And the Sky Bleeds Red

by Ardatli

Summary

Six months after the fight with the Category 3 Kaiju dubbed Honne-Onna, Pan Pacific Defense Corps Ranger Will Maximoff woke from his coma to find the world had moved on without him.

A sequel to He Dreams in Kaiju Blue.

Notes

With so many thank-yous to my beta readers for the first draft, MTYami, Xander and waitinginthepen. The rating on this one is more explicit than the last, mostly by virtue of the fact that everyone's actually conscious in this story.

There’s no official update schedule for this one, but the goal is to have it complete by the time PacRim2 drops on us.
Prologue

“Data stream, compiling.”

The soothing voice of the base’s AI faded into the background of the lab’s usual hum, the electronic whir and pulse of a dozen different mainframes and experimental boxes the soundtrack of Nate’s daily life. There was only one set of results he was interested in right now, the jumbled mess of compiled EEGs refusing to coalesce into a logical narrative.

He wasn’t a doctor, wasn’t looking for the medical reality behind the numbers—his interest was in the technical readouts that accompanied William Maximoff’s recorded brainwaves.

He had literal gigs worth of intermittently recorded brain scans from the six months the Ranger had been in a coma and the readouts from every system on his Jaeger from the same time frame, and was still no closer to figuring it out.

Somewhere in there was the key to a question that had been dogging Nate ever since Tommy and Teddy had burst into his lab with their utterly ridiculous theory. The one that had turned out to be true, in every sense of the word.

Billy’s trapped inside Magnus Echo. He’s stuck in the drift.

It had explained everything and nothing all at the same time.

And then they’d done it, that pair of insane assholes. They’d gone into the drift, connected to each other, to Magnus Echo and Billy’s unconscious self. And they’d brought Billy back from a catatonic state so deep that medical science had already given up.

Except driftspace wasn’t real. It was an imagined construct created by the human brain to explain the process of neural synchronization, a kind of waking daydream. The mind liked to have fixed points and references, so it provided them.

And this was the point that Nate kept coming back around to, over and over again in the months that had followed.

If driftspace wasn’t real, and if there was no metaphysical connection between a synchronized human brain and a Jaeger’s hard drive-

If consciousness itself was merely a function of electrical activity running through a compilation of grey matter and neurons-

Then what the hell had happened to Billy?

He’d watched the entire thing play out, and still couldn’t begin to explain. And that wasn’t good enough.

Nate drummed his fingers on the desktop, watching the graphs join, overlay, spin and expand in the air above it. The anomalies burned bright fuchsia against the green of flat-lined brainwaves, taunting him with their inscrutability.

It wasn’t solely a matter of professional pride, either. Billy was still in recovery. Four months in, and he was only recently able to take a flight of stairs without having to stop and catch his breath.

Diminished lung capacity, muscle atrophy, reduced bone density, the beginning of multiple organ
But one day he was going to want to fight again, to synchronize with Magnus Echo again. And Nate was going to have to be able to prove that it was safe.

Nate swept his hand through the flickering projection and closed down the series before the computer could finish running her commands. He was missing vital information, a hidden variable.

There was one option for that, though Marshal Danvers would skin him alive if she found out he was going to access those kinds of sites from the Shatterdome’s computers.

It was a human constant. The first few things anyone tried with new technology—no matter what it was, no matter how exclusive or expensive—were always the same. The illegal uses of pons systems were many and varied, and all of them were available on the dark web.

Nate called up a secure reader, triggered the VPN that would let him tunnel out of the base’s internal systems without setting off the guardians and anti-intrusion programs. Tony had used the same sort of programs to tap into the Shatterdome’s video feeds, and it was child’s play to take it out the other way.

If there was any information to be had about the energy released when someone died—or came close to death—while connected to a pons system, it would be found here in the asscrack of the information highway.

Someone, somewhere, had seen something similar. No Rangers, Nate had checked every one of the PPDC’s databases for that. But sex and death—that sort of thing made big money.

He regretted his decision reasonably quickly, some of the images and descriptions he came across burning their way past his eyelids and into his visual cortex. He’d have nightmares about some of that later. For now, though—Nate reached for his coffee, long since gone cold, and slurped from the edge, not taking his eyes off of the projection.

It took him an hour of digging, of sending his searches down three dozen different horrific rabbitholes, before he hit upon something that seemed promising. Another hour and he had a contact name.

Fg563421: looking for the lovelace recordings

BlinDManBluff21: you sure? That shit’s deep

Fg563421: do you have the files or not?

BlinDManBluff21: transfer the payment first – link’s gonna pop for you now

It wasn’t espionage in the service of king and country, but the thrill of acquisition, of success, of winning was enough to make Nate complete the transaction without a second thought. Or at least a third one. The file link pulsed at him in an angry orange that surged toward red. He swiped through the projection space to create a quarantine for it, a secret directory that wouldn’t alert the rest of R&D that something was taking up new space that it shouldn’t.

Even still, something gnawed at him even as he moved his hand into the space and grabbed for the file. Had it been too easy somehow? No—in what world could hours of searching down blind
alleys be considered easy? Nate relaxed. He’d earned this success, and he was one step closer to fulfilling his promise.

**ALERT – MALWARE.**

“Goddammit!” Nate snarled at the warning, shunting the file down into the quarantine before it had even finished reassembling.

**FILE QUARANTINED.**

“Nice try, asshole.”

That sense of being on the verge of victory collapsed around him, and Nate slumped back in his chair. Disappointment gnawed at his insides, shame taking the place of pride. “There’s two hours of my life that I’ll never see again,” he said aloud. Neither the computers nor the cup of coffee seemed very interested in what he had to say.

“Fine,” he sighed and stood, cracking his back in about four places. “I know when to take a hint. Don’t go anywhere,” he added, pointing at the computer system sitting on his desk. “I’ll be back, and this time we’ll be smarter.”

Deep inside the belly of the machine, unconcerned with the sound data being produced outside the mainframe’s cooled case, a ball of code unfurled. Carefully, logically, it examined the edges of its containment, sending out spikes of numbers to probe the corners for any bleed.

The cool air in the lab kept the computers’ whirring at a steady volume, no sign on the outside of the murmur of ones and zeros sliding tiny tendrils into the cracks in the walls of their prison.

It was night-time, the lab itself abandoned and dark, when a single signal burrowed its way out through the tenuous threaded connection of an old-fashioned VPN. It sent a single burst of numbers, fast enough and small enough that the network would register it as nothing but white noise, if it noticed anything at all.

[access granted]
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The calm following the crisis - but does a crisis ever really end?

Late Spring, 2019

Four years since the launch of the world’s first Jaeger, six years since K Day, few piloting teams in the world had as many kills as the Maximoff twins. Six months after the fight with the Category 3 Kaiju dubbed Honne-Onna, Pan Pacific Defense Corps Ranger Will Maximoff woke from his coma to find the world had moved on without him.

It took the next four months for his body to learn how to function again without the machines and the tubes, to walk without crutches, to fall asleep easily at night without wondering if he’d wake up again in the morning.

It would take a lot longer than that to recognize himself again.

Between the weight loss and the exhaustion, the scrambled fragments of memories merged with dreams, Billy saw more of himself in the face of his twin brother than in the gaunt, tired man he ignored in the mirror every morning. The more he tried to get a grip, the more he tried to haul all the pieces back into line and rebuild the guy he’d been, the more they shattered and spun out of reach.

And standing next to Tommy out on the helipad at the Los Angeles Shatterdome was more than enough to remind him how far he still had to go. The ocean stretched out behind the concrete slab, wide and dark; unforgiving. The wind whipping up around them brought salt spray that stung where it hit, and the chill sank into his bones faster than it ever had, before.

B.C. Before Coma.

The helo sat there, waiting. Only a short jump from the Shatterdome to the airport, and then a much longer flight back to New York. Not for him, but he was torn inside all the same.

“You’re cold, you should go back inside.” Wanda stepped in close beside him, her long dark curls —redder than the twins’ hair, curlier as well—tangling in the wind. Billy had been taller than his mother for years, but right now, as she put her arm around him, he felt small. It also felt kind of good.

Wanda’s arrival had been so typically her, showing up on Marshal Danvers’ doorstep and simply refusing to move until she was given all the clearances she needed to be with her sons. And for some reason the Marshal had gone along with it all. Eli’s Uncle Joe had made jokes about mountains and Mohammad, but at the time Billy had just been grateful. It turned out that even Jaeger-riding robot jockeys needed their moms once in a while.

“I’m fine, mom.” Billy let her tug him in to the hug for a minute or two, kissed her on the top of her head. “I promise.”

The frown still creased her face when she let him go, and she patted his uniform jacket back into
place. It was still baggy, even though he’d put some muscle back on, and she didn’t have to say anything for him to know what she was thinking. “I can always stay longer,” she offered, a dangerous look coming into her eyes.

“No, you can’t.” Tommy rested his hand on their mother’s back and made a face right back at her when she sighed up at him. “Mama’s boy over here needs to focus on getting back up to fighting trim, not looking over old photo albums. Besides-

“It’s been too long since the last kaiju attack,” Billy interrupted, ignoring Tommy’s jab and picking up on the next thing he was going to say. “I’ll feel a lot happier when we know you’re safe back east.”

She took his hand and pulled him into a three-way embrace, Billy’s face ending up smushed into Tommy’s shoulder. “I’d be a lot happier knowing you two were safe.”

“Mom-”

“I know. Promise me you’ll look out for each other. I feel so helpless being so far away.”

There was little he could say to that other than to hug her again, to promise he’d listen to the medics, to reassure her that everything would be fine. Then it was Tommy’s turn to say goodbye, Billy moving away to give them a moment. That meant he only caught the faintest edge of their conversation, mom’s hand gently cupping Tommy’s face. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

“Always.”

Billy wasn’t the only one who had changed. He might feel like he had faded, but Tommy stood taller now, his old bluster-over-fear replaced with a strength that Billy could see. Air was a wall between them, Tommy’s mind a mystery to him again after more than a year of living behind each other’s eyes.

Some of that strength had a name, and the man who shared it was somewhere inside the base.

The door opened behind Billy and he turned, half-expecting his thoughts to have summoned Teddy Altman from the ether. Marshal Danvers stepped out onto the helipad instead, ribbons bright splashes of colour on her dark green uniform. “Wanda. If they don’t put you on that helicopter, I will. Bodily, if I have to.”

… that wasn’t quite how Billy had expected the conversation to begin.

“Since when are you on a first name basis?” Tommy asked, echoing Billy’s own surprise. He didn’t move when Carol raised her eyebrow, but when their mother gave him The Look he closed his mouth.

“Carol,” Mom said warmly, and she stepped between the twins to come close enough and take the Marshal’s hands, lean in and kiss her on the cheek. Lightning didn’t strike anyone, which was something of a surprise. “Thank you for everything. At least I know I’m leaving them in good hands. And about approving leave for them for Rosh Hashanah-”

And rather than shoot her down, the Marshal only smiled warmly, like she and Mom were old friends. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll see what I can do.”

The final round of hugging and goodbyes was mercifully brief, capped off with a solemn promise to call more often. Billy stepped back against the wall as the helo’s rotors spun up and it lifted off. He stayed there, watching, until it was a small black mark against the sky.

Once she was out of sight, and the Marshal had ducked back inside the base, Billy slid slowly
down the wall. It held him up until his butt hit the ground, and he tipped his head back against the cool concrete. Just for a minute. He didn’t ache, not as badly as everything had ached and burned those first few weeks. It was more of an existential tired, a moment to confirm that yeah, the world was about to change around him all over again.

A familiar head leaned over into his field of vision, blocking out his view of the sky. “You okay?” Tommy asked, his brow furrowed in an expression so much like Mom’s that Billy wanted to scream.

“Yeah,” he answered instead, swallowing the irritation that was dogging him. None of this was Tommy’s fault. Not the accident, or the recovery, or even being drift compatible with someone else.

Tommy hadn’t asked for any of it, any more than Billy had. “I just need a sec.”

“Seriously. You look like hell. I’ll get your stuff moved over and you can crash.” Tommy stayed next to him, his boots right up against Billy’s hip, and his mother-hen routine was getting deeply, infuriatingly old.

*I’m going to need to learn how to do this without him.*

“I’m fine. And the last thing I need is you hovering.” Billy pushed himself up off the ground, his joints protesting. Tommy got out of the way before they cracked skulls.

“Jesus H, who pissed in your cornflakes?”

*Shit.* Billy paused with his hand on the door handle, and regrouped. *Not his fault.* “What, there’s no room for two of us to be obnoxious around here?” He added a grin on the end, looking back over his shoulder at his twin. “Come on, dork. Moving day, remember?”

“Oh yeah, because rooming with you is going to be a barrel of laughs.” But Tommy reached ahead and grabbed the door when Billy opened it, half a step ahead and perfectly in sync. Billy ducked in under Tommy’s arm, Tommy followed on his heels, their feet hitting the floor at the same moment. For a few seconds it was as though nothing at all had changed.

And once Billy was cleared to try drifting again, everything would be back to the way it was.

That had been Faiza’s condition. Billy could get out of the infirmary, away from sleeping in a hospital bed and all the beeping monitors and screens, as long as he wasn’t entirely alone. “I don’t need a babysitter,” he’d tried arguing. Because for God’s sake, if he hadn’t had a relapse by now he wasn’t likely to, and the migraines had stopped weeks ago. But she’d been a stone wall, and sharing a bunk bed with Tommy again had been the lesser of two evils.

Although now, surveying the room that used to be his, the air circulators barely making a dent in the closed-in smell of a lost year, he was having second thoughts.

A shelf ran along the wall above the desk, a fine layer of dusty grit settled over everything on it. The bright plastic of the action figures was dulled underneath, the lineup exactly how it had been that morning when he’d gone under.

(That sounded better than ‘got the shit kicked out of me by a giant drooling death-lizard because I let myself get distracted.’ It didn’t make the truth any less awful, but at least it sounded better.)

The Los Angeles Strike Group stood proudly in the center, his own Magnus Echo in the middle, scale-modelled and perfect. They were next to Romeo Blue and Coyote Tango—the classics,
from the first toy series and not the reissues, thank you very much—happily spit-roasting one of his limited-edition Trespasser figurines.

That would be Tommy’s sense of humour, the kind of thing that used to send Billy stomping out of his room to go put whipped cream in Tommy’s bed, or hide his guitar in the Jaeger repair bay. He could feel the irritation still, but muted—a reflection of something he knew he had felt before and should probably be feeling now. Poking at it didn’t do much. Wiggling the emotion like a loose tooth only made his stomach tense up.

“Billy?” Tommy poked his head in the door. “Oh good, you’re not dead. Would you get your ass moving? I’m starving and we’re going to miss lunch.”

“You’re always hungry,” Billy replied absently. He reached out and picked up Magnus, the unboxed one, and rubbed off the dust. There were teeny-tiny figures in the cockpit, if you squinted hard enough. The toy felt too light in his hand for what it meant, and he set it down on the desk like the precious talisman it was. The rest of it, including Tommy’s obscene tableau, he swept into the carton with the boxed versions, the rolled posters and the rest of his books. The last things to go before the room didn’t have anything of him in it anymore.

Magnus went up first next door. Tommy’s old single bed had been replaced with a bunk bed at some point in the last few days, and he’d already staked his claim on the top level. That was fine. It gave Billy the rest of the wall to put his poster back up, the idealized computer-enhanced beauty shot of their Jaeger standing in the ocean waves still layered with bits of dried sticky-tack. He smoothed it against the concrete, pushing the corners down until they held. Like slotting a satisfying puzzle piece into place, even if the picture wasn’t even close to complete.

“That thing again?” Tommy groaned, washing the dust of his hands in the tiny sink. “You could be putting up actual art, or even pinups or something, and you turn this place back into dork central.”

“You love it, and don’t even think about denying it.” Billy replied absently, standing back and checking that the poster was up straight. “Which of us was always gagging for the media blitzes, hm? You were practicing signing autographs before we got our first kill.”

“There’s nothing wrong with giving the public what they want,” Tommy countered, and when Billy glanced over he was grinning wide. “There’s a huge difference between that and having enough toys to open your own doll store.”

“I know where you’ve stashed your own figure, jerkface. Don’t try me.”

Tommy groaned and started heading for the door. “Are you done staring at your true love? I want lunch.”

“Go ahead without me,” Billy replied, Magnus’s action figure still warm and too light in his hand. “I want to go down to the Jaeger bay first.”

“She’ll still be there after we eat.”

“I know.” But the pull had started when he’d picked up the plastic toy, and it was stronger now as he stared at her poster. He’d been bonded to the Jaeger for six months in a way no-one had yet been able to adequately explain, and that tether still pulled, still wanted to snap him tight. “I won’t be long. Go grab us a table, k?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tommy grabbed his jacket as he left, the door sliding closed behind him.

A quick trip down to say hello to his girl—except she isn’t mine anymore, and won’t be for a
while yet—and then to the cafeteria. And the one person he was absolutely not trying to avoid.

The landing on the inside of the Jaeger bay had always been one of Billy’s favourite places in the Shatterdome. He’d discovered it a few weeks after being transferred to L.A., when he’d been given the free run of the place.

Almost no-one ever came to this section. There were easier ways to get wherever else you might want to go, but no-one had ever bothered to take down the supposedly temporary stairs. He could drape himself over the railing and watch the activity on the floor far below—the techs and other pilots running around, the tang of dust and engine oil thick in the air, and the Jaegers of the L.A. strike group standing like silent gods in their docks, watching over them all.

*Magnus Echo, Yankee Hawker, Stinger Goliath, Papa Valentine.* Jaeger designations had been so *odd* to him the first time he’d heard them, barely into the Academy and fresh to the military way of doing – well – *anything*. But now they were prayers, or invocations. The true names of Golems breathed into life by human souls.

His soul, once, not long ago. And in a way far more intimate than anyone else had ever experienced. If he could only remember it more clearly, instead of the ghost sensations that crawled over his skin in the middle of the night.

Billy’s boots clanged on the metal grid of the catwalk as he circled the bay, twenty stories high. Magnus still towered above him, another fifty feet worth of head and shoulders, the brilliant green chased with highlights in red. His and Tommy’s colours, dinged and scraped now, but he still remembered how she’d gleamed when they were all new.

Her skin was cool to his touch, the titanium smoother than anything under the reverent palm of his hand. He traced the edges of a hammered-out dent, a battle scar like the ones cut into his own side.

“Do you remember? Do you still know me?”

The Jaeger didn’t reply, not in words, but if Billy closed his eyes, his hand flat against her side, he thought he could feel the electric hum shift. Something raced across his skin, static and bright, a whisper that wasn’t sound, or sensation, but something halfway between.

Memory. *The snugness of the drivesuit close around him, the smell and taste of metal armor and rubber seals in the air he’s struggling to breathe. Magnus is sluggish today, can’t hold Billy’s irritation and Tommy’s resentment all at the same time and something has to give.*

Billy gives way first or maybe Tommy does, sliding sideways until they’re two-in-one, buy one get one free. Not perfect today, but enough to fight. Enough to win.

*Until it isn’t.*

*Honne-Onna’s eyes burn blue, her claws come out. Too close, they’re too close and Billy’s guard is too low. Tommy’s there with the cannon like he should – he’s faster, better, always where he’s needed.*

*But the beast comes down and Billy’s untethered, the rig buckling, metal shearing free.*

*Pain in his head, blood in his mouth, the taste of copper and smell of death. His face is wet.*

*Static static static why won’t Tommy answer*

*White noise. Quiet. And the blood-red sky gives way to stars.*
“Talking to yourself is a bad sign, you know.” The cheerful, familiar voice cut through Billy’s reverie, his heart pounding in his chest as he opened his eyes.

*It’s over.*

*That was almost a year ago.* And he was safe now, his feet on solid ground and the world spinning back up to normal speed around him.

“I’m in good company, then.” Billy found his voice, though surely she’d notice the way it caught in his throat, the spinach-taste of iron still a phantom on his lips. He dropped his hand and let Kitty hug him, giving her a squeeze back before she stepped away. “Because the number of times I’ve heard you cursing out inanimate objects is record-breaking.”

“That’s not talking to myself,” his pit crew chief grinned, her brown hair tied back in a ponytail and her tool belt hanging low around her hips. “That’s making sure Magnus knows who’s in charge. Come to supervise the work? The new actuators are going to make a huge difference in response time.”

“No, that is- I want to know, absolutely. But it’s not why I’m here.”

A small frown flitted across her face, and she didn’t bother trying to make it vanish when she caught him looking. “I’ll make sure you get brought in when we brief the guys on the upgrades,” she offered. While she meant to be kind, it was a reminder of where he still stood. Not one of ‘the guys,’ but a hanger-on for a team that had been rebuilt without him. “You’ll want to know for when you get brought back on rotation.”

“I’d appreciate that. Thanks.” He couldn’t summon up more enthusiasm than that, his eyes drawn back to the behemoth standing beside them. Billy reached out again, skated his fingertips over the deep red metal, the cockpit hatch Kitty had just emerged from still standing open.

“Could I have a minute?” He lifted his eyes and met hers, and the sympathy and understanding lingering deep within was something humbling.

She reached out across the space between them to lay a hand on his shoulder, the same hands that he’d trusted to bolt him in, keep Magnus alive, forge the bridge between them — his guide and guardian every time. “Don’t be so down. You’ll be back giving us shit in the drivesuit room in no time,” she said softly. He covered her hand with his and squeezed it tight before he let go.

“That’s the plan,” he replied to her compassion with a bright grin and all the false bravado he could muster. “Someone’s got to keep you guys on your toes, and Teddy’s much too polite to do it properly.”

There was no way she was buying it, but she didn’t call him on it, either. Just squeezed his shoulder one last time, turned and walked off down the catwalk, leaving him alone.

Not alone. With Magnus. Billy ducked inside, hitting the button to slide the door closed behind him.

Standing there, not in his drivesuit, no adrenaline pulsing through his veins—that part was a little odd. The cockpit sat silent, the HUD powered-down and the piloting rigs hanging loose, a jumble of greased-up mechanical parts. He circled the left side—his side, his rig—sense memory washing over him in a flood. *Engine oil and cleanser, rubber and the acrid taste of smoke.* His arms and legs felt heavy, like he was pulling Magnus along with him as he walked, her limbs responding to every hint of a movement, every passing thought.
Everything was the same.

Not everything. His rig had been reset to fit a bigger frame than his, arms set wider and height adjusted. Billy would be three inches too short to sit comfortably now. The difference between himself and Teddy.

Still, he could stand in the walkway between the hemispheres, slide his hand over the controls until he found the places where his fingers fit. They hadn’t changed out the grips, the control moulding to his hand as though it remembered that this was somewhere he used to belong.

That same faint static rush swept across him, the tiny hairs on his arms standing on end.

Remember the good parts. The rush of adrenaline when an alert went off, the solid sounds of the bolts and pistons driving home, the surge of strength and power and right when he slipped into Tommy’s mind/when Tommy slipped into his mind/when they became Magnus and something so much bigger than themselves.


More than that. The first parade when they’d won, early enough in the war that every victory was still a novelty. The strike group had been different then—Billy and Tommy, Kate and America, Carol and Jess—and the streets had been lined with people all coming to see them, their faces on every news blog and paper. The rising wave of adoration had watered dry ground inside him, soothed down rough edges grown from years of being the little guy, scrawny and mouthy and gay.

For a few years he’d been a hero instead.

“‘I’m here,’” Billy said into the silence. “‘Can you hear me?’”

He didn’t receive an answer. He hadn’t expected one. Billy breathed out, releasing the air that was sore inside his lungs. “‘I’m cracking up,’” he said out loud, Magnus’s metal walls sending a ripple of his own voice back to him. “Look at my life, look at my choices.” He had to laugh at himself, because everyone else was too busy Being Serious in his direction to give him any other option.

Billy let go and the faint sense of static faded away, He continued his circuit, tried to imagine Tommy and Teddy suited up, connected. It was a good image, even as the selfish part of him fought against it. “You’re in good hands, you know,” he said out loud, as though hearing the words would make them easier to believe. “The best.”

The melancholy that spread thick from his throat down to his heart didn’t seem to agree.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tommy and Teddy sneak Billy out of the Shatterdome, and they run into a problem along the way.

The cafeteria was packed this time of day, and Billy braced himself before walking in. A hundred people all talking over, around and through one another laid over the banging of trays and clinking of utensils made for a thick wall of sound.

It didn’t always bother him. When he was tired all of his senses somehow seemed amped up to eleven, regular background noise becoming an all-encompassing din. It was the kind of thing Faiza had promised would fade someday soon, as his body re-learned how to process sensory data. Right about now would be a really good time for ‘soon’ to get here.

Most of the other rangers were hanging out at their usual table, Josiah standing to make room next to Teddy as Billy approached.

He could go around to the other side, sit next to Tommy rather than assume — but it would cause waves he didn’t want, questions he didn’t feel like answering. Not now, and maybe not ever. There was still so much they hadn’t figured out.

Like how did you go from being a total stranger, to living inside someone’s head for months, to being almost-a-stranger again?

“Treat it like he was a one-night stand,” Kate had suggested, feet tucked up under her at the end of Billy’s narrow hospital bed. “You wouldn’t be freaking out like this if you ran into some guy you picked up at a club.”

Yeah, but this is different. Now that one night stand has my job, my brother, my friends... and all the non-thinking parts of me are convinced that we’re supposed to be madly in love.

Even now his heart was picking up speed, his stomach fluttering and half-nauseated. Teddy’s hair shone honey-gold despite the ghastly fluorescent lighting in the cafeteria, his lips lush and pink. Billy had tasted his mouth—in dreams and for real—and electricity had shocked every nerve ending he owned, settling into his bloodstream and searing his skin.

Instinct and impulse swore that Billy’s place was next to Teddy. That the residue of their link and the memory of the way their bodies moved was enough of a baseline for forever.

Which wouldn’t be so bad if the over-thinking parts didn’t keep getting in the way.

Like reminding him how he’d forced himself into Teddy’s mind in the first place, even if it had been his subconscious doing the pushing.

It wasn’t as though one of them had bought someone a drink, asked the other on a date, acted on a natural attraction. Teddy was Tommy’s partner, was drift-compatible with him, held Tommy’s life in his hands. So when Billy had been in danger Teddy had been given no choice but to play the hero. Whatever bonding they’d done in driftspace was only making things in the meat world that
much more awkward.

Like right now, when he’d apparently stopped moving for enough time to make Teddy’s friendly smile start to fade. *Fuck it.* Billy shook off the discomfort and slid into the empty seat.

“Oh, you.” Teddy was already done, his tray empty except for a couple of plates. His arm brushed against Billy’s as Billy settled in, a faint whisper of cloth against skin that sent a shiver racing straight up toward Billy’s spine then right back down again. If he leaned over just a little more he could rest his head on Teddy’s shoulder, nuzzle in and breathe him down, the sweet clean-sweat and pine-soap smell of him.

Did he have the right, or was that more shattered pieces of his dream-self making assumptions that awake-Billy couldn’t follow through?

“Fine, *I’ll* get trays,” Tommy grumbled under his breath, but he jogged off towards the serving line without a look back.

“Did your mom make it off-base alright?” Teddy asked quietly. Kate was holding court a little further down the table, telling some story that was making Cass laugh and Eli groan, and a bubble of privacy encompassed them for a moment.

“Yeah. She threatened to stay longer, but Carol convinced her to go.” Teddy’s pull on him was just like Magnus’, a steady northward tug reeling Billy in. He gave in, shut out the little back-brain voice yammering at him, and leaned his weight against Teddy’s arm for a moment’s respite. “She likes you, for the record. Said to say goodbye for her and she’s sorry she missed you this morning.”

“I like her too,” Teddy replied with a smile that was less beaming than the previous one, more introspective. Billy didn’t remember everything that had happened in his coma-dreams, but Teddy reliving his own mother’s death had been one of the scenes forever etched into the centre of Billy’s brain. “Though I don’t know if she was quite sure what to make of me.”

“The whole situation is weird, you have to give her that. But you’re Tommy’s co-pilot and he trusts you, so that counts for a lot.” Down the table Cass had sunk her head in her hands and was groaning in what sounded like pain, and Billy frowned. “What’s going on?”

Teddy followed his gaze. “Gossip from the Alaska Shatterdome. Kate and Chavez got back this morning and apparently it’s been a —what did she call it? Clusterfuck of earth-shattering proportions.”

“Barton and Morse,” Eli filled in, rolling his eyes. “They split up. Then Barton got sent off to the Academy to teach while the dust settles.”

Kate was laughing as talked, Tommy sliding in across from Billy with two laden trays. “I saw the footage of the training exercise right after they linked up in the simulator. Bobbi must have caught part of the memory at the start of their synch, because she got right out of the rig and nailed him.”

Kate mimed punching America in the jaw, and America rocked sideways like a good sport.

“Then Bobbi called up Nat, and they had lunch. Turned out Clint had been feeding *Nat* a line and she had no idea that *Bobbi* didn’t know he was on the prowl. They compared notes over a bottle of wine, had a laugh together, and Nat put in a request for a compatibility test that afternoon.”
“That’s savage,” Cassie breathed out.

“Turns out she and Bobbi are even more drift compatible than Clint and Bobbi were in the first place. So Clint’s ex-wife and his ex-girlfriend—who was the reason for his wife becoming an ex—are now riding together in his ex-Jaeger.”

