaxation. Maybe we should visit the county exhibits and ask them about good spots to go camping."

Mako nodded and stood up. "What are we waiting for, then?"

Raleigh bounced to his feet, glad to see Mako's usual spunk and energy had returned.

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1941

Mako and Raleigh browsed through the food courts again, looking for something to eat. Suddenly, Raleigh stopped dead in his tracks. "Mako… I have to try this."

Mako looked at the object of Raleigh's attention. "Okay, I can see why. After all, you Americans do love your bacon."

Raleigh grinned and walked up to the cart. "One bacon corndog, please."

The vendor took Raleigh's cash and handed Raleigh what appeared to be a regular corndog. However, as soon as the Ranger bit into it, its secret was revealed. Instead of the usual hot dog core, the corndog was built around a wound rod of bacon. Raleigh closed his eyes and savored the delightful creation. "Mmmmm… Maple syrup in the bacon. Best stuff out there."

Mako giggled at Raleigh's blissful face and snapped a photo on her phone. That is SO going on Facebook.

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2027

"No. No, absolutely not."

"Mako, you're a Ranger. You've ridden into battle inside something much larger and far more complicated."

"Yes, but I didn't oversee the assembly of this ride."

Raleigh buried his face in his palm. "Mako, it's a Ferris Wheel."
"One that gets disassembled and moved every three weeks."

"So? Wouldn't that allow it to be inspected in more depth than a permanently installed one?"

"Not necessarily."

"What about roller coasters?"

Mako's face drained of color, telling Raleigh all he needed to know. He literally bit his tongue to keep himself from laughing, which earned him a gentle slap to the back of his head.

"Watashi ga sonoyōni yuenchi no norimono o osorete iru riyū, watashi ga setsumei suru koto wa dekimassen... Watashi wa chōdo watashi. "I can't explain why I'm so terrified of amusement park rides... I just am."

Raleigh nodded. "Will it help if I tell you my phobia?"

"I know what it is. You're claustrophobic. I saw it in the Drift."

"Just like I saw your fear of roller coasters. I thought that this little ride wouldn't be so bad."

Mako groaned. "Okay, I'll make you a deal. I go on the rides tonight, you go caving with me in September when we go up to that park in Modoc County."

Raleigh paled, but he stuck out his hand. "Deal."

Mako took Raleigh's hand, and the two Ranger shook on it. "Alright, Raleigh. Let's get this over with, shall we?"

-.--.

2214

Gipsy's pilots flopped into the seats of their car. "Ugh. That was a hell of a day."

Mako simply nodded her assent.

Raleigh programmed the route home into the car's navigation computer, then also relaxed into his seat. "God I'm glad they allow these cars here in California. Otherwise, we'd need to hire a taxi every time we needed to go somewhere."

Mako looked at Raleigh. "Then maybe you should do something about that. After all, you have more experience driving than I do."

"True."

As the car began the drive back to their apartment complex, Mako closed eyes. "Ohhh… Probably shouldn't have done that."

"Why?"

"I'm so tired, I don't think I'll be able to reopen my eyes to walk to the apartment."

"Then let me be your eyes."

"Or my legs. I really like it when you carry me." Mako yawned.
"You do? I always assumed you were just being tolerant of it."

"I just enjoy physical contact. It's... Soothing. Especially from you."

"That's the Ghost Drift. Yance and I were like that after combat."

"No, I've always enjoyed the contact. It's just part of who I am. I'll sometimes wind myself up in my blankets."

"You haven't done it since we started to share a bed."

Mako chuckled. "That's because I have you to cuddle with."

"True."

They fell silent for a while, Mako resting and Raleigh watching the road go by. Finally, they arrived at their apartment complex. Mako stirred as she felt the familiar bump of the car driving straight over the pothole next to the storm drain, despite their best efforts to convince the car's AI to avoid it.

Mako groaned as she stretched. "I swear, one of these days I'm going to take that computer apart and reprogram it to avoid that one pothole." She unbuckled and got out of the car, DVD cases in hand.

"You'll probably find that it's covered in stickers saying 'WARNING: NO USER SERVICEABLE PARTS INSIDE.'"

"Only one way to find out." She leaned on Raleigh tiredly.

Raleigh scooped up his copilot. "Alright, alright, I can take a hint."

Mako giggled. "So you can. There's hope for you yet."

Raleigh chuckled as he walked up to their door. "Mind unlocking the door? Otherwise I'll have to put you down."

Mako nodded slowly and retrieved her keys. "I wonder how Munchkin's doctor's appointment went today. She was going in for a check on the baby."

Click. Mako unlocked the door and turned the doorknob. Raleigh turned around and nudged it open with his shoulder, then stepped through.

Mako shifted slightly, and Raleigh set her down. "Good thing you're so light, Mako. That's not so hard to do."

Mako opened her mouth to respond, but the sound of Miranda's door caused her to change her plans. "Miranda? How was it today?" Mako turned around to face the diminutive Australian woman.

Miranda nodded. "Yeah. I told them to not tell me anything other than if the baby's doing fine, which it is."

Raleigh squirmed, clearly uncomfortable about the situation. "I'm gonna go get cleaned up." He slipped down the hall towards the bathroom.

Mako turned to Miranda. "So, when's the baby shower?"
"Wednesday, after work." Miranda pointed her thumb in the direction of Raleigh. "He's invited, by the way."

"Oh, I doubt he'll come on his own. So I'll make sure to drag him out here."

Miranda grinned. "I think it'll be easier than you think, Mako. Here's going to be here."

Mako smiled. "Okay, yeah. He'll come willingly, then."

Raleigh reappeared from the bathroom and headed into the bedroom that the Rangers shared. *That's my cue.* "I think I'm going to call it a night. I'm really tired after today."

The short redhead gave Mako an evil grin. "So early?"

"No, not like that. Get that thought out of your head, Munchkin."

Miranda laughed. "Alrighty. See you in the morning."

Mako followed Raleigh into the bedroom, stripping off her shirt and shorts and changing into a tank top and some lightweight gym shorts before hopping into bed and snuggling up to her copilot. "Thank you for today, Raleigh."

Raleigh nodded tiredly, already half asleep. "You're welcome."

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**Author's notes:** Phew! Finally got past that block. And it feels so good to be back to writing.
Chapter 37: Stephanie

_Mako and Raleigh's bedroom_

_0514_

"MAKO! NOOOOOO!"

Mako sat bolt upright as Raleigh yelled in terror at _something_ in his dream. Before she could wake him, though, he rolled off the bed and onto the floor with a _THUD._

"Raleigh! You okay?"

"Ow. Note to self... tuck steel toed work boots further under the bed next time."

Mako would have chuckled if she hadn't still been worried about her copilot. "How bad?"

Raleigh shook the sheets out over the bed again. "Bad."

Mako looked at the clock. _Crap. Not going to be worth trying to fall asleep again."_ "Want to talk about it?"

Raleigh sat down on his side of the bed, back to the wall. "Do I really have a choice? You'll probably see it next time we Drift. Might as well talk it over now..."

Mako sat down atop Raleigh's outstretched legs. "No, you do have a choice. You don't _have_ to share what you saw. You can hold it in. But we both know that's not the healthy option."

Raleigh sighed ad braced himself. "We were in Gipsy. Old Gipsy," he clarified. "I was hurt badly, and you chose to eject me and carry on the fight solo."

Mako was horrified. "Raleigh, I _would never_ do that to you. I promise, on everything that I hold dear, that I will never, ever eject you unless I am going to be right behind you." She held Raleigh's head in her hands and leaned forward to kiss him on the forehead.

Raleigh relaxed visibly at that promise. "I know you wouldn't. That's why it's so scary for me to see that in a dream." He wrapped his arms around Mako's shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "But hearing you say that helps a lot."

Mako hugged him back. "Just don't do it to me again, okay?"

Raleigh chuckled softly. "What, scare you like that, or eject you?"

Mako eased out of the embrace and gently punched Raleigh on the shoulder. "You know damn well which one I'm talking about, Mr. Becket." She smiled before looking back over at the clock. "Might as well get up and get ready. I know I can't go back to sleep for such a short time."

Raleigh nodded. "Yeah, we've got a lot to do before Munchkin's baby shower tomorrow."

Mako paled as she realized she'd forgotten the party. "Oh, no. I don't have a gift." She turned to
face Raleigh. "I don't even know what to get for a gift!"

Raleigh pointed at the closet. "Bottom shelf, left side. Got something for you when I went out for mine."

Mako blinked in surprise. "Thanks. I completely spaced on that."

"You've been busy finalizing the designs of the Mark VIs. It's okay to forget the small stuff like that right now. I'll back you up, you back me up, and no one's the wiser."

"Except Herc, probably."

Raleigh frowned. "Okay, point. But he'd understand."

Mako grinned. "True." She stepped into the bathroom and looked in the mirror at her hair. It now stretched down past her shoulder blades, and despite the fact that she enjoyed being able to braid it for a change, it was starting to become a hassle. "Do you think I should cut my hair back, Raleigh? And don't give me a 'Whatever you want, I'll enjoy' answer."

"Mako…" Raleigh buried his head in his hands for a moment. "Gah. How do I put this?"

Mako giggled at Raleigh's torment, but didn't push him for an answer.

"Okay, I'll admit: I loved it when your hair was shorter, but I've seen how much you enjoy being able to do stuff with it now that it's longer. I say enjoy it now, while you don't need to have it short enough to fit in a helmet."

"And the blue tips?"

Raleigh grinned. "Definitely bring those back when we get back into war footing. It's part of your image. Every Ranger has something that is just classic them."

"So what's yours?"

"The bomber jacket. Yance was the one who pushed hard for them, but it was my idea."

"Ah. So the flight suits were Yancy's idea."

Mako saw a sad look briefly flicker across Raleigh face. "Yeah. Those were totally his idea."

"I wonder what sensei's… thing… was."

Raleigh grinned. "Did you ever see him dress in a t-shirt and casual jeans?"

Mako thought back over nine years of memories from her time with Pentecost. "You know what? He never did."

Raleigh nodded. "And that's what he was best known for. I think the most casual I saw him was in a polo shirt and slacks."

Mako nodded. "I remember that. He tended to wear that while on vacation."

"He took vacation?"

Mako laughed. "Rarely, but yes, he did. And for that crack, I get first turn in the shower."
Raleigh thought about it for a moment. "Fair enough. That way we'll both be ready to go at the same time."

"Hey!"

Raleigh laughed as Mako walked out of the bedroom, still glaring at him.

-.-.-

Mako's office

1127

Mako sighed and rubbed her temples as she hung up the phone. *God I hate dealing with subcontractors... And the PMS isn't helping.*

Raleigh appeared in her doorway as if by magic. "Need to spar?"

"Please."

"Good thing I already scheduled us a slot."

"Good thing my body runs like clockwork. I can schedule an extended lunch on days like today."

Raleigh nodded. "One small blessing, yes?"

Mako just nodded as they walked towards the main entrance… only to be greeted by an old friend of Raleigh's.

"Hello, Raleigh. Been a few years."

"Stephanie? How are you?"

"WHY WEREN'T YOU AT THE FUNERAL?!"

Raleigh winced at the well-deserved outburst. "I was in Alaska, working the wall. I wish I could have been there, but at the time, I couldn't afford to go, and I probably wouldn't have gone. It would have reminded me of Yancy too much."

The former pilot of Hydra Corinthian looked up at Raleigh from her wheelchair. "Okay, that's fair. I still don't like it, but it's fair." She turned to Mako. "Pleased to meet you again, Miss Mori. I see you've hooked up with Sunshine here?"

Raleigh groaned at the mention of his old nickname. "Steph, please. Not that again..."

Mako laughed. "Sunshine? You'll have to share the story behind that sometime, Raleigh."

Herc wandered out of his office to check on the Rangers. "Well, Raleigh's not bleeding, so I guess that means that he's forgiven. Welcome to Sacramento, Stephanie."

"Thanks for having me, sir. I'm glad to be able to help again. I've felt kinda useless after the accident."

Caitlin walked in the door at that moment. "Steph? How are you?"

"Been better, ma'am. Seems like you're doing fine, though. I can barely tell that you lost part of
your right leg."
"You think I'm not going to tinker with my prosthetic to try and make it more to my tastes?"

Stephanie laughed. "True."

Raleigh nodded to Mako, and they headed towards the door.

Herc looked at the two for a moment. "Oi. Where you goin'?"

Mako just pointed to the calendar and rolled her eyes.

Raleigh decided to elaborate a little more. "We've… got an appointment at a local *dojo* to go sparring. We kinda need to hurry now if we want to make our time."


Mako nodded. "I don't see why not. Besides, we're planning on getting some lunch afterwards, too. Maybe you and Raleigh can catch up?"

Raleigh nodded. "That's actually a good idea. I could use some input on some stuff from work here, too."

Mako held the door as the paralyzed Ranger rolled out. "That's why Herc called me in. He wants me to be a senior instructor for the new Academy. Said you could probably use the help."

Raleigh groaned. "God yes. I need another set of eyes to go over the curriculum and see what I've no doubt missed."

"No problem. I'll follow you guys, okay? I… kinda have trouble with a regular car right now."

Mako nodded. "We understand. We're the blue Tesla, by the way."

"You have a *Tesla*? I got a second-hand Sprinter conversion!"

Raleigh felt guilty about that. *She deserves to get more than us. She lost Kennedy and her legs. I'll turn Jaz and Miranda loose on that and get your payments set up.*

"What payments?"

"As a surviving ranger, you get $75,000 a year for life. For you, we'll see if we can swing you getting Kennedy's share, too."

Mako settled into her seat, deep in thought. *Hrm. The Mark VI basic structure is ready to share with other firms to add systems to, but Caitlin's twiddling her thumbs… I'll let her and Sergio work on making a prototype for Stephanie to test drive.*

Raleigh waited for Kennedy to get situated, then set the car's path into the computer. "Whatcha thinking about?"

"Powered exoskeleton legs for Stephanie. It'd let her walk again, just not with her own legs. I'll see if Newt has any suggestions on that front."

"Mako… it's spinal cord damage. It's not fixable."

"But what if it is, and we just think that it's not? Raleigh, that could have been us after we killed
Otachi. Kennedy LaRue died from her rig breaking off after a hard landing. Stephanie's back was broken when hers only partially broke."

"How'd that happen?"

"They used Hydra's Breath at point blank while laying atop the Kaiju. They had lost a leg already, and the Kaiju just wouldn't die. So they used the Breath. It tossed them nearly a mile before they landed on their back. The Conn Pod connections to the body broke in more than two dozen places, and Kennedy's rig broke off its mounts and she broke her neck." Mako's face fell. "At least it was quick."

"When did that happen?"

"October. Didn't you see it on the news?"

"No, I was on a really remote stretch of the Wall then. We barely had enough power to run the equipment. We didn't have enough to run the TVs."

"Oh."

"Yeah, Sitka was actually a pretty nice job site. Sure was warmer than Sheldon Point. That one was cold."

Mako grinned. "So you can get cold. I could have sworn you never got cold."

"Hey, you work in the middle of a blizzard up above the Arctic Circle in winter and see how well you fare."

Mako shut up before she shoved her foot into her mouth again.

-.-.-

Raleigh's office

1245

"So, restarting the academy, huh?" Stephanie rolled up to Raleigh's desk. "Lotta work ahead of you."

Raleigh pulled up a flowchart of the projected classes. "Yeah, but the big thing that worries me is the testing phase. We've already received more than 2000 requests for applications. We're not expecting to put them out for another nine months, though. We could have thousands of cadets in the first session."

"Which is not all that different from our class, remember?"

"We're talking an order of magnitude. Add a zero, Steph."

"Nah, can't be that bad. You'll lose half of them during medical qualification exams, anyways."

Across the hall, Mako took the crew chiefs and the crew of Brawler Yukon into her office and closed the door. Must be for that exoskeleton idea of hers.

Stephanie paid it no mind, and was instead leaning forward to tinker with the curriculum hovering over Raleigh's desk. "So, Miranda… What's her connection?"
"You remember Chuck, right?"

"Herc's son? Yeah, I remember him. How could I forget that attitude?"

Raleigh winced. "Well… She's his fiancé."

"Oh." Steph's face fell. "Ouch. Did she know?"

"About?"

Stephanie held her hands out in front of her stomach and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Oh, I see. I dunno. Mako and I never really pried into those days. We had our own problems back then to deal with."

"True." Stephanie leaned back in her wheelchair and looked at the flowchart. "Looks good, Sunshine."

"Gaaahh… You ever gonna let me live that down?"

"Of course not. I'll make sure to call you that in front of Tendo next month."


"Ask away, Baby Becket."

Raleigh glared at Stephanie, but continued. "I've got something really special to give to Mako, and I was just wondering if I should do it there, afterwards."

"Raleigh, if you're trying to ask if it's appropriate to propose to her at the K-Day ceremony, remember that there's going to be a truckload of photographers there. And you two have been working really hard at not making the tabloids."

"That can be dealt with. I'm just asking about it being right."

Stephanie looked across the hall at the closed door, listening to the technobabble filtering through the gap at the bottom. "I dunno, Raleigh. It's not something that I can answer. The only person who can is you. And trust me, you'll know what the right time is when you get to it." She grinned. "Although, from what I've heard about Miss Mori, she may just try to beat you to the punch."

Raleigh laughed. "Yeah, that is her style much of the time. My sister and Miranda both have tried to take her shopping. They usually have to take her to Sears' tool department or to a hardware store afterwards just to get her to be tolerant of the experience."

Stephanie chuckled. "She is the first woman I've met who hates shopping."

"Long story behind that. Maybe if you go with her, you can find out more."

"Oh hell no. You go!"

"I did. Wound up spending over $250 on a mechanic's toolkit instead."

"You, or her?"

"It's… shared."
"Uh-huh. Anyways, the plan looks good. We just need to get us a place to set up, and we're ready to start."

"Great." Raleigh closed the file and pulled up the calendar. "Hey, you free tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. Am I invited to the baby shower?"

"Of course. You're part of the Senior Staff now."

"I heard those capital letters, Raleigh. Why does that make the hair on the back of my neck stand on end?"

"Because it's a lot of responsibility."

"And driving a Jaeger isn't?"

"Without the fun of beating the crap out of a Kaiju."

"That explains the hair."

"So, coming?"

"Yeah, I'll be there. When and where?"

"Our apartment, 1830 hours."

"You guys got a handicapped access?"

"Yeah. The whole complex is ADA compliant. You can roll right in."

"Wonderful."

Mako's door opened, and the crew chiefs and Rangers came out with grins on their faces. Stephanie cringed. "Uh-oh. If both the Rangers and the Chiefs are grinning like idiots, it's about to get real crazy."

Crunch grinned. "Oh, you have no idea, Steph."

Mako shooed them down the hall. "Go on. You've got work to do."

Stephanie shrugged. "Well, might as well get settled into my office." She started to roll out the door, then stopped and turned to face Raleigh. "I know that you don't like to talk about it much, but… I want to talk to you. About Alaska."

Raleigh nodded, understanding what she meant. "Sure. Whenever you're ready."

Stephanie nodded and rolled down the hall to her office.

Mako wandered in, curiosity written on her face. "So, Mr. Becket, anything you'd like to share with me?"

Raleigh tried his best to look innocent. "About?"

"You know what I mean."

"That could lead me to one of several topics Steph and I discussed."
"Your poker face is terrible, Raleigh."

"Then quit hiding your cards, and I'll quit hiding mine."

"Sunshine. Why does she call you that?"

Raleigh relaxed. *Good, not the one I'd been worried about.* "Oh, it comes from an old magazine article from back when we were in the Academy and preparing Gipsy for launch. They described my hair as being 'sunshine blonde', which, at the time, was true."

"Ah. And I am going to get you back for that conversation about the mall trips."

Raleigh's face paled, causing Mako to laugh.

"Relax, it won't cause any lasting damage to anything other than your ego." Mako walked out towards the entrance and to the hangar across the street where they had set up their machine shop.

Raleigh pulled up an email from a small business which he had recently become a customer at. *The revenge isn't what I'm worried about…*

*It's what I was talking about before that.*

-.-.-

**Author's notes:**

First off, huge shout out to Jocelyn for her fantastic "Aurora Borealis" series, which is referenced here in several spots. If you haven't read it yet, stop and go read it. ALL OF IT. It's fantastic stuff and a must read for anyone who likes this story. Trust me, it's awesome. JUST GO READ IT!

Second, I have no idea what the hell happens at a baby shower. Never been to one, being an unmarried 20-something guy who's in no rush to have kids. But I will do a small scene from it in the next chapter, as it's kinda important to the story as a whole.

Third, expect to see some increasingly large time skips ahead. The gang's starting to get settled into a routine, so unless something unusual happens or it drives along a plot point, expect it to get kinda glossed over.

And finally, it took me a while to realize that the list of Jaegers I posted a few chapters back has a glaring omission: Korea's not included. Expect to see something to touch on that coming up as well.
Chapter 38: Surprises

Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda's apartment

July 22, 2025

1737

"Mako, can you grab the present out of our closet?"

Mako stuck her head out into the living area of the apartment to see Raleigh setting up some folding chairs. "Sure. Just make sure to leave an open space…"

"For the cake, I know. Relax, Mako. It'll be fine."

Mako ducked into the room that the Rangers shared and opened the closet. Now, where does Raleigh usually stick his presents? Mako thought back through residual memories from her copilot before looking behind the sliding door. Aha. Mako grabbed the compact box and lifted it up…

Revealing a small manila envelope.

Mako set the present down and picked up the envelope. It was sealed and had Raleigh's name on it. Hrm… I'll ask about it later. She tucked it back where it had fallen from and retrieved the box. "Got it." She walked out into the kitchen and placed it on the table. "What is it, anyway?"

Raleigh looked around dramatically, then leaned over to Mako. "It's a surprise."

Mako crossed her arms. "One that only you know the contents of, when it clearly is from both of us."

Raleigh paused, realizing Mako's point.

"So, what's in the box?"

"Starter kit for a photo album. No actual album, but there's all the other supplies you need to get started."

"Raleigh… That's brilliant! She'll love it."

"Hey, kinda hard to get clothing at this stage. We don't know how big the kid's gonna be…"

Mako shifted uneasily. "Well, she is getting pretty big…"

"Considering Chuck's height and hers… It's going to be a big baby anyways."

Mako frowned. "Huh. Never thought about that."

The deadbolt rattled as Miranda unlocked it to let herself and Herc in. The older Australian grinned and held up a box. "Cake's here."

Raleigh laughed. "I personally prefer pie. After all, the cake is a lie."

Mako stared at Raleigh in utter confusion, while Herc howled in laughter. Miranda buried her face
in her hands. "You had to go there, didn't you."

"Sorry, couldn't resist."

Mako turned to Herc. "What am I missing here? The cake is a lie?"

"You've never played Portal?"

"What's Portal?"

Raleigh groaned. "Great, we need to get a computer. I think I still remember my Steam account login."

"What's Portal?"

Herc grinned. "A mind-bendingly fun computer game. Came out a long time ago now, but it's still a classic. Ranks up there with Halo and Minecraft in terms of the impact it's had."

Mako wanted to press the issue, but a knock on the door provided a welcome exit for the others. Raleigh practically flew to the door. "I'll get it." He opened it to reveal the D'Onofrios. "Hey, come on in."

"Glad we could make it." Sergio stepped through the door, smiling. "I've been spending a lot of time down at the oncology center lately."

Raleigh's face grew dark with concern at that. "Any good news?"

"I'm not dead yet." Sergio shrugged. "At this point, any day I wake up is a good day."

Mako walked over, concern clouding her usually bright face. "I didn't know it was that bad. By the time Tamsin was at that point..." She trailed off, worried.

Caitlin wrapped an arm around Mako's shoulders. "I remember. We were never there when you were, but Tams was glad to have us coming to visit when you and Stacks were busy and couldn't come."

"Thank you." Mako smiled and eased out from Caitlin's hug.

Miranda poked her head out from the kitchen area. "Mako, can you give me a hand real quick?"

"Sure."

Raleigh gestured to the chairs. "Have a seat. Everyone else should be coming soon."

