He Dreams in Kaiju Blue

by Ardatli

Summary

Three years since the launch of the world’s first Jaeger, five years since K Day, few piloting teams in the world had as many kills as the Maximoff twins.

Or, the one where half of the YA are Jaeger pilots, Teddy wants his shot, and someone might be going crazy. This isn’t how things were supposed to be.

Notes

Endless thank yous to my betas, meinterrupted and feebleapb, for keeping me on the right track. Any errors I make are mine, not theirs.

Cover art by the amazing, AMAZING Maelikki.

Tags are accurate, though the explicitness rating may change in future chapters. I'll warn if and when it does.
Mechamechamechamechamecha.
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Area 51 Testing and Training Center, Nevada

Three years since the launch of the world’s first Jaeger, five years since K Day, few piloting teams in the world had as many kills as the Maximoff twins. Beyond their impressive record, and their status as the first piloting team assigned to the LA Shatterdome, the pair of sharp-featured young Rangers were what calculating producers called ‘camera-friendly.’ That, plus their willingness to give interviews, made Thomas and William Maximoff west coast media darlings. Producers especially loved Thomas, always good for a tight sound bite, who had bleached his dark brown hair white
somewhere between his first press conference and his second, and was rarely seen without a girl on
his arm and his brother hovering somewhere in the background. Kaiju kills aside, the twins made
good TV.

What all that meant was that Teddy couldn’t even turn on the news in freaking Nevada without
hearing something about them.

“ Barely a week after their last battle against the Category-2 kaiju dubbed ‘Rattler’ by the Pan Pacific
Defense Corps, the Maximoffs were spotted heading up a tactical training exercise with a fellow
Jaeger team near the Channel Islands. Magnus Echo and Yankee Hawker engaged with aircraft from
Edwards AFB during the four-hour scenario-“

The door to the dayroom opened behind him and Teddy hit the mute button with a groan. The old
couch that had probably been donated to the barracks sometime in the last century groaned back at
him as he stretched his arms out along the sagging cushions. Eli Bradley leaned over the top and
raised an eyebrow at Teddy from his vantage point. The harsh artificial light that ran everywhere in
the base carved shadows along the strong dark line of his jaw, made him look as though he were
scowling even when he smiled.

“Look at these jerks,” Teddy grumbled uncharitably, and waved the remote at the news footage
flashing on the dusty screen. Magnus Echo, a Mark II painted up in dark green with vivid red racing
stripes, did some ridiculous flip maneuver that sent a wave rolling up and half-over the other Jaeger,
and the dogfighting planes scattered in all directions. “All they do is show off.”

Eli snorted, entirely unsympathetic. “You can’t argue with their kill count,” he replied. “And they
have the deepest drift synchronization ever recorded. You want to be jealous, knock yourself out.”
He flicked at Teddy’s ear and Teddy jerked away.

“I’m not jealous,” Teddy replied automatically, but the twisting somewhere down in his middle
proved the lie. Eli’s smirk didn’t help matters. “Fine!” Teddy threw up a hand and then dropped it, a
puff of dust bouncing out of the cushion to scatter in sparkles under the light. “I’m a little jealous. I’m
so far down on the list that the war will be over before I ever get close to anything other than a
simulator.”

They only had the resources to roll out one Jaeger a year, if that, after all, and without a co-pilot, he
was doubly screwed. It didn’t matter what his kill counts were in training, as long as there were
compatible teams ahead of him.

If Teddy’s parents had still been alive, he might have had a shot. His dad had been one hell of a
fighter pilot, and he would have jumped at the chance to take on something like a Jaeger. But he was
gone, KIA long before the Kaiju war, when Teddy was barely old enough to remember the shape of
his face.

It was easier to pretend that he was happy where he was, a faceless cog in the machine that was the
Pan-Pac industrial complex. Just another grunt with a gun.

“ A lot of things can happen in a year or two,” Eli tossed back, but he brushed Teddy’s shoulder with
his hand before straightening up again.

“ Easy for you to say.” Teddy craned back over the couch to watch Eli as he walked away to grab a
soda from the fridge, his coveralls still properly creased and bagged over his boots. “You and Uncle
Joe are next in line when the new Mark IVs roll out.” There was that wave of envy again, but softer
and tinged with more pride and affection than the uncomfortable tangle that sat low in Teddy’s gut
when he watched video of William Maximoff and his twin.
The news report had changed focus, stopping the looped replay of footage from the last kaiju attack. (Code name: Yamarashi, taken out last year by Magnus Echo, Stinger Goliath, and the newly commissioned Yankee Hawker; Magnus Echo’s fourth confirmed kill). The bottle-blonde reporter on the screen had moved on to the ‘human interest’ segment, flashbulbs popping as the twins pushed their way through the crowd to the door of some fancy club. The camera zoomed in as William stopped to flirt with the doorman, and Teddy’s irritation flared again.

“Assuming we don’t kill each other before then,” Eli joked, flopping on the couch and grabbing the remote. He jabbed at the channel button and the television flashed through a half-dozen sitcoms, a talk show with flashing marquee lights, and paused at an old black and white movie about a giant fire-breathing turtle that had achieved serious cult status over the past half-decade. “Stop drooling over your crush and chill out for a while.”

“I don’t have a crush,” Teddy insisted hotly, folding his arms and turning away from the screen. “The pair of them need to stop sucking up to the media and this ‘Jaeger pilot celebrity’ kick. It’s annoying.”

“Sure, Teddy. Whatever you say.” Eli smirked. He might have a point, if Teddy had to be entirely honest with himself, but he wasn’t some ridiculous teenage girl, to start sticking posters of pilots up in his bedroom, like some shrine.

Sure, the twins were good-looking. So they moved like poetry in their Jaeger. It didn’t mean a thing when it came to personality, say, or whether he’d actually enjoy spending any amount of time with either of them.

Drift partners picked up each others’ quirks and characteristics after a while; it came with the territory. And if Thomas was the kind of publicity-craving jackass that he seemed to be in interviews, barely managing to contain his smirk and better-than-you swagger, well. The odds were pretty good that his brother was a lot like that too. So William Maximoff could take his stupid perfect cheekbones and his unblemished piloting record and shove ‘em.

It seemed, sometimes, like Teddy was the only one who felt that way. The LA Shatterdome was prime territory, responsible for the entire coastline between Mexico and Canada, and the three Jaegers stationed there had already racked up seven dead kaiju between them. Anyone within 500 miles of the coast could recite their stats.

Kate Bishop and America Chavez, Yankee Hawker. Two kill shots, four assists. Scott and Cassie Lang, Stinger Goliath. One kill shot, two assists. Thomas and William Maximoff, Magnus Echo. Four kills, three assists.

They were heroes, the Jaegers made into action figures, their pilots’ faces blazoned on magazine covers and t-shirts, and against the kaiju they were a bulwark, a barricade, impenetrable. Invincible.

Until the day they weren’t.

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Teddy woke to the sound of pounding on his door. His clock blinked at him – 4:13 am. The hell? He rolled bare-chested out of sweat-crumpled sheets and jammed his feet into his boots, pulse picking up as he wrenched open his door. It was only Eli on the other side, his t-shirt untucked and his eyes narrowed in anticipation. “There’s action in the Breach,” he said, without any other commentary. “Uncle Joe just buzzed me. Stark’s got a feed running.”
There was a secondary set of alarms at Area 51, linked to those at the Shatterdome on the coast. It was all highly unofficial, of course. Marshal Hill had a vein on her forehead that pulsed terrifyingly when she caught the system analysts and debuggers down in R&D burning bandwidth on the downlink from LA. But even the threat of divine-level retribution wasn’t enough to stop them all from convening in the lower labs when the kaiju alert sounded.

*Kaiju.*

“Two seconds,” Teddy promised, holding up a couple of fingers and ducking behind his door to grab a clean shirt. The air was cold on his back and his dog tags snagged on the neck as he hauled the dark green t-shirt on over his head and jammed it in the vague direction of the waistband of his fatigues. He wasn’t exactly presentable, but at least he wasn’t half-naked as he followed Eli down the winding corridors.

Stark’s lab in the sub-basement had been part of the complex before K Day, part of a military installation used for test aircraft that now belonged to the PPDC for Jaeger R&D. Conspiracy theorists had named Area 51 a center for research on alien technology fifty years before there had been any such thing; now they’d been proven wrong and made right all at once. There was irony there.

A vast arm structure lay open on the concrete floor of the vast underground hangar that had once held stealth fighters and long-range bombers, the iron skin splayed open and dissected, servos and electronics on vulgar display. Coils of wire and tubing hung out of the chasm, strung across the space like the veins that they were. It looked like an autopsy in progress, the tang of iron and oil hanging over the usual dry smells of dust and concrete. The Mark IV, pieces of a prototype grappling system.

If Teddy couldn’t pilot a Jaeger, at least he could have this; being close to the behemoth, able to run his fingers over the sleek polish of her frame, breathe in the faint smell of oxide that lingered long after the workings had powered down, stand beside the towering replica of a god on earth and feel anything but small. Fingers the size of Teddy’s entire body from knuckle to tip curled upward, beckoning to him. She would be gorgeous when she was whole.

He could only afford a glance, a wistful tug curling deep in his core, before he was turning away again and picking up the pace. A body jumped out of the way as Teddy skidded around the corner, Eli long since gone ahead. He’d almost mowed down Dr. Banner, and he was carrying a tray of beakers and test tubes that rattled and clinked together with his abrupt stop-and-swing-away maneuver.

Teddy stopped dead, an apology written on his face, but Banner gave him a vague smile in his usual long-suffering way, and nodded at the room he’d only just left. “No harm done. They’re in there,” he added unnecessarily, because the noise already filtering through the closed door gave the gathering away.

“Any sign of Marshal Hill?” Teddy asked, glancing back over his shoulder at the hangar doors, vast and cold steel-gray.

“All clear; she’ll be asleep at this time of night. Though I’m sure you can blame Tony if you get caught,” he added, that little grin that Teddy could never quite identify curling up one corner of his mouth, before he headed off with his batch of samples.

It only occurred to Teddy that he should have asked Banner why he was up and around so early long after the door had closed behind him.

Tony Stark’s lab was a riot of chatter, music and lights, as always, a low drum beat and heavy guitar
riff pulsing just at the bottom range of Teddy’s hearing. Teddy elbowed his way through the cluster of techs and other cadets to ease in beside Eli and his uncle. Josiah nodded to him but said nothing, his thick arms folded across his broad expanse of a chest and his attention entirely focussed on the monitors and displays. Stark’s screens were all displaying different things, night views of the ocean and burning red and blue data streams, rigged to show all the telemetry and video feeds he had tapped into from the Shatterdome.

“Twenty bucks says Yankee gets the killshot.”

Stark laughed from his chair, his eyes creasing at the corners and the scarring on his chest showing around the arm of his tank top when he waved his hands wildly in the air. “No bet, losers. Have you seen the new code for their aiming subroutines? What am I saying? Of course you haven’t. Yankee Hawker can take a fly off a tree branch at three miles; no, better – the wings off the fly, and not touch the tree.”

“That’s assuming Magnus doesn’t take it out first.”

“I’ll see your twenty and raise you ten on Stinger Goliath taking the kill. The Langs are insane.”

The main video feed zoomed in, piggybacked on one of the Jumphawks that hauled Yankee Hawker out and over the midnight ocean. It was still for a moment, no sound but for the chopping of the blades, the creaking and groaning of stressed metal, and the routine check-ins on the comms.

Hawker dropped, the water curling up around her legs, black as ink. Stinger Goliath dropped behind her, Magnus Echo already in the lead, beacons on and luminous against the mist in the air.

Teddy’s breath caught in his throat and he struggled to keep his heart from racing. Water sheeted down in the darkness, picked out by spots from circling helicopters and Magnus Echo’s brilliant halogen searchlight. The ocean was breathing.

Stark scowled and poked a finger through the indicator on one of his rotating holographic displays. Sound started to pipe in, beeps and voices from the Shatterdome’s LOCCENT, status reports and comms, chatter from the pilots as they deployed.

/Three on one is stupid odds; one day I want a real fight./
/You want this one, Kate? Be our guests! We’ll come mop up after you get your butts handed to you./
/Forget it, Billy; the girls just want all the glory for themselves./
/That’s women to you, Maximoff./
/Can the chatter, kids. It’s like a goddamned high school locker room out here tonight./

Teddy strained, absolutely not listening for one voice in particular, a rich, warm tenor that always laughed at his brother’s stupid jokes-

Because Teddy was a giant creeper, apparently, and Eli was already smirking. Teddy frowned at him, stepped back in beside Josiah and forced his shoulders down, his jaw to stay loose. The room was getting warm and stuffy, too many bodies jammed into too small a space, talking over and around each other. Teddy drummed his fingers against his thigh, his body thrumming in sync with the nervous energy filling the lab.

“What’s the name on this one?”
“Nothing’s dropped from LOCCENT yet. Wait – here it comes.”

“‘Hone-onna’”

“Is he for real?”

“Someone needs to take Choi’s movie collection away from him.”

*Estimated size 2600 tons, closing in. Projected first contact in T-minus ten minutes./*

“Biggest damn category three I’ve ever seen.” Jan, the tiny brunette who had supervised Teddy’s last training session, bullied her way under his arm and he stepped aside to let her get closer.

The name was apt. The proof flashed on the screens when the monster erupted from beneath the cresting waves, a skull-like face that was all angles and grey-bleached bone, teeth and claws. Jan actually yelped when the camera feed from Stinger Goliath zoomed in on the black hollowed eye sockets, and the thing turned. It tuned and it grinned right into the damn camera, and Teddy felt a shiver of fear rush straight through him to sit cold in his stomach.

It looked like it *knew.*

Hone-onna roared and the feed jumped back to transmitting from the helo circling high above, as Goliath flipped its power over to weapons. The holographic projections spun and jumped with it, a dozen streams of data spinning through and casting a witchlight glow on Stark’s face, lips moving silently as he processed it all.

The three Jaegers moved in patterns that were so familiar by now, Teddy could see the steps of the dance five moves before they happened. Hawker would stay back, fire her pulse cannon – there. Magnus was in close, the movement so fluid and clean that it didn’t seem possible. It was a computer simulation of a robot, not an actual mech the size of a skyscraper; nothing that large should be able to pivot, parry, riposte so *gracefully.*

Teddy’s hands were up in front of him and he hadn’t noticed until he caught Eli’s own hands twitching out of the corner of his eye. They were moving together, mimicking the Jaegers’ stances with their own bodies, the hours of training videos and sims that Teddy had put himself through singing now in his blood.

*That* was what he was meant to be doing. He punched forward with Magnus and he could feel the weight of the servos gliding along his arm, the pressure of the hydraulics digging into him, cradling him, transmitting every neural pulse and muscle movement into something a thousand times more powerful than he could ever be alone. Bend next, turn. Imagined respirators buzzed in his ears, reflecting the sound of his own breathing back to him. Bring the left arm up to block and leave an opening for Stinger Goliath—

It should have worked. It had *already* worked a handful of times before.

Hone-onna’s claws ripped through Magnus Echo and the screech of shredding metal was loud enough to cut through the static, the sounds of the ocean, the chatter on the comms. The Jaeger vented steam through the rents in her outer armor, sparks cutting through the darkness and escaping into the sky where stars used to shine.

*Hydraulics punctured; fluid leak. Magnus Echo losing motor control./*

*Goliath taking the lead./*
Copy that, Goliath. Flank and distract. Magnus Echo, what’s your status?

Billy’s out cold – fuck! HUD’s down; I can’t see a goddamn thing!

Prep medbay – Hawker, give them some cover.

Goliath fired, Hawker’s blast got there first. The kaiju reeled back and roared in triumph, momentum carried it forward again, those claws, burning blue, dripping oil and ichor that gleamed in the spotlights before they moved on again. Those claws came down a second time, a third, a fourth-

Magnus Echo fell to her knees. The displacement wave burst out from around her in a wall of salt spray that clouded the camera lenses. A plasma burst fired, a blue so bright that Teddy’s eyes burned, and the room fell silent.

The data continued to spool in, the video feeds giving them nothing but shapes in the mist and smoke. There was a harsh rasping of breath; someone was panicking, and close by. Josiah’s hand settled, warm and strong, on Teddy’s shoulder, pressed him down and back into himself. The breathing had been his. Teddy fought against the rising tide of panic, beat it down, but only barely. The blue glow of the kaiju flickered, then dimmed to grey. Three red lights burned on the radar scope for a split-second, and everyone seemed to be holding their breath together.

A creaking, groaning noise of distressed steel moaned out from the feeds. A second wave rushed up to swamp the circling helos. One of the red lights blinked, faltered, went out.

/Mayday, mayday, mayday. Magnus Echo is down. Control, do you copy? Magnus Echo is down./

To no-one’s surprise, Eli and Josiah Bradley were called up two weeks later.

The barracks had been like a morgue for the first few days after the attack, the usual post-kaiju ass-kicking celebrations subdued, conversations in the hallways carried on in a murmured hush. They’d lost Jaegers before; the Mark Is had a track record as bad as the kaiju, back at the beginning. It was different when it was so close to home, though, when it was someone whose voice they heard over the hacked downlinks every few months. Anyone who wanted to pilot studied the LA Jaegers and their pilots, watched their training videos, learned the terrain. William Maximoff was one of the closest things Area 51 had to a local boy, despite the fact that the twins had originally come from New York. (Or maybe Jersey; the reports conflicted.)

The status updates were more reassuring than they could have been; ‘medically-induced coma’ was better than dead.

Tony Stark had flown out with an entire cargo hold full of equipment and spare parts less than 48 hours after the incident to manage Magnus Echo’s reconstruction, which meant she wasn’t headed for Oblivion Bay with the other burned-out husks. Everything pointed toward William Maximoff recovering and being back out on kaiju watch again before the end of the year.

In the mean time, the American coast still needed a third Jaeger.

The loss of Magnus Echo cast a shadow over the entire program, and the news was having a field-day with the fear-mongering. Teddy flipped back and forth between random bullshit-spouting talking heads, his pad with all the specs from the last battle sitting forgotten in his lap.

Channel 42 was running some more amateur footage of the fight, from an angle that Teddy hadn’t seen before, and he stopped clicking, his thumb still on the button. It had been shot on a cell phone or
a personal cam of some kind, from down on the coast, and – hold it, wait – there. There was the moment the kaiju had turned, and looked at the cameras mounted on Stinger Goliath. It was no mistake, no fluke of the cameras catching the light; there was something deliberate there, in its motion-

“Are you watching that again?” Eli dropped down onto the couch beside Teddy and stole the remote from his hand. The screen flickered and popped into black, and Eli tossed the remote onto the side table. He was dressed for outside: not the casual t-shirts and cargos they wore as half-uniform in the barracks, but full fatigues with boots so well-shined that Teddy could see the reflection of his own feet in them. “That too,” Eli groused, and tried to steal the tablet from Teddy’s lap. That Teddy grabbed for, and the screen bleeped in protest when he wrestled the thing away.

“You’re going to make yourself crazy, you know,” Eli settled for telling him off instead. The schematics and analytics played out across the screen in Teddy’s hand. Magnus Echo died for the fifth time that afternoon, a bright red burn leaving an afterimage on Teddy’s corneas. He turned the tablet off.

“They made a mistake,” Teddy replied. It wasn’t anything unusual, reviewing the data from a kaiju attack after the fact. Losing one of the newer Jaegers, that was unusual. As was Eli giving him grief over it. Usually he was the first one in, scrounging through the feeds for information on tactics, exploitable weaknesses... Teddy narrowed his eyes, and Eli arched his eyebrow in response.

“The relied on old tactics, didn’t shake it up enough. We were all at that debriefing,” Eli reminded him. “You’re the only one obsessing. Are you sure this isn’t just because your crush got himself hurt?” Eli drawled, and there was a hint of a light in his eye that meant- that meant that Eli was a fucker.

“It’s not a crush,” Teddy protested hotly, because he was an idiot who couldn’t seem to learn not to take the bait when it was dangled in front of him. “I’ve never even met the guy. I doubt we’d get along even if I did meet him someday. Especially,” he added, matching Eli’s amused look eyebrow for eyebrow, “given that he’s in a coma. Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to mock the afflicted?”

“If I followed that rule, I’d never be able to make fun of you,” Eli replied easily.

Yeah, he was going to miss Eli. And it wasn’t just because they’d practically gone through the Academy in each other’s pockets. Eli had been there the day Teddy had gotten the news, called in to Xavier’s office to be told of his mother’s death in the Seattle attack. He’d waited outside in the hall while Teddy collapsed in tears, then picked up the pieces, brought Teddy back to the room Eli shared with Josiah and bullied him until he started eating and sleeping again. All because ‘someone’s got to keep an eye on you.’ Josiah had taken Teddy under his wing for real after that, treated him like another nephew, a real extension of their family.

It was almost like having a couple of brothers, or a co-pilot of his own.

Almost.

In a weird way, it was a blessing that Eli was so totally and entirely straight. If he’d even been a little bit inclined Teddy’s way, Teddy might have been tempted to try. Just to see what would happen. The crash-and-burn would have been epic.

“Shut up,” Teddy said, instead of any of the other things that were running around in his mind. “Shouldn’t you be packing, instead of harassing me?”
Eli didn’t respond to the grumpy undertones in Teddy’s voice, just shrugged and nodded at the entrance. Teddy looked over and caught sight of Eli’s massive olive drab duffle sitting beside the door, the name ‘E. Bradley’ scrawled across the side in thick black handwritten letters. “You sure you have everything?” Teddy jutted a thumb at the bag. “I’m pretty sure you could fit another couple of tarps in there; maybe the bathroom sink?”

He was rewarded with a grin and a snort of laughter. “Please. You’re just jealous of my amazing packing skills.”

“I’ll show you who’s packing.”

The door swung open as Eli was grabbing for a pillow that was definitely going to end up being swung at Teddy’s head. It was only Josiah who stepped inside, though, and the tension ebbed out of Teddy’s shoulders as he sagged back down into the half-broken cushions. Teddy tipped his head back over the arm rest and watched the door swing closed behind him. Eli kicked at Teddy’s leg and Teddy kicked back without looking.

“Hey, Uncle Joe,” Teddy greeted him affectionately, and Josiah looked down over the rims of the little round John Lennon glasses that he affected, a fashion so totally incongruous on the imposingly large wall of man that it totally negated whatever retro effect it was supposed to have.

“Theodore,” Josiah replied with a slow and meticulous smile. “Elijah, get your ass moving. They’re waiting for us on the hangar deck.”

Teddy pried himself out of the soul-eating couch as Eli stood, and he took the chance to scrub his knuckles across the top of the shorter man’s shaved head. “For luck.” He grinned when Eli took a swat at him, and Josiah hid a snicker behind a crooked finger. “You ready to be a hero, hero?”

“I was born ready.” Eli’s chest puffed out with pride, and he looked almost like he was taking his swagger seriously.

“You were born cocky, boy, that’s what you were,” Josiah replied, and Teddy couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up. It hurt already, watching Eli grab his duffle and haul it up on his shoulder, looking at Josiah in his uniform, his cover tucked under his arm like the Army man that he had once been.

He wanted to throw his arms around them both, hug them close and make them promise that they’d see each other again. But that would be ridiculous, childish. Teddy held out a fist to Eli instead, got a fist-bump, a grin and a nod back. It was enough. Josiah ruffled his hair and nodded quietly when Teddy turned to look, a dozen unspoken things sitting behind his eyes and on the top of his tongue.

“Stay safe,” Teddy said simply.

“I’m a lot more frightened of his mother and his gran than I am of any sea monster,” Josiah chuckled, then, more seriously, “and Papa Valentine’s no slouch. We’ll be fine, Ted. And we’ll be seeing you in the Shatterdome soon enough.”

“Gonna hold you to that, Uncle Joe.” Teddy shoved his hands in his pockets, just in case he felt another urge to grab and to hold.

Eli nodded, as though he were part of Teddy’s unvoiced conversation, and resettled his bag on his shoulder. They could definitely fit Eli himself in there, folded in half. He had to be carrying every possession he’d ever owned in that thing, catalogued and organized, no doubt, by color and date of purchase. “You just make sure they start a proper kill counter for us down here,” Eli instructed him
from half-under the bag. “None of Stark’s predictive bullshit. You know he’ll rig it.”

“Get out of here,” Teddy laughed, his suggestion drowned out by the door banging open and a handful of cadets stumbling in. Eli and Joe were the center of activity for a couple of minutes, handshakes and back-pats and ‘kick kaiju ass’s coming at them from all directions. They left on the tide of approval and excitement; the last glimpse Teddy had of them before the door swung closed was Josiah settling a companionable hand on his nephew’s free shoulder as they walked away.

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With Eli and Josiah gone, Teddy’s usual routines fell all kinds of flat. Duty hours weren’t so bad, even though his focus kept wandering. He caught himself staring out at the south-western horizon on more than one occasion, beyond the dirt and the scrub hills, searching for the ocean that lay hundreds of miles away. So other than getting told off for that, duty hours were fine. Meals were the worst. He had plenty of casual and friendly acquaintances, sure, and there were always crews willing to give him a place at their tables.

That was the thing, though; their tables. And if it came to a choice between being an obviously extra appendage, hanging off the end of one of the crew tables, or finding something else to fill the hours of downtime, he preferred to head down to the labs. He might not have the engineering background to be a real tech, but he could make himself useful as an extra pair of hands to hold wires and things while the real brains worked on the prototypes. There was only so often he could flutter his eyelashes at Jan, after all, before he got banned from the simulators altogether for being in the way.

That was how Marshal Hill found him, six weeks after the last kaiju attack. He was waist-deep in the guts of some highly technical piece of analytical equipment, Dr. Banner directing his every move with a distracted sort of stammer. The wiring was incredibly fine, the flashlight in his mouth bobbing as he breathed, the little circle of bright white light shifting every time he almost had the coupling attached. Just another moment, and... there!

“Altman!”

Hill – shit. What had he done? Teddy sat up instantly, his head bouncing off the sharp edge of the open access door. Stars of pain flashed behind his eyes and he grabbed his head with a low groan, dropping the coupling. It rattled across the floor with a series of small, sharp pings until it finally subsided into silence.

“Ma’am,” Teddy struggled to his feet, pressing his hand against the sore spot on his head. His hand was clean when he took it away, thank god – no blood meant no head wound or stitches, and wouldn’t medical have had an absolute field day with that one?

“What are you doing in there?” Marshal Hill asked, drawing herself to her full height. She was only a couple of inches shorter than Teddy and she held herself with an amazing amount of compressed power, like a 6’8” bodybuilder crammed down into a body half that mass.

And she could probably bench-press Teddy with the power of her glare alone, so he snapped into parade rest and winced at the reverb of pain that sent through his forehead.

“He’s doing what I need him to do,” Dr. Banner interrupted, hands up in front of him and his voice gentle. He was probably halfway to offering her a soothing cup of tea from the kettle on his desk that was in a permanent state of boiling, just-boiled or about-to-be-boiled. But-

Teddy frowned and looked again. Her expression was sharp as nails and twice as tough, but there was no popping vein. Her forehead was smooth. Whatever he’d done or not done, it wasn’t a capital
“He’s going to have to knock it off,” Hill replied to Banner, and Teddy looked back and forth between them. He was being pulled out? But why?

“I checked in with my CO before I volunteered, ma’am,” Teddy said. He would not worry at his bottom lip, because he cleared this all in advance. “There’re no regulations against offering to help out in the labs during off-duty hours, and I have the appropriate security clearances.”

“Tough shit,” Hill cut in, and all the background noise in the hangar – the beeping of a hundred different systems, conversations between the different crews – all of it died away to nothing and the world narrowed into a focus that was way too tight. His chest squeezed closed, stomach sore to match his head. “I want you off my base.”

‘Confused’ didn’t even begin to describe it; were there words in English that covered the swim of disorientation that threatened to sink him? “Ma’am?”

“Do I need to repeat myself, Ranger?”

“Ma’am-” he was a broken record, a stuck track, and he couldn’t keep up with the words she was saying, the gleam in her eye that had replaced the feigned anger. “Ranger?” He recovered his sanity, then, because now it was obvious what was going on.

Josiah had somehow bribed or blackmailed Marshal Hill into messing with him.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am, but I’m just a cadet. I...” he looked at her again, really looked, and dear god. Was that a twinkle in her eye? Whatever it was, it vanished instantly. Banner, on the other hand, had developed a twitch. “I have the feeling I’m missing something, here.”

Hill relaxed her stance and Banner leaned casually against his desk, watching the interplay. “I’ll talk slower, Ranger, so you can keep up,” she said, dry as anything. “You,” she pointed at him with an index finger, “are going to get your ass back to the barracks and pack your crap.” She pointed at the hangar bay door, then dropped the exaggerated act. “Because in just under an hour, there will be a helo waiting for you to take you down to the Shatterdome. Marshal Danvers will be waiting for you. She’ll give you the full briefing when you touch down.”

Holy shit. There were better words for it than that, more eloquent ones, but Teddy bit them all back. There was always the chance that this wasn’t what he was building it up to be, in his mind’s eye. He didn’t have a co-pilot, and from everything Eli had said in his emails, none of the teams were looking-

The penny dropped.

“Magnus Echo, ma’am?” He was guessing, but it was the only thing that made sense. William Maximoff was still out of commission, or at least if he was back in the field Teddy hadn’t heard anything about it. That left his twin a solo pilot, and their Jaeger hung up in dry dock. Unless-

“They’re calling in a bunch of single pilots to test,” Hill said, a warning in her voice, and he folded the warning up tight inside. To get the chance was a miracle – to get the spot would take another, and there wasn’t anything else he could do to prepare for it, other than... hope. Hope that he was good enough. Hope that he could somehow become the person that his co-pilot would need him to be. “You’ve got compatible EEGs, but you’re not the only one on the list, so no guarantees. This is your chance, Altman,” Hill nodded at him, then jutted her chin toward the door in a gesture of dismissal. “Try not to fuck it up.”
And that was the closest he’d ever get to a ‘do us proud’ from Hill. He couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across his face as he saluted, turned and jogged toward the hangar doors. He got a couple of thumbs-up along the way; it was no secret how badly he’d wanted this, just to have this one shot.

Except – he was riding on the back of a tragedy, to try and earn a place beside a man who’d already all but lost his brother. Teddy caught himself and tamped down the wave of seriously inappropriate elation, the feeling swamped under the rising tide of dread.

He was going to have to try and drift with *Tom Maximoff*.

Teddy’s step faltered and he had to do a fancy little jog not to fall over his own feet. There was no-one in the hallway to see it, thankfully, and he turned down toward the barracks, his footsteps echoing in the corridor. How was this going to be anything but awkward? He flushed warm with a vague sense of foreboding.

To drift with someone, to complete the neural sync and actually have a hope in hell of maintaining the handshake, pilots had to trust each other completely. There was no room at all for fear, or anger, or embarrassment.

A mess of nerves tangled up in his gut at the idea of actually stripping himself so bare. His gut clenched tight, low and fierce; some the things he’d thought about the twins... and the slightly inappropriate things he’d imagined, once or twice, about one of them in particular.

At least he’d never- *god*, that would have been humiliating!

All of it was going to have to go, get shoved way back into the recesses of his brain, never to be brought out into the light again. Whatever he might have considered, or thought, or muttered to Eli over breakfast when the news reels played- he couldn’t allow himself to think of any of it.

From now on, he was Tom Maximoff’s next co-pilot. Nothing else mattered.

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It took him less than half an hour to pack, to collect everything he owned in the world and stuff it into his duffle. It ended up maybe half the size of Eli’s, lying there open on the metal-frame single bunk that had been his for the past year. The tiny room seemed impossibly small now, grey-painted walls barren and cold. It was claustrophobic, rather than snug and secure.

There wasn’t much left there to miss, honestly, and Teddy said his not-so-fond goodbyes as the door to his room swung shut behind him for the last time.

Word had gotten around and a handful of the staff had come out to the landing pad to wave him off, or wish him luck. Dr. Banner shook his hand warmly – as warmly as he ever got, anyway, which was to say slightly standoffish and harassed – and pressed a ziplock bag of grey and brown dirt into his hand. “Tea. It’ll help relax you before a drift,” was all he said, and Teddy shoved it into the end of his bag before the duffle was unceremoniously tossed into the open belly of the helicopter.

Five minutes later and Teddy was airborne, the steel mesh of the passenger bench digging sharply into his legs and back. In two hours, they would be landing in Los Angeles. The burst of anticipation in his head tangled up with the dread that had settled low in his gut. There was no way he was ready for this; Hill had made a terrible mistake. They were going to take one look at his file and send him packing, and he would end up right back where he started.

The base retreated below them, shrank away to nothing as they moved over the hills, brown and beige and spotted here and there with green. It was too late to back out now.
LA didn’t feel like much of a change from Nevada, at least at first; one landing pad was the same as any other. The air smelled different, though, once Teddy had a second to stop and breathe it in. Everything at Groom Lake had felt dry, ironically enough, tinged with the faint undertone of dust and metal. Here, standing on the edge of the cliff, facing out to the ocean, it was salt and wet and musky-sweet. Sea air. And somewhere out there, far beyond visual range, deep beneath the surface of the rolling green-tinged waves, there was a tear in the fabric of the universe itself.

"Altman." A voice cut into his thoughts and Teddy turned smartly on his heel. The woman standing at the edge of the landing pad was in a marshal’s uniform, the ribbons on her chest a bright array of battles fought and won. Among the last were three rectangles of brilliant blue, Kaiju kills. Marshal Danvers had been one of the first; one of the best. She had been benched almost two years ago, if he remembered the half-heard gossip correctly; something to do with an injury after a fight. Her old partner had taken their Jaeger north, assigned to the Alaska Shatterdome with a new co-pilot.

She was taller than he’d expected, blonde hair caught back in a tight knot, and she bore a look of barely-contained exasperation so strong it seemed more existential than aimed at any one thing in particular.

"Ma’am," he came to attention, arms snapping straight. She waved him off as the techs buzzed around the landing pad, prepping the helo for takeoff again.

"At ease, cadet," she ordered him, and the expansive mood he’d been in since Marshal Hill’s announcement deflated again. This was still only a test; he wasn’t a Ranger yet, and he wouldn’t be until he had a co-pilot and a Jaeger, until he proved that he could do what the PPDC had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars training him to do. Teddy lifted his bag and slung the strap over his shoulder, the familiar weight of it grounding him again. Just another transfer.
Danvers eyed him as he fell in step beside her, the weight of her gaze measuring and judging, and it felt somehow... personal. That made a lot of sense, though. The Maximoffs had been stationed in LA for three years; they would have fought alongside Danvers and Drew as colleagues before she ever became a marshal. Teddy was there to test not just as a replacement for one of her rangers, but one of her friends.

What she said next, though, as they strode through the doors that led into the base, blew that theory entirely out of the water. “Your father was Captain Mark Altman, wasn’t he?” she asked, glancing at him sidelong. “USAF?”

Teddy’s step faltered, the echo of his footsteps on the concrete floor dying away. A handful of enlisted swerved around him, blue coveralls dark against the grey and olive-drab colour of the walls and ceiling and floor. “Yes, ma’am. His last posting was to AFB Fairchild, before-”

“Before he died,” she finished for him when he hesitated, that split-second pause enough. She gestured for him to keep walking, and turned down another stretch of hallway instead of passing through the immense double doors that would lead to the Shatterdome proper. Magnus Echo would be in there, if she was out of the repair bay, but he only had the time for a swift, longing look before she was leading him away. “I flew with him, before all of this,” and she gestured at the halls, the PPDC logo stencilled on every door they passed. One of them had a label on the wall beside the door, reading ‘Tech Lab 4’ in four different languages, and she swiped a key-card to open it. “I hope you’re half the pilot he was.” She paused. “We’re going to need it.”

He’d been half-prepared with replies for nostalgia, or compliments, or the nice and generic ‘sorry for your loss he was a good man’ that often came out all in one breath before a rapid topic change. This, less so. “Um. I hope so too,” seemed a really weak answer, but it was all that he had time for before the door opened onto a lab a whole lot like the one he had just left behind.

The desks and shelves were tidy, unlike Stark’s disaster area, and there was little in the way of personal touches anywhere, unlike Banner’s. The pons equipment and combat simulators were the same, though, cables and wires coiled in bundles beneath the arrays. The vast banks of computer screens along the wall almost identical, displaying dozens of readouts and datastreams that flickered by too quickly for Teddy to take in.

There didn’t seem to be anyone there. Just white walls, massive amounts of technology, and a half-full mug of coffee sitting out on one of the desks.

“Richards!” Danvers shouted, and folded her arms to wait. A scuffling noise came from a back room that Teddy hadn’t noticed before, and the door opened a minute later. The technician was younger than Teddy had expected, closer to his age than to Banner, and handsome in that square-jawed Clark Kent kind of way. He was wearing slacks and a button-down, rather than any kind of uniform or lab coat, but the older style suited him somehow.

Teddy had officially been single and hanging out with the same people for way too long. This wasn’t exactly the time to start checking out the staff. ‘Never’ was probably better, if he wanted to keep any semblance of professionalism at all.

“Here,” Danvers gestured at Teddy without much preamble. “Theodore Altman. He’s here to test for Magnus Echo. I need you to run his EEGs again, and record him in a sim drop. I want to see how he fights.”

Richards nodded, but before Teddy could work up any kind of a head of steam about being talked around and over, Danvers cocked an eyebrow at him and quirked up a small and knowing smile. “Sorry to put you through it again, kid. I need to know that we’re only sending in candidates with
serious chances for success. Anything else is a waste of everybody’s time. If you meet Richards’ benchmarks, I’ll schedule you and Maximoff for a combat synch test tomorrow.”

“About that-“ Teddy said, and it was probably glaringly obvious that he hadn’t known what to expect. “When am I going to have a chance to meet him? I assumed that he’d be here, and we might get a chance to talk.”

Before we have to try to fight, before we face each other in the kwoon with everyone else watching.

There was a pause, pregnant and round; Danvers and Richards traded glances before he answered, with a hint of an east-coast accent. “He’ll be around.”

A thousand unsaid things hung in the air, but Marshal Danvers only nodded. “Altman’s all yours, and he’s the last of them. I need your assessments on my desk by the end of the day.”

The room seemed to hold its breath until the door closed behind her, then Richards relaxed incrementally. “Nate,” he offered, holding his hand out to Teddy with a measuring smile. “But bellowing ‘Richards’ does work if you don’t do first names.”

“Teddy,” Teddy replied, and returned Nate’s handshake as well as the smile. His grip was strong, belying the scientist-dork stereotype, and he waved at an empty corner when Teddy let go.

“Drop your gear there; you’ll be here for a couple of hours while we run through all the preliminaries. Do you need anything before we start? Coffee? It’s terrible, but it’s real.”

“No, I’m good.” Teddy’s duffle went into the corner and he dropped down into an empty chair while Richards – Nate – started to input commands into a control display. He already had an answer to the only thing he really needed to know, but now, off the record, maybe – “what I need,” he tried, turning the chair to straddle it and folding his arms across the back, “is what’s going on with Tom Maximoff. If I’m going to try to synch with him, if I’ve got any chance at all of getting this right – then I need something more than the bits of gossip I’ve got.”

I need to be able to trust this stranger with everything I am. Because he’s my only shot.

Tell me that he deserves it.

Or that I do.

Nate didn’t answer for a while, staring intently at the electrode net he was untangling. The wires and ends slipped over and around each other under his touch, the curved bowl-shape emerging as he worked. “Tommy’s a friend,” he said, and Teddy startled a little bit at the sound of his voice. “Full disclosure, in case you do drift with him,” his mouth quirked up in the corner for a moment before it vanished.

“He and Billy... you have to remember that it’s different with twins, especially identical ones. It’s the same thing that makes them some of the best Jaeger pilots around. They’ve literally never been without each other. They had a neural bridge, for all intents and purposes, in the womb. And now he’s alone. He’s not dealing with it.”

He glanced up at Teddy, his blue eyes dark. “I don’t mean he’s not dealing with it well, I mean he’s not dealing with it at all. When he’s not in the pit pissing off his repair crew, he’s down in medical. He even sleeps there.” Nate stood, net in his hands. “Here. I’ll wire you up, then we’ll get the EEG out of the way. It only takes about ten minutes in our setup. Have you got any crap in your hair you need to wash out?”
“No, no gel or anything.” Teddy dropped his head to let Nate attach the sensor netting to his head. The little electrodes were cool against his scalp, Nate’s fingers deft as he poked the sticky little discs into place.

“Any piercings I should know about?” Nate asked, a glint of humour in his eyes.

“Nope.” Teddy paused for a beat, then, “It’s against regulations to keep the jewellery in while I’m on-duty.”

Was he flirting with his tech? Jesus. Nerves made him ridiculous. “Good to know.” Nate snorted a laugh in reply, and Teddy rested his chin on his folded arms and let him work.

Tom’s grief made sense. Losing his own parents had been devastating. How much worse would it have been to be inside his mother’s head, to feel everything she was feeling, see it happen, and still not be able to stop anything-

Teddy blinked fiercely, forced the warning prickles back out of his eyes. Not the time, not the place.

But it wasn’t the same. William Maximoff – it was utterly impossible to think of him as anything so familiar as ‘Billy’ – wasn’t dead.

“No,” Nate agreed, when Teddy asked. “He’s not. In some ways it might actually be easier if he were.” There was pain there when he spoke, something a little deeper than Teddy had expected to hear. “His body’s healed.” Nate stepped back and frowned intently at the top of Teddy’s head. He pried up one electrode, catching Teddy’s hair with his nail in a spark of pain, and pressed it down again a fraction of an inch over. “The EEG’s this way.”

“But?” Teddy prompted, standing to follow. Nate passed his hand across a sensor pad and the flat bed slid out of the EEG machine. Teddy stripped off, the protocol familiar, until he was down to only boxer briefs and his t-shirt.

“But he won’t wake up,” Nate replied as Teddy folded his clothes and set them aside. “There are hints of brain activity, enough to keep him from being classified as brain dead, but he’s been off the meds for weeks with no change in consciousness. The lights are off and no-one’s home.” He levelled a serious look at Teddy. “That is so firmly off the record that if you tell anyone, I’ll deny that I said anything and have the altered security footage to prove it. I only know because I’m the one monitoring his readings. But if anyone is going to make it as far as drifting with Tom, it’ll be you.

“So there’s your answer. Tommy’s stuck in limbo because Billy is, too.”

Teddy lay down on the bed, tried his best to settle down against the cold, hard surface. He had to relax, let the test happen. Don’t think about fathers and mothers without bodies to bury, or brothers half-lost at sea.

Think of the drift.

_The drift is silence._

Just one more thing before they started. “And you need someone to help him move on?”

Nate paused, one hand on the controls. The tunnel loomed over Teddy, sterile, silver and white, and a soft thrumming burr vibrated through him just below his hearing. “We need you to pilot a Jaeger,” Nate said, his expression shuttered and the conversation clearly over. “The rest is your problem.”
The simulated drop had been a good one, the kaiju based on Hone-onna, Magnus Echo’s last fight. Eight hundred viewings of the footage hadn’t been wasted effort after all – suck it, Eli – and Teddy’d had the kaiju down for the count less than ten minutes after the drop. A new personal best.

Now tested, probed, his muscles one generalized all-over ache from the workout in the sim’s articulated conn-pod rig and his scalp still sticky in spots from the gummy electrode pads, Teddy dropped his duffle in the small barracks room that was his – at least for the time being – and headed in the general direction of what he hoped was the cafeteria.

The implications of the information he’d learned from Nate – those he spun around in his mind, turning the thoughts over and around and through like an old Rubik’s cube, until hopefully they’d fall in an order which made some kind of graspable sense. He’d imagined William Maximoff as injured, maybe physically disabled somehow, not able to do the physical heavy lifting of a Jaeger conn-pod anymore. Or part-way recovered, still able to talk and joke with him, maybe give him his blessing as Teddy stepped up to take his place.

‘Gone’ hadn’t been on the radar at all.

And he was weirdly sad about it, for someone he had never met. Not officially met, anyway. Reading about someone in the news didn’t count.