“I’d feel sorry for the guy,” Eli folded his arms, leaning back, “but he brings this on himself.”

“There was a time when I idolized Rangers,” Teddy said whimsically. “Long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away.”

Tommy snorted, and pushed Billy’s full tray closer to him with a pointed look. “And that lasted, what? About an hour after you actually met some?”

“Try about thirty seconds into drifting with you.” Teddy grinned, and Tommy snickered in return. The easy bickering on either side of Billy itched angrily under his skin, a pin-pricking reminder of the months when the two of them had become the best of friends and Billy had been frozen in time.

The caf was still too loud, the lights too bright, and he still felt wrong in his own skin, a kind of unsettled claustrophobia that got worse the longer he stayed confined to base.

The tray in front of him was piled with food, all of it slowly cooling and settling in that glutinous cafeteria sort of way. He had to eat, he was even hungry for once, but the sight of it shut that reflex down cold. Even the stupid protein shake he was supposed to be drinking with every meal looked like nothing so much as cold congealed come.

Strawberry-flavoured.

Billy pushed the tray away, and Tommy shoved it right back. “Eat something, or I’m busting you to Faiza.”

Scowling at him didn’t change Tommy’s expression. It figured. Mom had just left and Tommy was going to be feeling extra-guilty for the next few days, which meant he was going to be riding Billy extra-hard as a result. “The shakes are disgusting,” Billy pointed out, entirely correctly.

Tommy doubled-down, poking his tray with his finger. “They’re good for you. Drink it.”

“If they’re that good, you drink it.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “You’re being a baby.” He grabbed the shake and twisted the top off the bottle, putting it to his lips. He was obviously setting up for the Big Gesture of Proving Billy Wrong, and Billy just folded his arms, watched, and waited.

The spit-take and Tommy’s incredulous betrayed glare at the bottle of gross was worth every moment of grief. Even Teddy turned back around, a fry he’d stolen from Eli’s plate halfway to his mouth, when Tommy sputtered. “That’s disgusting.”

There was no satisfaction on earth like twin-admitting-you-were-right. “Told you so.”

“Is it really that bad?” Teddy asked, not nearly wary enough.

Tommy glanced at Teddy, then back at the bottle, and held it out. “Here, you try.”

“Noooo. I think I’ll pass.” Teddy shook his head. “I have a feeling I’m going to be reliving the entire experience next time we get in Magnus anyway.”
Tommy’s smile was innocence personified. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“For once I’m glad it’s you in the hot seat now instead of me.” Billy didn’t think about the words until after they’d already left his mouth. Guilt and loss flooded him, his stomach twisting. He snapped a glance at Teddy, who flashed a guilty look at Tommy, who was actually snickering.

The tension that sat under almost everything these days didn’t vanish entirely, but Tommy’s laugh eased some of the tight grip around Billy’s heart and lungs.

“I’m out of here.” Eli stood, grabbing his tray and nodding at the others. “Meet me in the kwoon later, Teddy? It’s been a while since I’ve kicked your ass.”

Teddy shook his head. “Rain check? I’m off base this afternoon.”

Eli arched an eyebrow, but nodded. “You can run, Altman, but you can’t hide forever. Where are you going?”

Teddy’s smile was that self-conscious just-this-side-of-shy pleased glow that always sent butterflies through Billy’s stomach. “Tommy set me up with his tattoo artist. To get my piece for Magnus.”

“Oh shit, was that today?” Billy winced. In all the chaos of seeing Mom off, he’d forgotten half of the things he knew were supposed to be happening after.

He’d intended—he’d intended to do a lot of things, frankly. Trying to convince both Carol and Faiza that he was more than capable of being out of medical’s reach for longer than ten minutes had been top of his list. But he hadn’t, he’d gotten distracted and overwhelmed with everything else, and now he was going to miss out.

“It’s fine,” Teddy grabbed Billy’s hand and gave it a squeeze, letting his hand linger longer than just an impulsive touch. “It’s just a consult today. It’s more important to me that you guys are there for the actual ink part. Assuming you want to, of course.”

“Of course I want to.”

Tommy had gotten their Jaeger’s logo tattooed on him first, a concession that Billy had been right, that Tommy was glad that he’d followed his twin into a war they could easily have avoided. Billy hadn’t been as enthralled with the idea of ink, a lifetime’s worth of taboo pushing back against the urge to follow Tommy’s lead, to mark himself as belonging – both to Tommy, and to Magnus. He’d compromised, eventually, his shoulder bearing a much smaller version of the image that wrapped around one of Tommy’s hips.

Teddy getting the same thing had been Tommy’s suggestion, framed one day as an accusation. Think you’re too cool to join the club? But Teddy had beamed at the offer, lighting up so bright that Billy had been kicking himself ever since for not being the one to think of it.

And at the same time, not.

“Screw this.” Tommy pushed his tray away and stood. “We’re not on kaiju-watch this afternoon, Teddy already has liberty later, and I’m busting us out of this joint. Get civvies on, because we all need real food, and you.” he pointed at Billy, “need supplements that don’t taste like death. The PPDC supply chain can suck it.”

“Road trip?” Teddy asked, already grinning. “I’ll see what I can wheedle out of the motor pool. Billy?”
“I’m in. If I don’t get out of here I’m going to go completely stir crazy.” Billy crammed half the roast beef sandwich into his mouth and nodded, wrapping the other in his napkin for later. See? Eating. “Now that Mom’s gone home, as long as I’m back and in physio by four, no-one’s even going to notice I’m gone.”

“How is it,” Teddy said as he closed the driver’s side door behind him and joined the twins on the sidewalk, “that the PPDC let the two of you pilot a multi-billion dollar giant robot, and you don’t have valid California drivers’ licenses?” He hit the lock switch on the fob and the borrowed jeep bleeped at them from the curb.

“New York,” Billy shrugged off the question. “Cars were a lot more trouble than they were worth. We have a motorcycle, but it’s still back home.” And Tommy had done most of the driving anyway. He’d taken it so easily, while Billy had more of the ‘hang on by his fingernails and try not to scream’ approach.

The sun slanted between the buildings and cast Teddy in an ethereal glow as he approached. A memory slammed into Billy from nowhere, blue-tinted like his fever dreams.

Everything in darkness, drifting in a sea that lapped warm around his limbs. The clouds parting, a star streaking across the heavens, a radiant light that he’d followed without thought or plan.

The sea gone, the pair of them hovering in the blackness of space and Teddy the only star.

A beautiful boy—an angel with wings that spread out and cover them both, feathers traced with drivesuit circuits that burn red against the white. Nothing in the world has ever been so golden, so pure.

Billy reaching for him, straining only to find his fingers closing on nothing but air. Pushing everything he had into a wordless question, sending it out across the void.

~?~

The image vanished as quickly as it had come, and Teddy was only himself. Gorgeous beyond words, olive-drab uniform traded for jeans and a snug t-shirt, a flannel open overtop with sleeves rolled up to expose his forearms—but human and real all the same.

“I had a full license at one point,” Tommy added, his hands in his pockets as he fell in step with them. “Turns out cars don’t come with plasma cannons, and roads have speed limits.”

“For which we’re all eternally grateful.” Billy grinned at that memory, of the reflection in the rear-view mirror of the flashing red and blue lights of the cop car that had pulled them over, of Tommy’s wild laughter mixed with his own. That image was normal-coloured and not nearly so intense.

“Speak for yourself.”

“And the law-abiding citizens of Los Angeles,” Teddy added. His hand twitched at his side, like he meant to reach for Billy, but he tucked them in his pockets instead and fell in step with the pair of them. The sidewalk was rough under Billy’s feet, his ratty old sneakers so much lighter than his boots, the air alive and the breeze real, none of it canned or processed or recycled. Sunshine that warmed him through, not pushed by the cold full-spectrum lamp that was supposed to be a substitute.

None of his old clothes fit him the same way anymore, everything too baggy, his jeans riding low on his hips. But Teddy had looked him over as they left base and there had been admiration in
those blue eyes of his, enough that Billy’s stomach had clenched, turned over and back again in
the space of a heartbeat. He couldn’t look that much like death-warmed-over anymore if he could
get that kind of reaction.

Except for the questions that invariably followed fast on the heels of the rush. How much of the
way Teddy looked at him was because Teddy actually liked him, and how much was left over
brain junk?

How could he like anything that Billy was, when Billy was working his ass off to get better... and
then replace him?

I want you so badly. And I want what you have. But I can’t take my life back without stealing it
away from you in the process.

He wanted to scream, to find something to pound his fists against and howl the awful unfairness
of it out into the universe. It wouldn’t do any good even if he could. The game was zero-sum and
either way, he lost.

I’m so sorry. For which result, he wasn’t sure. I’m going to lose you and you aren’t even mine.

“What law-abiding citizens?” Tommy snorted. The city had changed a huge amount even in the
couple of years Billy and Tommy had been assigned to the Shatterdome here, all the film studios
and associated industries picking up and moving inland, taking the jobs and the high-rollers with
them.

(And who, five years ago, could ever have expected that Nashville would have become the new
center of the movie industry? The buckle of the Bible belt was half transplanted Californians,
these days. ‘Anything that’s not coastal’ had become the new qualifier.)

This area hadn’t changed all that much. A head shop crammed in next to a music store with
peeling vinyl stickers in the windows, next to two pawn shops and a pharmacy with signs in six or
seven different languages, at least one of which was going to be an advertisement for some highly
illegal kaiju-based addictive substances. Posters were staple-gunned to every telephone pole along
the sidewalk, concert announcements fighting for visual space with contractor flyers and missing-
person notices.

And up ahead, the noise of a disturbance. Someone was shouting—not in fear, but more like...
proclaiming, or giving a speech. A few people were hurrying past the corner, away from whatever
was going on, but more were pausing to watch, maybe a dozen drifting forward to take in more of
the spectacle.

Billy vaguely registered the presence of at least one news van, but it was the man in the red robe
with the salt-and-pepper beard, standing on a hastily-erected podium, who captured and held his
attention. He was older, maybe the same age as Carol, and his eyes blazed with revolutionary
fervour. A few more red-robed people stood arrayed behind him, hands clasped, their eyes fixed
on the speaker.

“And as the End Times draw closer we all must look within ourselves, my brethren, and examine
our acts.”

“Come on, let’s go,” Teddy urged quietly. He cupped his hand under Billy’s elbow, light pressure
urging him to turn and walk away.

Billy resisted, curiosity winning over common sense. Catching up on world events had involved a
lot of skimming news feeds and reading headlines, but the sheer volume of material meant he’d
missed some things. Obviously enough, since the robes and symbols on the preacher and his followers meant nothing to him at all.

“Hang on,” he tugged his arm back and felt Teddy flinch. He grabbed Teddy’s hand as an impulse-driven apology. “Who are these guys?”

Something in his movement must have caught the preacher’s attention, his eyes snapping right to the pair of them... and their clasped hands.

“Are we pure, able to withstand the tribulations, or are we sinners with blackened souls, putting our faith in false prophets and sticking hot needles into the eyes of God? For He is watching, and He is not pleased, no- like the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, we are being shown the wages of our sin!”

It wasn’t hard to imagine exactly what kinds of sin the preacher was thinking of.

“For fuck’s sake,” Tommy hissed under his breath.

“Now can we go?” Teddy urged again, his hand closing tighter around Billy’s. He took a step back just as Tommy pushed forward, all three of them tense, tight and anxious. Billy could feel that, at least, reverberating down through Teddy’s locked arm and resonating along the faintest threads of the ghost drift from Tommy. “Come on, Tom. Let’s get out of here. We don’t need to listen to this bullshit.”

“What I need is to give this guy a serious come-to-Jesus moment of his own,” Tommy snapped, his right hand balling up into a tight fist.

“Leave it,” Teddy coaxed him, tugging back on Billy’s hand.

“It’s seven-to-three odds,” Billy muttered darkly. “We can take ‘em.”

“Seven-to-two, and don’t you dare.”

“We have sinners among us even now,” the street preacher announced, his dark eyes locking on Billy’s and burning his anger right down into Billy’s soul. “Those who pervert the will of Heaven, upsetting the natural order.”

“If you’re not going to let me hit him,” Billy could be an adult; he could compromise. “Let’s at least piss him off. Maybe he’ll have an embolism. Or a stroke.”

Teddy frowned. “What did you have in mind?”

“Their actions bring death down upon the innocent, and suffering to the children of God!”

Fuck everything.

Billy freed his hand from Teddy’s, slung his arms around Teddy’s neck, and kissed him full on the lips.

He regretted it immediately. *Stupid stupid stupid – forcing yourself on him, not giving him a chance to refuse. You’re a terrible person.*

Except Teddy’s full-body freeze turned into what felt like a go-ahead pretty damn quickly, his hand flattening against the small of Billy’s back and tugging him close. Billy was peripherally aware of Tommy positioning himself between them and the nearest part of the gathering, but most of his attention was elsewhere, caught up in the rush when Teddy kissed him back.
He wanted this so badly, knew he couldn’t have it, despite every gorgeous, aching memory of Teddy’s body underneath him, of Teddy’s mouth on him. Because those memories hadn’t been real. The kisses they had tried when Billy’d first woken up had been different, awkward. Unearned.

Only now-

The short hairs at the back of Teddy’s head prickled against Billy’s fingers, and he shivered when Billy ran his thumb along the soft skin at the nape of his neck. Heat, the press of his mouth, the hard, strong force of his body locked against Billy’s- he wanted Billy just as badly, energy feeding back and forth between them. A mushroom cloud went off in Billy’s brain, everything on a glorious short-circuit.

And a jeer from someone watching brought him up from the swirling headiness of need. Without pulling away, Billy extended his hand, turned his wrist up, and raised a prominent middle finger at the fuming bigot on the podium. He knew without looking that Teddy was doing the same thing.

“Come on,” Teddy broke away first, but didn’t move his arm from around Billy’s waist.

Breathless and giddy, he didn’t take his eyes off of Billy’s, stayed close in Billy’s space. “I’ve got an appointment and these assholes aren’t worth being late.”

This time Billy let Teddy tug him toward the street, dropping his hand—with one last flick of his finger—and turning on his heel. The preacher on the podium started calling down hellfire and brimstone on them again as they walked away, the thump of his fist on the wood sending Billy’s heart leaping into his throat.

“Keep walking slow, don’t run, don’t let them think you’re intimidated.”

He braced—for a thrown bottle, or a blow to the back of his head—but nothing came, and neither the preacher nor his red-robed followers followed them.

Billy’s pulse was echoing in his ears even once they made it around the corner and out of sight, the rush of adrenaline leaving him light-headed and dry-mouthed. He stopped for a moment, just to catch his breath, and Tommy almost barrelled into him from behind. He had still been looking back over his shoulder, his brow furrowed with a deep frown.

“Are you okay?” Teddy’s hand was at Billy’s elbow again and he was hovering, but he was just as rattled underneath.

“I’m fine, just jumpy.” Billy waved him off. The wind kicked up and a discarded flyer flattened itself against his leg. He grabbed it and folded it up, jamming it in his pocket to throw away properly later. “Who the hell were those guys, anyway?”

Tommy shrugged. “Your garden variety end-times nutcase. The basic proof that humanity is never actually going to bond in the face of adversity.”

“A lot of those groups have popped up in the last year. I can’t say I’m all that surprised.” Teddy was looking past Billy back down the street, but shrugged and turned away. “I’ve done a lot of praying myself, and I wasn’t exactly religious before K-Day.”

He had? That came as something of a revelation, though it didn’t seem to surprise Tommy at all.

*Of course it wouldn’t. He already knows Teddy better than you ever will.*

And that voice in his hindbrain was being distinctly unhelpful. *Fuck off. I am actually capable of using my words.*

“End of the world will do that to a guy,” Billy said, infusing as much kindness and understanding
as he could into the not-really-a-joke, and he bumped Teddy lightly with his shoulder.

Who smiled, like he was getting it even though they weren’t co-pilots, because human beings had been able to communicate with each other long before drifting had been a thing. “Let’s hope it hasn’t really come to that.”

“If you two are done pontificating, we have somewhere to be.” Tommy strode ahead, pulling open one of the doors a few stores down, and waited pointedly for the pair of them to join him.

“Sure you’re ready?” Billy teased, trying to recapture the feeling of freedom and easy peace he’d had a glimpse of minutes earlier. They couldn’t talk about the kiss right now, and the usual mix of desire and uncertainty that ate away at his insides had been replaced by something buzzy and wild. “There won’t be any way to get rid of us, after this.”

Teddy’s flash of a bright smile made everything better. “Why, is this when she implants the GPS nanotracker?”

“Damn, you’ve uncovered my secret plan.”

“World domination by means of robot army?”

“Figured I’d start with the devoted harem of slave boys and work my way up from there.”

Teddy nodded thoughtfully as he followed Tommy into the studio. “It’s important to start small.”

“Wait a minute... Hey!”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A field trip ends, and Billy and Teddy have an unsatisfying conversation.

The appointment really had just been a consult. Janette knew Magnus’ logo from drafting sketches for the twins, and there had been nothing more to this one than picking where (left arm) and how big (about four inches across). She did order Teddy to take his shirt off, for which Billy was eternally grateful, even if it meant watching someone else put her hands on his bicep.

And it meant another chance to fight the war inside that kept on raging. Despite the taste of Teddy’s mouth still on his lips, the painful thumping of his heart, Billy watched the process with a twist of longing and dread combined. Because really, what was the endgame? Either Teddy stayed to pilot Magnus, shoving Billy aside, or Billy recovered enough to make Teddy unnecessary.

Teddy was his teammate and his replacement at the same time, and the two states couldn’t coexist.

Then there was Tommy. Billy wore his face, after all, or Tommy had his, but Tommy’s body language was different now. He walked like he was three inches taller, cleared space around him like he expected his shoulders to be broader. And the longer it went on the more differences would creep in, until their faces would be the only things they had left in common.

Then Teddy would have Tommy, too.

Outside of the mess that was Billy’s head, Teddy stopped looking at the stencil in the mirror and he turned to look for Billy’s approval, his teeth biting small dents into his lower lip. The knot dissolved, Billy forced it away, and he nodded, arms folded across his chest. “Looks good.” At least it isn’t exactly the same as Tommy’s.

“Unclench, dude,” Tommy muttered behind Billy at a level meant for his ears alone. “I can feel you making this weird.”

“You’re weird,” Billy replied, falling back on habit, and got a snort out of Tommy for his efforts. But he very deliberately breathed deep, centered himself, and let it go.

He’s my brother. He’ll always love me best.

And, I’m going to enjoy the rest of the afternoon if it’s the last thing I do.

It mostly helped.

Tracing paper away, adjustments discussed and Teddy’s shirt back on, they stepped out into a much quieter street than the one they’d left on the way in.

“I’ve never actually gotten a tattoo before,” Teddy was saying as they headed back to the car. “I’m still in the ‘how bad can it be’ stage.”

“It’s not that bad at all,” Billy reassured him, the memory of the needle’s heat on his shoulder
momentarily vivid. “You’re not like Extra boy over here, getting a complicated version that will take three visits to shade in.”

“Don’t hate because I’ve got style.”

“I hate because you’re ridiculous.”

Tommy reached out to ruffle Billy’s hair and Billy instinctively ducked away in time, hyper-naturally aware of Tommy’s position and his movements. He didn’t need to call shotgun because Tommy already knew, grabbing the handle for the back door once Teddy unlocked the jeep.

“Stop by Golden Apple on the way.” Billy grabbed for his seatbelt as Teddy slid in the driver’s side. “I want to check for something.”

“Not a problem.”

Tommy groaned from the back seat. “Can we not stop to buy comic books, you enormous nerds?”

“I’m not looking for books. I have something else in mind.”

“Is it a hot girl dressed like Catwoman?”

“Most definitely not.”

“Then wake me up when you’re done.” Tommy stretched out lengthwise along the back seat — all of him that could fit, anyway — and pretended to snore.

Teddy glanced back at Tommy, and Billy caught the edge of his grin. “Changed my mind. You can have the co-pilot chair back,” Teddy offered Billy, and Tommy flipped him off from the back seat. But the smile playing over Tom’s lips was more genuine than anything Billy had seen in a while.

For once, Billy caught one of those rare glimpses of how things could be.

Maybe they could keep this, somehow, even once Billy was better — they could go on rotation, or have one of the three as an alternate. ‘In case of injury, break glass to release pilot.’ Then Billy could have everything. Hell, he’d forgo danger pay and all of the rest if it meant convincing the brass to keep an extra on deck.

Billy kicked off his shoes and put his feet up on the dash in Tommy’s honour. It took all of five seconds before Teddy pushed them back down, but the teasing and laughter that followed lasted almost the entire trip.

“How poseable is ‘fully’?” Kate leaned over Teddy’s shoulder and swiped the action figure right out of his hand, ignoring his yelp of protest.

“Same as the rest of ours, I assume.” Cassie had her feet up on Nate’s lap, both of them sitting on the other battered old couch in the pilots’ ready room. “Unless there’s a new series out?”

Kate dodged Teddy’s attempt to grab it back, and he boosted himself up and over the back of the couch to go after her.

Sacked out in one of the armchairs, legs over one arm and his head back on the other armrest, Tommy shook his head. “Nah, it’s the same as all the others.” Kate ducked behind Tommy’s chair and he snagged the action figure out of her hand as he went by.
Kate sighed. “Traitor.”

“My loyalties are easily bought. And he paid for lunch.” Tom turned the figure over and started to rearrange the limbs into a posture Billy vaguely recognized from the times Tommy had screwed around with Billy’s collections. Tommy made a show of squinting up at Teddy, shielding his eyes from the light. “I’m not sure I see the resemblance, mind you.”

“Give me that.” Teddy took his action figure back, the yellow plastic hair bearing only the vaguest similarity to his golden blond. He straightened the legs out and tucked the little plastic drivesuit-clad version of himself into the breast pocket of his uniform jacket, its arms hooked over the side like it was taking a ride. “There.” He patted his pocket fondly. “Now the bad man can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Show me on the toy where he touched you,” Eli cracked, and Teddy’s laugh warmed Billy through. This was good. Being here, curled up at the end of the couch in a room filled with his friends, Teddy’s weight settling down by his feet. For a little while Billy could let go of everything else and just be.

The room was warm, for once, and he was still in civvies, so he could tuck his feet up and not get yelled at for having boots on the furniture. He tipped his head sideways and rested it against the back of the couch, letting his eyes close. Just for a moment, to really enjoy the sensation of being home, safe, and at peace.

The others’ voices seemed to be coming from far away, distant and muffled. Should we move him?

Nah. Let him rest. He needs it.

He was asleep for six months, you’d figure he’d be caught up by now.

There was laughter, and the faint awareness of something being tucked over him, and then he didn’t register anything at all.

“Good of you to join me, Mr. Maximoff.” Michael Twoyoungmen’s drawled greeting didn’t sound sarcastic, but the Canadian physiotherapist was very good at investing the most innocuous statements with layers of different meaning.

And he was late. Not by much, but enough to get the eyebrow of disapproval. “I fell asleep,” Billy admitted with a certain amount of chagrin. Tommy had tried his best to get Billy up and moving, but the ready room couch had been comfortable and Billy had dragged his impromptu nap out to the very last possible second – and apparently beyond. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Set an alarm next time.” He was being chewed out, but in such a mild way that Billy was momentarily suspicious again. But Michael didn’t push it, just had Billy sit on the bench so he could start running through the stretching routine that had been steadily growing in workload and complexity. Every time he added a new exercise Billy was both elated (because it meant he was getting better) and vaguely nauseated (because it meant he was going to be sore in all kinds of new and terrible ways).

Michael didn’t say much while he checked Billy’s range of motion and asked a few of the usual questions. He mostly watched Billy, a thoughtful expression in his dark brown eyes.

“Your back is the same today?”
“Sore,” Billy admitted grudgingly. “It’s the afternoon thing again. I’m fine in the mornings.”

“That’s a core strength issue, it’ll improve. And the dizzy spells?”

“Only one today. I blame the fresh air.”

“You were outside?” He arched an eyebrow and Billy had to think quickly.

“Helipad,” he offered as his explanation. “My mother left this morning. And if I’m going to be cooped up inside here much longer, I might just stow away on the next one and do the same.”

That earned him a headshake, but not the serious lecture he’d have gotten if the medical staff—or, God help him, Carol—caught wind of his escapade this afternoon. But he was going nuts inside the base, and surely mental health was just as important a factor as whether or not he got the occasional headrush from standing up too fast.

After a minute spent scribbling notes into the thick file folder stamped with Billy’s name, rank and serial number, Michael set the paperwork aside. “It’s easy to see you’re restless.” He stated the obvious, folding his arms in front of his chest in a mirror of Billy’s sullen posture. “But you have to have more patience. With yourself, as well as with the work. The rule of thumb for recovery after situations of prolonged immobility in a relatively healthy person is ‘twice as long.’”

“Twice as long for what?”

“Twice as much time to recover the strength as it took to lose it. You’ve got bone to replace along with the muscle, on top of the work to get your joints all moving properly again. You were down for—”

“Six months, I know,” Billy groused. “I’m really getting sick of hearing that number.”

“So you should expect it to take a year of steady improvement before you can come close to the fitness and mobility levels you had before your injuries.”

“A year.” Billy had heard that stat before, but he’d dismissed it as something irrelevant. Numbers like that were for people who had regular lives. He’d been a Ranger before the fight, at the peak of his physical game. He’d do it faster. “The war could be over by then.”

“Then with any luck you’ll be in excellent shape when it is.”

The frustration bubbled up behind Billy’s tongue, thick and painful in his throat. “That’s not the point!” He swallowed the bile and tried to ignore the impotent anger clenching tight around his gut.

This isn’t his fault either. Knock it off.

“Sorry,” Billy muttered, rubbing the back of his neck to ease out the kink from sleeping on the couch. “I know you’re doing everything you can.”

“That’s my job,” Michael said simply, and he sat on the edge of the chair opposite Billy’s. “And I wouldn’t be very good at it if I rushed your recovery, or triggered a relapse. Take deep breaths and center.”

Billy nodded, closing his eyes and following Michael’s advice. The guy wasn’t zen, precisely, but he placed a lot more value on meditation and serenity than Billy had ever been able to encompass before. Billy was not exactly a calm person by nature, and sitting alone with his thoughts for any length of time usually resulted in a darker mood than when he started.
Still, he breathed, and reached for the kind of calm that used to take him deep into the drift, where everything was easy and starlit. Some of that was still there inside him and he pulled it around himself like a blanket, or a cloak. “Whatever it takes to get me back in the connpod, right?” he asked, opening his eyes.

“Of course,” Michael replied, though when Billy opened his eyes Michael wasn’t really smiling, and he didn’t meet Billy’s gaze. “Ready?”

“I’m good,” Billy promised, holding up two fingers in the boy scout salute. “Treadmill again today?”

Michael shook his head. “Not this time. We’ll start with arms instead. Shift yourself to the edge of the chair, and brace your hands like so—you’re going to do chair dips for a bit, engage your triceps.”

Definitely not his favourite exercise, not by a long shot. But Magnus pulled at him, and the image of stars and the remembered peace of the drift stuck with him, his goal back in his crosshairs.

I’ll do this; I have to. And hope that Tommy and Teddy don’t end up hating me for it.

Teddy: We should probably talk about this.

Billy: Come by my room after dinner. Tommy’s going to be out.

Two hours of physio left him shattered, as usual, but the promise of Teddy coming by pushed Billy through the shower-and-shave portions of his evening. He sprawled on his bunk, Tommy’s bed above him blissfully empty. Kate and America had dragged him off somewhere, so that gave Billy the run of the room for at least another hour.

Enough time for a conversation he was pretty sure he didn’t actually want to have.

Just because you had wet dreams about me doesn’t mean we’re dating, Teddy would say. I thought we were taking this off the table. And he’d be right.

In the awful aftermath of waking up, Billy’s entire world had revolved around getting strong enough to get out of bed, never mind tumble back into it. There had been IVs and catheters, muscle spasms and all kinds of disgusting medical leftovers—his body had been a vacant apartment for too long, and the renovations took time.

And then on top of that, there had been the realizations.

That Teddy hadn’t asked for any of it.

That Billy’s saviour, his golden guardian angel, had been a real person after all.

That Teddy’s feelings about Billy were so tangled up with his general compassion and his loyalty to Tommy and the mindfuck that was drifting and piloting that neither of them had any idea which parts of anything had been real.

Teddy hadn’t even considered —because who would?—that when he’d agreed to drift with Tommy, he’d be getting a Billy as part of the package.

Accepting a job transfer shouldn’t come with a... an arranged marriage on top of it.

Except that there were still times when Teddy looked at him with wonder. And he was the one to
make physical contact more often—his hand on Billy’s arm, standing near enough that Billy could soak in his warmth and pretend. And today he’d kissed Billy back.

After Billy had assaulted him in public, naturally. Because Billy only ever seemed to be able to function in Extra Drama mode.

The door alert beeped. Billy sucked in a deep breath and sat up, raking his hands through his dark hair in the vain hopes of making himself at least a little more able to pass as a functional human being. “Just a sec.”

Teddy was standing in the hall when Billy opened the door, hands in his pockets and maybe—just maybe—looking as uncertain as Billy felt. “Come on in,” Billy said anyway, stepping aside to make way.