-.--.

Later...

Herc paid close attention to the course of the discussions at the shower as the topics drifted from how to hold a baby (Anna was used as an example) to how to change diapers (Anna again). Herc was listening for certain clues... There. Time for the guys to leave for a bit. He tilted his head towards the door, and Raleigh, Sergio, Crunch, and David all got up and left. Mako got up to follow, but was snagged by Vanessa instead. "Nope, you get to stay, Mako. Lots to learn."

Mako looked at Raleigh, who shrugged. "I'll stay out of trouble."
"That's not what I'm worried about."

"Relax. You'll be fine," Raleigh eased out the door and closed it behind him.

The guys all turned to Raleigh. Sergio let an evil grin spread across his face. "Right, so when're you gonna ask her?"

Raleigh rolled his eyes and looked up at the sky. "C'mon, guys. We're not ready yet."

Crunch chuckled. "Like hell you are. You two are practically married anyways. Might as well get the last bits of paperwork out of the way."

Raleigh shrugged. "When the time's right, I'll ask. Until then, buzz off."

Herc shifted uncomfortably for a moment as the tension rose. "So, Sergio, you going to be here for K-Day?"

Sergio nodded slowly. "Yeah, I should be able to make the trip, but beyond that… No promises. The cancer's spreading fast now."

David nodded as well. "Caitlin ready?"

"Ready as she can get right now. But she'll need help. Our Ghost Drift is tight, and I have no idea what'll happen when I buy the farm." He turned to Raleigh. "After I'm gone… can you help her move on? I know that you're not the best example of how to deal with grief…"

Raleigh put his hands up in front of him. "I know. I made a lot of mistakes after Yancy died. But I'll do my best to help her."

The men fell silent for a bit, before Sergio decided to break the ice with a different topic. "So, how 'bout them Steelers?"

Herc scoffed at the mention of the NFL. "You guys think American Footballs so great? Try Aussie rules. Now that's a man's sport."

Crunch turned to Herc. "Can it, Oz. Your idea of sports is insanity." He turned to Sergio next. "If Trespasser hadn't leveled Levi Stadium, the Niners would have won a Super Bowl in the last decade. Guaranteed."

David shook his head. "Silver and Black, my friends."

Raleigh laughed at the other men. "You all root for the underdogs. I, however, am a Twelfth Man fan."

Crunch slowly turned to face Raleigh. "Oh, I know that. Who do you think decorated your room in red and gold after Yamarashi?"

Raleigh tried, really tried, to not go ballistic on his crew chief. But when the former Marine kissed his own curled bicep, Raleigh let out a howl of indignation and charged.

Crunch knew it had been coming, and raced off into the apartment complex, taunting Raleigh the whole way. "Seachickens! Bawk, bawk, bawk!"

The others howled in laughter at the Ranger and Chief, causing Mako to poke her head out the door. She looked at the group and put two and two together. "Please tell me Raleigh's not trying to kill Crunch again..."
Sergio grinned. "Nah, probably just trying to tackle him and paint him blue and green."

Mako frowned at the mention of team colors. "Hmm. That is probably the first thing we won't be able to agree on."

"Oh?"

"I can't wrap my head around football. Baseball, though..." She grinned. "Giants. All the way."

Sergio smiled. "Oh, I can see the sparks from here when THAT comes into play."

Mako was about to reply when she heard Raleigh's howls as he came running around the corner of the building, one very happy Crew Chief in hot pursuit, borrowed Super Soaker in hand. "SAY THAT TO MY FACE AGAIN, SUNSHINE!"

Raleigh was snagged by Mako and Herc as he tried to race past and do another lap, and was promptly doused with ice water from the squirtgun. "PPPFFT! OKAY, OKAY!"

Crunch pointed the toy down at the ground. "Say it, Becket."

Raleigh squirmed, but the other two Rangers held him fast. "Fine...Niners will win another Super Bowl before the Seahawks will."

"Damn straight, son." He nodded, and Herc let go of Raleigh. Mako hesitated for a moment, scowling at her copilot's antics. Really?

Miranda appeared at the door. "If you're all quite done with being children again, it's time for gifts and cake."

Crunch leaned the Super Soaker against the apartment and happily walked inside, followed by the rest of the group.

-.--.

The group had brought a wide range of thoughtful and practical gifts for Miranda, most of which were now neatly stacked beside her chair. However, two remained: One from her roommates, and one from Herc.

Miranda took Mako and Raleigh's box and opened it. "Ohhh... Thank you, guys!" She pulled out the kit Raleigh had assembled for her. "I guess I need to go get an album for this, though."

Raleigh nodded. "Yeah, wasn't sure what you'd like."

Herc walked forward with his gift, which was, rather oddly, packaged in a manila envelope. "Miranda, I do apologize about the packaging on this, but it only arrived this afternoon." He handed it to her.

Miranda opened the envelope, deeply curious as to what it might be. To her surprise (and slight dismay), it was a stack of papers. "Herc... What is this?"

Herc squirmed. "I... was owed a few favors from an old service buddy. He's been reorganizing the filing system for the Sydney courthouse. He's offered to place a marriage certificate for you and Chuck in the system, if you want it."

Miranda clapped her hands to her mouth, stunned by what Herc was offering.
The older Ranger continued. "It'd be dated and time stamped to take place shortly before the call went out to Chuck to return to the Shatterdome. He's even got a few people who owe him favors to sign in all the right spots, including a justice of the peace. It'd be all official and correct."

"Yes." Miranda wiped tears away from her eyes. "Thank you, Herc. That's…" She set the papers down and got up to hug Herc. "Thank you."

---

Mako carried the cake over to the small table that was set up next to Miranda, and Raleigh produced a knife. Miranda accepted the knife and cut a slice from the cake. "So, the color of the inside of the cake will tell us whether it's a boy or a girl… And the verdict is…" Miranda slid the slice of cake out to reveal the interior.

It was marbled blue and pink.

Miranda blinked and did a double take, just to make sure. No… Can't be. There's no history on my family's side… She looked at Herc, who was clearly just as stunned.

Raleigh let out a chuckle. "Well, how about that." Mako backhanded him in the shoulder.

Vanessa hugged Miranda. "Congratulations! Is there any history of twins on either side?"

Miranda shook her head, still not believing what the cake was saying. "No. No history. Just… a fluke I guess." She smiled and looked up at the ceiling. If you're watching, Chuck… Thank you.

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July 26, 2025

0702

Mako woke slowly on Saturdays. It still took a little getting used to, but she was coming to enjoy it. A whole day with nothing time critical to do? That was a luxury that she hadn't had in over five years. Doing so for two days a week, every week? It hadn't been since before Tokyo. She rolled over to look at Raleigh, who was still asleep. Hmmm… Can I get up without waking him?

Mako started to slide away from Raleigh, but stopped as she felt him awaken through the Ghost Drift. He smiled and stretched. "Mornin'."

"Good morning, Raleigh."

Raleigh opened his eyes and looked at Mako. "So, what do you wanna do today?"

"I was thinking of making pancakes today." She shrugged. "How hard can it be?"

"Want help?"

"No, I want to do this myself." She grinned and touched Raleigh on the nose. "You get to shave off that scraggly thing you think is a beard."

Raleigh groaned. "Alright."

Mako smiled and hopped out of bed. She rummaged through her half of the dresser before pulling out a black PPDC tank top and gym shorts. "So, what do you want to do today?"
Raleigh sat up and looked out the window. "I've been thinking about getting my cameras back out and doing some photography."

Mako slithered into the clothes. "Of what?"

"Whatever strikes my fancy, I guess."

Mako paused for a moment. "Me?"

"If you want to, sure."

Mako shrugged. "I don't mind doing a shoot with you, Raleigh. It's doing one for a magazine that bothers me."

"I'm totally with you on that."

"Says the man who was on the cover of the June 2018 edition of GQ."

"Yance ate it up. I prefer to be on the other side of the lens."

"Okay, point." Mako grinned and headed out into the hallway.

Raleigh ran his hand across his chin for a moment before getting out of bed. *Hmmm... Shower first, or simply shave?*

-.--.-

Mako hummed a song to herself as she mixed the batter. She didn't know where it had come from, but it was now stuck in her head. *Not my usual taste in music, but it's not bad. Somewhat catchy, actually.*

Miranda walked out of her bedroom and yawned dramatically before taking in the sight of Mako cooking solo. She shook her head and looked again. "Okay, I must be dreaming."

"Morning, Miranda."

The petite Australian gave the coffee machine a longing glance before sitting down at the small table. "It's not a good morning yet. Hell, not even sure I'm awake. You're cooking solo and the kitchen's not on fire."

"One: I never said 'good' in my greeting. Two: yes, you are awake. Three: have a little faith, Munchkin. You've been teaching me a lot."

"Mmmm, true."

Mako began to hum again as she finished mixing the batter and poured some onto the griddle.

-.--.-

Raleigh put on an old Gipsy t-shirt and some gym shorts and padded out into the common area of the apartment...

And stopped dead in his tracks as he heard the song Mako was humming. *Where did she learn... Oh. Uhoh.*

Miranda spotted Raleigh. "Mornin', Sunshine."
Mako stopped humming and turned to look at Raleigh. "Hey, you okay?"

"That song… where'd you hear it?"

Mako's brow furrowed in confusion. "I don't know. It's been stuck in my head this morning. Why?"

"I haven't heard anyone else sing that in a long time."

"What is it?"

"It's an old family lullaby my mom used to sing. Handed down from generation to generation, and never recorded. I barely remembered it before you started humming it."

Miranda looked at the two Rangers, clearly confused. "So… how'd she hear it, then? You sing it in your sleep, Raleigh?"

Mako realized what had happened and groaned. "Transference. I've heard about it… I never expected to have it happen, though."

Raleigh nodded. "So my question is, what did I get from you?"

Mako frowned as she tried to remember something of her own childhood. "There was a song… I can barely recall it now, but…” She began to whistle what little she remembered.

Raleigh began to whistle along… and carried on after Mako tailed off.

Miranda's eyes widened at the display. "Whoa. That's creepy."

Mako frowned. "Did that ever happen to you and Yancy?"

Raleigh shook his head. "We shared enough life experiences that if it did, it wasn't noticeable. The closest we ever got to that was the time down in Lima where we were able to answer questions intended for the other. Kinda like us after Hong Kong."

Mako shivered at the memory of just how closely bonded she and Raleigh had been after their first combat drop. But now we have a different type of Ghost Drift going on. One that's more… intimate.

Raleigh looked at the griddle. "Uhh… Mako? Might want to go back to that pancake."

Mako shook her head and returned to the kitchen area. "Yes. Wouldn't want to set the kitchen on fire." She flipped the pancake with surprising skill to reveal the darkened underside. "Not a total loss… but not the fluffy golden color I was looking for."

Raleigh walked over. "Hey, it's a pancake. I'll eat it." He wrapped his arms around Mako's shoulders and put his chin on her head. "Especially since you made it."

Mako grinned. "Keep buttering me up like that and I might slip out of your grip, Mr. Becket."

"A risk worth taking, I'd say."

Miranda snickered to herself. "You do realize I'm still here?"

Mako smiled and looked over at the younger woman. "Does it look like we care?"

"Nope."
Raleigh let Mako go and went to the table. "You're our friend, Munchkin. We trust you."

"Thanks, guys."

Mako once again expertly flipped the pancake, causing Miranda to turn to Raleigh, curious. "You ever do pancakes before?"

Raleigh chuckled quietly. "I was really good at them. Why do you think Mako's doing so well?"

"So… what skills did you get in return?"

"Not sure yet. But they'll probably come out sometime soon." Raleigh absently picked up one of Mako's prized brain teaser puzzles that he'd been trying to solve for a week… and promptly solved it. He looked at the puzzle, then shook his head. "Man, talk about 'ask and ye shall receive'!"

-.-.-

Author's note: Man, that took a while. And not just to write! I've had some of those scenes in mind for months, but hadn't had a good spot to place them until now. Glad to finally have those off my shoulders.
"Hey, Steph? You have a few minutes to spare?"

Stephanie looked up to see Caitlin standing in the doorway. "Yeah. What's up?"

Caitlin looked down the hall towards Mako and Raleigh's offices before closing the door to Stephanie's office. "Two things. First, we've been working on ways to spin off Jaeger technologies for commercial use. We need your help testing one of them."

"Oh? Do tell me more."

"We're looking at the possibility of making an exo-suit of sorts to help people…" Caitlin swallowed nervously.

Stephanie crossed her arms. "People like me? People who have become paralyzed and can't walk?"

"Yeah." Caitlin looked down. "Sorry, that came out wrong…"

"No worries. Yeah, I'll help. No guarantees I'll use one myself, but I can be the test pilot for the project."

The former ranger smiled. "Thanks. That really helps."

"Now, there's a second bit?"

"Oh, right! Tendo's bookie habits have come back. He's taking wagers on when Raleigh's going to propose to Mako. Want in on the action?"

"Oh, that's not fair… for you."

"Oh, come on… he shared with you?"

"Classmates, remember? 2016-B."

"Okay, point. So, can you give me any hints?"

"Hmmm… Let's just say that, if the events of that day hadn't happened, neither of them would have wound up sharing a Conn Pod for Pitfall. That's all I'll say on the matter."

"Spoilsport. That narrows it down to, oh, a dozen different days."

"Instead of 365, so that really helps your odds."

Caitlin sighed. "Right. So, want to go try on the framework for the suit?"
Stephanie rolled back from her desk and out the door of her office. "Absolutely. Need to check the range of motion, I presume?"

"And make sure that you can put it on by yourself. That's rather important, right?"

"It would be useful, yes." The two women headed across the street to the hangar/workshop, where Mako was apparently fangirling over some new piece of machinery.

"... It's got laser-based 3-d printing, 9 degrees of freedom, and…"

Raleigh held Mako's shoulders. "Breath, Mako. It's not going to disappear overnight, no matter how rough the neighborhood may be."

Mako leaned back against Raleigh. "I know… I want to use it so bad! But it's still not calibrated yet, so it'd just make a mess."

Caitlin smiled. "Mako, it'll be worth the wait, I promise. In the meantime… Do you have the chassis ready for test fitting?"

"Yes. Crunch and I finished assembling it this morning." She grabbed the exoskeleton and brought it over to Stephanie. "This one isn't fully wired yet, but it'll be ready for hardwired powered trials tomorrow."

Stephanie took the rig from Mako and looked it over. "So, over or under?"

Mako frowned. "Over or under?"

"My pants."

"Oh! Over, for now. Makes it easier to make sure everything's working right. Once we're comfortable with how it's working, we'll make one that's lower profile to wear under your clothing."

Stephanie shrugged and rolled over to a low table with a mat on it. "This for me to practice on?"

Caitlin nodded. "I felt it'd be more representative than the floor."

"It is." Stephanie levered herself out of her wheelchair and onto the table with practiced ease. "It's about the right level, too." She laid out the exoskeleton and began to try it on.

Mako went over to try and show Stephanie how to put it on. "You want to start with…"

"Can it. Let me do this myself, please."

Mako blinked at the snappish response, then decided to go do something else in the meantime.

Caitlin sat back and watched Stephanie work over the suit, letting her figure out all the fittings and connections.

"So, Doc, how long did it take you to get used to the prosthetic?"

Caitlin blew out a breath. "A couple of months to become totally accustomed to it, I guess. Getting to know what the feedback felt like, what the pressures through the titanium peg meant, that kind of stuff. But I was walking on it without crutches in two weeks."

"Hmmm..." Stephanie grinned. "Okay, I think I got this figured out." She began by strapping the
feet of the suit over her shoes, then moved to the shins, where she tightened straps just above the ankle and just below the knee. Next, the thighs were secured with another pair of straps, leaving the back brace and feedback harness ready to be fixed in place. "Does the circuitry work through clothing?"

Caitlin shook her head. "Has to go under the shirt, I'm afraid."

Stephanie shrugged and untucked her shirt, slipping the feedback harness and the back brace underneath. "Okay, lemme get this tightened up…"

Mako wandered back over with a Torx screwdriver. "Ready to have it adjusted?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, since it's not powered up, we can move the joints and make sure that we have the correct range of motion and rotation axes. If they're out of alignment, it could lead to blistering at the straps or injuries to your joints."

"Don't want that…" Stephanie shuffled to sit on the edge of the table. "So, how do you make the adjustments?"

Mako fitted the six-pointed bit of the screwdriver into a socket on the right ankle joint. I'm going to move your foot around to make sure that the range and axes are good. That okay?"

"Go for it."

Mako grabbed the toe of the footpad and tipped the foot up and down, watching the framework and the leg to see if they moved relative to one another. There was a little movement, so Mako turned the screwdriver as she continued to move the foot. Inside the foot brace, the socket Mako turned drove a threaded bar against a nut located inside the frame, causing it to extend slightly. This slight change in the geometry of the frame caused the unwanted movement.

"That's one down."

"Out of how many?"

Mako's brow furrowed. "Twenty two."

"That's it?"

"We couldn't get it any lower, Steph."

"I'm not complaining! That's impressive!"

Mako smiled. "Thanks. Okay, let's get going on the others."

-.-.-

Herc scowled at the paperwork that sat on his desk, then looked at the webcam atop his computer screen again. "So, explain to me what this means."

The Jumphawk mechanic rubbed his temples. "Okay, you're an old fling-wing pilot, so you know how much of a maintenance nightmare large helos are."

"Yes, I do."
"The Jumphawks are worse than most. They're really not built all that well for the work they're doing. Rotor wake interference, turbulence, shock loads..."

Herc held up his hands. "I get that. What does it mean for us?"

"Long story short?"

"Please."

"We've got six, maybe seven lifts remaining per 'Hawk. Max of 21 lifts total."

"What happens if we exceed that?"

"Rotors will fracture, lift points will tear off... Who knows what else."

"And that includes transporting Jaegers from 'Dome to 'Dome."

"Yes sir. Each time the "Hawks take the load of a Jaeger, it's a lift. That includes refueling stops, by the way."

"So, we've got three hops across the pond."

"If that."

"Damn."

"That's the general consensus here, too."

"Can we overhaul them again? I know we did a Service Life Extension Program back in '21..."

"Possible. The new SLEP wouldn't have as large an increase in airframe life as last time, though. Might be cheaper to buy new ones at this point."

"Might be better to get a new design at this point, actually."

"True."

"Tell you what. Get me a quote for both a new SLEP and new build Jumphawks, and I'll get the quote for a new design. I'll take all three options to the Group."

"Can do, sir."

The mechanic ended the video call, and Herc began to rub his temples again. *Yet another headache to deal with. I'll never know how Stacker didn't get a stroke from all this. God knows he was at risk for it.*

There was a knock on Herc's door. "Come in."

Raleigh opened the door and took a seat. "Just got a call from the foundry doing the statue."

"Oh, good. What's the news?"

"It shipped this morning. They should have it here in two days, and it'll be mounted by the 5th, as advertised."

Herc sighed in relief. *One less headache.* "Very good."
Raleigh got up and headed to the door, but paused just short. "Sir… permission to speak freely?"

"Absolutely."

Raleigh closed the door. "Sir… would you get back into a Jaeger if you found someone that you were able to Drift with?"

Herc leaned back in his chair, caught off guard by the question. "That's a good question. I really don't know. It'd have to be someone special, probably. I'm not the Ranger I once was. My reflexes are slower, my endurance is lower… To be honest, I don't think my place in this next war is in the Conn Pod. I think I'm going to spend it in LOCCENT."

Raleigh nodded slowly. "Well, I hope you do find that copilot. Something tells me we'll need you out there, in the field, fighting Kaiju."

"Nah. That's what you and Mako are for now. You're the old hands. Hell, you're better than I ever was. The only reason Chuck and I were as good as we were in Striker was because of his aggressive nature and Striker's speed and power." Herc gave a sad smile. "Although I'd love to be able to take a Mk VI for a spin, that's for sure. They're looking really good now."

"That they are. Mako's worked hard on the first three, but she's turning all but Nitro Glow loose on others to finish."

"Why Nitro?"

"She's doing it up as a Juggernaut."

Herc blinked. "Juggernaut?"

"Yeah, she's doing four different styles of Jaeger. Scout, Brawler, Guardian, and Juggernaut."

"Huh. I'll ask her for more about that later."

"Yeah, it's a bit complex. But it makes sense. If we're going to have up to thirty Jaegers active, why not specialize them a little?"

Herc shrugged. "I'm just a pilot. Gimme something to drive and something to shoot at and I'm happy."

Raleigh laughed. "I think that's just a guy thing."

Herc chuckled. "True. Anything else?"

"No, not at the moment." Raleigh opened the door again and headed to his office.

Herc pulled up a file on his computer and made a few notes on it, then closed it and stared into the distance, lost in thought.

-.-.-

1248

Samuel Baxter looked up as his daughter walked into the office. "Emily! I didn't know you were coming home!"

"I didn't either until this morning."
"What's wrong?"

Emily looked at her dad, fighting back tears. "I got laid off."

"Oh, Emily…” He hugged her. "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged. "It happens. I just wish I had gotten better warning."

"I know. Anything I can do to help?"

"Do you know anybody who's hiring robotics mechanics?"

Baxter thought for a moment before grinning. "You know what? I might. Let me make a call…”

-.-.-

"Pan Pacific Industries R&D offices."

"Hello, Miranda."

"Oh, hello, Mr. Baxter. How can I help you today?"

"Can I talk to David or Jazmine?"

Miranda turned around and looked down the hall. "Mr. Ashburn's out right now, but Jaz is in her office. Let me see if she's available."

"Thanks."

Miranda walked down the hall and knocked on the door of the younger Becket's office. "Jaz, you got a moment?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Mr. Baxter needs to talk with you about something. He's on line two."

"Thanks. How are the twins doing?"

"They're quiet now, but earlier they were doing their best impression of Crimson Typhoon's Thundercloud."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. My kidney didn't like playing Kaiju."

Jaz laughed and picked up the phone. "Samuel. How are you?"

"I'm doing fine. You?"

"Enjoying the slightly cooler spell we're having lately… not that my brother would know the difference."

"That's true. He did spend a lot longer than you up in Alaska."

"Yeah... So, what can I help you with?"

"You guys have any job openings coming up? An… acquaintance… of mine is in the job market
"Yes, actually. We're about to start a hiring cycle here to fill some support roles… and to help get some Jaeger-tech spinoff programs going."

"Wonderful. I will point them your way."

"Anything else?"

"Actually, yes… can you have David call me when he gets back? There's some good news to give him."

"I will do that."

"Wonderful. You going to San Francisco?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Then I shall see you there."

"Alright. Have a good day."

"You, too."

Jazmine hung up the phone and looked at the ceiling. What kind of news does he have that he can't have me relay?

---

1402

David Ashburn walked into his office to find a sticky note from his protégé stuck to his phone. Call Sam. Good news? JB.

Interesting. Good news? He picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. "Hey, Sam. What's up?"

"David. Got a few calls from heads of state this morning."

"About?"

"I have one pissed at you for skipping them in the initial draw of Jaegers, half a dozen wanting to order one or more for their own countries, and a few others asking for status updates on their Jaegers."

"Skipped?"

"South Korea."

David blinked for a few seconds before covering the mic on the handset. "Shit shit shit… JAZ! HERC!"

Herc and Jazmine both appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

"We missed South Korea."

There was a long pause as the news sank in. "Oh, bugger." "Shit."
David put the phone on speaker. "Okay, how do we make it up to them?"

"They just want to be in before any of the option Jaegers."

Herc nodded. "We'll fit them in somewhere. How many they want?"

"They're committed to two. No options."

Jaz gave a thumb up and ran to Mako's office.

David turned back to the phone. "So, who wanted to get new Jaegers?"

"Laugh if you like, but... Britain, France, Germany, Israel, the U.A.E., Brazil, and India. Brazil and India want two each, as well."

Herc whistled. "With that many Jaegers, we might actually be able to assault the Breach and lay waste to the other side."

David looked at Herc with raised eyebrows.

"Not saying we will, but it's definitely a possibility now. Forty Jaegers?" Herc grinned. "We've got firepower to spare, even if we have a 25% downtime rate."