What it meant for tomorrow, he couldn’t begin to guess. Marshal Danvers wanted to keep Tom on Magnus, for whatever reason, rather than import an entirely new piloting pair. So that meant Tom had to be at least a little bit willing to entertain the notion of drifting with someone else. But whether he would need Teddy to be as much like or as much unlike his brother as possible-

He must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, though, the painted lines and symbols on the walls leading him astray, because when he pulled up in front of a large set of swinging doors, it was medical on the other side instead.

He had no reason to be there, no reason to push open the door and head inside.

The medical wing was pretty much like any other on every other base he’d lived on, both before his dad died, and after, at the Academy and Groom Lake. Quiet, white; with that clinging, cloying smell of antiseptic cleaner that only existed in hospitals but was in every hospital, everywhere.

Triage was at the front, beds and curtains at the back, and off to one side, a hallway lined with doors and curtained windows. Private rooms. Will Maximoff would be in one of those, attached to IV drips and feeding tubes and god alone knew what else. No-one had stopped him yet, so he kept walking, one foot in front of the other down the silent hall.

Maximoff, W.

The curtain was partly drawn back; he didn’t need to open the door to see inside. The small, utilitarian room was full, the IV stand and monitoring equipment next to the high-framed bed taking up the bulk of the space. The figure in the bed was so pale that he barely looked alive, his shock of black hair the only thing differentiating him from the sheets he lay on.

He barely resembled the man Teddy had seen in the videos, the lithe martial artist with the bo staff, whose dark eyes snapped with wit and humour in his interviews.

The sheet rose and fell in a steady shallow rhythm, the pulse monitor on the screen beside him never wavering in its steady metronymic count. He might as well have been a simulacrum, or some
animatronic doll built for medical students to study.

The figure beside him was the opposite. Somehow, someone had managed to fit a small cot in beside and below the raised hospital bed, sheets twisted and tangled on top. A chair was on the other side of the bed, and in it was Will’s brother. He slumped deep into the vinyl-upholstered armchair, his arms folded across his chest and his head bowed. He looked like he was sleeping; he might have been. But he was moving even in his doze, fingers and feet twitching restlessly, his head tipping one way then the other-

He half-jerked awake as he flung his arms up in front of him in a defensive position. Teddy stepped back and out of any kind of line of sight before Tom could notice that he was being watched.

Teddy knew those movements, had danced a fake Jaeger through them less than an hour before. Did he win, this time? Or did Tom lose the fight even in his dreams?

One more quick glance into the window before he left, just to be sure everything was alright. Tom was sitting forward now, his elbows on his knees, hands tucked into his bleached-white hair, his head hanging low and heavy. For a moment, he looked as small as Will.

He should go in and say something; there had to be something he could do to help, but where could he even start?

He didn’t have any right to be there at all.

Teddy turned, slowly, and took himself away.

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The walk back through the base to where he’d turned left instead of right went faster than the other way, but by the time Teddy found the actual cafeteria, his head was mostly clear again.

The doors to the cafeteria swung open and almost brained Teddy as he was lost in thought. He jumped back, let the tech crew file past him, and ignored the handful of curious looks cast in his direction.

A wall of sound hit him as he stepped in, the vast room echoing with a hundred conversations all jostling to be heard over top of one another. Long tables sat on either side of a wide aisle, the chow line a length of counters running down the far wall. This was familiar, achingly so; crews and support staff clustered in groups, a pack of skittles, crew from the launch deck, still in their brightly coloured jerseys. They had taken over an entire table in the back corner, matching ball caps hanging from their belt loops.

He scanned the room; Eli and Josiah were here somewhere; they had to eat, right? Unless they were training, or in a meeting, or on a different shift-

“Teddy!” Arms grabbed him from behind and Teddy spun just in time to be grabbed into a clasped-arm handshake and a thumping back-pat of a half-assed embrace. “You made it!”

“Provisionally only; don’t get your hopes up yet.” Teddy thumped Eli on the shoulder and stepped back. He looked about the same as he always had; two months as a ranger with no kaiju attacks yet hadn’t exactly changed him.

It was stupid how good it was to see him.

“Come on; we’re eating over here.” Eli headed off down between the tables, and now people were
stopping to take notice, heads turning and conversation buzzing behind him. It wasn’t exactly the parting of the Red Sea, but he’d been made as a person of interest now. It wouldn’t be so easy to sneak into medical again, the next time.

And where had that come from? He’d had no intention of doing it this time, never mind making a habit out of it.

There was no guarantee he’d even be on base past tomorrow, anyway.

Eli stopped walking and Teddy almost ran into him. Chuckling came from the people already sitting around the table. “You’ll need better reflexes than that, ‘mano, if you’re planning to be a pilot.”

The speaker arched an eyebrow at him when Teddy turned, his ears flushing hot at the tips. *Fantastic. Amazing first impressions there, Ted.* She was darker than Ted, though lighter than Eli, with a mass of black curls that fell down past her shoulders. Her uniform was a ranger’s, and the way she wore it suggested that it was on the purest sufferance. She had an arm slung over the shoulders of the woman who was all but sitting in her lap, and one leg up on the bench behind her.

He knew her face, just like he knew all of their faces; they were on newscasts and magazine covers, gossip rags and on the boxes of a dozen unofficial video games. *America Chavez. Holy shit.*

“Shut it, Chavez,” Eli replied without any sting to the words, and she flicked a couple of fingers at him in return. “Ted Altman, Bishop and Chavez,” Eli introduced them instead, even though he knew – of course he knew – that the introductions weren’t for Teddy’s benefit at all. “And the Langs.”

The others stopped their conversations and turned, and – except for Uncle Joe, of course, who was sitting across the table from a man about Joe’s age, his red hair cut in a slightly outgrown high and tight. Scott Lang. Which made the girl sitting next to him Cassandra. “This is the new guy?” Scott asked. Joe nodded, standing to grab Teddy’s hand, swallowing it almost entirely in his broad palm.

“If we’re lucky,” Joe replied, and Teddy couldn’t help but return the grin along with the hearty handshake. Joe had faith – in him, along with a lot of other things – and that actually helped. “He’s one of mine,” Joe smiled, that little warm smirk that meant he was really pleased. “Came up through the Academy together, shared our last posting. Ted’s good people.”

Cassandra Lang shifted over and patted the seat beside her. Bishop had been watching him with a tight and thoughtful look until then, but she held out her hand as he swung into the space between her and Cassandra. “Kate,” she clarified, and her face relaxed into a private sort of smile.

“Teddy,” he offered back and shook her hand. “And I’m better in the simulator than on my feet,” he offered as a joke, glancing at Chavez as he said it. She smirked, waggled her fingers at him over Kate’s shoulder, but didn’t offer her hand. Or her first name.

There was no mistaking that embrace for anything but what it was, and honestly, it was something of a relief. ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ had been repealed before the first kaiju ever made landfall, and for rangers it would have been as ridiculous as it was useless. There was no way to keep something that basic about yourself a secret in the drift.

Still... it was nice to see. Even nicer that no-one else seemed to be batting an eye.

He’d paused too long thinking about just that, though, because Chavez narrowed her eyes at him. “What’re you looking at?” Kate only raised an eyebrow at him and toyed with the straw in her glass, bringing it to her mouth.

He shook off the train of thought; *careful, or she’ll add ‘creep’ to your list of faults any second now.*
“Sorry. You’re Yankee Hawker, aren’t you? The snipers?”

That got him a slightly more appraising look from both of them, and Kate nodded. “Ranged support, technically, but I’d say ‘sniper’ is a lot more accurate. You’ve been following local news?”

The answer seemed obvious, but he nodded anyway. “I was watching a feed when you got the kill on Rattler last year. I didn’t think anyone could make that shot.”

Eli dropped back down into the empty seat opposite him, beside Joe, and slid a tray across to Teddy with something vaguely approaching lunch piled on it. It was cafeteria food, bland as anything and what wasn’t bland was probably toxic, but he hadn’t eaten since before the flight and that had been hours ago. Teddy tucked in, and the glare that Chavez had been giving him before was entirely gone by the time he looked back up. She wasn’t exactly relaxed, but it was a little better.

“No-one else could,” Kate said with a smug little smile. And despite all the stats running rapidly through his head – shots taken, distance and range, kaiju cause of death – he couldn’t think of a single example to prove her wrong.

“Barton and Morse.” Except, of course, that Eli had to prove him wrong. “Raptor Bravo took out the first cat two with pinpoint accuracy at a range of two miles.” And he matched Kate’s grin, smug for smug.

“Barton and Morse had backup.” Kate poked at him.

“So did you.”

“I thought you were all in Nevada last,” Cassandra said thoughtfully. “And it’s Cassie, by the way. Only the media calls me Cassandra.” She folded her arms in front of her on the table, brown uniform another shade toning in to the dun brown of the tray beside her and the gunmetal grey of the tabletop. Her long blonde braid hung over her shoulder in sunny contrast. “I didn’t know they streamed the fight data there in real time.”

“They don’t, technically,” Teddy said. He smiled sheepishly. “But those of us who are interested find a way. I’ve watched all of them – we both have. I saw Stinger Goliath’s first round,” he said. He didn’t need to prove himself, he didn’t, but damn. He was sitting with the rangers now, and all the information he’d been collecting, it all bubbled up as though it knew. Useful! Finally useful! Ussssse meeee.

Goddammit.

“One kill and two assists, but that kill was your first time out. You nailed that son of a bitch before anyone else was even in range.” And oh god, he was going to sound like the world’s biggest fanboy.

But Cassie grinned, and even Scott broke away from his conversation with Joe again with a look of pride. “I like this kid.”

“You would,” Kate said, and Scott only shrugged good-naturedly.

It was disconcerting, some weird juxtaposition of familiar and un-, sitting with Eli and Joe – and four of the rangers that they’d been dreaming of emulating for the last three years. He was in exactly the spot he’d wanted for so long... but it wasn’t his yet. He hadn’t even seen Magnus Echo in person.

“So do you memorize those stats for fun, or is your life just that dull otherwise?” Scott Lang teased him – Scott Lang was teasing him – and Teddy flushed again. His mouth was full, he had to grab a drink before he said anything, which would give him a second to come up with a good response-
Eli beat him to the reply. “He’s got a clipping folder on his computer; you should have seen the number of play-throughs on some of the interview videos.”

Eli was a dead man. “Keep that up,” Teddy managed to reply. Eli was leaning back as though anticipating a punch to the shoulder, but Teddy had him one better. “-And I’m telling them all about that binder you have, with the trading cards all sleeved in print-run order.”

Kate snorted. “Aw, Bradley, and here I thought you were cool.”

Chavez did laugh, then. “I never did.”

”It could be worse,” Cassie giggled. She leaned in a bit further, her eyes laughing. “Billy’s got two copies of each of the action figures- the jaegers and the kaiju. One set to keep in the packages and one for display. Except Tommy keeps screwing around with them and putting them into rude positions...”

She trailed off then, the light fading from her eyes and the silence around the table falling rapidly into ‘awkward.’ “Kept, I mean. I don’t think he’s been in Billy’s room since. Uh. You know.”

Chavez wound a lock of Kate's hair around her finger and tugged lightly, her own expression unchanging. Kate stared down for a moment, then pushed her tray away. It scraped loudly on the table, shattering their little bubble of quiet. She looked up at Teddy, calm and measuring. “You’re testing with Tommy tomorrow?”

And there it was. Teddy nodded. “Yeah. Assuming that all of Dr. Richards’ tests went well. I’m one of the candidates, anyway.”

Kate looked at him like she was staring clear down to his bones, unfolding his secrets page by page. Teddy held her gaze calmly; it was nothing compared to what a drift would be like, right? If he couldn’t handle being judged by someone outside his head-

“That boy’s got problems a new co-pilot won’t cure.”

Kate broke it off when Chavez spoke, twisting to frown at her co-pilot. “Don’t,” she warned firmly. “Whatever you’re about to say, just don’t.”

“We all know it’s true, princess.” The conversation settled between them, and it felt almost like eavesdropping to keep listening, except for the fact that the rest of the table was just as focused on the pair. “He’s always had an attitude problem, and playing along with this bullshit isn’t helping anyone.”

“America.” Joe spoke up then, his elbows on the table in front of him, hands clasped and a frown creasing his forehead between his brows. “This is hardly the time, or the place. That boy is the walking wounded.”

Her lips thinned, pressed tightly together, but while a challenge flashed in her eyes and Eli was as tight as a drum beside Teddy on the bench, she didn’t push. Joe stared her down, a calm mountain of a man who could outwait anything.

“What we need is a new crew, not a patch job,” America said finally. She flickered an eyebrow at Teddy, acknowledging his presence for the first time in the conversation. “No offence.” She didn’t exactly look sincere.

“They won’t do that. Not again.” Cassie replied, leaning back into her father’s shoulder and chewing at her bottom lip.
That seemed to end it, though why, Teddy couldn’t be sure, just that Eli was looking back and forth between them all with an air of exasperated confusion, Uncle Joe and America Chavez were staring each other down again, and the whole thing had taken on overtones of a soap opera that Teddy had channel-surfed to three-quarters of the way through an episode.

“Anyone feel like filling me in?” the dry question slipped out before he could stop it, but damn it, this was the sort of thing that he needed to know. He was going in blind. For all he knew, the other candidates were old friends of Maximoff’s, or recent lovers, people he might already know and trust, which would put him at a massive disadvantage.

Except that if he did have anyone else, they wouldn’t be bringing in a stranger.

And if he did pass the test tomorrow, then what? He’d been so focused on whether Tom would want Teddy inside his head, that he’d been able to force himself to ignore the other half – that this stranger, this hurt, bruised man, was going to be letting his brain wander through Teddy’s most private places.

What the hell am I doing?

It was Scott who broke the deadlock. “Not long after Billy got hurt, Marshal Danvers brought in a sub crew, a couple of new kids just down from Alaska.”

“So what happened?” Teddy asked. “Why aren’t they piloting now?” They definitely hadn’t been in a fight; there hadn’t been an attack since the one that had gone so badly wrong. Eli and Joe shared a look of faint confusion, then Joe steepled his fingers in front of his face and watched Scott with quiet reserve.

“Magnus didn’t like it,” Cassie replied quietly. Scott made a face that came close to rolling his eyes, but Kate didn’t blink.

“What do you mean?” Teddy asked.

He’d heard the legends; everyone had: stories of jaegers that moved in their berths while their pilots dreamed in their beds, of the jaegers themselves developing glitches, quirks that could almost be called preferences. But that was just so much sailor’s talk. Spend enough time with any piece of complicated equipment and you’d find yourself talking to it, giving it names and projecting emotions onto gears and wires.

That was just human nature.

“It’s superstition, nothing more.” Scott said, and it was Cassie’s turn to look dissatisfied. “They didn’t synch well with the jaeger and went back to the reserves.

“Tommy knows Magnus Echo better than anyone. He and Billy have been its pilots since it was commissioned. It makes sense to keep him on board as long as possible before having to train up an entirely new crew on an older machine.”

“Right.” Teddy knew he didn’t sound particularly convinced, but hell. What was one more thing to shake him up, anyway, when the last twenty-four had been filled with so many already?

He was itchy under his skin, his knee bouncing for lack of any other place to put the energy. The conversation moved on without him, and he tried to breathe the nervous jitters down. America and Kate rose to leave, the Langs following, but even Cassie’s encouraging smile and the careful nod that Kate sent his way didn’t do enough to ease the jitters.

They had a gym here, and a kwoon, and as far as he knew, he had the rest of the afternoon off to
settle in. Working off some steam sounded like the best thing in the world right now. It was better than sitting in a small room and worrying about a thousand things that he was never going to be able to change.

--

It didn’t matter where you were; every gym smelled like sweat. And feet. This one didn’t have the high overtang of chlorine that would suggest a pool, sadly; it was all rubber mats and hand sanitizer and the vague musty back-of-the-throat feel of old towels.

He’d learned to swim as a kid, but never really appreciated the soothing wash of cold water until the endless speed runs and endurance swims at the Academy. When your worst nightmares came from the ocean, your first line of defense learned how to swim. It had been an annoyance at first, one more hurdle to jump through when he was already starting behind. The repetition of it became soothing, though: the jolt of that first slice through the water, and the hollow echo in his ears that drowned out everything else in the sweet curve of motion. He could have used that today.

Weights and the elliptical, however useful, didn’t have nearly the same appeal.

It took two circuits before he could focus enough, a pleasant burning ache simmering low in his muscles.

44 – 45 – 46

He barely paid attention to the count sounding in the back of his brain as he pulled up into another crunch, and then another. Behind his eyes, the videos still played; from his review this afternoon, from before. Two bodies, lithe and slim, moving in a harmony so perfect that if it hadn’t been for the hair color, he’d have sworn he was seeing doubled video instead of two different people.

50 – 51

*Jab forward with the bo staff, then left leg down, sweep and dive.*

52

When it came to training – in the little bit of video he’d found on the server – when they faced off against each other, that was when things changed. Will – *Billy* – was half-airborne, liked to attack from above. Tom was faster, jab-jab-jab and back, out of range again. It kept them circling, over and under, neither taking the advantage for longer than a second, Billy’s cheeks flushing red and his mouth falling open a little with exertion and a gleeful grin-

58

*Stop that.*

He could do that. He wasn’t a jumper; preferred the ground solid underneath him, but he was a couple of inches taller than Tom. He could match those moves, mostly, and fit himself into the empty space that had been Billy’s.

60

“Aren’t your abs stupid enough already?” Eli’s face was hanging over his when Teddy opened his eyes, and he brought one of his hands out from behind his head to flip Eli off.

“What’re you doing here?” Teddy sat up in an easy motion, ignoring the ache across his gut.
Eli threw him his towel, and Teddy mopped down his face with one end. “We should go spar,” Eli offered. “I need a workout and you need to loosen up for tomorrow.”

“No Uncle Joe this afternoon?” Teddy rose to his feet and followed, padding barefoot across the mats toward the locker room that opened out onto the empty training floor of the kwoon. The air changed when they stepped inside, the clatter and noise of the gym fading into the distance. The walls were only partially soundproofed, the mats imported, but somewhere in the soothing browns and beiges, the muffled noise and pretend isolation, there was peace.

“Nope.” Eli grabbed two staffs from the rack along the wall, flexing one in his hands before he passed the other to Teddy. “He’s in a meeting with Colonel Rhodes; he’s trying to revamp the base’s chaplaincy program. You know how he is.” Eli stretched out, an arm over his head, and Teddy leaned against the wall to wait. “Sorry about lunch,” Eli added after a minute.

“No your fault.” Teddy twitched his lip up in a small grin. “Is Chavez always like that?”

“No always. Sometimes she’s downright unfriendly.”

He laughed, though he really shouldn’t, and Eli grinned at him from upside down, his hands pressed against the floor. “Honestly, she’s all right.” He shrugged as he straightened up, tugging his t-shirt back into place. “She and Kate are hell on wheels in a jaeger.” And that kind of ungrudging acceptance from the perpetually-skeptical Eli was about as high a recommendation as you could get.

The staff was cool in his hand at first, the wood polished smooth by a hundred different hands. Teddy paced out to the center of the mat and waited. Eli took up his stance, staff up at his side, and the whole thing was so utterly familiar and easy that Teddy forgot to be anything but at ease.

They bowed, then a beat, then Eli was in his space, his staff coming down. Uncle Joe was a brawler, heavy-footed and solid. Teddy squared off his shoulders and set his feet wide, brought his staff up to block Eli. He took it, bounced off, and circled around again. It was mechanical from here, falling back into the duck and weave of sparring with Eli, the rhythms and the patterns easy as breathing.

He knew the shape of these fights, the way he would come out and then back at him, the way Eli left his elbow up and his side exposed that fraction of a second too long.

“Two,” Teddy declared with a little rush of victory. “I thought you were some kind of hotshot now.”

Eli rushed him and had him flat, the end of his staff poking gently at Teddy’s skull. “I get by.”

Teddy flipped him and had him flat, the end of his staff poking gently at Teddy’s skull. “I get by.”

Teddy flipped back to his feet, grabbing Eli’s hand for leverage. His bangs were hanging in his face; he needed a trim, badly. He shoved them away with the back of his wrist, and only then caught the motion out of the corner of his eye. The door to the kwoon was open, like usual; but now there was someone standing in it. The hair color had been the thing that had given him away, bright and pale against the dark-paneled walls.

Tom Maximoff met his stare. There was nothing to read at all, in his eyes; they weren’t cold, or judgemental, or even angry. They were simply... there. Teddy lifted his chin and held the look for as long as Tom would allow it.

_Here I am._

Tom turned, his hands slid into his pockets, and he walked away.
Teddy watched him go, strangely deflated. And Eli – Eli watched Teddy, his hands wrapped around the staff that he had set against the mat in front of him.

“Do you think that was a good sign, or a bad one?” Teddy ventured, after a moment.

Eli frowned, then picked up his weapon again and gestured for Teddy to do the same. “With him? God knows. Now get your ass back in the ring so I can kick it.”

He could do that. It would help him pretend, at least, that the next eighteen hours would be purely business as usual.

Chapter End Notes

Skittles. http://www.navy.mil/navydata/ships/carriers/rainbow.asp They’re technically an aircraft carrier conceit, but given what we saw of the Jaegers launching in the opening sequence of PR, I have the feeling that the Shatterdomes would have a few of these guys kicking around. There were some yellow jerseys actually directing the launches in the movie, so I’m extrapolating.

–

I just really like Clint and Bobbi, okay?
Drift Compatible

Chapter Summary

Wherein there is a combat compatibility test, a drift compatibility test, and a decision.

Chapter Notes

Love forever to my beta for this chapter, feebleapb. All remaining errors are mine.

If there was one thing Teddy could be grateful for above everything else, it was for whatever brilliant person had made the decision to schedule the combat compatibility test for 0800 hours the following day. It meant less time to work himself into a state of nervous collapse, if nothing else.

He couldn’t bring himself to go down for breakfast; not today. The looks had been enough before when he was just an oddity. But today, when everyone knew what was coming? No thanks. The halls leading from his room to the gym were busy enough as it was, stares burning into the back of his neck as he walked by.

The trip down the wide concrete-colored hallway was both too long and too short. Eli and Joe fell into step on either side of him as he passed by the pilots’ dayroom, and the company made it easier. Less ‘green mile,’ more ‘eye of the tiger.’


“He’ll be fine, Elijah,” Joe rumbled from his other side.

“I know he’ll be fine, and you know he’ll be fine, but he doesn’t know he’ll be fine. That’s Teddy’s biggest problem.”


A crowd had already gathered in the gym; like it or not, rangers were big news. Three to one odds that someone here had a camera phone, despite the ban. Whoever ended up pairing off with Tom was going to end up front page headlines for the tabloids.

No pressure.

The other two candidates were already there. Teddy had tried to look them up the night before, but he only had access to the basics. Neither were experienced, both had simulator scores similar to his. On paper, at least, they were about evenly matched. The girl his age looked less nervous, brown hair tied up in a braid; the older guy more concerned. Teddy took a deep breath, reached down inside, tried to find that core of calm that Uncle Joe always talked about.

Eli gripped him on the shoulder and that gave him a focal point. No problem. Just one more sparring match. Then one way or another, life would go on.
“Marshal on deck.”

The crowd parted as Marshal Danvers entered, a man in crisp officer’s blues beside her. A younger woman, tiny, dark-haired and drowning in a bulky enlisted’s jumpsuit, trailed behind them with a clipboard that had a startling number of pages clipped to it. The officer had a chest full of ribbons, eagles on his shoulders, and RHODES on his name tape.

Every Shatterdome had a military liaison, left over from the days when the spaces used to belong to the Air Force and the Navy, the structure shifting around the PPDC to accept their newest branch with fewer growing pains than anyone had anticipated.

“Stark was only supposed to be here for one refit. One,” Danvers said as she walked by, shaking her head and paying little attention to the gathered group.

Rhodes snorted. “What did Maria say?”

“She laughed at me and hung up.”

“Just tell him no.” Rhodes was smirking, and Danvers shot him a look of pure disgust.

“And how successful has that ever been for you?”

Rhodes shrugged. “I could always shoot him. That worked well the first time.”

By then they had crossed the kwoon to stand at the far end, and they turned to face the crowd from that vantage point. Danvers gestured to her assistant, who stepped up beside her with the clipboard. “Call it, Kawasaki,” she said crisply, scanning the crowd. “Where the hell is Maximoff?”

“Here.” Tom stepped out of the far corner. The tank top and combat pants he wore matched Teddy’s, and his feet were already bare. He was muscled, lean rather than bulky, his slim frame usually hidden beneath the uniform jackets or the bulky drivesuits. Every step he took was controlled, quick and efficient, a living version of the images Teddy had memorized from the training tapes. Teddy knelt to unlace his boots. Tom had a hanbo in his hands already, and he spun it over his arm and across his shoulders in an absent, easy flourish. “Can we get this over with?”

“Lisa Molinari,” Kawasaki announced, and Molinari stepped forward. She bowed to Tom and they shared a smile, hers assessing, his wry and – something that Teddy almost wanted to read as ‘resigned.’

She was good, that was the worst of it. She was good, and she and Tom seemed to know each other, at least from the way they moved around each other as they sparred. But something was off; she was spending more time on flashy moves and fancy spins of the staff, and Tom got in under her defences one too many times. Three – four – down. End of trial.

Teddy sighed with relief, and immediately felt like a jerk for being happy about someone else’s failure. But he wasn’t a good enough person not to.

They bounced back to their feet, bowed again. Teddy blinked once when Molinari hugged Tom and he didn’t protest. She said something he couldn’t catch, and Tom’s quiet reply looked a lot like ‘you knew.’

Hunh.

“You ready for this?” Eli spoke in Teddy’s ear, and he turned. Eli cocked his head at the door and Teddy kept turning. The others were all there behind him, Kate and Chavez, as well as the Langs,
hanging back and leaning against the wall.

Teddy shrugged minutely. “Not really. But what’s life without taking some chances, right?”

Eli patted him on the shoulder, a gesture of confidence that felt better than he expected it would.

He turned back just in time to watch Tom take down the second candidate in less than a couple of seconds.

“Theodore Altman.”

And so much for zen-calm.

Teddy hefted his staff; the same one he’d used the day before. It had a good weight to it, and it sat easily in his hand. The mat was a little rough under his feet, just enough texture to keep an easy grip, enough give to prevent major injury if – when – one of them went down. Three steps took him to the center.

Tom waited for him there. His forehead gleamed; he wiped his brow with the back of his arm, and let his gaze rake critically over Teddy.

“We’re a rapid response team,” Tom said. His voice sounded sharper in person than it had over his radio, all edges and rough scars. “In fast, strike fast, out fast. You think you can keep up?”

Teddy settled into his feet, set the staff in front of him. “I’ve watched your tapes.” He returned cocky for cocky; it seemed like the thing to do. “I think I can manage.”

Tom’s eye narrowed at him and the corner of his mouth flickered up. Good sign. “You can’t learn a damn thing from tapes.” He was circling a couple of steps even though they hadn’t started yet, his grip shifting to a better position for a snap-shot.

“Try me.” Teddy moved his own hand, in case Tom was going to try to surprise him. He was heading left, which meant he’d try to come in from the right-

“Seriously? You’re going with that hokey line?”

“If you two are done with the dick-measuring,” Marshal Danvers’ voice snapped out, and Teddy stopped. Aw, no. Nice going, Ted. Trust him to forget the room full of people and his hopefully would-be commanding officer all watching while he and Tom sized each other up. “I’d like to get this done before 2019.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tom drawled, not looking chagrined or embarrassed in the least. He slid into opening stance, staff up in front of him, and they bowed.

Focus.

Kawasaki gave the sign.

Here we go.

Tom held back, circled three steps. Teddy relaxed a little bit; he knew this one. Two beats, then a feint; Billy’s move was a block and then around- Teddy followed it, met Tom beat for beat, in and down, but he wasn’t quite fast enough to complete the sweep. Tom took a point, with the end of his staff a hair’s breadth away from Teddy’s ribs.

“1 – 0.”
Tom frowned.

Teddy stood, braced. One mistake, but he knew these moves, could slip into them as easily as a second skin. Once Tom understood, it would be easy. *I'll be who you need me to be.*

He moved first this time, coming in and around, forcing Tom back. The staves clacked off each other, the reverb vibrating through his hands and wrist with the force of the hit. Tom rolled, bounced on his toes, and left his shoulder open.

“1 – 1.”

Tom’s frown deepened. He dropped his stance, held the staff loosely in his hand and paced around Teddy in a circle. This was new; this wasn’t something Teddy had ever seen before. He shifted his hands on the staff, brought it vertical beside his eyes, turned to keep Tom in view. What was he -?

The attack, when it came, was a flurry of movement and rapid jabs that Teddy had no set defense for. *Billy parried with a high stick, used the butt end to force an opening-*

He got the touch, heard the call, “1 – 2,” but it was only because Tom had dropped his stance altogether. He pointed at Teddy with his free hand, came in close to plant his hand dead center on Teddy’s chest and shove him. Teddy stumbled back half a step, too startled to block. “Stop fucking with me, asshole,” Tom snarled. His eyes were snapping his teeth bared, the low growl in his voice enough to set off a dozen internal alarms.

“What?” Teddy got his brain back in gear enough to step forward into Tom’s space, put him back on the defensive. He lowered his own staff, let it hang loosely by his side; they were off protocol so far now that Danvers and Rhodes were probably going to shoot them both.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to prove, but knock it the fuck off,” Tom said, and he clenched his hand into a fist, then dropped it down at his side. “Those aren’t your moves.”

*Oh.*

Three touches in and it was already crumbling around him. If he couldn’t find the right answer, and in the next few seconds, he might as well have never bothered with the Academy at all.

*It’s about compatibility.*

How many times had he heard that, over the eighteen months?

*More than that, it’s about honesty. There can’t be any barriers between drift partners. No secrets, no shame.*

It had been an easy assumption to make; the simple way in. But if he couldn’t get close enough, be *Billy*-enough to trick Tom’s reflexes into working with him the same way- well. What did he have left in his bag of tricks?

*Honesty.*

Teddy held up his hands, palm-out, the staff balanced lightly in his left. “I’m not fucking with you.” He rolled his shoulders, pulled his back tall, and waited.

Tom stopped pacing, stopped circling, and pursed his lips like he was mulling it over. “Then give me a real fight, not this paint-by-numbers shit.”
“Whenever you’re ready.” Teddy took a step back to plant his foot, the mat pliable and welcoming beneath him. He squared off, brought the staff up in front of him and sat it in the Vs of his thumbs, balanced. Waiting.

Tom stepped in first, fast and light. He came in from the side and Teddy blocked, stepped back, set his feet again and kept his knees loose.

He wasn’t a natural meat wall, like Joe, and he didn’t have the kind of speed the twins shared. He sat somewhere in the middle, and he had forgotten how easy it felt to slide back into his own stance, his own muscles and rhythm. There was no need to predict and plan; he didn’t have to think at all.

Just react.

There was nothing but Tom and the way he moved, circling again and then in. Teddy could see it in slow motion, the way Tom glanced to the left, the strike there. There. He pivoted, blocked. Riposte, double tap and Thomas caught it.

Another pass as fluid as before, catching the edge of the staff and using it for momentum. A pull in his shoulder as he rolled, taking Tom down with him. The rush of his pulse and the grin on Tom’s face echoed on his own. This was what muscles were made for, this give and take, the reciprocated dance.

He dropped his center of gravity as Tom sprang, swept with a leg and caught him. Tom bounced, saw him coming, was up and over and gone again. Teddy turned, because he knew where Tom would be; it was the only possible step in their square dance.

He caught Tom across the chest and they tumbled, rolled. Teddy’s feet were under him again and he surged to standing.

Tom was flat on the mat, his chest heaving. Teddy brought his staff up, poked him lightly in the collarbone with the tip. “Gotcha.”

“3 – 4.”

The world resolved itself back out of the haze at the sound of applause. Teddy’s vision cleared slowly, expanded back outside of the mat and the little bubble that had closed in around them.

The test.

He’d won the last point, but he barely remembered the previous three. Tom started to sit up and Teddy held out his hand. Tom grabbed him by the forearm, his hand sweaty, and Teddy hauled him easily to his feet.

There was stinging in spots he could have sworn Tom hadn’t touched, aching in places that hadn’t ached in a long time, and the rush of adrenaline still sang through every nerve and vein in his body. Teddy nodded at Tom, tried to catch his breath, and Tom –

Tom nodded back as he let go.

“Ranger?” Danvers was – was she smiling? Rhodes, beside her, definitely looked a little bit pleased.

“We’re good,” Tom replied, and the world spun around Teddy and reconfigured itself in another entirely new shape.

“Magnus Echo,” he breathed out with the kind of reverence that would have Eli punching him, if he
were anywhere within reach, but fuck, who cared about that? They had clicked. They were compatible. Teddy was going to be-

Tom snorted at him. “Don’t go getting starry-eyed on me, Altman. This could still blow up in our faces.”

He couldn’t help himself; the urge to roll his eyes was too strong, the relief and the high of success and the... the everything making him lose all sense of propriety. Teddy shook his head. “I’m not asking to marry you, I just want to drive the damned robot.”

Tom laughed – he actually laughed – a dry bark that seemed to surprise even him. “Good. I’m the wrong twin for that, anyway.”

“Believe me,” Teddy said, and the stupid grin plastered on his face had to be making him look like the world’s biggest fool, but he couldn’t seem to shake it. “You’re cute and all, but you’re not my type.”

There was a beat – had he screwed up? But Tom’s brother was gay; it’s not like he could have a problem with the idea of drifting with Teddy because of that.

The moment passed, and Tom held out his hand. Teddy took it, Tom’s palm hot and damp against his own, despite the quick scrubbing he’d given it on the thigh of his pants. “Just don’t go digging,” Tom advised him quietly. It went unheard by anyone else, excited conversation buzzing loudly in the room around them. “You chase the rabbit down inside my brain and you won’t like what you find there.”

“Everyone’s got skeletons.” Teddy shrugged it off. Something in the back of his brain, though - the part not jumping for joy - that part was sending out tendrils of worry.

Next was actually setting foot in a Jaeger. His Jaeger. Holy shit. It hovered on the horizon, distant and still unreal.

Marshal Danvers seemed to be anticipating his thoughts, because she was beside him when he turned, Sgt. Kawasaki at her side. “Congratulations, Ranger,” Danvers said crisply, and this time the rank really was his, earned and owned and all. He saluted and she returned it, then turned to Kawasaki.

“Get him fitted for a drivesuit, and confirm with Alleyne; we’ll run the neural test at 1500 hours. Let’s get this three-ring circus on the road.”

Eli cuffed him on the back of the head, which was about as good as a hug, and Joe nodded, his little round sunglasses low down on his nose. Tom was already halfway out the door, flanked by Kate and America, his boots only half-laced and a towel slung around his neck. He didn’t look back.

“There’s no way you’re going to fit into Billy’s drivesuit,” Nate explained as a tech pressed the overlapping edges of the circuitry suit closed up the length of Teddy’s spine. “You’re a good two inches taller, not to mention bigger in general,” he gestured vaguely at Teddy’s shoulders. He frowned at a gadget of some kind in his hand, then poked at the screen. A subtle vibration ran along the lines of the form-fitting black suit, a familiar, living pulse. He’d been in one of these at the Academy a couple of times; the gold wires embedded in the supple fabric trailed along the pathways of his own nerves.

The pulsing sensation faded away and Nate nodded in satisfaction. “Calibration set; next layer.” He
was elbowed out of the way by the techs who moved in, pieces of black armor in hand. Teddy watched his reflection in the glass of the door as they built him in, pauldrons, greaves, breastplate, back. They stopped there, played around with some settings at the sides until it snugged gently around his chest. He was half-remade in the window, his own head on top of a stranger’s body.

Teddy closed his eyes when they approached him with the feedback cradle, the clicking, moving metal spine that would read all the information from the circuitry suit. The piece that would make him one with the machine.

He heard and felt the click-click-snap as it slotted into place, an odd crawling sensation on his back as the attachment points pressed gently on the conductive suit beneath.

“Run the resistance test,” Nate ordered behind him, “and check that the connectors are solid.” It was immaterial, unimportant when compared to the feeling of being inside. The suit was close and solid around him; not heavy, but secure. There was a Ranger staring back at him in the glass, a man that he barely recognized.

It was over too soon, the technicians moving around him in carefully choreographed paths to strip him down, take the armor pieces away for fine-tuning. This was nothing new to them; how many times had they done this for Magnus Echo’s pilots alone?

And speaking of which-

“When do I get to see her?” Teddy asked, after the circuitry suit had been peeled off of him and he was allowed to put his own clothes back on. The uniform felt insubstantial after the drivesuit, flimsy and half-there, leaving him exposed. “Is there a chance I can get a look before this afternoon? I’m going to be way too preoccupied later to appreciate the moment.”

Light flickered over Nate’s face from the schematics display he was staring at, casting his face in shades of red and orange. A wire-frame outline of Teddy turned in the hologram, surrounded by floating drivesuit pieces and gradient bars in orange, red and green. He glanced up at Teddy’s question, blinking like he’d just woken up. “Yeah, we can do that.” He passed his hand through the floating image, poked and prodded at something that set more lights to flashing. “It’ll take half an hour for this to calibrate to your settings anyway.”

Nate was so casual about it, but every step down the hall that led toward the main doors of the launch bay ratcheted Teddy’s heart rate up another notch. He was moving in slow motion, pushing through molasses, waking up into a new dream.

The doors slid open when Nate swiped his keycard, and just for a moment, Teddy paused. His foot caught in mid-stride, then he caught himself, looked up and up and up into the vastness of the dome, and crossed the threshold.

On the other side of the door, life went on as normal for the dozens of pit crews, technicians and general staff milling around the Jaeger bays. There had been an exercise a couple of days ago, but you’d never know it now to look at them. Their chromed and burnished skins shone in the light, Yankee Hawker’s vibrant purple glowing next to the dark blue and red of Papa Valentine.

And there – there was Magnus Echo, green with white tracing marking out her ports and seams, the PPDC logo stencilled across her connpod and arms. Vast scaffolds on either side of the Jaeger let the cleaning crews get access, tiny as ants against the skyscraper-sized machine. Maintenance, Teddy’s brain supplied. Preparation for the afternoon’s test. He tried to imagine himself into it, picture the way he’d slide into the piloting rig, feel her respond to his movements and thoughts.
“There’s your ride,” Nate said, entirely unnecessarily. “Stark’s just going over the final checks.”

“Well, he says that’s what he’s doing, but personally, I have my doubts.” Teddy knew that voice, tenor and calm, the narrative line in every feed they’d ever picked up from the Shatterdome. The voice of the control center. He wasn’t at all sure what he’d see when he turned, but the young, slim man in the sweatervest and yellow-tinted glasses wasn’t exactly it. Older, maybe. He’d half-expected older.

“Ted Altman, David Alleyne,” Nate waved his hand between them, then jammed his hands back into his pockets. “Alleyne’s the Chief LOCCENT technician; he’ll be the voice in your ear when you’re in the Jaeger.”

“Yours and everyone else’s,” David said easily. He extended a hand, and his grip was calm and sure. “You’re the new guy piloting with Tommy, aren’t you? I heard about the compatibility test this morning.”

Teddy nodded, something like disappointment flickering very briefly as he let the handshake go. “That’s me. News travels fast.”

“Gossip’s the only thing that moves faster than the speed of light, especially on a base like this. Closed communities and all.” David stopped talking and his eyes flickered down, scanned back and forth – what was he-

The glasses. The realization hit Teddy before he could open his mouth and say something dumb. The glasses weren’t just a stylistic affectation, they were a HUD of some kind, little green flashes reflecting off of David’s dark eyes.

“What the hell is he doing?” David muttered, and brushed past them both to stand a few feet away. One hand activating the radio-mike hooked over his ear and the other fisted on his hip, he scowled and stared up at Magnus Echo. “You’re burying the needle. Knock it off and stick to the plan.”

Teddy couldn’t see where the reply came from, but it echoed, amplified, over the Shatterdome’s noise and bustle. The voice itself was unmistakable and kind of comforting, in its own weird and enthusiastic way. “You’re standing in the way of progress, Davy-boy; you’re a progress-murderer. What’s a little overload between friends?”

“We’re not friends, Stark. You’ve got five minutes to get Magnus back on spec, or I forward an annotated list of all your intranet infiltration attempts to Marshal Hill.”

Magnus Echo moved in her dock, the sounds of servos firing to life. It was loud and incongruous enough to make passers-by stop and turn to look. Her vast hand raised slightly, still connected to the harness that fed power to her substations. Three fingers folded down, along with the thumb.

David’s shoulders settled in the sigh of the long-suffering, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Nice, Tony. That’s very mature.”

Teddy grinned, ducking his head to hide the smile, in case David took offense. But Nate was fighting a smile as well, and he did grin – a quick flash – when Teddy caught his eye. “Business as usual?” Teddy asked.

The nod he got back was the best of all possible answers. “Welcome to humanity’s first, best line of defence. Such as it is.”

Noise bubbled around them as the launch bay lost interest in Magnus and went back to their regular business. Carts whizzed across the floor carrying supplies and personnel back and forth, a pit crew
passed with toolkits in hand, David Alleyne was reading Tony Stark the riot act over the comms, and somewhere in the distance a dog was barking. Servos whirred again as Magnus’ hand dropped back to hang at her side once more.

“Could be worse,” Teddy replied. He had been nervous before, but now he was just excited. Excited and awed, and ready.

--

He wasn’t ready.

Teddy stood in the drivesuit room trying to not fidget as the techs moved around him in their own private dance. The armor went on perfectly this time, adjustments made, each piece conforming to his body and building him into something that he wasn’t. Nate wasn’t on hand to reassure him this time; he was on the comms and monitoring the suit’s feedback, switching between displays with his head down and his brow furrowed.

And then there was Tom, being suited up on the platform next to him. His whole body was tense, despite the faint smile on his face. He chatted easily with his techs, though, accepted a fist-bump from one of them, and Teddy was fairly sure that Tom had waited until he didn’t think anyone was looking before he allowed himself to flinch. Just once.

The PA system cut in, David’s voice a little bit harried. “Magnus Echo neural test commencing in ten minutes.”

“Here we go,” Teddy muttered, half to himself. He moved when Nate gave him the nod, lunged forward and flexed, brought his arms up and rolled his shoulders. The drivesuit moved with him, bent with him, settled down onto him like a second, thicker skin.

“In harness, test mode, waiting for pilots,” the PA system said.

Tom flexed his hands and stepped off the platform, cocking his head to gesture Teddy forward down the catwalk. “Anything big to tell me before they wire us in?” he asked, strain underlying the casual banter.

I’m nervous / how can I let someone in / there are so many ways this can go wrong.

“Yeah,” Teddy said. There had been that photo of Tom in the paper, more than a year ago, coming out of a stadium with Billy, both of them in ball caps that hadn’t ended up hiding their faces well enough. He took the chance, schooling his expression into something serious. “I’m a Jets fan.”

Tom didn’t break stride, but the corners of his mouth did twitch up into a grin. He pointed back the way they’d come. “Get out.”

Bravado was so much easier than thinking about the metal walkway under his feet, and the vast space echoing below it. “Sorry, dude; no take-backs. You shouldn’t have let me kick your butt this morning.” The connpod door slid open, a grey-uniformed technician following them inside.

Lights blinked in brilliant patterns on the side consoles. The pilot rigs hung loose and empty in the center of the space, black-angled pistons and levers that formed the nerve center of the vast mechanical giant. The connpod smelled of engine oil and axel grease, the heavy tang of iron, and the musty scent of sweat and heat. It sank into the walls and into his skin, a visceral, slick thing so different from the antiseptic tang of the simulators.

“Pilots on board,” the AI said, that same smooth, crisp female voice that made the calls in the
simulators. That, at least, would be the same. Tom had his hand up against the panel when Teddy looked up, and something about the angle almost made it look like Tom was patting it in greeting. He dropped his hand when he saw Teddy watching, and turned to look at the rest of the cockpit. Teddy stood still.

Teddy’s hand lay on Billy’s rig, the place where Tom’s brother had come so close to death. The flash of hurt passed from Tom’s face, so quickly it could easily have been Teddy’s imagination, and something hard took its place.

“This one’s mine,” was all Tom said, taking his helmet from the technician’s hands and sliding it down over his face. He turned and stepped into the clamps on the right-hand rig.