There was another moment of terrible when Teddy hesitated in the middle of the room, maybe looking around himself at the new decorations, Billy’s toys and his books up on the shelf, the poster with the crumpled edges tacked to the wall. “I like what you’ve done with the place,” he said after a second, not sitting down. “It must be a bit weird sharing a room with your brother again.”

“Faiza’s being overprotective,” Billy grumbled, folding his arms in front of him and resting his hips against his desk. “I’m not going to slide back into a coma overnight, and Tommy wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop it if I did.”

“Maybe she’s trying to make sure you don’t throw any keggers,” Teddy suggested, a smile trying to decide whether or not to settle on his lips.

Billy snorted. “Like Tommy would do anything to stop that either.”

“Point.” And then he was just standing there again, hands in his pockets, not saying anything at all.

Did he expect Billy to start talking? He probably should. Except that Teddy’s text had sounded like he had something already planned out to say, and then Billy would be stepping on his moment.

Either way it would be the wrong thing, so Billy needed to lead in with the one that made him less of an oblivious jerk. “I’m sorry,” he began at the same time as Teddy blurted out, “I’m sorry.”

“You go ahead-” overtop of him again. Billy’s eyes snapped up from the spot on the floor he’d been fixating on, and Teddy was giving him a faintly exasperated laugh.

“You first,” Teddy said firmly.

Right. Billy drew in a deep breath. “I’m sorry for what happened—no. For what I did this afternoon. I know we aren’t—that is, I know you’re not—things are weird,” he gave up on trying to find the right words, “and that didn’t help.”

“I kissed you back,” Teddy reminded him gently. “I had plenty of time to stop it if I’d wanted to. The timing could have been better, mind you.” And was he—yeah, he was smiling, but still with that sense that he was keeping his distance on purpose.

It had been different, in the drift.
Walking along the beach that wasn’t a beach, barefoot and leaving prints in the sand. The waves lapped up against Billy’s toes and filled in the prints as soon as he made them, wiping out all evidence that he was there. Teddy walked beside him, his hair longer, his face younger.

“We moved around so much while my father was alive,” Teddy spoke softly, the wind still and the birds quiet. “I was never in any one place long enough to make close friends. There were always other kids around the bases, but there wasn’t much point when families were always getting moved around, transferred, parents deployed. I got good at being friendly, at making people like me. But I’m not very good at letting people know me.”

“You’re doing alright now,” Billy’d replied, squeezing Teddy’s hand tight. Billy had always had Tommy, and what other people thought of him didn’t matter. Different cause, same result. “I’m not running away from you in stark terror at your terrifying revelations,” he teased, tugging Teddy around and tipping his chin up to demand a kiss.

“That’s different,” Teddy had laughed. “It’s because you’re not-” and then he’d caught himself, and he’d kissed Billy, and the beach, the water, the birdsong all faded away.

‘Because you’re not real.’ That’s what Teddy would have said.

Only that Teddy hadn’t been the real one either, not the same person as the man standing there and waiting for him to say something. “Haven’t you paid attention this year? I’m all about the inconvenient timing,” Billy sighed, his smile rueful. The Teddy-in-his-head would have found that funny. Would the real one?

He did, or at least he laughed, the same warm sound. A piece of the puzzle seemed to turn and fit into place.

Maybe it was false confidence, maybe it was the energy changing in the room, but Billy’s mood lifted with that laugh. That was the Teddy who had been his lover, however briefly. And God, Billy ached for him.

“If things had been different,” Billy pressed on carelessly. “If we’d met at the academy, or if I hadn’t been hurt, this would be so much easier.”

Forget everything else swirling around them, rivalries and piloting and medical reports and timelines for recovery... part of Teddy had loved him for a while, he was sure of it. And Billy had loved him back.

“If we’d met at the academy we’d have been long-distance for years after graduating. And if you hadn’t been hurt, Tommy wouldn’t have needed a new co-pilot, and I’d still be in Nevada.” Teddy grimaced. “And that’s where this gets weird, isn’t it? So many good things have happened for me since I came here. And knowing you is a part of that. But it feels so wrong to be both grateful and guilty over the exact same events, and then feeling guilty again for the gratitude being there at all.”

It was the most either of them had said on the subject since Billy had woken up in the infirmary with Tommy and Teddy on either side of his bed. “None of this was your fault.”

Teddy nodded like he believed him. “So where does this leave us?” And when he looked at Billy again it was with soft eyes—something that looked half like hope, and half like Billy projecting the things he wished he could actually read on Teddy’s face.

“So seize the day?” Billy wanted to lean forward and grab Teddy’s hand, press skin against skin and remind him with warmth and touch and gentle hands exactly what they had been together.
I could steal him from Tommy, make him mine in a way Tommy can’t have.

It wasn’t the most self-destructive way to deal with the haze of resentment and longing that still tried to sink in its claws, but it was up there. “Michael and Faiza keep telling me it’ll be months yet before I’m ready to pilot again. We should take advantage of the time we have.”

*Before you leave.*

Teddy went quiet.

Billy didn’t need to say the words. They hung there like the great big unspoken balloon-elephant in the room that they were. “Assuming I get cleared again at all,” he tried instead, panic rising and making the words harder to find. “We should talk to Tommy. We can petition to keep the three of us together, two pilots and an alternate. And call Jan to get your appointment moved up. Once you’re labelled, you’re stuck. Can’t break up a matched set, right?” The joke fell flat, as did his mad scramble to find the right thing to say that would put their moment back together.

“Maybe we’ll be that lucky,” Teddy replied, sweet and a little bit sad. “Look, it’s late, and you need to be resting. I should go.”

“Wait, don’t.” Billy did grab for his hand this time, quick and too desperate. “You wanted to talk, and we’re talking. Don’t run away.”

“I promise I’m not running. I like you, a lot. You know that. And it’s not just because of what happened before.” He didn’t take his hand back, his fingers curling around Billy’s like he knew where he belonged.

“I hear a but coming.”

Teddy nodded. “But it’s complicated. You know that, too. And hooking up isn’t going to fix the way we met, or whatever ghost drift might still be affecting us. It would be fun, don’t get me wrong—”

Billy’s heart caught, hard, in his throat. “But you’re saying no.”

Teddy’s fingers squeezed his, tighter than before. “I’m saying let me sleep on it? We can’t keep circling each other like this, but I don’t want to mess everything up.”

Billy ducked his head, his cheeks betraying him and flushing warm. *That’s definitely not a yes.*

“That’s usually my line.”

“Maybe that’s where I got it.” Teddy took his hand back, but not before sweeping the pad of his thumb across Billy’s knuckles, his caress sinking into Billy’s skin and burning there. “We’ll talk at breakfast, okay?”

What else could Billy say? “Sure.” And he nodded.

Teddy hesitated, like he might have said or done something more, but all that came out was “Goodnight, Billy. Get some rest.”

Teddy was going to say no. That was the only reason he’d ask to wait, maybe to figure out what to say to soften the blow. So Billy didn’t ask for ‘one for the road’ like he wanted to, or grab Teddy’s hand and pull him close, put Teddy’s hand over his heart and make him swear to be Billy’s forever, damn the consequences. He just nodded, closing his eyes against the hurt that welled up deep inside. “Goodnight.”
The door slid open and closed again before he opened his eyes.

The room was empty after he was gone, the small space cavernous and hollow without Teddy there to fill it up. The silence wasn’t total, broken by the constant low buzz of the overhead lights, the faint sounds of voices from the hallway, the clanks and groans of a massive concrete structure.

And everything was awful.

What now? He could go back to the gym and try and walk off some of the guilt-slash-anger that was closing up his throat. Or he could do what Teddy wanted and try and get some sleep, though the chances of that working right now were next to nil.

Billy dropped into the desk chair, his shoulders and knees giving him warning signals from holding himself rigid for so long. The day which had started out with a certain amount of promise had devolved into a frustrating clusterfuck.

So fucking typical.

He powered on the computer instead, and it only took a few seconds to call up some of his and Tommy’s old training videos—footage taken in combat rooms at the Academy and various Shatterdomes over years. There had been days where they’d spent upwards of ten hours doing drills, training with a dozen different weapons and learning style after style, until every inch of his body had been one huge bruise. Every stage of the process had been designed to make those trained by it some of the best fighters in the world.

He didn’t have any weapons on hand in his quarters, but there were a couple of videos that were just hand to hand sequences. Those he could do. He settled into the opening stance for the first video on the list, ignoring the growing complaints from his knees. Exhaustion fogged in behind his eyes and he ignored it.

*Push through the wall. Prove you still have it.*

Thirty seconds in and Billy-on-the-screen had left Billy-now so far behind in the kata that there was no catching up again. He stopped moving, his breath hot in his throat and tears stinging his eyes again. Raking his hands through his hair and pushing it out of his face, he stood still and watched instead.

Billy-who-was moved easily through a complex sequence of attacks that he remembered down in his bones, but now could barely follow. It ended with Tommy on the floor, Billy-who-was laughing, reaching down to haul him back to his feet.

Billy held his hands out in front of him and looked at his arms, nothing at all like the sleek muscle taunting him from the screen. What had it felt like to be inside that body, so breathtakingly confident that he could do anything? As far as his internal clock was concerned it had only been a few months ago. Even so, he could barely remember. The shell he was stuck in wouldn’t cooperate.

“Fuck this,” he growled aloud, his words falling flat against the concrete walls.

Closing the video player brought up his messages—two saved, one new, from Erik Lehnsherr. If by ‘new’ he meant three and a half months ago, but still unread.

He closed the screen down instead of looking and shoved the laptop to the back of the desk, collapsing down into the chair. The videos were from a life he wanted back, so badly that he could taste it. (It tasted of bile and hard iron, blood and salt-sweat.) But what if.
The world was as quiet as it ever got, Billy was alone, and it surfaced as a whisper in his ear. The voice he hated, with questions that came curling, sharp-toothed, into his brain at moments like this when he was still, and tired, and scared.

What if he couldn’t have it back?

What if he could never become that man again?

If William Maximoff wasn’t a Ranger anymore… then what was he?
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Wherein Billy gets some bad news, and some good news, in that order.

He ran, because running was the easiest way to feel free. Tommy had shown him that. First drift, first time seeing through Tommy’s eyes—bound together since the womb, now they knew each other more deeply than anyone had the right.

Memory: The shock, the first moment when he knew:

~this is how much you love me?~

And now he ran, the sky blue above and the grass green below his feet, the distance eaten up by every step he took.

The cliff was in front of him, the land dropping away to the ocean. The water lapped at the base below, crystal blue and warm. He didn’t slow down, didn’t swerve. His foot hit the edge and he pushed, jumped, spread his arms and the wind caught him. For a moment he was soaring, untouched by gravity, wild and bright.

The light dimmed, the blue faded to grey. He fell, plummeted toward an ocean now black and stormy, waves crashing, white foam like angry teeth gnashing atop each crest. He struck the water, feet first, and tendrils wrapped around his wrists, ankles, knees, waist. He kicked at them and struck nothing, pulled his arms to break free, and the bindings only tightened. The light dimmed above him, the surface further and further away.

There had been an angel once, his wings a shield against the dark. With the last flicker of consciousness, Billy pushed his plea out into the void.

~Where are you?~

This time, there was no reply.

Bubbles floated up toward the last gleam of the sun, his lungs empty now and the cold black pressing in around him.

The light went out.

Billy fought against the blackness and the void, dragging in a sucking breath to fill his aching lungs. There was a voice in the darkness, and it sounded an awful lot like his own.

“Billy, wake up.”

And annoyed him, which was probably the most comforting version in the world. Billy opened his eyes. The sky, the ocean, the void—it all slipped sideways and faded away. The black tentacles of the beast resolved into his sheets, twisted around his legs in knots, and the space where he should have seen sky was filled with the solid iron frame of the upper bunk. Tommy’s
head and shoulders hung from there, upside down, his hair fanning out in obedience to gravity.

“You alright?” Tommy asked, and he vanished up over the side again before Billy could answer. He reappeared a moment later, right side up this time, sliding down the ladder without his feet touching the rungs.

“I’m fine. Just a weird dream.” Billy tried to push himself up to sitting, but his shoulders and arms refused to obey. Everything ached, right down through to the marrow of his bones. The light switched on and it shot right into Billy’s brain, bypassing his eyes and heading straight for the pain center attached to his optic nerve. “Turn that off, shit! Are you trying to blind me?”

The weight settling down on the side of his bed meant Tommy sitting beside him. The light stayed on. Billy flopped forward instead of trying to get up again, and he poked Tommy in the hip. **Poke. Poke. Poke.**

“Knock it off, shithead.” But like there always was nowadays, there was something satisfied in Tommy’s voice, even—especially—when he was telling Billy off for being a pest.

There were days when Billy didn’t actually mind being the younger twin.

Like now, when just making an inventory of his aches and pains left him exhausted, and Tommy’s hand was a cool and solid touchstone on his forehead. “Must have overdone it, that’s all,” he answered the question Tommy hadn’t asked. “I’m not sick.”

That was when the alarm went off, and Tommy threw something across the room. There was a thump, and the beeping stopped. “Was that my shoe?”

“Maybe. What were you doing last night?” Tommy sounded faintly suspicious, and he smoothed Billy’s hair back from his forehead as he asked.

“Nothing. At all.” Billy sighed inwardly. “Teddy was here and we talked for a bit, then he left, and I reviewed some of our old training vids. Then I went to bed. I bet this is from physio,” he added, and cracked one eye open to test the light again. It didn’t hurt as badly, so he tried for both. Better. “Michael never gets tired of finding new places to stretch me.”

“That could almost be kinky.” Tommy ducked out of the way when Billy took a half-assed swat at him. He crossed the room toward his locker, stripping off his shirt as he went. The little purple bruises Billy had seen yesterday had been added to, and pink scratch lines between them were already fading.

“This thing,” Billy asked, and Tommy glanced back at him over his shoulder. “You and the girls. How serious is it?”

And Tommy being Tommy, he only grinned and shrugged. “As serious as it needs to be.”

“You deserve more than that, you know.” And he did. Tommy deserved everything, including someone who thought of him first in all the world, not as a supplement to another, more important relationship.

Tommy shook his head. “Not everyone has white-picket-fence monogamy as an endgame, little bro. That’s what makes you happy. I’ve got the people I need, where I want them, for now.”

“And when that changes?”

“Let it go. Look, Eli and Joe are on watch today. If you want to try for another joy ride we can probably sneak you out of this dump again.”
“That’s pushing our luck.” Billy took a deep breath, grabbed for the pole of the ladder, and carefully, slowly, hauled himself up to sitting. There; that wasn’t so bad. Give him a few minutes under a hot shower, and he’d be better than ever.

Except then he’d have to face Teddy across the breakfast table and hear exactly how Teddy didn’t want to be with him after all.

Maybe he should just stay in bed.

The pounding of a fist at the heavy metal door cancelled that idea immediately. “Maximoffs, move it out! The Marshal wants to see you.” And a moment later a similar banging sound—Teddy’s door, across the hall. “Altman! Rise and shine. The Marshal’s office, now.”

Dread settled into the pit of Billy’s stomach, a cold hard lump that swelled and filled him up, pushing out the last of the optimism he’d managed to hold on to so far.

“We’re in trouble,” Billy said out loud.

“Don’t jump the gun,” Tommy warned him, throwing a shirt that Billy caught before it landed on his head. “It could be training related, or scheduling maintenance for Magnus.”

Billy hauled the olive-drab t-shirt on over his head, his dog-tags clinking at his neck. “You don’t honestly believe that.”

“Trying to look on the bright side.”

Teddy met them in the hallway a few minutes later, still tucking his shirt in to his uniform pants. Faint purple bags under his eyes suggested he hadn’t slept well either, and worry furrowed his brow. The worry lines didn’t go away when he caught Billy’s eye, though his smile felt genuine. And then he reached out for Billy—he did—and gave Billy’s hand a squeeze before dropping it and falling into step beside the twins. “Do you think this is about yesterday?”

“Sneaking off-base, you mean?” He’d been the only one who had technically ‘snuck’ —Teddy’d had permission, and Tommy wasn’t being caged in by medical reports that insisted he was in no shape to run his own life.

“Would you two just relax?” Tommy had his hands in his pockets, sauntering down the hall as though he didn’t care. “Billy made it back on base in plenty of time, and security only saw me and Teddy. How could she possibly know that he was AWOL?”

“So this was fun to wake up to.” Carol dropped a copy of the local newspaper on her desk. A full-colour photograph of Billy and Teddy filled most of the space above the fold. Their lips were locked and middle fingers raised, the red-robed harbinger frothing at the mouth in the less-sharply-focused background. The headline GAY RANGERS PROTEST PREACHER was blazoned across the top.

Oh God.

The screen on her desk and the one hanging on the wall were filled with similar images, other headlines from blogs and newspapers up and down the west coast—and beyond. The photographer must have been with the news crew Billy had vaguely noted yesterday, and then entirely dismissed.

Billy’s stomach was in knots already and this just yanked them tighter. Teddy had already mostly
shot him down, he wasn’t even sure what he wanted, and now their one and only really good real-life kiss was front page news.

What was Teddy thinking? Billy didn’t dare sneak a peek. Not now with Carol losing her shit at all of them.

“Let’s start with ‘I don’t remember approving liberty for anyone by the name of Maximoff’ and continue on to the massive PR disaster you’ve created for the PPDC, involvement in a public disturbance, defying direct orders not to leave the Shatterdome, William, and add ‘pissing off local religious leaders’ on top of this incredible shit pile you’ve just dumped in my lap.”

Billy stood rigid, his back at attention and hands clasped behind him. From the corner of his eye he could see Tommy and Teddy standing the same way, three idiots on the firing line together.

“With all due respect,” Tommy spoke first, clearing his throat. Was he seriously intending to fall on his sword for Billy? Not that they hadn’t covered for each other before—many times, in fact—but Billy was the expendable one now. If either of them was going to take the hit- “That asshole was disturbed long before we got there.”

And that sounded a lot more like Tom. Billy bit the inside of his cheek, hard, the only way to stop himself from busting out laughing and getting the Marshal’s boot to his balls.

“Whether or not I personally agree with the BuenaKai Church’s stances on anything—” and from the tone of her voice Billy was thankful that at least the answer to that one seemed to be ‘no,’ “-I have an installation to run. And right now I have every news outlet in the country clogging up the phone lines trying to get statements on the PPDC’s stances on everything from equal rights to freedom of speech.

“The only reason you morons aren’t being shipped out to some gulag in the Arctic right now is because we need you in Magnus. Whatever the hell you did to that Jaeger, it’s still only talking to you—but that doesn’t mean I can’t put you in a world of hurt if you pull a stunt like this again.”

Had Billy ever seen her so angry? He tried to remember back, and a few moments sprang to mind —only most of them had been aimed at Tony Stark and the J-tech crowd, not Billy. And maybe that was the major difference.

He opened his mouth to speak, the same time that Teddy said “Ma’am-” and she slashed her hand across her throat in an unmistakeable sign.

“I don’t want to hear it. Argue about which one of you is going to take the blame for everyone else on your own time.”

The office door slid open. “Carol?” Colonel Rhodes leaned in, his arm resting on the doorframe. He looked them over with something more of a faint sense of exasperation, and right now that was a welcome counterpoint to the Marshal’s wrath. “Got a minute?”

She canted back in her chair, clicking the bottom of her pen about five or six times in rapid succession, and the thick tension in the room began to drain away. “Yes,” she sighed finally, “come in. You,” she gestured at the three of them with the base of her pen, “get out of here. You’re all confined to base until further notice. And stay away from the media!”

Billy made his escape while the window of opportunity was there, nodding to the Colonel as he slid past and out into the hall. Tommy and Teddy followed right on his heels, and Teddy sagged back against the wall as the door closed behind them. He puffed out a long breath of air, deflating along with the sigh. “That answers that question.”
“Holy shit,” Billy replied reverently. The image of Carol surrounded by photos of their makeout floated back into his vision and he stifled a snicker. The wall between them and her office wasn’t that thick—if he laughed now, she’d hear it and kill them all.

He made the worst mistake ever at that point. He made eye contact with Tommy. The light gleaming there was enough to send the laugh—part hilarity, part tension release—bubbling back up his throat. Billy slapped his hand over his mouth to stop the sound and it came out as a muffled snort instead, which sent Tommy snickering.

“Holy shit,” Billy repeated once it was safe to remove his hand and he could breathe without choking on the laugh coming the other way. Tommy started to move down the hall and he rushed to keep up, Teddy at his side. “Did you see her face?”

“There was a vein throbbing right here, I kept thinking it was going to burst.” Teddy gestured at his temple. A smile tugged at his lips like he didn’t want to find it funny but was succumbing anyway. “This was not the way I meant to come out publically.”

Tommy laughed. “Too late now. Did you see the look on Rhodey’s face?”

“How did they even recognize us?” Teddy asked, baffled. “I did a couple of interviews after the Shelob fight, but it’s not like there was a lot of coverage, and we weren’t in uniform.”

“After the media circus we went through last year?” Tommy cocked an eyebrow at Billy, and … yeah. Of course it would have been nuts. Lose a Ranger, almost lose a Jaeger, and the press would have been all over it. More headline potential than the Sacramento Trespassers actually winning a game. And since Teddy was hanging out with the twins- “Once they saw Billy and me, it’s not like it was going to be hard to put a name to the square-jawed golden boy. You’re famous now, hot stuff.”

“Bite me.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Billy admitted, nerves coiling tight. He hadn’t considered a lot of things, apparently. “How bad was it last year? I haven’t gone back in the archives to look at anything other than major news.”

“Don’t.” Teddy shook his head, the smile fading. “Not worth it.”

For an instant he wanted nothing more than to go searching, to dig up anything and everything in the news relating to the incident—he had to stop calling it an accident, since it was nothing of the kind. But overall he was probably better off not.

A couple of techs were heading the other way, snickering over something. One glanced at Billy and Teddy and grinned, though Billy only managed a distracted smile in return before they passed and were gone.

“I’m sorry for getting you guys stuck in purgatory with me” Billy said after a moment, turning down the hall leading to the barracks: private quarters and the common rooms.

“And ruining any reputation Teddy might have had for having decent taste in guys,” Tommy added helpfully, dodging the hand Billy raised to smack him.

“Could be worse,” Teddy shrugged, his cheeks flushing pink. “We’re not benched, just grounded. In the teenager sense, I mean.”

“Until further notice. How long do you think that means?”
Tommy was just as easy about the whole thing, his hands tucked in his pockets and his gait just as loose as before. “At least ‘Mom’ didn’t take away our phones this time. Think we can get away with ordering pizza?”

Something was stuck to the door of Billy and Tommy’s room, pieces of newsprint held on with tape. Billy slowed and stopped, and when his brain registered what his eyes were looking at, he covered his face with his hand and groaned.

GO GO RAINBOW RANGERS proclaimed the headline on this paper’s version of the story, that same damned photo taking pride of place. Only on this one, someone had drawn a big red magic-marker heart around their faces, and added blissful little stick-figure doodles of a rapt and applauding audience all around the margins. Then cut the whole thing out and carefully scotch-taped it to Billy’s door, along with another six or seven similar articles, equally embellished.

“That’s really not your best side,” Tommy declared, looking the picture over more closely.

Teddy froze, his face gone blank and his shoulders rigid, a solid block against Billy’s side where Billy had imagined him being warm and welcoming a moment before.

Because now everyone would think they were an item, when Teddy had been trying to let him down gently. **Shit and shit again.**

Teddy only started to thaw when Tommy began laughing, giving him first an incredulous look and then, slowly, settling into something less wary. “You know who did that?”

He addressed the question to Tommy, but Billy answered first. “Not specifically, but if I had to guess, the style has Cassie written all over it.”

“But she’s not—” Teddy trailed off. “I thought she liked us.”

Wait. Was he was freaking out because he was taking it as a serious attack, not because it was a public demonstration of an offer he’d decided to refuse? Billy shook his head. “She adores us. And you. Promise. But it is a sign that we’re going to be eating shit over the media reaction for months.”

“And you know,” Tommy said all-too casually, his eyes a-gleam and his smile wide and wicked. “This means war.”

“Can we not do anything that can be traced back our way?” It was probably futile, but Billy had to ask. “At least until Carol’s blood pressure goes down a couple of notches.”

“Don’t wuss out on me now, little bro. The family honour is at stake.”

“Pranks at thirty paces?” Teddy guessed, arching an eyebrow. “This is a thing?”

“Turn and draw, partner,” Tommy mimed firing the plasma cannon down the empty hall. He peeled the papers from the door, folded them down and tucked them in his pocket. A satisfied smile blossomed on his face—one that reached his eyes and all but made him glow with the energy of his amusement. “Finally, things are starting to get back to normal around this hellpit.”

‘Normal’ would have sounded like some boring hell on earth not that long ago, but right now Billy would trade in just about anything to get back there. His new normal involved way too much time spent in the medical wing, though at least even those appointments were getting shorter and further between.
They still involved a lot of Faiza giving him the evil eye and telling him off about something or another, her Mary-Poppins accent not softening the blows. Like right now, for instance, while he rolled his sleeve back down and she frowned at his test results. “Your cortisol levels are way up.”

“Next time you should do stress tests before I get chewed out by my CO, not after.”

“And your blood sugar’s down. Are you sticking with your meal plan?”

“Yes!” he answered, too quickly. She looked at him, and Billy looked away. “Not exactly. But I picked up some protein bars in town to replace those godawful shakes, and they’re not so bad. Besides, I’m getting better. In a few more weeks—”

“Billy,” she sighed at him, and that was worse than the glaring, because it meant she cared and then he was honour-bound to actually take her seriously. It was a dirty trick.

“Months, then. You’ve said that everything’s going well.”

“You’ve been significantly deconditioned. It’s going to—”

Billy groaned. “Don’t say it. Please don’t say it.”

“Take time,” she said, but this time with more of a sympathetic smile than before. She leaned her hips against her desk and picked up a tablet, scrolling through some pages of data. “On the positive side, your bone density is back up to pre-incident levels. Do not take that as permission to start doing skateboarding tricks off the roof,” she shook her stylus at him, “or begin a new career as a stuntman, but it does mean that you’re no longer at an elevated risk for fractures.”

He perked up at that, sitting straighter in the hard plastic chair. “Does that mean I’m cleared to go back to the kwoon?”

“If you’re careful. Try and stay away from any major percussive injuries for the next little while. I only just managed to get you evicted from here.”

“Go on and say it, you miss seeing my smiling face every morning.” Buoyant now, the news was finally something he could hang on to as proof. He wasn’t going to be on the sidelines forever.

Faiza dropped the tablet back on to her desk and tucked the stylus into the pocket of her lab coat, where it promptly vanished under the edge of her crisp white hijab. She shook her head at him, but she was smiling all the same. “How can I miss you when you don’t go away?”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am.” Billy stood, but he didn’t quite make it out of her office before she called out to him again.

“Check in with Richards, by the way. He wants to do another set of EEGs and an MRI.”

That caught him off guard, and Billy hesitated, his hand halfway to the door handle. “More brain scans? What’s he looking for this time? Third eye? Alien eggs?”

And that was when she smiled, meeting his eyes. “To see if you’re up for a test on the pons. If he’s satisfied that everything checks out, I’ll sign off.”

If it weren’t deeply inappropriate for about six or seven different reasons, Billy could have crossed the room and kissed her for that. He stood there for a half-second as it was, turning the information over in his mind. The pons system was the core of the technology that allowed pilots to drift in the first place, to synchronize their minds with each other and then to their Jaegers. The technology that would give Magnus back to him—and Tommy as well. “You’re not serious.”
“This is a test, Ranger,” she replied, but the smile only faded a little. “I’m not guaranteeing anything, especially not until after I see the test results. And even if you’re able to sync up cleanly with the simulator, it doesn’t mean you’re going to be back in a Jaeger any time soon.”

“No,” Billy agreed, refusing to let anything puncture the exhilarating bubble of awesome that was currently encircling his entire body. “But it’s one hell of a huge step closer. Thank you, Doc. I mean it.”

“Tell Richards to forward me the results as soon as he has something. Now scram.”

“Scramming. Scramming right now.”

The light in the corridor seemed to be brighter when he left, gravity a notch lower—or was it that he was practically flying on that wave of glee and almost delirious anticipation? Only a test, he tried to remind himself. He left the medical wing and immediately turned down the corridor that led to the Jaeger Tech and Kaiju Science divisions. I’ve been through lots of those already.

But oh, what if?

The J-tech labs took up more than half the wing of the base, most of the space filled with parts of Jaeger engines and simulators, open computer towers and cables criss-crossing the floors at seemingly random intervals. Nate’s lab was behind all of that, his work on brain-computer interfaces not needing nearly as much room as the giant pistons and servos.

Nate himself was on the other end of the wing and deep in some major scrum with the rest of the tech-heads, leaving Billy to entertain himself until they solved whatever crisis was currently underway.

One of the screens on Nate’s desk was set to a news stream, the sound muted. A rally of some kind was happening outside one of the local police stations, and Billy hunted through the piles of loose papers and electronic parts until he found the old-style keyboard—and the mute button.

“How aren’t the police doing anything about the rise in violence and property crimes?” The sound blared into life and he quickly jammed the volume down to a reasonable level, stabbing his finger at the keys. I should be grateful that this isn’t about us.