"So... You guys think you can use that many Jaegers?"

"Absolutely. I'm not going to lie: We'll lose a few. But these will be a lot more affordable, and the crews stand a higher chance of survival now." Herc crossed his arms. "And if they're willing to pay for a Jaeger, I say let 'em."

"Then I'll pass along the word that they'll be getting their Jaegers. When, we're not sure. But they'll get them."

"Sounds like a plan." David made a note to have Mako spool up a few more Jaegers. "Any word on the options?"

"No firm word yet, but I've heard mutterings that they will convert them to confirmed orders."

Herc grinned. Stacker, you should be here, mate. Forty Jaegers. "And I assume you gave the usual answer for those asking about their Jaegers?"

"Yes. We're still designing them, and we'll unveil them when they're ready. Now please, let us do our jobs and quit pester ing us every week."

The three men laughed. "Alright, I need to turn our mad scientists loose on some more Jaegers."

"Tell them I said hello."

"Will do. See you in San Francisco?"

"Of course."

"Thanks for the heads up, Sam. See you on the 10th."

"No problem."

David ended the call and turned to Herc. "Forty Jaegers? How many are you going to deploy at any
"Probably turn loose two or three, even for small attacks. Larger attacks, we could make an argument for five."

"Jesus. I remember how awe-inspiring it was when they dropped in Los Angeles in 2017 with two. Five?" David made a 'mind blown' gesture. "We should sell tickets!"

Here shook his head. "Raleigh's going to have his work cut out for him, yeah? 39 crews to find and train."

"That will be a challenge. But I think we need to get the academy started first. And it'll have to be big in order to find those crews, and fast."

Here nodded and headed to his office. "Let's bring everyone else up to speed. We've got work to do."

-.-.-

Author's notes: Phew! Back at it again. And with a hell of a bang. 40 Jaegers? Got a lot of naming to do. ;)

Mako inspected the exoskeleton, checking for anything she may have missed. Nearby, Raleigh groaned. "Mako… That's the third check. It's fine."

Stephanie sat on the table edge, legs dangling over the edge. "He's right, Mako. Let's just get started."

Mako shot a glare at Raleigh, but proceeded to walk over to the computer that was monitored the exoskeleton. She touched a few controls, and the suit powered up. "Good to go, Steph."

Next to Mako, Caitlin looked up from her own computer. "Just try to raise your right leg."

Mako watched the feed from the sensors running along Stephanie's spine as they picked up the nerve impulses. It was utter noise to Mako…

Caitlin, however, saw something of value in the lines on the display. "Excellent! What are you feeling?"

Stephanie furrowed her brow. "I don't know… I haven't felt anything like it before… kinda stiff. I mean, I can feel a lot of resistance, but I don't have any experience to compare it to."

"Like your leg's stuck in something thick and goopy, perhaps?"

"Yeah… that's a good way of putting it."

Mako turned to Caitlin. "Is that a good or a bad sign?"

The older woman was grinning. "It's wonderful. The feedback is working as designed. Just like it did when Stacker strapped into the test rig in Pittsburg in 2014."

Raleigh and Stephanie's eyebrows shot up at that revelation. "Wait… Pentecost was an early test pilot, too?"

Mako nodded. "He was the first person to try the Pons. Without that test…" Mako shrugged. "There wouldn't have been Jaegers."

Stephanie grinned. "So I'm Pentecost's replacement in some sense? Out on the cutting edge, trying something untested for the first time?"

Caitlin nodded. "You're as much a test pilot as Chuck Yeager was when he was part of the XS-1 program."

Stephanie nodded and closed her eyes, focusing on trying to lift her leg.
Suddenly, the leg twitched slightly.

"YES!" Mako's face lit up and she hugged Caitlin.

"Well done, Steph!" Caitlin grinned at the former Ranger. "Keep it up."

Stephanie, grinning, tried to move the leg further. Another twitch. And another. But it didn't rise more than a few inches. The grin slowly faded. "Aw, man…"

Raleigh rubbed her shoulder. "Hey. You and Kennedy didn't just get into Hydra Corinthian and wade into battle on your first time in a Jaeger."

Caitlin nodded. "It's a time consuming process to train the computer to recognize your nerve impulse patterns. It's baby steps, Steph."

Stephanie nodded, clearly dejected at the prospect of an extended series of training runs with the suit. "I know, but I was still hoping to just strap in and go. Resume my old life to some extent."

Caitlin walked over to the table and sat down next to Stephanie, and popped her right leg off. She handed it to her. "I told you that it took me a while to get used to this." She tapped the suit. "This isn't any different. It's no different than learning how to pilot a Jaeger. Practice, practice, practice. Lots of fine tuning action/reaction cycles, feedback impulses, that kind of stuff."

Mako came over to join the others. "There is something that you need to focus on, here, too. It works. Yes, it's not perfect on the first run… But that's an incredibly rare event when you get a perfect first run of anything. There's always some issues to work out."

Raleigh chuckled. "So, do I need to go get you a can of Raid?"

Mako playfully punched Raleigh in the shoulder. "Shush. Don't interrupt me."

Stephanie laughed at their antics. "Okay, you two. Get a room while us adults keep working on useful stuff."

Caitlin made a shooing motion at the Rangers. "Go on, you two. We'll keep working here for a while. I'm sure that you've got stuff to do."

Mako groaned. "Ten new Jaegers confirmed, and ten more looking likely. I'm going to have to subcontract some of the design work!"

"As much as I hate his skirt-chasing tendencies… Call Jasper. He'd be glad to help out again."

"I might just have to do that." Mako took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "You're right. I do need to get back to work on the designs." She headed towards the door, then paused just short of it. "Don't give up, Steph. You've piloted one of the most successful Jaegers of the First Kaiju War to nine kills. You've faced harder tasks and longer odds before and won. You can do this."

Stephanie grinned. "You're right. I have faced greater challenges. She focused on the suit again, and the right leg twitched up a few inches. "Come on, you recalcitrant piece of overpriced junk. MOVE!"

Mako laughed as she and Raleigh headed across the street to the offices.

-.-.-
Miranda watched as Stephanie rolled into the office, visibly frustrated at the slow progress she had been having with the exoskeleton. "Hey, you okay?"

"Just wish this was easier. Driving a Jaeger sure seemed easier than this."

Sergio poked his head out of his office. "That's because you had the simulator to practice with." He frowned. "Hmm... Maybe we need a simulator for these. Don't know how it'd work, but I'll leave a message for the J-techs in Hong Kong and see what we can figure out."

"Thanks... But I don't know if that would help me at this point. I got the leg to move about halfway to the point I wanted it to, but it's..."

"Frustrating. Imagine how Caitlin felt when she was doing this with her leg... You have someone who understands what you're going through. That's a huge help."

Miranda smiled. "Hey, I may not have driven a Jaeger or lost a limb, but if I'm understanding this whole process right, you're learning a new skill. You don't just strap on a pair of skates and hit the ice at the Olympics and take home gold. It takes time, practice, and more than a few sessions where you wind up on your ass in a heap. But in the end, the rewards makes all the time and suffering earlier worth it."

Sergio gaped at Miranda. "For someone so young, you've got a remarkably mature outlook on life."

The petite Australian shrugged. "I get that a lot."

Stephanie rolled up to Miranda and hugged her. "Thanks for the encouragement. But I'm done for the day. I have half a dozen phone calls to make before lunch. After all, the Academy won't start itself."

Sergio chuckled. "Welcome to middle management in the PPDC. Check your free time at the door."

Miranda turned in her swivel chair to face the former Ranger. "Is that so? Because I heard a lot about the hijinks that took place in the Shatterdome during the time between alerts."

To his credit, Sergio's face was as still as if it were made from stone. "I don't know what you're talking about. Many of your stories would have come from Sydney. I never had the opportunity to serve there."

"I'm sure that's true." She gave him a feral grin. "And I'm sure that you have your own particular brand of shenanigans that you two got into up there in Alaska."

Sergio gave her a steady glare. "Some things I will be taking to my grave, Mrs. Hansen." He waggled his eyebrows and disappeared back into his office.

Stephanie laughed at the exchange and rolled down the hall towards her office. "Munchkin, you fit right in with this bunch." She grinned at her. "Welcome to the large family of egotistical robot jockeys, eccentric geniuses, and general do-gooders that is the PPDC."

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*Hong Kong Shatterdome*

*July 30, 2025*
Tendo walked through the once-again bustling hallways of the Shatterdome, coffee cup in one hand and bagel in the other. He nodded at familiar faces in the halls, greeted people who he knew, and maneuvers skillfully past workers prepping the 'Dome for its impending overhaul and update. He finally arrived at the K-Science labs to find Newt waiting for him. "You wanted to see me?"

Newt nodded nervously. "Yeah… Look, I know that I'm our best intelligence asset against the Precursors and the Kaiju… But I need to get out of here before the overhauls begin."

Tendo took a seat. "Why?"

"Because anything… Everything that I see, they can see too. Everything I know, they do too."

"I get that. Why are you asking me for leave time?"

"Because you're the acting Marshall around here."

Tendo rocked back in the chair, caught off guard by how Newt had been described. "Acting Marshall?"

"Yeah. Dude, you're one of the anchors of the PPDC. One of the 'fixed point' people that Pentecost used to talk about. There's no official boss here right now, so everyone has just defaulted to you."

Tendo thought it over for a bit. Ok, I see where he can get that impression… and it explains a lot of why I've been running around like the proverbial headless barnyard bird lately. "Okay, then. Any idea how long you'll be gone?"

Newt shrugged. "I'll keep feeding you guys any Ghost Drift info I get, but I need some time and space to… I dunno. Rediscover myself? Find out who I really am?"

Tendo nodded. "I get it. You've got a lot of vacation and sick time stacked up. I'll have HR burn that off first, then have you put on leave of absence. Just hit us up when you're ready to come back."

Newt smiled. "Thanks. I hope to be back before the Breach reopens."

"We'll let Hermann know to keep some space in his lab set aside for you."

Newt laughed. "No need. I think he'll know that already."

Tendo stood up and shook Newt's hand. "Well, then. Just remember that you are also one of those fixed points, too. You'll always be welcome here."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate that."

Tendo smiled and retrieved his coffee. "Good luck, man. See you around."

Newt gave Tendo a mock salute and headed to his quarters to pack.

---

The remnants of the PPDC leadership convened a conference call every so often to keep everyone in the loop. Now was one of those calls.
Tendo looked at the other participants. *Team Gipsy, the Chiefs, the D'Onofrios, Herc, Hermann, our new boss Mr. Baxter, and… Steph? Need to make a private call afterwards. "Okay, how is everyone?"*

Herc led off. "Things are coming along nicely here. We've got a J-Tech spinoff project coming along nicely, and the new Shatterdome site has started excavation."

Raleigh picked up where Herc left off. "The Academy curriculum has really taken shape. Steph has been a huge help for that. We're finalizing the staff and picking an initial location for the first few weeks, until the Frisco 'Dome's up and running."

Mako went next. "We've got a lot of Jaegers to design still, but the first three are fully fleshed out and ready to commit to hardware development. I'll do one more Jaeger, but the rest are going to be parceled out to others to finish. I've got Jasper Schoenfield leading a team working on a few, but the rest are going to go to others over the next few weeks. Fuji Heavy Industries has called dibs on Zephyr Angel, and I'm willing to let them have it… unless there's any naysayers."

Baxter shook his head. "I see no reason to block that. It's a good move on several levels. Politics, economics, logistics…" He shrugged. "We're going to need to split up production, though, if we want to get all forty done in any reasonable time."

Tendo nearly choked on his coffee. "Forty?!"

Mako was equally surprised. "The options weren't supposed to be finalized for another few months!"

"The nations in question all called me this morning. They're all in. The extra ten orders from the non-Pac Rim nations tipped the scales for them."

Tendo whistled in awe and leaned back in his chair. "Forty Jaegers… Those Kaiju don't stand a chance!"

Mako nodded. "If we restart and retool Sao Paulo, we can get them all done in two years."

Baxter nodded. "I'll get that rolling. Embraer will be delighted to help again."

Crunch jumped in. "I'll help you with that. Aki has the NorCal plant under control."

Tendo nodded. "And a couple of old friend of yours arrived a few days ago and offered their services."

Crunch's eyes narrowed. "Which old friends."

Tendo waved to a few people off to the side of LOCCENT, who walked into the field of view of the camera. Crunch's look of utter delight made the surprise totally worth it.

Several former Jaeger Crew Chiefs had volunteered to help out at the PPDC again, but Tendo hadn't been able to find much for them to do. Now that the 'Domes were being overhauled and the Jaeger fleet was being rebuilt, they had more than enough to do.

Kama Koi, the former Chief for Cherno Alpha, stepped forward. "Don't worry, Cap. I'll take charge of the setup of the new Hong Kong Assembly Facility."

Zelinda Christani, the former Chief for Tacit Ronin, and Astrid Drews, the former Chief for Brawler Yukon, both stepped forward. "We're going to go stateside and help with the Academy."
Zhang Li, the former Chief of Crimson Typhoon, smiled. "I'll take over for you on the Sao Paulo project, Colin. You're needed to help train new Chiefs. With forty Jaegers, we can't rely on people who have heritage from the Jaegers of old. We must mold them from scratch. And I can't think of anyone better than you for that."

Crunch smiled as he saw his old friends again. "Thank you, everyone. This will make things a lot easier."

Kama grinned. "Which is precisely why we signed back up. Besides, we were bored."

Aki chuckled. "I know that feeling."

Herc also grinned. "Then it's a good thing that the craziness is about to start. No time for anyone to be bored. And it all starts on the 10th. Everyone in this call will be there in their dress uniforms. The PPDC is going to be reinstated, and we're going to fully announce the Mark VI lineup as it stands right now. We'll also be publicly unveiling the plans for rebuilding San Francisco and the Ranger Memorial."

Everyone gave some signal of understanding, and the call cut off. Tendo thought about calling Stephanie, but decided that it could wait until the meet in San Francisco. Never thought that I'd be here. Twelve years later and a senior member of one of the most elite combat forces in the world. He took another sip of coffee and turned to the Chiefs. "Let's get ready to pack up LOCCENT. We need to be out in a week so that they can do the overhauls."

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*Mako and Raleigh's apartment*

*July 29, 2025*

*1822*

Stephanie, the D'Onofrios, Herc, and the Gottliebs had come over to the apartment for a movie night that Raleigh and Mako had decided to put on. A quick poll resulted in Mako putting in *The Wind Rises*. As the movie had started, Raleigh playfully scooped up Mako and put her in his lap, where she seemed to assume a cat-like state of relaxation. Stephanie watched as Mako seemed to relax, and correctly deduced that it was more than just the typical romantic/Ghost Drift intimacy of unrelated Rangers.

After the movie ended and the men had started debating the technical side of the movie, Stephanie pulled Mako aside for a chat. "Mako… I really wish I had a better way of bringing this up, but… There's more to your cuddles with Raleigh than just being intimate, isn't there."

Mako squirmed, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation. "Yes, there is."

"Ahh… It all clicks now."

"What does?"

"Okay, lemme explain first. I had a cousin who was diagnosed with Aspergers, back when that was the thing to do."

"So you're saying I have Aspergers?" Mako's eyes narrowed.

"No, I'm saying that you show many of the same signs and signals of having it. It's not a good or a
bad thing. It just…. It's a part of what makes you, you."

Mako was clearly confused. "Wait. I'm lost. It's a medical condition, but it's not?"

"They wrapped it in with autism back around K-Day, if memory serves. It's nothing to be ashamed of, Mako. It just means that your brain tackles things in a slightly different way than most people. You're able to utterly focus on a task. You enjoy a sense of order in your life. You have a particular field or topic that utterly fascinates you. You have fewer friends, but they're really close to you. And you have a harder time interacting with outsiders."

Mako nodded at the descriptions, all of which fit her perfectly. "But how does the cuddling have any relevance to that?"

"Do you feel safer and more comfortable when you're wrapped up, under physical compression across a large area of your body?"

"Why does that matter?"

"When my cousin got worked up or stressed, he would wrap himself up in a blanket. I used to think it was funny, but when I was old enough to understand, my mom explained it to me."

Mako thought back over the last few years. The waking up to find myself wrapped in my blankets when Gipsy was giving me trouble, pulling my seatbelt or crash harness tight when things got bumpy, the comfort of Raleigh's hugs and cuddling after a nightmare... "Yes, I do. I never really connected it until now."

Stephanie grinned. "I'm no expert, but it sure seems like you're an extremely high-functioning Aspie. Like I said, it's nothing to be ashamed of. You've been able to manage the symptoms on your own. Many Aspies would love to be able to do that. It took my cousin a long time and more than a few medication changes to get to that point."

Mako leaned against the wall, clearly shaken up by the revelation. "So, is there anything else I should know about it?"

"Not really. Like I said, you're managing the symptoms really well. Just… be yourself."

Mako nodded. "Can this just be our secret? You, me, and Raleigh?"

"Raleigh?" Stephanie instinctively looked over her shoulder, only to find the other Ranger still in discussion with Herc about the merits of the Zero versus the Wildcat, whatever that meant. "He's busy with the guys still."

"He's only half-involved in that conversation. He's been… listening in."

Stephanie slapped her forehead. "Right. You two are strong Ghosters. How he's kept… Wait. Said too much."

"Oh, no. Please, do continue." Mako gave the wheelchair-bound woman a feral grin. "You obviously know something about that secret project of his. I've been trying to crack that for weeks, without success."

"Nope. This is the first I heard of any secret project. And now I am curious as well… but he'll know that I'll just report to you now." She looked at the men in the common area. "Hmmm… We can squeeze play Tendo in a few days. He's got ears everywhere."
"Perfect." Mako's grin softened to a friendlier smile. "Let's go crash their debate over the better fighter in the Pacific Theatre of WWII. I'm going to make Herc's head spin."

"Now that I want to see."

-.-.-

**Author's notes:** I know, "How the hell is he so productive all of a sudden?!" Three words: Long. Road. Trip.

As for Aspie Mako… I'm an extremely high-functioning Aspie myself, and I used to hang with a bunch of fellow Aspies, so I was delighted to see Mako's character in the movie. I could totally see her as high-functioning, and it's been a *strong* headcanon since.
Forged in Fire, Chapter 41: Thinking About The Future

Sacramento International Airport

Terminal B, pickup area

August 3, 2025

1037

Mako and Raleigh waited patiently as the people mover brought another load of passengers from the concourse to the main terminal, looking for three particular people. Mako, despite her lower vantage point, spotted them first. "TENDO! ALISON!"

Tendo looked over to see Raleigh and Mako waving at him and his wife. "Hey, fancy meeting you here!" He smiled and walked over to the Rangers, carry-on bags in hand. "Sorry we're a little late. That little puddle jumper had some issues getting started." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the Alaska Airlines turboprop airliner parked at one of the gates. "I've seen mopeds in the Boneslums more reliable than that."

Mako winced. "That bad?"

"Took 'em four tries to get the number 2 engine to start up."

Raleigh took the bags from Tendo. "Man, that is bad." He nodded to Alison and young Yeye, who was fast asleep on his mom's shoulder. "Ma'am."

"Good to see you again, Raleigh."

Mako gestured to the escalators. "Baggage claim's this way."

Tendo and Raleigh took the lead. "So, how are things going here?"

Raleigh shrugged. "Okay. We're almost out of busy work, but more just keeps popping up."

Tendo chuckled. "Not work, Becket boy, the culture. A lot of Bay Area folks moved here after K-Day."

"Ahhh. Well, what area were you most fond of?"

"Kicked around in Chinatown a lot, obviously. The Embarcadero, too."

"Well, Chinatown's moved to South Sacramento for the time being, but I don't think they'll leave entirely. Mako and I were planning on going down there soon to check it out. They've apparently done a really nice job redecorating a few of the strip malls to look more like the old storefronts. And the Embarcadero… Well, it kinda fragmented all over the Central Valley. Pier 39 has kinda taken up residence across the river from Downtown, and Ripley's moved in on K Street, but the Exploratorium went to Davis, and Ghiradelli's moved to their plant down past Stockton."
"So I'd heard. What about, say, Oakland? Where'd they gravitate towards?"

"Oakland moved to Stockton. Much of what little shipping remained after the Kaiju attacks picked up that didn't go to Long Beach went there, so a lot of the dock workers followed. And the Raiders are camped out there for now. Berkley went to Davis. Two UCs, one campus, and hippies everywhere."

Tendo laughed. "Yeah, Berkley was a trippy place. I'd head the same about Davis, though, so that's a good match." They got off the escalator and walked over to the baggage carousels. "So, where did San Francisco proper wind up?"

"Sacramento. It's reportedly really invigorated the city." Raleigh shrugged. "Mako and I haven't done much exploration of the city, though. We're neck-deep in planning a half dozen projects."

Tendo spotted their baggage. "There, the blue ones."

Raleigh spotted them right away, as they were the old Gipsy crew luggage that had been given to the techs after Los Angeles. He laughed. "You've still got those?"

"Turbines still light up and spin, bro. They're a classic."

"Yeah, I guess so." Raleigh smiled sadly. "I sold mine back in Nome to help make ends meet one month."

"Bummer, man." Tendo went to set down the carry-on bags so he could grab the luggage, but Mako grabbed them before he could complete the move."

"Don't worry, Tendo. Raleigh and I have it under control. We already have a hotel room and rental car for you, too."

Alison smiled tiredly. "Thank you, guys. I'm not sure what we'd have done without you."

Mako smiled. "It's the least we could do." She tilted her head towards the door. "Ready to go?"

Tendo yawned. "Please. Any good coffee shops along the way?"

Raleigh grinned. "Lots. We passed one upstairs, actually."

The LOCCENT chief stopped in his tracks. "Traitor."

Alison rolled her eyes. "Come on, we'll find something else a little closer to the hotel."

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_PPI R&D hangar_

_August 4, 2025_

_1214_

Mako had finally been given the go ahead to spool up a test part on the new 3D printer, and she ate her lunch as she watched it work. Sparks flew as a high-powered laser melted powdered metal into a continuous weld, gradually building up the part. She bit into the cookie she had packed into her lunch… and winced as one of her back teeth flashed in pain. _What the… That's new. Good thing I was already going to the dentist Wednesday!_
Raleigh came over, worry clouding his face. "You okay?"

"You felt that?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry." Mako took Raleigh's hand. "Didn't mean to bother you like that."

"Nah, needed an excuse to get out of the office for a bit." He pointed at the printer. "Whatcha making?"

Mako grinned. "Laugh all you want, but… It's a coffee mug for Tendo."

Raleigh peered through the tinted armor glass at the work platform. "Okay, I see it now. Looks good!"

Mako grinned sheepishly. "It's not really my design. I slightly modified it to incorporate a little personal touch, but…" She shrugged.

"I think he'll appreciate it."

Mako smiled as Raleigh sat down next to her, and they watched the laser work across the surface of the coffee cup for a few minutes. Finally Mako took a deep breath and turned to Raleigh.

"Raleigh… I've been thinking."

"You do that a lot."

Mako punched Raleigh in the shoulder. "True."

"So, you were thinking?"

"Do we really need the larger bedroom? I find it a little big for my tastes."

Raleigh's gaze grew distant as he visualized their room. "Yeah… I see what you mean. Why, you want to switch with Miranda?"

"If she's up for it, yes. She could certainly use the space in a few months."

"That's true." Raleigh's gaze returned to Mako. "Moving day next weekend?"

"If she's up for it… sure."

Raleigh grinned. "Okay, then. The 16th it is."

"You sound like you're certain she'll go for it."

"I'm pretty sure she will. Hell, I'm half tempted to go find us a house or something and let her have the whole apartment."

"We don't need a house, Raleigh!" Mako shook her head. "Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?"

"No. The market's good for home buying right now. Herc's closing on a house soon, you know."

"He is?"
"Yep. Up by the hospital, actually."

Mako blinked. *Hmm… Raleigh does have a good point. It'd be an investment, if nothing else. *"I'll think about it."

"Really?"