Teddy nodded. “Fine with me.” The helmet fit over his head and locked to the neck seal, closing him in. It filled a moment later, the viscous yellow relay gel coating everything with the thin tang-taste of carburetors and citrus.

He stepped in to the rig.

Clamps closed around his boots, locking him to Magnus Echo’s legs.

Hands behind him fitted the plate to his back, the faint buzz of the connectors vibrating through the suit.

The arm braces closed around his wrists, locking him to her arms. Ocean waves rushed and roared in his ears, his own pulse echoing in the momentary silence of the helmet.

Voices spoke in his ear, the comm flashing to life with a warning chirp. Tom’s breathing underlay it all, a soft susurration of air beneath the voices carried to them from the LOCCENT. “Prepare for neural handshake,” Danvers ordered.

David’s voice was the next one he heard. “Initiating neural handshake.” That was a good voice, a soothing and sure voice.

“Fifteen,” said the AI.

Tom’s breathing sped up, and when he and Teddy looked at each other, Teddy saw his own nervousness reflected in his eyes. The scaffolding pulled back; the cockpit jolted as Magnus’ harness disconnected and rolled back, giving her the freedom to move in her dock.

Nervousness was fine, but not so much that it interfered. He needed something else to focus on, some way to stay clear. Joe had walked him through it before, when he was grieving, when thoughts of his mother had taken over every waking and sleeping moment of his life. But they might work equally as well for this.

“Five. Four.”

_In through the nose. Out through the mouth._

“Three.”

_Calm._

“Two.”

_The Drift is silence._
“One. Neural handshake initiated.”

Teddy was falling; he was falling and flying at the same time, and the world flashed into white. It was empty; he was alone in the blue.

Then he wasn’t.

*We could be heroes, Tommy. You and me.*

*Just think about the kind of good we could do.*

*Rocks between his toes and the ocean sand underneath,*

*Water’s so cold that his ankles ache,*

*waves breaking over the beach, the gulls crying*

*Carol says to trust him*

*Walk out on me now and you’ll never be a pilot.*

*Fuck you, Greg. I’ll keep taking my chances as a solo.*

*Why do you want to go west when we’re safe here?*

*I can't let my little brother go be stupid all on his own*

*Your mother was in Seattle*

*No body was recovered*

*I’m sorry, cadet*

*Green leaves above him, green grass below, the tree bark*

*rough against the insides of his knees. If he stretches*

*enough he can almost reach the ground—*

*I’ll be a hero, daddy. Just like you.*
Billy’s hanging in his harness, upside down;
there’s too much red.
stretch your fingers, Billy; you can do it.

I want to be part of something real

Don’t you dare leave me, you little shit

I’m not him, but I’m here

can I trust you

yes

“Right hemisphere, calibrating.”

Teddy raised his arms, and they were a hundred times heavier than they used to be. He moved and the world moved with him. He felt Tom’s arms inside outside and around him, the weight and power of Magnus Echo hovering around them both. He was a giant, a rock and a mountain. He stood a thousand feet above the world, and the flickering lights of the data streams on the central display flashed bright and beautiful through a brilliant blue-white overlay.

A ghost of a thought brushed his mind, gentle and inquisitive, unformed and half-real. It tasted metallic, the color of magic.

~?~

Too much data; his senses were getting confused. That was one of a dozen possible reactions to a first drift. He knew how to control this one - filter out the stimuli, focus on the tangible.

The connection trembled and tried to shake him out, the blue fading and flickering around his head. Teddy sank down into it, pressed against it to stabilize.

He opened his hand. The double-sensation reformed around him, coalesced again.

“Left hemisphere, calibrating.” The AI’s voice cut through the clearing mist, an anchor in the blue that Teddy could grab onto.

“Two pilots engaged in neural bridge.”

He opened his eyes and for a moment, the world was in stereo. He saw the HUD from the left and the right – no, Tommy is seeing the right side. He blinked and his vision cleared, and Tommy laughed at him inside his head.

~Please. Like you didn’t have issues the first time.~
Teddy thought it at him deliberately, pushed it through the squishy-jello fog that still lingered between their minds. He laughed at the flicker of surprise, the flash of

~learning faster than I thought~ that came from Tommy.

“Teach you to underestimate the rookie.” Teddy couldn’t fight the grin, the rush, the sudden burst of knowing. He saw Tommy’s mild surprise, his relief at being back in the connpod, a flash of grief for things he couldn’t change, the barbed wire he had strung around parts of his mind that functioned as an effective ‘keep away’ sign.

“Ready to initiate testing mode,” said the AI.

“They’re in,” David said over the radio. “But it’s not solid. Neural handshake is borderline at 92%.”

Rhodes’ voice was distant in the background but still audible, the microphone picking up the conversation from the LOCCENT. “It’s better, but will it be enough?”

“It’ll be enough,” Tommy replied. “Sir.” It wasn’t Teddy’s derision but he could feel it; an undercurrent – no, a sidecurrent, in a new part of his mind. It was Tommy’s emotion, distinctly not his own, but Teddy saw it, knew it, understood it as though it were. “Get a move on, Alleyne. I’m getting bored in here.”

“Keep your pants on.”

And then it was test-response, repetition and movement, Teddy’s muscles flexing and Tommy’s doing the same, Magnus Echo whispering back to them along the wires of the circuit suit. She was sluggish compared to the simulator, a half-second slower to respond. Was that him? Was it Teddy’s fault? He was the wild card in the mix, the new and untried factor.

~stop overthinking, asshole; you’re throwing me off.~

He sank back into the connection, let Tommy and Magnus Echo take what they needed of his strength. Arms were done, now legs. His thighs were going to ache after this; they weren’t even moving, nothing more than knee-raises, and he was already feeling a burn in new and interesting places.

“Turn head left, ninety degrees, hold.”

Teddy turned, Tommy turned, and something didn’t match.

The world fragmented, fractured into two, then three, then back to two.

He closed his eyes. The space behind them was white, not black. He reached for Tommy’s mind in the quiet. The edge of the world loomed, Tommy somewhere beyond it. Teddy reached across the void between them, looked down into a black chasm that opened, first a crack and then a rush-

“Stay in alignment, Magnus!”

A hand took his, held it. Tommy was there.

Teddy slipped, slid, fell softly back into the connection. It shook, fragile, but held.

“Handshake at 95%. You two alright in there?”

“We’re good.” Tommy’s voice was rough, the barbed wire back in his mind’s eye.
Teddy swallowed, his mouth dry. “Keep going.”

“Resuming testing protocols.”

The disconnection, when it came, was gentler than Teddy had expected, a slow settling of his brain back into his skull. He exhaled as his body shrunk down to regular size, until the backplate came off, his feet unclamped and his arms were free again. His breath was tinny in his own ears and he got rid of the helmet, passed it off to his tech with a word of thanks.

Tommy shook his hair back out of his eyes, his own helmet under his arm. A mixture of things played across his face, in his eyes; satisfaction, relief, guilt, then they were gone, replaced with a faintly sardonic smile. Teddy couldn’t remember why he had ever thought that Tommy was blank, or cold.

“Sucks about your folks,” Tommy said after a moment of silent regard. “Rough luck.”

“Thanks.” The distance was disconcerting now, more so than the connection had been in the first place. By all rights he should be able to reach and say that in less time than it would take to form the actual words. What else had Tommy seen? “Sorry about creeping on you guys in medical.” Just in case.

“Next time, come in,” Tommy said. He looked down at his gloves as he spoke, pulling at the fingers to get them off. “I’ll introduce you.” The sarcasm there was a cut, but not at him; it rolled off Teddy’s back so thoroughly that he didn’t think twice about taking Tommy’s hand when he extended it. It was a reflex, like the matching step forward had been.

He didn’t expect the flashes that burned through behind his eyes when their hands met, solid, utterly unlike the half-reality of the drift.

stretching before the cross-country meet (of course I’ll win)

a kiss with a brown-haired girl under a set of bleachers (you knew how this would go)

peeling Billy off the ground, nose bloody, eyes defiant (dumbass needs to stop picking fights he can’t win)

Teddy pulled his hand back, and Tommy smirked. “That’s... really weird.” Which didn’t even begin to cover it. They were flashbacks, contained, not thoughts. The neural handshake didn’t make them telepathic, not when they weren’t wired in.

“Drift hangover,” Tommy said, as though Teddy hadn’t just had a half-dozen of his memories go ricocheting through his brain for the second time; as though Tommy wasn’t seeing... what was he seeing? What moments of Teddy’s life were being filed away inside Tommy’s mind? “It’ll wear off in an hour or two as your brain gets used to it.”

“I’m glad you think this is funny,” Teddy grumbled.

“Could be worse,” Tommy snorted, still amused. “Until Billy learned to lock shit down, I learned more about his sex life than I ever, ever needed to know. Did they warn you about the dreams?” He headed for the door, already open for them, and the catwalk beyond.

And that – that sent Teddy’s already slightly befuddled brain off on a tangent or two he really didn’t need right then. Or possibly ever. “Uh. You know, not asking.” Tommy scowled at him. “But yes. A bit, anyway. In theoretical terms.”
“There’s bleed-over there too sometimes. It’s worst after the first drift, and mellows out after that. Don’t get hung up on any of it, because it’s not real memory. Just... leftover junk around the edges.”

A wolf-whistle sounded, piercing and loud, once they were out on the catwalk and visible to the rest of the dome. Teddy stopped and turned, tried to pinpoint the source of the noise. It took him a minute to spot Kate and Cassie, Cass half-hanging over the railing of the balcony beside the LOCCENT. She was waving, as Kate brought two fingers down from her mouth. It was too far to see their expressions clearly, but he could make a pretty good guess. Eli and Joe stood off to one side, watching. Teddy waved and Eli raised his arms in victory, but then Nate was ushering him back into the drivesuit room to get stripped down, and the moment was gone.

The rest was anticlimactic. Nate hurried off with pieces of his suit, muttering something about telemetry and electrical resistance; Tommy vanished, and Kate held her nose, proclaimed him ‘too pungent for company,’ and sent him off to the showers.

It wasn’t until he was under the hot water, scrubbing the last of the sweat from his skin and noting the new aches and strains that had come from piloting, that it really, truly hit him for the first time.

He was a Ranger. Ted Altman, co-pilot of Magnus-fucking-Echo.

Teddy let out a whoop of joy and punched up into the air with both fists. He knocked the showerhead up and over entirely by accident, spraying water everywhere across the tiny bathroom. Shit shit shit. He scrambled, panicking, to pull it down again so the spray splashed harmlessly off the tiles. He sagged against the wall, hysterics bubbling up from inside, years’ worth all coming out at once in wild peals of laughter.

Holy shit. I did it.

--

He dreamed Tommy’s memories that night.

He was a boy, running for the sheer joy of it down a winding trail in a park. Billy lagged behind, scrambling to keep up. They were six, round-cheeked and dark haired, scabbed knees and dirty-faced. Their parents were further back, somewhere, strolling arm in arm, and the sun filtered down through the leaves in a hazy, late-summer glow.

Tommy, wait up!

Come on, Billy! Run!

You’re going too fast.

Am not! You’re too slow.

He was sitting in their bedroom on the bottom bunk, watching Billy pick at a loose thread in the folded quilt. They were twelve, loose-limbed and gangly, with all the awkwardness of boys caught at the tail end of childhood.

I’m pretty sure I’m gay.
Is that supposed to be news?

You knew?

Duh. You only keep checking out Jimmy’s butt every time he gets off the school bus.

I do not.

Do so, butthead.

You’re the butthead. ... So you’re okay with it?

I can’t believe you’re supposed to be the smart one. If anyone tries to mess with you, they’re going to have to go through me.

.

He was twenty, and the world was ending. Billy’s hand scrabbled at his; he laced their fingers together and held on tightly as they stared up at the screen. The common room had settled in a thick and desperate hush, books set aside and exams forgotten. Manila crumbled as they all watched, turned to rubble by a nightmare with a face.

They said San Francisco was an anomaly.

I guess they were wrong.

What if they keep coming?

Then the Air Force nukes the bastards back to wherever they came from.

We have to do something. How am I supposed to sit here and pretend that Stats and Psych 201 are important anymore?

We’re just a couple of college kids, Billy. What do you think we could do?

.

In that hazy moment before waking, the colors changed. Nostalgia-gold and dappled green gave way to the pale, white-blue landscape of the drift. There was no frenetic movement this time, no thoughts or memories spinning by. There was only Teddy, and ahead of him, Tommy, facing away, dressed in his drivesuit and helmet.

Tommy turned, his gloved hands working at the latches on his suit, but it was Billy who slipped the helmet off and tucked it casually under his arm. His smile was like and unlike his brother’s all at once, a familiar gesture from a dozen interviews that Teddy had watched too many times to count.

“Can we trust you?” Billy asked. His dark brown eyes were the only things that were warm, surrounded by the cold, flat blue.

“Yes,” Teddy said, without hesitation. His body turned heavy, his hands covered over, and when he looked down, he was in his drivesuit, the weight of it solid on his shoulders.

Billy nodded, raising his helmet in his hands. He grinned as he dropped it down over his head, and in the dream, Teddy felt himself following suit. The seal locked around his neck and the visor filled with relay fluid, blocking his sight.
Teddy opened his eyes. His room in the barracks was dark, broken only by the standby lights on the commscreen and the red light of his clock. It was 0530 hours; too early to get up, too late to go back to sleep. The dream still lingered in the darkness, before he could roll over to turn on the light. He could almost feel the heavy press of the armor plates on his body, the cling of the circuit suit’s thin latex to his skin.

In that half-conscious moment, hanging between sleeping and real waking, a voice whispered into his ear. The sound was tinny, reverberating through the comm of the helmet he wasn’t wearing.

“That’s go kick some butt.”
Drift/Dream

Chapter Summary

Wherein Teddy tries to get the hang of his new life, and a night out isn't as straightforward as it used to be.

Chapter Notes

With so, so many thanks to my beta for this chapter, meinterrupted, and everyone who has commented and read along so far. <3

This was supposed to be the first half of one chapter, but the length got away from me. We're up to eight planned chapters now.

Come play with me on tumblr! ardatli.tumblr.com

New Pilot for Magnus Echo

By Irene Merryweather

Sources inside the Shatterdome confirm that a rookie pilot has taken William Maximoff’s old position in the Jaeger ‘Magnus Echo.’ William’s original co-pilot, his brother Thomas, is still holding the other spot, returning to active duty after four months base-side while the massive metal hulk was being reconstructed. It’s relatively rare for a new pilot to take over for one half of a team; will our favourite flyboy be able to gel with his new wingman?

“Marshal Danvers and her people are being tight-lipped for the moment, but here’s what we do know about Los Angeles’ newest Ranger: Theodore Altman is 24 years old and American-born. He graduated from the PPDC’s Jaeger Academy two years ago, finishing ‘with distinction.’ Until recently, he had been assigned to the Groom Lake testing facility... nice picture for the press release, by the way. Did you borrow someone else’s uniform? Because you never look that well put together normally.”

“Stop,” Teddy groaned, and shoved his head under the pillow on the end of Eli’s bed. “Shut up. Joe, make him stop.”

“Don’t look at me, kid,” Joe replied, amused, from across the room.

“The most important question on every girl’s lips,” Eli carried on reading, grinning like the big dumb idiot that he was, “is he single?”

Teddy swiped at him as Eli passed by, and Eli held the tablet over his head and out of reach. “I hate you. I knew that was coming. Why do they all do that?”

“You’re a hot commodity now, Ted,” Eli snickered, whacking Teddy on the butt with the back of
the tablet as he flopped down beside him. “You knew what you were getting into.”

“I need to do an interview or something,” Teddy sighed, shifting over to make room for Eli on the bed. “Maybe if I come out officially they’ll stop with the ‘most eligible whatever-whatever.’ You’re single and straight; why aren’t reporters picking on you?”

Eli snorted, and Joe raised an eyebrow at him over the folder of papers he was ostensibly reviewing over at the small desk. “They do, and they are. I’m just not reading those ones. This is a lot more fun.”

Teddy groaned again and swatted at Eli with the pillow, a desultory gesture that Eli easily batted away. This had become his routine over the past week; training in the mornings with Tommy, sometimes drifting, sometimes reviewing battle tactics and manoeuvres, then lunch, a simulator run or three with Tommy to get used to fighting styles, and if he was still alive after that, working out to develop the handful of muscles that had begun screaming at him after the run in Magnus.

After that, death. Usually in Eli and Joe’s room, so he could bitch and moan to a semi-sympathetic audience. The physical wasn’t the worst problem, as exhausting as it was. The sheer weight of the Jaeger on his mind was more crushing by far, bearing down on him even once he was disconnected. If he held perfectly still he could still feel her encasing him, a vast and looming presence that turned his arms and legs to steel and slowed his movements to half their normal speed.

Another facet of drift hangover, apparently, and another thing that would get easier with time.

Fuck that.

“I’m going to go to bed,” he announced, face-first in Eli’s mattress. “My bed. In my quarters. Once I can find my feet. I think they fell off.”

“Don’t leave body parts hanging around our room,” Joe advised sagely, utterly ignoring his pain. So much for sympathy. “It’s unsanitary.”

--

He dreamed of a green field, stretching to the horizon in all directions. A single tree rose into the clear blue sky, gnarled branches covered with jade-bright leaves. The only landmark, he found himself walking toward it, the grass soft under his feet.

“Up here, Tommy, come on!”

He stood beside the tree. A rope ladder uncoiled from somewhere up above, and a boy in shorts and running shoes scrambled up the top two rungs. He vanished into the leaf cover, consumed by the green. Teddy grabbed the ladder, the wood rungs rough against the palms of his hands. The ladder swayed as he climbed, meant for someone smaller, then stopped.

Teddy was smaller, his arms skinny and his knees knobbly, his body the pre-growth-spurt shape that had made him less than a target. Invisible. He was thirteen or so, and he scrambled up into the tree after Billy as fast as he could go.

Billy sat in the crotch of the tree, one leg dangling on each side of the lowest branch. Teddy sat opposite him, balancing on the branch until he could turn and straddle the branch as well.

"Do you ever wonder if we made a mistake?" Billy asked, staring off into the distance.

This was a dream, nothing more; a memory stuck in a loop. Except this time, Teddy didn’t know his
Billy leaned back against the tree trunk, his hair flopping down over his forehead. He pushed it back without looking, tangling it further. "Trying to do too much, too fast, without enough training," he replied. "You saw Carol. She could have died yesterday. I've never seen Jess fall apart like that." He stared off to the side, not at Teddy, his eyes unfocussed and unreal. *This is only a recording. Leave your message at the tone.*

The memory was off, twisted somehow, Billy too young, the setting too surreal. He gave up trying to analyze it and let the dream sweep over him.

"They're getting stronger every time."

"So we'll just have to keep getting better," Teddy said. It sounded like a Tommy-thing to say, infused with just enough confidence masked as arrogance to get by.

"That's your solution?" Billy asked, tipping his head back and regarding Teddy with all the scorn his still-adolescent face could muster.

"It's all I've got, take it or leave it."

Billy looked at him with recognition, almost like he were there and not an echo flash-impressed onto Teddy's neurons. He smiled, a half-wry grin that lit up his face, knowing and wise far beyond his apparent years. "With strategic brilliance like that on our side, we're definitely doomed."

Teddy opened his eyes. Vague shapes resolved around him in the darkness; the small desk, his nightstand and clock, the lit outline of the door that led out into the hallway. The clock flashed at him, 0558 AM. He was lying on his bed, crisp sheets under him and not the rough tree-bark he'd been half-expecting.

The field and the tree lingered in his consciousness as his alarm rang. It hung on in vague impressions of green leaves rustling and warm brown eyes as he showered and dressed. By the time Teddy slid in beside Eli, in what had become 'his seat' at the rangers' table in the cafeteria, he barely remembered dreaming anything at all.

--

The nursing staff knew him in medical now; there was no reason to skulk down the corridor and hope that no-one would notice. Teddy lifted a hand in greeting as he walked through triage and got only a distracted nod from Dr. Hussein at the intake desk in return. The hallway was doubly familiar now, a handful of impressions layered over his own memories, remnants of the same space travelled a thousand different times. He stopped walking for a moment and let the flow of it wash over him. The empty hallway dimmed, ghosts of orderlies, visitors, nurses flickering into existence for brief seconds before vanishing again.

Tommy had a phone to his ear when Teddy stepped in to Billy's room. He glanced up and then away when Teddy closed the door quietly behind him. "There's no change," Tommy said, slumping in his usual chair. He stared up at the ceiling and ran his hand through his hair, resting the heel of his hand against his forehead as though for support. "No, there's no point in you coming down. You wouldn't be allowed on the base anyway. Not without security clearances."

He paused, listening. Teddy sat back against the wall and slid down to the floor, resting his arms on top of his bent knees. Looking at the bed took force of will, just in case he saw something different than the last time. But Billy hadn't moved, still wired in to a half-dozen machines that bleeped and...
hummed and fed drips of fluids and nutrients into his still, pale body.

It had been a stupid thought.

“Yeah, mom. I will.” Tommy hesitated a beat. His eyes flickered to Teddy, then away. “You too,” he said curtly, and hung up. The cell phone hit the small table with a clatter, and Tommy sagged back into the chair, his head tipped up toward the ceiling and his eyes closed.

Teddy waited. The silence sat between them for a few minutes, comfortable instead of awkward, broken only by the soft, steady noises of Billy’s life support equipment.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” Teddy said finally.

Tommy cracked one eye open and looked at him. The dark circles under his eyes were less pronounced than they had been last week, but exhaustion still pinched at the corners. Teddy had brushed the edges of that bone-crushing weariness; it laid under everything, washed his world in grey. “How do you figure?”

“He’d have gone without you – maybe not to be a pilot, but he’d have gone.” It was obvious, even from the little fragments that had settled in to his memory, sediment drifting from Tommy’s mind to his. The twins burned so goddamn brightly, more than they ever had as figureheads or idols to be admired from a distance. “And you would have followed, eventually, if not immediately. There’s no way you could have stayed out of this fight.”

Tommy closed his eye again and rolled his head back, sprawling deeper in the chair in a study of feigned ease. “What would you know?” he said dismissively. One corner of his mouth flickered up and there was a thread of something warm and easy buried deep in his voice. “You’re just some dumb jock from Seattle.”

“I know stuff.” Teddy tipped his head back against the wall, watching Tommy from under his lashes. “I know your tough guy act is a crock of shit, for one.” That won him a flicker of a raised eyebrow, and the courage to continue despite the twist of anxiety. He was trespassing, tiptoeing into territory that had been there for him to see, but speaking it aloud was another thing entirely. “And that being a ranger is the best thing that ever happened to you, but not because of the fame and fortune part. You’d have been trying to save the world one way or another even if the Breach had never opened.”

Tommy didn’t punch him, which was a good sign. He tipped his head back and forth instead, like he was contemplating Teddy’s declarations, then cracked his eyes open again. “Keep talking like that and you’re going to ruin my carefully maintained reputation for not giving a shit.”

“If you think anyone still believes that, you’re a dumber jock than I am.” Teddy snorted.

He skirted the edges of the hollow space inside Tommy every time they bridged in, that barricaded void beneath the drift, black, yawning and empty where Billy used to fit. Teddy wasn’t allowed closer than that. The barbed wire appeared, every time, scaring him back to shallower waters. Here be monsters.

Silence fell between them again, harder-edged this time than the first. A phone rang somewhere in the distance, and a handful of announcements echoed over the PA speakers in the hall. Teddy’s watch peeped to mark the hour, and he glanced at it purely out of habit. 1400 hours.

“Have you had lunch?” Teddy asked, knowing the answer.

Tommy shook his head, though it was reluctant and slow. “No.”
“Go,” Teddy said. Then, when Tommy showed no signs of moving, “I’ll take a shift.”

Tommy started to sit up, but he stopped, looking at the bed.

He needed to take a break, from his own thoughts if nothing else. If Teddy could scare him down to the cafeteria, someone there – Kate, maybe, if she was taking a late lunch, or David? He ate late shift – could take over and keep him interacting with people for a little while longer.

“This is selfish, believe me.” Teddy injected a little bit of feigned acid into his tone, and Tommy arched a skeptical eyebrow. “We’re doing a pons evaluation this afternoon, and when you skip meals before a drift, I get the munchies. Go eat a goddamn sandwich before I end up raiding Cassie’s cookie stash.” It was an exaggeration and Tommy would know it, but he pushed himself up out of the chair anyway.

“I won’t be long,” Tommy said reluctantly. “One of the nurses will be back at 1500 to do his check-ins.” Teddy waved him off, and finally, Tommy actually left. Teddy stood as the door clicked shut behind him, and stretched his arms up over his head. His shoulders clicked and popped as he stretched, tension ebbing as he cracked his back in a couple of places.

The room felt empty with Tommy gone. There were two of them there, obviously, Billy lying there with the IV tubes and wires running back and forth and tying his body into a half-dozen different poles and machines. His heart kept beating, his chest rose and fell on its own power. He might have been asleep, but nothing flickered under his eyelids to suggest that he was dreaming.

Teddy itched with… something; the quiet pressed in on him from all sides. Billy lay so still that for a moment it looked as though he weren’t breathing at all, just an empty shell with no soul or life left inside.

The monitors showed him otherwise, and Billy’s chest rose a moment later. Rose and fell, rose and fell.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, kid,” Teddy said aloud. The sound of his own voice echoed back at him and honestly, he was being ridiculous. He shook his head to clear it and rubbed at his eyes. It was no wonder Tommy was tired all the time; the white noise from the machines in the room was creepy as hell.

He dropped into the chair and pulled out his notebook. He could get his studying done, if nothing else. Tommy’s book was sitting on the table, his bookmark tucked in place. Teddy flipped through the dog-eared pages, purely out of curiosity; they had apparently made it through the Entmoot somewhere in the last day or two.

“If you’re only holding out long enough to see how the story ends,” Teddy said aloud, easier this time, now that he’d broken the spell that his overactive imagination had set for himself. “I’ll spoil it for you now. Frodo destroys the One Ring.” The figure in the bed didn’t move, the heart monitor still keeping its steady, regular beat.

Teddy sighed, kicked off his boots and perched his feet on the edge of the mattress. “It was worth a try. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to quiz me on some of this.”

That didn’t earn him a reply either and Teddy let it be, flipping his notebook open, jamming his pen in his mouth, and settling in to read.

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Cold ocean water crashed over legs that both were and weren’t Teddy’s, the sensation half-dulled
and omnipresent. *Draw back, raise the right arm, drop it in 2, 1- now!* The kaiju roared as Magnus Echo’s fists struck home. The impact reverberated up Teddy’s arms, shaking him apart more intensely than any hanbo strike.

The world was ephemeral, cut through with the flashing data streams of the HUD. Another dream, then, lit in green and gold, not the brilliant blue-white of the drift.

Teddy pulled up, the jaeger responding to his thoughts as slick and sweet as Magnus never had in the waking world. Pulling in with his body like the second skin she was meant to be. He was connected to her along every nerve ending, wired in to the right hemisphere rig. Billy was on his left, their every twitch and twist perfectly in time, and why would he have imagined anything different?

Teddy and Billy gestured, punched down, and the stingblade slotted into active mode, extending from Magnus’ right arm like the sword of a holy avenger. They swirled, struck deep, slid home. The blade punctured, sliced, and cauterized the flesh in its wake. The kaiju fell, sending up waves on either side of the vast bulk of its body. Magnus drew back, pulled the stingblade free, and dropped her arm to let the ocean waves rinse the toxic sludge from the metal.

~*Hell yeah!*~ Billy’s exultation exploded in his mind, no grey mist dividing them. He sank through Billy’s excitement, rose up on it, fed his own back into it in a loop that left him shaking with adrenaline and adoration and glee.

Billy ran to him, golden in the drift/dream. They were in their rigs and they were outside of them, in the landscape of the mind. *Whose mind?*

~*both*~

Teddy gave up trying to make sense of anything, and sank into the moment. The un-reality broke over him in a salt water wave, and he drowned.

Billy ran to him, moving so easily despite the constriction of the drivesuit. His helmet was under his arm, and so was Teddy’s. Billy’s hand came up as he drew close, and Teddy met it in a high-five.

They were standing in the Shatterdome, and the pilots and crews around them were cheering. Teddy met Billy’s hand in a high-five, then low, then knuckles bumping against each other. “We did it,” he said aloud, aching for the brush of Billy’s mind against his again, a fill for that desperate hollow void that not even time could repair.

“We did. Not bad for a rookie,” Billy teased him, and his eyes were fire, burning with heat and pride, and everything beautiful.

“Not bad? We *nailed* him,” Teddy replied, his heart beating twice normal speed. “So how many is that now?” *Which kill was this? Which one did I see?*

“Eight for Magnus, but one for you,” Billy laughed, and poked him in the chest. “You don’t get to ride on my coattails, new guy.”

Teddy grabbed his chest and staggered back a step, feigning heartbreak. “Is that how you think of me? ‘New guy’? And here I thought we meant something to each other.”

“Do you want me to prove it?” Billy grabbed for his hand, but this time, drew him closer. Teddy looped his arm around Billy’s shoulders, the armor plating of the drivesuits a hard wall between them. Billy smacked him on the back, then let go of the awkward half-embrace.

He stepped away, and the world faded around him. They stood in a green field, on a beach, in the
kwoon. Billy crossed the mat toward him, his feet and arms bare.

“You’re dreaming,” Billy told him.

“I know,” Teddy said.

“It’s time to wake up.”

An alarm sounded off in the distance. The kwoon faded away, taking Billy with it. Teddy reached out and grabbed for him. His fingers slid through mist, and closed on nothing.

He opened his eyes. The room was fading slowly into light, and his clock was beeping on the nightstand. 0600 hours. Inexplicable grief squeezed around his heart, only fading when he struggled to sit, his feet planting, heavy and real, on the floor.

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“I don’t think it’s anything technical,” Nate said, and he finished detaching the pons rig from Tommy’s head. Teddy slumped over his chair, straddling the seat with his arms folded and resting on the back. “You sync up just fine at the beginning, and your EEGs remain compatible. There’s no physical reason why you should max out at ninety-five percent.”

“So it’s us, that’s what you’re saying,” Teddy replied, and that prognosis, as much as he’d expected it, stung. “Something psychological.”

“That’s what you’re putting in the report?” Tommy asked, his arms folded across his chest.

“It’s not a problem, officially, as long as you don’t drop below ninety,” Nate hedged, coiling the wires in his hands as he spoke. “That’s when the risk of dropping the bridge with Magnus gets too high. And if that happens during combat-“

“I know,” Tommy interrupted.

The door opened and Teddy turned to look over his shoulder. Cassie poked her head in, her body following a moment later. “Hey, boys,” she gave them a little wave, fingers curling down against her palm. She flashed a brilliant smile at them, mostly, apparently, aimed at Nate. “Are you busy?”

“We’re just wrapping up,” Tommy replied, smirking. “Weren’t we?”

“Um,” said Nate, and Teddy watched in mild fascination as the tips of his ears flushed pink.

“I won’t interrupt long,” Cassie promised. She stepped inside, long blonde braid hanging over her shoulder and her overshirt tied loosely around her waist. “A bunch of us are going out tonight. A bunch of us are going out tonight,” she told them, glancing at Teddy and Nate and then giving Tommy a sad smile. “Kate got passes for some new club opening. You guys should come too.”

“Who’s going?” Teddy asked, turning the idea over in his mind. He hadn’t been off-base since he got here, and LA had to be a hell of a lot more entertaining than back-ass-end-of-nowhere, Nevada. It would be a chance to blow off some tension, if nothing else.

“So far? Me, Kate, America, and David.” Cassie opened her eyes wide, looking at Nate, and toyed with the end of her braid. “And you guys, hopefully. Dad’s not really into it, obvs, and Eli and Joe are on standby tonight.”

“I’m in, sure,” Teddy nodded, and Cassie bounced on her toes. Tommy didn’t reply.
“Um,” said Nate. The pons rig beeped angrily at him and he stopped trying to turn it into a small ball in his hands. “I have – things. Capacitors.” He held up the tangle of wires in his hands as though to demonstrate.

“He’ll be there,” Teddy said.

“I will?” Nate’s eyes went wide and round, like a small animal spotting a headlight on the highway. Teddy nodded solemnly, his lips twitching. “You will.”

“Excellent!” Cassie twinkled at them. “I’ll let you get back to it, then. 2100 hours, at the main doors. Dress for dancing.”

The door slid closed behind her, and Tommy hooted with derision. “Wow. I thought Billy was exaggerating, but you really do have zero game.”

Nate sunk into his desk chair and held his head in his hands. “I have game,” came the muffled protest, and Teddy couldn’t help snickering. He felt guilty for it immediately afterward, though, which should count for something.

“You really don’t,” he did say.

Tommy just shook his head, with a sigh of amused exasperation. “How did you and Billy even make it out on one date, you enormous loser?”

Nate slumped back in his chair, shrugged instead of glaring at Tommy. “Honestly? I have no idea,” he said mournfully. “But that would be why there wasn’t more. I’m not... good with people. And girls are worse.”

“Last I knew,” Teddy felt compelled to say, his mouth tugging up into a grin. “Girls were people.”

“That’s just what they want you to think,” Nate said. “Then one day? You let down your guard and bam. They eat your head.” Teddy burst into laughter, the sound bubbling up out of him at the expression of mingled terror and exasperation on Nate’s face.

Tommy snorted dryly. “You watch too much Discovery Channel. Try sticking to the kaiju science documentaries, or you’ll never get laid.” He made eye contact with Teddy and Teddy lost the little bit of control he’d regained, cracking up again.

“Get out.” Nate pointed at the door, his face red. “Both of you. I have work to do.”

Still laughing, Teddy followed orders. He clapped Nate on the shoulder as he passed by, and waited for Tommy to catch up with him before opening the door. The minute of pause gave him the chance to get his breath back, and he sobered up as they left the lab space together.

“Come out with us,” Teddy suggested, when they arrived at the turn in the hall that would take him back down to the pilots’ quarters, and send Tommy back to medical. “It might do you some good to clear your head.”

Tommy hesitated, then shook his head, jamming his hands into his pockets. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“At least think about it,” Teddy urged. “Invitation’s open.” Tommy didn’t answer that time, turning instead to walk away. Teddy watched him go, dodging a group that barrelled down the hall in the opposite direction, until he vanished out of sight.
What the hell did ‘dress for dancing’ mean in LA? It definitely meant something different than it had in Seattle, or – God help him – Anchorage. In any case, Teddy’s choices beyond uniforms and more uniforms... were sadly limited. Jeans and a button-down over a tank top was about the best he could manage, but at least he had an excuse to put the earrings back in.

At 2100 hours he was jogging down the hall toward the main doors, ears tingling and his hands still smelling a little bit like some weird melon-strawberry hybrid from his hair gel. A low wolf-whistle of approval meant Kate, and he caught up with the assembled group, rolling his eyes at her. He matched the rest of them, at least, though Nate’s vague aura of discomfort negated any attempt at casual that his jeans might have been trying to convey. David Alleyne... looked really good. Especially in a v-neck. And unless Teddy was entirely off-base, that had been a approving glance he’d shot Teddy’s way, before turning aside to talk to Nate.

*Hunh.*

Kate pushed her hair back and slipped a pair of expensive sunglasses on her head to hold it in place. “Ready to roll, cowboys and girls?”

Teddy nodded. “There’s only one rule on nights like this,” Kate continued, aiming the information, he realized, entirely at him.

“What is?”

“Screw with the paparazzi,” America replied with a shark-like smile.

Cassie slipped her arm though Teddy’s, tucking in close to his side as they started out of the door. He glanced down at her with surprise, and she smiled. “Never go in and come out with the same person,” Cassie said. “If you dance at all, dance with everyone. Or at least mix it up some. Last time, Kate and I swapped shirts in the bathroom. It drives them insane not being able to come up with a coherent narrative.”

“That... makes a lot of things make more sense,” Teddy admitted, and Cassie squeezed his arm. She was looking at Nate as she did it, though, and Nate looked away, his face red.

The doors slid open for them, and the cool evening breeze hit Teddy in the face like a scouring pad. Cool fingers of air ruffled his hair and caught the edges of his open shirt, pulling out all the stress and weirdness of the past ten days.

He had nothing to worry about except getting a drink, maybe dancing a bit, and letting everything else just be. One evening, to let it all go.

“Rangers, over here! Rangers! Are you celebrating something tonight?”

“Where are Maximoff and Bradley?”

Flashes popped in Teddy's eyes, leaving blue and purple spots in his vision. He threw up a hand reflexively, squinting against the aftereffects. America led the group, elbows out, parting the crowd in front of the club like the red sea. But the questions kept coming, and Teddy hesitated.

“Lieutenant Altman! How does it feel to be piloting a Jaeger?”
He was allowed to answer that one, right? It hadn't even been two weeks yet, he didn't have any kind of official press scheduled; should he say anything? *Greg would be seeing this, wherever he was.*

Teddy turned and flashed the photographer a brilliant smile. "Really good," he answered, and more flashbulbs went off in response. Cassie tugged at his arm, and the others had slowed to wait for him. "It’s pretty much a dream come true." *That was a good soundbite; this wasn’t so hard.*

"Do you think you’ll be ready in time for the next kaiju attack?"

The flashbulbs made it hard to see who was asking. "We’ll be ready."

"What does your promotion mean for Will Maximoff? Has Marshal Danvers given up hope for his recovery?"

The next barrage of questions stuck into him like arrows, now they had their aim set.

"What does Tom Maximoff think about piloting with you?"

"How does it feel to be walking in a dead man’s shoes?"

Teddy gritted his teeth, tried to stay calm, but how *dare* they? Billy’s smile flashed into his mind’s eye, and the grey tendrils of despair that coiled around Tom’s heart, and the goddamn *gift* that had been Tom daring to trust, and let him in, even the little bit that he had. Red bled in around his vision, everything narrowing in on the balding, sneering man in the front of the pack, who jammed a camera in Teddy’s face. “Billy’s not *dead*, and I could never hope to replace him. He and Tommy are better men than *any* of us, so-”

Someone grabbed his arms, one on each side, and pulled him back. America and David, he realized after a second, the furious haze slowly clearing as they pushed him back and away from the photographers lining up behind the ropes. “You need media training, boy,” America snapped at him.

Teddy pulled his arm free from her hand and took a deep breath. David kept one hand firmly on his shoulder. “Don’t feed them,” he suggested quietly, and gave Teddy a gentle push toward the club door. “Once they smell blood in the water, they won’t give up.”

Grounded under David’s hand, Teddy let himself be guided into the club, the wall of heat and sound at the open door acting as an effective divider from the noise of the street outside. Lights flashed brilliant colors across a crowded dance floor, surrounded by plush booths. The drums reverberated up through his feet, his pulse shifting a little to accommodate. Kate led them unerringly through the crowd, into an open booth that had been cordoned off with a rope. *Holy crap.* She seemed to be taking it all as her due, but Nate just looked lost.

"You can’t let them get to you,” Cassie raised her voice over the music. “You should have heard the gross stuff they asked me when dad and I got assigned. They’re trying to get reactions – it’s how they get good pictures to sell.”

“Imagine their faces on the kaiju next time you have a simulator run,” Kate suggested, with an undercurrent of glee. “It’s amazing how much time that will carve off your average.”

“Come on, princess,” America tugged at Kate’s hand, pulling her out of the booth. “I came out tonight to dance, not sit around and bullshit.” Hand back over her shoulder, Kate’s fingers laced through hers, America headed out onto the dance floor and they were swallowed up by the crowd.

"Can you dance?" Teddy turned, but Cassie was elbows-on-the-table and leaning in, talking to Nate.
He frowned, offended. "I can dance. Just because I don't go out much doesn't mean I don't know how..."

"So what are you waiting for?" Cassie asked.

"What?"

"Ask me to dance, dummy."

"Uh. Would you like to-"

"Love to." She grabbed his hand and pulled him out on the floor, narrowly missing David reappearing with a waiter in tow and a tray of drinks.

"Ah, young love," David commented dryly as he turned to watch them go. The drinks were set on the table and Teddy counted six shot glasses on the decorated tray. "First round is on Kate; I opened a tab." David selected one of the glasses and held it up to the light. The drink inside shone a brilliant, acid blue, not all of the illumination coming from the spotlights overhead.

Teddy grabbed one of the glasses for himself, and held it out to David, clinking it against the rim of his glass. "Cheers."

"Skål," David replied without batting an eye, and they drank. The alcohol burned down Teddy's throat, clean and strong, and with a flavor that was vaguely fruit-adjacent. He flipped the empty glass over and stuck it on one of the kill-counters stamped on the tray.

One.

A flash of almost-memory hit, swamped him in a rush of sensation, the taste and smell of iron and the weight of the jaeger bearing down on his arms, and then it was gone. He could almost remember, almost name it - the connpod, the kaiju, Billy-

"Are you alright?"

David's voice cut through his momentary distraction, and Teddy nodded, his head spinning for a second. "Cheap date," he joked, making a transparent excuse. David only let his gaze wander for a moment along Teddy's shoulders before he looked away again, but he was smiling.

Nate, it turned out, could have used a few more dance lessons, though Cassie was giving it the good old college try. America and Kate were wrapped around each other in ways that made Teddy briefly wonder about his own sexuality, because damn. And David could really move, surprisingly. Especially for a guy who spent 90% of his time co-ordinating other people while they actually did things.

("Bullshit," David said to that. "I cover more territory in the base in a day than all of you robot jockeys do in a week. Working out more than you read doesn’t automatically make you a good dancer either.")

Shot number two was with David and Nate, taking refuge from the dance floor to hide in their booth. Round three was about to become a thing when the others stopped and looked over Teddy’s shoulder, in the general direction of the club’s front door. Teddy turned.

Tom walked through the crowd wearing his arrogance as armor, clubgoers moving out of his way without argument. There was the swagger Teddy remembered, all glossy artifice. Tommy reached over Teddy’s shoulder without a word, and stole the shot glass from his hand. He tossed the drink
back and slammed the glass down on an open kill counter – they didn’t have many left to fill. He slouched against the edge of the table, and nodded to the girls as they came back to the booth.

“You made it,” Teddy said gently, nudging Tommy’s arm with his shoulder.

“Yeah, well,” Tommy shrugged. He left the faintest pressure on Teddy’s shoulder, a brief impression of a lean-in before it was gone. “I hate to miss a party.”

“Barkeep!” Kate flagged down their waiter, standing on the bench and waving. “Another round, plus one.”

Tommy’s jacket found its way onto the bench by the time the drinks got there, and he moved with an ease that Teddy had only seen so far in Magnus, or in someone else’s memories. Teddy took a glass along with everyone else, and pushed in to the circle to chime the rim against the others. They were missing people – Scott and Joe, and especially Eli – and the last time this group had been out together, Billy, not Teddy, would have been standing in the circle. Even with those changes, though, the surge of energy ran through them, a palpable live wire of expectation and camaraderie.

“Bottoms up!” Kate announced, they drank, and Teddy flushed warm down through his toes. “Come on, loner boy.” She held a hand out to Tommy, who looked at it, then at America, then back to Kate again. “You owe me a dance.”

The DJ was spinning club beats but Tommy and Kate didn’t seem to care. They moved out on to the dance floor and he rested his arms on her shoulders and she linked her hands behind his back. They swayed like that, foreheads tipped close together and lips moving in quiet conversation, until just watching became too intimate and Teddy looked away.

“Nate?” Cassie looked at him questioningly, but he shook his head.

“I’m exhausted. Go on without me.”

“Party pooper,” she teased him, then cocked her head at Teddy and looked hopeful. “How about you?”

“I’ve got stamina; I’m good for another round,” Teddy said, and David choked on his drink.

Teddy laughed and let Cassie lead him out into the crowd, into the beat and the press of bodies, a hundred different kinds of cologne and aftershave, perfume, sweat and want. The heat and the sound pushed other thoughts from his mind, leaving him deliriously blank.

He ached, his muscles protesting quietly against the movement, but the ache was a good, well-used sort of feeling. The back of his neck and his knees stung with pricklest of sweat. The button-down had come off before they ever hit the dance floor, and his tank top clung, chafed as he moved with friction on skin already sensitive from too much time in the circuit suit. He tingled, electrified and wild, Cassie’s face flushed as pink as his felt.

A space opened between two groups of dancers and Teddy saw a familiar profile, sharply defined cheekbones, dark hair that flopped over his brow-

Not possible.