Statistics and headlines crawled across the bottom of the screen: comparing this year to the last, to the five previous. Rising rates of mugging and robberies, arson. He didn’t feel all that grateful.

“…here with media rep from the LAPD—can we expect to see more of a visible police presence in coming months?”

The officer on screen looked like she’d rather be anywhere but there, her tight frown not the usual sort of fake reassurance you expected to see from press scrums. “It comes down to budget; more than twenty-five percent of the state’s original funding for criminal justice is now being diverted to the PPDC. And when forty percent of police departments in the state are facing more cuts, the field as a whole is suffering.”

“That’s not fair!” Billy flinched at the accusation, blurting out a reply to the screen as though the police rep was speaking to him directly. “If some kaiju takes the city down, then there won’t be anyone left for the police to protect.”

The faces on the screen didn’t respond to him, obviously enough, but something off-screen definitely caught their attention. A middle-aged woman rushed the interview, papers in her hands.
They flapped and some fell as she jammed them against the chest of the police representative, the reporter reaching out in a futile attempt to shove his arm between them.

“Don’t talk about budgets —what are you doing to find her? Nothing!” Not a terrorist, which had been Billy’s first gut-level reaction, scanning her hands for a weapon—but there was nothing there except the papers, the all-caps letters MISSING stamped in bold across one of the visible edges. The adrenaline died down, threat level decreased. She was just another mother, greying hair tumbling loose from a rough ponytail, makeup-free and a light coat open over clothes that looked slept-in.

The police rep held her hands up, eyes darting to the camera still trained on the interaction. She pushed gently, putting space between them. “Ma’am, if you’ve filed a report then we’re working on it – but considering the number of—”

Conversation buzzed up around them, the reporter following them a couple of steps, uniformed officers moving in behind the mother to bundle her off to some less publicly-embarrassing spot. Jail, probably.

She shook off one of the hands on her arm, waving the papers again. “You don’t care! You just write it off as a casualty of war! There’s a war here but you’re on the wrong side!”

Then, as Billy braced for the whole thing to go pear-shaped, familiar red robes moved through the chaos of the crowd.

Not the old man this time, but two woman about the same age as the furious mother—one white, tall and slim and blonde, the other shorter with dark brown skin, both dressed in lightweight layers of red and orange that seemed to float about each woman as she moved. Protestors parted for them and they reached the front before the uniformed officers regrouped.

“Billy?” Nate called his name and Billy muted the sound again. The door slid closed behind Nate and he dropped a badge back into the pocket of his jacket. “Sorry for the wait. Tony did something to the archive retrieval function and now the sockets aren’t responding properly—”

On the screen, one of the red-robed priestesses had her arm around the mother’s shoulder and was speaking to her, compassion written large across her face, their heads close together. So they’re not all bad.

Probably.

“Anyway,” Nate seemed to notice he wasn’t listening, and dropped the recitation of exactly what Stark had done to the computer systems. If Billy was lucky, that might take some of the heat off of him. How many people could Carol stay angry with at once? “Did Faiza tell you why I wanted to see you?”

Billy stopped watching the news feed, dragging himself back into the moment. Nate was frowning at him, dark brows furrowing and a line forming between them. There had been a time when Billy had found his intensity cute, wondered if maybe… But there was a very fine line between ‘intensity’ and ‘kind of scary, dude,’ and adding social awkwardness on top of that meant the whole thing had lasted all of one date. At least they’d called it a night before their friendship had taken a hit as well.

“Simulator run?” Billy pushed his luck, jumping right to the thing that mattered the most. What were more exams going to show them that Nate didn’t already know? He put on his most innocent, eager face. “And refitting my circuit suit.”
Nate snorted. “Nice try. MRI first, or they’ll dangle me over the Breach as Kaiju bait.”

“Danvers wouldn’t bother. You wouldn’t make more than a mouthful, even for a Cat-one.”

“Keep going AWOL and you’ll find out before I will.”

Folding his arms and watching while Nate puttered around his equipment, Billy conceded defeat. “But if the tests show you want you want to see, Nate—I need to get back in there.” And putting it into words made it real, the taste of yearning solid on his tongue. “Maybe once I can synch up with Tommy again, the rest will fall into place.” And he’d have a real purpose again, rather than just taking up space and resources that were more needed elsewhere.

Nate’s reply went in a different direction, though, straight to Billy’s core. “And you won’t feel so left out?” He looked up from the control panel, and held Billy’s gaze. Sometimes, awkward or not, Nate was far too perceptive for his own good.

Billy looked away, tried to wiggle out of the discomfort that bubbled up inside. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He wasn’t that selfish, to be jealous of Tommy’s friendship with Teddy, to want to shove himself into the middle of the bond they’d been building. (Yes, yes he was.) Teddy needed friends in his life as much as anyone, and he desperately needed people who could be trusted. And Billy knew better than anyone that Tommy was the best.

But shameful as it was, other thoughts crowded in on the heels of his denial.

Tommy and Teddy in the ready room, laughing at a half-finished phrase. In the middle of a conversation, catching one another’s eyes and smiling at a joke no-one else had heard. Tommy jumping in to finish Teddy’s sentences with a word, the way he and Billy used to. Their wordless, easy understanding that left Billy alone on the other side of a thick glass wall.

“Yeah, you do. Put this on.” Nate tossed him a set of scrubs, and Billy caught them out of the air. “And you didn’t hear it from me, but Teddy’s said the same thing. About you and Tommy, I mean. You and your brother have a history and a connection that can’t be replicated.”

And Tommy and Teddy have a ‘now’ that I can’t touch.

Was that also the reason Tommy wasn’t giving him shit about Teddy, or whatever relationship they were or weren’t having? Usually Tommy went straight for the jugular when he found an easy target. But on subjects that mattered the most... it took pliers and a hammer to beat word one out of him.

Maybe it wasn’t Tommy-and-Teddy, with Billy as the useless third wheel. Were all three of them triangulating around each other in a haze of unspoken hope and fear?

The faded green cotton was soft in his hands, the bundle of fabric something else to focus on.

“Turn around,” Billy fired off as he pulled his shirt off over his head. At least he could try to drag things back toward the light-hearted back and forth. It was so much better than sitting with his own darker thoughts. “No peeking.”

“I was in the room when they pulled your feeding tube. The mystique’s long gone.”

Still, Billy waited until Nate had turned his back before he finished changing, the scars on his arms and across his chest still vivid and pink. They’ll fade in time, Faiza had assured him. Not circuit-burns, like those which had singed Tommy’s skin for a while (or so he said)—any marks on him
from the incident were long since healed). These were from shrapnel and scalpel, from the damage and the repairs alike. And he hated every one.

He hauled on the scrubs, covered the memories over with the now. The rest was routine: earplugs, the cold of the bench seeping into his limbs, sliding slowly into the gaping metal maw to have his brain virtually sliced and diced, served up for the examination of others.

The only way to survive was detach. Find the space inside him that still resonated with the drift, and set himself free among the stars.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Wherein Billy chases the RABIT and Nate has a plan.

The light woke him up around the same time the distant muffled hum stopped, and Billy opened his eyes. Nate stared down at him, lips moving, but no sound came out. At least not until Billy popped the earplugs out and pushed himself up to sitting.

“You fell asleep in there?” Nate gave him a look like he’d done something terrible, or at least unexpected, but Billy couldn’t find the wherewithal to care.

“What else was I supposed to do? MRIs aren’t exactly riveting entertainment.” His face split with a yawn that he managed to cover with the back of his hand, then shook the last edges of sleep off. He’d been dreaming. Not an important, vivid dream, but one that had something to do with Teddy nevertheless. Hopefully the scanner hadn’t picked up anything embarrassing in his brain activity to go along with that. It couldn’t see that, could it? “How do the results look?” he asked quickly.

Nate pinched and spread his fingers in the middle of the projection display, exploding Billy’s brain scans into the air above his desk. He spun the image around once, twice, and shrugged eloquently. Colours flashed across the projection, highlighting areas in greens and sombre yellows. No screaming reds or oranges flashing dire warnings, not this time. “Normal, normal… boringly normal.”

“Which is good,” Billy asked, just to be sure.

Nate’s satisfied nod told him enough even before he opened his mouth. “It’s very good.”

“Dr. Hussain wanted to see these. I have to get her to sign off on this before she changes her mind, or Carol decides to ship me back inland.” Would he understand the urgency, now that the stars were finally beginning to realign in Billy’s favour? Nate would. He had to.

The speculative look that came into his eye was like a gift, a gleam that suggested Billy was about to get everything he’d been wishing for. “Screw it,” Nate said, looking from Billy to his scans and back again. “Why wait? Faiza’s going to sign off on this anyway, you said so yourself.”

Billy’s mood lifted again, coming so close to buoyant that he could practically float with it. “She did say that as long as you approved, she’d rubber-stamp.”

And then Nate frowned in thought. “Mind you, the Marshal won’t approve.”

Like that was a deterrent? Billy was about to argue when he caught that gleam in Nate’s eye again—son of a bitch knew exactly what he was doing. Billy grinned instead. “Fuck it, I’m already in trouble. I don’t care. Let’s do this.”

Nate was already moving to a cabinet before Billy was finished answering, unlocking it and hauling out a pons rig, the silicon contacts wobbling on their spurs like some benign spider’s legs. “Did you want me to call Tommy down for this?”
He considered it for a moment, then shook his head. “No. he’s been like an old bubbe lately, fussing over everything. I want to know what I’m dealing with before I say anything.”

The answer didn’t faze him, Nate offering his knuckles for a fistbump before spinning his office chair around for Billy to sit. “We got this.”

“We got this,” Billy echoed, and for a moment, he really believed it.

He redressed, exchanging the scrubs for his uniform again, olive drab and comfortable. Another familiar process, Nate settling the pons around his head and fixing the contacts in place. Easy, so familiar, and so damned normal in a way very little in the past four months had been.

There would be no drifting with anyone, not the first time around. It was just a simulation, a quick test with the training system. Nate had the controls, could trigger the synapses that would be sparked by the real thing, so that if something went wrong he could throw the switch in plenty of time to prevent neural overload—or a stroke.

The screen fuzzed out for a moment, and Nate banged his fist on the side of the tower.

“Problems?”

“The humidity’s making everything glitch, I think. Nothing a little percussive maintenance can’t cure.” He kicked something below the desk, and the images popped back into perfect clarity. Nate looked up from behind his console, his gaze intent on Billy. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Billy sank his fingers in to the armrest, and took a breath. He had a moment to wish he’d given a different answer- Tommy should be here, he’s always been here- but the drift rose up around him and overlaid the world with stars.

Floating in the blue, the galaxy spinning up and around him, he’s aloft on the solar winds, a supernova sparking into life. The lab fades and vanishes in the light, a nebula of colours curling around him, whispering to him. We missed you.

Home, and he’s small, curled up in his mother’s lap. Mother holds the book open on her knee, the pages curled at the corners with age and wear. Billy traces the black-ink letters with his finger, makes the familiar sounds. Aleph. Baes. Gimmel.

The tree is older than the house, gnarled leafy branches reaching up to the sun-bright sky. The rope ladder makes it easy to scale, to swarm up the trunk and secret himself away, where he can watch the world and the world can’t see him. The wood planks of the treehouse are rough under his knees, his fingertips. It’s easier sometimes, to disappear.

“You gonna run, little faggot? Gonna go cry to mommy?”

He wants to, but his mother’s arms won’t protect him forever. He balls up his fists instead, half the size of John’s stupid meathooks, and he stands his ground. “You’re just pissed because I’d sooner french kiss a garbage can.”

It’s going to hurt, when the fist comes down, but it’s better than giving in.

Tommy’s voice is behind him, and he doesn’t even have to turn to know—Tommy has his fists up too. “A garbage can would be a step up. You want a piece of my brother, Kesler, you have to go through me.”

You’re drift compatible
I always knew that

Maximoffs—meet your ride. Magnus Echo.

She’s beautiful in a way nothing else has ever been before or since

(She?

Of course she’s a she. Don’t be an ass, Tommy.)

And he (they) belong to her.

Waves lap at their legs, the cold of the ocean not making it through the layers of titanium and wire that pass for Magnus’ nerves. He’s been blinded by anger, a fight over nothing that means nothing and will be forgotten as quickly as it began. They have all the time they need to make things right, he and Tommy.

Billy’s trying to push that through the drift, to sit behind Tommy’s eyes, and that’s when the kaiju rises. He’s distracted, Tommy’s bleeding emotion all over him and he doesn’t see the hit until just before it connects.

Pain. Pain and fear and everything from the battle with Honne-onna that he’d forgotten searing through his mind all at once. Memories from all sides flooding in and burning open pathways that had scarred closed.

Blood in his mouth and blood on his hands, stinging his eyes and he can’t get clear; swinging, unmoored.

Tommy’s reaching for him but Billy’s too far away and moving farther.

He tries to force the scream but all that comes out is red, red everywhere and the taste of iron, of bitter cloves.

“Billy!”

And then it was gone. Nate had the pons set in his hands, the lab resolved around him again, the hitch in Billy’s chest and the tears on his cheeks the only evidence that anything had taken place at all. His mouth still tasted of blood.

“Are you alright?” Nate was shining a penlight in his eyes, the jolt painful. Billy pushed him away, wiped the wetness from his face with the back of his hand.

He tried to form words and choked on them, swallowing hard before he tried again. His head swam with the disorientation, and when he looked down at his hand, the back of it was streaked with red.

Another drop fell from his nose, splashed bright against his wrist.

Nate pressed tissues into his hand, grabbed the back of his head and tipped it forward. “Pinch there until the bleeding stops,” he insisted, his voice tight with something not unlike panic.

Billy shook and he shouldn’t be shaking; any sign of weakness and it would be months – years before they let him try again. “I’m fine. I chased the RABIT, that’s all. I’m fine.”

“Bullshit, you’re fine. You can’t lie to me, Billy; I’m literally reading your mind right now.” He
was scanning the telemetry, the image of Billy’s brain overlaid with more information, parts of it lighting up with strings of green and blue letters.

Billy stared at him, his poor bruised synapses absolutely refusing to acknowledge the statement. He blinked. Nate glanced at him, made eye contact, and one corner of his mouth quirked up into a grin. Sliding down the seat and groaning were definitely actions within Billy’s range right now, so he did them both. “That was awful,” he added, just in case Nate wasn’t sure. His voice came out muffled and nasal, but there was still blood on the tissue when he snuck a wary look.

One more betrayal from a body that still wasn’t his.

Nate stayed silent and for a moment Billy wondered. “Is there a problem?” he asked casually. Too casually, it sounded forced even to himself. How could it not matter? If his body healed just fine but his brain couldn’t- then what would he do with himself?

It doesn’t matter, because that won’t happen.

“No problems,” Nate answered after a moment, and Billy refused to admit that the fear drained out of him, because that meant admitting that he’d been afraid of the answer in the first place. “Just your garden variety first-stage neural overload. The sections of your cortex targeted by the pons lit up brighter than I’ve seen before…” He was half-explaining, half muttering to himself, already lost in whatever dark and tangled maze made up his intellect.

“It’s like you were sunburned when Magnus went down,” Nate finished after a minute. “And you’re still sensitive to touch. I know Faiza’s going to say to wait it out a little longer-”

“She’ll be saying that five years from now if I give her any excuse,” Billy complained. Another peek and the new tissues were still clean. He swiped at his nose one more time, just to be sure, but the bleeding seemed to be done for now. “Come on, Nate. There’s got to be another option.”

That earned him a scowl but not a really intended one, nothing with force or portent behind it. It was a thinking scowl, so Billy sat back and left him to it.

“Acclimatization,” Nate suggested after a moment. “Building up calluses, in a sense. We work on it slowly, increase your tolerance levels until you can do a simulator run without overloading. But you were under for less than a minute this time before the telemetry went nuts.”

“So next time we start with a few seconds, and work my way up.”

“I’m still going to have to send something over to medical.”

That was easy, the answer still spinning in the projector between them. Billy stood, reached in and gave the image of his brain an almighty shove. The sensors picked up on his motion and obediently filed the scans away in a folder.

“Send her the MRIs, like she asked for. No-one else needs to know about the rest.” Nate didn’t answer immediately. He almost had him. Billy leaned his elbows on the desk and met his eyes.

“Has anyone ever done that kind of incremental testing with this system? There’s probably a whole lot of new information you could pick out of the datasets from experiments like that.”

One more lure to dangle, another hint at a puzzle that only he could solve… Nate was predictable, at least, and Billy… well. He could be as much of a manipulative bastard as his grandfather, if he wanted to be. He wasn’t proud of it, but there it was.

Nate nodded, and the burst of triumph in Billy’s chest only went to prove that he was a terrible person. “Not since Dr. Lightcap’s first trial runs back in year one of the project. It could be
interesting.”

“Then we have a deal.” Billy clapped Nate on the shoulder, sealing the promise before Nate could take any of it back.

Back in his quarters, Billy stole a minute to change into a clean uniform. He bundled up the jacket with the blood spots on the wrist and shoved it into the bottom of his trunk. Laundry could wait until later, when a blood-stained uniform could just as easily be from taking a bad hit in the kwoon rather than something more off-limits.

His clothes from yesterday were still in a pile, and he took a second to shake them out, toss the shirt and underwear towards the laundry bag half-shoved under his bunk. Something crinkled in the pocket of his jeans, and he pulled out a folded piece of paper, momentarily unfamiliar.

Unfolding it brought the memory home, and with it a connection. A missing person flyer, the paper that the wind had ripped from a pole. Not the same one he’d seen the mother waving around on the news feed, but one a lot like it.

The kid looking out at him was a young teen, a girl with long, wavy hair and a smile too big for her own face. Something about it caught him, held his attention. Her smile reminded him of Tommy, a little, back when they were kids.

And below the picture, a name. Not one that meant anything to him, except as a sign that she’d been loved. That she had belonged to someone once, and was missed.

Molly Hayes.

He tossed the paper toward the recycling unit, but changed his mind halfway through the throw. He grabbed the paper back out of the air instead, smoothed it out and laid it on the desk. Molly stared back up at him, her beaming smile tugging at something nameless inside.

Where are you, kid?

Gone inland, more than likely. Picked up roots and taken off to somewhere safer, a sanctuary city where her biggest worries would be sunburn and homework, not watching the waves. It was a better thought, one he’d have to check on, but it sounded more than plausible.

In the meantime, the others were waiting for him in the kwoon. He had clearance now, more proof that he wasn’t going to shatter into a dozen pieces at the slightest breeze.

Billy left the paper on the desk, flung himself into a clean uniform, and out the door.

Non-coms had taken over the first combat room, greeting Billy with friendly cat-calls about the photos, and about Teddy. He laughed it off, but the awkward rubbed the edge off of his emotional high.

The second room had the people Billy was looking for. Cass and Eli were going at each other with staffs, Scott and Joe egging them on, but there—Tommy and Teddy were down at the far end of the room, shoes off and focus on each other.

Teddy gestured, corrected the position of Tommy’s block, running through a combination at half-throttle. Kickboxing this time, a style that the twins had learned from the fightmasters back at the Academy but rarely hauled out. Not when the swings and strikes of bōjutsu came so much more naturally. He and Tommy were built for speed, not brute power, and Magnus had followed suit.
But now Tommy moved through the new combination as easily as breathing, Teddy’s rhythms mirrored in every dodge and strike. *The more things change.*

Pang of envy aside, Billy paused to watch. Tommy was still Tommy underneath the new veneer, his exultant grin as much a part of his fighting face as the furrow of concentration between his brows.

And Teddy—he was magic, his bare arms slick with the sheen of sweat, tank top clinging to his chest. The dimmer lights in the room served to pick out highlights: the damp curls of his hair against his forehead, the cut of his jaw—strong, blunt, so unlike the twins’ sharp edges and points. He was solid through the waist and hips where Billy narrowed, a column of strength and fierce, protective power.

“Cut the crap, Cass! Shit!” Eli’s yelp broke through Billy’s hungry staring, and he turned.

Just in time to watch her go up and over, using the bō as a pole for vaulting, tucking and rolling in the air as easily as she did on the ground. She landed lightly, knees bent, and followed gravity down, dropping and sweeping Eli’s feet out from under him before he could do more than try and track her trajectory through the air.

He landed flat on his back with a grunt. “Goddamn gymnasts.”

Eli’s uncle started laughing and Scott clapped, the pair of older men seated easily on the steps that led up to the platform in the corner. Eli and Joe were still partially strangers to him, their Jaeger a replacement brought in when Billy had been out of commission. But Joe carried a calm certainty with him that soothed raw edges, and Eli was someone Billy had instinctively felt that he could trust. That is, Teddy trusted them both, considered them the closest thing he had to living family, and that was enough.

“Nicely done, kiddo.” Scott cheered his daughter on, a smile on his lips. “If we ever needed proof that these two aren’t drift compatible, we’ve just seen it.”

“Not in any measurable way,” Joe replied with good humour. “But if Elijah doesn’t start relying on tactics instead of instinct, he’s going to end up with more than a few new bruises.”

“My tactics are just fine, she cheats,” Eli grumbled, ignoring Cassie’s offered hand to push himself to his feet on his own power.

She didn’t seem to mind, flipping her long blonde braid back over her shoulder and leaning easily on her bō. “Being faster doesn’t count as cheating, it just means you have to work harder.”

Tommy and Teddy had paused to watch, and Teddy caught Billy’s eye, his hesitant half-smile a warm and welcoming thing that sank into Billy’s bones. His whole body felt alight with it, as though Teddy were a sunbeam aimed entirely at warming Billy down to the quiet darkness at his core.

Breath caught in Billy’s throat. He should go over and join them, break into their cozy camaraderie and demand their attention. It wasn’t fair that Teddy could have such an effect on him, even across the room, even in the middle of every distraction possible.

He didn’t want to feel that swell of envy. Not when he was also being flooded with memories of Teddy’s laughter and his kisses; the image of his hand drawing Billy up out of darkness; bright red lines of energy settling over the skin of Teddy’s arms and marking him; the vivid sensory overload of Teddy on his hands and knees taking Billy deep inside him, the universe turning to a brilliant explosion of light.
They could have that again, somehow. Probably. Maybe. If Billy could get over himself long enough to turn back into a decent human being.

“Making headlines again, Billy?” Cassie padded over to him, racking the staff with the others.

The moment broke, Teddy turned back to his practice session, and Billy gave Cassie a suspicious once-over. She didn’t look like she’d been pranking him only hours ago. No, despite the teasing commentary she practically glowed in her pale blonde innocence, only missing a halo hanging above her head to complete the angelic picture. “You know, if you wanted to make your first public appearance since…” she hesitated for a second. “The thing into a spectacle, you could’ve warned us first.”

“Oh sure,” he scoffed instead. “I’ll call you next time we run into a homophobic psycho and give you the heads-up.”

“I’d totally show up for that if you did,” Cass offered, and the shine in her smile took a lot of the sting out of his craptacular morning. She nudged him, an affectionate shoulder-bump. “So what’s the news on you, hey? When do you get to ride again?”

Had Nate said something already? The flash of irritation was as brief as it was bright. It had been less than half an hour, all told, since Billy had left Nate’s lab, and there was no reason he’d have come running down to the kwoon to tell his girlfriend all about Billy’s failed pons test.

So he just shrugged, drawing on the sinking depression he’d felt the night before rather than today’s cascade of bright new hope. “Not a clue. You know medical—they play everything close to the chest.”

“You must be going absolutely stir-crazy.” She squeezed his arm and fell silent while they watched Eli and Joe spar, the two powerful men much better matched in form and strength.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he replied, the potent mix of emotional highs and lows from the last little while fuelling his exasperation. “It’s worse than at the beginning. At least then I really couldn’t do that much. But now, when I know I can do more if they’d only back off and give me the chance to prove it… it’s making me nuts.”

A sympathetic smile followed and a wave of relief washed over him, a lightening of a weight he hadn’t realized was pressing down on him. Because she hadn’t told him to tough it out, or to be grateful for the freedoms he’d already won back, or remind him of his injuries—like he could ever forget!

Leave it to Cassie to be the one person who would let him be scared and frustrated without taking it personally.

“You should talk to David,” she suggested after a moment. “He’s been petitioning Marshal Danvers to get him another assistant controller in LOCCENT. You already know everything there is to know about Jaegers, it wouldn’t take that long to get you up to speed on the protocols.”

“Move to a desk job?” Billy’s first reply was an immediate dismissal of the idea, but … really, it wasn’t a hideous idea. Not like he was doing anything all that useful right now.

Cassie ignored his tone, reacting with the press of her sharp little elbow into his ribs. “It would be something to do while you wait for your clearance.”

“Instead of hanging out down here bugging you?”

“Precisely.”
“Who’s bugging who?” Teddy stopped beside them, towel slung loosely around his neck, and Billy’s mouth went dry.

There was nowhere to look that was safe. His bent elbows turned his upper arms into acres of solid muscle; the green tank top snug and damp, outlining the rises and falls of his chest, the sweet dip towards his stomach; the barest hint of blond stubble along his jaw giving it texture that would feel rough against Billy’s chin if they kissed—scrape sparks from Billy’s skin, already stretched far too tight.

Teddy stood right there, right beside Billy, and he could catch a hint of clean sweat-smell, an ache rising to meet Billy’s immediate and desperate urge to turn toward him, press his face into the place where Teddy’s throat met his shoulder, breathe him in and lick him, find out if he tasted as good as he smelled right now-

And Billy’s face flushed hot, which meant he was turning red, and he’d already given Cassie far too much material for mockery this week.

“Your boyfriend,” Cassie laughed, and she hadn’t missed a thing, her knowing smile just annoying enough to bring Billy down off of his lust-driven adrenaline rush. “He’s distracted by your bulging biceps.”

Teddy shook his head, shifting his weight uncomfortably. “Come on, Cassie. It’s not like that.”

“I came down to work out, actually.” Billy jumped back in to the conversation, once he was confident enough that he could speak without having his voice crack and betray him. “Dr. Hussain cleared me to start training down here again.” He left off the ‘take it easy’ part of her orders, because fuck it. The brilliant smile he got from Teddy and the way the awkwardness faded away made the little lie worth it.

“Are you serious? That’s great news. Come on, I’ll show you some of the moves Tommy and I were working out. If you want.”

He didn’t have to demand anything, because Teddy was offering it to him freely. Pleased surprise washed through him, driving out the last of the sour grapes.

“Yeah, I would.” Billy snagged a staff out of the rack as he followed Teddy’s lead back to the mats, the wooden bō sitting in his hand as easily as it used to.

“You’re late, slacker,” Tommy called as Billy got closer, another piece of Billy’s life coming back into focus. He grabbed Billy’s forearm and yanked him in for a hug as weird as it was wonderful, Tommy’s hand on his back feeding into his strength for a beat before he let go. “You missed the first half of practice already.”

“Just means I’ll have to kick your ass twice as much now to make up for it.” Billy took a couple of steps back and swung the bō over his head experimentally, testing the weight, the balance, everything that had been second nature not that long ago. It went where he told it, he snapped it back into a high guard and there—there was the rush he remembered, the weapon becoming an extension of himself, a missing piece slotting back into place.

His shoulders and knees ached, leftovers of yesterday and anticipation of what was to come, but it was a good sort of sore. An ‘I’m alive and moving’ kind of sore. It felt so damn good.

Cassie headed off toward the locker room door, waving cheerfully to Billy as she went. “Going to grab a shower,” he heard her tell Scott before she vanished from sight.
Except that when he turned back Tommy was watching the door as well, and the smirk growing on his face triggered all of Billy’s spidey-senses at once. “Tommy?”

“Wait for it.” Tommy’s grin grew wider, Joe and Scott not paying any attention to them at the far end of the room.

“What are we waiting for?” Teddy glanced back and forth from Tommy to the older rangers, then at the door. “You didn’t actually do it, did you?”

“What did he do?” Billy frowned.

“Me?” Tommy placed his hand flat against his chest, his expression as cherubic as a saint’s. “Only stand up for my team. In this case my co-pilot, who has shed blood with me, exactly like a brother—"

He was so full of it that his teeth were practically brown. “Thanks,” Teddy muttered. “I think.”

“—and who, due to some very cruel mistreatment, was led to believe that he was being bullied. Which, as I’m sure we’ll all agree, is downright despicable behaviour coming from finely-trained, adult, military professionals such as ourselves.”

“Tommy, no—”

“So what did you do?” Billy asked, and Tommy held up one finger. Two.

The unmistakeable pop of a powerful air compressor sounded from the locker room, followed immediately by an outraged yelp.

Tommy nodded in satisfaction. “Glitter bomb in her locker.”

A metal door slammed, there was the sound of heavy stomping footsteps, and Cassie reappeared. She was still dressed, but millions of tiny sparkles stuck to every exposed part of her skin and quite a lot of her workout gear, the sweat from training an irresistible glue. Scott and Joe’s conversation faded into silence.

She surveyed the room, her eyes narrowing when they landed on Tommy. “Oh. Really?”

He smiled.

She scowled. “That’s it. Ceasefire over. It is on.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned around and stomped back into the locker room, puffs of glitter settling in her wake in gentle, sparkling clouds.

Teddy watched her go, his eyebrows up. “Should we be worried?”