"Even if we don't use it during the next war, it'd be an investment. A source of income separate from our stipends and the PPDC."

Raleigh grinned. "So, not getting ahead of ourselves?"

Mako smiled back. "More of a case of 'thinking about the future.'"

Raleigh kissed Mako on the forehead. "See, you've always been the better of the two of us at that."

"Really? Because I never thought past the end of the war, either. This is a learning experience for both of us. Our first real taste of true adulthood."

"That's…" Raleigh stopped. *She's right. Most of my time after Anchorage was spent running away from my past. I never really tackled things in a mature, level-headed manner. *"Damn." He hung his head. "That is really true."

Mako wrapped an arm around her copilot's shoulders. "Hey. It's not an attack. I didn't mean to…"

Raleigh took Mako's right hand in his own. "I didn't take it as one. It's not an attack, it's a reflection of reality." He looked to Mako, smiling gently. "A truth I hadn't realized. Thank you, Mako."

"You're welcome, Raleigh." Mako leaned against Raleigh's left shoulder and watched the printer continue to work on Tendo's coffee cup.

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*Mako and Raleigh's bedroom*

*August 5, 2025*  
*0240*

Mako had learned long ago that she would wake up in the middle of the night with either a solution to a problem or a crazy idea in her head. As a result, she kept a pad of paper and a pencil on her nightstand at all times. Just in case…

"*STARBURST GEMINI!*"

Raleigh snapped awake and instantly began to scramble for something to defend himself… only to fall out of bed with a *THUD*. He poked his head above the edge of the bed to see that Mako was hurriedly jutting down some notes on the pad of paper. "Jesus, Mako. Scared me half to death!"

Mako was utterly focused on whatever she was writing, so Raleigh peeked over her shoulder. *Starburst Gemini. Brawler/Scout Hybrid. MUST BE TWINS (Ident.) Plasma, TPackII, Maxed drivers. Chain, Sting, ? Sensors lite, maybe small launcher? Shin guards. Elbow Rockets: Y/N?*

Raleigh groaned and got back under the sheets. *Another Jaeger. I'll ask her about it tomorrow at dinner.*
Mako put the pad back down and laid down again, instantly asleep as her head touched the pillow.

Raleigh stayed awake a few minutes longer before also falling asleep, with one final thought: *If that's a Jaeger name, it's pretty cool.*

-.-.-

**PPI R&D Offices**

**0830**

"Mr. Hansen?"

Herc looked up from his computer to see Jazmine standing in the doorway. "What's up?"

Jazmine closed the door and sat down at the desk. "I... need some advice."

"About?"

Jazmine squirmed, clearly uncomfortable with something. "I... I'm torn. Part of me wants to sign up to be a Ranger, but another part of me knows that I'm better suited to help from behind the scenes. I'm not a fighter, not by any stretch of the imagination. My battleground is in the office, trying to outbid a competitor. But I still can't shake the feeling that I might be looking the wrong way. Maybe I am supposed to follow my brothers and defend humanity in combat."

Herc leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Jazmine, I'll be honest. Being a Ranger is dirty, nasty, dangerous work. Yeah, you're a rock star, but that also means you're put on a pedestal for all to see and idolize. All your redeeming qualities are held up as "the best of humanity." But your flaws, your dark marks, those are also brought into the light. And they're not always the kinds of things that go away." He rubbed his face. "My brother Scott was an example of that. He was really good at hiding a lot of things, not only from the media, but also from me. Even in the Drift. Things that ended his career, and almost ended mine if it hadn't been for the five kills I'd already scored and the fact that I was needed to pilot Striker Eureka." He rocked the chair back forwards and looked Jazmine in the eyes. "I don't know what darkness may lie in your past. I really don't care, either. What matters is, you are an even rarer find than a Ranger: A brilliant young woman who is able to take the reigns of a major company, one that has the technology, know-how, and resources to literally save the human race, and you have everyone's support." Herc smiled gently. "I'm not a business man at all, but my wife, Angela? She had some serious chops for business. You remind me a lot of her. You'll do better in the boardroom than you would in a Conn Pod. Just like Mako's a terror to the Kaiju, you'll strike fear into the hearts of the old guard in business."

Jazmine shyly smiled. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Herc."

"You're most welcome, Jazmine."

Jazmine got up and started to leave the office. "I have one other thing to ask, though."

Herc paused, partway through opening his email inbox. "Shoot."

"Do you think you'll jockey again?"

There was a long pause as Herc mulled the question over in his head. "No. I think I've had my fill. Lost two copilots and two Jaegers." He frowned. "Don't want to add a third to the list. Besides, I'm getting on in years. Being a Ranger's a young person's game."
Jazmine nodded slowly as she opened the door. "Thank you for the honesty. And the advice." She slipped out the door and down the hall to her office.

Herc stared out the door at the wall across the hall for a few moments, lost in thought, before returning to his inbox. Great. More paperwork from Hong Kong.

Chapter End Notes

And that brings us up to speed with FF.net! Expect the next chapter soon(ish)!
Forged In Fire, Chapter 42: Shock And Awww…

Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda’s apartment

August 6, 2025

0712

Raleigh was happily eating his breakfast as Mako headed out the door to go to the dentist. “Hope it goes well.”

Mako gave a nervous smile. “I’m just worried they’ll order my wisdom teeth out. The only reason I still have them is because I didn’t have the time to recover.”

“Something you’ve got plenty of now.” Raleigh walked over and gave her a hug. “Relax. It’ll be fine.”

Mako loosened up slightly as Raleigh hugged her. “Thank you. And as much as I’d like to just stay here like this…”

Raleigh let her go. “Go on. Don’t want to be late.”

Mako smiled again and headed to their car.

Down the hall, Miranda stumbled out of her bedroom, still half asleep. “Mornin’.”

“Morning, Munchkin. How’d you sleep?”

“Poorly. Feels like Thing 2 has been practicing his martial arts on my organs again.”

Raleigh winced. “That can’t be fun.”

“Says the guy who… Well, I was going to say ‘will never know what a pregnancy feels like,’ but with you and Mako…” The petite Australian shrugged. “This is taking a little getting used to.”

“The pregnancy, or having a pair of Rangers as your roommates?”

Miranda stuck her tongue out and groggily walked over to the coffee maker. “You know which one I meant.”

Raleigh chuckled and turned back to his breakfast. “Should still be fairly hot, so mind your tongue.”

“Thanks.” Miranda poured herself a small cup of coffee and went to the fridge. “Oh, you guys are awesome.” She pulled out the fresh carton of cream and added a splash to her coffee, then put it
back into the fridge. “Must be nice to know exactly what’s about to run out in the fridge. I was always behind the curve on that.”

Raleigh tilted his head towards the door. “Yeah, Mako’s pretty good about that.”

Miranda sat down at the table, coffee cup cradled in her hands. “About her… and my previous train of thought…”

Raleigh raised his eyebrows. “What about it?”

“What are her periods like for you?”

Raleigh didn’t hesitate for a moment. “She really hasn’t had any since the day I met her.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s bullshit-”

Raleigh held up a hand, and Miranda stopped. “In the early days of the PPDC’s existence, it was decided that they should use a progesterone replacement that prevents the uterine lining from forming in the first place. The main drawbacks are that you have to go off it at least once a year to ensure that everything still works right, and that you get a little antsy and irritable at the start of the cycle. Supposedly, it’s because your body still realizes that it’s supposed to be getting ready for a potential pregnancy, but something’s keeping it from doing so.” He took a sip of his own coffee before continuing. “But everyone I talked to about it was willing to deal with those side effects. After all, how would you feel if you had to fight a Kaiju while on your period? And be honest.”

Miranda took a deep breath and blew it out her lips. “I’d do it, but I suspect it wouldn’t be a wise move. I… Are the circuitry suits waterproof both ways?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, it could be messy, then. And since the uterus is basically shredding itself to pieces…” Miranda trailed off.

Raleigh nodded. “I agree with your assessment. You’re having an organ tear itself up. If it were any other organ, that’d be cause for a trip to the ER, right? And yet, it’s considered normal to just keep going like nothing unusual is happening?” He shook his head in dismay. “Thankfully, a couple of bright folks, Caitlin included, realized that having a female Ranger on her period would not be optimal. She’d run the mission, because it was her job. But in the Drift, your pains are shared.”

“So, your copilot would be hit by it, too.”

“Exactly. And if it were a guy, who’d never felt that before?”

Miranda chuckled. “Ouch. He’d be in for a hell of a ride.”

Raleigh smirked and raised his coffee mug in a salute to his roommate. “That’s the real reason for the progesterone replacement.” He took another drink from his coffee. “And from what I’ve gathered in the Drift, Mako’s extremely thankful that it was made available to all PPDC personnel who wanted it, not just Rangers.”

“She have a hard time with her periods?”

“Very.”
“Oh.” Miranda frowned. “She seen a doctor about it?”

“Not yet. I haven’t brought it up yet, and since she’s gone through her teenage years around military kids… she’s of the opinion that it’s normal for her.”

“It might not be normal. If it’s really painful, she should talk to her doctor.”

Raleigh shrugged. “I’ll bring it up… but you may have a better chance of getting her to listen.”

“Why? You’re the person she’s shared her soul with. You’re her copilot. Why wouldn’t she listen to you?”

Raleigh gave a wicked grin. “Because I’m plumbed differently.”

Miranda nearly choked on her coffee. “WHAT? You did NOT just play that card, mate.”

“Oh, I did.” Another grin. “Besides, as you said, I have no experience with that stuff yet.”

Miranda grumbled for a few seconds. “Fine. But you owe me.”

“Name your price.”

“There’s this microbrewery on the outskirts of Sydney, not far from the old Shatterdome. Six pack of their pale ale.”

“It’ll be in the fridge when you get back from the hospital after having the twins.”

“It’s a deal.”

-.--.

Dental office
Fair Oaks, CA
0801

“Aha. Sneaky little thing.”

“Aaaah?”

“You said it was a sweet sensitivity?”

“Aahhaaa.”

The dentist pulled the mirror out of Mako’s mouth and hit a switch on the chair, then rolled his own chair back. “It’s a cavity.”

Mako’s confusion was evident on her face as the chair returned to the upright position. She took the cup of mouthwash from the hygienist and began to rinse out her mouth.
“It’s all the way back on the backside of your lower right wisdom tooth. That’s one of the hardest areas to clean, so don’t feel so bad. Many people your age have had several cavities by now.”

Mako spat out the mouthwash in the small sink near the chair. “My… adoptive father… was rather adamant about that.” She grew pensive for a moment as she rinse the cup out and refilled it with fresh water. “I never argued with him on that.”

“Well, my personal recommendation is to not fill that cavity.”

Mako looked at the dentist, clearly confused. “Not fill it? Isn’t that what you do to cavities?”

“Normally, yes. But it’s in a spot that, unfortunately, will be a problem spot for you to keep clean.”

“So you want me to let it rot?”

“No. Although you’ve got the space for your wisdom teeth, they’d be a constant source of problems. Cavities, fillings…”

Mako shuddered. “No thank you. My boyfriend had a bad experience with a filling once. He shared the story with me a few months ago and I’m not too keen to run that risk.”

“If I may ask… what went wrong?”

“Not enough anesthetic, apparently. He felt a good bit of it.”

“That’s…” The dentist winced. “That’s poor patient care. Does your boyfriend remember who that dentist was?”

“He might. I’ll ask him.”

“If he does, let me know who it was. If he’s local, I’ll stop by and have a little chat with him.”

“Is Anchorage considered ‘local’?”

“Well, I’d been trying to decide where to take the family for vacation next year…”

Mako smiled. “Please, no need to go out of your way on his behalf.”

“Hey, it’s the least I can do for him. After all, you two saved us all.”

Mako groaned. “Damn. Again?”

“No worries. Your secret identity is safe with us.” The dentist grinned. “Tell you what, I’ll go get you a couple of referrals for a consultation with some of the local oral surgeons. Nancy here will get you one of our goodie bags.”

The dentist disappeared back down the hallway to his office nook, and the hygienist opened a drawer and pulled out a small paper bag with a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in it. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Mako sighed. “I get that a lot.”

“It’s not every day that someone that stood toe to toe with a Kaiju and lived to tell the tale comes into our office.” The older woman smiled. “Let alone someone who did so in a Jaeger. It’s nice to know that you’re just another normal person, too. Makes me feel safer.”
Mako blinked at that. *Why would that make her feel safer? I know that I would feel a lot better knowing that it was someone much more... well, less flawed and broken.*

Mako was still musing the hygienist’s words when the dentist returned, a small packet of papers in hand. “Here you are. Four different surgeons in the area.”

“All personal or professional opinions?”

The dentist frowned for a moment before tapping one of the slips of paper. “These guys. They’ve gotten high praise from all of my patients that have gone to them.”

Mako looked at it and decided to call all four first. “Thank you.”

The dentist gave Mako a formal Japanese bow, then left the exam room to take care of another patient.

Mako stood there, utterly stunned by the gesture. *I haven’t had that happen to me in months...*  

-.-.-

*Ten minutes later...*

Mako found herself absentmindedly running the tip of her tongue along the sides of her wisdom teeth as the car drove through town. *I wonder what it’ll be like to have them out.* She looked at the slips of paper, then pulled out her phone and dialed a number from memory.

*Brrrrrrr... Brrrrrrrrr-CLICK.* “Yello.”

Mako grinned at the sound of Raleigh’s voice. “You ready to go?”

“Of course. Just waiting on you. How’d it go?”

“It’s a cavity.”

“Bummer. What’re they gonna do?”

“Have my wisdom teeth removed.”

There was a long pause before Raleigh continued. “What?”

Mako giggled. “The cavity’s on a wisdom tooth.”

“I get that. But isn’t that a little, I dunno, extreme?”

“Not when the dentist says that it’ll be a continuous problem there. I snuck a peek at the x-rays...”

“Mako... just because you x-rayed parts for Gipsy doesn’t mean that you can read the dental x-ray.”

“I know that... but the enamel back there was rather thin. I can see why he wants them out. It’s this, or a lot of fillings.”

There was another long pause before Raleigh spoke again. “Okay, that’s a good point. Besides,
now you’ve got the time and someone to keep an eye on you after you come out of surgery. Trust me, you want that other person to be there."

“Yancy, or your mom?”

“My mom. Yance had school still. I was 16.”

“Mmmm.” Mako looked out the window to see their apartment block coming into view. “Okay, just pulling up now. Ready?”

Raleigh appeared in the doorway of the apartment, phone still in hand. “Yup.” Click.

Mako watched her copilot lock the apartment, then kissed him on the cheek as he got in the car. “So… ready for another exciting day at the office?”

“Hey, you get to play with the robotics. I just get to drag schedule blocks and curriculum sections around on the computer.”

“I have something in mind for you to help with. Just hang on for a few more weeks while we get Stephanie back on her feet.”

Raleigh nodded at that. “Okay, I can do that. Besides, I’ve got a few other things I can work on to help kill the time.”

Mako looked at Raleigh, clearly amused. “Like your secret project?”

“Oh, no. That’s done. I’m just waiting on a good time to share it with you.”

“Spoilsport.”

Raleigh simply smiled at his copilot’s comment.

“I’m going to find out somehow.”

“I don’t doubt it. You’re stubborn as hell when you set your mind to a task.”

“You know you enjoy it.”

“Part of the reason we work so well together.”

“Mmmm…” Mako relaxed in her seat. “Can’t argue with that.”

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_PPI R&D Offices_

1215

Mako was deeply engrossed in an engineering model of the new Mark VI Conn Pod when Jazmine knocked on the doorframe. “Hey, Mako. Got a moment?”
“Hmm?” Mako kept working on a particularly important hardpoint, using a stylus to pull it out a little more from the wall.

“Got someone for you to meet.”

“One moment…” Mako saved the changes, then looked up at Jazmine. “Okay, what’s up?”

Jazmine stepped aside to reveal a familiar face. “This is Emily. She’s coming onboard to help you guys with the new exoskeleton program.”

Mako smiled. “Welcome aboard.”

Emily gave a shy smile. “Thanks. I’m just glad to have a job again. Getting laid off sucks.”

“Well, if this exoskeleton works, we’ll have plenty of work ahead of us. Come on, let’s go take a tour of our shop.” Mako got up and walked down the hall, Emily in tow. “It’s a little bit on the warm side in there, though. Unavoidable part of it being a repurposed hangar.”

As they walked past the desk at the door, Mako notice that Emily wasn’t the only new hire. Miranda was teaching an unfamiliar face how to handle the small mountain of data that flowed through the office.

Emily eyed Miranda with curiosity as they headed out the door. “Sorry if it’s a bit prying, but… is she an Aussie?”

Mako looked at her watch. “Wait…”

As if on cue, a pair of motorcycles raced down the street, headed to the Coast Guard Air Station at the north end of the flight line.

Emily stared in awe. “How’d you know they were coming?”

Mako grinned as they crossed the street. “Those two guys are always cutting it close to get to the Station on time. They’re almost as reliable as a watch.” She shook her head in dismay. “Getting back to your point, yes, she is an Australian. Came from the Sydney Ring.”

“So… why’d you pick her? Connections, or skills?”

“She’s really good at whatever task she applies herself to.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Mako opened the small door into the receiving area of the hangar and grabbed an electric flyswatter from a hook just off to the left. “Yes on both counts. She’s the widow of a Ranger. And no, I’m not telling you more without her consent.”

Emily eyed the flyswatter with visible concern. “Uhm… something I should know?”

“Yes. I’m deathly allergic to bee and wasp stings. And since the yellow jackets love to set up nests on the rafters here…” Mako brandished the device and looked around. “Looks clear for now. Let’s go.”

The two women turned right as they cleared the door… and Emily’s jaw fell open. “Whoa…”

More than two dozen machines ran along the left side of the hangar, ranging from grinders and drill presses to lathes and milling machines. The right side was packed with raw materials and
components. And in the center of the hangar, right beneath the Big Ass Fan…

“Work, you recalcitrant piece of scrap!”

“Steph, your yelling at it won’t make it work any better.”

“Stuff it, Sunshine. Doc, is the computer even on?”

“Yes, Stephanie. It’s on.”

Mako groaned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “When was the last time you ate, Stephanie?”

“Breakfast. Why?”

“Because it’s now 1220. Go take a lunch break. You’re bitchy when you’re hungry.”

The former pilot of Hydra Corinthian opened her mouth to protest, but the growl of her stomach beat her to the punch. “Fine.”

Raleigh pushed Stephanie’s wheelchair over to her. “Here. Don’t worry about taking off the suit. Just go get something to eat.”

Mako tilted her head towards Caitlin. “Come on, let’s go meet the brains of the project.”

Caitlin looked up from the computer terminal she had set up on a folding table. “Hey, Mako. Brought the new hire, I see.”

“Yes. Emily Baxter, this is Dr. Caitlin D’Onofrio. Cait, Emily.”

Caitlin held out a hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Emily took the offered and shook it. “Same here.” She pointed at the computers. “Can I take a look?”

“Sure. Let’s get you up to speed.”

The two women headed over to the table and started to talk shop, while Mako headed over to Raleigh. “Hey. I thought you had some scheduling stuff to do.”

“Nah. Got bored and decided to come over to give Steph a verbal punching bag.”

Mako nodded. “It does seem to help her.” She gestured at the open hangar doors. “Anything of interest today?”

“Not really. The neighbors have been busy, though.” Raleigh tilted his head to the south, where a civilianized OV-10 Bronco in an eye-catching red and white paint job taxied along the ramp, the cockpit open as the crew tried to stay cool in the large greenhouse-like cockpit. “There’s a small forest fire near Blue Canyon again. They’ve been making the run from here, though.”

Mako shrugged. “I hope they can get a handle on it quickly. They can’t afford to have another big one right now.”

“Yeah.” Raleigh’s face darkened. “I remember one, back in 2017… Yance and I were in LA with Gipsy, and a huge fire broke out. We wanted to take Gipsy out to scuffle out a firebreak.”

Mako laughed at the image. “And what did the brass think of your idea?”
“Oh, they wanted to do it, too. But the government thought that it would be a ‘waste of resources’ to do so.”

“When was it?”

“Early October. Turned out to probably have been a wise idea to have us stay in the ‘Dome.”

Mako turned back to the hangar. “Yes, what with Yamarashi coming later that month.”

“Yup.” Raleigh watched Caitlin and Emily tour the shop. “So, what do you think of Emily so far?”

“Raleigh, I came right over after I was reintroduced.”

“Ah.” Raleigh scratched the back of his neck. “Then I guess they haven’t told you the other bits of news?”

Mako slowly turned to face her copilot. “What news.”

“Uhm… Vanessa’s coming on, too… and David and Jaz are headed downtown to start on a real office and HQ.”

Mako blinked in surprise. “Vanessa? I thought she was on leave still?”

“Hermann’s working from home. He says it’ll allow him to focus on the math more than he could hope for here.”

“Mmmm… I think I’ll turn Vanessa loose on the exo systems with Emily, then. They’re both robotics experts, after all.”

“You know, we really need a better name for that.”

“Hmmmm…” Mako’s brows furrowed as she tried to come up with a name…

The door to the hangar opened, and Max sauntered in, Herc close behind. “Hey, guys.”

“Sir.” “Hey, Herc.” “Sir.”

Max whined and looked at Herc.

“Well, you silly dog, where’d you put it?”

Max looked around the hangar before sauntering over to the racks of piping and barking.

Raleigh was closer than Herc and looked at where Max was focused. “Max… How’d you get your ball in there? It’s up the pipe!”

“Sorede oshimal!” That’s it! Mako’s face lit up. “MAX!”

Herc looked at her, clearly confused. “What?”

“Mobility Augmentation eXoskeleton!” Mako grabbed a nearby sheet of paper and a pen and quickly sketched out a logo.

Raleigh managed to extract the ball from the pipe. “Go get it, boy!” Raleigh lobbed the ball across the shop, and the bulldog tore off after it.

Mako finished and held up the result. “I’m no graphic artist, but it’ll work for now.”
Raleigh nodded and gestured to the door. “Want to take a lunch break, too?”

Mako paused for a moment. “I hadn’t been hungry before, but now?” She held a hand to her stomach briefly. “Yes, let’s go get some food.”

“Any preference?”

“Food is food right now, Raleigh. Your choice.” Mako laced the fingers of her right hand through Raleigh’s left, and the two Rangers walked out the door to the car across the street.

Herc looked down to the ground to see Max waiting patiently, ball in his mouth. *Boss... play with me?* “Alright, you big baby. *Fetch!*

-.-.-

***PPI R&D Offices***

*August 7, 2025*

*1652*

Raleigh rolled back from the desk, watching the computer shut down. *I can’t wait for the Academy to be ready. We need new pilots desperately, and that’s the only way we can train new ones.* He grabbed a small stack of papers off the printer and exited his office, closing the door behind him.

“Hey, Mako?”

Mako’s head emerged from her office. “What’s up?”

“Ready to go?”

Mako shuffled slightly and looked down at the floor. “Actually… Jaz and I are going to the mall. She says I need to get some more nice clothes.”

Raleigh smiled and nodded. “Hey, it’s good for you to get out from time to time, yeah?”

“True.”

“So, dinner when you get back?”

“Sure!”

Raleigh hugged his copilot. “Alright. Try not to hurt her too badly, okay?”

Mako grinned. “No promises.”

“See you at home.” Raleigh walked down the hall. “Hey, Munchkin, can you give me a hand with something?”

The Australian looked up from her desk. “Sure. What do you need?”

Raleigh handed over the stack of papers. “This is the latest draft of the entry exam for the
Academy. I want a fresh set of eyes to go over it and see if it makes sense.”

Miranda took the papers and read the first few questions. *Hmm… Let’s see if I can actually finish this.* “No worries. Any time limits or restrictions?”

“Well, obviously no Google. And time limits… Hmm. Hadn’t thought of that. Say… 15 minutes?”

Miranda eyed the questions again. “No way. 30 would be better.”

“Okay, then, 30 minutes.”

“Then I will do my level best to answer these in half an hour.” She folded them and tucked them into her purse, then followed Raleigh out the door. “See you later tonight.”

“Why?”