He blinked, and the crowd closed in again. He blinked, and Billy was gone.

Teddy pushed past other dancers, scanning the room. Bodies moved past him, hands brushed his sides in invitation, but none of them was right. Teddy came out on the other side and there, there he
was, the familiar shape of his toned shoulders and arms, the lean taper of his back-

Tommy danced with Kate and America, his t-shirt off and tucked into the back of his pants. Lines of black ink, Magnus Echo’s unmistakeable logo, curled around the angle of his left hip and along the vee of muscle that vanished beneath his waistband, and his bleached-white hair picked up the colors of the flashing strobes.

A trick of the light, nothing more.

Cass caught up to him, her brow furrowed. “Something wrong?”

Teddy shook it off, his brain fuzzy and adrenaline high. “No. Everything’s fine.”

He tugged her closer. Kate moved aside to include them in the circle, America pressed tightly against her back. The song was an older one; it had been playing non-stop on the radio back in the dorms. Before. The bass line and the drums pulsed around and through him, a primal heartbeat and a war cry. Niggling thoughts and anxieties washed away. Teddy raised his arms and gave himself over to the moment. They were rangers, they were beautiful, and tonight, they were fire.

*Let’s make the most of the night, like we’re gonna die young.*

--

Teddy had mostly sobered up by the time they spilled out of the club again, and the cool night air did the rest. The euphoria didn’t fade nearly as quickly as the buzz, though, lifting his spirits higher than even the adrenaline and sensory overload had managed. Exhaustion caught up with him as he stumbled over the threshold of his room, waving off the teasing laughter and closing the door fast behind him.

He got his shoes off before falling into bed, and that was enough of a success.

--

The club jumped, the bass line pounded, and the lights flashed down on him, green and gold. David left to get drinks from the bar, but it was Billy who returned.

His t-shirt was a half-size too small across his shoulders, his jeans just as snug, and a gold hoop glinted in his right ear. Billy reached out with his free hand and trailed a light touch along the rows of hoops and cuffs in Teddy’s ears, his pupils dark and wide. “You look good,” Billy said, and handed Teddy a glass.

“You too.” Teddy let himself admire, slid into the booth beside Billy. The sound of the music faded away, until it was only the two of them in the half-dark, the flickering strobe lights, and a little bubble of silence pushing away the outside world.

“Cheers,” Billy said, and clinked his glass against Teddy’s. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his chin lifted, that long golden column of skin begging to be touched, or kissed.

*That’s not one of Tommy’s memories.*

“It’s nuts in here tonight. I don’t think I’ve seen this many hopeless meatheads in one space since registration day at the Academy.” Billy set his glass down and trailed a finger through the condensation on the glass table.

Teddy dragged his eyes away from Billy’s skin, and the way the arc of his collarbone peeked above
the v-neck. “Meatheads aside, I’m glad you came.” We missed you. He misses you.

“I’ve got to enjoy my new-found fame and glory while I can,” Billy joked, drawing a happy face in the water beaded on the tabletop. “They’ll all realize what a giant dork I am before too long, and that’ll be all she wrote.” He doodled wings on either side of the happy face before swiping his hand through the condensation and erasing it altogether.

Teddy raised his drink in a salute. “I’ve got your back. The media already think I’m an easy target; we can be public disappointments together.”

Billy flicked his fingers at Teddy’s glass. His nail hit the edge and it rang out in a chime; not quite glasses clinking, but close enough. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“---

“So how hung over are you?” Eli needled Teddy as they made their way to the table, balancing breakfast trays in their hands.

“Surprisingly, not bad.” His head ached somewhere in the back, and there was sand in the corners of his eyes, but he was otherwise functional. “Which is amazing, considering I have no idea what was in those shots.”

Teddy stopped dead, and Eli ran into his back, cursing him out. Tommy was sitting at the table, half-asleep over a mug of something hot. The others were ignoring him, from what Teddy could tell, Kate snickering quietly with America over something on a tablet. Teddy shrugged inwardly and slid into the empty seat on Tommy’s other side.

Cassie was slumped over with her head on her folded arms, looking a lot worse than Teddy felt, and Scott was busy pulling one strand of her hair. He held a finger up to his lips to silence any comments or questions Teddy might have been brewing, and drew the single golden thread completely taut. Cassie grumbled something under her breath, but didn’t move. Teddy held his breath as Scott twitched his fingers one last-

“Don’t even think about it,” Cassie said clearly.

Scott pulled, she elbowed him in the ribs, he scrambled to catch his mug before it sloshed coffee substitute all over the place, and Joe guffawed.

Breakfast included vaguely rubbery eggs and slightly dubious toast, but it went down easily and Teddy let the noise and bustle of the room wash over him as he ate. Kate kicked him under the table after he started to feel more alive, turning the tablet over to show him the screen. Lurid tabloid headline colors flashed at him, and he groaned.

The paparazzi. Right.

“Well,” Kate said, smirking. “OK USA has you dating Cass. You do make a cute couple; pity about the gay thing.”

“Speak for yourself,” David said from behind her, and he took a seat at the table along with them.

“Morning, tiger,” Kate greeted him. “Sleep well?”

“Like a baby. Doing the morning roundup?”

“‘Sources inside the Shatterdome say’, apparently” America drawled, amused, “that Teddy and Kate are muy caliente. Perez, on the other side, got his sweaty little hands on a snapshot of Teddy at some Pride event years ago, and is convinced that he’s dragged Tommy over to the gay side. Good job,
“What the hell did you do last night?” Eli asked.

Teddy shrugged. “More than I realized, apparently.”

“You didn’t come out of this unscathed either, boyo,” Kate interjected across the table.

“Me?” Eli recoiled. “I was sitting in the dayroom watching bad TV all evening, waiting for Kaiju sign. Which didn’t happen, by the way. In case you were wondering”

“Tough,” she replied, and Cassie sat up to listen. “Because Huffpo apparently thought that David was you-“


David rubbed his hand over his head, and his short crop of tight dark curls. “You’d think they’d at least notice the hair.”

“You’re giving those morons way too much credit,” Scott folded his arms and leaned in so he could see past Cassie’s head.

“The best part is that the editor goes on with a scathing piece about ‘party-hard rangers leaving us unprotected’ while we all went out to get our drink on. I think someone’s been saving that one up for a while, and finally had an excuse to slap it up.” Kate said, rolling her eyes.

Joe shook his head. “Turn that garbage off,” he suggested, waving a hand in the general direction of the tablet. “There’s no truth or benefit to it, and all you’re doing is increasing their advertising revenue.”

“Come on, old man,” Tommy finally said something, stretching his arms out in front of him and popping his knuckles one at a time in rapid succession. “Don’t you want to know what your adoring public thinks of you?”

“The only things that matter,” Joe replied serenely, “are what I think of me, and how Allah thinks of me. And no newspaper gossip column is going to change either of those for the better.”

David leaned in closer to Teddy, his elbow on the table, and Teddy turned to face him. He seemed absolutely none the worse for wear, which was a bit humbling, considering Teddy had to have a good twenty pounds on him and had matched him shot for shot.

“I was wondering,” David said, and then he hesitated, which was so utterly unlike David that Teddy actually felt a flash of concern. “Would you be interested in getting a drink sometime? Just the two of us.”

Teddy founndered, caught more off-guard than he should have been, but over breakfast and surrounded by co-workers wasn’t exactly how he’d pictured his dry streak ending. “Like a date?”

“Yeah,” David raised an eyebrow at him, laughter in his voice. “Something approximating a date-like event.”

He should say yes. Frankly, he should say ‘hell yes,’ and thank his lucky stars that a cute, smart, nice guy was actually into him. But when he tried to picture it, the only things that drifted across his mind were questions.
“I-“ Teddy began quietly, and David’s face fell. That hurt, and Teddy winced. “It’s nothing personal,” he jumped over what he’d been trying to say, and David’s brow furrowed. “I think you’re awesome, and I had a good time last night.”

“But?”

*But I’m hallucinating my co-pilot’s comatose brother on the regular, and that might become a problem.*

“But,” Teddy sighed, shifting on the hard bench. “I have a lot of junk around the edges that I need to sort out,” he confessed, keeping it vague on purpose. “When I’m not training, I’m studying, and when I’m not doing that, I’m plugged into someone else’s brain. I don’t think I’d be very good company for anyone right now.”

David nodded understandingly, and that was almost worse. “I can respect that,” he said after a thoughtful beat. “Just so we’re absolutely clear, and I don’t stick my foot in it, is that a maybe-later, or a definite no?”

Teddy chewed the inside of his cheek. “It’s a ‘can I have a rain check?’”

David had a nice smile. “Yeah. You can. If you get your ‘junk’ sorted out and I’m still kicking around this dump, you know where to find me.” He stood and said his goodbyes, and walked off with his hands in his pockets. Teddy sagged, tension draining out of him, his elbows on the table and his chin resting on his fists. Then he just felt guilty. And more than a little bit foolish.

*Goddammit, Altman. What is wrong with you?*
Cold ocean water crashed over legs that both were and weren’t Teddy’s, the sensation half-dulled and omnipresent. The waves undulated far below him, blue, green and grey. Teddy and Tommy towered above the surface, giants staring out at a world suddenly made small. His shins wanted to cramp with the icy water but couldn’t, perfectly warm and supported at the same time. Teddy shifted in his harness, tried to shake off the creeping sensation of other-ing that made his skin crawl, and Tommy laughed at him from the other rig. “You think this is weird? Wait until we step on a fish.”

“How long are they going to hang us out here?” The clock counted up the seconds in a slow and steady pace. How long did it take to get exercises underway? Magnus and Papa Valentine had been dropped at the same time, the swaying ride over beneath the jumphawks simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying; the plummet on release had been the closest he’d ever come to whiplash. Now they were stationary, thigh-deep in currents and other, more physical things that brushed around their legs, while Eli and Joe got further instructions somewhere behind the island.

“You have someplace better to be?” Tommy’s physical voice was dryer than his mental one, the amusement there rolling through Teddy in gossamer waves.

“I can probably come up with one or two.”

A few drifts in and it was getting easier to pick apart the feelings and strands that made up Tommy, and keep them distinct from the threads that were distinctly Teddy’s. Tommy wove through his mind in shades of green and silver, as the smell of wind and the earth after a rainstorm. His contentment at being out in Magnus again colored everything today, tinged the sky in Teddy’s mind’s eye in gentle hues of pink.

Tommy loved this, almost as much as he loved his brother, and those two emotions had become hopelessly intertwined.

Except now Teddy took Billy’s place.

He cleared his mind, opened to it, tried to sink into the drift the way he’d been taught. The white-blue of driftspace opened to him, unfolding and unfurling, a half-real landscape behind his eyes.

*Magnus*
Tommy’s thoughts, tinged with the smell of fresh-cut grass.

The only time the guilt faded, the only hours in the day when
he wasn’t watching, waiting, helpless and useless –
This was it, the time when he was doing the thing he was born to do
Except that wasn’t true, not entirely-

The sky darkened to a blush, warm arms surrounded him
Brown swells of breasts and hips, the sultry heat between her thighs
An altar at which to worship
Kate’s laughing
Her hair is silk in his fingers, and it’s half nostalgia, half desire
Wrap his fists in it and tug, bring her up to meet him as America bears down-

~AUGH!~

Teddy yelped, Tommy laughed, and Teddy hauled his shields up around his mind, blocking out the intensely personal and private images that had come filtering through the neural bridge. America and Kate? Holy shit. “You didn’t.” He pointed at Tommy accusingly, and shook his head as though he could dislodge the impressions that Tommy had left there. Deliberately, if the laughter was any indication.

Tommy affected a look of purest innocence, which sat no better on him than cruelty could do on Teddy. “Why not? They offered. And there’s nothing wrong with some fun for old times’ sake.”

On the one hand, it had to be a good sign of Tommy’s start to his own recovery. A month ago, two, would he even have considered taking them up on it? It still boggled the mind. On the other hand…

The half-forgotten longing and the glibness behind Tommy’s lie bled through Teddy’s shields. Tommy’s old regrets shaded his emotions, and made the back of Teddy’s neck tickle.

Teddy closed his eyes, the low buzz of voices from the LOCCENT murmuring in the background. Magnus was still; everything else was the drift. He sent the images spiraling toward Tommy, opened up to let the memories flow, directed and aimed with careful precision.

Allan’s lips had tasted of nachos and beer
His calloused hands slid up Teddy’s chest,
Long dextrous fingers pock-marked with solder burns and thin white tool scars
His moan when Teddy pressed inside him, hot and slick and sweet-

Tommy’s disgust was exaggerated, his face contorting as he effected a dramatic recoil.

~Did not need to see that, bro. Too much information.~
“Feel my pain,” Teddy retorted aloud, then: \textit{~I dunno about that. I mean, I never would have, uh, pegged you for a bottom.~}

“You’re not as funny as you think you are.”

“I’m not so sure. I may be on to something here. Are you \textit{sure} you’re ‘the wrong twin’?”

The sensations that flooded Teddy’s system in that instant were as potent as the first set, his stomach churning and heaving in an attempt to expel a breakfast that he had felt just fine eating. His head throbbed in a memory of pain, nausea, and the aftertaste of vomit, the knowledge that he was far too drunk, was \textit{still} blasted, even twelve hours and an attempt to sleep later. Billy was going to point and laugh, then make him coffee and force him to choke down scrambled eggs...

It faded as quickly as it had begun, the forced memory as insubstantial as the mist that edged the drift. Tommy snickered somewhere in the background of the white noise, Teddy’s disorientation passing and leaving him on solid ground.

“You realize, of courth,” Teddy lisped in an admittedly terrible impression, “that thith meanth war.”

David’s voice cut through the banter, the volume up. “Can it, you two; we’re ready at this end.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Teddy replied with a lazy grin, last echoes of laughter – whose, he couldn’t be entirely sure – dancing through his mind and lifting everything back into the sunlight.

A startled chuckle came back to him through the radio, and Teddy couldn’t help the smile that it triggered.

“Say that again,” Tommy jibed. “I think he likes it. You have a command fetish, Chief?”

Marshal Danvers cut in before Teddy could react, exasperation sharpening her tone. “Can you idiots at least \textit{pretend} to focus for five goddamn minutes?”

“Papa Valentine is in position and holding.” Eli didn’t need to sound nearly so smug.

“Light engagement,” Danvers reminded them. It had only been an hour ago that they had been sitting in the briefing, but now, in Magnus, it felt so different than that clinical overview could ever have prepared him for. “Plasma cannons and Magnus’ blades are deactivated, light-tagger replacements activated. Sensors will pick up a direct hit and record it for scoring. Hand to hand is allowed, but \textit{try} not to break your rides on workouts. Three hits and you’re out. Let four through and I’ll kick your asses personally.”

“Now it’s on,” Tommy purred in challenge, and Teddy could feel his eyes narrowing behind his faceplate. They turned their heads as one and looked at each other, and the smile spreading across Tommy’s face was shark-like and toothy. “Try to keep up,” he said. Teddy’s pulse picked up even as Tommy formed the thought, and he grinned back in response.

The go signal came.

They moved. The water parted before them like the Red Sea for Moses; they sliced through the waves as though they were nothing. The ocean floor beneath Teddy’s feet blended with the boots that encased them, the double sensation welcome now. Activating the stingblade on Tommy’s arm tingled in his fingers, the control for the neutered exercise version of their weaponry a perfect replica of the real thing.

\textit{Nerves, not his own, mingled with excitement. Concern over the unknown and the new; could they}
do this? What were they facing?~

~Chill, Tommy. We got this.~

Joe and Eli’s moves were second nature to Teddy now, every breath and shift a habit born of long study, a book he’d memorized long ago. He opened it for Tommy, let him see the pages all at once; the way Eli shifted his weight before striking, Joe’s preference for the right hook, their solid and unmovable strength together.

~We’ll never take them fist for fist.~

Tommy’s reply echoed in the back of Teddy’s mind. ~So we do it our way instead.~

They darted in. Papa Valentine waited for them, planted firm on the ocean floor, thick royal blue legs as sturdy as Eli and Joe’s own. The unmoveable object.

Tommy spoke aloud this time, the grin in his voice as telling as any rush of adrenaline through their veins. “Meet the irresistible force.”

They skidded in under Papa’s defenses, Joe’s favorite arm block keeping them back. Papa had plasma cannons, better at short range than long, but Magnus could circle back and away before the slower-moving Jaeger could come to bear. No tag, not yet, but they’d gotten close.

His arms were heavy, heavier than in the simulator, lifting them more sluggish than the action should be. Teddy strained, pushed against the resistance of the rig, the capacitors and wires thrumming along his skin, the crackle of the circuit suit pressing along his veins. Too slow; they were moving too slow, and what should have been an easy tag brought Papa’s giant fist crashing down toward Magnus’ head.

1-0.

“Get in the game, Altman,” Tommy snarled at him, the flavor of his mind flooding mud-brown with irritation and self-recrimination. Teddy opened to the drift, tried to sink in again; they skidded sideways and away from a second blow, managing a tag between Papa’s shoulder blades as they made the turn.

Resistance again. The floor of the mindscape like jello, too shallow, too light. The void of the drift pulled at him, the clear blue depths of the connection opening, waiting to take him in and pull him under, a holy baptism. He skimmed the surface only, the fog and the barbed wire pressing up to keep him back.

It made some things easier, the chance to tuck his more private thoughts away and keep them locked safe where Tommy would never find them. If he knew, if he ever suspected the kinds of things that came to Teddy in his dreams – their partnership would be over long before it began.

Even so, the endless possibility of the neural bridge called to him through the grey.

Magnus wanted the bond, even as her pilots resisted.

They swerved, danced back, stepped lightly to the side, Magnus a second behind where she should have been. Teddy snarled, battered against the push-back airbag that kept his mind penned in. Screw secrets. We need this. The walls pressed back, the fog thickened, and Teddy bounced off them in the drift.

Magnus faltered, and Papa landed a blow. Another. Uppercut to the midsection and Papa staggered
back, but it was three down already – three down and they had lost, lost before they’d even begun.

Teddy pulled his mind away from the bridge, lost the image of Tommy’s fingers clasping his, shook them off as they faded away into nothing. Alarms sounded and he dimly heard David’s voice shouting into the radio, something about 93%, 92-

It was too heavy. He was too heavy. He couldn’t control the rig, the mountain of machinery as silent and inert as any skyscraper.

Something wet ran down his cheek.

Magnus teetered, toppled, and fell to her knees. The cold, dark ocean washed up around her. Tommy said nothing.

Silence echoed in the hollow spaces.

He was alone.

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“What the hell happened to you out there?”

Marshal Danvers paced behind her desk, her uniform open at the throat and her hands gesturing in front of her to punctuate every sharp and angry word. “I’ve seen better performances from cadets their first time in the simulators! You’re both top of your game in the pons tests, so I know that’s not it. Stark and Richards have been over every inch of Magnus with a fine-toothed comb, so I know for damn sure that it’s not the tech that’s the problem.” She wheeled and slammed her open palms down on the cluttered surface of her desk. Pens rattled in a chipped Academy mug sitting on the corner.

“Which leaves us,” Colonel Rhodes cut in from where he perched on the edge of Danvers’ desk. He put a hand out to still the cup without looking, then folded his arms in front of him again. His expression stayed as calmly stern as Danvers’ was fierce. “With the obvious conclusion.”

“That it’s us, you mean.” Tommy stood beside Teddy, eyes forward, hands behind his back, utterly rigid. His eyes were studied and blank, and for the first time in weeks, Teddy could look at him and have absolutely no conception of what he might be thinking. “Come out and say it, Colonel, Marshal. We failed. We weren’t good enough.” The sneer laid thickly in his voice, aimed at all of them, at Teddy, at himself?

Danvers’ eyes burned into Teddy. “That it’s you. You screwed up.” He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, the thick dread spreading through his chest. The obvious answer was staring them in the face; Teddy was the weak link, the newest variable. If either of Magnus’ pilots were expendable, it was-

“Tom.” Danvers began, then shared a look with Rhodes that made both their foreheads crease, and her eyes look tired. Her shoulders sagged, just a fraction that he never would have seen if he hadn’t been watching, and Rhodes shook his head in the barest hint of movement. “I know how it is,” Danvers said, instead of whatever she had been going to, and her voice this time was softer. And tired. So, so tired. “To be cut off from the partner you trained with. To be faced with the choice of retiring, and moving on. Or accepting that some things can’t be changed and finding a new way to fight anyway. That’s the difference between a quitter and a hero. Which one are you going to be?”

It wasn’t the greatest, as far as inspirational speeches went. It was right up there with the ‘look to your right, look to your left, only two percent of you will still be here at graduation’ lecture from the first day at the Academy. Even so, Teddy’s gut clenched tight around the words and his lungs closed
up on him. His breath could only come in short, shallow huffs, and he kept his eyes forward, his hands locked behind his back.

Tom’s anger radiated off him, in the set of his shoulders and the line between his brows, in the way his fists balled behind his back where only Teddy could see them, and the tickle in the space of the back of Teddy’s brain that he’d started to think of as ‘Tommy’s sublet.’ “With all due respect, ma’am,” Tommy bit off in clipped pieces, “I’ve got the highest goddamn kill count on the American coast. I’ve earned that seven times over.”

“The Maximoff twins have that kill count, not you,” Danvers replied, and almost looked sorry when Tommy flinched. “And what I have,” she said, her voice rising again, “is a billion-dollar machine that I can’t use, because I can’t find pilots who can handle the job.”

His blood boiled and part of him knew why, knew that was what she wanted, what she was trying for. The rest of him didn’t care. Tommy was hurting and Tommy was bleeding inside, in a way that Teddy remembered two times over. My partner. You don’t talk to my copilot that way. “We can handle it,” Teddy broke in hotly, and almost missed the tiny smile that flickered on the corner of Rhodes’ mouth before it vanished again. “You said yourself that you understand the problems with changing co-pilots; I’m at least half of the problem here as well.”

“Stay out of this,” Tommy hissed. He broke stance and they faced off, his hands flying up in front of him.

“No. I may not be the co-pilot you want, but I’m the one you’ve got,” Teddy fired back, the edges of his vision clouding red. The office itself fell away and it felt like driftspace, just Tommy’s green eyes narrowed at him, the edges of his emotions prickling at Teddy through the bond that wasn’t there. “So if you still want to have Magnus when Billy wakes up, let me in. Let me help.”

“I’m not telling you again, Altman-“

“Enough.” Danvers half-shouted, and Teddy snapped back into the world. She settled back, leaning on her forearms, her hands braced flat on the top of her wide metal desk.

“And that would be our problem right there,” Rhodes commented calmly, half under his breath.

Danvers shook her head and the weight of her disappointment fell heavy on Teddy, bearing his shoulders down. “Whatever it is,” she rubbed her forehead dismissively, “fix it.”

As though it would be that easy, just… ‘fix it.’ How did you fix two lifetimes of mistrust, of screwed up relationships and bad friends, of abandonment and disappointment, death and loneliness and fear, all at once? If it were only a matter of willpower, Teddy could have solved a lot of his own problems a long time ago.

“Fuck each other if you have to; I don’t care.” Teddy choked on his next words and Tommy just lifted his chin, the tops of his cheekbones red. “Just get it done.”

The hallway was empty when the door closed behind them a few minutes later, the click of the latch echoing down the length of the otherwise-silent corridor. The Marshal’s parting shots rang in Teddy’s ears in the quiet, - if you assholes can’t get it together, I’ll find someone who will – and he sagged back against the wall. The cool, rough concrete scraped against his back, an unyielding support that he could rely on.

Tommy turned on his heel, his hands jammed into his pockets and his body tight as a bowstring, vibrating in his tension and anger.
“Can we talk?” Teddy said softly. “Please?”

“I don’t do heart-to-hearts,” Tommy snapped back, not pausing in his long stride.

He was halfway down the hallway before Teddy spoke again, his voice loud enough to echo down the concrete tunnel. “We have to deal with this someday, Tom. You can’t run away forever.”

“Watch me.”

Tommy kept walking. He didn’t turn around.

--

Three hours in the gym and the kwoon should have left Teddy too exhausted to dream. His body ached, the soreness of overuse settling thick around his muscles and joints, along with a bone-deep weariness that the hot water of the shower couldn’t begin to touch. He sank into bed with a long, low groan, allowing himself the luxury of complaint in the otherwise-empty room.

Eli would have given him shit for it, but Eli wasn’t there. Billy would laugh, call him an idiot and an old man, but fondly, so that Teddy would know he didn’t really mean it.

No, he wouldn’t. Because Billy wasn’t there either. Billy had never been in Teddy’s room, or spoken with Teddy. Because Billy had been in a coma for weeks before Teddy had ever left Nevada.

Memories of the drift tangled with dream-images and real conversations, blending together in his mind in a cacophony of blue and white, gold and green.

Teddy flung his arm across his eyes and tried to force his body to relax. Toes, wiggle and release. Arches of the feet, stretch and release. Calves, stretch, hold and release.

I’m only a year older than you, you know.

That doesn’t count as ‘old.’

Tell that to Tommy; he’s been lording ‘five minutes’ over my head since we were infants.

What would you know? You’re not even here.

Harsh.

Billy was there when the dream began.

They sat side by side, the metal of the scaffolding creaking gently with their movements. The vast space of the Shatterdome launch bay opened up below them, LOCCENT techs and maintenance crews scuttling back and forth like ants on patrol. Teddy folded his arms over the cool steel bars that cris-crossed in front of him, his chin resting on top of them. Billy sprawled beside him, loose-limbed and easy, kicking his running shoes out over the drop. He was sixteen or seventeen this time, a faint trace of puppy fat lingering in the softness of his cheek and the swell of his lower lip, his youth sparking in the eager flash of his hands in the air.

His dark brown hair stuck out at all angles, bangs flopping down over his brow the way they always did when Billy was this age. He was getting better at picking them out, the Different Stages of Billy Maximoff. Only current-Billy looked as polished as he did in his press releases and interviews, hair gelled to the side, his smile guarded but his eyes bright. Thirteen-year-old Billy tended to have a
black eye more often than not. By seventeen when his shoulders had filled out and he was almost as tall as Teddy, those had pretty much stopped. (The terrible bowl cut when he had appeared as a six year old that one time had been particularly memorable.)

Someone should brush his bangs out of the way, just- reach out and smooth the chaos so that Billy’s eyes would be more visible in the half-shadow; his dark, dark eyes and the black lashes that swept across the high arc of his cheekbones when he blinked.

Teddy wrapped his fingers around the bar and did nothing. “That’s pretty advanced,” he teased instead. “For a baby to start mocking so young.”

“You have *met* my brother, right?” Billy snorted good-naturedly. “He was born for sarcasm.”

“A trait which you don’t share at all, of course.” Teddy replied, deadpan.

Billy laughed, a light bubble of sound, and leaned forward to rest his own arms on the bars, his legs dangling free over the ten-story drop below them. “Absolutely not.” The silence drew out between them in silver strands, comfortable and warm. “He’s tough to get to know, for most people,” Billy explained after a while, tracing some vague shape on the metal bar. “But he’s not really that complicated. Just a little prickly on the outside.”

“Like a cactus,” Teddy complained. Billy’s long, slim fingers trailed softly around the curve of the scaffolding.

“It’s not a bad analogy,” he replied. “Spikes on the outside, but soft and sweet in the middle. And there’s an agave liquor joke to be made in there somewhere, but I can’t think of it right now without invoking some really unfortunate phrases like ‘juicing.’”

“Please never go there about your brother.” Especially while Billy was sitting so close, looking like the amalgam of every boy Teddy had ever loved from a hopeless distance, dark hair and golden skin, vibrant and warm and so brilliantly alive.

Billy waggled his eyebrows, but even he couldn’t hold the joke for long and his face fell into a wrinkled nose of disgust. “Deal.”

An alarm sounded somewhere in the distance, and a crew jogged off below them to answer it. Their yellow hats reflected the glaring halogen lights strung across the walls, and shone that much brighter. Billy turned his head to watch them go. Magnus shifted in her dock, her vast bulk gleaming in those same lights and her head turning in a perfect echo of Billy’s motion.

“He wasn’t always like that.” Teddy’s memories of the drift were never complete. He saw what Tommy wanted him to see, mostly. The rest lingered in fragments, vague and less distinct, like stolen photographs or whispered conversations in a dream. The twins’ laughter, he remembered; Tommy’s as bright and warm as Billy’s at first, until by the time they were piloting together it had gone cold and sardonic, self-loathing laced through the sound.

Billy sank his chin onto his arms in an imitation of Teddy’s posture. “No,” he agreed, after a moment’s silence. “Our parents divorced after we went to Alaska.”

That was in their official biographies, of course, along with Scott’s old job as a cop, Eli being raised by his grandmother, Teddy’s dad’s military record. The way Billy said it, though… “He thinks it was his fault?”

“He remembers when things were good, and then he remembers that they weren’t,” Billy replied quietly, staring out over the bay while Teddy memorized the way he chewed his bottom lip. “He
forgets that our dad left before, but he always came back. And then the kaiju war started, and nothing was the same. We left, and he left, and now, except for our uncle, she’s alone.”

“So when you got hurt?” Another piece fell into place.

Billy’s head dropped, his forehead pressed against his wrists and his hands on the bar of the scaffolding. He sat there for too long, impossibly small and young, his knuckles white. Teddy couldn’t stop himself, didn’t mean anything by it; he laid his hand against Billy’s shoulder. The bone was close to the skin there, Billy’s body all angles. He flattened his hand and held it there, passing his warmth to Billy. It would be so easy from there to pull Billy into his arms, to hold him and offer all the comfort that neither the Billy-in-the-real-world or Tommy would accept.

One because he was unconscious, and the other because he was being kind of a dick.

“All we ever wanted was to be heroes.” The grief there was a palpable thing, thick and heavy in his voice. “We were, for a while. But it’s so easy to hurt people at the same time as you’re trying to help. And not even know. Once you do see it, it’s too easy to feel selfish for needing-” he gestured at the Shatterdome, the Jaegers in their docks, the window of the LOCCENT high on the opposing wall. “This.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be a Ranger,” Teddy protested hotly. “It’s so difficult, you have to be passionate about it or-”

“Or you’ll never survive,” Billy finished his sentence for him. “But maybe there’s something a little bit wrong with wanting to see movement in the Breach. Because it’s the biggest thrill in the world when that alarm comes in, and you’re suiting up to go toe to toe with Godzilla. We’re gods when we’re out there. But a single screw-up, one moment of hesitation – just one – and that thing takes apart six million people. Or more.

“Sometimes I think this is too big for just the eight of us.”

“Nine, now,” Teddy replied softly. Billy’s shoulder moved under his hand, like a half-hearted shrug, but he leaned back into the touch when Teddy tried to take his hand away.

He left it there.

“Back to six if you and Tommy can’t get your shit together,” Billy pointed out, a smile flickering on his face again for a moment.

“He gave me a hangover,” Teddy grumbled. He could take a cue. “Granted it vanished after a minute, but still.”

Billy’s laugh this time was knowing. “Our second drift, he spent half the time trying to plant post-hypnotic suggestions.” He turned under Teddy’s hand and leaned in, resting his head on Teddy’s shoulder. The heat from his body soaked in through Teddy’s shirt and Teddy slung his arm around Billy’s slim shoulders out of sheer reflex. Billy was more solid than a dream had any right to be. “If he’d had his way, I would have been quacking like a duck and probably smoking something flavored.”

He looks like a kid. This should feel weirder than it does. “What did you do?”

“I sang ‘It’s a Small World’ in his head about five times through. He was humming it for days.”

Teddy was still laughing when he woke up in his bunk, alone.
The morning routine was easy to stumble through without thought; useful, because his mind was entirely wrapped up in the dream, in Billy’s revelations – or were they images of what Tommy would think that Billy would say in those circumstances?

Frankly, the whole thing made his head ache.

Teddy was halfway down the hallway and contemplating heading for the infirmary to find Tommy, when he slowed and stopped instead. He turned, not letting himself overanalyze why, and made his way to the vast double doors that led, instead, to the Jaeger bays.

Scaffolding rose high along the walls on either side of each Jaeger, long steel beams and bars crossing and supporting each other in endless zig-zag rows. If he looked up, then over to the left, he would see the pace where he and Billy had been sitting. *In his dream; he must always remember that it had only been a dream.*

The bay bustled even this early in the morning, Teddy’s presence the anomaly in the workday rhythm. A couple of techs buzzed by, dressed in jumpsuits with Magnus’ logo blazoned on the back. They waved and he saluted back, watched as their cart pulled in and stopped at Magnus’ immense feet. He’d tried to make a point of learning the names that first week, when everything had been so chaotic. Kitty something; Doug. At least he wasn’t so distracted that he’d forgotten that.

Stark was up there somewhere again; Magnus’ lights shone red and blue, her vast body thrumming with energy. It surged up inside him as he got closer, something deep in the center of his chest resonating along her frequency.

*Hello,* she called to him. *Hello. I see you.* His heart beat a desperate rushing answer back. Tommy’s issues be damned; Teddy could no sooner give up Magnus now than he could cut his own arm off at the shoulder. He was going to make this work if it killed him.

The spot up on the scaffolding drew him, some tug in the midde of his gut getting stronger as he climbed. There would be a pillar, then a long open space, a handful of nicks in one of the bars, a scorch mark from some long-ago welding torch. He found it, every detail as it should have been, though he’d never been up that way in person. The back-brain sensation nudged him, a lingering memory: Tommy wandering the base, looking for Billy, finding him here. A dozen similar images flooded through him.

*Billy sitting with his back against the wall and lost in thought; hanging over the railing to get a better look at Magnus Echo; sprawled on the plywood flooring with a book propped open on his chest.*

Recognition fought with uncertainty, his memories of sitting there with Billy overwriting the knowledge that he had never been here before.

The world spun and Teddy closed his eyes. *Focus on the now.* He brought up his walls, drew the lines around what he knew to be true, shutting out the sense-impressions filtering through to change it. The world resolved itself into one layer again when he opened his eyes, everything back to where it was supposed to be.

Mostly everything.

The Jaegers all stood in their bays in careful order, arms hanging at their sides, palms turned inward, cockpits facing forward. Except Papa Valentine, the newest design, whose conn-pod was stored separately. And except for Magnus Echo, whose head turned to look off to the right.
He could be excused for not noticing the change before, considering how high the Jaeger loomed above him and the others on the floor. Now, memories flashed behind his eyes, rapid and unstoppable: the techs racing to the source of the alarm. Billy’s head turning to watch them go, Magnus’ following. Dark hair superimposed itself on green metal, and he saw the motion repeat itself over, and again. Turn and watch. Turn.

Billy had looked back. Magnus had not. And now-

Now she stared off in the direction the techs had gone, her conn-pod head twisted almost ninety degrees off of true.

*It had been a dream.*

Hadin’t it?

Stark hung himself off the scaffold on the other side and shouted gleefully at one of his minions. Small figures waved back at him from down below, and servos whined in response. Magnus’ head slowly pivoted back into forward position, and the collar locked again.

Teddy let out the air that had been stuck in his lungs in a shaky and self-conscious laugh. Yeah, that was brilliant. He was spending too much time dwelling on dreams, that was the problem. He was getting himself tangled up in fantasy and ghost stories.

So what if it was taking him a little longer to adjust to Tommy’s memories? There were good reasons for that. They had no history together, for one. Most partnerships came in with shared context to ground them, while he and Tom had nothing. And Tommy had a lot more experience living with someone else in his head half the time – he couldn’t be expected to have the same reactions as Teddy.

*And if he were,* came the uncharitable thought, *would he tell anyone?*

There were no ghosts here, only memory bleed and coincidence.

Mystery solved, Teddy turned to go. He ran his hand along the steel bar as he did so, letting the smooth metal play out beneath his fingertips.

*All we ever wanted was to be heroes.* Billy’s voice whispered in the back of his mind, the memory a jab of something poignant through the middle of his chest.

Servos whirred into life behind him, and Teddy stopped. “What the hell?” Stark yelled, over on the other scaffold. “I said *don’t* trigger it. Hold it still or *you’ll* be the one needing your shocks recalibrated.”

“Something misfired,” came the call back. “Nothing’s been initialized from outside.”

“Not possible!”

Teddy turned around as the argument continued. Magnus’ conn-pod had swiveled again, pivoting cleanly on the massive neck. The vast cockpit module barely resembled a head; was only recognizable as such because of the humanoid form it was perched on. The tall windows on the front of the conn-pod hardly looked like eyes; not unless you were blind-drunk and squinting.

But in that moment, her ‘head’ turned in his direction, Teddy could swear that Magnus Echo had eyes, and sight. And she was staring directly at him.
Technical Specifications

**Given Name**   Magnus Echo

**Launch Date**  December 23rd, 2015

**Classification**  Mark-1

**Status**  Active

**Country of Origin**  USA

**Pilots**

Thomas Maximoff

Theodore Altman

William Maximoff (medical leave, indefinite)

**Kaiju Killed**  7

That much, he already knew. Teddy drummed his pen on the edge of his desk and paged down through Magnus’ technical specs for the second time. His notebook was filled with scribbled references that weren’t adding up to anything yet, the records on the mainframe not giving him anything more than he’d already gleaned from other sources. None of it explained the things he’d felt and seen that afternoon.

*Magnus looked at me. She knew I was there.*

It shouldn’t be possible. Stark’s muttering hadn’t given him a whole lot of confidence in the tech team’s ability to figure it out, either.

Her service record wasn’t much use; that was the first place he had gone for answers. The Maximoff twins had been Magnus Echo’s first and only pilots, until Billy’s injury. Following his coma, Marshal Danvers had brought in a new pair, another set of twins. But despite their off-the-charts drift compatibility with each other, for some reason no-one could pinpoint, the Beaubiers hadn’t been able to sync up with Magnus properly. In the simulator, in the pons, in any other Jaeger, they hit 100% every damn time. In Magnus, they’d never managed higher than eighty.

*At least we aren’t that far off.*

The thought was uncharitable at best, and Teddy dismissed it roughly. Jean-Paul and Marie were up in Alaska now, listed as pilots for the new Mark-3 ‘Nike Aurora.’ So at least something had gone right for them after Magnus’ rejection.

*And when did you start thinking of it as something deliberate?*

Teddy leaned back in his chair and frowned at the screen. Jaegers were machines; they didn’t have free will, they couldn’t *dislike* someone, no matter what stories circulated when the crews went drinking. And there always were stories, of course. Of Jaegers that disobeyed commands in order to save their pilots; moving in their docks all on their own; old stories of ghost ships and strange tides resurrecting themselves for a new era.
The file tree on the mainframe linked everything at this level, from daily maintenance reports to energy usage and – there. *Nate Richards, public directory*. Nate had been Magnus' main technical liaison from the beginning. If anyone knew what her systems and readouts were supposed to look like, it would be him. A few clicks later and Teddy was staring at Nate’s reports, each one of them a mass of jargon and terminology that he only half-recognized, and barely understood.

This file was the same as all of the others; strings of numbers and shorthand that made sense only to Nate, peppered with short paragraphs of explanation and run-on trains of thought that petered out or segued into more tables. 'Anomalous,' though; that caught Teddy’s eye easily enough.

The more Teddy read, the slower his pen moved, the beat he tapped out fading into silence. A blip. It probably meant nothing; Nate’s notes dismissed it as a readout error. But the more files he read, the more it turned up. Again, on the Beaubier's second drift, and then on their third and last in Magnus. Core systems lost speed while the twins were in harness, the power flow dimming, as though resistance had entered the circuit somewhere along the line.

As though Magnus was protecting herself.

And yet Magnus wanted him. He could feel her pull even when he was far away, in a faint blue-metallic underlay, the taste of cloves in his mouth. He could close his eyes now and sense her, a soft rumble in the back of his mind that anyone else would call 'ghost drift,' if he ever tried to explain. It wasn't that.

“Sleeping on the job, Ranger?” The voice sounded inches away from his ear at the same time as someone grabbed the back of his chair and rattled it briskly. Teddy's eyes flew open and he managed to shake his fist at Eli rather than deck him. Eli sidestepped and leaned over Teddy to look at his screen. “Can't say I blame you; technical reports are the worst.”

Teddy shook his head to clear it, filing away the fuzzy, half-formed theories to be examined later. “I thought some of this might be useful,” he admitted, then shrugged to throw Eli off the scent. He would be all over it, if Teddy convinced him to help; he'd have every remotely connected file pulled from the server, cross-referenced and summarized for his viewing pleasure.

Not yet. Once he had more than a vague and uncomfortable suggestion of a theory, or a nameless suspicion with no proof. When guilt didn't sink, stone-like, in his stomach like he was thinking about betraying someone else's confidence. *Then* he'd ask for help.

“But all it's doing is making my eyes water,” he lied.

Eli narrowed his eyes; he had always been good at picking up things in Teddy's voice. But this time, he said nothing. “No wonder, if this is where you've been all day,” he replied instead, a study in casualness. “Come on,” he straightened up and gestured at the door. “They’re serving dinner. I want to get down to the mess before Alleyne swipes the last damn butter tarts again.”

It was so perfectly normal that Teddy grinned, standing up and leaving the computer and the dozen open files behind. Normal was good; it was something to cling to when nothing else in the world made sense. “I thought they weren't nearly as good as Gran's,” he asked with a grin. He grabbed the door and hauled it open, waiting for Eli to precede him through.

“They're not,” Eli retorted, pretending to be offended. He headed out into the hall, nodding at a couple of guys from maintenance as they hustled by. “But it's like sex. Even not-so-great butter tarts are better than no butter tarts at all.”

Teddy snorted, shoving his hands in his pockets and falling into step beside him. “So what you're
saying is that Alleyne's been cock-blocking you.”

Eli snickered, and the twisting lurking in Teddy’s gut undid itself. He was alone in his own head for once, no tugs or voices murmuring behind his brainstem. “If you want to push the analogy to unreasonable levels, sure.”

“And since when are you having sex? Did you find a girlfriend I don’t know about?”

“Maybe if you spent more time hanging out with me and less time buried in reports and in the infirmary, you’d know the answer to that.”

For a moment, just one, he could pretend that they were back in Nevada, or further, at the Academy, when his mother was still alive, Tom and Will Maximoff were still remote and distant cereal-box figureheads, and the world itself made sense.

“Touché.”

Later on, he would come back and the tabs would still be open, streams of data telling a story that he had barely begun to decode. One he couldn’t ignore any more.

Somehow – defying all laws of physics and biology – on some level, Magnus Echo was aware.
Rolling in the Deep

Chapter Summary

Wherein Tommy and Teddy have a discussion, and Chekov's gun is fired.

Chapter Notes

My soul is sold to feebleapb and meinterrupted, who beta this for me and keep me on track. Ladies, you are my light.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

No matter how many times Teddy glanced at the message icon in the corner of his computer screen, the little number on his internal account didn’t change. Not that he expected Tommy to try and reach out – not after the way their meeting with Marshal Danvers had ended – but they had another exercise that morning. It would be kind of reassuring to know that he wasn’t an hour away from jumping into a Jaeger with a guy who hated his guts. And they couldn’t afford to ignore the elephant in the room any more. There was a block in their drift, a wall that resisted their connection. It was borne of shame, guilt and pride, brotherly love, despair and loneliness all tangled together, steel spikes in the mind that drew blood when Teddy ventured too close.

*The deeper the bond, the better you fight.* But the opposite was just as true; the longer they stayed in the kiddy-pool shallows, the less likely they’d ever be to reach combat readiness.

The little green dot in his sent folder meant that Tommy had read Teddy’s message, anyway. It hadn’t said much; words had never been Teddy’s forte, not the way some people could be eloquent about their feelings. But you didn’t need a whole lot of them to say something like ’sorry I’m not your brother; now stop being a dick about it.’ Only more polite.

You probably needed more words than that to make it sound less stupid, but hey. He worked with the material he had.

So that was Tommy’s end of things taken care of, or at least as much as Teddy was actually able to influence. Now he just had himself to get straight.

So to speak.

Teddy snorted at himself as he rummaged through his drawer, another sock entirely eluding him. *Figures. Can’t get a drift right, can’t find more than one clean sock. Winning on all counts this week, Altman.*

Hands on his hips, he surveyed the tiny barracks room. The laundry bag hung from the back of his door, but socks came in pairs. There wouldn’t be an extra clean one sitting around in there. He made the bed every morning entirely on autopilot and just like they’d had drummed into them back at the Academy, hospital corners and spotless underneath and all. The only place left to look was the trunk sitting at the end of his bed, and the kit bag he’d folded haphazardly to stuff into the bottom that
chaotic first day.