Billy nodded solemnly. “Terrified.”

“What a pair of babies. Come on, little brother.” Tommy smacked him on the shoulder, the broad grin not leaving his face even as they moved back toward the mats. “Get your game on. I’ve got months worth of beating on you to make up for.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Kate puts in her two cents, and Billy and Teddy have a lunch date that goes very well. Until it doesn’t.

“So what’s the deal?” Kate sorted through her cards and pulled two out, dropping them face-down onto the crib pile. She glanced back up, a smile tugging at her lips and her eyes gleaming. “And don’t try and snow me, Billy, I know all your tells. Are you and Teddy dating?”

“Bullshit you do,” Billy fired back, but she wasn’t actually wrong. “And no. We’re not.” He paused, staring at his own hand, then slumped deeper into the ready-room couch. “I don’t know what we’re doing.”

She arched a perfectly contoured eyebrow, turning over a card and settling back against the pillows. “Based on that photo, you guys definitely looked like you knew what you were doing. Your lead, by the way.”

Billy played his seven and shrugged uncomfortably. “Yes, no maybe? I jumped the gun, but he kissed me back. And then when we tried to talk about it after, things just got... confusing. Now he’s running hot and cold, and I’m pretty sure he’s trying to avoid being alone with me.” Billy set his chin in his hand and watched as Kate sorted through her cards. “Maybe it’s just too much to untangle. If circumstances were different... but they’re not.”

“Eight, making fifteen for two.” Kate pegged her points cheerfully, and changed the subject. “Have you guys actually talked about the things that happened around here while you were bonding on the astral plane?”

Hah. “Nine. Run of three for three. Suck it, Bishop. And... no. Not really.” He couldn’t follow the jumps in her train of thought, but rolling with them took the heat off of trying to explain his current self-inflicted life crisis.

He chewed his thumbnail and considered. “Only the things I think Teddy told me in driftspace. I know Tommy crashed in my room with me. I reviewed the records of the Shelob fight. Other than that and cruising the major news sites... no. Tommy changes the subject and I wouldn’t even know where to begin the conversation with Teddy. Which is part of the problem.”

Kate didn’t play a card immediately, setting her hand down in her lap. “Tommy wouldn’t talk to Teddy in the beginning. He wasn’t really talking to any of us, but definitely not Teddy. I think he was convinced that once the brass got a replacement pilot, once the strike group was back to full strength, they’d stop caring so much about fixing you.”

“He probably wasn’t wrong.” It hurt to admit. He couldn’t believe that Faiza would have given up, but when nothing else had worked, what would her options have been? Sooner or later, as his organs failed, someone would have had to give the order to pull the plug.

“You should have seen him when he first got here. Quiet, spent a lot of time reading the room. But the way he looked at Magnus... it’s the same way he looks at you now when he thinks no-one’s watching. Like he’s not quite sure any of this is for real. Seven.” She played her card and
Billy groaned. “Run of three for three, and thirty-one for two.”

“You cut that out.” He had two cards left to play, neither of them appealing. “Like he’s worried I’m going to take it all away from him, you mean.”

Kate stuck out her tongue at him. He couldn’t kick her without knocking over the small cribbage board sitting between them on the couch. “No. I say what I mean. No-one can take away what Teddy’s done around here.” She watched him for a moment, and when he didn’t respond, she carried on. “He got your brother off that ledge when Tommy wouldn’t let any of the rest of us close. He got Magnus back out on patrol, and saved your skinny butt when – brutal honesty time – everyone else had just about given you up for dead.”

It was true, but that didn’t mean she actually had to say it out loud. “That was brutal, thanks so much. This is why I enjoy our little talks.”

“Play your cards, Maximoff. And when the three of you were linked, you blew all previous synchronization records out of the water. Not to mention lots of pieces of kaiju. I don’t think Teddy’s going anywhere. He’s earned his spot.”

“Which means I’m out.” He played the worst of his options, to get it out of his hand. “Three. It makes logistical sense. They’ve got two compatible pilots, they don’t need to spend the money and time to get me back into fighting condition. It would be cheaper to make me retire, and they wouldn’t have to run the risk that I’d fail again.”

“Why do I like you so much when you’re such a moron?” Kate’s irritated look as she laid her card down gave him life, a sign that maybe he wasn’t actually in the most hopeless timeline. “How long do you think Tommy would stick around here if you got discharged? They need two out of the three of you here to pilot Magnus, and if he bails then they’re back down to one ranger and a Jaeger dead in the water.”

That was a beautiful and terrible thought at the same time. Tommy would stick up for him. Teddy would probably feel compelled to do the same. But if it came down to choosing between letting Billy go, and giving up on being Rangers altogether? He didn’t entirely believe that they’d make that sacrifice. Or that he could live with himself if he asked them.

Tommy needed a cause, on a level so deep it was practically in his DNA, and Teddy was living his life’s dream. Not to mention that if Magnus was being as obstinate about her pilots as Carol was claiming, then their quitting would take an entire team and pit crew out of commission. No, with Kitty and Doug’s jobs on the line, not to mention innocent lives put at risk with one Jaeger down, it would take more than general affection for Billy to make either of them give up on being heroes.

And he wouldn’t want them to anyway. They were better people than that.

“Alright, great and powerful trash heap. If you’ve got all the answers, what do I do now?” He played his six on hers, pegged his points and frowned. “Teddy’s avoiding me, while the entire west coast thinks we’re going to be the Advocate’s next cover story. I can’t even sit down near him at lunch without some wiseass making comments. And it’s my fault, I know, but now he’s getting flak for a relationship that doesn’t actually exist.”

“Maybe I should send out a press release. Claim it was a publicity stunt to draw attention to religious homophobia, or something.”

Kate’s eyebrow went up again, her lips pursed like she was thinking—no, scratch that. Plotting. She liked to blame America for being impulsive, Tommy for being devious, but under that thin
veneer of civility she was the worst of the bunch. “If he decided that he wanted to start something after all, would you?”

“In a perfect world, where I didn’t have to watch the man of my dreams mind-melding with my brother, fighting my fights, in my Jaeger?” Billy blurted out the awful truth before he could stop himself, the empty room and Kate’s probing questions triggering the fatal error.

“Oh my God,” he groaned, sinking his head into his hands. “See? I’m a terrible person and this is why no-one should ever date me.”

“Oh look, he’s human after all,” Kate cracked, but she reached over and ruffled his hair affectionately, even though he was a garbage fire of a man. “I bet that felt good to get out in the open. Pick the zit, squeeze the pus.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“But I made you look up.”

“Kate-”

“Hush. I’m talking. The Defense Corps has spent way too much money on your training —and on Teddy’s—to force either of you to retire just because they’ve got choices for Magnus now. Seven, brings us to twenty-two, and I get a point for last card.” She pegged ahead and laid out her cards for counting, not missing a beat. “What if Tommy breaks his leg, or Teddy gets the flu? They’d need someone extra on deck. Frankly it would make sense to have alternates assigned to all the teams. You and Tommy are just lucky enough to have found an awesome one.

“And once you get it through your admittedly super-thick skull that Teddy’s not your rival, then maybe you can get yourself laid and stop moping.”

Billy shook his head, the sting fading now that she wasn’t yelling at him for his stupid, unreasonable jealousy. “I’ve got... fifteen for two, fifteen for four, run of three for seven. Even if Teddy doesn’t actually resent me, even if he’s attracted to me, I can’t make him want to be with me. That’s not how it works.”

Kate snorted. “Believe me, he wants you.”

Billy scowled at her. “You don’t know that. How can you know that? Is he talking to you about me?”

“I know because every time you turn around he stares at you like he’s dying in the desert and your ass is the only oasis. Did you want me to talk to him?” She swiped the five off the top of the deck and ran her numbers, counting as she pegged. “Fifteen two, fifteen four, a pair for six, a run of four for ten, a run of four for fourteen, and you, my friend, have officially been skunked.”

Billy stared down at the board, willing the numbers to change, but no hope. “No. Absolutely not.”

“Are you sure? As we’ve just seen, my grasp on strategy is a whole lot better than yours.”

He could say yes, go all high-school on the situation, but in the end what would it accomplish?

If Kate was right and the PPDC were willing to hang on to three pilots, even on rotation, then it solved all their problems. Billy would get better, he’d be put back on active duty, and he could start rebuilding his life around Tommy and Teddy together.

God, it was a gorgeous dream.
Except that Teddy was the one who’d asked for time to think things through. And now he’d taken
days more than he’d originally wanted, which didn’t suggest anything good. Sending Kate to bug
him wasn’t exactly going to encourage him to make his mind up any faster.

“No,” he repeated firmly instead, scooping up the cards and shuffling the deck back together. “I’ll
take care of it myself. I’ll talk to him.”

Eventually. After another game. Or maybe after dinner. Or breakfast tomorrow.

After all, it was a small base, and it wasn’t like either of them was going off of it any time soon.

Billy: Meet me for lunch after training?

Teddy: Yeah, I’d like that.

The morning passed quickly, but also agonizingly slowly, Billy’s mind working overtime.
Scenarios played themselves out in his mind, a dozen permutations of possibilities—leaving him
so distracted that he couldn’t even get up enough enthusiasm when the second pons test went
much better than the first round. It was only five seconds this time, just enough to feel the familiar
tingle of connection before he was pulled back into himself.

Nate gave him a deeply baffled look as he stored the headpiece away, calling Billy’s name a
second time to get his attention. “Something on your mind?”

Billy shrugged, yanking his focus back to the here and now, to the hit of satisfaction that Nate’s
experiment had worked. “When is there not?” It was a total non-answer, but one that seemed to
satisfy Nate enough to drop the issue. Billy pushed himself up out of the chair and shook his head
to clear it. A faint soreness pinged at the back of his eyes, but nothing at all like the headache that
had dogged him before. “Same time tomorrow?”

“Assuming the numbers are fine once I run them, you got it.”

“They’ll be fine.” Not that he really knew what numbers Nate was talking about —brain waves or
volts or midichlorians —but confidence (sheer bloody-minded cussedness, as per Faiza) worked to
barrel his way through a lot of situations.

He left the lab and the doors slid most of the way closed behind him, the gears grinding on the
final couple of inches. Billy half-turned, and the system seemed to get over whatever hiccup had
engaged, the doors closing the way they were supposed to.

This place is falling apart around our ears.

Once upon a time—about four months ago as far as his memory was concerned, ten months by
the calendar—Billy had been not only able but easily willing to spend upwards of ten hours a day
in combat training. Since he’d been cleared to train again, he could barely make it one (and in
‘easy’ mode, no less) before even taking breaks after every bout wasn’t enough. Before his head
had started spinning and his breath became impossible to catch.

Be happy with what you’ve accomplished, blah blah blah.

He’d do better tomorrow. His goal was right there, over the balcony of the scaffolding in the
Jaeger bay, Magnus’ vast, empty eyes staring back at him. Billy shifted his seat, the metal grid
pressing ridges into his legs. Teddy didn’t seem to feel it, his back against the girder opposite Billy, his legs stretched out alongside and his boot resting gently against Billy’s thigh.

Billy’s spot. And now Teddy sat here with him, both of them in uniform, the remnants of lunch long since thrown away. Billy rested his arms on the railing and set his chin on them, the ache of the familiar overlaid with the knowing that everything had already changed. Magnus wasn’t his, not anymore (not yet). And when she was—then everything could easily change again.

“This is where I first realized you were real,” Teddy said quietly, his voice a welcome addition to the constant rumble of activity in the cavernous space. “And not just a fantasy or a delusion in my head.”

“How do you know I’m not now?” Billy teased, and Teddy’s toe poked him gently in the thigh.

“You feel real enough,” he said, smiling. “If I’m in a rubber room somewhere, I’ll take this version of reality instead.”

Billy laughed, letting go of the railing and flopping back against the girder at his back. “What made you realize? That’s what saved me, you know.”

Teddy shrugged it off, always uncomfortable with the reminder. There wasn’t any reason to be. Billy was at peace with the idea, even if the whole scenario still gave some people (not naming names, Nate) quantum physics-related conniption fits.

“Magnus looked at me,” he replied, staring out at the Jaeger the same way Billy had been doing only moments before. “There was no power to the servos, no pilot engaged at all, she shouldn’t have been able to move. But she turned her head, and I could swear that she knew I was there. That something was ... homing in. Does that make any sense?” he asked, frustration turning his lower lip into a gorgeous frowning curve. “Do you remember anything like that?”

Did he? There had been something, a memory that slid aside even as he reached for it.

Black, black cold, no stars and no moon, only the empty nothingness.

He’s dead he must be dead and buried, the aching loneliness absolute. No other feeling but this.

A light—only a spark, the faintest star in the heavens, but against the blackest black it burns like a campfire, or a beacon. He’s not dead yet but he will drown if he can’t reach it; the fire pulses with a living heartbeat, a promise to draw him in and let him warm himself.

It’s too far, too much to ask. He’s paralyzed in a bitter cold that turns his bones to shards of ice.

The light is there, and still he sinks into the dark.

Billy shook his head. “Not really.” Teddy made a soft noise that sounded like disappointment, but there weren’t words to describe any of it, not in a way that Billy could make anyone else understand.

The silence crept in between them again. Teddy hadn’t brought up the kiss yet, or the photos, or whatever else had been on his mind, but that was okay for the moment. Training with them had soothed part of the itch in Billy’s soul, some of the restlessness bled off. Maybe Kate was right to hope. He hadn’t dared to bring up the subject himself yet, savouring the moments of easy conversation before he torpedoed everything again. A transport doodled along below, Kate and America behind it geared up for a practice run.

He watched them, and Teddy watched him. “What do you think you’ll do, once the war is over?”
That was a question they hadn’t covered before, as they tried to fill in the blank space between ‘total strangers’ and ‘mind-melded accidental telepaths’ that had marked the parameters of their whatever-this-was from the beginning. Billy didn’t have a great answer.

“Dunno. Finish college, I guess. I only have a year and a half worth of credits, but I’m sure some of the Academy classes will transfer over. Even if Advanced Combat Tactics and a Conn-pod practical aren’t really courses that would count toward a B.Ed.” The idea of trying to get that transcript past a registrar was funny as hell, mind you. “I think PPDC enlisted get folded in under the GI bill, so I should probably take advantage.”

Teddy’s pleased smile made the idea something more appealing than it had been when Billy’d started speaking, the possibility of a future beyond the Shatterdome starting to spin into existence deep inside. “That’d be a trip. Imagine walking in to your tenth grade homeroom and finding out your teacher was one of the heroes of the Kaiju War. You’ll get mobbed.”

“As if. Gulf War vets didn’t exactly get welcomed back with open arms.” No, more likely they’d all get pensioned off and that would be the end of it. No-one would want to dwell on the time that the world almost ended. Until the TV movies came out, and then they’d get ninety percent of the details wrong.

Teddy gave him a look, and that was when Billy remembered that his dad had died in combat way back when, years before anyone had ever used the term ‘kaiju’ for real-life monsters. “That was an entirely different scenario. And they didn’t have giant robots. There’s a serious cool factor there.”

“You know, I was never into giant robots before the Jaeger program started. Or science fiction. I’d always been more of a high fantasy fan.” He felt vaguely guilty admitting it in front of Magnus, so Billy looked away. What she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her. “Little did I know, right? I was nowhere near genre-savvy enough.”

Teddy grinned, and Billy had a momentary flash of regret for admitting it. But then—“Elves and quests for the one true sword across pseudo-medieval battlefields?” Teddy’s smile held recognition in it, not a sneer or a wind-up for teasing. That wasn’t as bad as actively being laughed at, but he had his honour to defend.

“You mock, but taking kendo as my phys-ed requirement in freshman year turned out to have been an awesome call.” Billy replied loftily, and he won a laugh from Teddy that smoothed every one of his ruffled feathers. This is okay. We can do this. This part of him is the guy I remember. “And if we’re not on a quest to save the world right now, then what the hell are we doing?”

“It’s too bad there isn’t a One Ring for all of this,” Billy continued on, thinking aloud. He couldn’t reach any of Teddy from there except for his calf, but he gave it a warm squeeze anyway, nudging Teddy’s thigh with his foot. Teddy tipped his foot and pressed his leg up against Billy’s hand, a tacit return of the contact. He hasn’t said anything yet, but he hasn’t moved away, either. “Dump that into the Breach, problem solved.”

“You never know,” Teddy shrugged. “Hong Kong and Japan are supposed to be gearing up to try another nuke.”

“That didn’t work last time,” Billy felt compelled to point out.

“I think this one is bigger.”

“Hopefully this is a case where size matters.” He couldn’t resist the flippant reply, and Teddy turned a little pink across the top of his cheeks. And that was too cute, his faintly embarrassed
flush making something ping dangerously close to Billy’s heart. But if he chased the innuendo, and Teddy balked—no. Billy was not going to be the one to spoil the moment.

Teddy did it for him. “I hope it does work, this time. Then we can get on with our lives.”

*Get on with our lives.* Away from the Shatterdome, he meant. Leaving Billy and Tommy behind.

Would he really be happy walking away from everything that surrounded them now, the gorgeous machines that filled the bays beyond the railings, the buzz and hum of purpose and bravery that made up the background noise of their world?

“You’re looking forward to leaving?” Billy frowned at the idea. “I thought that you wanted to be a Ranger. More than anything, you said.” That wasn’t one of the scenarios he’d been trying to picture.

“I wanted this, and I love being a Ranger. Of course I do! But the whole point is to win. To put the war behind us. No more invaders from beyond killing thousands of people on a whim? Yeah. I’m looking forward to that.” And Teddy frowned back at him, which only served to make Billy feel very small. Because he was right, and Billy had only been thinking about himself.

*A memory: Teddy in the dreamspace of the drift, curled into a ball and sobbing for his dead mother. The world on fire around him, Billy had been unable to do anything but pretend to hold him close and murmur promises of peace.*

“I’m an idiot,” Billy offered up by way of apology. “I should have realized what you meant, and yeah- Yeah. Too bad they won’t let us keep the Jaegers, though. It’ll suck to see them go into drydock, or whatever you do with decommissioned mechs.” That would be better, keep the good, the *wonderful* parts of this life without the necessity for it.

He couldn’t stay sitting on the hard metal grid any longer. He grabbed on to the railing and pulled himself to his feet, rubbing his hip where the girder had been digging in. Leaning on the upper railing got him a better view of the space, the constant low-level chaos that one day they’d all have to leave behind.

Teddy ducked his head, glanced out at the Jaeger bays with a wistful sort of smile. “It would be tough to find an apartment with a big enough parking spot.”

“But think about how easy it would be to talk our way out of parking tickets.”

The clamps holding Yankee Hawker in place started to retract, a move followed by a burst of cursing from one of the techs, an answering call over the loudspeaker from LOCCENT, and the clamps slowly, grindingly, settling back into place with the scream of deeply-annoyed metal.

Teddy pushed himself to his feet, not quite joining Billy at the railing. “It’ll be tough leaving all this glamour behind,” he replied with dry humour. “But if it means peace, and a chance at having a normal life again, I’d be good with that.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Billy shot him a grin, and Teddy waited him out. “You’re as much of an adrenaline junkie as Tommy and me, you just enjoy having a rep as the calm one.”

“You have to promise to keep my secret,” Teddy teased him back. “I like being seen as the only responsible adult on our team.”

*Our team.*

Was it really possible?

A three-sided shape was the most stable of all geometric forms. Therefore, QED. If Tommy, Teddy and Billy were the vertices, that made **brothers** into one side; **co-pilots** another… and left one last side of this triangle an open wound that desperately needed healing.

Billy nudged him gently. “If they only knew you as well as I do.”

“No-one does. Other than Tommy, anyway.”

Billy let out a long breath, not quite a sigh. “Except that’s not really true, is it? And that’s the problem.” If Teddy wasn’t going to bring it up, then it was his turn to be the responsible one. “We’ve been in each other’s heads. I know things about you, about the way you think and feel, that no-one else in the world has ever known.

“And at the same time, I couldn’t list off your top three albums, or your dream vacation, or even the name of your last boyfriend. And trying to fill in the blanks is like…” he groped for the words, for the metaphor that would fit. “Like watching a new prequel to your favourite movie, but by a totally different director. So the information—how event A turned into personality trait B — is all in there, but the connections don’t line up neatly.”

And Teddy laughed at him, but it was kind and warm, and with something in it that suggested he wasn’t only tolerating Billy’s flailing, but that he understood. “Human beings don’t line up neatly. For the record.”

“Yeah, well.” Billy grumbled at him. “They should.”

Teddy stayed where he was, watching Billy, his lower lip caught in his teeth. “The whole situation is weird,” Teddy confessed after a long, quiet moment. “But I’ve been thinking about it a lot the last few days, trying to pick out the parts that make sense. And there’s more of them than I thought.

“What we talked about before, Billy—I’m in if you are. If the offer’s still open.”

And he held his breath, watching Billy, waiting for his reply.

Billy took the bait, his heart thumping so loudly in his chest that he was half sure medical was going to send someone after him with a blood-pressure cuff. “Hooking up?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of actually dating. You know, getting to know each other like ordinary people.”

**Oh God, oh God.** This was happening, against all Billy’s dire predictions, despite all the roadblocks and problems screaming down the turnpike toward them at top speed.

If they were going to have half a chance at anything this couldn’t be about Teddy-and-Tommy, or about Billy-and-Tommy, about jealousy or loneliness or anything of the sort. Parts of Teddy were still unknowns, here-be-dragons, gaps in Billy’s memory that only time together could fill in.

But he’d loved Teddy before, or at least he’d thought he did, and his body remembered and craved every last damn thing. His voice cracked when he replied. “There’s nothing about you that could ever be ordinary.”

Catching Billy’s hand, Teddy tugged him away from the railing.

Billy let Teddy pull him further into the concealing shadows of the scaffolding. It was both easier
and harder to talk this way, the dimmer light offering more privacy for his thoughts, not being able to trace and overanalyze a hundred flickers of expression over Teddy’s face. The closeness, on the other hand—Teddy’s fingers laced through his, the rest of him barely an inch away, near enough to smell the piney edge of his soap, feel the puff of his breath on Billy’s cheek. That made it a lot more difficult to concentrate. Billy’s pulse raced, heat gathering low in his groin.

*I want him. And that’s not ever going to go away.*

Teddy leaned in and cupped his face. His palms and fingers were broad and strong, rough with calluses, but everything else about his touch desperately soft. The sweet press of his lips was new and so familiar all at the same time. The physical shock of it hadn’t diminished, even as it layered overtop of the bone-deep recognition that had been planted inside Billy’s soul long before he’d woken up.

Billy couldn’t help the groan that pulled from his lips, the way he sank into the kiss, the warm seas rising up and closing in over him. The kiss on the street had been intended for public consumption, to shock and awe. This one was all for him, for *them*.

Teddy’s lips tasted of mint, his breath sweet and hot along Billy’s neck when he trailed his mouth down, grazing his teeth across the skin at the edge of Billy’s collar.

*He wants me.*

Teddy wanted him, or his breath wouldn’t catch when Billy grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him closer. Teddy’s hands slipped into his hair, his body pressed up against Billy’s. He didn’t seem in a rush to leave at all, his mouth moving over Billy’s, parting his lips to let Billy’s tongue inside.

Billy slicked his tongue between Teddy’s lips, the rush of desperate need coursing through his blood. The restless itch deep inside Billy’s bones got worse, his hands splayed out across the solid wall of Teddy’s chest, the thin cotton of his t-shirt separating skin from skin. He burned and he ached, his cock hard against his zipper, his pulse a drumbeat in his ears.

Here in the warm strength of Teddy’s arms, the thick muscle of his thigh solid up against Billy’s, the sounds of the outside world receded until there was only this: the pulse of blood in Billy’s ears, the soft rush of Teddy’s breath, the taste of his mouth and the sweet-hot-wet of the kiss.

Billy’s ears were ringing, his heart racing, and -

It wasn’t his ears that were ringing.

That was the alarm, blaring into life above Billy’s head. *Movement in the Breach. All Rangers report.*

“*Shit,*” Teddy cursed under his breath, pressing his forehead against Billy’s shoulder.

Billy plummeted from bubbling euphoria to crushing disappointment all in one move, coming back to himself half wrapped around Teddy, Teddy’s glorious, gorgeous hard-on riding against his hip. “*No.*” Billy slid down the wall, letting Teddy go, the cool air flooding in where Teddy’s heat had been now a vicious reminder of the perversity of the universe.

Teddy grabbed his face in both hands and kissed him again, deep and slow, the taste of his tongue and his lips lingering in Billy’s mouth. “We’ll talk more later,” he promised, his eyes locked on Billy’s. “I promise.”

“I’m going to cash in on that,” Billy warned him, and his racing heart was pounding hard in his
chest for another reason altogether. “Come back here in one piece or I’ll raise you from the dead and murder you again myself.”

“Deal.” Teddy smiled against his lips, his hands warm on Billy’s chest, slipping down and tugging Billy’s shirt back into place. He hesitated a second. “Albums I’ll have to think about and get back to you. My most recent ex was Allan, a Jaeger tech at Groom Lake. Before him was a guy I was with at the Academy. His name was Greg, he scrubbed out in the second cut, and he’s an asshole. And my dream vacation used to be parasailing in the Caribbean. Now I’m thinking hiking. Mountains. Something inland. More data points to add to your mental spreadsheets.”

He locked eyes with Billy until Billy relaxed and nodded, smiled. “You know that’s not exactly the point I was making.”

“I know. But you asked, so.” Teddy moved in for one last kiss, teeth scraping against Billy’s lower lip. Billy wrapped his arms around Teddy as tightly as he could, pressed him in, tasted everything he could reach in the second or two that he had left.

“I will be back.” Teddy made his promise solemnly, then let go. He took a couple of deep breaths, the red flush receding slowly from his cheeks, then took the stairs back down to the Shatterdome floor three at a time.

Billy watched him go, arms wrapped around his chest as though to keep the last remnants of Teddy’s warmth pressed close. There was no-one in earshot when he spoke, his voice little more than a murmur. “You’d better be.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Breach opens, but it's all very anticlimactic. That's also a metaphor.

A few minutes after Teddy had bailed out to go to his briefing, Billy was in the elevator heading up to LOCCENT. He obviously wasn’t going to be included in the ‘all Rangers on deck’ call, not until he was formally back on active duty. But he had high enough clearances to get in to the command center, and there was no way in hell he was going to let a kaiju attack go by without knowing every last detail as it happened.

Blue lights everywhere gave LOCCENT an eerie glow, the oranges, yellows and greens of the monitors and HUDs popping bright against the contrast. Techs worked at the half-dozen computer stations set up in the back half of the room, only a couple of them glancing up or giving Billy a cursory nod as he made his way past. Radar and sonar systems flashed updates on one screen, a world map on another with a bright pinpoint of red over the spot in the Pacific Ocean that was the source of all their current problems.

David Alleyne had the best seat in the house. The mastermind, the beating heart of the Shatterdome – whatever you wanted to call it and however poetic you wanted to be, the LOCCENT Mission Controller was the Rangers’ eyes and ears when they deployed.

His system was set up so that he could see his displays and watch out the window into the Jaeger bay at the same time, control panels blinking and beeping under his fingertips, and as always, the tiny blinks and flashes of the data stream being projected onto the yellow glasses sitting at the end of his nose. A hundred screens fed information through at a rate far faster than Billy could assimilate – or even hope to understand.

Right now the blue-outlined schematic for Yankee Hawker was showing on his main display, a half-dozen prompts giving status updates and readouts as they waited for the pilots. A constantly updating scan of the Breach turned in the air at his right elbow, an amorphous blob of red shimmering but not coalescing into shape somewhere in the middle.

David wasn’t watching with his full attention, one hand over his ear as though he were blocking out sound. He glanced up at Billy and nodded in acknowledgement, then his eyes glazed over as his attention was pulled away by whatever was on his comm. “Yankee Hawker’s going to hold the mile until we have confirmed approach,” he announced to the LOCCENT at large, and a couple of techs started entering new data into their consoles. “Other crews standing by on ready-5.”

That done, he dropped his hand and turned his chair to face Billy more head-on. “Come to watch the fireworks?”

“Mind if I stay?” Billy perched carefully on the edge of the desk closest to the wall, where he wouldn’t accidentally sit on any of the controls. “I promise not to touch anything.” He smiled, a pathetic attempt at channelling the rush of nerves into a joke, but David didn’t call him on it.

He nodded instead, and was that sympathy reflected in the dark eyes behind the faint yellow glow of his glasses? As long as it wasn’t pity, Billy would take it. “No problem. Sometimes it helps to
have a second pair of eyes on the feeds.”

Booted footsteps rang on the metal-plated floor, and Carol—looking a lot less pissed and a lot more concerned and thoughtful than she had before—stopped behind David’s shoulder. He straightened as she approached; Billy did too, though he stayed seated rather than jump to attention.

“Marshal Danvers on deck,” David announced, and answering confirmations came from the radio—America and Kate, getting locked into their rigs in Yankee’s conn pod.

“What are you doing in LOCCENT, Will?” The marshal spoke to Billy first, though she was scanning the HUD and the data feeds as she did, not missing a thing.

He held up two fingers in a scout’s salute (though he’d never actually been one). “Staying out of the way. Promise.”