“Going shopping with Mako and Jaz.”

“Oh. Well, have fun.”

"I intend to."

Raleigh smiled and headed to the car, while Miranda waited for Mako to come out of the office. After a few minutes, the Ranger finally appeared. "Jaz will be here in a minute or so."

“You sure you want to do this?”

Mako looked at her feet, clearly unsure about the situation. “Part of me doesn’t want to do this, just on principle, but the other part of me wants to do this as part of moving on and overcoming my fears.”

Miranda gave Mako a worried look as Jazmine pulled up to the curb. “Hey, ladies. Need a lift?”

Mako smiled at the temporary reprieve from her conversation. “Depends. Where are you going?” She waggled her eyebrows and opened the door. “Thanks for the ride, Jaz.”

“No problem.” She looked at Mako. “You sure you’re feeling okay? This is totally out of the ordinary for you.”

Mako buckled into the seat and closed the door. “Yes.” She hooked a thumb over her shoulder at Miranda. “I was just talking to Miranda about this, so I’ll just start from the beginning.”

Miranda and Jazmine waited patiently for Mako to start.

Mako took a deep breath, rested her head on the headrest, and closed her eyes. “This… This is a big step for me. *Willingly* going to a mall…” Mako took another deep breath. “Malls just bring up… painful memories.”

Miranda nodded. “Tokyo.”

“Yes. We were at the mall when Onibaba attacked. In the rush to escape, I…” Mako trailed off and swallowed hard. “I got separated from my parents. So, I started wandering around, looking for them.”

“And then Onibaba found you.”
Mako nodded. *MAAAAMAAAA!!!!* She winced as the memories resurfaced again, igniting old feelings. “I ran. What else could I do?”

Miranda placed a hand on Mako’s shoulder. “You did what you could. There’s no shame in that. I probably wouldn’t have had my wits about me enough to do that.”

Jazmine nodded. “Mako… You of all people would know that we’re safe from an attack right now.”

“It’s not fear of an attack that keeps me away… It’s the fear of the memories, the emotions, the feeling of utter helplessness… That’s what scares me.”

Miranda gave a gentle but firm squeeze to Mako’s shoulder. “Hey… That’s what we’re here for. You don’t have to bear this burden alone. It’s like piloting a Jaeger, yeah? The load of this will knock you down, but if you split the burden…”

Mako nodded slowly.

Jazmine smiled gently, even though Mako’s eyes were still closed. “And the store you mentioned by name?”

Mako’s cheeks flushed slightly. “Uhm… That’s…”

Miranda and Jazmine chuckled lightly at their friend’s embarrassment.

“I… I just want to have something to surprise Raleigh with.”

Both women’s laughs stopped.

“I… It’s hard to explain.”

Jazmine smiled gently. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to.”

Mako visibly relaxed at that, and she put her head against the headrest again.

-.-.

As Jazmine drove them to the mall, Miranda pulled out the practice test and began to read over it. *Okay… easy, easy, easy, little harder, easy…* Quickly, Miranda breezed through the test, finishing it before they got off the freeway some 10 minutes later. *Huh. That wasn’t so bad. I’d expected it to be worse than that.* She looked up and realized that they were just pulling into a parking space. Miranda looked back at the test, then at Mako. *Hmmm… Not now, but soon. New Year’s resolution, perhaps.*

The three women got out of the car and entered the mall, where they were immediately met by a salesperson eager to make quota for the day. “Can I help you find anything?”

Mako bit her lip nervously for a moment before replying. “Yes, actually. I was looking for some nice dresses. Casual, but somewhat classy, too.”

“I have just the thing. If you’ll follow me?”
Raleigh, Mako, and Miranda’s apartment
1845

Raleigh powered up his camera for the first time in over 5 years. To his relief, it worked perfectly. Good. Now I can put this to use tomorrow. But first… Raleigh fiddled with the settings briefly, then took a quick shot of the kitchen. Another few settings, and another photo. A few more, and a third shot. Then, Raleigh powered down the camera, removed the memory card, and slipped it into his old laptop. “Let’s see what we’ve got…”

As the Ranger worked on the photos, Sadie sauntered into the room and hopped into Raleigh’s lap. “Prrrttt?”

“Hey, fuzzball.” Raleigh scratched the ragdoll behind her ears, and the cat curled up in his lap. “And of course I have to get up.”

The cat purred and flexed her paws, clearly not planning on getting up soon.

Raleigh chuckled and returned to his work. Aha. I thought there might be a few new artifacts in the images. Might have to have the lenses serviced.

There was a rattle from the door, and both human and cat looked up to see who it was. Mako stepped through first, followed closely by Miranda. “Thanks for the lift!”

Jazmine must have waved, as the two women closed the door. Sadie decided to go greet her other humans and vacated Raleigh’s lap. “Prrrrttt?”

Miranda squatted down as best she could and picked up her cat. “Hey, sweetie.”

Mako came and leaned over Raleigh’s right shoulder, chin resting on his collarbone. “Whatcha doing?”

“Calibrating my camera sensor. It’s been a few years since I last used it, so I want to make sure it’s fully operational. Looks like it is.”

“Okay. I’m going to go put my new clothes away, then start on some dinner.”

“’Kay.”

Mako went into their room and hung up the new dresses, then looked at the smaller bag she had tucked at the bottom. Despite her best efforts, a portion of the label was still visible. “…ORIA’S SEC…” Mako turned around, seeking a good spot to hide it for the time being. Her eyes came to rest on the closet and Mako walked over to see what nooks and crannies she could either make for find. Gotta be something to use… She moved a few boxes and found the small manila envelope for Raleigh. It had been opened, and Mako was sorely tempted to look inside. She began to chew on her thumbnail, a habit she had acquired after Hong Kong. Finally, she put the envelope back where she found it, determined to find a different way to figure out what it was. A quick rearrangement of
three boxes resulted in a suitable pocket for Mako to stash the bag and its contents.

As Mako returned to the common area of the apartment, she noticed that Miranda had sprawled out on the couch, her belly sticking up into the air. She chuckled as Sadie hopped up onto her owner’s belly and curled up, contented for the moment, “Does she do that often?”

Miranda smiled. “Nope, she’s been oddly affectionate lately. Not complaining in the slightest, though.”

Mako walked over to the kitchen and poked her head into the fridge. *Hmmm... What do we have to cook with?* “Okay, how does stir fry sound?”

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*American River Parkway*

*Goethe Park access point*

*August 8, 2025*

*1802*

Raleigh smiled as the car eased into a parking spot and shut down. “Gotta love self driving cars.” He released his seatbelt and popped the trunk, then got out of the car to retrieve his camera bag and tripod from the back. “And I have to admit, this is a pretty nice spot.”

Mako also got out of the car, looking around. “It is. It’s nice to have such a nice parkway in the middle of a major city.” She grabbed the picnic basket that they’d borrowed from a neighbor and followed Raleigh out onto the grassy area near the bike trail. “So, what’s the plan?”

“No plan. I’ve never had much success with posed shots. And besides, I prefer the spontaneous, unexpected shots that reveal so much more of the character of a person.”

“You never cease to surprise me, Raleigh.” Mako smiled at her copilot.

“I have my inspired moments.” He waggled his eyebrows and took Mako’s right hand with his left. “See a spot you like?”

Mako looked over the field for a moment before pointing out a small knoll near the edge of the field. “I like that spot.”

“Then that spot it is.” Raleigh set up the tripod, then mounted the camera on it.

Mako set out the picnic dinner they’d brought, then watched as Raleigh aimed the camera at her and adjusted a few settings. “What are you doing?”

“Setting a random timer. It’ll make the camera take photos at intervals. Easier to get a spontaneous shot when you don’t know it’s about to happen.” He sat down on the blanket they’d brought and set out. “If you’re uncomfortable with it…”
“No, it’s fine. Just… curious.” Mako’s gaze grew distant for a moment. “You said you preferred to be on the other side of the lens, though.”

“For this, I’m eager to be here. With you.”

Mako smiled and handed Raleigh a plate.

-.-.-

Sacramento Chinatown

That same time

Jazmine eyed the restaurant that she and David… Scratch that, he’s Hannibal Chau again tonight… had arrived at. “You sure this is the right spot?”

Chau put on his iconic goggles. “Of course it is. Now, this isn’t to be shared with anyone you care about, okay, but this? This is the headquarters for the local branch of the Tong, and they owe me a favor or two. Couple other things… Keep your head down, speak when spoken to, and don’t elaborate any further than you have to when answering a question. Got it?”

Jazmine looked at her mentor. “Got it.”

“Good. Let’s go.” They exited the car and stepped into the restaurant, where two men waved metal detectors over them. Finding nothing, they proceeded into the back, where a small but well-furnished room awaited. Standing on the far side was a Chinese woman with a clean-shaven head. “Chau.”

“Fang, glad to see you’re still in one piece.”

“Who’s the báisè mogulz?”

Chau opened his mouth to reply, but to his surprise, Jazmine spoke up first. “I think the question you should be asking yourself, Fang, is ‘Why is she here?,’ not ‘Who’s the white bitch?’”

Fang glared at Jazmine for a moment while Chau rubbed his temples. “I told you…”

“Can it, Chau.” Jazmine calmly returned the glare, then smiled slightly as Fang backed down.

“I apologize for my… indiscretion. I was unaware you spoke Mandarin.”

“I’m full of surprises like that.”

Chau cleared his throat to get the attention of the two women. “Alright… let’s get down to business, shall we?”

-.-.-
Mako and Raleigh sat hand in hand and watched the parkway bustle with activity. Raleigh smiled as a pair of ducks whistled overhead. “You know, it’s been a while since I sat back and enjoyed life like this.”

Mako looked at him. “Yes… It’s good to see what we’re fighting for. What we’re trying to preserve.” She let go of his hands and leaned back, taking in the sunset. “A chance to unwind, too, before Sunday.”

“True.” Raleigh dug his hands into his pockets. “That’s going to be a painful day for a lot of people.”

“It always has been.”

Raleigh nodded. “But sometimes, the pain comes from cleaning the wound so it won’t fester, right?”

Mako smiled. “That’s surprisingly deep from you, Raleigh.” She ran her hand through his blonde hair. “You should do that more often.”

Raleigh smiled. “Nah. It happens when it happens. Like now.”

Mako’s eyebrows went up. “Oh?”

“I decided it’s time to reveal my secret project to you.”

Mako waited patiently as Raleigh dug into his pocket. A ring, perhaps?

“Aha! Gotcha.” Raleigh did indeed produce a small loop of metal. “I tried really hard to do this right, but it didn’t come out like I wanted.” He handed the misshapen ring to Mako, who looked it over with a practiced eye. “Sorry it’s a mess.”

“No, it’s fine.” Mako saw that Raleigh had indeed worked hard at it. “That’s probably better than I could have done. I’m more of a blade smith, remember?”

“True.”

Mako put the ring in her pocket. “I’ll find a good spot for that when we get back. Thank you, Raleigh.”

“You’re welcome, Mako.” He stood up and walked over to the camera. “Okay, one last photo before we call it a night?”

“Sure. What do you have in mind?”

“Something semi-posed. Go ahead and stand up.”

Mako did so, brushing pieces of grass from her favorite blue skirt. “Okay, now what?”
“Close your eyes.”

Mako gave Raleigh a skeptical look. “Really?”

“Just… please.”

“Okay.” Mako closed her eyes. “So, what had the plan for the ring been, proposal?”

“That was the plan, yes. But remember what training taught us?”

Mako grinned at the memories from the Academy. “‘No plan survives contact with the enemy.’ Combat Tactics 101.”

“Yeah, well, my enemy was my own inexperience.” Raleigh dug into his other pocket and retrieved a small case. “So, what do you do when your plan falls apart?”

“Call for backup?”

“Yep. So that’s what I did.” He snapped the case open. “Open your eyes, Mako.”

Mako did so, and saw Raleigh kneeling before her, a small black box in his hands. Within the box, riding on a small clip, was a ring. Mako clapped her hands to her mouth in surprise.

“Mako, will you marry me?”

Mako nodded, tears of happiness leaking from her eyes. “Yes. Yes, Raleigh, I will gladly marry you.”

Raleigh stood up and hugged her, relief clearly visible on his face, before holding her at arm’s length. “Wait, getting a little ahead of myself, right?”

Mako’s musical laugh filled the park. “Yes, you are.”

Raleigh took the ring out of the case and slipped it onto Mako’s finger. Oh thank god. It fits perfectly.

Mako took a moment to examine the ring. Unusually, it was stainless steel, and a rare alloy at that. Raleigh, you clever little sneak! I’d know that alloy anywhere! Equally rare was the two navy blue sapphires flanking an exquisite fire-orange diamond. It’s Gipsy. “It’s beautiful.”

Raleigh hugged Mako again. “Hey, I had to do something that went well with you.”

Mako smiled and leaned against her now-fiancée. “Suck up. You know I would have taken the one you made, right?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to do it right.” He kissed her on the top of her head. “And I can tell I hit the mark with the design.”

“It’s fantastic. You used a bit of Gipsy, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. One of the focal array rods from the left arm.”

“Thought so.” Mako looked at the camera. “Did you get a picture of us? I could have sworn I heard the shutter go off.”

“Oh yeah! I totally forgot!” Raleigh and Mako walked over to the camera and pulled up the picture.
“Aw… We look so cute.”

Mako smiled as she saw the photo. “So, who do we tell first?”

Raleigh’s grin disappeared. “Shit. Tendo’s probably got a bet going on this.”

“Yes, he certainly would do that. Let’s call him second.”

“Then, who do we call first?”

Mako didn’t hesitate at all. “Caitlin and Sergio. They’ve been in our shoes, remember? We do have a wedding to plan now.”

Raleigh’s face paled. “Oh, man. When will we have time for that?”

“We’ll make time.” She toyed with her ring for a moment, getting used to the feel of it. “Well, let’s pack up, shall we?”

Raleigh nodded and packed up his camera. “Munchkin’s gonna flip.”

“So will your sister.”

“True.” Raleigh smiled. “Hey, think we should turn Miranda loose on wedding planning?!”

Mako paused. “You know, that may be a good way to keep her from going crazy on maternity leave. Herc says she’s one of those people you never allow to get bored.”

“Oh, joy. Well, at least twins will keep her busy.”

Mako finished packing up their picnic and started towards the car, leaning happily against Raleigh. “So… About your secret project…”

Raleigh unlocked the car and released the trunk latch. “Was it worth the wait?”

Mako grinned as she put the basket into the trunk. “Oh, absolutely.” She grabbed Raleigh by the shoulders and pulled him down slightly. “And thank you.”

“You’re welmmmph.”

-.-.-

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap that took a while to write. But it was SO worth it.

This marks the midpoint (yes, you read that right) in Forged in Fire. Expect lots more shenanigans, tech, and fluffy goodness ahead!
And for those of you wondering what Jazmine and Chau were doing… It’ll come up next chapter. Promise.

HUGE shout out to artificiallifecreator/shmoo92 for helping me with a critical part of the story. I owe you a story with Shatterdome shenanigans!
The team starts making headway on the MAX suit's issues, while Mako is dealt a major setback on the Mark VI program.

Forced in Fire, Chapter 43: Progress

PPI R&D workshop
Sacramento, CA
August 11, 2025
0907 PDT

"Okay, Steph. Ready to try the suit again?" Mako looked at the former Ranger. "Or are you going to just keep using the wheelchair today?"

Stephanie growled as she swiped the battery pack off the workbench and clipped it into the spinal pickup of the MAX suit. "That last bit was overboard, Mako."

Mako shrugged and rolled Stephanie over to the treadmill that Vanessa had brought in. "Perhaps."

Vanessa walked in from across the street, a cup of tea in one hand and a tablet in the other. "Ready to try to walk today, Ms. Lanphier? I talked with Dr. Lightcap, and she is confident we've got it right this time. She said she made a simple error late at night trying to get it ready for you last time, and that's why there was that lag in the response."

Steph scowled at Mako, then grabbed hold of the rails of the treadmill. "Whatever. Let's just get this over with. I've got stuff to do this morning."

Vanessa waved the tablet at Mako in a shooing gesture. "Go on, Ms. Mori. Raleigh needs you across the street for something, by the way."

"Thank you, Vanessa." Mako nodded at the engineer, then turned to face Steph. "Hey... We'll get it right, I promise. It may take a few more times is all."

"Real encouraging, Mako."

Vanessa set down her tea and scowled at Mako. "Go."

Mako sighed and walked out the smaller side door. I wonder what Raleigh needs me for...
Raleigh poked his head into the break room to find Mako finishing making herself some tea. "Hey."

Mako walked over to Raleigh. "Vanessa said you wanted me for something?"

"Yeah... We're getting some more employees again."

"So soon after Emily and Vanessa?"

"Yeah, but they're in a different field."

"David and Jaz aren't wasting any time, are they."

"Nope."

"So, what field are we getting into this time?"

Raleigh leaned against the doorframe. "Aviation, apparently. A former USAF pilot who was part of the K-Day response is coming onboard as an aeronautical engineer. What for, I have no idea. You might get more out of her than I did..."

"She's here? Now?"

"Talking with Here." Raleigh tilted his head in the direction of the offices. "Want me to see if she's done?"

"No. I'm sure I'll meet up with her later."

Both Rangers looked towards the front door of the office as the bell jangled briefly, then at each other. "More visitors?"

Mako poked her head out into the hall. "Huh. Blue suit zoomie."

Raleigh leaned out behind Mako. "Wow. Jaz really wants to get the new branch up and running... two light colonels in a day?"

Mako looked over her right shoulder. That's not the one who was in earlier?"

"No. New one." Raleigh shrugged. "Guess you missed her today."

Mako raised an eyebrow at Raleigh. "Well, if she's going to be working in PPI, I'm sure she'll come in and say hello eventually." She shrugged and headed to her office. "Besides, I've got work to do... that Conn Pod won't design itself."

Raleigh hung in the doorway for a moment, then walked back into the break room. He saw Mako's
forgotten tea, still steaming on the table. Grabbing it with a sigh, Raleigh walked into Mako’s office, ducking around a holographic element floating near the doorway. "You forgot this."

"Just... set it on the desk?"

"Sure... but it's getting cold."

"Mmmhmm." Mako grabbed a stylus from a mug on her desk and began adjusting a duct on the inside of the Conn Pod hull.

Raleigh smiled as he watched Mako working. *I love it when she gets so focused on her work like that... she just tunes out the outside world and becomes the project.*

-.-.-

0945

Stephanie leaned on the handrails of the treadmill and slapped the OFF button. "Vanessa..."

"Yes?"

"Whatever you're trying to do... it's not working. That last set of steps I tried to do was worse than last week."

"Sorry. It's just... Frustrating. I mean, everything should work out, but there's something that keeps throwing it all off!"

Caitlin walked in and handed Stephanie a water bottle. "Then call it quits for now and let's go over the data. Emily, come on over and join the powwow."

The young mechanic and machinist hopped off the stool near the CNC lathe and jogged over to the group. "Whassup?"

Caitlin "grabbed" the holographic schematic of the MAX suit and dragged it to a tablet, then walked over to the huddle of engineers. "Steph, what would you say is the biggest issue with the suit right now?"

The former Ranger took a drink from the water bottle before responding. "It feels like there's still a small amount of lag in the system. I tell my leg to move, and there's just enough of a hesitation that it throws me off. Kinda like when you try to talk over the phone, but you can hear your voice coming back from the other end. There's just enough of a delay that it scrambles your train of thought and you just go 'Uhhhhhh...'"

Caitlin nodded. "So, there's a delay in the movement, or in the feedback signal?"

"I don't know. It just feels... off. I can't explain it."

Vanessa frowned and looked at the schematics. "Well, I think that we need to get another data point for this if we want to track down this flaw. Two or three more would be better, but even a single new opinion would be better than nothing."
Caitlin pulled her right pant leg up to reveal her prosthetic leg. "You've got one."

Vanessa frowned. "That's not quite the same."

"No, but it's close enough. It runs on much the same software." Stephanie began to unstrap the exoskeleton. "You guys want to start troubleshooting some more? I've got some stuff to do this morning."

Caitlin nodded and began to open up the hologram model of the MAX suit. "I thought we'd optimized all the hardware already. Do we have too much inductance somewhere? That'd cause the lag..."

Vanessa frowned as she joined Caitlin at the schematics. "It's not a hardware issue. We've got that totally dialed in now. So, it's a processing issue." She shot a glance at Caitlin. "Which is your area of expertise."

Caitlin grimaced. "Might want to take another look at that, then. Or, get a fresh set of eyes..." She scratched her head for a moment, then turned to Vanessa. "Say, didn't Hermann do some coding work on the Mark I's?"

Vanessa smiled. "Yes he did. Want me to take a copy of the code home?"

"If you would be so kind."

Emily leaned in and grabbed the processor unit. "What if we switched to a silver alloy for the conductors on the circuit boards? That'd reduce the resistance, and a little lag."

Caitlin shook her head. "Not enough to account for the delay Steph's talking about. It's, what, tenth of a second?"

Stephanie tossed the suit onto the work bench. "Bout that. Maybe a little less. Enough to be a serious problem."

A new voice came from the entryway. "Sounds like there's too much of a processing loop."

Caitlin turned around in surprise. "Miri? What are you doing here?"

"They wanted to pick my brain on some stuff. Mostly about who would be a good choice for commanding the rotary-wing branch."

Stephanie frowned. "You look familiar."

Miri smiled. "Shave about twelve years off and replace the silver eagles with railroad tracks."

Emily gaped. "You're Miriam Ramirez. You were one of the EVAC pilots on K-Day!"

Miriam bowed theatrically. "At your service."

Caitling laughed and waved her old friend over. "Let me guess. They wanted you for that commander slot?"

"Oh, no. Of course not." Miriam laughed. She gestured to the holodisplay. "Exoskeleton of some sort, right?"

Stephanie held up the hardware version. "Yes. This one's to get me walking again."
The helicopter pilot walked over to the display and looked the design over. "Looks sweet. If you made a full-body one, the DoD would be knocking on your door non-stop."

Vanessa frowned. "We're not ready for that yet. Besides, there's certainly a market for civilian use ones, like with Steph. Imagine how much of an improvement in quality of life this would be for a paraplegic."

"If we can get the damn thing to work right. Right now, though, it's a piece of crap." Stephanie began rolling her way towards the door. "Call me when you get the glitch sorted. I've got stuff to do."

Vanessa sighed and dragged the code over to a tablet. "I'll get Herman on Skype and see what we can find. I probably missed a semicolon somewhere, and he'll spot it." She took the tablet and walked out of the converted hangar after Stephanie.

Emily stared at Miriam for a little longer, then headed back over to the lathe she'd been working on earlier. "Cait, if you need me, I'll probably be cussing at the coolant pump on this thing."

Caitlin shut down the display and pulled a chair over. "So, they wanted your advice for the new StrikeHawk unit leader?"

"Yeah. I was surprised they didn't give me the pitch." Miriam smiled. "After all, flying a Pave Hawk near a Kaiju is old hat to me."

Caitlin laughed. "You're too much of a practical, get-your-hands-dirty leader for that kind of a posting." She picked up her water bottle and took a drink.

"Then why'd they ask me to be the Marshall for the San Francisco Shatterdome?"

Caitlin spat water across a nearby computer, then began coughing. "A Marshall? You?"

Miriam handed Caitlin a shop rag. "About my reaction, too."

"They must be desperate." Caitlin took the offered rag and began to clean off the computer. "Either that, or the new members of the Working Group want people who can actually lead."

"Well, that certainly explains why Herc is getting a promotion." Miriam settled onto a stool. "They want him to be in charge of all the Rangers."

"Well, that's actually a good choice. He's the most senior active Ranger we have."

"What about you?"

Caitlin pulled her right pant leg up to reveal her prosthetic leg. "They'll never let me strap into a Jaeger again."

"Hey, if anyone could find a way around that little issue, it'd be you."

"True... but Sergio won't be there for it." Caitlin tossed the rag into the "DIRTY" bin nearby. "He's got less than a month left."

"The docs have said that before, Cait. He's bounced back, what, four? Five times?"