A sock! Balled-up and shoved into the far corner of his bag, but clean nevertheless. Maybe the day was looking up after all. He sat back on his heels and pulled the bag out from under his spare boots and some random books, just for the sake of thoroughness, and shoved a hand inside to do one last check around for other stray bits. His fingers closed around something plastic, and Teddy frowned as he drew it up into the light. The small baggie was filled with loose grey and brown leaves and dirt, maybe a quarter-cup’s worth. He slipped his finger along to break the seal and took an experimental sniff. He’d toked up once in college, just to see what all the fuss was about, but this definitely didn’t look like that. Didn’t smell like it either. The leaves gave off the faint scent of spice, nothing at all like the sickly-sweet pong of the loading dock behind the Arts building. So then what-?

A memory floated up from somewhere: Dr. Banner, disheveled as always, following Teddy out to the helo pad.

“Tea. It’ll help relax you before a drift.”

Dr. Banner had pressed the bag into Teddy’s hands, his expression intense, and he’d never given it a second glance. Hell, he’d forgotten about it entirely until now. He sat the bag on his desk and dropped into the chair, frowning at it as he considered his options. There was no telling what was in the stuff. Bruce would never deliberately try to poison him, but some of the concoctions he’d brewed for himself back at Groom Lake had smelled more like bio-warfare than anything meant to be ‘soothing chamomile’ or ‘citrus rush.’

On the other hand, Dr. Banner’s entire job was figuring out refinements to the pilot-Jaeger interface. If this had something to do with that, then Teddy was guaranteed a higher-than-chance probability of the tea blend doing something interesting and useful as a result.

Or a really bad caffeine hangover.

Oh, hell. He and Tommy were already so far into the doghouse that they might as well get matching collars and leashes. What did he have to lose?

Hot water was easy enough to come by, a tea ball less so, but he managed, and soon some of the weird-looking mixture was steeping away in a mug. The room filled slowly with the spice-sweet scents of cloves, pine, and something else indefinable and strong.

Now what? Teddy sat back and thumbed through his notebook as he waited for the tea to brew. Two days of research and what had he come up with? Pages of notes about superstitions and gossip; a story about a Jaeger in Peru that had stopped working when one of its pilots died. A pilot in Japan who claimed to be able to read her partner’s mind even when not connected through a neural bridge. A whole lot of rumors and nothing concrete.

He tossed the book back on the desk in frustration and pulled the tea ball out to sit on the edge of a plate. The spice-smell hit him face-first, hurling him back in time, into the memory of ginger cookies and cold winter days. He breathed deep and a knot inside his chest loosened, taking with it images of scarves and flushed cheeks, his mother in figure skates and a vague green-clad figure twirling her around and around until she doubled over with laughter.

Shaking his head broke some of the spell, and Teddy set the cup back down on the table to let it cool a little more.

Holidays with his mother had been small and cozy, the two of them curled up in matching robes and plaid pajamas, giant fuzzy animal slippers and hot cocoa with marshmallows, some old black and
white classic movie paying silently on the television. Christmas last year had meant Gramma Faith’s
dinner table, his not the only too-pale face among the collection of Bradley relations and adopted
strays.

What would this year bring?

Except he was supposed to be working on the Magnus Problem, not letting his mind wander. Right.
He pushed the cup a little further away, and the rush of memory subsided with the smell.

What would Eli do in a situation like this, where he had a pile of disconnected data and no solid
theories?

He’d make a list.

Teddy pulled the book and pen toward himself again and flipped to a blank page. He might not have
the anal-retentive soul of a true archivist, but he could make a stab at getting some of his thoughts in
order.

Fact: Jaegers are mechanical, and are not designed to have a consciousness.

Like Nate kept saying, they were only machines. They couldn’t think independently, couldn’t feel,
certainly couldn’t react. Not without programming and pilots to tell them what subroutines to run.

Fact: Many people have reported anomalous behavior in older Jaegers.

Theory: Some Jaegers develop quirks that look like signs of consciousness.

Fact: Human beings are pattern-seeking, and look for connections where none exist.

And wasn’t that the impetus behind most ghost sightings and UFOs, at least in the pre-Kaiju world? He’d been into that sort of thing once: dust and bugs glowing like orbs caught in photographs,
matrixing making faces appear in fancy wallpaper designs, stories where everything happened in too-
easy sets of three. Back then, they had all seemed harmless and fun.

Theory: The human shapes of the jaegers and the weird nature of the drift may lead pilots to see
signs of awareness that cannot be substantiated by proof. (Ie, we’re seeing what we think we should see).

Except that didn’t account for the blips in Nate’s measurements, or the weird anomalies in the
Beaubier twins’ drift attempts.

Fact: There are no records of any anomalies in Magnus Echo prior to the fight with Hone-onna

Fact: William Maximoff was badly injured in the fight with Hone-onna and has yet to regain
consciousness.

Fact: Some stories say that jaegers can exhibit signs of protectiveness towards their pilots.

Theory: Something triggered in Magnus Echo as a reaction to Billy’s injuries.

Teddy drummed his pen against the edge of the desk, the steady beat running faster and faster as his
head spun with the implications of what he’d just set onto paper. If he was right, if any of it was even
remotely close to the truth, then Magnus somehow knew Billy, missed him, and wanted him back.
Or at least was somehow… what? Too in tune with one set of minds to fully accept another?

Theory: Magnus Echo knew the Beaubiers weren’t her usual pilots. Fact: Teddy was able to sync to
Magnus; it was his sync with Tommy that was the problem. Theory: Magnus Echo accepted Teddy.

Theory: Magnus liked Teddy.

The cup had cooled enough that it was only warm against his fingers when he picked it up, a soothing buzz through the china that relaxed his hands. He breathed it in deeply, let the spice-forest-dirt floor smell settle softly through and into his pores. Even the smell was relaxing when it shouldn’t have been, a gentle mellowing and soothing down around the edges of his exposed nerves. An alarm beeped on his calendar, sounding a hundred miles away. Teddy blinked at it lazily. Half an hour until his next exercise.

He didn’t need to write the next two down.

Fact: Reports suggest that a pilot can compensate for a co-pilot's deficiencies in certain areas during the neural bridge; a stronger pilot can pull up a weaker one.

Theory: If Teddy could make his side of the drift stronger, he could bring Tommy with him.

Teddy drank. The tea sank down inside his body, warm and peaceful, sending tendrils of calm curling and flexing gently along every line and sinew of his body. The rush passed after a moment and left him clear-headed in its wake, his body drifting in a languid, almost post-orgasmic state of relaxation.

Gotta remember to thank Bruce. This stuff is awesome.

The alarm went; twenty minutes to get to the ready room and suit up.

Softly, gently, more at ease in his own skin than Teddy could ever remember being before, he rose from his chair and headed for the door.

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Tommy beat Teddy to the ready room and was half strapped in to his drivesuit by the time Teddy arrived at the door. He – well. Teddy would have said ‘looked like hell,’ but that was hardly much different than the way he appeared most of the time when he was on base. He had relaxed a little bit at the club, though the large number of shots Nate and David had kept on pushing into his hands probably had a decent amount to do with that. And then there had been Magnus two days ago, before everything had gone to hell.

Now he looked down at Teddy from the platform as Kitty snapped his breastplate into place, his lips pressed together with something like wariness.

“We good?” Teddy asked, and held out his hand. He held his breath.

Tommy hesitated, but only for a second. Kitty moved out of the way, casting a weighted look at the pair of them, and Tommy put out his hand. His palm was cool and dry, with the faint antiseptic tang that always seemed to linger in the air of the infirmary. His hand felt right in Teddy’s, the sensation neatly slotting into a void in the back of Teddy’s mind that was marked brother. A new space, for someone he never actually imagined he’d have; one that Tommy took entirely for granted.

“Yeah.” Tommy nodded, still guarded. That guard slowly settled as Teddy hung on, the sharp lines smoothing out beside his eyes. He didn’t quite smile. “Let’s go mess someone up.”

--
The drift started the same way as it always did. Teddy fell softly into Tommy’s mind, images and half-finished thoughts pressing close around the edges. He had no walls of his own at all this time, a fuzzy-edged mass of boneless id and ego. He floated easily downward, untroubled by jutting splinters and jagged blades.

Space expanded behind his eyes, the drivesuit and circuit suit beneath it pressing into his skin, a secure embrace that kept him steady in the center of the universe. The sky in their shared mindscape dimmed from blue to deepest black, galaxies and nebulas making a stately and soundless waltz through the void.

*My god, it’s full of stars.* An old joke, one his mother would have laughed at. Billy would laugh too; he knew the classics.

Maybe one day they would watch movies together, he and Billy and Tommy, sprawled out on a couch together, fighting over pillows and afghans, and the last few handfuls of popcorn. That was a good image, a warm and cozy and home-like one. Magnus seemed to approve, a faint purr-like rumble sounding far off in the black.

Tommy sent a faint question, nothing strong enough to put a word to, and Teddy opened his arms wide. He was drifting deep, but there was less of Tommy in this fathomless space than he had expected. And yet, he was the farthest thing possible from being alone.

He felt the presence behind him, but he couldn’t turn to look. Arms lay across his own, strong lines of muscle echoing his movements. Warmth pressed against his back, the shape of it indistinct and nebulous. Fingers laced through his and curled when he made a fist, carrying the weight of mountains. All of it was so utterly familiar that Teddy’s body flushed warm with relief and returned affection. The scent of cloves lingered in his nose, and his mouth tasted metallic-blue.

*Welcome,* it seemed to say. *I know you.*

~I feel you~ Teddy thought aloud. ~I’m here.~

~who’s there?~

The thought came through, so distant and formless that it was barely words at all, colored blue and white, silver and grey. It was like and unlike Tommy at the same time: not the smell of green grass, but the sound of the wind in the leaves. Was it *Magnus?*

Only one way to find out.

~*Teddy. I’m Teddy. I’m your pilot.*~

Red ran from the void, a single thread that wrapped itself around Teddy, looped and spun and then sank into his skin. The lines of it gleamed along his body, marking out the gold and silver pathways of the circuit suit’s wiring. He tingled all over, the hair standing up on the back of his neck and his mind sparking with blue fire. His skin stung and burned where the thread touched, until it faded slowly away.

~*mine*~

*Holy shit.*
Another voice broke in, all familiar sharp and jagged lines. ~*What the hell is going on with you today?*~

*Tommy.* Half the point of this had been to improve his connection with Tommy. Teddy sought out the brilliant flame that marked the other presence, so far above him that Teddy might as well be sitting on the ocean floor. He stared up at the surface from a full forty fathoms deep, and opened his mind to the channel that still locked them together.

The rush and surge of the bridge pulled him up; up and up towards the surface until he was back on old ground, the mindscape reforming around them both. Tommy’s mind grabbed for his, the image of their hands locking together a reassuring and familiar one. Magnus reformed around him, the dual realities of the drift and the physical word slotting themselves together before his eyes. The smells and sensations assaulted his senses all at once, chrome and oil thick in his nose and the radio shouting in his ear. How long had he been flying high?

“What’s with you?” Tommy asked it verbally; a defensive move. He could feel Tommy’s insatiable curiosity though, his need to pick away at rough edges. He circled Teddy’s newfound strength, edging closer with every brush against his mind.

“Trying something different,” Teddy breathed out. He sent a burst of thought, the condensed image of Dr. Banner, the tea, the promise. The starscape.

Tommy’s surprise colored everything orange, a bright and laughing shade. ~*Drugging it up? How very delinquent of you.*~

~*You’re a terrible influence.*~ Tommy’s laughter was a balm to his nerves, one more familiar thing that let him ground himself.

_Forgiven._

Tommy thrummed with energy and light beside him, his mind-image so much brighter than it had been. Teddy tested the bond, plucked at the threads of it until they sang. He could move mountains like this, every cell of his body alive with the rush and the pulse of the engines. Stinger Goliath waited for them, a red mark on the radar screen, their next hurdle to jump.

“What neural bridge at 98% and holding.” David’s voice, crisp and efficient, sounded through the comms.

“Better.” That was Marshal Danvers, her tone friendlier than the last time, and Teddy flushed warm with her approval.

_So this is what it’s supposed to feel like._ Every time he’d drifted before this had been a pale imitation, those handful of percent changing everything. When they moved it was poetry, water breaking around them and sun gleaming down from the clear blue sky. Magnus sang in his blood and in his brain, Tommy’s presence beside him strong and solid. Their hands reached, feet stepped, three interconnected bodies moving perfectly in tune.

Teddy still couldn’t see it all. The fence sat around the no-man’s land between them, but the barbs at the top were dull to the touch and the chain links faded to something half-misty and insubstantial.

Goliath moved into position. Magnus followed.

_Game on._

--
Either the thrill of victory was enough to wipe out every lingering trace of Teddy’s previous sour mood or Dr. Banner’s tea was an upper as well, because by the time Magnus was back in harness, Teddy was riding one hell of an adrenaline high. Sweat pooled in his elbows and at the backs of his knees, the rest of his skin prickling with it and his hair wet. He needed about three hours under hot water to beat the aches and pains out and send the grime of battle swirling down the drain. He handed his helmet off to Doug with a wide grin of thanks. Tommy had a grin on his face as well, that only subsided a little when he caught Teddy looking.

The mood in Magnus Echo’s ready room was about a million times brighter than it had been when they’d first suited up, the smile that Doug had given Teddy echoed a dozen times over on other familiar faces. Not just Tommy’s team, or Magnus’. His team. And they rose and fell with his successes and failures. It was a toss-up as to whether the responsibility was too much (it was) or the rewards too much for him to really believe (that too).

By the time Teddy was back in workout togs and ready to kill a man for a decent shower, Scott and Cassie were walking out of the door marked ‘Stinger Goliath’ and waved them down in the hall. Nate lingered in the doorway behind Teddy, watching Cassie, and Teddy muffled a chuckle as he followed Tommy away to give them a little bit of room. Scott reached out to grab Teddy’s hand in a rueful handshake, and Tommy intercepted to turn it into a fistbump instead. Scott fumbled, shaking his head at Tommy’s snicker, and managed to grab Teddy’s hand anyway.

“So that went okay,” Teddy ventured. Technically he and Scott Lang were equals, as much as Cassie, or America or Kate. Scott and Cassie had been the new kids on the block until Eli and Joe had shown up, after all, and had only been jockeying for a couple of years themselves. There was something about him, though; the way he carried himself, the formality trained into him through years of law enforcement work before he’d turned Ranger that felt almost military, or maybe just watching the way he treated his daughter – the pull to impress him was strong. At least for Teddy. Tommy gave him as much respect as he gave everyone except for Marshal Danvers, which was to say, not much at all.

Scott flashed a grin, and Teddy’s back straightened automatically. “Not bad, for a new kid.”

“Not bad?” Tommy scoffed, resting his elbow on Teddy’s shoulder and leaning most of his weight onto his co-pilot. Teddy resisted the urge to step sideways, but barely. “We kicked your butt, old man.”

Teddy glanced back at the door to gauge Cassie’s reaction, but her head was tipped up and Nate’s was tipped down, and while they weren’t actually kissing, they were speaking closely and quietly enough that it was a near thing. Teddy looked away.

“Make it best two out of three before you start with the bragging rights,” Scott was saying when Teddy tuned back in. He folded his arms in front of him and laughed.

“You’re on,” Tommy agreed, and straightened to standing before Teddy could dump him on his butt.

“You’re going to get us killed,” Teddy joked without thinking. He didn’t realize what he’d implied until after the words had left his mouth. Idiot! Tommy didn’t say anything, though; just punched him in the shoulder, ducked away when Scott tried to ruffle his hair, and headed for the showers.

Teddy watched him go, only glancing at Scott when he heard the soft huff of his breath. “He’s doing better, these days,” Scott said, and it was probably supposed to make Teddy feel better. “It’s been a while since he’s laughed. That’s thanks to you, I think.” He bobbed his head to the side, then added, “and a bit of the girls.”
It did help, a little.

“I wish—” Teddy broke off before he said anything damning. Because wishing Billy back to fill the hole in Tommy’s heart was directly wishing himself right back to Nevada where he’d started. And yet.

“Chin up, kid,” Scott advised him, as a door slid closed behind them and Cassie approached, a spring in her step. “Only way out is up, and other such clichés. You’ll figure it out.”

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Teddy pulled his shirt off over his head and paused a beat before opening his eyes. There were no lines on his arms, and his chest was still unmarked. Part of him had imagined, maybe even hoped a little—but whatever had happened in the drift had stayed there. Nothing lingered on his skin to prove that any of it had been real. He could still feel the sparking tingle along his nerves when he closed his eyes, the places where the red thread had pressed into him, then dissolved away into his flesh.

What did it all mean?

It meant that Bruce Banner was a scary man, Marshal Danvers would string Teddy up from the flagpole by his testicles if she ever discovered that he’d been jockeying under the influence of hallucinogens, and that Teddy should have had the tea examined before drinking anything. File that under ‘questions he should have asked before acting on impulse.’

He ducked into the shower stall and scrubbed the sweat and grime from his body, still smooth and mostly unmarked. There was the tiny white scar on his hip from when he’d tobogganed into a tree when he was six, the funny bump on his knee from a bike accident when he was fifteen, the rough calluses on his hands from basic training and beyond. Signs of a life lived, but nothing much more than that. He’d never found the thing he’d wanted to put on his skin forever, never been able to pin down what the picture would be that would make him more... himself.

He traced his fingertips across the plane of his shoulder as he rinsed off. There would be space there for something. Magnus’ name, maybe. No matter what happened next, he was her pilot now and no-one could ever take the experience away from him. Immortalizing that made sense, in some abstract sort of way.

Tommy was moving as slowly as Teddy was, still only half-dressed and messing with his hair in the locker room mirror by the time Teddy pried himself out of the shower. He watched Teddy through the reflection as Teddy pulled on clean clothes, waiting until Teddy settled the t-shirt down past his head before speaking. “So what the hell happened out there?”

Teddy pulled the shirt down to give himself time to think through an answer. He gave up and shrugged, playing dumb. “We won an exercise.”

“I mean before that. You fuged out on me; you were gone for a good minute, maybe more. I thought you’d gone to chase the rabbit, but I didn’t get pulled in.”

The bench behind him seemed like a good idea. Teddy sat down on it and pulled one knee up, grabbing a boot to have something to do with his hands. “It was that stuff from Dr. Banner; it made me kind of loopy,” he confessed. Though Tommy already knew that part. “I thought it might help, if I could be more relaxed in the drift, maybe we’d get our numbers up. But when we went in- it was different. I saw – I’m not entirely sure what I saw.” Teddy ducked his head and focused on pulling on his boot. “Stars, mostly.”
Tommy leaned against the row of lockers, his arms folded tight across his bare chest. Magnus Echo’s logo curved up around his hip, the other end vanishing down into his waistband. “Billy sees driftspace like that,” he said after a minute, and Teddy’s head jerked up in surprise. Tommy kept talking, and Teddy bit his tongue, hard, to stop himself from interrupting. “He has a thing for stars. Did you get that from my memories?”

Teddy nodded slowly, though the explanation didn’t chase away the niggling off-centered-ness of the entire thing. “Probably,” he replied, because Tommy seemed to be waiting for him to say something. “I hate to ask how much of my junk you’ve got rattling up around in that hollow space you call a head,” he teased, a deflection that he didn’t entirely expect to work. But Tommy snorted and flipped him off without any feeling behind the gesture.

“Problem with drifting with a goody-two-shoes,” Tommy said instead, “is that there’s nothing exciting to find there.” That wasn’t true, of course; neither Tommy’s disdain nor the description of Teddy, but Tommy knew that. And he knew that Teddy knew. And so forth.

“Speaking of which, delinquent boy,” Teddy followed the subject change and yanked his boot lace tight. Tommy arched a bleached-white eyebrow. “Where’d you get your ink done?”

Tommy pulled a shirt out of his shelf and hauled it on over his head. “A place in San Fran; America got a couple of things done there and recommended it. He was good. Why?” he looked Teddy over critically. “Are you seriously thinking about getting a tattoo?”

Red lines swirled around Teddy’s wrists in his mind’s eye, marking out the gridded pattern of the circuit suit’s gold wiring. He blinked and they were gone. “Maybe. At some point.” And what would Tommy say if he made it into a challenge? “I could get something like yours,” he suggested, keeping his voice light. “Put our badge on somewhere interesting.”

Tommy didn’t flinch, but he did go very, very still. Only for a moment, though, and then he was back to normal, swinging around to grab his jacket off the locker’s inside hook. “Wait until you’ve earned it,” he said, the distance back between them.

Teddy grabbed his ankle and held it, his thumbs pressing against the point just behind the bone. “Are we still on this? We worked well together today, Tom. Danvers isn’t going to throw me out on my ass just yet.”

The slam of the metal door echoed in the empty locker room, and Teddy jumped. “One training maneuver doesn’t make us successes,” Tommy replied, and what he didn’t say rang as loudly as the words that came out of his mouth. “Not yet.”

“It’s been months since the last kaiju attack,” Teddy said, and for a moment he didn’t care that it was a reminder. It’s not like Tom ever forgot. “There’ll be another one any day now. Once we have a kill together, will you finally start to accept that I’m really here?” His pulse echoed in his ears, rushing like the sea, louder than it should have been. He hadn’t meant to bring it to a head, not here, not like this, but here they were and there was no taking it back now.

“You’re a sub, Teddy. Billy will wake up, and you’ll be shipped back to Nevada or Alaska or wherever the hell they send extra Rangers.”

Teddy growled, red flaring up in the corners of his vision. He clenched his fists, dug his nails in deep to force his temper down. His palms stung, and gave him something to focus on. “You’re that anxious to get rid of me? After all this? Way to make a guy feel welcome.”

“You can’t fit nine Rangers in four Jaegers.” Tommy snapped out the words, fierce and quick as a
whip cracking in the air. “It’s bad math.”

The penny dropped, the empty spaces inside singing with new-found realization. Teddy was on his feet before he made the conscious decision to stand, moving toward Tommy in tight and purposeful strides. “And no space in your brain for three?” he guessed, newly sure of what the answer would be. “That’s what this has all been about. You’re not trying to keep me out—"

“Yeah,” Tommy spat back, drawing himself up tight and rigid until he could almost meet Teddy’s eyes on the same level. “I am. You’re the rebound guy, Altman; the benchwarmer brought in for a single period. I let you all the way in, and it’ll take that much more time to get up to speed when Billy’s back.”

“And if he doesn’t wake up?” Teddy put it into words, the sounds like ash in his mouth. “What then?”

“Fuck that noise.” Tommy backed off a step. “As long as he’s alive, there’s no way I’m letting that get overwritten. Especially not for some goody-two-shoes know-it-all robot jockey from Seattle.” He said that last word like a curse, an absurd retread of their old joke, but this time he wasn’t laughing.

“You’re scared,” Teddy said, putting voice to the dawning realization. Tommy shook his head violently.

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“Bullshit.” They stood toe to toe, neither willing to look away.

“You have no idea what it’s like.” Tommy’s words spilled out of him in a rush, tumbling and sliding over and against each other, his color high. “I can still feel him. When I’m asleep, when I’m awake, when we’re drifting. I can hear him, feel him, smell him, for fuck’s sake. My brother is in my head. And no matter what you and I have to do right now to make a fighting team – you can’t have that. That’s his place. There’s no room for you.”

It was too close to what he knew, the things Teddy saw at night when he shut his eyes. He had the perfect lead-in right there; he could tell Tommy now, get it all out in the open, shatter the whole damn thing all at once and let the pieces fall where they would. And then what? Would Tommy hate him for intruding even more into his private spaces, claiming things that he was never supposed to know?

He hesitated. “I’m not going to replace him; I never could,” he said instead.

_Coward!_

Tommy shook his head and backed toward the door. “I’m not taking the chance. I can’t be the one who kills him.”

“It wouldn’t have to be that way. We need to work together on this; we’re supposed to be a team. Me and you against the world. We can figure something out that wouldn’t hurt Billy, or you. If you’ll just trust me for real.”

Tommy pushed open the door to leave, and the hunch and tension in his shoulders was all the answer that Teddy needed. “You don’t know any of that, and you can’t prove it.”

Frustration wound tight coils around Teddy’s throat and made his voice guttural and harsh, a growled-out threat rather than the invitation it was supposed to be. If he could only make him _see!_ “Drift with me properly, then you’ll see how much I know. Dammit, Tommy!”
But Tommy was gone, the door to the locker room swinging closed quietly on its spring despite the force behind Tommy’s shove. Teddy wheeled and slammed his palms into the locker doors behind him, the sharp sting popping the world into brighter focus.

They couldn’t leave it like this, not after their first successful drift. Not when they were so goddamned close to being something. The infirmary. Tommy would go there first to check on Billy. If Teddy hurried, he could catch him before Tommy made any kind of decisions that all of them would regret.

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The run down to the infirmary took five minutes and felt like a year. Teddy skidded around the corner and slowed to a stop when he got into the medical wing proper; crisis point or not, running into – or over – a stretcher or a wheelchair would make a terrible day that much worse for everyone.

Intake was mostly empty, just a lab-coated researcher chatting quietly with the nurse who was examining a burn on his arm. Dr. Hussein sat at the desk, a handful of open files and clipboards piled haphazardly in front of her. She looked up when he approached, the soft white fabric of her hijab draping over her shoulder as she moved. She’d been kind to him from the beginning and his intake exams, one of the few who had smiled at him before he’d proved himself in the kwoon. Teddy managed a smile back, avoiding the flash of worry and sympathy in her eyes. “Just here to talk to Tom,” he held up a hand in case she started asking questions.

“Tom’s not here,” she answered gently, shaking her head. “I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

And that- yeah. That stopped him dead, because where else would Tom have gone? He always came back here, no matter what had happened during the day. No matter how far he ran, all roads led back to Billy. He could go, then, try the cafeteria, or maybe Tom had gone to talk to Kate…

Or he could sit here and wait, instead of chasing someone who didn’t want to be found. “I’ll go sit with Billy for a while, then,” he said, shrugging with fake nonchalance. Dr. Hussein seemed to accept the put-on for what it was, or at least, she didn’t ask any more questions. “If Tom comes by-“

She nodded easily. “I’ll let him know you’re here.” Her accent lilted, and, not for the first time, Teddy wondered. How did you come to be here, of all places? England is on the Atlantic; you were in no danger. Was it the same as the need that pulled me? Like with Tom, he didn’t dare ask it out loud. Unlike with Tom, he doubted he’d ever hear her answer. It was nicer to pretend that she’d said yes – yes, we’re alike, you and I. The same things drive us, and we’re all in this together.

It was a nice thought.

“Actually, don’t,” Teddy sighed and gave up on the fantasy of universal co-operation. “Then he’ll be able to keep avoiding me. Pretend I snuck past while you weren’t looking, and don’t tip him off?”

Dr. Hussein cocked her head at him quizzically for a second, then that same smile tugged at her lips again and she nodded. “I’m no actress, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.”

Billy’s room was empty except for the figure on the bed, the book on the bedside table – Return of the King, finally – and the machinery keeping Billy alive. As always, Teddy stopped in the doorway and watched him breathe for a few moments, marked the rise and fall of Billy’s chest, saw the pallor of his skin, waited for some flicker of consciousness, or recognition.

Like always, it didn’t come.
Teddy dropped down into the chair beside Billy’s bed and tipped his head back against the wall. The hush and flow of the machines set a rhythm that his own breathing matched to after a while, the only things breaking the silence. “How is this even my life?” he asked Billy rhetorically. Billy didn’t reply. Rude.

“It’s weird,” Teddy began again, then groaned and rolled his eyes at himself. “Of course it’s weird. I’m in the hospital talking to an unconscious stranger. I’m pretty sure this isn’t what Mom meant when she told me to ‘let my feelings out occasionally.’”

Billy’s heart monitor peeped in consistent, unchanging rhythm.

“I’m getting all these flashes of you,” Teddy confessed. “Impressions and dreams, made up of bits and pieces that I stole from Tommy’s brain and patched back together like a crazy quilt. And you don’t know about any of it. I don’t even know how much of it is really you, and how much is the way Tommy sees you. He loves you so much; how could he perceive you as anything less than amazing?”

Billy breathed in and out. Teddy shook his head. “Not that I think you would be anything other than great in real life as well,” he added quickly, reluctant to offend the comatose guy, because apparently this was his reality now. “But I’m still that one step removed. Because it’s not you.”

God, that hurt to say. To suggest that the smile he lived for, the way his heart sped up when he was getting ready for bed, the way he sunk greedily into dreams, these days – to say that the friendship and affection he felt from Billy was a fantasy, or worse, an hallucination, was to bring home just how empty and out of place he really was.

“Next thing you know I’ll be trying to set an extra place at the table for Harvey the Rabbit,” Teddy groaned, which turned into a harsh, barking laugh. “This is just as bad, you know. Because if... no, when you wake up, none of it will have happened. I’ll have all this history of feeling like I know you, all these memories of what it’s like to be your friend. And to you—” it stung, it stung and ached and burned deep inside, bile rising to prick sharply at the top of his throat as he said it. “I’ll be a total stranger. And then—”

And then he’d be gone, back to Nevada. Or wherever they shipped unwanted Rangers.

Thanks, Tommy. Thanks ever so much.

“Maybe Tom’s right,” Teddy sank down and rested his head in his hands. “Maybe I don’t belong here after all.”

The heart monitor beeped twice, then picked up the old pattern where it had left off. Teddy looked up sharply, but nothing at all had changed. Billy still lay there, eyes closed, dark hair growing long, and skin growing pale. Teddy stood, touched the back of Billy’s hand lightly with two fingers. He was cool, not cold, but without the faint pulse that flickered in his throat and the gentle rise and fall of his chest, Teddy would never have known he was alive.

“I’m sorry,” he said, though he couldn’t begin to put into words what he was apologizing for. “For not knowing how to fix you. For not being able to fix him. For using you like a confessional when you don’t even know who I am.” He rested his forehead against the white-painted wall and sagged there for a minute, then steeled himself.

He walked away.

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There was no way he could go back to his quarters and relax after that. The track was always an option, and the temptation to put in some music and just run for hours was almost strong enough to make him cave. The post-drift lethargy was brutal, though, and his legs screamed at him just from the walk from the infirmary back to the barracks. Working off the stress and leftover adrenaline from the fight wasn’t going to work. Sitting alone in his room and brooding over it wasn’t going to help much either. The door to the dayroom was propped open, spilling light across the floor of the barracks hallway. Mingled voices and laughter drew him, the sounds of community, of affection and friendship and belonging.

Teddy paused just outside the pool of light. What if Tommy was already in there? Or Kate. Kate might be in there, and she would probably take Tommy’s side in things. They had a history that went back years, after all, and now Tommy was an occasional third party add-on to her current relationship. She was Tommy’s friend, not his.

Someone inside laughed again, a warm and rich sound, and someone else began strumming on a guitar, the music light and lively. He was being ridiculous. He was permitted to use the pilots’ dayroom, no matter what Tom currently thought of him. He was a pilot – and a Ranger – and the equal of any of them. And this morning, he and Tom had beaten Cassie and Scott in a fair fight. Surely any one of those things would be enough to move him up from ‘sub’ to something that someone might want to keep around.

Teddy stepped inside.

The room was as busy as it had sounded, half of Yankee Hawker’s pit crew taken over various chairs and couches. America was involved with three of them in some card game that Teddy didn’t recognize right away, but apparently involved a lot of verbal threats. Kate sprawled on the couch, a girl perched on the opposite arm with the guitar that Teddy had heard from the hallway. It looked a bit like a private party. He should probably go. Kate, on the other hand, gestured imperiously for Teddy to come and join her.

He did, and settled back into the cushions gingerly, but Kate either ignored or entirely failed to notice his attack of nerves. “Good show today,” she greeted him with praise, and despite himself, Teddy smiled back. She draped her legs across his lap with a gesture of easy familiarity, and wiggled her toes at him imperiously until he took the hint. Foot rubs, he could do.

“I should be asking you for one of these,” he tried a joke after a minute. “I’m the one with three hours in a Jaeger to beat out of my spine.”

“Ask nicely and maybe you can convince ‘Meri to stomp on your back a few times,” Kate suggested with a wicked grin that suggested it might not be the smartest course of action. “She’s got killer thighs.”

“I prefer to stay alive, thank you very much.” Teddy replied. He forced what was supposed to look like an easy grin. America tipped her head at him in an approving nod before muttering something darkly under her breath and dropping two cards into the discard pile.

“He’s smarter than he looks,” Kate called over, and Teddy snorted, dropping his head to hide the flush.

“That’s me,” he replied after a second. “Big dumb jock on the outside, Rhodes scholar on the inside.”

Kate punched him gently in the shoulder. “Nothing wrong with a big dumb jock or two around the house.”
“She should know,” America commented from the sidelines. “She has three chained up in the closet.”

“I’ve been out of the closet a long time,” Teddy said, and the tight knot around his heart started to loosen. He had been chilled through to the bone, exhausted and sad, but the warmth in here was thawing him out again. The jokes were easy, the faint affection – or at least acceptance, from America’s side – felt real. “I’m not going back in for anyone.”

Kate’s laughter sounded natural, not forced, and she tipped her head back on the arm of the couch. “Don’t stop,” she ordered, when he took a moment to rest his hands, and he snapped back to keep rubbing at her feet.

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” he murmured, his lips tugging up into a helpless grin, one that she echoed back.

Somewhere in there the tech specialist had started to play her guitar for real, the chords of the modern folk song simple and familiar. Kate’s hum vibrated through the knee that Teddy had crooked under her body, and she bounced one toe in time to the beat. Half the room was doing the same, the unofficial anthem of the Shatterdome one of those songs that defied all attempts not to join in.

Despite himself, despite everything, Teddy found himself chiming in on the chorus, the swell of voices around him pressing him forward, wrapping around him in a blanket of sound.

“Oh- oh, how do we know / what’s out there in the depths below? / Oh-h, what do we do / when we’re down with a case of the kaiju blues?”

In some ways, that was the easy part. If and when a kaiju came, his role was simple. Smash it. Save people. Stay alive. Preserve the chance to have more moments like this, where they were all just people with really cool day jobs.

It was everything else that was messy and all tangled up.

This moment, at least, was simple. Kate wasn’t asking him for anything except his company, and apparently that was good enough. It didn’t fix the rest. But it counted as a start.

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Teddy dreamed that night, like he always did.

He sat on Billy’s top bunk in the barracks, his feet dangling down over the side. Billy sat beside him, both of them in half-uniform, the dusting of dark hair on Billy’s strong forearms utterly and unfairly distracting. The gun-metal grey décor was as uninspiring as Teddy’s room, but Billy had posters up on the walls with tape; other Jaegers, magazine photos of other teams, a shelf with a display of every kaiju or Jaeger action figure Mattel had ever made. Tommy had been in here again, obviously; Tacit Ronin was doing something highly suspect to one of the kaiju that the toy manufacturer would never have approved of. The tiny paper ‘bottle of lube’ was a nice touch, though.

Billy swung his feet through the air and propped himself back on his elbows. His hair flopped over his brow, and this time Teddy did reach out to brush it away. Billy leaned in to the touch, his skin warm and vital, and Teddy’s pulse hammered in his ears.

“I used to have such a crush on you,” Teddy said, pulling his hand away and sitting on it. No touching coma boy. Even if this is only a dream. Wrong wrong so wrong.

Billy pressed his hand to his chest and looked wounded. “What do you mean ‘used to’? Is the bloom
off the rose so soon?"

Teddy snorted with laughter, but shook his head. “It’s skeevy to have a crush on a guy in a coma, I’m sorry.”

“You mean you only liked me for my mind? That’s not how it usually goes.” Billy teased him. The hem of his olive-green t-shirt rode up when he huffed out a laugh, and there was more of that dark hair on his stomach, a faint trail that would connect his navel to his groin. Teddy curled his legs up, suddenly aching and half-hard.

*I’ve been single way too long.*

“I’m not exactly into necrophilia,” Teddy pointed out, rather wisely, if he did say so himself.

“I’m not exactly dead.” Billy paused for a moment, contemplating the ceiling. “I don’t think I am, anyway. But then, how would I know? I don’t remember a white light, or a tunnel.” Billy flopped over to lie on his side and Teddy hesitated only a moment before stretching out to lie next to him. The space between them was too small and too vast at the same time, and Teddy’s body thrummed to the energy that burned between them.

Billy felt it too, if they way he shifted and flushed was any indication. But he wasn’t there, wasn’t real, it was all Teddy’s imagination doing this to him.

“How much do you remember?” Teddy asked out of curiosity. He only knew the barest minimum, what could be seen from the video feeds, the official reports, that single glimpse he’d received during his first drift with Tom. Those memories were buried deep in Tommy’s no-man’s land now, walled away in his fortress of solitude.

Billy chewed on his bottom lip and frowned, hands clasped behind his head. His lanky form sat against the divots and hollows of Teddy’s body. All he had to do was move forward a couple of inches and their curves and angles would meet, fit together as though they had been made for each other.

If it’s only my imagination, then surely there’s no harm?

“I remember taking a hit,” Billy said contemplatively. “I got distracted, and I started to lose the drift. I tried to get back in, to get control, but it was too late. My rig snapped; something broke. I’m not sure what. I bounced, my head hit… something. There was a lot of blood. I remember Tommy yelling. Then it all turns into static.” He tipped his head and directed that thoughtful frown at Teddy. “Until you.”

The chill centered on Teddy’s spine zipped up and down it, raising goosebumps on his arms. He sat up and tucked one leg in close. “This shouldn’t be happening,” he said slowly, picking and choosing his words as his mind tried to encompass the new revelations. “If you’re a memory of Tommy’s,” he continued, “then this conversation is impossible. You were disconnected from the drift, so he can’t remember this from your point of view. And if you’re a dream of mine, then where did I learn all the details?”

Billy shrugged expressively and sat up to face Teddy properly. “Does it matter?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Teddy said, after thinking about it for a second. “It does to me.” *Because if you’re a memory, or a dream, then I’m really all alone again.*

Billy was taking the whole thing much less seriously. “Maybe some things can’t be explained,” he
offered up with an amused grin. “Maybe I am dead after all, and I’m haunting yoooooou.” He waggled his fingers in Teddy’s direction, and Teddy gave in and laughed.

“I’ve seen you in medical; you’re not dead,” he advised.

Billy recoiled, and put on an offended expression. “Are you watching me while I sleep? How very Edward Cullen of you.”

“Please. I don’t sparkle.”

“No,” Billy regarded him, that thoughtful look back on his face. His cheeks were faintly shaded with stubble, his hair rumpled the way Teddy’s fingers had left it, and he looked every bit as perfect as in his interviews the week before his last fight. “You definitely don’t.”

He leaned in, one hand resting on Teddy’s knee. Teddy had time to back away, to close his eyes and wish him away, to open them fully and force himself to wake up.

He didn’t do any of it. He let his lips fall open just enough, tipped his head to avoid bumping noises, and slid his hands around the sharp planes and arcs of Billy’s hips. Billy brushed his lips against Teddy’s, gently at first, then pressed closer. He grazed the edge of his teeth across Teddy’s lower lip and kissed away the soft gasp that Teddy couldn’t bite back.

Teddy buried his hands in Billy’s hair, sank his fingers there into those dark, silken strands and held on to stop himself from drowning. He smelled of desire and musk, some rich deep scent that Teddy couldn’t name. Billy’s mouth was hot, hot and slick and full of promises, whispered into Teddy’s mouth, against his throat, the skin behind his ear.

Teddy pulled Billy into his lap, and Billy straddled him without hesitation. He ground down against Teddy through the layers of canvas and cotton that separated them, and ran his hands, broad and strong, along the muscles of Teddy’s bare forearms. Teddy’s skin tingled where the touch passed, Billy’s hands tracing out the pathways of Magnus’ red thread.

“Mine.” Billy murmured into Teddy’s hair, punctuated by a soft gasp as Teddy rolled his hips and pressed up into the hard thickness of Billy’s cock.

Mine.

Teddy froze. “What did you say?”

“I… uh,” Billy stammered, leaning back and sucking back a deep breath. “You don’t like it?” he asked nervously, nothing there but the anxious lover, wanting so badly to please and be pleased in return. “I can take it back, if you don’t. Pretend it never happened. That is~"

“No,” Teddy insisted, shaking off the weirdness of the moment, his body screaming at him and his mouth dry. “Don’t stop, not any of it. It’s good,” he breathed out, as Billy’s hand started to slip between their bodies. He arched up into Billy’s palm, the circle of his questing fingers. “Everything’s good. Except you; you’re incredible.”

Teddy’s hands drifted lower, cupped Billy’s ass and held him close. Billy’s body was hot against his, long, firm and lean, and his fingers traced out familiar patterns on Teddy’s skin. He pressed Teddy back and Teddy went gladly, Billy still straddling him on the top bunk of his barracks bed.

“Mine,” Billy murmured again and kissed him, their hips rolling together as they found a sweet, insistent rhythm. “Promise me.”
“Yours,” Teddy gasped. He let Billy pin his arms down and trace the lines of fire with the tip of his tongue, their bodies locking together as he surged ever closer to the need-sweet crest of orgasm. “Always, always yours.” Then he was gone, and Billy with him, their bodies shaking, their fingers tightly clasped together, and Teddy’s body slick with sweat.

*If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.*

Chapter End Notes

‘Kaiju blues’ was written by Eggwish, and was my gift for Jaegercon 2013. <3 Take a listen to the actual track here!

https://www.dropbox.com/s/k233txox630b646/kaiju_blues.mp3?dl=0
Awakening

Chapter Summary

Where there’s movement in the Breach, and that’s not the most important thing that happens.

Chapter Notes

So much love to feebleapb and meinterrupted, who got no breaks at all between chapters this time. Thank you!

Teddy rolled over when the alarm rang, stretching luxuriously. His pajama pants stuck to him, uncomfortably damp, and the memories rushed back in a blur of bodies and desperate desire. Sated and foggy-blissed, he reached out for Billy beside him, for the comfort and sweet pliability of morning-warm skin. His hand fell into empty space. He opened his eyes. His own room resolved around him, the bright colors of Billy’s posters on the walls replaced with the dun-grey of the plain concrete. The upper bunk where they’d made love was the lower bunk of his own bed, where he had fallen asleep alone.

None of it had been real. How was that even remotely possible?

Teddy ran his hand down across his chest, grimacing at the mess that stuck and pulled when he moved. Gross. Billy had bitten at his shoulder and his nipples, pinned his arms in place and sucked marks into the soft flesh underneath. He raised his arm, held his breath, and forced himself to look. The skin there was pale and unblemished, the same as it had been the night before, the same as it had been in the shower after his hallucination in the drift. He had come in his pants, sure, but that itself was hardly different than a few horrifically embarrassing nights during puberty.

He flopped over, raking his hands through his hair as his mind raced. Was he finally cracking? Sometimes people just couldn’t cope with drifting, with the experience of having someone else in their head. Maybe he was less stable than the tests suggested. Maybe he was finally losing his grip.

He desperately needed a shower, and to do laundry, and then... then he would have to talk to someone. Nate, maybe, or Tony. Not Marshal Danvers. Not yet. She might bench him, and he couldn’t risk that.

Teddy grabbed his pillow and tucked it under his chin. Something lingered there, and he buried his face in the fabric. His heart beat faster. He breathed deeply. There, under the lemon smell of detergent and a hint of his shampoo, he smelled it again: the faint and familiar note of a musky cologne that wasn’t his.

Billy. How-

Teddy sat up slowly, the pillow between his hands. He stared at it for a good, long time. When he closed his eyes, he could still feel Billy’s mouth on him, hear whispers in his ear.
Mine. Billy and Magnus had both called him that. At least, he had assumed it was Magnus at the
time. The lines still sang under his skin where Magnus had marked him in red, the same pathways
Billy had deliberately traced out with his fingertips and tongue.

It was too real to have been a dream, too new and strange to be a memory.

Billy’s heart monitor had fluctuated yesterday.

A voice had called to Teddy in the drift.

My god.