“Make yourself useful,” was all she said in reply, and the glance she gave him was kind. *Hunh. Maybe I’ll be out of the doghouse sooner than I thought.*

“Are we ready?” she asked, and David nodded. Billy leaned forward to watch as David called up the feeds from the Jaeger, already being wheeled out toward the vast doors and the launch platform beyond. Billy’d been on the other end of the process a hundred times over, but he’d only seen this part in training vids. Another lifetime ago.

David was talking into his mic, and the wire-frame outline of a Jaeger rotated slowly in the air above his console. America replied, her face shimmering into view below the main projection, caught by the small cameras in the Jaeger’s conn pod. */Yankee Hawker ready to go./*

David nodded, poking at the three-dimensional display to check the settings. “Uplink confirmed, ready to launch.”

“Engage pilot to pilot protocol.” Carol’s voice was calm and cool, but from here Billy could see the faint line between her brows, and the press of her lips that turned them narrow. She was concerned. Not quite as far in as ‘worried,’ but definitely concerned.

David didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. “Engaging protocol now.”

The AI’s voice, so achingly familiar, made her reply. “Pilot to pilot connection protocol sequence initiated.”

*/Yankee Hawker ready and aligned./ That was Kate, the pulse above her image strong and steady, marking the beats of her heart in careful detail. What had it been like when Billy went down? Had they all been sitting right here watching his life signs fade away, counting the moments until the jumphawks could get him home?

Carol made the call. “Prepare for neural handshake.”

“Handshake starting in fifteen seconds. Fourteen.” David began the countdown, and Billy could smell the drive fluid, knew the pressure of his helmet around his temples, *feel* the way his wrists locked in to the rig and the satisfying click of connection when the world snapped into brighter focus than ever before.

“Two. One.”

The AI continued, oblivious to Billy’s little stumble down memory lane. “Neural handshake initiated.” The display flashed, LOADING, then the overlays confirmed what Billy already knew
the results would be. KINESTHETIC SYNCHRONIZATION.

David sat back in his chair with a look of satisfaction. "Neural handshake holding at 97.5%"

/Right hemisphere, calibrating./

/Left hemisphere, calibrating./

Billy mouthed the words along with Kate. Left hemisphere had been his from the beginning, Tommy taking the lead without having to discuss it. And they’d broken almost every record, holding their link close to ninety-nine percent most days. The power of twins, according to their trainers; one soul in two bodies. Pseudo-mystical bullshit, if you asked Tommy. Billy wasn’t sure what he thought. Not anymore.

**PILOT LINK. CALIBRATION COMPLETED.**

It was done, the external video feeds showing Yankee dropping easily down into the waves. It seemed so easy from the outside. America and Kate would be drifting now, slipping easily through one another’s minds, every passing thought and feeling an affirmation of the most intimate bond human beings had ever experienced, all of it in service to one of the greatest war machines ever created.

And any moment now, that power would be unleashed.

Billy had been holding his breath, but he let it out, slow and steady. There were no unusual movements in the waves, nothing except the ripples of Yankee’s passing. And the Breach model still rotated around beside him, the red kaiju sign refusing to coalesce into something more tangible.

/Any news on position, LOCCENT?/ America asked over the comms.

“It’s not moving,” David muttered, frowning at it. “It’s just hanging there in the Breach.”

/With our luck it’ll head for Alaska and the Beaubiers will get the kill,/ Kate sighed. /Jean-Paul’s already enough of an arrogant prick without adding another notch on his belt./

“You do remember you’re on speaker, right?” David spoke into the mic, but Billy hadn’t missed the smile that had flashed across his lips.

/I’ve said it to his face before, I’m not worried./

David, on the other hand, was looking more concerned by the moment, and even Carol was starting to get antsy. She expanded the display, poked at it as though changing settings would give her more answers.

A minute passed, then a few more, Yankee making an easy circuit of the waterfront, up to her thighs in the ocean waves. America was the one who cracked first, feigning a yawn. /Well, this is fun./

/I could be doing my nails right now – it would be more exciting./ Kate picked up the thread.

/I think Alleyne just likes watching us sweat./

/You think he’s got a thing for women in drivesuits?/

“I think the pair of you need to remember that I’ve got admin access to Yankee’s kill switch,”
David replied, easily enough that this had to be normal enough routine now, the easy banter a little different from the dynamics that Billy remembered from before. Of course it was. They had ten months worth of conversations under their belts that he hadn’t been around for.

Carol, on the other hand, had lost interest in the comms and was standing by one of the consoles, talking to the tech. The world map zoomed in to the Pacific Ocean, the red point on the Breach unchanging.

“There’s no movement at all.”

“Nothing we can detect, ma’am. All systems suggest the throat’s opened, but nothing’s coming through — or going back.”

“Alleyne, call Alaska and see what they’ve got. Even if something’s down in our sensor grid we can triangulate off of their data.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Awareness prickled up Billy’s spine. The Breach was a tunnel, not a parking garage. Nothing just hung out in there—they came up roaring and ready for blood. He glanced at Carol, cocked his head at the mic in a wordless request. She nodded, folding her arms and taking stock.

“Yankee, this is LOCCENT—”

/Check it, we have a Maximoff on line 1./

America snorted. /Glory-hog. Tell him to leave a message./

He should probably have been annoyed, but America was smiling at him—smiling! And for a moment he was in there with them, hearing them give him shit over his own radio, part of that greater purpose again.

“Can you get deeper out? Deep enough to get your audio receptors under water as well as your sonar. They might have figured out some kind of trick to keep themselves off-radar, but nothing can hide the actual sound of that much moving bulk. If it does show up at least you’ll have some extra warning.”

Kate nodded, America gave him a faintly surprised and approving nod, and the immense purple mech turned south-west and headed for deeper water. Something red flashed behind them on the screen, but the little burst of light—a reflection off something?—was gone by the time he tried to focus on it.

Another few minutes—enough time for Yankee to sink in to the shoulders and plant her feet—and David was hanging up the phone and shaking his head. “Choi has nothing.”

“No movement?”

“Nothing. The last movement they recorded in the Breach was four months ago, the one we took down.”

The tech who had been working with the marshal, a pretty dark-skinned girl with wide eyes and a name tape that read Khan, approached the group. “It’s sacrilege, I know, but what if—” David gave her a look like he knew what was coming, and she shrugged. “Turn it off and on again?”

“This is a mainframe so sophisticated that it took two years to design and three months to install and calibrate properly, it’s not some ... Windows system from the two-thousands that’s going to
throw a blue screen of death when someone sneezes on it!” His outrage was so personal that Billy almost laughed out loud.

“So try just the monitoring subsystem. Even if there’s a mysteriously invisible kaiju in the Breach it’s not going to get here any time soon, and Yankee’s already on it.”

David was poised to keep arguing, but Carol cut him off with a hand wave. “Just try it,” she requested, ignoring the long-suffering sigh she got back in return. “Waiting isn’t giving us any results.”

Growling under his breath and muttering something that sounded halfway toward mutiny, David turned back to his console. A moment later the projection of the Breach vanished, the faint power-hum dimming slightly.

/What’s going on, LOCCENT?/ Kate’s slightly bored, vaguely annoyed voice cut through the comms. /Any updates?/

“Hold for sitrep, Yankee.”

America’s occasional tendency towards pragmatism must have won out, because Kate’s only reply was a bordering-on-professional /roger that./

Internal countdown finished, David played his fingers out across his console and the monitoring display powered back up. It blinked, the lights across the top flashing in sequence, and the Breach spun back up into view. Only this time it was clear blue, obviously closed, with no indication whatsoever that there had been an alert at all.

He blinked at it unhappily. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Billy’s eyebrows shot up as LOCCENT buzzed back into activity behind him, various alerts standing down and messages muttered into headsets. “So that’s new.”

“There’s something screwy going on with the computers this week,” David replied, stabbing his finger sharply at – and through – various indicators on the HUD.

Khan passed behind him, a tablet in her hand. “Mercury in retrograde,” she said sagely.

David scowled at her. “Mercury is not in retrograde, and it wouldn’t mean anything even if it was. Which it isn’t, because astrology is fake science.”

Carol, in the meantime, had already called up a comm link to the J-tech labs and was arguing with one of Tony Stark’s eyeballs and a small section of his sideburn. “What the hell are you doing down there?”

“I know you like to pin everything on me, I do, I’m a very tempting target. But I swear on everything that I hold holy that it’s not me this time.”

“You don’t hold anything holy, Tony.”

“Now that’s just untrue. I am devoutly faithful to my toolbox, the concept of the ideal 36-24-36, and a perfect Laphroaig Islay Single Malt.”

“Tony.”

The eyeball and sideburn moved away and the rest of Tony’s face came into view, bags creasing his under-eye with smudges of purple. “Honestly, Carol. We’ve been trying to chase down this
“You need to find it and fix it now, before we have more problems than unnecessary alerts!”

“Working on it.”

“Mercury,” Khan said, passing behind David and Billy heading the other way, her arms loaded with cables. “Retrograde.”

Everything standing down, David called Yankee Hawker back in. With a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure the Marshal had left, he kicked back in his chair and scrubbed at his eyes, fingers tucked behind his glasses.

“Long day?” Billy asked, pulling his knee up and resting his chin on it. Sitting there, watching from the other side, was sending him off-balance somehow. Like his flaws were too exposed, too raw. The shield helped.

“The longest.” A stretch and something clicked in David’s shoulders, a crack from somewhere near the top of his spine. He glanced at Billy over the rims of his glasses, weighing and measuring and somehow sympathetic at the same time. “I heard you had a pons test with Nate.”

That hadn’t taken long at all. So much for the promise of secrecy. “Do you hear everything?”

David gave him a caught-out kind of half-smile. “Just about. Nate didn’t rat you out, for the record. I saw the power draw surge and did a system check. How’d it go?”

That was slim comfort. At least the news of Billy’s literally bloody failure hadn’t made it into the gossip networks yet. That or David was lying to be kind. So instead of confirming or denying anything, he took the cheap way out. “Eh,” he shrugged and said casually, letting David fill in the details for himself.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s just a temporary setback. I’m not worried. But look—don’t mention it to Tommy, alright?”

David’s brow furrowed and he looked at Billy like Billy was some kind of fascinating and troubling specimen. “Why not?”

“I haven’t told him about this. You know how he gets. He’ll get all uptight and he’ll tell Teddy, and the pair of them will sit on me and I’ll never be allowed to do anything for myself again.”

There was a moment of hesitation, and when David replied it was with a casual sort of air so specifically nonchalant that all of Billy’s suspicious nature went on high alert. Something’s up, and he knows it. But what? “Got it. Look, if you want to sit in some time I can show you the controls and how everything works up here. You know tactics and the current Jaegers’ capabilities backwards and forwards, and I could use the extra pair of eyes and a voice on the mic. The Marshal can’t be everywhere at once.”

There was nothing overtly terrible or foreboding in that, and when David replied it was with a casual sort of air so specifically nonchalant that all of Billy’s suspicious nature went on high alert. Something’s up, and he knows it. But what? “Got it. Look, if you want to sit in some time I can show you the controls and how everything works up here. You know tactics and the current Jaegers’ capabilities backwards and forwards, and I could use the extra pair of eyes and a voice on the mic. The Marshal can’t be everywhere at once.”

There was nothing overtly terrible or foreboding in that, and Billy’s suspicions swung over toward guilt for suspecting— but the itch in the back of his brain refused to go away. Still, it was a hell of a lot better than sitting around doing nothing except think about his next physio appointment, and he said as much. “But it won’t be forever—just until I’m back in Magnus.”

“I know,” David reassured him, and Billy let out the breath that had caught in his chest. “But if I can abuse you while you’re grounded, I’ll do it.”
The relief washed over him out of proportion to the comment, but it had been that kind of a roller-coaster day. “Planning to take advantage of me, Alleyne?”

David froze for a half-second before rolling his eyes. “I don’t think your boyfriend would appreciate that. I do read the news, you know.”

“It’s not—” except now it probably was, even if it hadn’t been at the time. “Never mind.”

“Get out of here,” David frowned at him, but that was all he said as the vast doors opened to the Jaeger bay and the trolley began wheeling Yankee Hawker back inside. “I’ve got work to do. But swing by tomorrow. I’ll have a login set up for you by then.”

“Sure,” Billy agreed, and boosted himself down off the table. He landed easily enough but his knees complained at the shock, an indignity to remind him of his reduced place in the grand scheme of things.

Where to next? Teddy would be released from ready-5 soon enough, but any time they might have been able to steal before had been eaten up now by the false alarm. Tonight, then. He’d see him after physio. And there were a number of things that Billy needed to look into before then.

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Hours later, Billy had been stretched and folded, pushed and prodded, Michael’s calm insistence that he certainly could do more somehow worse than any drill sergeant’s thesaurus of curse words. But always, the promise underlaid it all.

*If you do this, you will get what you want.*

If he followed his program, worked his ass off, hit the milestones Michael and Faiza had set for him, then he’d get to be back where he belonged.

“When I get back to piloting—” Billy had begun to say, and Michael had only smiled and changed the subject. But—

“You’re making great progress,” Michael had told him today, with a small, contained nod of approval.

It was enough incentive to keep him pushing through his body’s groans of protest, to keep his eyes focused on the wall instead of the bicycle’s slow parade of numbers.

At least it was enough incentive while he was actually in the middle of the work. The aftermath, crashed out in his quarters with his muscles slowly seizing up again and even his bones exhausted, was less fun. But he had a project now, something to keep his mind off of the discomfort that even the hot shower couldn’t completely beat out of him.

Billy scrolled through his accumulated alerts and search results for the last few hours, drumming his fingertips restlessly on his desk. The news sites were little help, the headlines of the day all blurring together in a wall of repeated wire stories and local human interest. *Local ombudsman testifies in ration-shortening trial. BuenaKai Church stages rally outside EPA offices to protest looser water quality regulations. Leaked concept art reveals new Star Trek series considering part-Kaiju crewman.*

In what universe were missing kids not major news? His own, apparently.

*Molly Hayes.*

He hadn’t been able to shake the memory of her face, and now, the missing-person poster re-
flattened out beside him, he was busy abusing his clearances and credentials to do a little social engineering. He wasn’t a hacker—that was Nate’s skill set—but he was pretty good at talking people into doing things. And one suggestion of PPDC interest and resources in play and the clerk at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children had been only too happy to help.

That had given him the where-when-how—a month ago, last seen on a bus heading home from school, and a closed-circuit security camera showing her getting off at a stop a lot further along the line than her usual.

It didn’t give him much of anything to go on, except that it obviously had nothing to do with the kaiju.

Billy leaned back in his chair, the spring in the back catching and preventing him from going ass over ears onto the floor. What, exactly, had he been expecting to find that detectives hadn’t? A link blinked at the bottom of the report—*cross-reference by location / date / victimology*—and he clicked.

Where the news media had given him a lot less than he’d hoped, the official reports blew right past his defences and all but stopped his heart. Page after page of reports of the children the Rangers hadn’t been able to save. Names and photographs, faces so much younger than his own staring back at him from grainy and pixelated scans of family pictures, graduation photos, school poses. Not all of them were recent, of course, the fashions and hair alone showing how far back the database extended.

Some of them would have just moved on. Communications weren’t the steadiest these days, and some would have just wanted to disappear. Others would have been taken by loving parents as part of custody disputes, maybe a few dead by their own hands in the face of a world gone mad.

A powerful part of him didn’t blame those ones at all. What would he have done if he hadn’t been able to turn his terror into fight?

But that still didn’t account for them all.

Sadly, there was no way to filter down for ‘remove all the kids with shitty families or who had the resources to get the fuck out of dodge.’ Fine. He refined the search down to within the past year, greater LA area. Taking it down to that plus similar victim type—adolescent girls living with natural parents, no police records on any immediate family members—left him with only a handful from all across the state. Still, whatever pattern might be there wasn’t jumping out at him. Not yet.

So much for the eureka moment from the well-meaning amateur.

Billy headed for the tiny bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, sparking his nerves back into momentary life. Bracing his arms on the sides of the sink, he stared at himself in the mirror.

His own dark brown eyes stared back at him, a familiar sense of disconnection crawling up his spine. He was floating a half-inch behind his own head, a sign that exhaustion was crawling up on him.

Teddy hadn’t been back to his quarters the last time Billy had checked, but he’d probably be there by now. The walls of Billy’s room were closing in, the itchiness and restlessness under his skin translating outward to the small shared space. Tommy would be back soon as well, filling it up even more, his energy a live wire sparking off in all directions.

Usually Billy welcomed it, a way to keep himself focused.

Tonight everything was already too loud, fabric scraping against his skin twice as rough as it
should be, bright light pinching the corners of his eyes. All he wanted was the soothing strength of Teddy’s calm, the chance to push through some more of the barricades they’d built between themselves over the past months.

No-one answered a few minutes later when Billy knocked, his hair damp from the quick scrub-up and his mouth fresh with mint.

Billy didn’t technically have access to Teddy’s room but he knew the code, one of those random pieces of mental flotsam he rarely questioned. The door slid open and the lights flicked on, revealing an empty room. Teddy’s few personal possessions sat on the shelves and the desk, his bed a single rather than a bunk, but otherwise the room was an almost perfect mirror of Billy and Tommy’s.

Except that it smelled like Teddy, even the recycled air carrying a hint of his aftershave or shampoo, something that Billy’s brain identified as him. It soothed the jangling raw edges, untangled the knots in Billy’s shoulders the way his own space couldn’t.

It wouldn’t be long before Teddy was back. Billy pulled off his boots and kicked them aside, taking advantage of the lack of Teddy in the bed to sprawl across the whole thing. It wasn’t hard to do; the single mattresses were cramped even for one regular-sized guy.

He only closed his eyes for a moment, the better to replay the lists of names in his mind. Names and faces, and then back to the sketchy details in Molly’s own file. Somewhere in there was the clue that would let him bring her back home to her family, if only he could spot it.

Somewhere in there, lying in Teddy’s bed, his mind sending him down a half-dozen blind alleys, the exhaustion took over. Between one thought and the next, without noticing, Billy slipped sideways into sleep.

He was dreaming or he wasn’t, a low voice murmuring his name. He wasn’t going to answer. Or he would but he couldn’t, swimming against heavy limbs up towards consciousness, the light above molasses-golden and just as thick.

Asleep but not in danger, not this time. The blue-black of the before-time was gone, here was warm, amber and orange. “Fine then, move over.” A voice he knew, indulgent and kind. Teddy, his brain supplied the name along with a scent-memory of his skin, a perfume that meant home/safe/love.

Warmth against his back, something solid pressed against him from shoulderblade to ankle, a soft, settling sigh.

All was well. He slipped back down into sleep, and this time he didn’t dream at all.

Billy drifted gently up into a vague sort of awareness, from a deeper, more gloriously restful sleep than anything he’d had in a very long time. Everything was warm and soft, utterly relaxed and loose.

Except for the incredibly important exception of the delicious pulsing ache in his groin, his cock morning-hard. And the firm length of a body behind him, a shape he knew without having to think it over. The broad plane of Teddy’s chest pressed against his back, his nose buried in the back of Billy’s hair, his arm looped over Billy’s waist, his hand flat against Billy’s stomach. And, of course, the hard-on that was pressed so snug against Billy’s buttocks that they might as well be naked, because the layers of cotton between them didn’t seem to be making any kind of
difference.

He drifted there for a minute, in that blurry world between sensation and real awareness. His body thrummed excitedly to the circling brush of Teddy’s palm across his stomach, his hips—lower now, and lower again. Teddy moved against him in a similar sort of sleep-mazed way, his lips brushing the back of Billy’s neck. He murmured something softly, a mumble that sounded like Billy’s name.

Billy tipped his hips back, no pressure to break the moment in the dim light. And there, he felt the thick line of Teddy’s dick sliding rough against him, muted by their clothes. Teddy’s chest was bare, God help him, his arm tightening around Billy at the firmer contact. He murmured Billy’s name again, more clearly this time, lips moving warm against the sensitive skin at the nape of Billy’s neck.

Teddy traced a lazy circle around Billy’s fly and stroked his open hand against the bulge.

The rush was instant, desire hot and thick in his throat, aching so tight it was painful. Billy thrust up against Teddy’s hand, chased the sensation before Teddy took it away again. Fuck, he had been touch-starved for longer than he’d realized, the simple pressure and gentle motion of Teddy’s hand as electric as the first time he’d ever been kissed. Every nerve sparked and hummed, a circuit springing to life between Teddy’s mouth on his neck and his hand on Billy’s groin.

Teddy didn’t let go, even though his breath quickened and his own hips moved. He ran his hand down along the length of Billy’s cock, making a soft needy noise when Billy bucked up into his touch.

Please, he needed more than that, more than the dulled sensation of pressure without the glide of skin on skin. He turned his head, tried to capture Teddy’s mouth with his, taste him and lick into him and drown in his mouth forever and ever, amen.

That was when Teddy really seemed to wake up, dropping his hand away and his whole body going stiff against Billy’s back. “’m sorry-” he began to apologize, not necessary at all.

Billy laced his fingers through Teddy’s, brought his hand back to Billy’s cock, pressed up into their joined grip. “It’s okay,” Billy whispered, any sound louder than that a risk he wasn’t willing to take. Teddy relaxed against him and Billy pushed his cock up into Teddy’s fingers. He gasped for the sheer joy of it, of being touched and touching, of feeling Teddy’s desire—for him, Teddy wanted him and Billy could do this now, touch and want and take without anything stopping them.

Teddy’s reaction was to close his fingers tighter around Billy’s cock, to rub up against him from behind, and Billy let go. He tipped his head back, let Teddy mouth at his throat, lips wet and his breath hot, tight little puffs against Billy’s skin.

He was wet for this man, God have mercy, pre-come beading and making everything slick, his briefs damp and his balls already drawing up tight.

Teddy popped the button on Billy’s trousers, an easy familiar gesture, slipped his hand down inside. He did something with his thumb, a swipe that gathered up the moisture on the head of Billy’s cock and smeared it around.

The sound ripped out of Billy when the jolt seared through him, sensation piling on top of sensation. Teddy pulled, a slow-rough drag of his hand, not quite wet enough to be slick and that—and that, oh God—he closed his hand around Billy and he stroked and the rush was coming, his spine tight, pressure building up fast inside his gut with pleasure so intense it was painful.
Teddy’s cock slid against his ass, thick and long, and fuck - he was going to - “No,” Billy swore aloud, his fingers sinking hard into Teddy’s thigh, and “shit” and “FUCK.” His orgasm hit him out of nowhere, a solid punch to the gut. He came too hard and too fast, flames burning right through every nerve and out—spurting thick over Teddy’s hand, again and again, aftershock after shock, his body tight as a drawn bow and his hands shaking.

Teddy made a small disappointed sound, the bleak wall of guilt and shame slamming in before Billy’s ricocheting pulse even had a chance to slow. All that drama and he couldn’t even - Teddy had barely touched him and he’d gone off like some dumb virgin kid.

“Shit,” he cursed again, defeated. “I’m so sorry.”

He couldn’t turn over, couldn’t face the look that had to be on Teddy’s face right now; disappointed, or disgusted, or worst of all— pity that Billy had been revealed to be broken and pathetic-

“It’s fine,” Teddy said instead of recoiling. He let go of Billy and wiped his hand off on one edge of the sheets. “It happens.” He nuzzled in behind Billy’s ear and kissed him lightly, the brush of his lips feeling almost like forgiveness while the loss of his touch was another devastation.

“No to me! I’m-”

He didn’t get the rest of his objection out, Teddy’s laughter rumbling against his back. “Out of practice? Still working on that merit badge?”

And if Teddy was teasing him then maybe there was a chance to rescue the situation after all, rather than bracing to be tossed out of bed on his ass. The heavy, liquid post-orgasm fog settled down over his brain despite himself.

Billy stretched, gingerly at first, then longer when the expected pangs of pain didn’t set in. Teddy ran his hands over Billy’s chest and up his arms, checking out his muscle, maybe, or just looking for that same kind of skin-contact that had sent Billy rocketing over the edge at light speed. Turning over, Billy took Teddy with him, sliding down the wall next to the bed a little before they settled. Teddy was on his back this time, and Billy on his knees straddling his hips, his pants still undone and come drying sticky in the dark trail of hair below his navel.

The overhead lights were still off, only the faint glow from the desk lamp letting him see what was stretched out underneath him now, acres of a gloriously muscled landscape all opened up for him to explore.

“Billy?” He’d paused too long just staring, and Teddy settled his hands on Billy’s hips.

“Let me look,” Billy asked permission even as he began to trace his fingertips across Teddy’s chest, map out the new/familiar terrain for himself. “You’re so beautiful.” Some of it he knew well: a couple of faded scars, small pink nipples peeking out from a scattering of blond hair, hair that trailed all the way down below the elastic waist of his pajamas and the pressure tenting out the cotton. Teddy was still hard, and when Billy glanced up he caught Teddy watching him intently, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

He could redeem himself here and now, give Teddy something better than the memory of Billy tapping out before they’d even gotten started.

Billy pressed his lips to Teddy’s chest, flicked at his nipples with the tip of his tongue, and Teddy jerked beneath him. Lips, tongue and hands, he worked his way down Teddy’s ribs, his stomach,
then Billy settled between his knees. He tugged Teddy’s waistband down, Teddy lifting his hips to allow him access, pushing the fabric down to bunch around the powerful muscles of his thighs.

Teddy’s cock rested against his stomach, flushed red and gleaming wet at the tip where it emerged from the folds of his foreskin. It jumped even as Billy watched, a pearl of pre-come forming. He surged forward, hunger flooding him, and licked, Teddy’s body arching and his hips all but lifting off the bed. The taste of him flooded Billy’s senses as he took Teddy in his mouth, wrapped his lips around his girth. Teddy’s groan hit him full at the base of his spine. When Billy glanced up his body, Teddy’s cock rubbing against his bottom lip, Teddy was watching him with heavy-lidded eyes, the flush tinting his cheeks and throat with pink.

He fell into it, into the rhythm of the rise and fall, just the tip at first and then deeper- he could go deeper, get more of those sounds to rip out of Teddy’s throat-

*Pressure at the back of his throat, up the back of his nose, choking him and he can’t breathe around the tube. Even when he gets air in it tastes thick and plastic, can’t fill his lungs enough and he’s going to drown, the mechanical beeping relentless around his head.*

Coughing, Billy pulled off, fighting for breath that—for one terrifying minute—wouldn’t come. He was fine, he had air, there were no tubes down his nose anymore, nothing blocking his throat, just a flashback at the worst possible moment and the panic rush could stop any time now, *thank you very fucking much.*

It only took a second, but that was more than enough time for Teddy to realize that something was wrong. “Are you okay?” He sat up, hand cradling Billy’s cheek, his face creased with concern. *Strike two.*

“Fine,” Billy insisted, getting his wind back and forcing a wry smile he wasn’t feeling one-hundred-percent. “Breathed in at the wrong time, that’s all.” He leaned in to kiss the worry away from Teddy’s face.

Teddy only hesitated for a moment before he was returning the kiss, fingers slipping into Billy’s hair, his tongue darting between Billy’s lips and tasting the corners of his mouth. Billy broke away first, sitting back on his knees and pushing Teddy lightly in the shoulders.

“No, lie down,” he ordered, teetering on the edge of the bed and almost overbalancing. Flailing, he caught himself before he fell, jamming his arm against the wall. Teddy grabbed him by the other hand and pulled him back across him on the narrow bed, his laughter starting to border on the edge of hysterical.

Once he could breathe again, Billy pushed himself back to his knees, Teddy sprawled under him across the bed. He’d started to lose his erection in the moment, and that was for the best because Billy could take him in again without worry, steal the chance to go all the way down on him while he was still half-soft and Billy couldn’t embarrass himself all over again.

More careful this time, Billy wrapped his hand around the base of Teddy’s shaft. Teddy relaxed, his eyes locked on Billy. Slow and careful, so he didn’t trigger another weird memory, he took the head of Teddy’s cock in his mouth, the weight of it pressing down on his tongue. Teddy was a grower, God was he ever, and the feel of him hardening between Billy’s lips as he slowly slid off was worth a whole lot of stress beforehand.

It took a little while, but finally Teddy’s hips started jerking up in tiny abortive thrusts like he couldn’t help himself. That was better, a sign Billy was doing *something* right. *There,* his chest flushed red and his balls pulling up tight, Teddy fucked into Billy’s hand once more, twice, fast and hard. Billy’s lip caught on the ridge, and then Teddy was crying out and coming, his eyes
closed and head tipped back, his throat bared and vulnerable.

Wasn’t perfect. Not by a long shot. Not even close to any of the ways Billy had imagined their real first time together, even taking the choking and the hair-trigger out of the equation.

He wanted to curl up in Teddy’s arms, wait out the quarter-hour until his alarm went off, but-what if he tried and Teddy asked him to leave? Maybe it would be better to slink back across the hall now and wash up before Tommy woke up and noticed he was still gone. Or-

Something was tugging on his hand. Teddy laced his fingers through Billy’s and pulled him forward; Billy tipped over and let himself fall, be caught in Teddy’s arms and held close. He pressed his face into the soft skin by Teddy’s armpit, drank in the moment before Teddy would say goodbye. “That sucked,” Billy groaned, his voice muffled against Teddy’s chest. “Not you—you’re amazing. I mean me.”