"Yeah, but this one's the worst case yet. And he's done fighting. He won't say it, but I know he's given up."
"Why do you say that?" Miriam set a hand on Caitlin's shoulder. "Cait."

"He's being very open about his mortality lately. Lots of cracks about it. You know how he gets when he's made up his mind on something that makes him uneasy."

Miriam frowned. "Yes, I do. Sounds like him after K-Day. We'd all seen what Trespasser did, and he wasn't shy about voicing his concern about how high the cost would be if we had to fight another one." She looked out the open doors onto the flight line beyond. "It was scary how right he was."

"But we're still here." Caitlin shrugged. "How long that stays the case depends on how the next two years go."

"So I've heard. And since I'm probably going to wind up commanding a few Jaegers, mind helping a friend get up to speed on what I'm going to be dealing with?"

"One condition. Talk to Sergio, please. As a friend and former squadron mate."

"Deal. Where's he at?"

Caitlin made a mournful face. "Mather, at the VA hospital. Talking about end of life stuff."

"Then what good is me talking to him going to do? He's already doing that, it's a little late for me to change his mind."

"I'm not asking you to change his mind, Miri. Just... I dunno. Talk to him."

"Kay." Miriam nodded and pulled Caitlin into a hug. "Just hang in there, alright? And you've got my number if you ever need a friend to talk to."

Caitlin nodded. "Yeah."

"Now, tell me... How was that little Mexican joint in Philly?"

"-.-."

1207

Raleigh walked into the office with his arms full of bagged lunches. "LUNCH IS HERE!"

Miranda popped up beside Raleigh and snagged a bag. "Thanks."

Herc appeared in his doorway. "Thanks, Raleigh."

"No prob." He walked into the break room and set the rest of the bags down on the main table, then snagged his and Mako's. "Yo, Mako! Food!"

There was no response.

Raleigh sighed and walked into Mako's office to find her utterly fixated on her computer screen.
"Hey, lunch is here."

"Mhhhhmm."

Raleigh set a bag down and pulled out the hamburger within, then waved it under Mako's nose. Mako reared back in surprise. "Oh, you... That's not fair." She snagged the burger and glared at Raleigh. "You got Habit."

Raleigh grinned and headed out of her office. "The usual?"

"Sure." She returned her attention to the computer. 1210 already? Wow, I really got wrapped up in my work. "Hey, Raleigh?"

Raleigh returned with a glass of lemonade. "Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"No problem." He sat down and pulled out his own burger. "So, how goes the Conn Pod?"

"I'm running a stress analysis right now. After Otachi, I want the pressure hulls to be much tougher." Her gaze grew distant for a moment. "If we'd known about that earlier..."

"Hey." Raleigh leaned forward. "Don't blame yourself. You weren't the engineer who designed Typhoon's Conn Pod."

Mako nodded and returned to her burger.

"So, want to talk to Munchkin about swapping rooms tonight?"

Mako shrugged. "Sure."

"Hey... What's wrong?"

Mako sighed and set her burger down. "I'm... I can't describe it well." She looked at Raleigh. "I guess I'm feeling a little down after yesterday."

Raleigh rolled his chair over to Mako and pulled her into a hug. "That's why we're doing this... So that we don't get another K-Day."

Mako leaned into Raleigh and nodded. "I know... but there are days when I wonder if it'll be enough."

The computer chimed, and Raleigh let Mako go. "Survey says?"

Mako pulled up the results on the display. Several areas were highlighted in red. "Kuso. Again?"

She rubbed her temples and growled. "Every. Single. Time. It's always something else that fails. What am I missing?"

Raleigh pulled Mako away from the computer. "Easy. Don't keep obsessing over it."

"But it's going to get people killed!" Mako's eyes narrowed in anger. "Raleigh, I have to get this right-"

Raleigh put a finger on Mako's lips. "Stop. We've got how many other engineers available to work on this?"
Mako rolled her eyes.

"You know we've got someone with high compression experience, too. You've just been hesitant to ask her because she's not an actual engineer by training."

"I'm not, either, Raleigh."

"So, go drag Emily in here. Maybe she'll see something you've overlooked."

Mako's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Fine. I just don't know what I could have overlooked..."

Raleigh shrugged. "I don't know, either. Now, a steel reinforced concrete structure, I could probably eyeball and give a yea/nay on, but this?" He waved at the model on the screen. "Way above my level."

Mako glared at the screen before returning to her hamburger. "I guess a second set of eyes couldn't hurt."

---

Emily poked her head into Mako's office. "You wanted to see me?"

"Come here and take a look at this real quick." Mako pulled the Conn Pod design up on the holo display.

"What am I looking for?" Emily skillfully grabbed the pressure hull and spun it around. "Wait... Why are the walls so thin? And look at all these creases and welds." She looked at Mako. "Sorry to be blunt, but it's no wonder Crimson Typhoon bought it. These hulls aren't rated for extreme pressures. Hell, it's a miracle you survived Pitfall."

"So, any suggestions?"

"Yeah..." Emily "crushed" the model and tossed it into the holographic garbage can alongside the desk, eliciting a yelp of dismay from Mako. "Start over from the beginning. What's the strongest cross section in engineering?"

Mako's eyes narrowed. "A circle, of course. Why?"

Emily smiled and generated a ball in the display, then removed about half the inside diameter of it. "Boom. There's your basic pressure hull design. Anything else?"

Mako stared at the sphere for a moment before groaning. "I am such an idiot."

"Oh, and use titanium for it. No massive viewports, either."

"What?"

"Yeah. Isn't that what killed the Kaidanovskies? Breached front viewport?"
Mako nodded slowly, thinking over the changes she would now need to make to the Jaeger. "And escape pods?"

"How many times were they used successfully?"

Mako frowned. "Twice. Raleigh and myself."

"Out of how many losses?" Emily quirked an eyebrow. "Look, you can make the whole Pod an escape capsule."

"But with that much titanium, it'll never be buoyant enough to float."

"True. So, you add some applique layers which add buoyancy." Emily paused, then headed out of the office. "Be right back, gotta get something."

Mako eased into her chair and rubbed her eyes. This is going to set us back weeks, if not months... and the time it'll take to cast the hull will be much greater than if we were to use composites.

"Okay, got it." Emily tossed a magazine onto Mako's desk. "Glass minispheres embedded in a graphite epoxy matrix. Tough under pressure, chemical resistant, and buoyant enough to float an Abrams tank."

Mako eyed the cross sectioned material. "That... makes a lot of sense. So, what, we add bolt points for the applique panels and strap them on?"

"Sounds reasonable. Makes it easy to replace battle damaged segments, right?" Emily pulled a chair over and sat down. "So, now for the details. How big of an interior do we need..."

--

Mako, Raleigh, and Miranda's apartment

1806

Raleigh and Mako came through the door of the apartment with bags of groceries. "Munchkin, we're back!"

The Australian appeared from the hallway to the bedrooms. "So, what'd you get?"

Raleigh grabbed a package of cookies and handed them to Miranda. "These are for you..."

Miranda's eyes widened in shock. "Tim Tams???? Where did you find these?"

Mako smiled. "There's a British food store along Watt Avenue near the office. We stopped in to see if they had anything from Australia..."

Raleigh picked up where Mako trailed off. "Turns out, they'd just gotten a shipment in today."

Miranda gleefully tore open the package and pulled out a cookie. "Ohhhh, you guys are awesome. I haven't had a Tim Tam in years."
Mako leaned over and eyed the package. "I've never had one before. Can I..."

Miranda hissed playfully and clutched the package close. "Mine."

Raleigh laughed and handed Mako a box of Pocky. "You've got your own, Mako."

"Spoilsport."

Raleigh just smiled and set his bag down on the counter. "So, what's the dinner plan for tonight?"

Mako watched as Miranda practically inhaled the first Tim Tam. "Well, Miranda seems to be intent on having her package of cookies for dinner..."

"OI!"

"... But I was thinking of doing fajitas."

Raleigh nodded and began to put the groceries into the fridge. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Not at the moment, no." Mako snagged a bell pepper from the bag of groceries and set it aside. "Leave the onion?"

"Got it."

---

Raleigh sat down on the couch with a groan. "Oooh, that was a long day."

Mako flopped onto the couch next to Raleigh, then lay in his lap. "You had a long day?"

"Yeah. You wanna trade tomorrow? I've got seven different potential instructors to call."

Mako shook her head. "No thank you. I'd much prefer to continue with the Conn Pod redesign."

Miranda opened the cupboard and retrieved her Tim Tams. "You guys are redesigning the Conn Pod?"

Mako sighed. "I overlooked some basic engineering principles when redesigning. Makes me wonder what else I've missed."

Raleigh rubbed Mako's shoulder. "Hey. Relax. You'll get it sorted out."

"I'm with Raleigh. You'll get it done, Mako." Miranda settled into a chair with a groan. "Ooof. Word of advice for you two... Twins suck."

Mako laughed. "Duly noted."

Raleigh nodded. "On the subject of the twins... Mako and I wanted to offer you the master bedroom."

"Really? I though you could use the space."

Mako shook her head. "No. It's too much space, to be honest. We don't need much room, and
you're going to need quite a bit for the twins when they arrive, right?"

"I suppose so..."

Raleigh shrugged. "Besides, your room is about the same size as the rooms in Ranger Country. We're used to it."

"You sure you want to give up the extra space?"

Mako and Raleigh responded in unison. "Yes."

"Okay... so, when do you want to switch?"

"This weekend?" Raleigh shrugged. "We're pretty flexible about it."

"Alright. Saturday it is." Miranda gleefully dug into the package of cookies. "Mmmm... Thank you again for these."

"You're welcome." Mako smiled, then laughed as Sadie came into the room. "Hey, Sadie."

The grey cat came over to Mako and promptly hopped into Mako's lap, where she settled down and started to purr.

Miranda glared over her cookies at her cat. "Traitor."

Chapter End Notes

Aaand we're back! Didn't expect to be gone for a year, but that's life. I've finally gotten settled in after a major move to the Seattle-Tacoma region, so I'm hoping to pick up the writing again. Thanks for the patience and understanding, everyone.
Acceptance

Chapter Summary

The MAX program gets back on track, and Stephanie has a much needed conversation with Raleigh and Mako.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the long break, folks. Kinda lost motivation for writing for quite some time. But, we're back with a new chapter, and hopefully this will be the start of a new streak of chapters. Hopefully.

Forged in Fire, Chapter 44: Acceptance

PPI R&D Offices
Sacramento, CA
August 14, 2025
1157 PDT

"Look, every time you guys tinker with it, it doesn't get any better! So QUIT MESSING WITH IT!"
Hermann hurried out of the path of Stephanie as she rolled out the door of the offices. "I take it that the MAX is having issues still."
"No shit, Sherlock. I'm about ready to call it quits and leave." Stephanie glared over her shoulder.
"I mean, I understand that they think they're helping... But this..." She waved at her wheelchair.
"This is part of who I am now. A reminder of how massively Kennedy and I fucked up the Seattle drop."
"I don't recall it being, as you so crudely put it, a 'fucked up' drop."
"We didn't stop the Kaiju before landfall. Hell, it got almost all the way up Puget Sound before we managed to engage it."
"Casualties were surprisingly light, given the location of the battle."
"Hermann, just stop, okay? It's not helping."
Hermann scowled, but relented. "Then what would help, Ms. Lanphier?"
Stephanie sighed. "Just... convince your wife to leave me alone for now. Please?"
"I will do my best, but I give no promises."
Stephanie nodded and rolled down the sidewalk.
Hermann smiled and started towards the offices again, only to have to dodge Raleigh as he hurried out the door. "Steph, wait up just a second!"
"Rough day in the office, Mr. Becket?"
"Yeah... Oh, come on, Steph!" Raleigh took off after the other Ranger.
Hermann finally made it through the door and into the offices. "Vanessa?"
The new receptionist(secretary hooked a thumb in the direction of the hallway. "Break room. Quite an argument brewing there, so mind your head."
"Thank you for the warning." Hermann bowed his head and made his way down the hall,
following the sounds of several voices.  
"I'm telling you, we're not getting any improvements with it anymore. Steph's right."  
"Nonsense. We've got a lot of data from her time in Hydra Corinthian to draw on, so I don't see why it's not reducing the feedback lag."

Hermann cleared his throat as he entered the room. "I... might have an answer to that, actually." Vanessa set down her mug and wrapped Hermann in a hug. She switched to German for some privacy. "Hey. How's our daughter?"

"Sleeping soundly, thankfully. The sitter will contact me if things change." Hermann smiled, then turned to the rest of the group. "Now, about the the MAX issues..."

Mako quickly pulled out a tablet and handed it to Hermann, who waved it off. "We've made some coding changes..."

"And I don't have to look at them to tell you what's wrong," Hermann sat down in a chair, put his glasses on, and produced his own tablet. "You're using her data from Hydra Corinthian, yes?"

Caitlin looked over Hermann's shoulder as he pulled up some data. "Yeah. We figured it'd give us a head start."

Hermann nodded slowly and scrolled through lines of code. "But, isn't the data from any of the Jaegers going to be impacted by the second pilot?"

The room fell silent for a moment before a chorus of groans and curses broke out.

"I figured as much. As it turns out, the code's delay is because it keeps looking for that second pilot to also give feedback to. Ah, here it is." He held up the tablet for the team to see. "I took the liberty of replacing much of your work on signal processing and feedback with archival code from the first experiments with the Pons, with some refinements based off Dr. Lightcap's work for her prosthetic. It should be much faster at processing data... but it will require Ms. Lanphier to start from scratch again."

Mako groaned again and headed to the door. "Right. Going to make myself scarce for that conversation."

Caitlin gave a dismayed sigh and grabbed Mako's shoulder. "Nope, team effort. She can't kick all of our butts at the same time. Gottlieb, why would she need to start over?"

Hermann handed Caitlin the tablet with one hand and removed his glasses with the other. "Because you took the route that looked easiest to get a working prototype, not the route that would have led to a successful product. It would have worked for this one person, but would have been an abysmal failure for anyone else. Now, it has genetic algorithms for data processing, allowing the same base code to adapt to whoever uses it."

Vanessa kissed Hermann on the forehead. "Thank you, dear. Shall we go get some lunch while you're here?"

"Gladly." Hermann shut down his tablet. "Dr. Lightcap, I uploaded the new code to my partition of the PPDC server network. You should be able to find it under the 'MAX' folder."

Caitlin nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Gottlieb."

Hermann nodded once, tucked his tablet away, and headed for the door, leaving Mako to confer with Caitlin. "So... Want me to go get Steph?"

"If you would be so kind, Mako, that'd be much appreciated. I'll start the update and then go get us some lunch."

Mako nodded and hopped out of her chair. Now, where did she... Ah. Raleigh's with her. "Okay, I'll be back in a bit. I think Raleigh's finally convinced Steph to open up to him."

-.-.-

Five minutes earlier...

Raleigh jogged down the sidewalk in pursuit of Stephanie. "Steph, wait up!"

"No, Raleigh. Just leave me alone."

"Steph... You know I can't do that right now." Raleigh caught up with her and slowed to a walk.
"We need to talk. About you."
Stephanie stopped her wheelchair and set the parking brakes. "Raleigh, I don't want to talk right now. Just please give me some space."
"I've given you space, and you're using it to avoid this talk. You knew it was coming."
Stephanie looked at the ground in front of her, pointedly avoiding Raleigh's knowing look. "Yes."
"I know there's no good time for this, but the longer you put it off, the harder it will be." He sat down on the grass and stared through the nearby fence at the bustling flightline. "We need to talk about the Seattle drop."
Stephanie scoffed. "What's to tell? I know you've read the report."
"I have. But that's the official, clinical report." He smiled. "But, we're both experienced Rangers, and we know that the reports can't capture everything. There are things that only another Ranger could understand. Things that we leave out of the official reports because no one on the brass would believe us."
"Yeah." Stephanie sighed.
"So... what happened?"
Stephanie watched a fire tanker taxi past before responding. "Well, it all went to shit right from the start. He was well inside the Straits of Juan de Fuca by the time we made it up from Los Angeles, so we dropped into the shipping channel about ten miles north of Elliot Bay, trying to head the bastard off. Turned out that he was prepared for our usual grab-and-smash opener."
"Oh?"
"You ever seen a hagfish before?"
"Not in person, no-oh. The slime."
"Yep. We laid hands on him, and all of a sudden we're enveloped in this thick black cloud of goop, and the Kaiju just blitzes past us at twenty knots as pretty as you please. By the time we got clear of the cloud of slime and cleared the intakes, he was halfway to Seattle."
"So you raced after him across the mudflats."
"Probably not one of our brighter ideas, but it was faster than swimming or trying to run in two hundred feet of water or so. Got there just as he made the turn into Elliot Bay proper and tried to grab him again. Another burst of slime and he headed towards the cruise ship terminal."
"Right. So you chased him into the gap between the piers."
"Yeah, and we finally were able to land our first blow. Dear God, that crackling feeling when you land a solid blow and the bones in the Kaiju yield... It felt so damn good to finally get that. Kennedy was grinning from ear to ear."
Raleigh smiled as he recalled the feeling. "Yeah, that is a good feeling. You know you've hurt it."
"Exactly." Stephanie sighed and stared into the distance. "Then it finally got its feet under it and bucked hard against our legs and knocked us back a few steps. Gave it the room it needed to make a run towards downtown."
"And then?"
"We finally brought out the claws and got a solid grip on him. Twirled him around and tried to toss him towards deeper water."
"So, why'd he wind up going towards the port?"
"You ever grabbed a lizard by the tail?" Seeing Raleigh shake his head, Stephanie sighed. "A lizard's tail can break off as an escape mechanism. This Kaiju could do the same, leaving us with his tail in our hands and the body flying towards the port. So we chased after him and tried to grab him in the port. Finally managed to tackle him by kicking him into the football stadium. Sorry about that, by the way. I know you love your Seahawks, but..."
"I know. Sometimes you just need to have an empty building to drop on a Kaiju to slow it down."
"Yeah. So we tackle him and wrap him up in a bear hug."
"And that's when he dug his hind legs into your right leg and tore it loose."
There was a lengthy silence. "You know better than most Rangers what that feels like, Raleigh."
"Yeah. I do. Hurts like hell."
Mako walked up and silently sat down with Raleigh.
Stephanie eyed Mako for a moment before continuing. "It really did hurt. Not just the loss of the limb... the electrical burns."

Mako slid up a sleeve to reveal her own set of scars around her right shoulder. "Marks of a seasoned Ranger, no?"

"Yeah, but this was worse than the usual localized overloads from battle damage. It threw us off balance, you know? Like when you get hit upside the head real hard in the Kwoon when someone doesn't pull their punch." Steph paused, obviously fighting back tears. "And that's when Kennedy just... knew. Somehow, some way, she knew this was the end of the line for us." Another pause. "I guess I did too, to an extent. I mean, we both knew... we all knew, that sometimes, the only victory is one where both sides die. And we always knew, to an intellectual extent, that each drop could be our last. But... it never seems real, the fact that you could actually die out there, doesn't really sink in until you're staring the Grim Reaper in the face and you realize he's staring back."

Mako and Raleigh nodded in unison, fully aware of the feeling.

"But, yeah. Kennedy just... got real quiet, even in the Drift. It was only a moment, barely long enough to register for us, let alone for the data logs. But... she was at peace with the fact that she was probably about to die. And then, it was over, and... she hit the trigger on Hydra's Breath."

Steph closed her eyes and hung her head. "Next thing that I remember, we were sailing through the air over the port, tumbling, and I remember watching the loose bits of crap knocked loose floating around and then, I realized that the ground was getting awful close and..."

Raleigh got up and wrapped an arm around Stephanie's shoulders. She leaned forward and started to fall from her wheelchair. Shitshitshit.

Mako was suddenly at Steph's other side and helped her down onto the grass alongside the sidewalk. "Hey. Steph, you okay?"

Stephanie started sobbing and curled up as best she could.

Raleigh eased her into his lap and held her. "Shh... Let it out. Mako, gimme a hand here."

"With what?" Mako was visibly confused and alarmed.

"Back pocket, left side, I have a small pack of tissues. Could you...?"

Mako fished the plastic package out and removed one. "Here."

"Thanks. Hey, it's okay, Steph. Here, take this." He handed Stephanie the tissue, who nodded and grabbed it.

Mako looked on, worried. "Should I... I don't know, go get someone?"

Raleigh shook his head. "Nah, we got this. Cait and Herc have enough to worry about right now."

Mako nodded and sat down next to Raleigh. "So... what now?"

Raleigh hugged Stephanie again. "We let Steph vent some more, be here for her. She'll talk again when she's ready."

Mako sighed and leaned against Raleigh. "Were you like this after...?"

"Not exactly, no. Didn't have two friends to comfort me." He smiled sadly for a moment. "But the rest of it, yeah." Raleigh sighed and looked into the distance. "Having your copilot violently torn from the Drift like that... It's not easy on your psyche." He looked at Mako. "You've felt some of it, but that's... It's like seeing the aftermath of a car crash. You can see that it was violent, can see what happened... but you weren't there. It's a different thing altogether to be in the middle of it."

Mako nodded slowly, recalling Raleigh's RABIT back in January.

There was a long pause before Stephanie blew her nose and tossed the tissue aside. "h-How..."

Raleigh took a long, slow breath. "How did it feel to me?"

Stephanie nodded slowly.

"Like you said, there was a brief moment of... clarity? Acceptance? Yancy knew that he wasn't going to make it." Raleigh hung his head and closed his eyes. "He accepted that fact, but it didn't make it any less terrifying. There's a feeling of... Helplessness, I guess? Knowing that whatever happens is beyond your control."

Stephanie nodded again.

"And then... Knifehead pulled him away. There was a brief flash of pain as his legs hit the Conn Pod hull, and then... Gone. Nothing." Raleigh tilted his head back and opened his eyes to the
"And then you realize it at every level. Your copilot, the one person in the world who knows you, the person who you've linked minds with and shared so much... They're gone, and they're not coming back. It feels like the world's just dropped out from under you and torn your soul out with it."

Mako nodded slowly. "I think that's just part of the feeling of loss, but still..."

Stephanie nodded again and plucked another tissue from the package. "And after that?"

Raleigh looked her square in the eyes. "After I woke up in the hospital, I was... off balance. Not physically, but emotionally. The bond you form in the Drift... It's more than just memories. I heard the Jessops describe it as having a fragment of your soul stay with your copilot. But when your copilot dies... so does that fragment. And since you've made a space in your mind, your soul, for that fragment... it leaves a hole there in the shape of your copilot."

"So... how do I close that hole? Drift with someone new?"

"No. Honestly, I think that'd make it worse, if you Drifted while the 'wound' is fresh. Like... like trying to use a torn muscle too soon."

Stephanie's gaze grew distant. "But you Drifted with Mako."

Mako frowned. "Only after nearly five years. And honestly, it was a gamble according to the 'experts' in Neurosci."

Raleigh nodded. "Besides, our first Drift was rougher than most. Strong, sure, but... turbulent, and filled with hazards and dangers you can't see in the flow. Like a river swollen with snowmelt in spring."

Stephanie nodded slowly, still gazing into the distance. "So, what can I do? Just carry on like nothing happened?"

"No, not like that. You do need to carry on, but ignoring your losses, hiding from them... that's not healthy. Trust me."

Mako gently smacked the back of Raleigh's head. "Yes, you would know about that, wouldn't you."

"Hey, at least I can provide some advice. Not all of it will be helpful as I can only speak for what worked for me. You'll be different, Steph, as will the techniques that do and don't work for you. Just... let us know if you need help. That's what friends are for."

Stephanie took a deep breath, nodded slowly, and looked at her wheelchair. "Yeah... Thank you, Raleigh. You were right... I needed this talk. It's painful, yes, but needed."

Mako caught Stephanie's gaze at her chair. "Want help getting in, or do you have things under control?"

"Nah, I got it. Thanks for asking, though." Stephanie levered herself back into her chair. "So, you guys figure out what was going wrong with the damned suit? Because if the answer is no..." She fixed Mako with a pointed glare.