Maybe he wasn’t losing his mind after all.

--

Eli’s phone rang without an answer when Teddy called, and he ended up leaving a message instead.
‘Meet me in Nate’s lab’ wouldn’t tell him much, but then, Teddy wasn’t a hundred percent sure
exactly what the news was going to be. Not until he got down to the infirmary.

His whole life these days seemed to be watching for signs that things were happening the way his
brain told him they were, and this time was no different. Billy had been so alive last night, had been
warm in his arms, had kissed him like Teddy was the thing that made the sun shine. He had been so
real. By all rights, when Teddy looked in the door to his room, he should be sitting up in bed, his
IV’s unplugged and his machinery turned off, as vibrant and sparkingly beautiful as he had been
when he had pressed Teddy back into the standard-issue sheets.

Billy lay in his bed, eyes closed and equipment on, his chest rising and falling in the steady rhythm
that had become everything that Teddy hated.

Tommy sprawled on the cot beside Billy’s bed, still half-asleep. He blinked up at Teddy with bleary
eyes, and frowned. “What?”

“Were you here all night?” Teddy asked without any kind of greeting or explanation. Not that
Tommy would really care.

“What?” Tommy pushed himself up to sitting, and shoved his hair out of his face. “Why do you
care?”

Teddy sat down on the edge of the cot. He couldn’t afford to start another fight, not now, not when
things were finally starting to make sense. He could see the glimmer of an answer in the distance, just
barely out of reach; all he needed was a few more answers, a little more information, and it would all
come together. “I’m sorry,” he started, though by all rights Tommy should be the one apologizing for
being a stubborn lunkheaded jerk.

That sounded like Billy talking. Teddy pushed the thought aside and pressed on. “For yesterday, I
mean. I didn’t say things are carefully as I should have, but I need you to listen to me right now,
Tom.” He said it as earnestly as he could, his eyes wide and pleading. He’d grab Tom’s hands if he
thought begging would help, which it probably wouldn’t.

Tommy stared at him for a beat, and then another, then whatever internal war he was fighting sorted
itself out. “I was here,” he said, defeated. “From about nine on. I reviewed our footage, watched a
movie, ate some chips, passed out. Satisfied?”

Not in the least, but it was a good start. “Did anything happen last night? Anything out of the
ordinary?” Normally he wouldn’t exactly be jumping all over Tommy to ask about his twin’s bodily functions, but if Teddy had experienced… symptoms… of things… well, there was a chance. It was worth asking. Sort of.

“The movie was actually semi decent?” Tommy snarked back. “That’s pretty unusual.”

“Yeah, funny,” Teddy shot back, before he remembered that he was supposed to be making nice. *Billy’s life could depend on it.* “I mean with Billy’s life signs. Were there any fluctuations, anything… not normal. For current normal.” He gestured vaguely at the bed and the equipment that surrounded it.

Tommy shook his head and spoke slowly, as though speaking to a small child. “He’s in a coma. That means stuff doesn’t just change. He’s not suddenly going to decide one night, ‘hey, I feel like a beer,’ and go raid the nurses’ fridge.” His eyes narrowed and he stared at Teddy, his t-shirt rumpled and sweats bagging around his waist. Teddy had the immediate and intense urge to gather Tommy up in his arms and give him a bear hug. He’d probably get body slammed into the floor if he tried it. “Why?” Tommy asked, finally. “What was supposed to happen?”

“Nothing,” Teddy shook his head, the denial rising easily to his lips. “That is – come with me.” He held out his hand. “I’m on to something big, I’m sure of it. But I need you, too.”

“If this is about the drift yesterday,” Tommy warned him, holding his hand up to ward Teddy off. “I’m not in the mood to hear it, dude. As far as I’m concerned, nothing’s changed.”

“It’s not,” Teddy promised, and traced a cross over his heart just for good measure. “It’s about Billy, and Billy’s dreams. And I’m pretty sure that you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Tommy’s eyes narrowed to tight slits and he stared at Teddy for a long count. “Not entirely, no. And I need more information than that.” He was lying, Teddy was sure of it; when he sifted back through the drift memories he could see snatches of it, of dreams that weren’t dreams, images too surreal to be memories, a shifting spectrum of gold, green and blue.

“I have a theory,” he confessed. *Please listen. Please believe me. If you don’t, this all ends here.* “I might be on to something that could save Billy. Bring him back. Into his body, I mean, because obviously his body is right here.” He was rambling and had to shut up, like, now, because Tommy wasn’t looking any less suspicious.

That seemed to have done something, though, because Tommy rose to his feet and padded softly around to the end of Billy’s bed. He flicked a finger out to scroll through the night’s charts and biofeedback data, then shook his head. “Nothing here, for the record. And you didn’t study medicine; what could you know about comas that his doctors don’t?”

“Nothing,” Teddy admitted softly. “But I do know a lot about Jaegers, and driftspace, and Billy. I know that what I’ve been seeing, what I’ve been experiencing, isn’t normal. And it’s the same for you. Our low sync score is just a symptom; we’ve been focussing on the wrong thing.” He grabbed for Tommy’s hand, instinctively reaching out to make some kind of connection before he realized what he was doing. Tommy’s hand was warm, and he didn’t pull it away immediately. “Come with me. Give me ten minutes to explain my theory to you and Nate, and then you can tell me that I’m full of shit.”

The smile crooking up one corner of Tommy’s mouth meant he’d won. “Ten minutes,” Tommy repeated. “Fine, whatever. Now get your ass out of here so I can get dressed.”

Everything felt light now that Tommy had at least agreed to hear him. Making him believe it when
Teddy was still unsure – that would be the next trick. Teddy turned to go, pausing only with one hand on the door frame. “Seen it.”

“Out!”

--

It took less than the ten minutes for Tommy to dress and splash water on his face, and he was still tucking his shirt as they strode down the hall toward Nate’s lab space. Eli was already waiting, leaning against the wall and messing around with something on a tablet, his brow furrowed in thought. He looked up when they approached, his expression cleaning at the sight. “You going to fill me in, or what?” he greeted them, and Teddy felt a momentary flash of guilt.

“Good luck,” Tommy grunted. “He won’t even tell me.”

“I only want to go through it once,” Teddy admitted. “I may as well get mocked by everyone together.” The door bleeped at him when he tried to walk through, the lock engaged and no-one on the other side responding.

“He’s not there,” Eli said, his mouth twisted in a frown. “Already tried it.”

Teddy thumbed the lock, on the off chance that his access was enough to override whatever Nate had put on the door. The lock bleeped again, and the light stayed red. “Nate?” He called through the door, rapping on it with his fist. “It’s Teddy. Open up, dude.” The door slid open after a minute, and Eli huffed a long sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his exasperated soul.

“Sorry,” Nate’s voice called from the back of the room. He peeked around a set of shelves, then hurried to close the door behind them. “Scott’s not with you, is he?”

Teddy frowned. “No, why?”

Nate shifted uneasily, and Eli’s shoulders shook at some private joke. “No reason,” Nate said, and waved them in. The lab was half in darkness this early in the morning, and Tommy made a beeline directly for the coffee pot burbling away on the counter beside the sink. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not a secret,” Teddy objected. “Not really. But if I’m wrong... I don’t want to go to the Marshal yet, that’s all. Not until I have some kind of physical proof to back me up.”

“Talk.”

Teddy looked around at the circle of faces, Eli’s direct and oh-so-familiar pointed stare, Nate’s driven curiosity, Tommy’s wary hesitation. Two had been strangers until a few months ago, one as comfortable and familiar as his own skin, and now they were the core of his world. Them, the other Rangers, Billy. They had trusted him enough to assemble when he called, were waiting for him to trust them now.
He took a deep breath, and tried to find the right place to start.

“Memories share in the drift, we all know that,” Teddy said, and Tommy rolled his eyes over the rim of the coffee pot. “All these little bits of floating junk get stuck. That’s why new partners get weird dreams.” He waved his hand in the air in a vague gesture supposed to demonstrate... something. He didn’t know. “And I had a lot of that at the start, you remember.” Eli nodded in answer to Teddy’s question, his frown etched in the lines around his mouth.

“Thing is, they never stopped,” Teddy kept talking, the words spilling out of him faster now. He closed his mouth, tried to catch back on the bubbling torrent before he screwed this up, the relief at being able to put it to words riding roughshod over his carefully planned speech. “The first dreams I had were about Billy, mostly; bits and pieces of old conversations, things he and Tommy lived through together. But lately,” Teddy shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Hear me, believe me, you know what I’m talking about. He’s been talking to me. Not as a memory, but as a person. He remembers things from other conversations, he saw things from our exercises—”

Tommy’s expression had gone carefully blank, and he put the coffee pot back in the machine without looking away from Teddy. Nate sat up in his chair, an eyebrow heading for his hairline. Eli still just frowned. “I think he’s aware,” Teddy finished. “Aware and trapped, in the drift, maybe, or in Magnus, or hell – in Tommy. Or me. But that’s why he hasn’t been waking up. Because his mind – his soul – it’s stuck somewhere else. And he needs our help.”

It sounded so dumb when he said it out loud, when he was met with the disbelief or scepticism in his friends’ eyes.

“That’s one hell of a leap,” Eli said, pursing his lips. “That’s what you were looking up before? With all those technical readouts?”

Nate looked stung. “You’ve been working on this alone? Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“I wasn’t sure that anything was going on,” Teddy confessed. The memory of what had tipped him over the edge – that, he kept for himself. “Now I am. There’s some data to back me up, and I know now that I’m not imagining things. Errors when the Beaubiers tried to sync with Magnus, anomalies in the driftspace that shouldn’t be there.” He looked up at Tommy, beseeching. “You’ve felt it too, Tommy, I know you have. You told me yourself, that Billy is still in your head. I think... I think that might not be so metaphorical after all.”

Eli’s slow head shake stung. “The drift doesn’t work that way. It’s not purgatory, or some physical place; it’s just a reflection of two sets of brain waves lining up. There’s nowhere for someone to get ‘stuck.’”

“He’s there, Eli,” Teddy insisted. “He’s communicating with me, consciously. I don’t know how to explain it, but either I’m going insane, or Billy’s gotten into my head. He tells me things I could never have known on my own.”

“My vote is for ‘insane.’” Tommy spoke, acid and cold. Teddy was probably the only one who could hear the desperate shake underneath his voice, the tremble as he tried to hold it all together. Tommy’s hand shook and he clenched his fists tightly. “I knew you were a bit obsessed with my brother, Altman, but this is fucked up.”

“It’s not about obsession, or what I do or don’t feel.” Teddy began to argue, red creeping in around his vision. He bit his tongue and stopped; he’d never be able to justify himself, not like this.

He held Tommy’s gaze, and hummed, very deliberately, and very clearly. “It’s a world of laughter, a
world of tears—"

_I sang ‘It’s a Small World’ in his head five times through._

If Tommy wasn’t already pale from lack of sunshine, he would have gone paler still. “Who told you about that?”

“Billy did. He’s still alive; I don’t just mean on life support, I mean _really_ alive. Aware. I just can’t figure out how. That’s where I need your help.”

Tommy shook his head and raked his fingers back through his tangle of white hair. “You pulled things out of my head, Altman. That’s all. Billy’s been out cold for months. He’s not doing or saying anything, to anyone.”

“Are you sure?” Eli spoke up. “It may sound out there, but Teddy’s not the kind of person to make something up.”

At least someone was willing to back him up. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure.” Tommy snapped. “And anyway, if Billy’s in there – then why didn’t he reach out to me? Why _you_?” His voice cracked at the end, agony leaking out around the edges.

Teddy’s heart squeezed tight and sour in his chest at the desperation there, so carefully hidden until that moment. He wanted – what? To run over and hug him? What kind of comfort could he offer when Teddy was the one doing the hurting?

He stayed in his chair instead. “I don’t know,” Teddy confessed. The world narrowed to himself, and Tommy, and nothing else. “Maybe it has something to do with the bond that you already had. You said you were dreaming about him, and so was I; he could have been trying to reach out to both of us. You could be so used to hearing him that the dreams didn’t seem strange to you.

“Or it could have been Dr. Banner’s tea. That was when the dreams really changed, after the last drift. He said it was to help me go deeper, and I did.” He was flailing and he knew it, reaching for some explanation beyond ‘because he likes me better’ that had to be tearing Tommy apart. “Maybe whatever drug is in it helped me make contact.”

Tommy’s anger mounted, chasing away the pain in his eyes. “That’s a whole lot of maybes to make yourself feel important,” he spat back.

Don’t get baited, don’t give in. “Just give me this,” Teddy pleaded. “If he was. If Billy has somehow been trying to communicate. Something would show up somewhere, wouldn’t it?” Teddy looked at Nate, then, with wide eyes. Help me out, here. “On an EEG, or something. His heart monitor fluctuated yesterday,” Teddy remembered aloud. “When I was talking to him. There have to be more of those. Maybe there’s a pattern.”

“He’s not being monitored 24-7,” Nate replied pensively. “He’d have to be wired in to the EEG to get proper brain activity data.”

“But he’s been checked periodically,” Eli objected, coming around. Teddy could practically see the gears turning behind his eyes, the lure of the problem drawing him in.

“Yeah, he has,” Nate said slowly, and he seemed to be taking Teddy seriously, maybe even warming to the idea. “I can take a look at what we’ve got on file, but there’s no guarantee I’ll find anything.” Tommy still stood frozen, and Teddy wanted so badly to reach out and take his hand.
Tommy jerked his hand away.

“It’s somewhere to start,” Teddy said, balling up his fist and dropping it back into his lap.

Nate tilted his head, thinking, then nodded. “Tom? Can I look through his records? I’ll need your consent to get into them.”

“What, to go looking for a non-existent needle in a haystack?” Tom brushed past them, heading for the door. His face was set and cold, a twitching in the corners of his jaw and the throbbing vein in his forehead betraying everything he didn’t want to let show. Teddy made one last grab for his hand, to try and offer something, but he shook Teddy off and slammed his palm against the door lock to open it. “Knock yourselves out.”

Nate spun in his chair and started poking at his terminal, a hologram interface popping up and splashing his face with red and yellow light. Eli laid a warm and solid hand on Teddy’s shoulder, and squeezed gently. “He’ll come around,” Eli said. “Especially if you’re right.”

“And if I’m wrong?” Teddy asked, closing his eyes and leaning into the contact.

“Are you wrong?”

“I don’t think so.”

Eli left his hand there, grounding him. “Then don’t worry about it.”

--

Murmurs seemed to follow Teddy as he walked through the base, whispers dying when he entered a room, heads turning to follow and then away again. The back of his neck prickled from the feeling of eyes on him, the knowledge that someone had said something to someone-

It was imagination, or his self-consciousness talking; they had no way of knowing what he’d told the guys that morning, or, so much more importantly, the thing he hadn’t told them. Nobody knew about that, no-one except Teddy – and Billy, maybe – and he fully intended on keeping it that way.

Still, whether anyone actually was talking about him or not, it was a lot more comfortable to take his sandwich and go eat it on the scaffolding next to Magnus Echo. Billy’s spot. No-one else was there when he jogged up the last couple of stairs, and Teddy sagged against the structure, sliding down it inelegantly. He came to a stop with his feet hanging just over the edge, his back against the wall and his limp processed-meat sandwich in his lap. Noise filtered up around him; clanging of metal on metal, the buzz of dozens of voices rising up and curling around each other, the low hum of electronics and engines and everything else mechanical and beeping. It sounded like home.

Teddy closed his eyes, not at all sure of what he was trying to do, and he reached. He reached out with his mind and tried to feel... what? Something; anything outside of himself that would suggest that the drift still lingered. That there was something more than the cross-wiring of a handful of his braincells, or a misfire in a computer chip. That something, someone, was listening.

Nothing. No Magnus, or Billy whispering into his ear, or even the faint sensation of Tommy making commentary like the peanut gallery. Nothing but his own inner voice telling him to eat his stupid sandwich before he had to add ‘warm’ to its list of problems.

He opened his eyes and sighed, taking a bite.

The stairs clanged behind him, someone chasing up them two at a time. Teddy waited and Nate
appeared, looking around him nervously before sliding down to sit beside Teddy.

“Are you still avoiding Scott?” Teddy asked, sideeyeing Nate for all he was worth. “I haven’t seen him this morning at all, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Nate shook his head. “No, I know where they are; they just came in from a run.” He glanced over the edge of the platform, scanning the area, then pulled his head back in.

“So?” Teddy asked. Nate was a bit weird, yeah, but seeing him this skittish was weirder even than his usual. “What’s the big deal? That’s all we ever seem to do around here – train and have briefings about training.”

Nate settled down opposite Teddy, his legs crossed and his tablet in his arms like a security blanket. “Cassie and I,” he started, then stopped. His cheeks pinked up, along the top of his cheekbones.

“Cassie and youuuuu...?” Teddy drawled, dragging the sound out to make Nate go slightly pinker. “What? Played charades? Shared a milkshake at the Choklit Shoppe?” Teasing him was way too much fun, and helped take his mind off of other things. A lot of other things.

“Something like that,” Nate muttered under his breath, and sighed. “But this is the first time she and her dad have drifted since we – uh.”

Oh no. Oh, no no- Teddy couldn’t help it. He snickered, and Nate looked like he wanted to die, staring at the floor as though praying it would open and swallow him whole. “So what you’re saying,” Teddy grinned wide, “is that Scott Lang knows what your O-face looks like.”

“Shut up,” Nate groaned, and hid his face in his hands.

“Cheer up,” Teddy suggested, still chuckling. “Maybe it won’t be that bad. You could have made such a terrible impression that she didn’t think about you at all.”

Nate raised his head and glared daggers at Teddy.

“Just trying to help.”

“Just you wait,” Nate mumbled, tipped his head back to rest it against the beam behind him. “One of these days Tommy’s going to show you a lot more than you bargained for.”

“Been there,” Teddy replied ruefully, “done that. He, America and Kate are a recurring thing, apparently.”

“Dear god.”

Nate’s expression went distant for a minute, and his cheeks pinked up again. Teddy kicked his leg. “Stop visualizing. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“You don’t appreciate the good things in life when they’re handed to you.”

“It’s a little too much breast for my tastes, but thanks anyway.”

They sat for a moment, Teddy methodically working his way through his sandwich, and Nate occasionally peering over the edge to watch the traffic down below. Teddy finished his lunch and dusted the crumbs off his hands, and Nate frowned. “I’ve got about four different data sets going right now, by the way. I should have something to show you – if there’s anything to show at all – by tomorrow. It would go faster if I had something specific to search for, but just looking for statistical
anomalies in five months worth of accumulated biometric data is going to take a while”

Teddy nodded. “I know. I figured that much. I’m just grateful that you’re looking.”

Nate smiled sadly, and nudged Teddy’s leg with his toe. “What are friends for? Anyway, if there’s even the slimmest chance of getting Billy back, we have to try.

“Now,” he said after a minute, standing and tugging his lab coat back into place. “Come back to the lab with me. I want to run a couple of baseline scans on you today to compare to your run in Magnus tomorrow.”

Teddy pushed himself to his feet, and followed Nate down the stairs. “And if Scott comes after you for sleeping with his daughter?” he teased.

“You punch him, I’ll run.”

--

That night, his dream didn’t start with Billy.

It began in fire, with buildings crumbling and the sounds of screams, and in a television announcer masked in bland concern, describing the end of Teddy’s world in words too short and clipped to hold any meaning.

“My mother’s in Seattle; I have to go!”

“The roads are cut off, Teddy. It’s a three-day drive at the best of times, and you’d never make it down there now. There’s nothing we can do from here.”

“You don’t understand, Eli – I have to – someone has to –“

“They deployed Raptor Bravo. All we can do is wait.”

“And pray.”

Prayers hadn’t done any good then and they didn’t do any good now, no matter what Uncle Joe might think. The city burned, the Cat-2 ripping through the buildings and dropping overpasses, killing without notice or hunger or thought. Until Raptor Bravo came, Barton and Morse, dropping in from the heavens to save the day.

Too late. Always too late. Flame licked up the side of his face as he crouched over her body, the body he never actually saw. He’d never made it down, had been safe in Anchorage behind the Academy walls while his mother had burned.

“I couldn’t save you.” His throat burned from the smoke, his eyes from the tears running down his face, hot streaks that smudged black against his hand when he wiped them away. He knelt on cracked pavement in the middle of a firestorm, his mother’s body broken in his arms.

Rivulets of blue, viscous and toxic, curled around his knees. The heavy wall of ammonia stench hit him square in the face, foul and unrelenting, the sky bruised purple-green.

He sobbed, his shoulders shaking, letting out the tears he had tried to so hard never to cry. He would die here with her, the hollow ache of loss and loneliness so acute that he could feel nothing else.

Until the arm slipped around his shoulders.
The ammonia reek of kaiju ebbed away, replaced instead with leaves in the summer, musk, spicy cologne and the faint memory of cloves. Smoke and ash faded, the wailing of survivors melted into quiet, and the angry, bleeding sky darkened to a sea of stars.

Teddy curled into Billy’s arms, his body shaking. He dug his fingers in, grabbed hold of fistfuls of Billy’s uniform sleeves, the chain of his dogtags a cool line against Teddy’s cheek. Hands stroked over his back, his shoulders, his hair, pushing away the shakes and the nausea. Billy murmured soft words into his ear, things Teddy could barely make out, but Billy’s voice washed over him, soothed him, gave him the space to reach out for calm.

“I’m here,” the words resolved themselves, once Teddy’s shakes had all but gone. He scrubbed his wrist angrily across his face, wiping away the tears on his cheeks and the evidence of his breakdown. “I’m here, and you’re alright. It’s only a dream.”

“You’re only a dream,” Teddy said viciously, then instantly regretted it. The wry smile on Billy’s face was a blessing that meant he hadn’t been taken seriously.

“I’m your teenage dream tonight,” Billy sang, deliberately off-key, and despite himself, Teddy laughed. He buried his face in Billy’s shoulder, legs curled underneath him. How could this be a dream when it felt so tangible? He splayed his hand out on Billy’s chest, the faint thrum of Billy’s heart beat a pulse sitting right beneath his skin. Billy pressed his lips to the top of Teddy’s head, arms tightly wrapped around him, until Teddy was ready to sit up again.

“You’re real, aren’t you?” Teddy asked, sitting up just enough to cup his hand to the side of Billy’s face. He looked gaunt today, thin rather than slim, his cheeks hollow and stubble marking his skin. His hair fell longer than he usually wore it, untrimmed and brushing his shoulders. His eyes were tired and sad. “Not just something I invented.”

Billy tipped his head forward until their foreheads touched, and he drew in a ragged breath. Then he nodded. “I think so,” he said quietly. He drew his thumb along Teddy’s jaw in a tender caress. “We would know, wouldn’t we? If I was just a product of your wishful thinking?” He sounded unsure, just as lost as Teddy felt, and that wasn’t fair! One of them was supposed to know what was going on, at least. “But I’m not. Just a product, I mean. I can think, and I can feel, and I don’t know everything about you, but I know that I’m not supposed to be stuck in limbo like this.” The words rushed out of him in a panic. Teddy pressed his thumb to the corner of Billy’s mouth, and his mad onrush stopped. He opened his eyes and looked into Teddy’s, and there was no starfield there; just warm brown eyes with unfathomable depths, that Teddy could drown in for the rest of his life. “I know that I want you.”

That sounded a lot like something a dream of his would say, feeding into Teddy’s hopeless fantasies, but he fell into the hope and longing anyway. “I’ll find you, for real,” Teddy promised, bringing Billy’s knuckles to his lips. “We’ll fix this together, Tommy and I.” Billy’s hand was cool under Teddy’s; he laced their fingers together, squeezing tightly.

Billy’s legs curled under Teddy’s, their hands laced together and foreheads touching. Billy breathed his air and gave it back to him, their lips so close that Teddy felt the reverberations of Billy’s words before he heard them. “Don’t take too long.”

There was nothing else to do then but kiss him, kiss him and tangle his hands through Billy’s hair. Billy kissed back, opened for him and stroked feverish hands up Teddy’s sides, under his shirt, along his back. He pulled Teddy down and they were in a bed, a four-poster thing hung with blue velvet curtains that had been drawn closed to keep out the world. Teddy pulled at Billy’s shirt, got it off over his head. He could count Billy’s ribs, more prominent under his skin than before; his skin was marked red with old bruises at his elbows, wrists, the backs of his hands. He was still beautiful, still
so utterly and decisively *Billy* that none of it mattered. Teddy cupped Billy’s face in his hands, and rose up on his knees to kiss him more deeply than ever before.

At least for a little while, neither of them would have to be alone.

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The phone rang while Teddy was in the shower the next morning, scrubbing away the evidence of his ... his what? His wet dream? That was technically correct, but also horribly wrong at the same time. They had made love, he and Billy, with hands and mouths and bodies riding slick and high, and calling it a ‘wet dream’ made it sound... tawdry. Like something Teddy had fixated on, instead of Billy finding him.

Or he was obsessing over semantics, because it meant not having to get out from under the hot water and check his messages. If Marshal Danvers was going to kick him out of the program, he’d rather have his last few minutes of peace and quiet *before* finding out.

It was Nate’s voice that greeted him when he called up the message and stuck it on speaker, though. He was speaking quickly, too fast and too technically for Teddy to understand him, not without playing it back three or four more times. By the time Teddy had his uniform on and boots laced, he had the basic gist: There was odd stuff, Nate was really, *really* excited about it, and Teddy and Tommy had to meet Nate in his lab immediately following their exercise this morning.

For which Teddy was already running late. Damn! He jabbed at the speaker button, grabbed his jacket, and let the door of his room slam closed behind him. Breakfast would have to wait; he wasn’t feeling all that hungry anyway. The important thing was this: he’d been right. And maybe, now, there was a chance.

--

“Nate called you?” It wasn’t bad for the first thing that Tommy said to him in the ready room. Kitty smacked his shoulder to get his attention and Tommy held out his arms in response, holding still as she bolted him into his drivesuit. There was definite room for improvement in his tone, for one, but the ice in his eyes had been replaced with what Teddy would silently term ‘cautious optimism.’ He wasn’t running through the base shouting for joy, but Teddy would take it.

“Irhe,” Teddy nodded. “While I was in the shower so I only got his message, but still. Fingers crossed, right?”

“Irhe,” Tommy mumbled, rolling his shoulders to settle the weight of the suit. “Fingers crossed.”

So that had started well. They loaded in and Magnus airlifted out to the middle of the bay. The grey sky loomed low overhead, confining and oppressive, the water reflecting the same sombre palette.

“Pilot to pilot protocol engaged.”

Which was about the point at which it all went to shit. The drift took Teddy, pulled him down, images flashing bright before his eyes. Dinner with Eli and Joe, their conference in Nate’s lab, all the things that were on Teddy’s mind, the fragments and swirling notions that colored his thoughts and demanded his attention.

All of them. Including Billy, naked and beautiful, opening up to Teddy for another searing kiss.

“Holy fucking *shit,*” Tommy exploded at him, his fist jerking in the rig as though, were they both free, he could take a swing at Teddy. He closed his eyes and dropped into the neural bridge instead,
and Teddy followed. “You sick son of a bitch,” Tommy spat at him, running at him with a hanbo across the vast empty plain of driftspace. “He can’t consent, you know that, right? He’s unconscious.”

“He’s not!” Teddy shouted back, ducking out of the way. A staff tried to resolve itself in his hand, called by his reflexes, and he threw it aside. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Tommy, if you’d only listen. He’s conscious, somehow. He’s aware. He’s reaching out to me for help.”

Tommy turned on the balls of his feet and dropped into an attack stance again, his feet bare and tank top leaving his arms exposed. Teddy was dressed for the kwoon as well, only peripherally aware of the weight of the drivesuit on his body, the call of voices over the comms. “Let me in,” Teddy asked again, standing tall. He opened his hands wide – no weapons here. No tricks. “See what I’m seeing. Show me what you know.”

~You want to know?~ Tommy’s voice echoed in Teddy’s mind, his lips not moving. He threw the staff away and it vanished into the blinding blue-white light that surrounded them. He held his arms out to the sides, matching Teddy’s stance, the universal sign for ‘come at me, bro’. ~Fine. Have it all.~

Tommy flung his memories at Teddy like an attack, shards of thought and sensation with edges like shattered glass. The fragments rushed at Teddy, too fast to duck, too many to evade. Voices shouted at him from all sides, yelling in his ear that he had to tune out.

“You’re chasing the rabbit - pull out of it!”

“This is the exact opposite of correct, guys!”

He ignored them, he stayed where he was. He closed his eyes and reached out for Tommy, let the glass slice through his skin and flesh, the blood trickling down his arms in wounds that would leave no visible scars.

~They fight that morning

Tommy storms down the hall, his flightsuit half done up and his jacket missing, alarms going off all around them. All he can see when he turns is Billy running to keep up.

“If you weren’t being such a dick about it,” Billy spits out at him, and Tommy’s seeing red.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” Tommy growls, and Billy flinches. Good.

“At least I’m trying, alright? Family is family.”

“Maybe for you.” He shakes off Billy’s arm and comes close to smacking him across the face in the process. “Where the fuck was he before we were famous? Some grandfather.”

He power-walks toward the ready room; once he’s suited up he won’t have to talk to Billy anymore. He doesn’t like talking. Not about shit like this.

“Damnit, Tommy!” Billy’s right behind him, and that’s how it should be. No matter how far he runs, Billy will always be there. Tommy can apologize in the drift. He always does.

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It shifts.
Teddy stands in the foyer of a large and empty house. There are no furnishings, no photographs, only pale walls and bare windows letting in the early rays of morning sun. He walks slowly across the wooden floor; he’s wearing his drivesuit and the boots are heavy, but he doesn’t make a sound.

Someone is sobbing.

He walks down the hallway, white tile taking over from hardwood. A boy is huddled in the corner, his arms wrapped around his skinned and bony knees. Dark hair sticks up every which way. He snuffles, wiping his arms across his nose. Tommy, or Billy?

Teddy crouches down beside him, and the boy looks up, scrubbing at his face to get rid of the signs of his distress. Tommy, then.

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying,” Tommy says scornfully, despite his red-rimmed eyes. “Only babies cry.”

“You’re not a baby,” Teddy says kindly, and the urge to pull Tommy into an embrace has never been so strong.

Tommy nods, mollified. “But Billy is; it’s why I have to look out for him. Mama said so.”

“So if you’re not-crying,” Teddy says, and Tommy’s lip twitches up at the corner in a gesture so familiar that it hurts all over again. “Why are you not upset? Has something happened to Billy?”

Tommy shakes his head solemnly, and his eyes really are green. When he speaks again, it’s in a rough and almost inaudible whisper, his face pale and lip trembling. “Daddy’s gone. It’s my fault for being bad.”

Tommy and Billy walk into Magnus’ conn-pod; Billy just can’t let it go.

“Why do you have to be such a jerk all the time? It’s like you can’t ever accept something good.”

Tommy scowls. “It’s my own special charm. Now can we get this over with?”

Head down and helmet on, he can tune Billy out.

A thought, only a flicker of resentment from a night disturbed and pressure coming at him from all sides. His anger bubbles up, striking out at the only safe outlet, the only one who will always love him. The one person who will never leave.

Instead of saying that, he thinks:

~ Of all the possible brothers in all the history of the world, why did I have to get stuck with you?~

A woman, beautiful, with Billy’s dark, dark eyes and masses of brown curls. She’s sobbing, stretched out across a large and empty bed. Sheer red curtains blow in the window. It’s cold.

Tommy stands beside the bed in his drivesuit, with his helmet tucked under his arm. He bends and kisses her on the cheek. She doesn’t move.
“I’ll protect Billy, mom. I promise.”

-Magnus lurches out to sea, they’re off-sync and reeling. Billy seethes with resentment, boiling bruised-purple under his skin. They come together when the time comes, though; even when they’re angry, maybe especially then, he can feel Billy in his bones.

They’re one person like this, a whole person. Maybe the person they would have been if two cells hadn’t split at just the right time, turned Billy and Tommy into something else.

The conn-pod jolts and Teddy falls; Tommy and Billy are secure in their rigs. Until they aren’t. The world explodes in flashes of fire and falling debris, dies in the sound of screeching, tearing metal. Billy is swinging free now, he connects with the support strut with a wet cracking noise. His helmet is filled with blood. He looks up through the red, stares at Tommy and tries to reach out, his lips moving. No sound comes out.

-Tommy sits, his arms around his scraped knees, his eyes red-rimmed from crying. He’s all of six years old, maybe even less. His hair is still dark, his face so young, but his eyes are already old. When he looks up at Teddy, his face is covered in streaks of blood. A red tear slides down his cheek, and he flinches when Teddy wipes it away.

“Mama is crying because I was bad. I didn’t take care of Billy.”

-Teddy reeled, staggered under it all. He opened his eyes to driftspace, the constellations wheeling by overhead. His bare arms showed no marks, just like he knew it would be, but his heart was bleeding.

Tommy’s voice echoed in the empty spaces of an empty house. ~He’ll hate me.~

Teddy opened in turn, turning his face to the sun. It rose into the starry sky, one more sphere hanging in the heavens. He showed Tommy everything. His father, enlisting, Seattle, the dreams.

~I could have saved her. I chased dreams of being a somebody, and abandoned the only person I had left.~

~We can still save him.~

He couldn’t tell whose thought that was, tinged green and blue and red, echoing everywhere and nowhere at the same time. A tide of sound rose around them, claxons and alarms blaring. Driftspace dissolved in a wash of light and the conn-pod resolved around him again, less real, somehow, than the place he had just been.

David. He shouted across the airwaves, Teddy’s ear burning with the note of panic in his voice. Not David, that didn’t make sense. He was unflappable, their cool, calm center. Until now.

“We have movement in the Breach! Magnus Echo, Yankee Hawker, respond. Kaiju signature rising. Category Two.”

The last of the haze washed away with the news, and Teddy’s heart raced. His pulse beat furiously in his ears, and his mouth went dry. Tommy shook his head to clear it, punched a button on the center console. “Magnus Echo responding. Ready-ready status. Sorry for the disconnect, boss.”
The Marshal’s voice took over, signals being piped in on the open channel. “Scramble Hawker and Magnus from current positions, get Goliath and Valentine on deck now!”

Kaiju. A kaiju. They were going to face one, now, in minutes, and Teddy was still reeling, unsteady, adrenaline and exhaustion leaving him an emotional wreck-

~ We got this.~

Tommy echoed Teddy’s old reassurances back to him, reverberating along their bond with a warmth that Teddy had never felt from him before. Wind whispered in branches somewhere, and the pine-Christmas-clove taste of Dr. Banner’s tea lingered on the back of his breath. Tommy’s pulse was racing too.

~ We got this.~

“Four minutes to estimated contact,” David reported. “Magnus is still in trouble, synchronization’s way off. No, hold on; ninety-three percent. Ninety-four percent and rising. Looking good.”

“Yankee Hawker, hold position six miles out. Magnus Echo, you’re on point. If you can’t get the kill, keep him busy until the others get to you.” David’s voice softened, concern coloring it darkly. “You guys going to be okay out there?”

“We’ll be fine,” Teddy promised, but despite his words, despite the momentary boost of confidence Tommy had fed him through the neural bridge, the terror sat cold around his gut and refused to let go.

When Shelob rose, it came up from the depths with long, spindly limbs and fangs dripping blue. Its mouth opened wide, wider than any real spider’s ever could no matter what David named it, triple-pronged jaws snapping at Magnus before it dove back beneath the waves. It was fast, faster than Teddy expected, enough to make Tommy recoil in surprise before they jumped back. They brought their fists up, sent their stingblades ratcheting into open position.

Shelob struck, they ducked, swung beneath its mandibles and connected once. A great leg slammed down and barely missed them, sending a plume of water up to drench Magnus’ sensor array. Panic and bile rose in Teddy’s throat, Tommy’s memories flooding him. Billy in the rig, his helmet filling with blood. Seattle on fire, his mother’s body burning to ashes.

“Magnus! Pull it together! You’re both way out of alignment!”

“They’re losing it. SHIT. Get Hawker in there now!”

Shelob reared out of the water and its scream was the scream of dying men. Teddy swung with all his strength, cut the stingblade across its bulbous torso; it wasn’t nearly enough, just enough to get it to stumble back one step, two, the multitude of many-jointed legs scrambling to keep itself upright.

The kaiju screamed, baring fangs, and two legs reared up over their head, hooks easily the size of Magnus Echo’s blades gleaming wicked and sharp at the end of each one.

Fire and blood consumed them, his skin blister-burned, the world washed in red.

And then it was blue.

Blue light filled the conn-pod. No, it was driftspace, overlaid onto the physical things before his eyes. Stars whirled in the air above them, blue light opening and enfolding them, raising Magnus’ arms to block the strike. They moved effortlessly, so easily, like there was no weight to them but
Teddy’s own arms, his own skin. They punched, cut through black hide, and Shelob staggered.

The conn-pod smelled of cloves, and arms laid down over Teddy’s. Fingers laced through his.

They needed – he needed – Teddy flung out a hand to Tommy in the drift, fingers scrabbling for some sort of purchase, a grasp on their link to haul themselves back in sync. A hand clasped his, warm and familiar, and Tommy’s shock echoed through the drift as loud as if he’d shouted it.

Billy held on to Teddy’s hand, and to Tommy’s. He hung between them in the conn-pod, there and not there, overlaid on the real in a haze of brilliant blue light. He wore his drivesuit, no helmet, his hair tangled and flopping over his face. His eyes were closed, and Tommy’s heartbeat pulsed in time with Billy’s, in time with Teddy’s.

Tommy’s thoughts rang in Teddy’s mind. ~Real, real all along and not the ghosts of his guilt~

Relief flooded the connection. Relief, forgiveness and undying, overwhelming love that pulled Teddy through in the undertow. He gasped, drowning, and sucked in lungfuls of canned air that stank of engine oil. Billy’s arms wrapped around him in driftspace, and Tommy’s hands held his tightly. Vast blue wings spread out behind them, a field that encompassed and surrounded them. Tommy and Billy’s thoughts rang clearly in his head, no longer muffled or constrained by any fog, or void, or fence.

“Three pilots, engaged in neural bridge,” the AI said smugly.

The comms exploded with noise, shouting from the LOCCENT making Teddy’s head ring.

“Magnus? What the hell is going on out there?”

“Maximoff, speak to me. Altman! Are you still in control?”

“In control and ready to go, ma’am.” Tommy answered briskly, then with awe and wonder in his voice and a revelation Teddy had never heard before, “Billy’s here too. I don’t know how, but-” his voice broke and he stopped talking.

Kate’s cry of “holy shit!” was enough to send everybody else shouting again, and Shelob rose up from the deep.

“Too much chatter!” Danvers yelled. “Clear the channel!”

Teddy took over the mic. “Moving to intercept, LOCCENT. Do we have air cover?”

“Neural bridge at one hundred percent of normal. One hundred and three, one hundred and five and climbing.”

“Air cover confirmed, Magnus. Hostile incoming, 8 o clock!”

They ducked and this time the world stopped to let them through. Magnus was a dancer, lithe and unencumbered, anticipating every one of Shelob’s strikes before those stabbing arms could connect. A shot fired, whizzing through its abdomen, and the monster shrieked in outrage. It wheeled to strike at the new intruder, Yankee Hawker, posing purple and brilliant against the sky.

Magnus took the opening the girls had given them, bringing a fist and stingblade up from below. Teddy hauled his fists up through the air, Tommy and Billy moving with him as naturally as though they had been training together for this moment all their lives. The blade sliced through the monster’s hide, cauterizing as it went, no blood escaping to poison the water below. Gases blew out from the
bulging abdomen, caustic enough for the sharp ammonia smell to seep into the conn-pod and overlay everything else.

The rest was a blur. They punched and kicked, Hawker taking shots to weaken it, until the kaiju lay broken below them, eight long, spindly legs and a deflated torso sagging, a massive carcass, in the shallows by the shore.

Teddy sucked in breath, the fetid smell of kaiju tainting everything, and he turned his head. He saw Billy one last time, from the corner of his eye, a figure outlined in light. He turned transparent and then faded slowly away, until Teddy and Tommy were the only two left in the drift.

“You-” Tommy started to say, his lips cracked. Teddy could feel how dry his mouth was, how scared, and he sent a wordless affirmation in reply.

~You saw him too,~ Tommy asked, just to confirm, giving up on speech for now.

~You know I did.~

Tommy closed his eyes, and tears were prickling at the corners of them that he would never admit to.

~Crying isn’t just for babies, you know.~ Teddy thought at him, wrapping the idea up in a bundle of warmth and acceptance, and his adoration for both twins that went beyond anything he had words to express.

~You only say that because you cry when you watch The Notebook.~

Danvers and David were shouting at them on the comms, Kate and America yelling at them on the private channel, and Teddy ignored them all. They began to swing their arms, starting the long walk back to the Shatterdome, jumphawks and air support fighters whizzing by overhead.

~We’re getting him home.~ Teddy thought at Tommy, packing all the confidence he could ever remember feeling into that one sentence.

~You’re damn right we are~ Tommy replied. ~And fuck anyone who gets in our way.~
“What the hell was that?” America and Kate ambushed them the moment Tommy and Teddy left their ready room. The door slid closed behind them, the heavy steel sections clunking into place. Tommy didn’t stop and Teddy kept pace, their strides matching despite their different builds, their arms swinging in easy synchronization. It wasn’t until he thought about it that it suddenly felt awkward, but forcing himself to walk out of sync felt worse. “Tommy, don’t you dare shut us out,” Kate grabbed for Tommy’s arm, wheeled him around to face her under the power of his momentum. “What did you see?”

“Billy,” Teddy confessed, locking eyes with Tommy for a moment and feeling that rush of fierce determination all over again. They were going to do this, and that meant **allies**. More than just Eli and Nate; they needed everyone on-side. “We saw Billy. We’ve-” he hesitated. This was it. Telling the guys had been one thing, one step towards trust, and they hadn’t let him down. But now, facing this, facing them...

He had *action figures* of the LA Rangers, for Christ’s sake. They were still in a storage box somewhere, because having that stuff shipped out to LA felt a bit weird and stalker-ish, but that didn’t change anything. If they laughed at him, called him crazy, didn’t believe... that would hurt worse than almost anything. He’d only just managed to earn their real respect, and this was the moment where it could all be ripped away.

Teddy hesitated, swallowing against the nausea. Tommy’s steady gaze didn’t waver.

*For Billy. For Tommy.*

“We’ve both been dreaming about him,” he explained succinctly. Tommy’s expression didn’t change; he’d known what Teddy’s choice would be.

Faith. In **Teddy**.

How had he begun to deserve that? When?

“He’s been trying to communicate with us, and today he broke through.”
Tommy picked it up from there, a smooth and easy segue. “He’s stuck in Magnus, and we’re going to bust him out. You with us?”

America and Kate shared a look that lasted less than a fraction of a second, and then the four of them were moving down the hallway together in slightly-offset doubled synchronization.

“Why didn’t you tell us about this before,” America frowned at Tommy.

“And what would you have done?” Tommy challenged her.

On Teddy’s other side, Kate slipped her fingers between his and squeezed his hand. He squeezed back, grounded in the feel of another person, another heartbeat humming in rhythm similar to his own. The faint awareness of Billy and Tommy still clung to the back of his mind, shadows and impressions of presence and emotion that curled around him. He wasn’t in this alone. Maybe he never had been.

“You’re idiots,” America told Tommy, in words dripping with scorn.

Tommy’s grin spread across his face, shark-like and anticipatory, his excitement and desperate need to go-go-go a pulsing beat along Teddy’s spine. Tommy pushed open the door that led to the medical wing. “I get that a lot.”

They weren’t the first ones to get to the infirmary.

“Utterly, absolutely unacceptable!”

“...vital...”

“If you think you can just march in here and do experiments on my patients without any kind of by-your-leave, Dr. Richards, you are sadly mistaken!”

The door opened onto chaos. A cluster of nurses and orderlies had escaped to the back rooms, and in the middle of the triage floor, Nate faced off against a furious Dr. Hussain. The usually calm and gentle CMO was in the closest thing Teddy had ever seen to a rage on her, and she stabbed at Nate’s chest with an accusatory finger. Every jab rocked him back on his heels, wires for an EEG setup twisted in his hands. She only came up to his nose but the sheer power of her determination made her look taller. Her lab coat flapped with the force of her gestures, but her pristine white hijab never shifted.