He felt Teddy’s shrug, the pause that meant he was trying to figure out how to say something he didn’t want to, in a way that wasn’t a lie but also wasn’t mean. It was a very specifically Teddy sort of pause, and thank goodness for the bond that let Billy identify it.

“It was fine,” Teddy said after a beat, but he was running his fingertips up and down Billy’s back in a gentle caress that was almost an apologism of his own. “Call it a practice run.”

That wasn’t a ‘get out of my bed,’ so Billy dared to slip his arm around Teddy’s waist, his head still pillowed on Teddy’s chest. “Does that mean you’re not breaking up with me?” It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours. If he was, this was going to be the shortest relationship of Billy’s life.

“Over awkward sex? Hardly.” Teddy’s arm came tightly around him, snuggling Billy closer still. Billy took his cue to curl in and absorb Teddy’s warmth, flatten his hand against his chest and soak in the strength in his muscles, the perfect stable solidity of him. “Though I’m looking forward to actually getting you naked when we try this again.”

And because Billy never could leave well enough alone, he pressed a kiss to Teddy’s sternum, chest hair tickling Billy’s nose. “Wake me up when you come in, next time?”

“Are you planning to break into my room on a regular basis?”

“It’s technically not a break-in if I know your keycode.” Very technically.

“Fair. And I don’t actually mind.”

Billy pushed himself up onto his arms, leaning in to capture Teddy’s mouth with his, a sweet, lingering promise to do better, be better. “Would this be the equivalent of knowing where you’d hide your spare key, if we were dating like regular people?”

“In a magnet keeper under the mailbox,” Teddy replied easily. “Flowerpots are cliché for a reason.” And when he kissed Billy back, pulling Billy down to him and his fingers tangling in Billy’s hair, it was an answer he could cope with for now.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens, and Tommy is a cockblock.

There wasn’t time to try anything else before they’d have to be up for the day, so after prying himself reluctantly out of Teddy’s bed, Billy shoved himself quickly under the shower before slipping back across the hall to his own room. The lights were still off, Tommy’s hand dangling from the upper bunk. A faint snore confirmed that he was still asleep, wouldn’t notice Billy sneaking back in. Not that he was hiding Teddy from his brother—it was pretty pointless, considering—but he still didn’t feel like explaining himself. To Tommy, or anyone.

He changed in the dark, ducking into their bathroom to shave. The face that stared back at him felt like his own for the first time in months. The bags that had sunk below his eyes were almost entirely gone, and his brain was seated in the center of his skull where it belonged. Amazing what a decent night’s rest could do. Even crammed in beside Teddy in his single bed, Billy had slept better than he had in months.

The worst of this was definitely behind him now.

Tommy was awake and blearily rubbing his eyes by the time Billy left the bathroom. He paused on his way down the ladder, like he was going to say something, then just shook his head. Billy jumped aside as Tommy whipped the end of his towel at Billy’s legs, the end catching him just enough to sting. The bathroom door closed behind Tommy before Billy could retaliate.

Brothers.

He had a little time before he needed to be anywhere, the computer humming to life with the touch of his hand. The fingerprint reader sent him straight into his own accounts. System maintenance messages, the emails from his grandfather that he hadn’t answered, and there—the news alert he’d set up earlier. Not a new missing kid, but the reappearance of one of the names on his original list. Tandy Bowen. And not the happy-reunion smiling-press-conference kind of headline that he wanted to see.

Washed up on El Captain State Beach last night, wounds appeared to be self-inflicted. Case open pending coroner’s report. There weren’t any grim photos with the update, thank God for that, but the terseness of the details said more than enough.

Goddammit.

The beach wasn’t far from the Shatterdome at all, maybe an hour’s drive west of Point Mugu and the old Air Force station that had been repurposed into the PPDC’s southernmost American stronghold. Whatever had happened to Tandy, whether she’d taken her own life or had it ripped from her, it had been right in Billy’s back yard. And he hadn’t noticed a thing.

That wasn’t fair. It wasn’t like he could be expected to track every kid who went up the cliffs, every boat around the islands. But someone should have been watching.

On a hunch, a faint tickle in the back of his brain that meant he was forgetting something, he
pulled up the database and did another search. This time for cause of death. Cross-referenced by location.

Three.

She wasn’t the first, she was the third dead teen to have washed up along the southern California coastline in the past few months. One had been flagged as a victim of the last kaiju attack, the second accidental drowning. And now this one, suicide.

Maybe there was nothing new about that, nothing weird about bodies being discovered. The world could be a terrible place. Any flick through the news channels would tell you that. People died all the time, and in California, a lot of people died near water.

The niggling warning didn’t go away.

The shower turned off and Billy clicked out of his searches, closed everything down except his message program. He needed more than a faint hunch before he asked Tommy for his advice, or all he’d get would be teasing about conspiracy theories and tin-foil hats. He was scrolling through emails when Tommy came back out, scrubbing a towel over his hair.

“Anything exciting?”

Billy shook his head. “Mostly junk. United Way Appeal. Solicitation for donations from the BuenaKai Church. And—” he hit upon the perfect distraction, a way to take down two birds with one stone. They needed to have this conversation anyway. “Those emails from Grand-dad.” He raised an eyebrow at Tommy. “Are we going to talk about this? Ever?” It was unfinished business, the fight they’d been having the day Billy had been hurt.

He was busy clearing the decks of his emotional jetsam this week, he may as well tackle some more.

“How about ‘no?’” Tommy scowled at him, his mood shifting immediately into a dark and thundering thing. Tommy had been closer to Erik than Billy had been, had idolized their grandfather so much more. He’d been the one more deeply scarred when Erik had walked away.

“We have to deal with it eventually. He’s back. And sooner or later he’ll work his way into Mom’s good graces as well. Isn’t it better to figure out what we’re going to do before we go home for a visit and find him sitting at the dinner table?”

“If that happens, I’m leaving. You can come with me or not, I don’t care.”

His frustration bubbled over, setting Billy’s own teeth on edge. “He’s family, Tommy. What is wrong with you?”

Tommy threw his towel at Billy’s head, pulling on his clothes with sharp, tight movements. He was closed off but he still looked Billy in the eye, his green gaze glittering and hard. “He walked out, Billy. He didn’t like Dad, fine. He and Mom got into it, fine. Whatever. Grownup problems. But he took it out on us as well.

“He had a dozen different ways to stay in touch, you know Mom wouldn’t have stopped him. And did he ever try? And then suddenly when we were in the news—when we earned this ourselves, you and me—he wants to come back and take some kind of credit for being family? Fuck him. We were disposable, just like everything else in his life. That kind of loyalty I don’t need.” He spat that last comment out, tugging his shirt down over his head as punctuation.

Pulling itself in two, Billy’s heart ached. For his brother, for the memory of what it had been like
to be a whole family, for himself and knowing that he couldn’t put any of it back together alone. “He probably had reasons,” he replied, knowing just from the look in Tommy’s eye that it wasn’t going to work. “How do we know that he didn’t try? Maybe Mom did tell him to back off, or Uncle Pietro stopped him. Or he thought we’d be better off without them fighting around us.”

“That’s your problem – you’re always looking for the benefit of the doubt. There’s gotta be a reason.” Tommy grabbed the back of Billy’s chair and spun him around once, then stopped the spin with his foot. “Life lesson, little brother. Sometimes the world is just shitty, and there’s no reason for it at all.”

“With an attitude like that, I’m amazed you’re still talking to me.” Billy shot back, rising to his feet. He faced off with Tommy, his jaw set, and Tommy’s mulish stubbornness stared right back at him. “That’s your answer, just give up?”

“He gave up on us first.”

Oh, that stung, and the worst of it was that Tommy had a point. He was the one who usually lashed out, all prickles and thorns, but that was because he carried everything so deep and so raw. So much more than Billy, who wore his heart on his sleeve. He knew exactly what Tommy was feeling in that moment, the breathless, hollowed-out ache of abandonment.

So he did the only possible thing, and pulled his brother into a tight hug. Tommy didn’t respond except to go stiff, his arms hanging motionless at his sides. Billy squished him tighter, held on.

Eventually Tommy capitulated. He raised his hands halfway, dropped them again, then finally wrapped his arms around Billy in return. And for a moment, they held each other up. “You suck,” Tommy said, his voice muffled by Billy’s shoulder.

The next breath Billy took was a hundred pounds lighter, despite the snug pressure of Tommy’s arms around his ribcage. “I won’t call him until you’re okay with it.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Tommy grumbled, his back rising and falling before he slowly loosened his grip.

Billy nodded, taking a deep breath of his own as he let go. “That’s fine too.” He held Tommy’s gaze for a moment longer, remembering. Under your spines, I know you—I’ve always known you. Even when all we have are words. “Breakfast?” was all he said aloud.

And Tommy nodded. “Coffee,” he added, shoving his feet into his boots and hauling on the laces. “Especially if you were up all night with loverboy over there. Has medical even cleared you for that yet?”

“Oh God.” Billy pinched the bridge of his nose, the humiliation he’d been ignoring rolling back over him in waves. “Can we not?”

Apparently the answer was no, because Tommy’s good-natured teasing followed him out of the room. Billy glanced back at his computer one last time as he escaped to the quiet of the hallway, the screen dark now and the mystery temporarily locked away.

Turning the corner on the way back to his room hours later, Billy slammed his hand against the keypad, allowing himself one small burst of frustration before he had to get focused again.

The sheer blockiness and industrial everything at the PPDC had been a shock to Billy's system when the twins had first landed at the Academy, but now seeing green was the anomaly. He needed to get out of the base again, and soon. The itch was back up his neck and the walls were
starting to press in, feeling the creep of the claustrophobia that used to be annihilated by running Magnus between the waves and sky.

His door slid open. Tommy wasn’t there, which was probably for the best. Billy would get more research done if he didn’t have to answer questions about what, and why, and how dumb was he to get sucked into something that wasn’t his business anyway.

... No, Tommy wouldn’t say that. He’d be more likely to listen, raise an eyebrow and then jump in with both feet, taking Billy along for the ride in a tornado built for two. But Tommy had Magnus and Teddy to worry about. Billy was perfectly capable of managing a project of his own.

Sitting at his desk, he opened up the files once more. Probabilities and statistics had never been his thing. He’d taken Stats as a freshman because it was the easiest option to get rid of his math requirement, but none of the formulas he’d memorized for that would be useful in figuring out this sort of pattern.

Fine. Forget tables and charts full of numbers that made his eyes glaze over—he needed their stories. Start with everyone in the past year.

Sinking in to the databases, Billy followed his hunches. Down one trail, then another, he pulled, saved and printed the pieces of files that seemed most relevant, or even just those that set the puzzle-piece shapes in the back of his brain spinning in new circles.

There was a design there, as intentional as the strike group’s attack formations, as real as the body lying in the police morgue. He was good at that—seeing patterns from a distance, bright connections fading in and out of his vision, nodes and vectors aligning overtop of the data spooling out in front of him.

The afternoon slipped away around him. By the time the door slid open with a soft affirming beep and click, Billy had accumulated a small stack of case summaries spread out over his desk and had a map open on his screen, stars and question marks blinking at him idly from points around the coast. The second presence in the room didn’t register until Teddy was already settling down on the edge of his desk, casting a curious glance over the papers drifting across the fake wood surface.

Billy flinched, and pondered his options for a half-second. Lie? Sweep everything into a stack under a book? Or don’t bother because he had basically been caught out and any kind of over-reaction would look even more suspicious.

The last one. Billy gave up and ran his hand up Teddy’s thigh, because it was firm and broad and right there beside his arm. “Hey, you.”

“Hey yourself. I came in to see if you were planning on resurfacing any time soon. You’ve been closeted in here for hours.”

The clock blinked at him when he checked, confirmation that Teddy was telling the truth. Billy leaned back in his chair and grinned, his hand still resting on Teddy’s leg. “I haven’t been closeted since junior high.”

Teddy snickered and he looked down at Billy’s desk, eyes skimming over the pages. Billy fought the urge to blank the screen, shove everything into a drawer, avoid the look of pity and the inevitable ‘you’re going to give yourself a headache’ or ‘you know you’re not well enough to do anything useful’ reaction that was bound to come. Couched in nicer language, of course, but always meaning that underneath.
Instead, Teddy reached out and spun the top sheet of paper so he could read it. The gears were turning behind his eyes when he looked up again. “You’re on a hunt for something. What are you up to?”

“Missing kids,” Billy admitted. “It’s something that’s been bugging me lately. I keep seeing them in the news. I’m trying to... I don’t really know yet. Not exactly. I just have this feeling that something’s not right.”

Teddy nodded slowly, a furrow forming between his brows. “Is this about the girl whose body they found this morning? I saw that report.”

“That, and this-” Billy tugged the crumpled flyer out from the pile, Molly’s wide smile shining out at him. “And I keep coming back to that news conference the other day, the look on that poor woman’s face. Too many missing, she said, and the cops aren’t doing enough to find them. And it looks like she wasn’t wrong.”

He let out a breath, deflating along with the air. Now Teddy was going to roll his eyes, or shrug, or worst of all, pat him on the shoulder and tell him to focus on his own health before trying to get involved with anything else. “When I say it out loud it doesn’t sound like much, but think about it. What better way to hide something more awful than in a different apocalypse?”

And once again, he’d completely misjudged. Teddy shuffled through some of the other printouts, pulling the handful of posters out to lay them side by side. Five young men and women—five too many—some still just kids. The furrow between his brows was joined by a considering frown. “You’re thinking human trafficking?”

Billy flipped back up to sitting straight, his arm resting on Teddy’s thigh, a solid point of contact that he couldn’t give up. “I hope to God it isn’t. These ones that I printed, here—all of them were last seen either near or heading toward the same area.”

And that was where the map came into play. He zoomed out to include the Shatterdome, the point where the body had washed up west of them, the cluster of red points to the east. “Is that near the old airport?” Teddy asked, cocking his head. “What else is there?”

“Surfridge,” Billy shrugged, “Playa del Ray.” Teddy gave him a confused-puppy sort of look and he continued. “It was some super-ritzy beach neighbourhood back in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. But everyone moved when LAX went in and the airport authority took over. America’s got stories about sneaking over the fences when she was a kid and the whole thing was basically just wasteland.

“But when the airport moved inland after K-day, a handful of warehouses went up instead. You can’t build new housing anywhere within fifty miles of open water now, so who else was going to use it?”

“Makes sense.” Teddy slipped down off the desk and knelt beside Billy’s chair, resting an arm on Billy’s knee. He was still looking at the screen and the papers like he was taking Billy seriously, like he believed.

He was also a lot closer than he had been even sitting on the desk, and if Billy wanted to he could turn his head and stick his tongue in Teddy’s ear. The temptation passed quickly enough, but the shivery awareness of Teddy’s body next to his didn’t fade. “What else is there?”

Right. Focus.

Billy did a quick search and a list popped up on the third hit. “Um. Warehouses, plumbing supply,
BuenaKai Church of the Redemption, and some buildings belonging to a pharmaceutical company.” He winced, memories of a half-dozen old horror movies jumping up to say ‘hi’ all at once. “You don’t think they’re disposing of human test subjects... do you?”

Ever the voice of reason, Teddy shrugged and shook his head. “That’s a bit cinematic, don’t you think? Besides. Why bother... I dunno... creating some kind of human-kaiju hybrid murder beast when the real ones are so deadly already?”

“That’s even darker than where I was going with it,” Billy replied, with a certain amount of awe. “Congratulations.”

“I try,” he replied modestly, then bounced up on his toes and poked at Billy’s screen, serious again. His arm brushed against Billy’s, their shoulders nudging, and Billy had to wrestle down all kinds of inappropriate thoughts. “So if Tandy Bowen was last seen at Manhattan Beach, then how did her body get to Santa Barbara?”

“She could have been kidnapped and dumped, that’s the logical answer. Though if there were any witnesses to that, it’s not in files that I could get access to. We’d need Nate to hack something, and I don’t want to have to explain why, not just yet.” Teddy nodded like he understood and Billy gave in to a little bit of that temptation, resting his hand on Teddy’s back. The contact was an electric surge, making Billy’s toes tingle. “The current could have done it, I suppose. If she really did kill herself at the beach she could have been washed out to sea and back again.”

The frown came back on Teddy’s face. “Not unless she went in somewhere else. Look- do you mind?” he nudged Billy’s hand over slightly so he could take over the keys, typed out a quick search and pulled up an ocean map covered in red, green and yellow arrows. “The currents don’t go that way.”

Since when was Teddy an oceanographer? Billy stared at him, caught in his surprise, and Teddy blushed pink across his ears like he could feel the look. “You can feel them against Magnus’ legs when we’re out there. The water pulls in the opposite direction. If she did get washed up by the current, then she had to have gone in... here. The Channel Islands.”

Billy frowned. “There’s nothing there but parkland and the old Navy base.”

Teddy only shrugged, his muscles moving under Billy’s hand. “What does Tommy think about all this?”

“I haven’t spoken to him about it yet. What if I’m wrong and I’m just wasting time?” It wasn’t that he was hiding anything, it was just that... he wasn’t sure quite what. A need to prove himself. Which was ridiculous, because the answers were what mattered. Not who got the credit.

“Then we’ll find out sooner rather than later. Three heads are better than one.”

“Three?”

Teddy’s reply was easy, light, like none of Billy’s concerns were bothering him at all. “What, you think I’m going to leave you to take this on alone? That’s what teams are for.”

Guilt crept in along with the defiance, a mix that Billy couldn’t begin to puzzle out easily.

He hadn’t hidden anything from his brother in years, and when his secrets had come out, Tommy had always been the first one he’d told.

Now he had a secret with Nate, and one with Teddy, and he wasn’t sure which one he wanted to keep to himself more. Or why.
All he knew was that he felt unsettled. Like he would be giving away something important. An odd sense of loss that he couldn’t quite name.

“I’ll talk to him about it later,” Billy promised.

Mind you, he had no choice now. If he made Teddy promise to keep it locked down during a drift Teddy would probably try, and risk losing their connection. Teddy and Tommy topped out around ninety-four percent on good days, enough to get the Jaeger moving, not enough to deal with any additional strain. He couldn’t handicap them further.

_There had been one time when we’d been more, when the three of us together had blown right past every benchmark and every record ever set._

He wanted that back, and to be fully awake this time. To be present and aware enough to feel both of them surging into his mind, to be part of that ultimate gestalt again.

He couldn’t have it. But there were other ways to get under someone’s skin.

Billy swiveled his chair so that he was facing Teddy, their heads on a level. He let his gaze drop to Teddy’s mouth, lush and sinful. Shutting out all his other projects, all his fears and problems, he let himself imagine what it would feel like to have those lips on him, pressing kisses down his chest, or wrapped around his cock.

Billy moistened his own lips, his breath catching and mouth gone dry, and Teddy’s eyes fixed on the motion.

“That’s not really why you came in here, though,” Billy suggested. The vibe in the room changed as he spoke, going thick with heady anticipation.

“Nah. Tommy got drafted to help out with some kind of upgrade on Goliath, and I’ve got some time.” Teddy paused for a second. His frown was replaced by a half-smile, and tight tension crackled in the air between them. “Are you ready to take a break? Sitting this long can’t be good for you.”

This was it. Billy was going to find out exactly how many of his dirty Teddy-related fantasies could come true. He felt the edge of a faint shiver under his hand, then Teddy leaned over, caught his chin between his fingers, and kissed him. His lips were warm and soft, slightly chapped, a sweet press that was more promise than fire.

Billy kissed him back, tugged at his hand to pull Teddy to standing, get their bodies closer together. Lips, teeth, tongue hands—he fell headlong into the rush of sensation.

_I remember how you loved this before, how you got so hard for me just from kissing. Will you want me the same way now that I’m real?_

As if he’d heard Billy’s questions, Teddy froze.

With his hand splayed flat against the small of Billy’s back, the other buried in his hair, Billy’s mouth on his pulse point and his heart beating ten times normal speed—he froze.

_Maybe the answer’s ‘no’ after all._

Billy’s defenses were down too far to snap them back up and pretend like this wasn’t happening. Not now, when everything else in his world was so muddled and uncertain. Billy tipped his head back, tried without success to catch Teddy’s eye. “What’s wrong?”
“That reaction isn’t ‘nothing.’” Billy dropped his hands from Teddy’s waist and took a half-step back. He needed to get space between them to let himself cool down. Also, give Teddy room to breathe, to say goodbye if that was what he needed. “If you’re not feeling it anymore, then tell me. Before this goes any further.”

“That’s not it, I swear! I want this, with you, I do. It’s- it’s more complicated.” Teddy trailed off, looking anywhere but into Billy’s eyes.

Billy bit back the words before they could tighten his throat and expose the way his heart was collapsing in on itself. “I really hate that word. If this is about the other night-”

“It’s not that either. It’s stupid.” He dragged his fingers through his hair, like a habit he’d picked up when it had been longer.

Billy grabbed for Teddy’s hand and held it tight, and Teddy didn’t pull away. “So get over it,” he suggested flippantly, and Teddy cracked a small smile. “Or use your words, because I’m not in your head anymore, and guessing at what you might be thinking is making me crazy.”

“With all due respect,” Teddy was teasing him, and that was so much better, the tension easing off a notch. “You were crazy long before I showed up.”

“Yeah, I remember. Some of it, anyway. I think.” Whether the things Billy remembered were the same as the things Teddy remembered was a different issue, another thing they hadn’t really talked about.

“Tommy caught that memory the next day. And he was pissed. We came out of sync, I thought he was going to murder me right there in the cockpit. It was on your behalf,” he added hastily. “He thought I was perving on you because you were unconscious.”

“I appreciate the whole riding to my rescue thing, but what has that got to do with anything now? I’m awake, and definitely, enthusiastically consenting.” If Teddy was about to bail out because of something Tommy had done, or said, Billy was going to make his brother pay. For the rest of his life. “Just to be clear: I want to make out with you. I want to sleep with you. I want to provide you with a very large number of hopefully very good orgasms, as often as you want them.”

“And I appreciate that, believe me,” Teddy replied, flashing a faint, almost inadvertent smile. “That’s not just it, though.” And he was nervous. About what? Teddy was the beautiful one, tall and strong, with shoulders like a Greek god’s, abs Billy could bounce quarters off of and a mouth
that he wanted to feel everywhere on his body. What could he possibly have to be nervous about?

“What if it isn’t any good?” Teddy said simply. “What if I’m not good enough…” and his ears were pink at the tips, his bottom lip curling out in the beginning of a pout.

So Billy was kind, even while he wanted to burst into hysterical laughter at the very idea that Teddy, beautiful, strong, kind and generous Teddy, could somehow not be ‘enough.’ “Performance anxiety?” he asked softly, and he tightened his grip on Teddy’s hip, stepped closer so that he could feel Teddy’s body heat again.

Some of the tension in Teddy’s shoulders and back seemed to ebb. “Maybe a little,” he confessed. Then he did meet Billy’s eyes, his smile rueful and knowing. “To drift with Tommy properly, I can’t block him out of anything. Which means he’s going to see some of this, whether I want him to or not. And I’ve never been in a situation before where my lover’s closest relative is going to be in a position to make performance assessments afterward.”

“When you put it like that, it does sound weird.”

“A bit.” He chewed on that full lower lip of his, leaving it gleaming. “What if this makes things worse? Between the three of us, I mean. We’ve only just started to work things out.”

Billy nuzzled in and traced a line up Teddy’s jaw with his nose, intimate and tender. Teddy tipped his head and made space for him, his breath hitching. “What if it makes things better?” He wanted, needed to touch him, to taste him, to get Teddy’s skin wet under his mouth and chase the beads of sweat, collect them on his tongue. To get close and feel, skin under his hands and Teddy’s hands on him.

To belong to Teddy in a way no-one else could. To have something that was just for them.

“I’m nervous too, you know,” Billy confessed, resting his cheek on Teddy’s shoulder. Teddy’s arms came around him in what felt like an automatic reflex, and Billy took full advantage. The words stuck on his tongue, but he couldn’t beg Teddy to talk and then keep his own feelings under lock and key. That wasn’t fair. He breathed Teddy in, captured the memory of being warm in his arms, the scent of his skin, the barest prickling edge of stubble along his jaw.

“In the drift, I was whole. I saw myself the way I used to be, not the way I am. I’ve got scars now that I didn’t have before, and you can still practically count my ribs. I could understand if you weren’t attracted to me this way.” He paused and took a deep breath, his chest locking tight at the thought. *Please, don’t let this be the rest of it.* “It would hurt like hell, but I would understand.”

He wouldn’t, not really. Or at least he would understand, but not be able to get over it any time soon. But admitting that wouldn’t help matters.

“That’s not the case at all,” Teddy insisted, and he splayed his hand flat against the small of Billy’s back, tugged him in as close as they could get with clothes still between them. “I saw your memory of yourself, before, but I’m looking at you, now. And I like what I see. Scars and ribs and everything. For that matter, I’m pretty sure that I’ll like what you become in the future, too.”

The moment was too much, treading too close to something more powerful than Billy could cope with. “Spirits of Billy past, present and yet to come? Should I rattle chains at you?” The joke bubbled up without thinking, a deflection and a wall thrown up hastily in the space where Teddy had already begun to seep into his pores.

Teddy snorted. “Stop that. I was being lyrical. *Romantic,* even.”

“Sorry.”
“It doesn’t happen all that often, you know.” But he was smiling, and he took a step forward, backing Billy up as he went.

“I said sorry.” Billy’s back met the wall and he relaxed against it, letting the solid concrete hold him up. Desire fizzed in his chest, tiny champagne bubbles washing through him and burning away the anxiety. He slipped his hands up under the hem of Teddy’s t-shirt and met skin there, forbidden and sleek. He’d mapped this territory once before, half-asleep and fuzzy-brained, but this was different, brighter and intentional and wild. A victory, racing through the space where the fear had been.

Teddy’s stomach tightened under Billy’s explorations, Billy’s fingertips brushing against everything he could reach—the flat plane of his chest, the faint coarseness of hair, silk-soft skin along the ridges of his ribs. Teddy’s breath caught again and he pressed closer, one hand bracing himself on the wall next to Billy’s head.

“I’m not entirely sure you mean it,” Teddy murmured, and he was right there, his breath tickling Billy’s lips, and he was going to – they were so desperately close.

Teddy kissed him, gentle at first, tentative and searching, but this time Billy didn’t hesitate. He kissed Teddy instead of waiting for Teddy to pull away. He kissed him back, desperately hungry, and Teddy’s hand snuck up under Billy’s shirt, his palm hot against Billy’s waist, the rough calluses on his fingers dragging against Billy’s side. Rough and soft together and every nerve ending tingled, alive for the first time in forever, alive and needing, everything thrilling to Teddy’s touch.

Teddy’s hand slid higher under Billy’s shirt, fingertips grazing across his chest, brushing hot across his nipple. It was barely anything, a faint skimming touch, but sensation cascaded over him—a fountain of water in a parched desert.

He yearned into it, Teddy still so maddeningly gentle. “I’m not going to break, I promise.”

“You sure?” Teddy teased.

“Of course I’m sure. My brain may have been making out with you regularly, but my body is touch-starved. That’s a thing.” He fastened his mouth on Teddy’s throat, kissed and bit at the tendon there, the thick line of his shoulder.

“Being touch-starved?”

“Mhm. Scientific fact. Human beings heal faster with skin to skin contact. It’s why they have cuddlers for premature babies.”

Teddy nuzzled in, breathing him deep, his voice a softly teasing lilt. “Are you saying you’re premature?”

“At the rate we’re going now we’re seriously overdue.” Billy hiked his leg up over Teddy’s hip to pull him closer, Teddy grabbing at his thigh and tugging it higher, his knee against the wall and Billy riding into him. And oh God, Teddy was most of the way to hard too, the thick line of his cock unmistakable against Billy’s stomach.

Teddy cupped Billy’s ass and held him steady, punctuating his words with a kiss that grew in desperation. “Pushy.”

“Tease.”
God, give me this. You’ve taken almost everything else away from me, just let me have this.

The door beeped, clicked.

Slid open.

“Augh! The hell, guys?!”

Tommy’s yelp cut through the haze, the bubble around them popping.

They froze, Billy’s hands heading for Teddy’s zipper and Teddy grabbing Billy’s ass, the whole thing in clear view of the previously-locked door.

Tommy jerked back and the door slid closed again. His outraged shout came through even as the latch clicked home. “You better not be using my bunk for that shit!”

“Oh fuck,” Billy groaned.

Teddy fell forward, his forehead planted against Billy’s shoulder. “Maybe if we don’t say anything, he’ll go away.”

“Be vewy vewy quiet-” Billy muttered and Teddy began to laugh, his shoulders shaking. If he would just go, they could pick up where they’d left off—Teddy was still hard against him, Billy’s heart pounding triple-time.

Tommy banged on the door. “I need my uniform, assholes!”

He had to let go, Teddy’s shoulders slumping. “He’s not leaving.”

“I’ll hold him down while you kick him,” Billy offered as they disentangled themselves, his groin thwarted and aching.

“Don’t tempt me.”

A minute later Teddy’s hair was still a tumbled disaster, his skin flushed, a grimace of discomfort on his face as he straightened his clothes. He looked the way Billy felt, walking frustration, and there was something that struck a satisfied chord deep inside even while Billy’s skin felt stretched far too tight and his blood still ran hot. I did that. He wants me as much as I need him.