Mako nodded. "Yes, it took an outsider's perspective to get us on the right track, but we are pretty confident that we've got it nailed down at this point. We're compiling the new code over lunch. If... you're willing to keep going. If not, I understand."

Raleigh nodded at the two women. "I'll go see who drew lunch duty today. See you back at the office."

Stephanie nodded back at Raleigh, then turned back to Mako. "How much of a setback are we talking?"

Mako grimaced and looked at her feet. "Pretty much a fresh start, in terms of actually testing the suit and training the computer." She looked back at Stephanie and met her gaze. "I know, it's taking longer than we'd hoped, but..."

"Hey, that's R&D for you." Stephanie shrugged. "Shit happens." She released the parking brakes on her wheelchair and started rolling back to the offices. "Just keep in mind, that I'm just testing this. No guarantees I'll ever use it myself, or that all paraplegics will want to use it, either. Some folks are perfectly fine with wheelchairs."

Mako walked alongside Stephanie. "Oh, no. That's not the point. The point is to provide people with options. If they want to use a MAX in addition to, or in place of, a wheelchair, that's their call,
not ours. But that's still a ways out. We need to prove it works first."
"Mmmm, good point... Which is where I come in." Stephanie nodded slowly. "But, a single data point doesn't make a trend or pattern. We'll need other testers."
"Again, let's not get ahead of ourselves. If we can't fix that feedback bug, this won't work for anyone."
"Also a good point. Let's get some lunch, then. We've got a long afternoon in the hangar ahead of us, I suspect."
Mako stopped and faced Stephanie. "You sure you're okay with this? I don't want to force you into this..."
"Well, Raleigh said that I should carry on. And I still want to help make people's lives better, even if I can't do so from the Conn Pod anymore. And this is probably the closest I'll ever come to strapping into a Jaeger again. So yeah, I want to do this." She started rolling again with a sly smile. "But first, lunch. You know how crabby I get when I'm hungry."
Meet the New Boss

Forged in Fire, Chapter 45: Meet the New Boss

PPI R&D Offices

Sacramento, CA

August 18, 2025

0711 PDT

"Mr. Choi, What are you doing to that poor coffee machine?"

Tendo looked up at the new voice and saw Miriam Ramirez leaning against the doorway of the break room. "Oh, sorry, ma'am. Didn't realize there was anyone else in at this time."

"Wanted to get an early start on reviewing some reports from the last war. I want to see if there's any areas for improvement this time." She walked over to Tendo's table. "What did the coffee machine do to deserve a complete teardown?"

"Well, it can't make what Icebox survivors call 'milspec' coffee." Tendo picked up one of the components and held it up towards the ceiling lights for inspection.

"'Milspec'? Okay, color me curious."

Tendo put the component down and began to inspect another. "Term came from an old Navy sailor who I worked with before K-Day. He'd somehow managed to find out what the best parts of each military branch's coffee was, and rolled it into a single blend. He taught me how to make it while I worked the ferries in the Bay, and I took it with me into the PPDC. We ran on the stuff in Alaska, guzzled it like a tank burns fuel." He leaned back in his chair and eyed the new Marshall. "The big issue is doing it in small quantities, like for here. Most 'domestic' machines simply can't make it happen without some mods. Thus, teardown." He gestured at the dismantled appliance. "I'll have it back together in another ten minutes or so, and coffee will be ready by the bottom of the hour."

"Fast work, Mr. Choi." Miriam walked over to the sink and filled a teapot with water, then set it on a hotplate. "I'll have to try it later, but for now, I'll settle for instant coffee."

"Yuck. Can't imagine trying to survive on that stuff. No disrespect, of course." Tendo turned back to his work on the coffee machine and began to adjust several controls on a circuit board.

"Well, I developed a tolerance for the stuff in Syria, back in '17 and '18. CASEVAC missions for our 'limited' boots on the ground presence." Miriam looked past the wall in front of her. "Stupid leaders making stupid decisions, getting people hurt or killed." She turned to face Tendo. "That's why I'm digging into the reports from the first round of this war, trying to see if there's places we can improve. Ranger safety, repair times, anything."

Tendo set down his tools and frowned. "Well, I know Mako's working on completely revamping the Conn Pod designs to reduce the chance of a hull breach, but there's still room for improvement on that front. I mean, you heard what happened to Steph, right?"
Miriam nodded.

Tendo looked at the parts on the table, frowned again, and looked up at Miriam. "Y'know, just had a thought. There were only two fallen Ranger teams that didn't get taken down by a crew injury or Pod breach. And both of those were prompt radiation poisoning."

"How many drowned in the Conn Pod?"

Tendo's face fell. "Too many. Far too many."

"So, possible solutions for that are... what?"

Tendo furrowed his brows and started reassembling the coffee machine. "Well, we could do drysuit-style Drive Suits, and completely seal them. Maybe... hmmm. I'll get back to you later on that. Need to make some calls to Hong Kong, talk with the techs there. Maybe rope our Rangers in on that, too."

Miriam smiled as the tea kettle began to whistle. "Sounds like a plan, Mr. Choi. Keep me informed."

"Yes, ma'am."

---

0815

Mako settled in front of her computer and pulled up the design for the Conn Pod. *Let's see what the team in Tokyo has done with the syntactic foam applique panels...*

Miriam poked her head in the door. "Ms. Mori, sorry to intrude like this..."

"Please, call me Mako, ma'am. And it's okay, I'm just getting started for the day, so it's not an intrusion." Mako gestured to a chair in front of her desk. "What can I help you with?"

"Well, I'm going to be a Shatterdome Marshall, so I figured I should have at least a passing understanding of Jaeger engineering. And who better to ask than yourself?" Miriam looked at the holographic display between her and Mako. "I take it that this is the new Conn Pod design?"

"Yes. Just looking over the updates from the team in Tokyo." Mako keyed in a few quick commands, and several areas began to blink brightly. "Hmmm... looks like they added a few centimeters to the syntactic foam."

"Pardon my ignorance, but... Syntactic foam?"

"Oh! It's a mix of glass microspheres and epoxy that is lighter than water, but able to withstand significant pressure. We're using it to provide positive buoyancy for the Conn Pod if it gets separated from the Jaeger, either by battle damage or by ejection as a last-resort escape method." Mako pulled up the changelog and skimmed through it. "The team of engineers from Fuji Heavy Industries added 2.7 centimeters of thickness to the layer of the foam, to give some extra margin for flotation. Can't argue with that."

"So, you've started contracting out some of the engineering work?" Miriam watched as Mako began to review the other changes.

"Yes, it's getting to be too much for me to handle on my own. I knew this point would come, but I
just wasn't expecting it to be quite so early on in the design phase.” Mako paused her review and looked at Miriam. "It's hard to let go of complete responsibility of your personal project and let others in on it... but it needs to be done, especially as I lack experience in a lot of engineering fields that will have a direct impact on the production of the Jaegers."

"From what I've heard, that's normal, Mako. And yeah, it is hard to hand off a project you've sunk a lot of time and energy into. But, as you said, it does need to be done... especially since I need you to help with stuff that your personal experiences will be invaluable in. Well, you and Mr. Becket both."

"Such as?"

"I want to make sure we get our Rangers back from combat as fit and healthy as possible."

Mako instinctively rubbed her right shoulder, feeling the circuitry burns beneath her shirt. "That may not always be possible. We're soldiers, ma'am, albeit of a very different breed than most. Injuries come with the job."

"But, we can prevent or minimize some of those, correct? Things like sprains, broken bones, dislocated joints, those kinds of injuries, right? I mean, look at Ms. Lanphier. That injury should have been preventable."

Mako fixed Miriam with a fiery glare. "Until you step into that Conn Pod, ma'am, you have no idea what we face, or the risks we have to take in combat."

"Then show me. Show me, at full scale, the current pilot rig."

Mako sighed, shrugged, and pulled the appropriate schematics up. "This is the ones we are currently planning on using. They're legacy Mark V rigs. Yes, you get tossed around a lot, but you're secure."

Miriam stepped "into" the holographic model of the rig, and it "snapped" to her arms, back, and feet. "God, this is some serious Tony Stark stuff. Can't wait to see what other firms can do with holographic interfaces like this." She moved her arms, and the arm segments of the rig followed her as if she were wearing a Drive Suit. "Motion matching is great, but how much protection against shock loads do these provide?"

Mako tried to stifle the wince that she felt as she remembered her two combat drops, but some managed to make it to her face.

"I take it that it doesn't provide a whole lot."

"We... do get bounced around a lot."

"And why the separate foot locks, rather than having them integrated into the rest of the rig?"

Mako bit her lip as she thought. "I remember that Brawler Yukon had that kind of rig, but... I don't know why exactly we moved away from it. I know that it's caused some issues in the past, sprained ankles and such." She turned her attention to the computer and called up a new file. "Here, I'm going to swap the left rig for a Brawler Yukon rig."

There was a knock at the door and both women looked at the source: Raleigh, holding a steaming coffee mug. "Hey, Mako... Tendo finally fixed the coffee machine. There's a fresh pot of the Good Stuff."
Mako grinned as she heard the capital letters and hurried to the door. "It's about time he got those mods done." She took the mug from Raleigh, took a deep whiff of the steam coming off it. "Ohhhh... Thank you, Tendo."

Raleigh stepped into the office proper and eyed the projection. "Working on a new rig, huh?"

Mako let out a contented sigh as she took a sip of the coffee. "Marshall Ramirez wants to see if there's any spots we can improve the safety of the rig."

Miriam nodded and stepped beyond the reach of the holographic rig, which returned to a ready position. "Combat-ready Rangers are an incredibly valuable resource, as they're, what, one in 10 million?"

Mako looked over her coffee mug. "Try an order of magnitude more rare. Current research puts that figure closer to 1 in 100 million."

Miriam let out a respectful whistle as the fact sank in. "So, only 75 pairs in the world?"

"That's based off of some old data, though. Mako and I kinda threw a wrench in that formula. Our best projections at the moment are still pointing to less than 200 pairs, though, so pairings are still hard to find." Raleigh eyed the rig that Miriam had been in. "Well, a good starting point would be putting dampeners on these, to help soften sudden shock loads, like from taking a solid whack to the Conn Pod. Not only would it help prevent injuries, it'd get us back into stance and into alignment that much faster." He looked at Mako. "How hard could that... Oh. Heh." He grinned. "I'll leave you to your brainstorm."

Miriam watched as Mako grabbed a stylus off the desk and hurried over to the computer. "What's going on?"

Raleigh tilted his head towards the doorway. "Mako's got this... 'Lightbulb...' face."

Miriam chuckled at his decent impression of Gru, and walked out of Mako's office. "So, what, come back in a few hours and see what she's come up with?"

"Pretty much. When she gets totally focused, I'll have to go in and break her train of thought to get her to eat. Kinda cute, actually." Raleigh settled into his own office. "So, going on a bit of a safety witch hunt, I hear."

"More than a bit. In my review of the first phase of the war, I've found that there were a lot of cases of 'we don't have time to come up with a better solution' being thrown around the Jaeger program. I want to try and remove as many as practical, as quickly as possible. After all, Jaegers are replaceable. Rangers? Not so much."

Raleigh looked Miriam in the eyes. "Ma'am, it's rare to lose the mount and get the riders back. As the old meme went, I'm the outlier and should not be counted."

"Well, then consider my mission to be making you the start of a trend, and not an outlying data point." Miriam gestured to Raleigh's computer. "How goes the training syllabus?"

"Coming together nicely. Need to pester Mako to finish with her section, but I'm willing to wait a little to let her hand off most of the Jaeger engineering before bothering her with that."

"Fair enough. Any other projects you're busy with?"

"Not really. The curriculum is starting to come together nicely, so I'm finding myself having some
spare time. Why, you have something in mind?"

"I've tasked Mr. Choi with coming up with improvements to the Drive Suits to better protect the Rangers who wear them. Perhaps you can provide some insight from the Ranger's perspective to help refine the design and identify other areas for improvement?"

"Sure. That'll mesh well with Mako's current fixation." Raleigh smiled and nodded in the direction of Mako's office. "Anything else I can do to help, ma'am?"

"Not today, no. But in a few days, I may be having you and Mako in my office for a conversation about some stuff. Not sure exactly what yet, but we'll cross that bridge when we get there." 

"Sounds like a plan. Oh, and Mako's going to be out the first week of September, and I'm probably going to be gone for the first few days to help her."

"So I heard. Wisdom teeth suck."

"Eh. She's simply having them pulled, not extracted like I did."

"Ditto. Alright, I'll let you get to work, Mr. Becket." Miriam headed out into the hallway and towards her office. Moving up in the world, Miri. An office to yourself? Boomer will have a field day with that...

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1224

Miriam walked into her office and settled into the seat behind the desk. "Let's see what brush fires I need to put out over lunch..."

As if on cue, a knock came from the doorframe. Miriam looked up to see Herc standing in the doorway. "Come on in, Herc. What's up?"

"We... have a small problem." Herc settled into a chair and closed the office door. 

"We... have a small problem." Herc settled into a chair and closed the office door. 

Miriam raised an eyebrow. "Explain, please."

"You familiar with the V-50 Jumphawks we use for transporting Jaegers?"

"Not by professional contact, no, but I've seen one up close at an airshow back in, oh, 2021? Something like that. An uglier mishmash of technologies and upgrades you'll be hard pressed to find."

Herc sighed. "Yeah, they're not pretty, but they've gotten the job done for the time being."

"I hear that 'but', Herc. Spill."

"The fleet's tired and worn out, Miriam. We need new lift capacity. I turned some of the aviation branch in Hong Kong loose on getting quotes for a second SLEP and new build Jumphawks." Herc rubbed his temples. "It's not good."

"On a scale of 'depot overhaul' to 'JSF boondoggle', how bad are we talking?"

"The responses on SLEPs range from 'You don't have that kind of money' to flat out 'We won't even lay eyes on your birds, let alone quote you for a SLEP.' And Boeing Vertol is asking an arm and a leg for new build. Jaeger limbs, I might add."
Miriam leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. "Well, shit. Any bright ideas?"

"Yeah, but promise you won't laugh."

"Right now, anything is on the table."

Herc leaned on Miriam's desk. "Okay, did you see that project from Imabari Shipbuilding a few years back, right after the Wall began to get built?"

"Imabari... rings a bell but can't peg why. Refresh my memory."

"Think Marvel Helicarrier, but real life. Imabari wanted to use a fleet of what they called HULCs, or Hovering Utility Large Carriers, to carry containers and bulk goods across the Pacific after the Wall sealed it off. The project got put on hold due to the reduced need for shipments across the Pacific, but there's still three nearly complete airframes sitting in 'drydock' near Hiroshima."

Miriam sat back upright in her chair. "You have my attention now."

"I dropped them a line about three weeks ago, asked if they thought there was any chance of converting them into Jaeger carriers. They said that they would look into it."

"Go on."

"They just called back."

Miriam tried to stifle the smile on her face, without success. "Quit teasing, Herc. Out with it."

Herc grinned and leaned back in his own chair. "They said that they can fit three Jaegers and lift equipment inside the holds, no sweat. They've even started to cut metal on the refits and have ordered long-lead components for another three frames."

Miriam's jaw dropped. "Sonofabitch. Right, what's the price tag?"

"They're chipping the first one in for just about free."

"Just about?"

"They want to choose the name for it."

"So long as it's appropriate, I don't see why not. What'd they have in mind?"

"They want to call it the Kaori Jessup."

Miriam stood up and paced around her office. This could be a massive win-win for both of us. They get to show off their latest and greatest technology, we get to honor one of our fallen in epic fashion. Not to mention the PR angle of THREE Jaegers dropping into combat from a Helicarrier. "Herc, I still feel like there's a boot over my head, waiting to crush me like a bug. What's the cost on the other carriers?"

Herc winced. "$75 billion a piece."

Miriam whirled around to face Herc. "Jesus. That is steep. Any chance we could demob them after the war and turn 'em loose on the market?"

"Imabari seems to think so. They said that the costs were the whole package, too. Repair, refuelling, upgrades, that sort of stuff, all included up front. That's some sharp customer service, if
I do say so myself."

Miriam nodded slowly, thinking over the situation. "How long to get the Jessop ready for service?"

"One year, tops. She should be ready before the Jaegers are. The other two partials should be ready before the deadline of April 2027. The three fresh units would take until August or September of that year."

"Okay, that works... Hmmm. We'll need to get them to team up with Fuji, as they're working on Jaegers, get them both on the same page for umbilicals and interfaces. Mass and balance could be a bitch, though."

"They said they have that under control."

"Good. Thank you, Herc. That's a crisis I am glad never reared its head. Keep me posted on that, please."

Herc smiled, sketched a quick salute, and departed Miriam's office.

Miriam picked up the phone and consulted the cheat sheet of numbers alongside her computer. "Hey, Samuel? It's Miriam. Got a few minutes?"

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1701

Miriam sighed as her computer shut down for the night. God, this program's a mess right now. Projects and people scattering everywhere. She rubbed her face and rocked back in her chair. "Now I know why they wanted me on board..."

A familiar soft chuckle came from the doorway of Miriam's office. "All hail Miriam, the cat wrangler. How you doing, boss?"

"Sergio." Miriam stood up and walked over to the former Ranger. "Been a few years, hasn't it."

"Yeah, it has. Would have been, what, Brandon's memorial service, right?"

"Yeah... Yeah it was." Miriam nodded slowly. "God, time flies these days." Miriam paused, then looked over to Sergio, horror and apology evident on her face. "Sorry, that..."

"It's okay, Miri. I've gotten a second chance... and a third, and a fourth, and... y'know. Seriously, it's fine." He gestured to the door of the office. "C'mon, Cait and I haven't hosted a friend for dinner in a while."

Miriam's stomach rumbled at the mention of food. "You sure, Sergio?"

"What, you already have plans for dinner?"

"Not really, no. I'm just..."

"Relax, I've been having a good day today. Lots of energy and all. It's worth celebrating at this point."

Mako bolted from her office right in front of Sergio and Miriam. "Ooops! Sorry, didn't meant to almost run you over, Sergio."
"Ahhh, it's okay Mako. Say, you and Raleigh have any plans for dinner tonight?"

"Not... really? Miranda's having dinner with Herc tonight..."

"'C'mon. It'll be good to let your hair down with your new boss, if nothing else."

Mako eyed Miriam, then nodded once. "Okay. Still at the address on Arden?"

"Of course. You really think that we'd get a house right now?"

Mako winced. "Sorry. I ... didn't think that through very well."

"It's fine. Cait may be having trouble with the whole 'impending death' thing, but I'm just... resigned, I guess? Accepting? Whatever." Sergio shrugged and headed through the door. "See you there, Mako!"

Mako frowned and looked at Sergio with concern. "You knew him before K-Day, ma'am?"

Miriam nodded. "A little, yeah. He had just joined the squadron a few weeks before it all went down. We got to know each other a lot better over those six days." She paused and took a deep breath. "You learn a lot about people when you're in situations like that... racking out when you can in tents just off the tarmac, grabbing meals during fuel breaks... I imagine you know a little about that kind of stuff."

Mako held the door open for Miriam as they headed out. "The last year of the war was... hard. But nothing like what you put up with, I suspect."

Miriam's gaze grew haunted for a few seconds, and Mako felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. The things she would have seen... I can imagine pretty well what it would have been like.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaah! Sorry, been sitting on this chapter for a while, and I'm finally happy enough with it to post. Yes, I'm still alive. Been busy with life, school, that sorta stuff. I'm still working on this story, I promise.
The door chime went off as Jazmine led yet another new hire into the offices. "Sorry you're not at the main office downtown, but we're still setting stuff up. I know you're not a big fan of concurrency, but needs must, y'know?"

The newcomer smiled. "Hey, at least I don't have to worry about incoming fire here. After that, anything's perfectly fine." She followed Jazmine down the hall to an empty office. "This it?"

"Yep. We splurged a bit on the hardware, as you can see. Full holographic interface, gesture and remote input, the works."

"Hmmm. Any chance I can get a flat screen monitor until I can get the hang of the holographic interface?"

Jazmine blinked at the surprising request. "Uhhh, yeah. I'll go get one today."

The newcomer arched an eyebrow in response. "Uh, I'll go get one today."

The newcomer arched an eyebrow in response. "You weren't planning on having folks not used to the holo interfaces?"

"No, I just never thought about needing to help folks through the conversion."

"No worries." She smiled and dropped into her chair. "I'm excited to see what I can do with this... I never had the opportunity in the Air Force to use cutting edge office equipment."

"Huh. Well, I'm going to go get you that monitor. Anything else I may have overlooked?"

"What CAD software you use? I have some stuff I need to port over from Pro-E and Creo."

"Uhm... Lemme go get our expert real quick." Jazmine ducked out the door and knocked on Mako's doorframe. "Hey, Mako?"

Mako pulled her earbuds out and looked up at Jazmine. "What's up?"

"I need someone to translate some geekspeak for me. You busy?"

"Not exceptionally so, no." Mako stood up and trailed Jazmine down the hall. "What's the subject?"

Jazmine waved Mako into the freshly occupied office. "Walk her through the technical stuff?"
Mako started in the doorway before stopping in shock at the sight of the occupant. "No... Way..."
She whirled around to Jazmine. "You hired Boomer Carson and didn't tell me?"

"Should I have?"

"YES!"

Raleigh, having heard the commotion, came out of his office. "Breathe, Mako. She's not going to
vanish."

"But... that's Olivia Carson, one of the heroes of K-Day! I had a poster of her on my bedroom
wall!"

"Relax." Raleigh put his hands on Mako's shoulders. "You only get one first meeting of a
childhood hero. Don't make an ass of yourself."

Boomer chuckled at the display. "Miss Becket, is every day this crazy?"

"Yep. Welcome to the nut house."

Boomer grinned, leaned back in her chair, and tucked her hands behind her head. "I think I'm going
to like it here."

R&D shops

1045

Stephanie rolled her wheelchair over to the workbench in the converted hangar and levered herself
onto it, then began to put on the MAX suit. "Any major alterations to the code, Doc?"

Caitlin shook her head. "Nope. No changes at all, actually. Just repeat the same routine as last
time."

"Got it. Mako, you have the powerpack?"

"Oh, right!" Mako reached under the workbench and pulled a large battery pack off of a charger,
then handed it to Stephanie. "Here we are, all charged up and ready to go."

"Thanks." Stephanie finished strapping in, accepted the powerpack, and seated it on the receiver at
the small of her back. "Okay, starting with left leg movements." She began to slowly raise and
lower her left leg. "Mako, if you don't mind me asking... Why were you so excited over Boomer
coming on?"

Mako blushed. "She... is a bit of a childhood hero."

"Oh, really? I would have pegged Doc here as one, but her?"

"It's... a bit of an involved story."

Caitlin swiveled her chair to look at Mako. "So? We've got time. And it'll keep Steph from getting
bored."

"True. Want me to switch legs yet?"
"Uhmm... yeah, got a good data set there. Whenever you're ready."

"Switching now. So, Mako, you willing to share that story?"

"I guess." Mako sat down on a chair and leaned back. "It all started back in, goodness, 2011? My father took me down to the viewing stands for the Tanegashima spaceport to watch the launch of Kounotori 2, the second Japanese resupply mission to the International Space Station. It was the first one that was in daytime, and I was finally old enough to somewhat understand what I was watching."

Stephanie stopped moving her right leg for a moment. "2011? That would have made you, what, 8?"

"A little less than that, but close." Mako closed her eyes. "I still remember sitting on my father's shoulders, watching the rocket lift off the pad on a pillar of smoke and fire, wondering why it was so quiet for several seconds... then the noise arrived." She smiled. "I was so scared for a moment, thinking that maybe it had blown up, until my father explained that it was normal for that to happen. That was the first time I really appreciated how different the speed of sound is from the speed of light, even if I didn't realize it at the time."

Caitlin nodded to Stephanie, who slid off the bench and into her wheelchair. "Sorry to interrupt, Mako, but you ready to try walking on the treadmill again, Steph?"

"Absolutely. There's almost zero lag now, so I feel pretty confident about walking safely."