“If you had been monitoring him properly in the first place,” Nate accused doughtily, keeping himself still, his chin lifted petulantly.

“Show me your medical degree, and then you can lecture me about appropriate procedure!” She drew a breath and continued on, barely breaking momentum. “You accessed medical records without permission, put William through unauthorized tests; give me one good reason why I shouldn’t have you permanently banned from my infirmary.”

“Do we step in?” Teddy muttered, glancing at Kate, and then at Tommy, for some kind of guidance. The first time he’d met Dr. Hussain had been during his intake exam. She’d teased him about his piercings and offered him a lollipop from her candy stash at the end. This was a whole different side of her, one that he was pretty sure he never wanted to get in front of.

Kate looked uncertain, and that was never a good sign.

“I had permission from his next of kin; that’s all I needed!”
“Nothing happens here without my being made aware of it. His health is my responsibility.”

“We better,” Kate muttered, and Tommy was already moving forward, his head ducked low and shoulders loose. A piercing whistle sounded behind them, cutting through the raised voices and stunning the room into silence. Teddy’s mouth snapped shut.

The marshal pushed her way into the room, all elbows and presence to clear her path. David trailed her, his entire body taut and tense. He cast a look at Teddy and Tommy that was both accusatory and apologetic, a tablet in his hand. Data streams flickered in reverse across the amber lenses of his glasses, reflecting in the shine of his dark brown eyes. “Knock it off,” Marshal Danvers commanded, her voice ringing clearly through the turmoil.

Quiet didn’t ‘fall’ so much as ‘pop spontaneously into being’; even the normal buzz of the infirmary seemed to fade into nothingness at the marshal’s command.

A vein jumped in Nate’s forehead, his jaw set tight.

Faiza had frozen in mid-point, her finger pressed against Nate’s sternum, her eyes wide with surprise. She straightened, and folded her arms firmly across her chest. “Carol, I need to report a serious ethical breach.”

“It wasn’t.” Nate objected, and Tommy interposed himself between Nate, Dr. Hussain and Danvers.

“He had my permission. Billy’s awake, Carol.” The words rushed from him, air from a popped balloon racing to get out before something rose up to stop their escape. Someone behind them gasped, and then hushed quickly. “Everyone heard what happened during the fight, everyone saw that. You know you did.”

“At this point I don’t know what I heard,” Danvers said, and she was as stern and remote as the mountains.

“Three pilots,” Kate added, her arms folded across her chest. “That’s what we heard.”

“Mate, you’re out of your head,” Dr. Hussain shook her head. “William’s exactly where we left him, with no change in his status except for whatever damage Richards managed to do.”

“No, he’s right, sort of.” David cleared his throat. “Something did happen, at least as far as Magnus was concerned. I’m just not ready to call it Billy’s consciousness. Not yet.”

Nate took a couple of long strides toward the intake desk and the monitors behind it, then stopped. The vein jumped in his temple again and he unclenched his jaw. “If I may,” he asked. It was Nate’s best attempt at an olive branch, however stiffly delivered.

Dr. Hussain furrowed her brow and stared back at him, the anger and protectiveness still simmering in the back of her dark eyes. “Go ahead,” she allowed, however reluctantly.

Nate lifted his chin, stubborn and fierce. “But I am.” He took a step toward the intake desk and the monitors behind it, then stopped. The vein jumped in his temple again and he unclenched his jaw. “If I may,” he asked. It was Nate’s best attempt at an olive branch, however stiffly delivered.

Dr. Hussain furrowed her brow and stared back at him, the anger and protectiveness still simmering in the back of her dark eyes. “Go ahead,” she allowed, however reluctantly.

Nate took a couple of long strides toward the monitors and activated the displays with a wave. “This is Billy’s EEG from his last formal check, two weeks ago.” Teddy trailed after Tommy, getting a better look at the display. The others followed, David shifting closer to Teddy and Kate. The lines showed everything that Teddy had come to expect: nothing much of anything. Four lines traced across the screen, two gently undulating and two all but flat. A few flickers in response to timed testing stimuli proved that he wasn’t entirely brain dead, and that was all.

“And this is from today.” The overlay chart was like nothing Teddy had ever seen before, bright spikes surging up toward the top line and then bottoming out again. Billy’s brain activity jumped
from nothing to far beyond normal human capacity, bounced between those limits for what looked like five, maybe ten minutes, and then returned to nothing again.

Dr. Hussain muttered something under her breath and braced her arms on the desk as she leaned in to get a better view.

“Normally comatose patients show activity in delta waves, and Billy’s theta wave activity has always been a bit high, but look at this - his alpha waves kicked up the moment Tommy and Teddy entered the neural bridge, and started spiking when Shelob attacked. That’s conscious thought.”

“That makes zero sense,” Dr. Hussain said in English, wheels and gears turning visibly behind her eyes.

“That’s because it only happens when Tommy and Teddy are drifting,” Nate pushed through. “Only one other test was ever done on Billy when Tommy wasn’t physically present, and that was while Tom was in a simulator run. There were a couple of small anomalies then, but nothing like this.”

Teddy knew that one. He could close his eyes and find Tommy’s memories of the simulator test, Billy’s presence a thick blanket of guilt and pain overlaying everything he tried to do. Tommy had bailed out early, refused to complete the test drop, come back three days later and killed every digital kaiju that the computer system could find to throw at him.

**Billy’s first attempt at contact.**

“I’ve been cross-referencing all his records and ever since Teddy transferred in – ever since Tommy and Teddy started working with Magnus again – there’s been a pattern. Billy’s heart rate increases when they drift. Not much, not enough to mean anything alone, except that it happens every time. It starts when they sync, and ends when they drop the neural bridge. If we had brain data, I’d expect to see movement there too. We missed it because we weren’t monitoring him at the right times.”

“Oh my God,” Kate breathed out, and America gripped the scruff of Tommy’s neck in a gesture probably intended to be comforting.

Teddy reeled, his knees sagging. All of it, then, could be true. Billy’s voice whispered sweet nothings in his ear, and the smell of his hair, his cologne, filled Teddy’s nose. *Not a dream? Was any of it actually a dream?* The moment any answer seemed to coalesce it had been questioned again, turning him inside out and upside down, his own emotions as suspect as Tommy’s protests of innocence or America’s mask of indifference. The world kept shifting underneath him, and the only stable ground he knew was here, at the Shatterdome.

“There’s still a lot that needs to be done before we can call him partially aware,” David cautioned. “There’s no evidence that anyone’s ever been able to create a sustainable telepathic link that persists after the pons connections has been severed. Even so-called ‘ghost drifts’ are more of a muscle memory, not any measurable or real connection.”

He didn’t have to look so smug about it all, like he was somehow pleased that Billy wasn’t around. And the way he stopped and frowned at Teddy, the crease in his brows... it had to be wondered, even though it made Teddy’s gut turn over to even think about it.

If Teddy wasn’t so obviously focussed on Billy, would David be more interested in helping out? Would he be more likely to believe them, if he wasn’t invested in the wrong kind of way?

Danvers wheeled on him. “You’re not surprised.” It was a statement, not a question, and Danvers’ eyes narrowed at David as she took his measure.
David shook his head, sharing a glance with Nate over Danvers’ shoulder. “Nate talked to me about it this morning when he was setting up for the test. He asked me to make sure the drift recordings were being monitored in real time.”

“And?” Danvers asked.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” Teddy burst out, not able to contain himself. Proof, proof, he wasn’t insane, or making it up because he wanted it so bad... “You saw him.”

The slow head shake and David’s apologetic look did nothing to prevent Teddy’s stomach from plummeting. “Despite the audio, the monitor recorded nothing outside of established parameters.”

“Bullshit!” Tommy exploded beside Teddy. “You’re losing your touch, Alleyne. He was there and everyone heard it. ‘Three pilots.’ You can’t tell me that was something Teddy and I dreamed up in the drift.”

“It could have been a glitch. Older machines get strange sometimes, and Magnus was one of the first. There’s no telling what extra bits of data have been squirreled away inside her databanks. Or what wishful thinking can accomplish.”

“That’s a copout, and you know it.” Tommy flared at him, their foreheads nearly touching. There was no sign anywhere there of the men who had sat down together at the bar and bought rounds of shots for each other, or the calm voice through the comms that had guided Tommy through eight kaiju fights and uncountable training missions. Teddy ached, in his head and in his heart and he could stop all this right now by siding with David, by backing down and letting everything go back the way it was.

Except that was the one thing he couldn’t do.

The way Danvers pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes as though she was in pain wasn’t exactly encouraging, or hopeful. Teddy squeezed Kate’s hand, just to feel another living human being beside him. She squeezed back, fierce and hard, and that was something. Not enough, but something.

“Faiza,” Danvers said after a few seconds, and the room’s attention seemed to swerve back to Dr. Hussain all at once. “Help me out here. Small words. What does any of this mean,” she gestured at the charts still displayed on the screens. “Medically speaking?”

“Small words.” A small smile flickered very briefly over Dr. Hussain’s mouth, then vanished again. “William’s brain is physically fine. The trauma healed months ago, and technically nothing should be preventing him from waking up. The data that Dr. Richards recorded seems to suggest that there’s some vestiges of his consciousness hanging in. Delta waves are the unconscious mind; we expect to see those. Theta waves kick up during dreams, so that’s not entirely surprising. Alpha waves indicate conscious thought, which William shouldn’t be capable of. Comas like his don’t normally resolve independently, and the likelihood of his actually being able to communicate intelligently through the drift, even if he were even semi-conscious, is slim to none.

“He’s not hooked up to a pons; there is no way that Tom and Teddy drifting could have any direct effect. Unless it has something to do with the twin-bond. Or,” she added with a frown, side-eyeing Tommy. “It’s a phenomenon similar to the ghost-drift, and we’re seeing some form of residual impact on William’s brain activity.”

“So you’re saying that it could be nothing,” Danvers followed up, “or that he’s in there but taking an extended vacation until he hears the Jaegers fire up.” Danvers turned sharply on her heel and
scowled, pointing a finger at Tommy. “You two make me nuts. Only a Maximoff could go AWOL and still technically be here.”

“No-one else has our innate sense of cool,” Tommy replied, whip-fast and bouncing impatiently on his toes. “Altman’s starting to pick it up. Slowly.”

“What’s the next step here?” Carol asked, and Dr. Hussain frowned.

“I’m not ready to say,” she cautioned, “but now that we’ve seen one instance with indications of returning brain activity, we obviously have to follow up. Following protocols,” she glared at Nate, and at Tommy. “There are reasons they’re in place, and that’s to protect the health of the patient. There are some more things we can try to boost William’s awareness, if he is beginning to come out of it. I want to run through some of those options before we even consider anything more drastic or experimental.”

“Give me a list,” Carol nodded. “And keep me apprised.”

Dr. Hussain turned, then paused and held out her hand to Nate. He drew the tablet closer to himself, and she waggled her fingers impatiently. “Give me that.”

“Nate-“ Teddy begged quietly.

Nate’s jaw unclenched and he gave it over, relinquishing the information and analyses to Dr. Hussain. She took about three steps toward her office door, then turned and frowned at him over her shoulder. He stared back at her, and she crooked an eyebrow. “Are you coming along or what? We haven’t got all day, you know.”

A smile blossomed on Nate’s face and he caught up, bending his head in to speak with her as they vanished around the corner into her private office.

“As for the rest of you-“ Carol looked them over with a critical eye. “Good work out there, all of you. Go shower,” she commanded imperiously. “Including you, Maximoff. Billy will be fine for the next hour.”

“But-“ Teddy started to object. He needed to see Billy, reassure himself that ... that what? He had no idea. That something important had just taken place. That they weren’t giving up. That whether Dr. Hussain believed them or not, they were still that one step closer to fixing the mess that Honne-Onna had made.

“No buts. You stink like drivesuit funk and sweaty socks. Get yourselves clean and report for debriefing in twenty, my office.”

She waited until they had all filed out, watching to make sure they had gone, and the door closed to leave the four of them in the hall once more.

“So,” Kate began, sliding her hands into her pants pockets. “That went well.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” America snorted, the first thing she’d said in a while. “It’s a waiting game now, unless Nate can somehow convince Dr. Hussain that your theory is right. They’ll end up stimming him again, or trying another drug therapy.”

Tommy shook his head. “None of those worked before; there’s no point to any of it. Not when we know what’s going on.” He trailed off, lost in thought. He looked so much like Billy for a moment that it was eerie, the same furrow in his brow as he contemplated something, the creases at the corners of his eyes. Only the color was wrong. Tommy came back out of his head then, as though
he’d felt Teddy staring. He shook Teddy’s hand off his shoulder and pasted his grin back into place, whatever he’d been contemplating locked away unshared. “Come on, Altman. Last one to the men’s showers is a sack of kaiju shit.”

When he put it like that, Teddy really had no choice but to beat him handily.

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Somehow, it hadn’t really sunk in until the debriefing. Seeing Billy, seeing Tommy see Billy, all of that – it had entirely overshadowed the realization that he had actually killed a kaiju.

They’d done it.

He was a Ranger for real now, had the right to paint a kill marker on his drivesuit, stitch a patch onto his jacket, or hell - tattoo it on his ass if he wanted to.

He’d heard about worse. Barton.

“Are we boring you, Altman?”

Teddy sat up in his chair, face flushing hot. America huffed scornfully at him, but Kate’s smile held something more like understanding. “No ma’am,” he blurted out quickly. “Sorry. I was – thinking. Ma’am.”

“When you can learn to think and pilot at the same time, then we’ll be getting somewhere.” The brightly colored symbols that denoted Yankee Hawker and Magnus Echo flashed on the screen as Danvers flipped her pointer back on and returned to dissecting today’s fight – or, as she put it, ‘that embarrassing clusterfuck.’ Which, yeah. Harsh, but fair. If Billy hadn’t shown up when he did, they would have been just so much slag at the bottom of the ocean.

Even the simulators hadn’t been able to replicate the feeling perfectly. Nothing had prepared him for the chill deep in his bones when the monster rose, water sluicing down off its hide – not scaly, not leathery, something else and otherworldly – and its eyes glowing a fierce and brilliant blue. No teeth; kaiju didn’t have them. But fangs; it had had something like fangs, projections descending from a triple-beaked mouth. Shelob had snapped at the conn-pod like it knew the pilots were inside, little morsels of meat trapped in their huge iron shell.

Holy shit, we killed a kaiju.

Tommy kicked him under the table, and Teddy blinked to clear his mind. Steam was all but coiling out of Marshal Danvers’ ears as she glared at him, caught daydreaming again like some dumb first year cadet.

Smooth. Real smooth.

The strident ring of the phone on Danvers’ desk saved him from having to apologize a second time. She glowered darkly at him from under lowered brows and the sense of relief died before it ever fully realized.

“Danvers,” she answered, and a moment after that, her forehead creasing in a frown, “fine.” The look she shot at Tommy and Teddy could only mean one thing. Something about Billy. “Get your shit together and you can present to everyone at once.”

Tommy shifted forward in his seat until the back legs were lifting off the floor, and his fingers tapped a relentless staccato on the edge of the desk. America reached out and grabbed his hand, forcing
them into stillness. His toes began tapping instead.

Danvers dialled something else on her phone, not looking up at them. “Kawasaki,” she said into the phone. “I need the rangers, conference room 2A, in fifteen. Add Stark, and page Rhody; he wanted to be in on this.” Some silence while a low voice murmured just barely in the audible range on the phone in Danvers’ hand, then she hung up and finally – finally! – let them in.

“Richards thinks he’s come up with something,” she announced simply. “I’m not going to play stupid and pretend that you weren’t all listening to the place and time. Move it out.”

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The conference room was only just large enough to hold them all, the eight rangers seated around the table. Cassie curled in next to Kate, their heads bent together in hushed conversation, but Scott leaned back in his chair with folded arms and a frown settled into the lines on his face. Nate argued quietly with Dr. Hussain in the back of the room, his hands gesturing in the air. Not good. The marshal was nowhere to be seen. Eli clobbered Teddy on the shoulder as they pulled out chairs. It was all Teddy could do to perch clumsily on the edge of his, every nerve ending vibrating. The cold concrete walls and floor were the same as in every other room on the base, dispassionate and uncaring, oblivious to the importance of the meeting that was taking place.

This could be it. Billy, we’re coming.

Tommy met his eyes then, green, flecked with silver and hastily withdrawn hope. His insides shook; all Teddy had left to offer was a tight, thin smile.

The door opened and Stark breezed in flanked by Danvers and Rhodes. “And what I’m saying is that if you don’t call Banner in on this, you’re going to regret it. The man is almost as smart as I am. Maybe smarter. No, never mind that. No-one’s smarter than I am. But we want him on board.”

Eli sat bolt upright in his seat and even Uncle Joe straightened slightly on his other side, his hands clasped together on the tabletop in a mockery of his usual serenity. Not for himself, Teddy realized slowly, because Billy had been hurt weeks before Eli and Joe had transferred. For him.

How did anyone ever repay love like that? How could you live without trying?

“Sit,” Danvers ordered, pointing at an empty chair, and wonder of wonders, Stark actually obeyed. He wouldn’t be down for long; Teddy had never seen him sit still for longer than a few minutes. Her aide followed and shut the door behind the crowd as the latecomers sorted themselves into the last couple of chairs.

Only a few hours had passed since the drift; it felt longer. The memory of Billy’s face lingered when he blinked, his eyes filled with stars and his hands solid and tight in Teddy’s, an afterimage of brilliant blue. He breathed him in and let him out with every exhale, trying and failing to keep Billy close behind the walls of his chest. Tommy sat across the table, too far away when Teddy had been under his skin. He itched inside his own, his body too small for all the energy it contained. He needed to spill out of it again, link with Tommy and find that space in between, where they could expand and fill the sky.

“Go ahead, Richards,” Danvers settled, still standing, leaning against the wall with one foot up. She folded her arms in front of her and watched with steel in her eyes as Nate made his careful way up to the front. He smiled at Tommy when he went by, made this little nod of confirmation that made Tommy sit up and drum his fingers on the tabletop in rapid patterns. America flattened her hand over Tommy’s to stop the tapping, and left it there.
“Based on the data I collected this morning,” Nate began. Dr. Hussain muttered something under her breath from the back of the room. Stark finished poking at his tablet and Dr. Banner’s face appeared on one of the screens, his hair dishevelled and tumbling over his brow, and glasses perched on the end of his nose. He nodded to Danvers and Stark, the camera zooming out for a moment to focus on the wall of his office, and then back in to his face.

“Based on that data,” Nate continued, and he pulled up the EEGs Teddy had seen before the debriefing. “And comparisons with other, similar reports, I’m more certain than ever that Billy’s coma has something to do with the fact that his accident happened during a drift. Somehow, some part of his consciousness is trapped inside his Jaeger. I want to set up a four-way neural bridge – Tommy, Teddy, Billy and Magnus. We use Tommy and Teddy as anchors- or beacons, for lack of a better term.”

A rustle and a murmur ran around the table.

“Beacons? They’re not lighthouses.”

“I keep saying, it doesn’t work that way.”

“The world has mysteries beyond what we acknowledge, Elijah.”

“That’s nuts,” Scott muttered, loud enough for Teddy to hear, and Cassie glared at him.

Stark laced his fingers behind his head and put his foot up on the table. Danvers rocked the back of his chair to dump him forward, and he dropped his feet back down to the ground with a petulant sigh. “How do you propose we do that?” He directed his question to Nate, not Danvers. “We can’t exactly get him into a drivesuit. He’d be all floppy, for one thing.” He glanced at Tommy and Teddy, and shrugged. “No offense.”

“I’ve figured that out,” Nate insisted. “We can run a secondary pons rig through LOCCENT; all we need is for Billy’s bed to be rolled up there. We can plug him straight into the neural bridge while Teddy and Tommy are in Magnus, and keep him under medical supervision at all times.”

“What do you think that’s going to do?” Scott asked, and he traded looks with Rhodes that seemed to say ‘kids these days’. Bruce just sat there, taking notes and looking at something off his screen.

“It will give Billy a chance to find his way out of Magnus Echo’s databanks and back to his own body. His soul is what’s trapped, and this is the only way I can see to get it out again.”

“There’s no such thing, Richards,” Tony shook his head. “A mind is a set of electrical impulses firing at top speeds through approximately three pounds of squishy meat. There’s nothing there that can ‘transfer,’ and nowhere in a Jaeger for it to go.”

“That’s what I said,” Eli interrupted, his hands flat on the table in front of him like he was going to go for Stark in the next few minutes. “But looking at this, even I can see that I was wrong.”

Kate laughed low. “Did he just admit that? Someone call Guinness.”

“Shut it, Bishop.”

“Settle down, kids,” Danvers ordered from the door where she stood, her hair wound up behind her head and making her look even more official than usual. Her crisply-pressed uniform and the PPDC flash on her shoulders added to that dark blue line of authority, and even the civilians in the room quietened in automatic reaction. “Faiza, talk to me. What’s your take?”
“I think it’s one of the barmiest ideas I’ve ever heard,” Dr. Hussain answered, and Teddy’s heart plummeted. “We’re jumping the gun, and this plan is far too risky.”

Banner looked up, interested again apparently.

“What sorts of risks?” Danvers asked, before anyone else could.

“Neural overload’s your main one,” Dr. Hussain answered, staring Nate down as if daring him to contradict her. “Brain damage – again – or a stroke. The human brain was never meant to drift with one person, never mind bridge with two people and a Jaeger at the same time. We push the limits of what our neurology can take every day; this would be unprecedented.” She sighed, spread her hands and looked at Teddy and Tommy with compassion and an aching sadness on her own, an apology without words. “Carol, if you let them do this, all three of them could die.”

Teddy rubbed the back of his neck and tried to find the words for the argument he needed to make. “But we’ve drifted with three, just this morning. And there was nothing that turned up on our records. David said so himself,” he said pointedly. “No anomalies on the drift recordings, even when Billy bridged in.”

“You don’t know that he was actually there,” Rhodes pointed out. Tommy scowled at him, his hand still pinned under America’s palm.

“You’re suggesting that he was hallucinating?” Bruce broke in, leaning in closer to his camera and steepling his fingers as he listened.

“We analyzed that tea you gave to Altman,” Dr. Hussain interjected, and Teddy stopped breathing. Bruce looked at him, he glared at Nate. Nate shook his head vehemently and pointed at David, whose shrug was entirely unapologetic.

Teddy stared in horror. “Can’t anyone keep a secret around here?”

“Protopine, lavender, passiflora, valerian – you’re lucky he didn’t fall asleep halfway through the drift! Of all the irresponsible things!”

“What the hell were you doing with my ranger, Banner?”

Banner arched an eyebrow, nonplussed and calm as ever. “It was an experiment based on solid data, Carol. Anxiety is known to reduce the effectiveness of a neural bridge, so anti-anxiety compounds should deepen it and allow for a better connection. They showed amazing results based on initial projections.”

“Where was your control group? Even I know that without controls and blind trials it’s not science, Bruce. It’s just you screwing around.”

“They were off the scale in that last one; it deepened the drift beyond anything we’ve ever seen before. ‘Even you’ can see the benefit of that.”

“Except now they’re seeing ghosts. Didn’t help matters much there, did it?”

“It may deepen the drift,” Rhodes interrupted before Danvers and Bruce could go another round. “But it also leaves them that much more vulnerable. What if something had gone wrong during the fight? His reaction time could have been too badly slowed to be useful.”

“It didn’t, and I wasn’t.” Teddy raised his voice over the grown-ups bickering, his face hot and burning. “We’ve won everything we’ve tried since I drifted that way, and our connection’s strong.
Not perfect, but we’re all ignoring the reason why. Tommy and I can be one of the best teams out there, but we need to save Billy first.”

Dr. Hussain shook her head vehemently. “Carol, don’t do this. You’re going to lose three lives trying to save one. We have other options.”

“You’re going too damn slow,” Tommy sniped at her, white-knuckled on the edge of the table. “If one of these other miracle solutions would have worked, why aren’t you doing it now? Or last week, or last month?”

Scott pushed his chair back from the table, and he was leaving, abandoning them. It was one thing for the doctors not to believe, but Scott – he was a ranger, He knew what it was like to see someone inside your head, to know Cassie on every conceivable level. *Traitor.* “This is ludicrous,” Scott said, and Tommy’s jaw set harder. “You’re searching for something that isn’t there. Stimulating his brain, maybe – but going looking for his ‘soul’? You’re going to kill yourselves and it will be for nothing.”

“You can’t stop us.” Tommy turned to face him, looking past Kate as though she didn’t exist. “Wanna bet?”

“Please.” Teddy said into the growing tension, and they looked at him. Tommy’s eyes burned into his and he held Tommy’s gaze steadily. “All we’re asking for is a chance. Stick whatever monitors on us that you want, whatever precautions you think will help. Billy’s stuck in limbo and he knows it, he can see and hear us and he needs our help. ‘Leave no man behind,’ right?” The room was silent now, everyone watching him, some with surprise, some with resignation, and some with pride. “We need to try. This isn’t some clinical theory to argue about; this is a man’s life. After everything he’s done, everything he’s given to the PPDC; we owe him that much.”

It was a better speech than he had expected, more words than he had known how to put together, when every beat of his heart still thrummed with *Billy-Tommy, Billy-Tommy*, and the world shone faintly in blue.

“And what happens to all those lives he’s saved when you die as well, and we’re down another Jaeger?” David’s lips pressed together and thinned from the pressure, the reflection of the room’s lights on his glasses hiding the expression in his eyes.

“There are three other teams.” Tommy kicked back in his chair and lifted his chin. “They may not be Maximoffs, but they’ll do alright. It’s a risk I’m going to take.”

“It’s not up to you.” Scott flinched and winced for no apparent reason, and glared darkly at Cassie. He wanted to jump, to shout, to bring the room down around them, even as Danvers traded looks with Hussain and Rhodes, as Joe folded his arms and stared at the data on the screen, as Banner argued with Stark in technical language too thick for Teddy to follow. They were losing sight of the problem even as they pretended to be focussing on it, and Billy’s voice echoed in his ears. *Don’t take too long.*

Danvers shook her head. “It’s too much risk,” she said finally. Hussain relaxed, and Tommy’s brow lowered in fury. “With too little evidence that it will work. I’m not ready to chance it.”

Rhodes snorted. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“My life is one thing; someone else’s? Three someone else’s in this case? That’s different. Faiza, create your new care plan. We’ll revisit once we’ve run out of other options.”
The room exploded, half in relief and half in indignation, the noise drowning out the crushing defeat that settled deep in Teddy’s gut. His heart hurt, his chest ached, and the room was too small, too close, too... everything. Tommy’s restless anger rushed through Teddy’s veins and they broke for the door at the same time. Tommy grabbed his arm, steeled him, the door slamming closed behind them. The sound echoed down the hallway. There was no defeat in his shoulders, no slump to replace the fire. He smiled, shark-like, and Teddy held his breath. “This isn’t over yet.”

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The dayroom was larger than the conference room but felt more tightly packed, even with the television pushed back against the far wall and the scuffed-up old couch shoved into the corner. Joe took up a lot more space than little Cassie, his hand on Teddy’s shoulder in a gesture as comforting as Eli’s taut and furious pacing was the opposite. “Sit down already.” Kate stuck out a foot in Eli’s path, but he stepped over it and kept going.

“I don’t know how you can be so calm about this,” Eli snapped. “Marshal Danvers is being shortsighted, and we’re the ones who will end up paying for it when these two go AWOL.”

“I never said I was calm; I said you needed to sit down before I gave in to the urge to shoot you.” Kate lifted her lip at him and he made a face back at her.

America curled her legs under her in the faded armchair. “I told you this would happen.”

Next to Kate on the couch, her father leaning over the back with his arms propped on the cushion beside her head, Cassie chewed on her lower lip. Her blonde braid hung over her shoulder, her legs tucked up underneath her in an unconscious mirror of America. She looked very young all at once, young and just as lost as Teddy felt. “Maybe it isn’t so bad?” she suggested, and Eli scowled at her. “No, I’m serious. We can just wait it out, and when Faiza’s done the tests she needs to run, we can try to convince them again. None of them hurt Billy the first time, they just didn’t work.”

“He may not have that much time.” Nate closed the door behind him, looking almost furtive as he came into the dayroom. Cassie sat upright on the chair, a glow coming over her that turned her pale features into something altogether new and sunny, and Scott scowled.

Why?” Teddy interrupted before the conversation could derail entirely. “What aren’t you telling us?”

Nate shook his head as though to clear it and refocused, gesturing at a tablet in his hand. “The spikes in Billy’s brain activity,” he began, jumping right in without further preamble. “They’re burning up energy Billy doesn’t have to spare. Faiza started running some tests as soon as we got back to the infirmary, and I overheard her talking to Banner. She picked up signs of neural degeneration that weren’t there three days ago. If Billy goes through too many more drifts like that? He’ll kill himself trying to make contact.”

“You’re talking about serious brain damage,” Joe replied, no cheer or comfort at all in his low, sonorous tones.

Nate nodded rapidly. “And permanent this time. Whatever we do, we have to do it fast. Before Tommy and Teddy get into Magnus again.”

“We’re doing it, your four-way drift.” Tommy’s hands tightened around the back of the plastic chair he was leaning on, his knuckles going white. “Billy needs me, not all this dicking around with protocols and ‘further studies.’ Set up whatever you need, Nate. Teddy and I are going in.”
“Shouldn’t you be asking him before you volunteer him for your death mission?” Scott argued, pointing at Teddy. Teddy shook his head.

“I go where Tommy goes,” he said, that feeling of certainty fighting it out with the fear and the panic and the overwhelming everything that went with the world moving too fast for him to keep up. “And I trust Nate.”

“That’ll be your last mistake,” Scott warned him.

“You take risks all the time, old man,” Tommy spat out. “Suddenly saving my brother’s life is too much?”

“I take risks for myself,” Scott said, but he was looking at Cassie as he spoke. “Because it’s my choice. You’re talking about dragging Teddy in to something he has nothing to do with, and because he’s your co-pilot, he’ll go along with the insanity. And Billy doesn’t get to have a say at all. You could kill them both.”

“I’m as much as part of this as anyone.” Teddy rose out of his chair and faced off against Scott. His palms stung sharply inside his clenched fists, and he didn’t look down to see why. “I know Billy as well as Tommy does, now, and I’m not afraid of a little risk. Sacrificing ourselves to save others – that’s the whole reason all of us are here, isn’t it? The reason we all wanted to be rangers in the first place. Because we’re the people who have the ability to do what others can’t. Because we have the power to be heroes.”

Someone hissed a breath out between their teeth after Teddy finished speaking. He uncurled his fingers, red marks burning into his palms from the pressure of his nails.

“Being a hero is sometimes about knowing when to leave well enough alone.” Scott stood, shaking Cassie’s frantic hand off his arm. “For the good of the many. I’m out. I can’t be a party to this.”

“Scott,” Joe warned, and Scott turned. “Think this through, man.”

“Cassie? Come on, kiddo. We’re going.”

“No,” she said, and both Nate and Scott looked at her with wide eyes. “I’m staying here,” she continued, and Nate’s smile spread as Scott’s glower intensified. “Billy needs us, Daddy. Please.”

There was no give in the set of his jaw, or pity in the shake of his head.

“You can’t tell them.”

He stiffened, her eyes pleading and wide, and Scott squeezed his own eyes shut for a moment before he replied. “You should know better than that,” was all he said. He turned and left the room.

Cassie jumped to her feet, hands on the back of the couch as the door swung closed. The snap of the latch seemed to echo in the silence that followed, sharp and final. Cassie didn’t follow. She slid back down to sit on the couch, and Kate tucked an arm around her waist.

“Right,” Cassie said after a minute, dashing something away from her eyes with the back of her hand. Nobody said anything, and Teddy looked away. “Nate has to reconfigure the equipment for the three-way neural bridge–”

“– And figure out how we’re going to get access to LOCCENT,” Nate added.

“What can I do?”
Kate squeezed, but it was America who replied, her expression calm. “Talk to your dad,” she suggested, and Cassie stiffened. “Try and bring him around. Of all of us, he’ll listen to you.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Cassie said bitterly, but she nodded nevertheless. “I’ll try.”

“And in the meantime?” Joe raised an eyebrow, and Eli stopped pacing the edges of the room.

“For us?” America arched an eyebrow at Eli and Nate as though waiting to be contradicted. “Business as usual. They’ll expect us to be in pissy moods, so we give them pissy. Go to the gym, go to the kwoon, sulk over dinner in the cafeteria. Let them think that we’re getting over having lost the fight.”

“And then?” Cassie asked, looking from one face to the other, with eyes that glimmered faintly with hope.

“And then tonight, we meet,” Eli said firmly, and Nate nodded.

“0030 hours,” Tommy said, his eyes alight. “That’s at shift change and there’ll be the most chaos in medical. Here first to check in, and then we split up. Teddy and I hook into Magnus; Nate and Eli get Billy; Joe and the girls take over LOCCENT. And then we save my brother.”

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That afternoon was easily one of the longest of Teddy’s life. Avoiding the marshal was easy enough; she was closeted in her office with Rhodes and Stark, and every time he got within a few dozen feet of it he heard more than one voice raised. He was supposed to be making appearances, so was Tommy, for that matter. But the gym was too full of people looking at him funny, and the simulators were no better. He tried to read up on the reports from the last couple of training missions in Alaska and Russia, to study tactics and debriefs. The words swam in front of his eyes when he tried to concentrate, little black fish slipping sideways and blurring into illegible grey streaks.

They were going to be disobeying direct orders tonight. He didn’t feel nearly as bad about that as he imagined he would, not in the abstract, but none of that changed the notion that after tomorrow, they most likely wouldn’t be rangers anymore. They would be traitors, liabilities, disgraced.

There would always be kids coming up after them with better drop:kill ratios and tighter drift compatibility, with faster reflexes and records that didn’t involve mutiny and court-martial. They would be expendable.

Maybe, if Billy remembered him after all was said and done, the twins would let him tag along. They could... go farm goats, or something. Farming was good. People needed food, especially inland where the land had been eaten up by developers building housing for the coastal refugees.

There. He had a backup plan. Sort of.

In the meantime, he and Tommy were hiding out in the last place anyone would think to look for them at the moment: the infirmary. Dr. Hussain was closed in her office, the nursing staff bustled around dealing with other patients, and he and Tommy had taken up their usual places in Billy’s room, Tommy on the cot between Billy’s bed and the wall, and Teddy curled up in the armchair. “Time, Tommy,” Teddy murmured, looking at the clock that blinked implacably on the wall. Ten minutes until Billy’s next scheduled check, which meant only a few left before they had to bail so as not to be chewed out. Again.

Tommy closed the book and put it aside. The book sat in its same old place on the bedside table, the bookmark hanging out of it like always. As though Tommy would be back tomorrow, same bat-time,
He stood, bending over Billy in the bed. He leaned in and drew a breath, and the tenderness in the moment felt so real that Teddy had to blink and look away. He missed seeing whatever expression was on Tommy’s face, but he heard the words he said loud and clear.

“I know you can hear me,” Tommy said, all soft and reverent, packed with a depth of emotion that he would mock Teddy for endlessly. Teddy held his breath. “Billy, you asshole.”

One corner of Teddy’s mouth tugged up in a smile. He didn’t dare laugh.

Tommy straightened up and grabbed his jacket, speaking as casually now as if Billy were sitting up in the chair and watching them go. “We’ll get you out of this, butt-face, if it’s the last thing we do as rangers. You are gonna owe me so big. Bigger than the time I told mom I was the one who broke the bedroom window. Bigger than the time I covered for you when you ran her car into a ditch. I am going to own you.” And satisfaction and anticipation bloomed in the smile on his face.

They faded when he looked at Teddy, unfolding himself out of the chair and moving for the door. “If Scott was right,” Tommy started, and the thinking-line appeared between the furrows of his bleached-white brows. “If you’re just doing this because we’re co-pilots- you can back out. You know that, right? The shit is going to hit the fan in magnificent quantities tonight. You don’t have to get splattered.”

“I’m one of you, aren’t I?” Teddy fired back, and just saying it out loud felt right. It felt so very right, and he could see Tommy feeling it too. “You just said it. I’m your co-pilot, and in some funny way I’m his co-pilot as well.” He gestured to Billy’s comatose form. “And even if he wakes up and doesn’t remember any of it, for a while there, we were good friends.”

_It’s so much more than that. I love him, and you know it. Someday, maybe, even if he doesn’t remember any of this – he might fall in love with me. “I’m in. For however much flying feces comes our way.”_

“Even though we’re going to get our asses handed to us?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Tommy held out his hand, and Teddy took it, clasped it tight, then slid his fingers to grip, tug, lock thumbs, knuckle-bump.

“Come on, loser.” Tommy’s smile didn’t hide any sarcasm or edge at all. “Time for the condemned men’s last meal. I want noodles, and you’re buying.”

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Midnight passed, his clock ticked over from one day to the next, and Teddy pulled on his boots. The quiet in the room felt ominous now, instead of peaceful, the weight of a dozen bad decisions pressing down on him and whispering premonitions of doom.

He should leave a note, in case Dr. Hussain was right. He could make a recording to send to- who? He paused halfway through lacing up his boot and stared at the frayed end of the lace, rough between his fingers. The only people he would need to speak to were going to be waiting for him at the other end of the hall.

The other was waiting in the drift.
Teddy shook his head to force the thoughts away, and jammed his lace through the last few eyelets hard enough to fray the end further. Uniform code be damned; after this stunt, they’d be lucky if they didn’t end up in the brig for the rest of their natural lives. The plastic bag of tea leaves crinkled in his pocket, an extra reminder of the plan. Not like he needed the reminder; not after going over ever detail with Tommy that afternoon, worrying at the weak points, trying to find something, some key, that would let it all fall into place.

The hallway wasn’t as quiet as his room; the half-dimmed lights of the night shift flickered and hummed softly to themselves, and a couple of techs passed, heads bent together in conversation. They didn’t acknowledge Teddy beyond a basic nod, and he didn’t press it, slipping past and shrugging his jacket on over his t-shirt. *If I’m going to go, I’ll go out looking like a ranger.*

Tommy met him halfway down, falling into easy lockstep without blinking. Eli fell in step on the other side, flanking Teddy a half-beat off from their steps. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” Eli grumbled at them both, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders tight.

“You want to back out, Bradley?” Tommy stopped outside the dayroom, but didn’t open the door. “Chickens cross the road here.”

“Call me a chicken again and we’ll be able to tell you and Billy apart by the number of teeth.” Eli flared back at him, practically vibrating with worry rather than anger. He’d always been like that; the crankier he got the more deeply concerned about something he was, and the more powerless he felt to fix it. “I just want to know that you’ve got a real plan.”

It wasn’t a bad question, all things considered. “Unless we’ve been locked out of the ready room, our part’s not difficult,” Teddy replied instead, stepping forward so that his shoulder was angled between the two of them. It wouldn’t do much if one went for the other’s throat, but at least he could get in there before things went entirely to hell. “I can get Tommy in to his suit and he can do mine. It’s the rest of it that’ll be tricky. LOCCENT will be worse than medical.”

The door at the end of the hallway opened and a figure approached through the half-darkness. Short, short-ish hair, wearing a skirt instead of a uniform; she passed under one of the lamps and the shadows picked out the contours of Wendy Kawasaki’s face. Eli drew himself up and tugged at the hem of his shirt, fidgeting with his belt before dropping his hands again. *Oh really, now.*

Tommy nodded to her, grinning. “Under control.”

Wendy’s eyebrow arced in a perfectly sceptical bow and her fingers drummed on the clipboard under her arm, but she nodded to all of them. It might have been a trick of the light, the smile that touched her eyes when she looked at Eli, but then again, it might not. “Is this it?” She did ask. “You promised me a real team.”

“After you,” Tommy gestured at the door, the thin line of light coming from underneath it a beacon of hope.

“How did you get sucked into this?” Eli was asking Wendy quietly as Teddy headed for the door and pushed it open.

“Amazingly enough, Tom asked nicely. You think I enjoy letting you guys do all the fun stuff?” Wendy answered, and Teddy hid a grin. His pulse jumped, his heart starting to race, and he scrubbed his palms along the thighs of his pants to clear the faint sensation of sweat.

Joe, Kate and America stood talking quietly in the far corner of the room, Cassie nowhere to be seen. America partially hid a fourth person that Teddy couldn’t identify, not until he stepped into the room
and the mystery person turned to face him.

David.

Teddy caught Tommy’s arm. “That’s what you meant when you said getting into LOCCENT wouldn’t be a problem?”

“He can get us in without setting off any alarms,” Tommy said, and it was perfectly logical and perfectly awful. “And he owes me one.”

He owed Tommy a lot more than that, considering. “He ratted Banner out to Dr. Hussain, and he was ready to let Billy die this morning!”

“And now he isn’t.”

“Look,” David said from next to Teddy’s elbow. Teddy wheeled around, ready to confront him, clenching his fist. “I like Billy, alright? I don’t want him to die any more than you do.” David kept talking, his hands up and ready to ward off the blow. He looked like he meant it, damn him, and Teddy forced himself to drop his arm. Joe moved into his peripheral vision, his arms folded and his gaze steady over his little round glasses.

“So this isn’t because I turned you down, or because of how I feel about-“ he almost said ‘Billy,’ almost tipped his hand, but stumbled over the word just in time. “-my co-pilot?” There. David flinched, like he wasn’t buying it. “The way you were talking this morning, I couldn’t be sure.”

David frowned, his voice dropping so that it was just the two of them in the conversation. Tommy spoke with Wendy and Eli across the room, his hands moving rapidly in the air but his eye on Teddy and David. “I’m not that petty, whatever you might think. Nothing’s changed; your plan is still way too risky.” David shook his head with vague contempt. “But no-one else on base knows these systems as well as I do. And if you’re going to be idiots anyway, I’d better be the one there ready to pull the plug and save your sorry butts.”

The joke came before he could stop it, the faint sense of relief at the growing numbers in the room overwhelming his better judgement. “You used to like my butt,” Teddy said, ducking his head as his ears pinked up. Now David was going to think he was flirting, when it was really just tension and running off at the mouth, and-

“It’s amazing how quickly ‘stupid’ trumps ‘cute,’” David said dryly. Teddy jerked his head up, startled, and met David’s eyes. The butthead was grinning.

The laugh came easy this time, more nerves than anything else, but it was something they shared and it was a new beginning.

“Yeah, whatever,” Teddy shrugged sheepishly, and David snorted. “We can’t all be Mensa candidates.”

“Try ‘ninth youngest member on record.’”

“We better get moving,” America’s voice cut in, and they moved to rejoin the group in the middle of the room. “The longer we wait around contemplating our navels, the more likely we are to get busted.”

“What’s the plan?” Joe asked, all eyes now on Tommy and Teddy.

“Same as before,” Tommy began, as Teddy shrank back inside. “Joe, you, Kate and America –
looks like we lost Cassie, hunh? – you guys and David secure LOCCENT. Nate’s got the tech and instructions you’ll need to compensate for the four-way drift in the system and patch in Billy’s end once he gets up there. Teddy and I go for Magnus.”

“Leaving Eli and Nate for medical,” David asked, because of course he hadn’t been there that afternoon. “How are you planning to get Billy out from under Dr. Hussain’s watch? She’s got eagle eyes. There’s no way you’re going to be able to spirit away one of her patients, especially not after this morning.”

“There he goes, being all logical,” said Kate.

“Maybe,” a voice sounded from the back of the room, the far door to the hallway opening. “We bring medical to him.” Cassie came in, then, her father and Tony Stark, of all people, following behind. “Don’t be mad,” she clasped her hands, “but Tony can help. You know he can.”

Scott looked pale and a little bit lost, but whatever Cassie had said to him must have worked. He caught Tommy’s eye and held it for a moment, then shrugged. Tommy nodded, and that was the end of that.

Up, down, up, down, Teddy’s stomach was starting to feel like he’d been riding a roller coaster for the last few hours, with no end in sight. He jumped in, before Tommy could say no, before David could insult anyone again, before his hope could turn into confusion one more time. “Can you do that?” he asked, and from the surprise on Stark’s face, he figured Stark must have been pretty sure that he was going to have to fight for it. “You’re talking about wiring Billy in to the pons and connecting him from there, aren’t you?” Mensa that, Alleyne.