Mako opened her eyes and sat up in the chair. "Well, then, how about walking over to the treadmill?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Mako, she's not-"

"Sure." Stephanie took a deep breath, then grabbed hold of the workbench. "Relax, Doc, I've got this... I think."

Mako and Caitlin both left their chairs and hurried over to stand near Stephanie. "Be careful." "No need to rush things..."

"Nah, I got this." Stephanie leaned against the workbench as she started to stand up. "See, everything's juuuuuhhh!!!" Stephanie began to frantically wave her free arm as she wobbled.

Mako reached out and caught the free arm to steady Stephanie. "Easy, Steph! Caitlin, you sure the positional feedback is working?"

"Yes, it is. Steph, any ideas as to why you're so wobbly when standing freely?"

Stephanie furrowed her brows, thinking. "Y'know... I might. It's hard to explain, though."

Vanessa Gottlieb hurried over to the group. "What are you doing? If she falls..."

"Hey, Vanessa. Great timing. We were just talking about some balance issues."

"Oh?"

Stephanie lifted a foot experimentally and took a step forward... and only her firm grip on Mako's forearm kept her from faceplanting. "Okay, definitely have an issue there. And I'm pretty confident on what the issue is."
"That fast?"

"Yep. I can feel where my feet are... but I can't feel with them to save my life. Like, I can't feel when my feet make contact with the ground, or how hard they're pressing."

There was a few moments of silence as the news sunk in, followed by a scramble as Vanessa and Caitlin both dove onto computer terminals and launched into a deeply involved discussion. Mako, however, helped Stephanie back into her wheelchair. "Well, you've gotten their full attention focused on the computers for the next several hours. I think we can knock off the MAX for the day now."

"Agreed. Need any help with your stuff?"

"Mmmm, not at the... wait. Yes, actually. Meet you back at my office?"

"Nah, gotta get used to this thing anyways, so I'll wear it for now. And you left me hanging on that story." Stephanie released the brakes on her wheelchair and started rolling towards the door.

Mako followed Stephanie out the door and across the street toward the main offices. "Right. So, I was utterly fascinated by the rocket, and my father explained how it was going up to a house in space with six scientists and engineers living in it. Predictably, I became fascinated with the ISS, too. The next year, my father and I went down to watch the third Kounotori launch. By then, I had told my parents that I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up."

"I had a whole plan... get into the Japanese Self Defense Force academy, get an engineering degree, become a fighter pilot, and then apply to be an astronaut. Seemingly simple, right?"

"I sense a 'but' there, Mako."

"Kinda. K-Day happened." Mako opened her office and stepped inside, with Stephanie close behind her.

"So? The space program continued strong for several years, and they're still keeping the ISS manned today, if only with a skeleton crew." Stephanie rolled one of the chairs in front of Mako's desk out of the way, then parked her wheelchair in the opening. "I mean, K-Day was bad, but we thought it was a one-time event."

"True. But that's not what I meant. Who was one of the greatest public figures born from the events of those horrible seven days?" Mako raised her eyebrows and leaned back in her chair, waiting for Stephanie's response.

There was a few moments pause as Stephanie racked her memory before a look of realization crossed her face. "Of course! Captain Olivia Carson."

"Exactly." Mako rocked forward in her chair. "She was everything I was aspiring to be at the time... A fighter pilot, an engineer, absolutely brilliant both academically and tactically, cool under pressure, and took no bullshit from anyone, no matter how much they outranked her. The fact that she wasn't a stereotypical American woman didn't hurt, either." Seeing Stephanie's curious look, Mako continued. "You know, not a white woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, legs for days..."

"None taken, Mako. Yeah, I can see how you'd see her as a better role model than, say, Samantha Carter from the Stargate franchise. What was her family background again? I remember it wasn't Japanese..."
A new voice chipped in. "Three quarters South Korean, one quarter Iowa corn farmer, by grandparentage."

Mako and Stephanie both looked at the doorway in surprise and embarrassment to see Boomer leaning against the doorway. "Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to..."

"Nah, it's all cool. I've heard far worse conversations about me." Boomer grinned and stood up straight in the doorway. "And for the record, Mako... You could have done a hell of a lot worse picking teenage heroes." She winked at Mako, then ducked out of the doorway.

Stephanie turned back to Mako, smiling. "I think she likes you. Not in a romantic way or anything, but more like a mentor/big sister kinda way."

Mako gulped hard and pulled up a file on her computer. "Uhh... yeah, here's what I needed your input on." She 'grabbed' the file on the holographic display above her desk and 'threw' it at Stephanie's tablet, which let out a 'ding!' a moment later as the file transferred.

Stephanie pulled up the file and quickly skimmed it. "First glance looks good, but mind if I take a few minutes to go over it in more detail?"

"By all means." Mako took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"You going to be okay?"

"Yeah... it's just... she is definitely not what I expected."

Stephanie laughed as she unlocked the brakes on her wheelchair and rolled out of the office.

-.-.-

Boomer's Office
1404

Former Lieutenant Colonel Olivia "Boomer" Carson sat down in her chair with a sigh and looked around the office. Too bare. I guess I could bust out the office decorations now...

There was a soft knock on the doorframe, and Boomer looked up to see Miriam standing there, grinning widely.

"Miri!" Boomer bolted from her chair and wrapped her longtime friend in a crushing hug. "How are you?"

"Doing well, despite having been shoved into a spot well above my pay grade." Miriam returned the hug for a few seconds before letting out a squeak of annoyance. "Too tight, crazy woman."

Boomer released her friend and stepped back. "Sorry, just... excited." She looked Miriam over. "So, they roped you into a Shatterdome command?"

"Yep." Miriam eased into a chair, and Boomer returned to hers. "Got a lot of catching up to do at the moment, but Herc's a good teacher. He may not enjoy the fact that he's the boss right now, but he bears the weight of command better than most."

"That's good. He may lack the charisma of his predecessor, but if his time as a Ranger is any indication, humanity's in capable hands."
"True that, amiga." Miriam grinned, then gestured to the bare walls. "And what's with the drab office? You've had all morning..."

"Oh, please. I'm still trying to figure out the computer." Boomer gestured to the holographic interface, which promptly went crazy as it tried to make sense of her hand gestures. "See? I maybe good with tech, but this is some serious Tony Stark level shit, Miri."

"Wait 'til you see the shop across the street. You'll love it."

"Quit taunting me, Miri. Lemme tackle one thing at a time this week while I get my feet under me." Boomer chuckled and looked around the office. "Y'know... I do have my office decor box in the back seat of my truck. Wanna help?"

"God yes. I need a break from butting heads with bureaucratic types." Miriam stood up and followed Boomer out the door of her office and out to the parking lot towards a battered Toyota Tacoma pickup. "You're still driving that thing? How many miles on it now?"

"Almost back from the Moon now." Boomer unlocked the passenger door and folded the seat forward, then reached back and pulled a moving box out and passed it to Miriam.

"That's it?" Miriam eyed the truck's faded paint and dented bodywork. "Sure looks like it's been through more than that."

"Hey, it may not look like much, but it's got it where it counts." Boomer extracted another box, knee'd the door shut, and locked it. "Namely, reliability and ruggedness."

Miriam gave the truck another look over. "You don't say."

"Hey, I know what it takes to kill one of these things. Namely, an antitank missile or a 500 pound bomb hitting it square on the nose. They're tough." Boomer led the way back into her office, then set down her box.

"Uh-huh. Sure." Miriam set her box down next to Boomer's. "And how many Tacomas did you scratch overseas that way?"

"None. The Tacoma's the American import version. Everywhere else, it's a Hilux." She opened the box and pulled out the picture on top. It showed a grinning, younger Boomer in her flight gear, standing next to a soot and grime coated A-10C Warthog parked on the ramp of an airfield. The smile on Boomer's face vanished as she looked at the picture, and she wiped a little dust off the glass of the picture frame before setting it flat on the desk, gaze distant. "And I killed 23 of them in my deployment back in '17 and '18."

Miriam heard the sudden and familiar change of tone in her friend's voice and decided to drop the subject. "So, what's in this box?" She popped the top off the box and was greeted by a small digital picture frame. "Desk stuff?"

Boomer's face brightened as she saw the digital picture frame. "Yep! As well as some nails and thumb tacks for the stuff in this box." She held out a hand, and Miriam passed the unit to her. "Say, is the power supply in there?"

"Uhhhh... Yeah, here we are." Miriam handed Boomer the wall wart and cord, then switched over to the other box while her friend set up the picture frame. "So, what can I do?"

"What's the next item in the box of wall stuff?" Boomer ducked under her desk and plugged in the wall wart, then fed the cord up onto the desk and plugged it into the digital picture frame, which lit
up and began to boot up.

Miriam pulled a framed picture out of the box. "A picture of... Say, isn't that the eclipse you went to watch?"

Boomer leaned around to check. "Yes! That absolutely goes up on the wall."

"I still don't see why you went to all that trouble to go see that eclipse. I mean, eastern Oregon? Really?"

"You had to be there, Miri. The pictures and videos simply don't do a total eclipse justice."

"I'll take your word for it. Where do you want it?"

"Opposite the door. Here." Boomer handed Miriam a small nail. "Hang it on that, if you would?"

"Got a hammer, genius?"

"Of course. Should be one in the same box... though it may have shifted during the move. Some of the freeways weren't exactly smooth."

Miriam quickly felt along the edges of the box, finally locating the hammer. "Got it. Any place in particular?"

"Meh. Somewhere that it'll be visible."

Miriam rolled her eyes. "Real helpful, Boomer."

There was a knock on the doorframe, and both women turned to see Mako standing there, hammer in hand. "Oh. Looks like you came prepared."

"That I did. You're welcome to help, though." Boomer smiled.

"Here, Mako, does this look like a good spot?" Miriam held the picture of the eclipse on the wall.

"Uhm... I guess?"

"Engineers." Miriam shook her head in dismay. "No sense of style."

"Hey!" "That's not true!"

Miriam winked and handed Mako the picture. "Hold this, please."

Mako took the picture, and Miriam began to drive the nail into the wall. "Say... isn't this the 2017 eclipse?"

Boomer grinned. "Yeah. That was a fun trip. Picture was taken by a member of the group I wound up with. He was kind enough to forward it to me through a friend."

"Wow... I've been meaning to go see an eclipse."

"Totally worth doing it if you can swing it. There's something truly awe inspiring about it."

Miriam put out her hand, and Mako returned the picture to her. "Yeah. I got a pretty good shot of it while at the office that day. Ducked outside just in time for maximum coverage." At Mako's curious look, she elaborated. "I was based at PDX at the time. We had something like 97%
coverage. Boomer wound up a few hundred feet off the center of the path of totality. What did you get, 2 minutes?"

"And twentyish seconds, yeah. Deep in a national forest, about a mile above sea level, and far from any light pollution. The view the night before was absolutely stellar, pun intended." She pulled out another framed picture, this one of an A-10 as seen from a tanker aircraft. "Here, find a spot for this one."

Mako giggled at the joke as she accepted the picture. "Sounds like fun."

"Oh, it was a hoot. Hung with a bunch of engineers from Seattle, talking shop after dinner the night before. Good times." Boomer's face shifted, and she fell quiet. "Y'know, I'm gonna leave this one in the box this time, Miri. At least for now."

Mako caught a quick glimpse of the picture of Boomer in front of her plane, noted the sudden change in attitude, and decided not to press the matter. "How's this?"

"Yeah... That works I guess."

"You okay?"

Boomer sat down heavily in her chair. "I'll be fine in a few minutes. Just... Bad memories is all."

Mako looked quickly between the two older women, realizing there was something going on, but not quite sure what.

Miriam nodded. "Okay, I think I can take care of this. Mako, show her the shop across the street. Boomer, you'll love it."

"Sure." Mako handed Miriam the picture and gestured out the door. "After you, ma'am."

Boomer walked over and exited the office, with Mako close behind. "Sorry about that Mako, it's just..."

Mako put a hand on Boomer's shoulder. "I understand. Really, I do. I still get shaken up whenever I see that picture of me in Tokyo. So if you ever need someone to talk to, Raleigh and I are always ready to listen."

Boomer nodded slowly. "Thanks, Mako. I appreciate the offer, but... Not right now, y'know?"

Mako nodded. "Come on, let's show you the shop."

-.-.-

1545 PDT

Boomer had returned to her office in a better mood to find it fully decorated by her friend. She took a look around to see what Miriam had put up. All happy memories... Sometimes it's good to have friends who know you that well. There was knock from the doorway, and she turned around to find Mako standing there. "What's up, Mako?"

"I, uh... I was wondering if you might have a few minutes? I'd like a second, outsider opinion on some work I've been doing."

"Yeah, absolutely. Can you access it here? And while we're at it, maybe you can teach me how to fully use the holographic interface. I've gotten the basics from the tutorials, but... some of the
nuances are lost on me, and you seem to be a natural at it."

"Oh. Yes, I can, on both questions." Mako sat down at the desk and quickly pulled up her partition of the local server and opened a file. The office was promptly filled with the latest Conn Pod configuration.

Boomer whistled in respect. "Okay, that's nifty. I didn't know I could use the whole office for this."

"Yeah, it makes it easier to work with stuff when you have more room to work with. Marshall Ramirez called it, and I do quote, 'some real Tony Stark stuff'."

Boomer laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like her. She's not wrong though. This is amazing."

Mako grinned and walked into the Conn Pod. "We're doing a drastically different design on the Pod this time around, to better protect the Rangers. Thicker pressure hull with simpler geometry. But, it does pose some serious problems for construction."

Boomer walked over to stand with Mako. "Why? What are you making it out of?"

"Titanium."

"Oof. Okay, yeah, fabbing something this big out of titanium's going be a pain. What'd you guys do last time for titanium parts this big?"

"Custom castings. The whole process took weeks if done right the first time." Mako pinched the bridge of her nose. "We had more than a few Jaegers get delayed by months by failed castings. We don't have the luxury of doing that this time."

"True. So... how can I pull the whole pressure hull out by itself?"

"Like this." Mako made an odd gesture, and an interface panel appeared. "Hide everything except that layer."

"Nice. Kinda like AutoCAD." Boomer quickly hid all the parts aside from the pressure hull.

"We took inspiration from just about every different CAD program in regular use. Each has their own little quirks that can be useful."

"Yep. Okay, so..." Boomer noted some of the dimensions on the pressure hull and winced. "Jesus. That's a lot bigger than I expected. There's no way you'll be able to reliably cast that in a single piece, and forging it into the final shape will be an absolute nightmare. You're going to have to segment it for initial fabrication, and then weld it together for your final hull form."

Mako groaned. "I was afraid you'd say that. I know exactly how hard it is to weld large pieces of titanium, let alone something this thick..."

"I do too. But, there's welding, and then there's welding." At Mako's curious expression, Boomer continued. "These walls are, what, nearly two feet thick? You're not TIG welding them, that's for sure... but there's other methods of welding that are better suited for factory assembly than for repairs, and I assume that's where you got most of your experience from, right?" At Mako's nod, she continued. "That's probably why you haven't gotten much experience with those techniques."

"Such as?"

"Well, this particular part, regardless of materials used, screams electron beam or high power laser
welding. I'd personally lean towards e-beam myself, as it's somewhat more common, has better penetration into a gap like what we'd be working with, and it's pretty much perfect for this kind of job when working with titanium. The real question becomes, how to part out the hull."

"Uhm... I'll bow to your superior knowledge here."

"Nonsense. Use that brain of yours for more than driving a Jaeger, Miss Mori. Think it through. What are your choices, and what are the costs and benefits of each? Think out loud, too... sometimes, by describing what you're thinking, you'll realize something you missed before."

Mako sat on the edge of Boomer's desk and scaled down the pressure hull to a size more suitable for moving around in her hands. "Well, we've got several sets of points that have to be worked around, most importantly the access hatch and the utility penetrations, here and here. Otherwise, the outer surface of the hull is pretty smooth."

"Internal?"

"Multiple hardpoints for the life support, rigs, computers, displays, stuff like that. But, it's pretty straight forward. And those can realistically be welded onto the hull by hand if needed at a later date. That's easy enough to TIG weld, despite the heat sink factor from the hull."

Boomer grabbed the projection, enlarged it to nearly a meter across, and moved it to the center of the room, where she began to walk around it, hand on her chin and index finger tapping on her lips. "Well, we have to segment it somehow. What options do you have for that?"

"Well, the easiest would be to just do it in two hemispheres, but that's still a lot of mass to work with." Mako slid off the desk and started walking around the projection opposite Boomer. "We could do orange peel slices, too... but that'd be a lot of welds coming together in the same spot, which is just begging for problems, right?"

"Mmhmm."

Mako furrowed her brows and started spinning the projection around its vertical axis. "I'd almost say do a soccer ball, but that's a lot of pieces..."

Boomer stopped pacing and snapped her fingers. "C-Dec!"

"What?" Mako eyed the pilot in confusion.

Boomer grinned. "Sorry, bit of an obscure reference from a military sci-fi series a friend introduced me to a couple years back. Use a dodecahedron."

Mako's eyes widened. "Of course!" She grabbed the control stylus off the desk and quickly laid in a framework of 12 pentagons linked into a ball, moved it over to the pressure hull, and began to shift it around. Finally, she stepped back and inspected her work. "Okay, we'd need... three? Three different types of segments. Hatch, interface, and everything else. We'd even be able to just mass produce the 10 main segments. Hatch segment could be a cut down main, but interface would have to be custom from the start..."

"Don't forget beam stops and runouts."

"Beam stops?"

"The difference between an e-beam welding unit and a charged particle beam weapon is extremely small. If you're not careful, the beam can punch through the weld area and burn a hole in anything
beyond it. So, beam stops are used. They're just overhanging bits of metal to serve as an extra bit of containment. When you're done welding, you can just grind them off if you need them gone. And runouts are areas to let the beam move past the weld zone to create a clean finish. Might be tricky on the final assembly, but I think if you contract that work out, they'll find a way to do it." Boomer clapped her hands together and turned to Mako. "So, fabrication is decided on. Now, is there anything inside the Conn Pod that can't fit through that hatch opening? Because you'll need to install that before final welding."

"Yes, but as you said, if we simply specify how we want the finished Conn Pod to be rigged and get out of the way of the contractors, they'll make it happen."

"Yep. Now, kind of off topic, but... what happens when you move the head of the Jaeger? I've always been curious. Do you feel the motion of the head, or is that somehow overridden or dampened?"

Mako opened her mouth to reply, then stopped, an odd expression on her face that quickly turned into a huge grin. "Boomer, you're a genius." She darted out of the office and down the hall to her own office.

"What the heck?" Boomer looked down the hall to see Raleigh poke his head out of his own office. "Does she do that often?"

"Yeah, she does that a lot when she gets a good idea. She'll probably be out in a few hours."

"Huh." She shrugged and ducked back into her office. Smart kid, with a lot of potential. I'm certainly going to keep an eye on her...

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Boomer's hotel room

1907 PDT

Boomer flopped onto the bed, tablet in hands. "Come on, please don't be busy..." She opened up Skype and started a call. Several seconds later, it went through. Her face lit up as the screen shifted to show the recipient. "Hey, you!"

"Damn, beat me to it."

Boomer laughed and propped the tablet up on the nightstand. "Wanted to call and share my first day at the new job... figured you'd enjoy it. Hope you're not too busy."

"Nah, lunch break, so you called at a good time. And of course I would enjoy hearing about your day. This is the happiest I've seen you ever since you left the 354th... Speaking of which, want me to pass any message along to Mike?"

"Nah, not for now." She grinned. "I'm not entirely sure how much I can tell you about exactly who I'm working alongside, but... It's some pretty prestigious folks. You'd probably get a kick out of a few of them... Especially this young engineer I worked with today. Reminds me of what I imagine you'd have been like at her age, actually. Smart kid, good groundwork, but not much manufacturing experience."

"Ah. So, you're mentoring her?"

"Kinda? Not officially, but... Let's just say that there's some hero worship from her end, so that's
making things easier."

"Nice. You pitch the special projects you've been working on yet?"

"No, I want to get established first, then starting trying to shake things up. But it's certainly on my agenda."

"Good. For what it's worth, I still think that-"

"No. We've talked about it. There's a reason they're using Jaegers."

"Come on. We both know exactly how much more effective-"

"And we both know exactly what the NIMBYs and the suits would think of it."

"But-"

"No. End of discussion, because we've been over this multiple times, and it's always come back to the same points. Back on the topic of my new job, please?"

"Hmph. Fine. You had mentioned after the interview it was an R&D shop? How is said shop?"

"It's damned impressive, if I do say so myself. Couple printers, some CNC lathes and mills, and a bunch of more traditional manual machines. You'd be a kid in a candy store in there."

"I assume you managed to keep from drooling all over the place?"

Boomer laughed. "Mostly. But there is certainly some room for both improvements... and shenanigans. Black knobs everywhere. And yeah, they've got the right stuff for that prank you showed me."

"Oooh, make sure you record the results. That one's always hilarious."

"Count on it."

"So... Uhm, about, y'know... us."

Boomer's smile vanished. "Look, you've got a good thing going up there-"

"I know, but you sound like you're enjoying it there, so... I assume you're going to stay for a while, right?"

"Yeah.... but I don't want you to give up your job. In case this doesn't pan out..."

"You forget I grew up in the area, Olivia. I know there's places I can ply my trades at with ease. There's the Citation shop at SMF, DynCorp over at MCC, CalSTAR too... I have options there."

"But you'd lose all your seniority."

"So did you, right? They offered you a squadron, Olivia. Now that's seniority."

"And we both know that I'd have been miserable in that slot. Too much desk time, not enough flight time. Not to mention that I'm not exactly the most tactful officer the Air Force has produced, and anything at or above that level is more about politics and ass-kissing than actual competence."

"Which we both know you hate with a passion only exceeded by your love of flying and blowing
"shit up. Preferably at the same time."

"Guilty as charged." She sighed. "I guess you're right. We've talked about this before, but... I dunno." She looked down at the bed. "I guess I'm just nervous. This would be a big change. For both of us." She looked back up at the camera on the tablet. "And we're both kinda bad with sudden, severe changes."

"I know. But, I think we'd manage just fine, especially together. Tell you what... I'll swing some vacation time in a few weeks, come down and visit. I'll see if I can quietly line up some interviews then as well. I have no doubt that Cessna would snap me up, and DynCorp would probably at least nibble."

"Don't quit your job just for me, please?"

"I won't. I'm just looking at options, yeah? Olivia..."

There was apparently some commotion in the background, as the face on the other end looked away. Boomer heard only a few snippets of the conversation, but it sounded serious, a hypothesis proven moments later. "Hey, gotta go. A 757 on approach just took a couple major birdstrikes on the right wing, engine included, and they want all hands on deck for damage assessment."

She winced, knowing how much damage that could cause... not to mention the mess that also ensued. "Go. I'll catch up with you tomorrow." She reached out and touched the screen of the tablet, a gesture matched on the other end.

"Count on it." The figure put on a ball cap, touched two fingers to the right corner of the brim in a quick salute, winked, and ended the call.

Boomer sighed and picked up the tablet, closing Skype and shutting off the screen. God, the idea of actually living together, finally, after knowing each other for a good portion of a decade, adventuring together, and all the other stuff in between... It's both exciting and mildly terrifying. But... Maybe it's time to take that step. She looked not at the window, but beyond it, deep in thought.

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Chapter End Notes

Aaand we're back, after more than a year! Sorry about the delay, folks, but school and work have eaten up a large amount of my free time for the last year and a half. Thankfully, it's been worth it, as I'm now 6 months or so from completing school. (Huzzah!) I've also had trouble getting my muse to cooperate with me on this story until a few weeks ago, and the chapter had been partially complete for a good chunk of the last year, but I've gotten it done to a point I'm happy with. Not going to lie, though, I'm not entirely sure when I'll be posting the next chapter. Hopefully somewhat sooner than the interval between this chapter and the previous one, but no promises. Also, I'll be hopping back into more of a Mako and Raleigh focus for a few chapters, as I've gotten the two new characters who are going to be quite important down the line introduced properly.

Anyhow, catch you in the Drift, folks!
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

-Mav