Stark just grinned. “As long as no-one’s revoked my command codes, we’re a go.”

“And if they have?” That was David, unimpressed.

“Then I’ll need an extra two minutes to get myself some new ones. Are we doing this, or not?”

“I do believe that we are. Now, unless we want to miss that shift change.” Joe tapped at the watch on his wrist in warning.

“We should have half an hour,” Wendy said, from her perch on the back of the couch beside Eli. “Before Carol or Colonel Rhodes notice that something’s off and rain hellfire down on us, so let’s make this snappy.”

The teams began to break off, Nate speaking to Eli, Wendy and Stark with grand gestures, David leading his group away. Scott approached, looking less grey around the gills. “What’s my part?”

“Come to the ready room with us.” Teddy didn’t hesitate. “We could use an extra pair of hands down there. And a teapot.”

“Down the rabbit hole for real, eh boys?” Scott asked, but there was something in his face that looked... hungry, almost, or wistful.

“Go big or go home, old man,” Tommy answered, and he began to move for the door. Teddy fell in behind him, the hallway stretching down both directions, dim and empty again. “We’re only going to get one shot at this, so we better make it stick.”
Teddy had never seen the ready room dark and empty before. The stand-by indicators blinked steadily on the consoles, a dozen amber fireflies in the dimmed half-light. Consoles made shadows against the steel-grey walls in the glow coming in from the open door behind him, vast blocks of darkness that stretched up to the ceiling. He caught himself looking for Kitty and Doug, for the half-dozen other techs who had made Magnus Echo and her pilots their life’s work. They’d be asleep now, their ears half-tuned for the alarm from LOCCENT, waiting in dreams for the call to action. It would be a very different alarm that woke them this time.

“‘I’m sorry,’” Teddy muttered under his breath. *Here’s hoping you guys don’t get in trouble because of us.*

Scott and Tommy made beelines to the drivesuits, the empty armor pieces sitting in their niches along the wall like icons in a church. Tommy’s, battered and worn, with scuffs and scars, patches seared black and dull with carbon and fire. Billy’s, minus the helmet, sitting unused and unlit in the far compartment, the repairs gleaming dully in contrast to the chipped and scratched paint. Teddy’s, larger, newer, still shiny along all the connectors and edges where Tommy’s paint was chipping off.

Someone had attached a vinyl kill-marker sticker to Teddy’s chestplate, the kind you found in kids’ sticker books or toy decal sets, the stylized kaiju head shining neon yellow. Rolling googly eyes gave it the look of a deranged muppet. He laughed, couldn’t help it, and the sound broke the hush that hovered over them. Tommy half-turned as he pulled his circuit suit snug over his shoulders, his answering snicker short and sharp.

“You?” Teddy asked.

“Nope. Unlike some around here, I’m not a total dork.” Tommy grabbed his leg plates and knelt to strap them into place. Scott handed Teddy his circuit suit and waited for him to strip down, the usual ritual hurried this time and the air electric with danger that was all of their own making.

It was the stillness that made Teddy stop dressing, Scott behind him riveting his shoulder pieces into place.

Tommy was a creature of motion, his every cell and fiber alive with pulsating energy. He was as impossible to capture as a flash of lightning, bouncing on his heels when he stood, his fingers and toes tapping out coded messages to the universe.

Except now.

He stood still beside Teddy, his helmet in his hands, the feedback cradle pulsing and alight along the length of his spine.
Tommy had to be as scared as Teddy was. There were no second chances. Their synch had to be perfect, beyond strong. They’d done it once before, with Billy’s help, and before that, with Teddy’s anxiety dulled thanks to Bruce’s tea. There was no guarantee that either would have the same effect this time.

*Take nothing in, leave nothing behind.*

That was the one thing Teddy had never, ever been able to do cleanly. How did you let go of the burning, that need that drove them all, the passion and loyalty and desperate love that was pushing Tom?

For Billy’s sake, he had to try.

The soft shuffle of footsteps behind Teddy meant Scott had returned, and he only had a moment to breathe before Scott was pressing Teddy’s feedback cradle into place. His body rolled into it instinctively, hips rocking back and his back arching as the contacts locked in. Heat ran along the wires of the circuit suit, a pulsing sensation as the feedback loop built itself along every waking nerve and synapse. He huffed out a soft breath and Tommy looked up.

His eyes were wide and his lips pressed close, his skin about two shades paler than his usual faintly olive tones.

“What if?” Tommy said, and his voice caught. Only once, and only for the briefest of moments before he pulled it all in again and his jaw went hard. But it had been there, Teddy had heard it, and Scott suddenly found it Very Important to be doing something over on the other side of the room. He wasn’t so bad after all.

Teddy reached for him. He reached out and cupped his hand along Tommy’s jaw, and, since this was Tommy, not *Billy*, left it there instead of reeling him closer. Tommy grabbed him around the wrist and held him there, his thumb along the tendon and reverberating with the thrum of Teddy’s pulse.

*What if we don’t find him?* Tommy meant. Without asking, Teddy knew. That, and worse; *what if we find him and he’s too broken to fix?*

*What do I do if I know that my brother is gone?*

“He’s there,” Teddy repeated his mantra, the rock-solid surety that the smell of Billy’s hair and the insistent heat of Billy’s lips had given him.

*Faith.*

“He’s there and he’s spoken to us. We just have to go grab him and drag him home. Then you can yell at him for the next year for breaking curfew.” Tommy’s fingers tightened around Teddy’s wrist, the bones moved under his skin. He didn’t flinch, stood there and took it. If he could be nothing else, at least he could be this. A touchstone, a rock of Gibraltar, a single point of certainty. It would last only as long as Tommy wasn’t sitting inside his mind to feel his own fear, but that could be enough.

A muscle twitched in Tommy’s jaw, beneath Teddy’s hand. His teeth ground together and Teddy felt the vibrations up through his skin and into his own bones. He felt it when Tommy forced himself to relax, his face so like and unlike Billy’s all at once. Teddy left his hand there until Tommy moved, relaxing his grip on Teddy and dropping his hand to his side. White pressure-marks lingered on Teddy’s skin, four fingers and a thumb that tingled with returning sensation.

Teddy pulled his gloves on, hiding the marks before they could fade pink and vanish.
“Boys,” Scott warned them, nodding toward the clock. “We’re about to hit the mark.” Two cups of tea stood on the cold steel desktop in the corner, steam curling up into the darkness in lazy spirals.

Teddy hit the microphone on his radio, the frequency tuned to a private channel, his face reflected in the visor of the helmet that Tommy set down on the console in front of him. The curve and the shadows distorted his face into a stretched and ghoulish shape, all hollow eyes and an inhuman mouth.

“Magnus at ready-five,” he reported, in a voice calmer than he felt. *Will they be there? Or are we alone in this again? Please, oh please- “What’s your ETA?”*

“Ready in medical,” Kate’s voice answered, not Eli, and Teddy blinked. “The others have LOCCENT under control.”

“Kate?” Tommy asked, his brow furrowed.

“I want to be down here when Billy opens his eyes. Nate and Stark are up to their tits in readouts at the moment anyway.”

“Charming,” America’s voice replied after a hiss of static. “LOCCENT is locked down and secure. We’ve got about ten minutes grace until Kawasaki has to start intensively bullshitting the incoming shift, so make it go.”

“Roger that,” Teddy replied. “Making it go.”

He released the button and silence filed the room. Scott pressed a cup into his gloved hands, the thickness muting the heat from the mug and making him fumble. “Whatever happens,” Teddy said, the words pressing against the back of his lips until he had no choice but to open and let them spill everywhere.

"Shut the fuck up," Tommy warned him, cradling his own mug. The earthy smell of grass clipping and dried herbs filled Teddy’s nose. Somewhere in the haze he remembered a pine forest, dried branches crunching underfoot, and the smell of campfire smoke.

"It's been good riding with you," Teddy said anyway.

Tommy sneered. “I said shut up.” He poked Teddy in the arm. “Ass.”

“Whatever. Butt.”

Tommy clinked his mug against Teddy’s, and nodded. “Here we go.”

Teddy drank. Tommy’s adam’s apple bobbed as he tilted his head back and swallowed the tea down. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and waited impatiently for Teddy to finish draining his cup.

The swimming-through-syrup sensation came faster this time, thick and heady, the world receding and approaching at the same time. Scott opened the door, and an alarm rang somewhere in the distance. “Waiting for-“ the AI began to announce, then shut off with a garbled groan. Magnus’ conn-pod was right in front of them, five steps, three, one-

“Pilots on board,” Magnus greeted them quietly, in a voice that didn’t echo into the corridor this time. “Preparing for neural handshake, test mode engaged.”

“Hey, baby,” Tommy said openly, patting Magnus’ control panel as he passed, his hand lingering on
the contour of his rig. Teddy stepped into his position on the left, his body shuddering in anticipation as the bolts closed over the latches on his boots. His arm cradles rose up and he slipped into place, Magnus closing around him as a second skin – no, a third; a layer beyond the drivesuit that had become his armor. Only this time any dragons he had to fight were inside. His head spun.

“Countdown to neural handshake in five,” David’s voice announced. “5 – 4 - 3,”

His helmet filled with the smells of citrus and engine oil, and his body shook with the vibrations of Magnus coming to life around him. Tommy nodded at him from the other rig.

“Neural handshake initiated.”

The world doubled, overlapping not-quite-vision multiplying around him until he stood at the center of a hundred mirrored facets, Tommy’s face staring back at him from every other one.

He blinked and focused, dragged the overlapping worlds back into one stereoscopic reflection. Driftspace coalesced around him, half-in and half-over Magnus’ conn-pod, the control panel blinking its lights lazily in Teddy’s peripheral vision. The word clicked back into place, overlaid with the familiar white-blue haze of the drift.

He reached for Tommy and felt Tommy doing the same, insubstantial tendrils of thought like fingertips brushing against his skin.

“Right hemisphere, calibrated,” the AI reported. “Left hemisphere, calibrated.”

He could close his hand around Tommy’s, the feeling of contact overlaying the sensation of the gloves covering his fingers. Teddy closed his eyes and sank into the drift, the blue washing up to cover everything. Tommy’s hand grew solid in his, a heavy, weighty thing.

Tommy fit himself around the ragged edges, his own raw and bleeding places staunched where they pressed together. He expanded to fill the universe, powerful and mighty, but a chasm still sat inside, hollow, void, and aching. Waiting.

They needed one more to complete the triad. Maybe they always had.

“Two pilots engaged in neural bridge.”

He stood in the center of a white light, an empty landscape that stretched out to all horizons. A hand locked in his, the fingers slim and long. Dark hair flickered at the edge of his vision and Teddy forced himself to turn, his limbs sluggish and slow to respond. Tommy stood beside him, easy to recognize now even through his hair was dark. His smile crooked on the opposite side to Billy’s, the angles of his face sharper.

“How will we know?” Teddy asked, whispering even though there was no reason for it.

“Know what?” Tommy’s voice fell flat, with no echo in it.

“If they did it. If Billy’s ready.”

“I don’t think we can.”

Teddy nodded slowly. “Leap of faith time?”

“If you think you can handle it.”

A voice echoed somewhere in the distance. “What the hell are you doing?” Carol.
They were out of time.

Tommy pointed. “There.”

A barbed-wire fence coalesced out of the light, everything beyond it thick with shadow. The fence gleamed as they approached, their feet falling silently on a ground that was neither hard nor soft, but simply there. Spikes glittered moistly along the top of the fence, viscous-red with congealing blood.

“I-“ Tommy stopped. He held out a hand toward the fence, slowly, then jerked it back and cradled his hand to his chest. His face was stricken when he looked at Teddy, broken, his mouth contorted in a tight and twisted line of guilt. “I can’t.”

We have to. Teddy grabbed for his other hand, and Tommy pulled it away. “Yeah, you can,” Teddy said gently, instead of trying again. “Billy needs you, Tom. I can’t do this alone.”

“He doesn’t need me,” Tommy said, and his voice cracked. “I couldn’t save him, before. I couldn’t stop it. I failed, in every way that matters. I hate to break it to you buddy, but the newspapers lie. I’m no hero.”

The fence grew taller, shadows stretching across the marble landscape, black lines scratching thick and permanent gouges into the white.

“You did your best, Tommy,” Teddy said, and his own heart was breaking alongside Tommy’s. Was it Tommy’s pain or his own that burned along every vein and left his stomach distended and heavy as a bowling ball inside his gut? Did it matter? “And maybe it didn’t work then, yeah, but you’ve been alone for so long and you’re used to being two. I have your back now.”

Please.

“I’m not strong enough,” Tommy said quietly.

“I’ll be strong enough for both of us.”

Please.

Echoes of shouts filtered down as though from a hundred feet away, tinny and indistinct.

What the hell / unlock the door / unauthorized access

“We’re out of time.” Tommy shook himself free from Teddy’s grip. He faced the fence and held up his hands.

Nothing happened.

Not for a moment, anyway, long enough for the panic to set in, thick and fierce. If Tommy wasn’t strong enough to fight his own mind, his own doubts and the pain that drove him... they would be sunk. If he gave up now, they would never get another chance. Teddy held his breath, standing as close behind Tommy as Tommy would allow. He couldn’t do anything except think at him, send him strength and guard Tommy’s back like he had promised. But maybe in the unreal dreamspace of the drift, that could be enough. Power curled around them, gold and green and all but tangible, caressing fronds of light that illuminated Tommy from without as well as within.

The red oozed back up the tips of the spikes and vanished, leaving the spires clean, razor-sharp and deadly, before they too faded away. Tommy stared ahead, his eyes fixed on the shifting shadows beyond the fence. He trembled with the effort, his brow furrowed and beading with sweat, his body
rigid from strain and his hands balling into clenched, white-knuckled fists. The bars faded, dissolved away into streaks of grey mist, and then vanished. Golden light faded back to drift-blue. Tommy sagged, stumbled, then caught himself before he could fall.

The abyss loomed at their feet, a crack in the marble that extended, jagged and black, toward some distant vanishing point. “Ready?” Tommy asked, as though he were hoping Teddy would say no.

“Ready.”

Moving as one, they stepped into the void.

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“Tom?”

The chair is hard under him and the world is grey. His head hurts, it hurts so bad. “Give me something, Faiza. Anything.”

“It’s not good news.”

Tommy stops breathing, then, “No. I’d know if he were dead.”

She shakes her head, but her eyes are kind. He doesn’t want that. Anything but that. “He’s alive, but there’s been damage. We won’t know the full extent until he wakes up.”

“When? Tomorrow, next week?”

“It’s impossible to say. We’ve done everything we can to relieve the pressure on his brain; now it’s up to him.”

--

Cold water runs up the beach and crashes over his ankles. The sand is cool and squidgy between his toes, the only part of him not warm through from the baking sun.

“Squidgy isn’t a word,” Billy says, but he’s grinning, turning his face up into the sun. The light is too bright behind him; the sunset backlights Billy and blocks his face. All Teddy can see is a brilliant golden glow.

“I think you’ll find that it is,” he says, and squeezes Billy’s hand back. There’s no breeze, but the reeds along the dunes are rustling anyway. The waves roll up on the beach and slide away again, taking Teddy’s footprints with them. “Squidgy is a useful word. How else would you describe rice pudding?”

Billy pretends to think. He’s got Tommy’s wicked grin. “Cold come. But not as fun to make.”

“Oh my god, that’s gross.”

“Big bowl of come. Mmmm, bukkake.” Billy jumps aside when Teddy tries to shove him into the oncoming waves.
“You’re gross. That’s vile. I can never eat rice pudding again.”

“Not without thinking of me, anyway.”

“These days,” Teddy says, and he wipes away the tears of laughter that streak his cheeks. Is that what they’re from? Or has his face always been wet? “I don’t think of much else.”

Billy is laughing when he turns away, but not when he turns back. Blood runs down his face, pools along his collarbone. A gash behind his hairline hangs open, a flap of skin and hair oozing red.

“Where is Tommy?” he asks, and his voice bubbles with liquid, catches and breaks. “I need-“

--

“You need to go back to your room and get some sleep, Tommy. It’s been two days.”

“I’m not leaving until he wakes up. C’mon, Kate. Do you really want the first thing Billy sees to be some random nurse with a catheter or a syringe? He’s going to think he’s in hell.”

Kate sits down next to him, and who asked for her input anyway? “Unless you can get that hottie from third shift to be the one on duty. I don’t think he’d mind that.”

“Seriously?” Why won’t she just go away and leave him and Billy alone? Except if she did, there would be no sound at all except the hiss and beep of the machines.

Maybe it would be better if she stayed. He’s not going to ask.

“Great ass, nice arms and a spongebath. What more does a guy need?”

“Hah-hah funny.”

“Would you let me help? For once in your sorry life?” She puts her hand on his arm and she’s everything, everything and nothing because she doesn’t want to be anything. Not to him.

He hurts, and he wants her to hurt too. “You’re the one who dumped me, Katydid. Why are you doing this?”

“Because we’re friends, dummy. And just because shit happened, it doesn’t mean I stopped caring. You get that, right?”

It’s a damn good thing that Kate is smarter than he is, or wiser, or maybe just a lot more willing to take his shit. “Yeah. Sure.” He can’t look her in the eye. He does anyway.

“Go, Tommy. At least shower and change, okay? I’ll sit with him until you come back.”

“You won’t leave him alone?”

“Not for a second.”

He believes her. She hugs him close, and he puts his head on her shoulder. Just once. Just for a moment. He believes her that things will turn out right.
"I thought the drift was silence?"

Joe smiles, steeps his fingers and leans back in his chair. It creaks alarmingly under his weight. “That’s the easy way; show nothing, fear nothing, want nothing. It’s a very Buddhist way of looking at things.”

"You don’t agree, obviously." Teddy rests his chin on his knees, tucked up against his chest. The barracks rooms are small and spartan, but Joe and Eli make them feel like home.

"Why do you think family make the most compatible partners?"

"Because brains are similar, or you’ve got familiar backgrounds and expectations. Except that doesn’t always apply to lovers or friend-pairs, does it?” He frowns as he thinks; Uncle Joe grins. "Trust, then. You have to trust them not to hurt you." That itself hurts. He’d been so wrong.

"And have you ever known family, born or chosen, who don’t have a thousand built-in triggers and problems with each other? No-one makes us as happy, or as angry, as the people we know the best." Joe looks up; he’s looking at a framed photo on the desk, him, Eli, Eli’s mom, Gramma Faith. He smiles.

"The drift may work with silence, but the best, deepest bond is fuelled by love."

--

“We need some help over here!” The cacophony on the radio is brutal and confusing, too many voices saying too many things that overlap and contradict. Teddy’s in his rig, Tommy’s on the other side, but they’re in the ocean, not the Shatterdome.

Weren’t they supposed to be in the Shatterdome? Nate was putting Billy into the pons, to-No – why would they be? They’re in the water and they’re fighting Honne-Onna. His twin is in the left rig, just where he’s supposed to be, and even though they were at each other’s throats before, even though he can feel the anger bubbling away, he’s put it aside for now. Right now they have a chance to let that power out, let it go where it can be useful.

He’s Teddy, but he’s Billy, the two layered on each other with no beginning and no end.

Honne-Onna rises.

The conn-pod jolts and shakes around him, his rig jars and something’s wrong, something’s come loose. They were hit too hard and now he’s falling. The sound of Magnus tearing at her seams burns into his brain along with the ripping-shredding-shrieking pain that sings through his arm-hand-head.

Something cracks against his skull, the pain shatters the word into sparks of white. He sees Tommy through a veil of red.

His face feels wet. Is he crying?

“We need some help over here!”
“Magnus is down!”

“Repeat. Magnus is down.”

--

There should have been birds, gulls and herons wheeling overhead in the cerulean blue sky.

Umbrellas too, dotting the beach, along with trails of footprints and remnants of picnics left strewn across the hard-packed white sand.

The water stretched on into eternity in front of him, blue-grey and intangible, whitecaps appearing in the distance before falling to be consumed by the wake that gave them birth.

The pounding of the surf mingled with the harsh echo of Teddy’s breathing, the two sounds ricocheting around inside his helmet, a hurricane wind to match his churning thoughts.

A shadow moved on his right side. Tommy stood beside him on the beach, his drivesuit covering everything except his head, his helmet tucked underneath his arm. A starter’s pistol echoed in the distance and Tommy’s head whipped around, his eyes bright.

Teddy’s helmet faded away, his vision clearing as the blinders fell away. The drift gave him cargos and a t-shirt, not the PPDC uniform he had lived in for so long that it had become a second, so-familiar skin.

A crowd cheered, their voices carried on the wind, applauding for the victory of the fastest boy in town. Tommy leaned into the breeze and the sound, a flower turning to the sun’s warmth.

Teddy turned around, scanning the horizon and the beach. They were here to look for someone; there was supposed to be someone else here.

A sandcastle lay in ruins halfway between the water and the damp high-tide line, a paper flag half-buried under the crumbled retaining wall. Teddy walked toward it, bent and brushed the sand away from the paper banner. Magnus Echo’s logo blazed back at him, silver and red and green, the curlicues spiralling under and around the name in patterns so familiar he could draw them in his sleep.

Teddy picked it up, the flagpole a gnarled twig broken from a maple tree. There shouldn’t have been any trees at the beach; where did the sandcastle builder find a twig? The breeze picked up again, bringing with it the smell of sea and salt, the green acridity of low tide, and over it all, the burn and heat of cloves.

The sand in front of him had changed, the beige-white beach ending, only to be replaced by a field of green grass. Billy’s climbing tree stretched its branches out across the otherwise-empty clearing, the leaves fresh and green and thick as springtime. A treehouse sat in the upper branches now, the rope ladder hanging down the thick and solid trunk in open invitation.

Billy. The name came back to him and so did everything else, a rush of memory that sharpened and narrowed his focus. Mission Billy gotta save gotta find not enough time!

“Do you think he’s in there?” Teddy asked the presence at his elbow.

Tommy nodded, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, his baggy hoodie falling down over his waist and hips to hide them. “It’s his thinking place. He was always hiding up there, with his comic books and trading cards.”
“It’s time he stopped hiding.” Teddy took a step but Tommy was already in front of him, running across the field, swift and wild as the wind.

He took another step and the tree was right in front of him, the ladder in his hands. Teddy scaled the wooden rungs carefully, the ladder shaking with every step. It wanted him and didn’t at the same time, the tree moving to bring him closer, somehow, the ladder trying to throw him down.

The door to the treehouse loomed above him, dark and forbidding. Shadows lurked and drifted in uneasy and unnatural shapes, tendrils and long fingers reaching out, brushing against his clothing and then drawing back.

Too dark, turn back, too much! You don’t belong here, don’t belong, not wanted not here go away; no-one sees you, no-one loves you, you’re alone and will always be alone-

It wasn’t his own voice, that much he knew, the low and insistent whispering a constant hum in the back of his mind. They would push him away, came the unbidden thought; they would push and he would fall, would break against the ground and die in the drift.

Not today, I won’t.

Teddy braced his arms on the rough wooden boards of the floor and shoved himself up and in, his knees scraping against the unfinished edges.

The shadows shattered.

Inside, the treehouse looked surprisingly comfortable, a Captain America sleeping bag thrown over an old mattress pushed up against one wall. A camp lantern shed a soft golden glow over the small room, milk crates standing in for bookshelves and covered with stacks of trades and dog-eared novels.

A copy of Return of the King sat beside the bed, a bookmark tucked in place.

The boy sitting in the corner, his knees pulled up to his chest, couldn’t have been more than sixteen. Black hair flopped over his brow, tumbled and messy. His olive-golden skin was grey-cast underneath, dark rings under his deep brown eyes betraying his exhaustion. The bandage taped over his temple was clean, but his jeans and sweater were frayed and muddy at the hems.

Teddy stared and Billy stared back. “Sixteen was a good year,” Billy said.

Teddy would have loved him then.

“I’m Luke Skywalker,” Teddy offered, standing and holding out his hand. Real? Are you real? Please tell me you’re real and you’re here, and that this is almost over. “I’m here to rescue you.”

Billy curled his legs underneath himself and stood, slowly, unwinding as though the movement hurt in all his joints. “Aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?”

He loved him now.

The room shifted and Billy looked behind Teddy, behind and away. Then he was running, and Tommy was running as well. The twins collided in the center of a vast white room, the faint and familiar sounds of medical equipment and monitors cutting through the hush. Their arms went around each other and Billy buried his head in Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy saw Teddy looking and turned his face away, turned it toward Billy and pressed their foreheads together. Dark and light, mirror-images and photo-negatives of each other, the twins whispered together as though no-one else
existed in the world.

Teddy backed away.

That was it, wasn’t it? The way this would end. Not with a bang, or a KIA on his record, not with a hero’s welcome or the bits and pieces of the family he had started to imagine that he deserved.

Tommy and Billy belonged as co-pilots together. That was what he had been trying to fix, after all, and now they were that much closer.

Teddy took another step. All they had left to do was resurface, bring Billy back up, and then it would all be over. The Maximoffs would be co-pilots again, and Teddy would be extra. Superfluous.

There’s no room for nine rangers.

It was the right thing to do. That didn’t make it hurt any less.

The twins unwound from around each other, and Billy had changed. He matched Tommy’s height now, no longer gangly, or all knees and elbows. His hair curled a little around the back of his neck, and the white of his hospital scrubs made it look that much darker. Red sores opened on his arms where his IVs would go, the flesh melting away from his bones until he stood there as skinny and pale as he had been that first day Teddy had sat beside his bed in medical and listened to the soft susurrations of his breathing.

Tommy and Billy stared at one another, one long look, and then Billy let go of Tommy’s hand. Billy held his hand out to Teddy, his other sitting on Tommy’s arm, and the two of them waited.

For him.

He should walk away, leave the brothers to their reunion, bring them up out of the drift with him and leave them be.

He couldn’t be that selfless. He wasn’t that good of a person.

Teddy took Billy’s hand.

Tommy stepped back, his finger still linked in one of Billy’s. Billy tugged and drew him in. His hand was cool in Teddy’s, their fingers interlocking as naturally as breathing. His body was a line of heat against Teddy’s as he pressed in, Billy’s shoulders, chest, legs tight against Teddy’s and so achingly familiar. He had kissed those thighs, stroked his skin and tasted every inch of him in their intertwined dreams.

His free hand slipped into Billy’s hair, his palm resting lightly along the angle of his jaw. Billy tipped his chin up without words, his lips parting in invitation. Teddy kissed him, a tentative brush of lips that went no further, that didn’t need to. They melted into each other, fire and water, muscle and steel, the dream and the dreamer.

“Alright already,” Tommy grumbled, but his hand found its way to Teddy’s shoulder and stayed there, completing the circle. “Save it for the honeymoon.”

Teddy broke away first, Billy leaning into his mouth to steal one last press of lips before it was over. Teddy stared into Billy’s eyes, into the light of a galaxy that burned in the core. He fell into them and would keep falling, every day forever. He dragged the pad of his thumb lightly over the swell of Billy’s bottom lip.
“Teddy-” Billy began. A trickle of blood ran down his hand from the open wound on his wrist, vanishing before it hit the marble-white floor.

"You've been dreaming," Teddy said softly.

Billy’s eyes closed, exhaustion and grief written in every new line on his face. “I know.”

“It's time to wake up.”

Billy nodded, his eyes still shut. “I'm so tired,” he confessed, soft and guilty.

“We got this, baby brother.” Tommy had them, then, took both their hands and kicked. He kicked against the floor, against the walls, pushed off against the air itself and they were falling/flying, arcing through water that was clouds and sky together in one.

They crested, hand in hand in hand, the marble walls splintering and dropping away. The world was brilliant blue, arcing with power. The hands in Teddy’s faded away, mist slipping between his fingers the tighter he clung.

Noise filtered in through the water in his ears, a radio crackling somewhere in the vast and empty distance. Teddy’s arms and legs sank, heavy, weighted down by stone and metal that could move mountains. His head spun, thick and sore, spears of light lancing into his eyes when he tried to force them open.

“Unplug them, goddammit! I don’t give a shit about failsafes.”

“What in the hell do they think they’re doing?”

“Exactly what you told them not to do.”

“Raise your hands anyone actually surprised by this.”

“Shut up, Tony.”

Too much; Teddy sagged against the cradle of his rig and let Magnus take his weight, his fingers and toes tingling from the faint pulsing of the circuit suit. He should move, needed to go- somewhere – needed to see, to know, to be reassured that it had all been worthwhile. His brain was empty, hollow; Tommy, Billy, Magnus; all of them were gone, the bridge dissolved.

“Allahu akbar! We have brain activity.”

“Holy shit they did it.”

“They did something. I need a critical care team in here, stat.”

“Someone get those assholes out of my Jaeger!”

Teddy closed his eyes and let the darkness swim up to meet him.

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It wasn’t Billy’s heart rate sounding in his ears; it was stronger, steadier, more familiar. Teddy curled his fingers and found crisp sheets beneath him. The pinching sensation on his finger was a clip that he shook loose, and the beeping changed to a loud, clear tone.
It shut off, something clicking in the background. “Welcome back.” Eli had a curl to his voice, one that would match the curl Teddy would see in his lip if he opened his eyes. He knew that sound. It meant Eli felt safe enough to snark him, and that meant he wasn’t dying. Probably.

His head kind of wanted to dispute that.

One eye, then the next; the light was dim, but there was enough to make out the shapes of the door, the chairs beside his hospital bed, the IV stand next to him that was slowly leaking something clear into a needle in his hand. *Neural overload*, Dr. Hussain had said. *Brain damage*. Teddy struggled to sit up, needles behind his eyes plucking at the nerve endings in his brain. *Did the brain have nerve endings?* He remembered reading somewhere that it didn’t. His did now. His tongue was thick in his mouth, his lips dry. Eli passed him a glass with a bendy straw and held it steady to Teddy could drink.

“How long was I out?” He asked, a coil of fear winding its way up inside of him and tangling his stomach in knots. *Months? Eli doesn’t look any different. But, he was born old and cranky, so who could really tell?*

Eli looked at him quizzically; he must have caught the tremor in Teddy’s voice. “About six hours, give or take.” He definitely noticed the sag in Teddy’s shoulders as the tension rushed out of him.

Six hours; that meant it was – what? Barely coming up on breakfast time, considering when they … when they had… “I don’t remember getting here,” Teddy confessed. He sat up, and his head didn’t hurt nearly as bad as it had a moment ago. The water must have helped. He and Tommy had been in Magnus, that much he knew.

“I’m not surprised. You were both mostly unconscious and freaking out when they pulled you out of Magnus. Dr. Hussain had to trank you so Nate and Stark could crack you out of the drivesuit.” Eli said, almost perversely satisfied.

Teddy gaped at him, then forced his mouth shut. Drugs would explain the headache, at least. “You’re kidding,” he said, just to be sure.

“I’m not. I almost had to give you mouth-to-mouth. It was traumatic.”

“And Tommy?”

“I didn’t give him mouth-to-mouth either.”

“Funny.” Teddy scowled at him and that must have gotten through, because Eli dropped the teasing grin. “What about Tommy, Eli? And Billy?”

“Tom’s fine,” Eli promised him, but then that damned grumpy grin came back. “Well, ‘fine’ being a relative term. He’s no more brain-damaged than he was yesterday. Which isn’t saying much.”

He still wasn’t answering the other half of the question. Was he avoiding it? Had nothing changed? He might not be able to remember everything that had happened after they started to come out of the drift but he knew for sure that he had heard something, had felt a surge of elation, raw and wonderful, as the conn-pod had coalesced around them again.

“Eli,” Teddy said, raw and wounded, his heart bleeding. “How is Billy?”

“Awake,” Eli said softly.

He said other things after that but Teddy didn’t hear them, those two perfect, amazing syllables
bouncing around in his brain. Awake. He’s awake. We did it. He needed the IV out – that was easy enough. One sharp yank and it was out, the sting and bead of blood that welled up at the site totally, utterly inconsequential. He stumbled out of bed and that presented problem number two, beyond the exhaustion trembling in his legs. His ass was hanging in the wind, the hospital gown worse than nothing at all. A clean pair of uniform pants and a t-shirt sat on the chair beside his bed, neatly stacked in Eli’s tell-tale triple-fold. That worked. “What the hell are you doing?”

Putting on pants.” Teddy pulled them up – too bad Eli had forgotten about boxers – and shrugged his shirt over his head. A commotion in the hall outside meant that someone had finally noticed that he’d unplugged himself, and that gave him only a few seconds to make his getaway. Spending the next two hours being poked and prodded without any idea of what was going on outside, without seeing Billy and Tommy for himself... no. That wasn’t going to happen.

“Like we’re not in enough trouble already? Some of those orderlies could fold you in half.”

“If you have to, Eli. I have to see.” Teddy gave up trying to tuck his shirt in and pulled his boots on over his bare feet. Eli didn’t object again. When Teddy stood up and looked at him, Eli just shook his head and smiled that rueful, kind of sardonic grin that he always had when Teddy was being a harmless sort of idiot.

If he’d died, if he and Tom hadn’t managed to pull it off... Eli’s ‘you suck but I love you anyway’ smile was one thing Teddy would never have seen again.

Caught up in impulse, and a rush of desperate affection, Teddy grabbed Eli’s face in his hands. Eli yelped, and Teddy pressed a noisy, smacking kiss on the top of Eli’s shaved head.

“Get off,” Eli grumped from under Teddy’s arm, and he laid a pointy elbow in the middle of Teddy’s ribs. “I’ll hold off the horde, just get your butt out of here before the nurses catch you. They put Tommy in Billy’s room.”

Subtle wasn’t going to fly this time, so Teddy opened the door and ran. There weren’t a lot of places they could have put him, so it wasn’t hard to get his bearings- he swerved around the nurse’s station and ignored the yell, skidding to a stop outside Billy’s door. It was partly open and there were voices, one Tommy’s, the other barely a hoarse whisper.

The edge of the bed was visible from the doorway and Teddy couldn’t go in; he couldn’t do it. The slender hand on the blankets was still filled with IV needles and tape, but it lay at a different angle. He could see bent knees if he looked a little further in, Tommy sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed.

“Did you call mom?”

“I called. She cried at me a lot. You owe me.”

“More than when I crashed the car. I know.”

The longer he stood there the longer he could pretend that it would all be alright after all. Billy would recognize him, would remember the conversations Teddy imagined they’d had. Tommy would still need him by his side, would want him to stay his co-pilot.

The longer he waited before he went in, the longer he could pretend that he still belonged with them.

“Ranger Altman!” The nurse at the end of the hall folded his arms over his chest and glared him down. Teddy straightened up hurriedly, but not before he saw movement from inside.
“Get your ass in here, Theodore,” Tommy called out. “Unless you’re getting off on the whole lurking thing.”

Caught between the Maximoffs and a nurse who didn’t seem inclined to be gentle with his follow-up exam, Teddy picked the best of two bad situations. He ducked his head and slipped into Billy’s room, closing the door behind him. He stood there for a second, gathering his thoughts, then with a shaky exhale that betrayed everything he wished desperately that he could keep hidden, he turned and looked.

Billy sat propped up in his bed, the head of it raised just enough to let him see the room. Two new IV bags hung from the poles of his bed, the medications different eighteen-syllable names than before. The infirmary pajamas hung loosely on him, betraying the weight loss that even the tube feeding hadn’t managed to entirely prevent. His jaw was shaded dark with the day’s stubble that no-one had thought to remove, but there was color in his cheeks and his wide, dark eyes were open.

He had ridiculous eyelashes, long and sweeping, practically casting shadows on the sharp angles of his cheekbones.

Tommy sat on the end of Billy’s bed, his legs curled underneath him and one hand laced through Billy’s. He’d changed somewhere in the past six hours as well, gym clothes replacing whatever they’d put him in after being dragged out of Magnus. He looked back and forth between Billy and Teddy with a grin that changed from surprised to knowing and a little bit evil, and Teddy should have been worried.

He might have been, if he could stop looking at Billy long enough to think. But his brain was full of white noise, and all he could see was a thousand replays of his dreams, of the dappled shadows of the leaves falling across Billy’s face as they sat on the branch in his tree. Of the sure flick of his hands as he skipped a rock across the water at the beach. Of the way his entire face and body lit up when he laughed, his total lack of self-consciousness with his head thrown back and his eyes fierce with joy.

This man, this Billy, sitting in the bed and holding his brother’s hand – he looked back at Teddy, with slow and dawning realization in his eyes.

Billy moistened his lips and Teddy couldn’t help looking, watching the flicker of his tongue and the gleam on his bottom lip after. “I do know you,” Billy said. The slow and whispered revelation had the impact of a nuclear bomb. “I know you,” he repeated, more assuredly this time, “Teddy Altman.” And he smiled. He held out his hand, the one not taken up by Tommy’s palm.

It was him. Teddy crossed the floor in less than two steps, seizing Billy’s extended hand before he could change his mind and take it away again. Billy laughed, a brief jolt of delight that devolved into coughing and Tommy diving for the glass of water at his bedside, and Billy laced his fingers securely through Teddy’s. He would have had to break something to take his hand away now; there was no way he was going to try.

When the dust settled and Billy was breathing properly again, Tommy was perching on the opposite side of his bed, Billy had rolled to his side, and Teddy was sliding up the bed. He picked his way carefully between the wires and tubes that still ran off of Billy, connecting him to machines that would soon be totally, utterly unnecessary.

Billy traced the angles and curves of Teddy’s face with a curious fingertip, pausing with the pad of his finger gently resting on the swell of Teddy’s lower lip. “How much of what we saw was the same, do you think?” He asked, and Teddy had to lean in a little to hear properly.
“Not sure,” Teddy admitted, and Billy’s finger moved with Teddy’s mouth. “We’ll have to compare notes.”

“I remember this,” Billy offered, and he tilted his head. The first brush of his lips against Teddy’s should have come as a surprise, but somehow, the line of Billy’s body pressed against him in the narrow confined of his hospital bed, the metal rail digging into the small of Teddy’s back, and Billy’s twin brother making gagging noises over on the other side-

Somehow none of it was surprising at all.

Teddy parted his lips and breathed Billy in, every particle of him soaking in to Teddy’s skin. He clutched at Billy’s hip through the thin sheets and his pajamas, cupped and traced the jut of his hipbone. Billy took the invitation and deepened the kiss, still only lips, still so gentle, but the heat and pressure there were enough, sweet familiar promises of what was eventually to come.

The door opened, and Teddy didn’t bother to open his eyes. He heard Tommy say “just work around them, Doc,” and he slid his arm close and tight around Billy’s waist. He wasn’t breakable; never that, but everything was so precariously balanced that it seemed the slightest move, the softest breath out of place, and it would all shatter.

A conversation was happening behind them, and it couldn’t be less important. Billy curled in, pressing his hand flat against the center of Teddy’s chest, a gesture of security and trust that drove a stake into Teddy’s heart and filled his stomach with butterflies all at once.

“I’ve got your R2 unit,” he murmured softly, just to see, just to know. “I’m here with Ben Kenobi.”

“Ben Kenobi?” Billy murmured, and there was that brilliant and joy-filled smile again, his hair tumbling down into his eyes the way it did when he was sixteen. He wouldn’t be like that again, not for Teddy; now they would always be synchronized. “Where?”

“Physiotherapy,” Dr. Hussain said behind them, and Billy sighed so deeply that his entire body lifted with the breath. Teddy settled back on his elbow and tried to force himself to pay attention. Tommy was nodding along. “Cognitive therapy, speech therapy, a very carefully monitored exercise program to reverse the muscle atrophy. And that’s for starters. It’s going to take months of work to get back to functioning normally, never mind piloting.”

Billy tried to push himself up, his arms trembling with the effort. Teddy slid an arm underneath him and lifted so that Billy was sitting up almost all the way and leaning back against Teddy’s chest, warm and solid. “What about piloting,” he asked, scratchy and faint. He coughed and his ribcage shook with it.

“William, I’m sorry,” Dr. Hussain shook her head. “It’s much too early to say. The amount of physical strength that’s required, not to mention the serious possibility of PTSD from your experience – it could take years to get back up to effective strength, and that’s just the physical side.”

Billy nodded, the tension in his shoulders and back a palpable shift, his brow creasing. “But it’s not impossible,” he asked. Tommy folded his arms and frowned, and that stillness was coming over his eyes again, that look that said ‘I’m feeling things that you’ll never get to see.’

“We’ll see as we get further into your recovery.” And that was all she would say. “For now Carol wants to keep Ted assigned to Magnus. We’re just grateful to have you back with us.”

The rest was scheduling, and checking Billy’s vitals, and Teddy gladly tuned out in favour of studying Billy and the cautious way he moved, muscles unfamiliar and strange; and watching
Tommy, who alternated between yawning in ostensible boredom and watching the proceedings with an eagle eye from beneath half-closed eyelids.

Dr. Hussain left, finally, with threats at Teddy and at Tommy, and orders to leave Billy alone to let him sleep. Teddy crawled back in alongside Billy at his patted invitation. Billy curled around him gingerly, his movements as slow and cautious as an elderly man’s. Teddy kissed Billy on the top of his head, hospital smell be damned.

Tommy sprawled out on his cot on the far side, made a face and a gagging noise at the pair of them. “Dudes. Gross. Promise me you’ll figure out how to keep me out of this next time I need to drift with one of you.”

Billy snorted, his head pillowed on Teddy’s chest, and his eyes closed. “Consider it payback.”

“For what?” Tommy asked, wounded.

“Lisa,” Billy said, grinning. “And Kitty, and Kate... I know way, way more about the icky heterosexual lifestyle than I ever needed, thanks to you. You can suck it.”

“You left out America,” Teddy added, just for completeness’ sake.

“Hunh. Didn’t see that one coming.”

“I don’t think anyone did.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, but when Teddy looked, he was grinning. “You’re just jealous of my game.”

“Nah,” Teddy replied. “I’m good.” He ran his hand down Billy’s back, soothing the tension in his shoulders, idly counting the bumps of his spine. He was here, true, but for how long? Months would go quickly, quicker than it seemed now at the beginning of it all, and eventually the other shoe would drop. “Sooner or later we are going to have to talk about this,” he said into the silence, and Tommy lifted his head from his pillow with a frown. “Once you’re better,” Teddy said to Billy. “I’ll be—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Tommy said firmly, as though that was the end of that. “We’re a team, Altman, and teams stick together. Besides,” he stretched his arms out over his head and lay back, relaxed like he didn’t have a care in the world. “There’s no guarantee that this loser won’t find himself on the wrong end of a fist again, and then where will we be?”

“I feel like I should protest,” Billy whispered, “but I like Tommy’s plan.”

“I’m recording that for posterity,” Tommy sniped easily. “For next time you feel like giving me grief.”

It was so easy to believe him, to fall into the easy banter and let the reality of Billy, awake and in his arms, lull him into acceptance.

“We should have Carol call someone at the Chinese Shatterdome,” Tommy finished off-handedly, but the gleam in his eyes betrayed his interest. “I heard a rumour from Stark that they’re working on a design for a three-fer.”

And there was a thought, no decisions needed, no going back to being an extra, unneeded and superfluous. The three of them had been drifting together for months already, when you came down to it; there would be no questions about compatibility. The only thing needed now was for Billy to get better, to heal his body as they’d started to heal his mind.
“I call shotgun,” Billy murmured. Teddy wrapped his arms around him, Tommy teased him from the cot, and the beep of the monitor was as soothing and familiar as it had once been a pounding metronome that counted down the moments to disaster.

For the first time in who knew how long, a wave of peace crashed over him. They weren’t home free, not by a long shot, but this also wasn’t the ending. It was the beginning of a whole new and incredible dream, a vision of a world he had never imagined he could have. Exhaustion tugged at him, sleep pulling him under, and Teddy let himself sink down into it. Will I dream of you again? Perhaps not. But he would be there when Teddy woke up, this time. The future would be colored gold and green, silver and blue, and the dark chocolate brown of the world’s most gorgeous eyes.

He closed his eyes, Billy pressed against him and their limbs in a hopeless tangle, and fell into a peaceful, easy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who’s come along on this wild ride with me! I certainly didn't set out to write anything nearly this long when I started outlining, and your comments and reviews have been the best thing ever. Thank you so much.

There is technically another part, but it's visuals, not story. Clicky!

Come play with me on tumblr!
I had a bit of fun with the Jaeger Generator.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!