“My room?” Teddy offered, the door sliding open and Tommy storming in.

Please, and right now, Billy had been about to say, but Tommy’s appearance derailed his train of thought. It was pretty normal to come back dirty from working on the Jaegers, but Tommy looked more like someone had opened a vent or cut the oil line over his head, his hair slicked down and a dark sheen coating his shirt, drops splattered on his pants. “What-”

Tommy glared at them both. “Don’t say it.” He pushed past Billy and headed for the bathroom.

“Teddy, Scott wants to see you down in J-tech.”

“Me? Why?”

“I didn’t ask.” The door shut behind him.

Teddy pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered something that sounded a whole lot like “oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“Come on,” Billy objected, defeat crawling heavy over him. “You’re not even on duty right
now.”

The bathroom door opened and Tommy stuck his head out. “He has a single room,” he pointed at Teddy, but glared at them both. “Use that next time.” He vanished again, followed by the sound of the shower turning on full-force.

“How long do you figure we can stall Scott?”

Billy was pouting, he knew, and it was so tempting to haul Teddy off across the hall and play hooky, grabbing whatever time they could before someone else tracked them down, but- “Not long enough.” Not to make it good. “You’d better go.”

The kiss that Teddy gave him as he left did help a little, the tight press of his fingers enough to leave faint red marks on Billy’s hips. It wasn’t enough to stop Billy from whacking the everloving hell out of Tommy with a pillow as he tried to get dressed again, but it was better than nothing.

Black cold surrounds him, but he’s not alone in it. Not this time. It’s behind him, gone when he turns, a looming presence that he knows— he knows — is too big, too much for him to face. He tries, but however fast he moves it’s faster, a darker shadow sliding away from the edges of his vision.

Tentacles grab him from behind, wrap steel bands around his arms, legs, waist. One pushes between his lips, smell and taste of rubber, forces down his throat until he can’t breathe, can’t scream.

Billy sat up in a rush, his eyes snapping open, his throat and chest closed tight against the air. For a moment he could hear the rush and fall of the ventilator, feel the pressure of the hoses in his nose and throat. And in the darkness, the tight haul of muscle binding his limbs. Something more-

Her face, her smile, turned to helplessness and grief; arms reaching for him that turned to Teddy’s arms, holding Billy as he wept. Then Teddy was Molly again and she faded into mist, even as Billy reached to pull her toward the light.

A voice in the night- Please-

Rage and helplessness swept through him, his knuckles tight on the sheets, the power of the wave of emotion leaving him sweat-beaded and shaking. But darker-darkness above him was the bottom of Tommy’s bunk, and the soft snore in his ears wasn’t his own breathing. There; a touchstone of the real. Billy matched his breath to Tommy’s, in and out, the panic receding with every shared drag of air.

The surge faded more slowly than it had come, leaving Billy knowing two vitally important things.

Molly Hayes was still alive. And she didn’t have much time left.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

This one’s a little short, but it ends where it has to.

The little red marker that had been beside Billy’s name since he’d woken up in medical was gone when he took a look at his records the next day. He could go off-base now, and Tommy and Teddy were off of restriction as well, but it felt somehow anticlimactic. He put in the form to request liberty anyway.

Proper channels, this time. He couldn’t run the risk of having it denied. If he didn’t get off base soon he was going to go stir-crazy, and now he had fresh purpose. And a list of last-known locations.

Tommy had stumbled down from his bunk earlier than usual, bleary-eyed and rumpled as he headed out to get suited up. The active piloting teams were scheduled for three days of manoeuvres, all four Jaegers and a contingent from the Air Force running a half-dozen new scenarios in the bay beyond the Shatterdome.

Envy and grief welled up inside Billy, filling his lungs and squeezing tight around his heart.

*I should be out there with them.*

He didn’t have time to dwell.

Shove it down instead, jump on the feelings until they went back in their little box, to be dealt with some other time. *Preferably never.*

LOCCENT was still quiet when he walked in, the calm before the storm while the pilots were still in their briefing and the pit crews were doing their final tweaks and polishes. David stared at his monitors, flickers of light across his glasses the faint indication of the data streams feeding through the HUD lenses. Billy dropped down to sit on the edge of the console, avoiding looking at the window at the swarming activity in the Jaeger bay below.

David acknowledged him a moment later, a faint nod all he got for a moment before David sat back, pushing his glasses up on his head. He looked tired, or maybe stressed out, bags under his eyes and a frown line etched deeply between his brows. “What’s the story?” Billy prompted, a faint alarm ringing in the very back of his brain.

“ Weird telemetry, that’s all.” David gestured at one of the projections, the cryptic notations apparently meaning something to him. “I’m going over the data from that false alarm a couple of days ago.”

“Was there something in the Breach after all?” That was more interesting than pining over manoeuvres he wasn’t allowed to join, and Billy leaned forward, trying to see whatever it was that David was picking out of the endlessly scrolling wiggly lines.

David shook his head. “No. It’s human-made, whatever it is. Some kind of signal interfered with the information we pull from the satellites and ocean floor sensors. It was random, weak, not on a
frequency we usually monitor, but it’s been repeated a few times recently.” David frowned at Billy, as though trying to come to some kind of decision, then tapped at his keyboard and brought up a map.

It looked an awful lot like the one sitting on Billy’s computer at that exact moment, except that a few of the flagged locations were different. “There’s a mark on the Channel Islands,” Billy said, more of a question than a statement.

“It’s the closest I can figure to the origin point for the signal,” David replied with an audible shrug. “It’s difficult to get a fix without having an active line to trace back, especially since it wasn’t directed at us in the first place. It wasn’t an attack, at least. It looks like it was aimed out to sea.”

The Channel Islands. It was too much of a coincidence, too close to home. Billy shook off the fog that was still lingering from his dream, leaned in on his elbows. Whatever was going on with his kids—they’d become ‘his’ somewhere between yesterday and now, and ‘kids’ even though some of them were close enough to his age to be peers. He couldn’t quite explain the protective urge that had sprung out of nowhere, and wasn’t in the mood to examine it.

Whatever was going on, the island chain was a part of it.

“Isn’t there a Navy base out there?” Billy asked innocently. “Maybe they’re up to something.”

David’s expression turned thoughtful, that look that he wore when he was evaluating his options. “That base was decommissioned. They only use it for training the SEALs now, and we get an alert when they have a session coming up. There shouldn’t be anyone out there until July.”

Everything he said was just more confirmation, and Billy’s gut started screaming at him. He couldn’t get out to the islands by himself, not without renting a boat and filing travel plans. He’d get spotted and have to explain himself within seconds.

“What if someone’s at the base who shouldn’t be?” he asked instead, aiming for more ‘concerned and confused’ than ‘I’m a tin-foil-hat wearing conspiracy theorist with an idea.’ “It would be worth it to check and make sure the place is still empty.”

That earned him a suspicious look, and a noncommittal “hm” from David. “You’re awfully interested in this thing.”

Billy sat back and folded his arms. Totally not defensively. David didn’t call him on it. “I’m bored, David. I may not be a computer nerd, but this is still a lot more interesting than sitting around here doing push-ups and watching paint dry.” And that actually wasn’t a lie.

For a moment he wasn’t sure if David would let it rest. But he nodded, made a note on the pad by his elbow. “It’s not a bad suggestion. I’ll get someone to do a run-by once the Jaegers launch. If there’s anyone out there who managed to avoid the security patrols, the heat sensors should still be able to pick them up.” He drummed his fingers on the console, then swivelled his chair to face Billy. “I want to ask you something.”

“Sure.” Billy tried to school his face into nonchalance, rapidly running through all the possibilities he could think of. Was he in trouble for something again? “Fire away.”

“Will you authorize Nate to share the records of your pons sessions with me?” David kept his voice low, glancing toward the techs currently out of earshot at the other end of the room. A sardonic grin tugged up at one corner of his mouth. “The records that don’t officially exist for the unauthorized work you’re certainly not doing, that is.”

That... hadn’t been on Billy’s list of possible topics. He blinked, unsure. Was David planning to
turn him in? Hardly likely. He was a friend, however cordially distant now. But in a previous life he’d been Billy’s lifeline. “Why?” Billy settled for asking.

“I have an idea,” was all David said, leaning back in his chair. The dim blue light of LOCCENT glinted off his glasses, turning the reflection green. “Give me a week to run with it, and I may have something for you.”

“This is about getting me back in my Jaeger,” Billy guessed, and the anticipation swelled up thick inside him. David might not understand exactly what it was like to pilot—no-one could unless they did it—but he seemed to get exactly why it sank into someone’s blood. Given that, the answer was simple. “Yes. Definitely. I’ll tell him.”

The radio crackled to life, Tony Stark’s voice coming through. “Hold on to your butts, kids. Parker’s pushing a patch to the network now. No need to panic. Save your work and don’t mash any buttons for the next minute and a half. Starting — fifteen seconds from now.” David started closing windows without a glance at the speaker.

“More computer problems?”

“A virus got into the system. Some asshole downloaded infected porn, probably, and it got past IT. It’s nothing major, just a deeply annoying example of some dumb kid with too much time on their hands.” David finished closing everything down and glanced behind him, seemingly satisfied at what he saw.

“Four, three, two-” Tony’s voice transmitted cheerfully.

The lights went out. The Jaeger bay outside the window went dark. The steady buzz of electricity that Billy never noticed—that had stopped too, the silence that followed like thick cotton padded around Billy’s ears.

A beat, two, then the hum started up again, a handful of lights and indicators flashing back to life.

“A full system shutdown is not a ‘patch,’ Stark!” David snapped into his mic.

“Oops,” said the radio. The lights turned back on in the bay first, then LOCCENT, a couple of consoles blooping with irritation. David’s stayed dark.

“That’s it,” David muttered as he pushed back his chair and stormed off, the conversation with Billy obviously over for now. “Genius or no genius, I’m going to wring his goddamn neck.”

The next couple of hours were punctuated by a lot of techs running around, David and Tony complaining loudly at each other, and eventually, finally, the systems repaired, calm restored, and the Jaegers airlifted out to begin the exercises.

Billy should have been out there. It was a blow to the solar plexus to be sitting next to David in LOCCENT instead, talking to Tommy and Teddy on the mic.

Knowing that they were co-pilots was one thing, a loss Billy was slowly, hatefully, getting used to. He’d reconciled himself to that, he had! And to finding a way to build Teddy into his own life. Keep the good and throw away the awful, the bitter jealousy and the bone-crushing sense of loss.

But seeing them while they were drifting—the shifts in their expressions as they communicated faster than light, the way they mirrored one another, Tommy looking so much more like Teddy and less like Billy with every twist of his smile—he couldn’t lie to himself.
It hurt somewhere deep in his soul, at the connection point where Tommy used to be. The pain twisted in his gut, as much envy as it was loneliness. And fear.

How could he be expected to share his brother with his lover and vice versa? When the two of them knew each other so much more intimately than Billy ever could?

*I bet Dear Abbie never had to field a question like that.*

And what would happen when he recovered? If Kate was wrong and the PPDC decided that either Teddy had to go—or Billy did? You couldn’t get three people in a conn pod.

That thought was worse than the sharing. Either way, a piece of himself would be ripped away. Either way, he would be tearing Tommy in two.

*Don’t think about it. Just... don’t.*

Especially not now, with Tommy chatting away on the mic and David managing the other three Jaegers as they moved into attack positions.

*We’ll figure something out. We have to.*

/Coming around the north side now. Where did you say there was a problem?/

Billy settled back in, focused on the here-and-now. “David could only isolate the signal to the main island itself. Is there anything obvious?”

Teddy answered the question, his arm blocking his face for a moment while he changed up something on his display. /Nothing at all. No heat signatures, no flying pyramids, no giant space guns./

“That’s a relief. We’ve got our hands full with the first invasion already,” Billy snarked back, Teddy’s grin contagious.

/Hold up- There’s something here, but it’s not people. Not anymore, anyway. There’s a burn scar just up from the shoreline—someone had a campfire going. Looks like there may have been equipment set up as well, or a couple of ATVs./

/It was probably some UCLA science students messing around with another telescope experiment,/ Tommy jumped in. Teddy glanced his way, Tommy glanced back, and Billy could practically hear the hum of conversation moving between them, faster than sound, faster than light. /The astrophysics crowd are nuts for that stuff. But whoever was here, they’re long gone./

Back to a classroom to crunch numbers on microwave emissions or sunspots, or to a secret hideout for something far more sinister?

“Come back in, Magnus. The exercise is about to start.”

/Roger that./ The Jaeger’s vast bulk turned and started to walk back toward the rest of the strike group, the waves splashing high around her thighs.

Billy’s imagination was prone to running overtime, but even so—this was confirmation that he wasn’t totally out to lunch. All he needed now was a little more hard evidence.

He had to find something that even Carol wouldn’t be able to deny, proof that would get the attention of the proper authorities. Whatever was going on, part of it was sitting right at their doorstep.
“Two more months,” Billy bargained, searching Michael’s face for something—a curve of his eyebrow, a nod, a twitch—that would give him a hint. “Six months in recovery is a nice round number, it’ll look great in my records. Six months down, six back up, it’s almost poetic.”

Michael reset the machine Billy was still sitting in, moving to the desk to jot more of his endless notes down in the file folder sitting open on top. “Don’t push it.”

Billy was not above wheedling. “Come on, Michael. I’ve been improving by leaps and bounds. Just give me a timeline, project it off my current progress, anything. And don’t go all Master Yoda on me, either. ‘Patience you must have, young Jedi.’”

Michael actually chuckled at that, a low, warm sound. “It’s not a bad mantra, Yoda or not.” He set his pen down and came back around the desk, folding his arms across his chest. “You’re asking me to predict the impossible, Billy. I can tell you a few things for certain. You won’t be piloting by tomorrow, or two weeks from now. What the further future holds-” and he shrugged. “That’s for us to keep working towards.”

Billy met his gaze, but Michael was unreadable. His lips smiled. His eyes didn’t. “You’re making excellent progress. Focus on how much you’ve achieved in such a short time. Keep this up, and the rest will fall into place.”

He wasn’t going to break. Billy had tried about five different ways to beg, bribe or trick an answer out of him that morning alone, and inevitably the conversation would change direction, or Michael would find some way to reassure him in a way that didn’t involve any details at all. So he nodded, dissatisfaction crawling spider-like through his veins. “Three more months?”

We have entered the bargaining phase of grieving.

No, he’d been there for weeks already.

“No promises. Do you have enough energy left for the bike? I’d like to see you increase your cardio.” A phone rang in the distance, muffled by the door of Michael’s office. “Hang on a minute. I’ll be right back.”

He headed for the small corner office, leaving Billy alone for a moment in the weight room.

Not alone; surrounded by his thoughts, which were undeniably terrible company. Billy stretched, slow and cautious, checking in with every muscle as he pushed his arms out in front. Something popped in his shoulder, the pressure relieving immediately, but the ache low in his back and the stiffness would take more than a stretch to work out.

If David admitted to having an idea, that meant David was ninety percent of the way towards a solution. And that meant that Billy had to get himself in peak shape now or risk not being ready to seize the opportunity when it came.

The click of the door closing behind Michael meant that Billy had real privacy, and his file was still open on the desk. That innocuous-looking folder, with its sheaves of scribbled notes from a half-dozen medical professionals—all of them weighing in on Billy’s condition, his progress, his entire future.

He was across the floor and behind the desk in less than five seconds, flipping through the paperwork inside. Some of it he recognized. Exercise plans, lists of resting pulse rates, all the bits and pieces that were part of Michael doing the job that had won him dozens of accolades over the years. Nothing but the best for the PPDC.
Nothing at all about projected recovery times, no forms for release from medical supervision.

He was about to put everything in order and slip back to his chair, when he turned over the bottom page in the stack. It was dated a month ago, the note ‘cc Carol Danvers, Faiza Hussain’ jotted down on the bottom in Michael’s clear, clean handwriting.

The last line caught his eye first.

Everything stopped.

Not just the room. The air itself went molasses-thick, stuck in Billy’s lungs, bile rising sharp and painful in his throat.

Billy staggered back, caught himself before he could fall to his knees. The joints sent daggers up through his thighs when he twisted, salt in the gaping wound that ripped open across his soul.

What the future held? Michael had apparently known that all along.

Lungs tight and heart cracking—no, not cracking, shattering, so fine he’d never collect all the shards—he forced his eyes back up, made himself read the rest. That made it real. His fate laid out in black ink, white paper.

*Progressive degeneration of articular cartilage due to long-term immobility. Recommend continued monitoring, glucosamine supplementation, switch to low-impact exercise to prevent further damage to medial compartment.*

*Maintenance protocol only; projected best outcome 75% function. High risk for osteoarthritis. Knee replacement may be required in the long term.*

*Return to piloting not recommended.*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Billy reacts badly, and a new player enters the game. But what is Alex Wilder’s connection to current events?

Chapter Notes

For the record, this whole thing was plotted out and partially written before I knew there was going to be a Runaways TV show, so characterization is primarily based on the comics versions of the characters (particularly Molly. Oops.)

Return to piloting not recommended.

*He knew. He’s known all this time.*

There would be more paperwork somewhere, recommendations for his dismissal or transfer, medical reports and red-stamped files passing through a hundred different hands, all of them knowing—and still letting him believe in the impossible.

So much for the three-person team. He’d almost let himself believe it would be possible, even if he’d have to be an alternate. Better to be an understudy than never on stage at all. Except even that was off the table now, in the clearest possible terms.

David knew. He knew everything that happened on his watch. Why had he lied? And Nate—had Nate known? Did Tommy?

Was Billy the only one kept ignorant, left to marinate in a bubble of his own oblivion?

They’d left Billy to hope, continue to pray, to dream... when all along, everyone else had known that it was impossible.

*No-one tell the cripple anything; he doesn’t need to worry/he’s not strong enough to take it/he’ll believe anything if you give him what he wants to hear.*

Return to piloting not recommended.

And the inevitable follow-up that would surely show up in his records any day now, **Transfer of duty station pending.**

Carol could still ignore the recommendation.

But why would she, when he was never going to be allowed back in Magnus?

*What do you do with an extra Ranger?*
He’d be sent to the Academy, that was what, end up teaching tactics and battle strategy, sharing a six-by-six office with Clint can’t-keep-my-pants-on Barton. The transfer papers were probably already in the system waiting for some bureaucrat’s rubber-stamp.

And Billy would die alone, rotting away from the inside-out.

The darkness curled around him, hands around his throat and blood-toothed words hissing in his ear. *That solves Tommy’s problem. They’re better off without me anyway.*

*Why make them go to the trouble of shipping you out? It would be easier to-

No, no no—that was a path he was not going down. Not today, not ever. The door opened and Billy’s head jerked up, Michael coming out of his office. There was no chance to get back to his seat or pretend he didn’t know, and his anger wouldn’t have let him try.

“When the hell were you planning to *tell* me?” Billy shouted, shaking the folder in his hand.

“My job is to get you back into peak condition. Would you have kept working so hard if you’d known?” Michael paused on the other side of his desk, folded his arms and stared Billy down. Michael didn’t even look guilty, damn him, he should have been! He should have been feeling awful about the lies and he was making excuses instead, acting like he had any right to the moral high ground.

“I might!” Billy slammed the folder back down on the desk, the papers scattering across the surface, some skidding off to float down to the floor. “Who are you to make that call for me?”

The display of temper didn’t do anything to Michael’s attitude, his self-righteous smirk so fucking *punchable* that Billy could barely stand it. “Someone who knows a little bit about injury and recovery. I know you’re upset right now, but it was that motivation that brought you this far. And in a year, ten years, you’re going to be grateful for the results.”

“Maybe. But I’m not going to lie down and give up just because there’s an obstacle in my way, and if you ever thought I would, then you know jack shit about *me.*”

“Then you won’t be letting this stop you now.”

He couldn’t stand around and wait for Michael to smarm at him again. If he never heard anything about ‘what will be will be’ again, he’d throw a goddamn *parade.* “You can take your recommendations and shove them up your ass. Write whatever you want to in my file. I’ll do the work on my own.” Billy stormed toward the door, slamming it open with his outstretched hand.

Back to his quarters, change, and... and then what? Michael would be after him, Faiza would be calling him down for a Very Serious Conversation About His Future, and Carol –

He wasn’t ready to see the transfer papers yet. He wasn’t ready to have any of it be real.

Did he have a choice?

In his room, Billy yanked his sweaty shirt off and pulled a clean one on, every ache and pain a reminder of betrayal so thorough that he could barely get air into his lungs. How many people on base knew that he was washing out? Did *Teddy* know? Was all his concern really for Billy’s health, or was he worrying about the day when Billy would be sent away for good?

A message had come in while he’d been wasting his time at physiotherapy: liberty permitted. That was his way out and his way back all in one.
His original plan had been to drag Teddy into L.A. with him once the exercise was over, but that wasn’t an option now. Not with the way he was feeling, every wall closing in. And he couldn’t go in to the cafeteria or the ready room and see everyone watching him, knowing what they knew.

Billy needed out, the panic setting in, every sudden noise sending his adrenaline spiking.

His poster mocked him from the wall, Magnus standing in the ocean, waves breaking triumphantly across her flank. Now she seemed to be laughing at him, a big green and red monument to his total and utter failure.

Billy let out a yell, a scream that pulled everything up from the base of his lungs. He grabbed the poster and pulled it off the wall. One of the edges tore, the adhesive popping free, and the paper crumpled in his hands. He shoved it haphazardly in his foot locker and kicked the box as it closed. Fuck everything.

The twins’ bike was still in NYC, but the motor pool had a few. With civvies and sunglasses on, away from the other Rangers, no-one in the city would ever recognize him as the kid who used to drive a robot.

The requisition was easier than he’d thought it would be, the borrowed helmet and Tommy’s leather jacket extra security for the body that had already failed him in too many ways.

Billy kicked the bike into life and minutes later he was screaming down the highway, the Shatterdome vanishing behind the kicked-up cloud of dust.

First stop, the bus terminal that had been Molly Hayes’ last-known-sighting.

Or... he could say ‘fuck it all,’ go drink himself stupid at a bar, hit the clubs he used to go to with Kate and Cassie and the gang. Put down the stress and the strain for a couple of hours and just be a stupid millennial again, like the last six years had never happened. Except they had, and he’d changed, and he couldn’t just disappear into a bottle—or up his own ass.

He hit the accelerator, half an eye on the speed limit...but only just. The engine’s pulse drowned out the jangle of his thoughts, rubbed away the raw edges until he was nothing but a shell for the sound.

Even if he was officially a lost cause as far as the PPDC was concerned, there were a few people out there who still needed him for something.

There were other ways to be a hero.

One bus station looked a lot like every other one, and other than getting approached by a cop when he stopped to film outside a bank (last sighting: college freshman Niko Minoru), Billy’s afternoon had been disappointingly free of excitement.

He had footage of all five last-known-locations now, descriptions of the spaces and what was nearby, had taken a long meander down the beach. That was probably going to be the most useful footage of them all, including some unexplained movement on the horizon when he’d panned out across the ocean and another set of those strange red flashes that had flickered and then vanished beyond the waves.

The coffee shop bustled around him. Billy sprawled out in a booth in the corner, all but invisible to the rest of the room, a printed version of his map spread out in front of him where he could cross off the places he’d already checked.
What had he been expecting? Some kind of tingling revelation, or an x-marks-the-spot? No such luck. This wasn’t a movie, he had to remind himself, where one clue led easily to the next and he’d suddenly stumble across a warehouse filled with kidnapped victims.

His next step was to get his butt down to Playa del Ray, scale the fence and see what was left there. The likelihood was that he’d find exactly the same sort of thing he’d run across so far—a couple of bored security guards, innocuous storefronts, life moving on with no indication that anything had ever happened.

Still. He looked up, blinked away the strain from staring too intently at his small phone screen for too long. The community bulletin board on the wall next to him was filled with posters, Tandy’s face looking down from a tattered old flyer. It was half-covered over with concert announcements and apartments for rent, her photocopied smile vanishing beneath the weight of daily life as though she’d never been there at all.

Billy’s phone buzzed in his hand, flashing up an alert for the latest in a series of increasingly annoyed texts from Tommy. He made a face at his phone, finally tapping out a curt reply. Went off-base for a while. I’ll see you at dinner.

Despite everything Tommy seemed to think, he didn’t need a keeper.

**Tommy:** Took you long enough to respond, asswipe. What’s your problem?

**Billy:** My only problem is you making me crazy.

**Tommy:** Get over yourself.

**Tommy:** Two-pump chump.

Because of course Tommy had seen *that*, out of everything rattling around in Teddy’s brain. Why had Billy ever imagined that he’d be able to keep anything solely between himself and Teddy? Or that he would be okay if everything was shared? It had been different when the connection was a two-way street, when Tommy had been as open and vulnerable to Billy as Billy still was to him.

Teddy worried about being embarrassed but it was *Billy* who had been exposed, stripped bare and left for the elements. Worse, for Tommy’s entertainment. Billy had been an idiot to assume that he could carve out any kind of space for himself between the two of them.

Bad enough that Tommy treated Billy like he was helpless half the time. Now he had even more ammunition to cut Billy down.

He replied to Tommy’s text, drawing on some of the more inventive curses he knew, and killed the notifications on his phone. Anything else Tommy wanted to say to him could wait until Billy got back to base.

Billy shoved his phone back onto the table and it spun across the top, careening toward the other edge with no immediate sign of slowing. Billy dove for it, regretting everything all at once, but a brown hand caught the phone before it could smash to the floor.

Catching himself on the edge of the table before he could slide off the bench and hit the floor himself, Billy pulled himself back up to sitting. The newcomer didn’t move.

Jeans, a loose t-shirt, a red scarf with the same kind of markings that had been on the robes of the preacher and the woman at the press conference—Billy tensed, braced for some kind of attack, but nothing came. The guy just smiled, and handed his phone back. He wasn’t the preacher from
before but a man about Billy’s age, with warm dark skin and his long black hair left to curl naturally. Having a rough day?”

The crawling tension didn’t leave, Billy’s shoulders nice and knotted up, but there was no immediate threat and he tried to force his stupid reflexes to stand down. “You could say that.” Then because he wasn’t a jerk, he nodded back, lifting his phone. “Thanks for the rescue.”

“Not a problem at all.” Except that he didn’t leave, his attention caught by Billy’s map before he started speaking again. “You’re Will Maximoff, aren’t you? The Jaeger pilot.”

Ahhh, shit. So much for flying under the radar. “Depends who’s asking.” He didn’t look like he was about to start throwing punches—or worse yet, preaching—but other than that Billy had no guesses as to where this conversation was heading.

The guy ducked his head and chuckled, his smile somehow managing to be both knowing and self-deprecating at the same time. “Alex Wilder.” He offered his hand, this time without a phone in it, and Billy shook it automatically.

“You’re part of that new church,” Billy hazarded a guess.

Alex nodded, taking a seat opposite Billy in the booth without so much as asking. “The scarf gives it away, hunh? Look, I wanted to apologize for what happened. I know the way the media’s framed everything, but I want to reassure you that the BuenaKai Church is a big supporter of equal rights. Homophobia has no place in our teachings. Wayne has a tendency to get... carried away when he’s preaching. He’s been spoken to.”

“So they sent you out to do his dirty work?” Billy asked, his hackles still up. Not that he’d expected a better apology. He hadn’t expected anything other than more hellfire and brimstone. But the ‘I’m sorry about the thing that guy said’ wasn’t exactly reparations.

Alex didn’t seem to take offense, Billy’s barbs just sliding off his Teflon-coated smile. “He’s passionate.”

“He’s a menace.”

“I can’t argue with that. And if it helps any, he’s on probation and won’t be getting sent out to spread the word again anytime soon.” That helped some. It didn’t change anything about the poison that ‘Wayne’ had already dropped into people’s ears, but at least it was some kind of action. Assuming that Alex was telling the truth now.

Billy nodded, hesitated a moment longer, then conceded. “I appreciate you letting me know. I’m not sorry for the way we reacted, but if he was as off-message as you say he was, I hope it didn’t cause too many problems for you.”

“I’d like to call it even if you will,” Alex offered, folding his arms on the table and leaning in. “We’re not a hate group, we’re just searching for answers. Our members want to believe in something bigger than ourselves. Like you, for instance. You believe in the PPDC.”

Not anymore he didn’t. Oh, he would defend their purpose with his dying breath, marvel at the science that had gotten them so far and worked so many miracles, the lives that they’d saved and their devotion to the mission. But when it came down to trust? To knowing, deep in his gut, that his chain of command had his back?

In a single moment that had all fallen apart, the puzzle pieces turned to charcoal and ash. Billy grabbed for his empty cup as a way to avoid replying, only a drop of cold coffee left to roll down the side and spread bitter across his tongue.
He couldn’t say any of that to a stranger so he shrugged instead, Teddy’s voice echoing in his memory. “I’ve done a lot of praying myself, and I wasn’t exactly religious before K-Day. “There are a lot of people searching for answers these days.”

And at least one who had only just realized he didn’t have any.

Alex nodded, his gaze intent. Like he understood more than what Billy was saying, somehow saw the struggle behind his half-assed words. He knew who Billy was, he had to be at least a little bit aware of what had been going on the past year. The media loved a sob story, and a ‘fallen hero’ narrative would have been great for sales. And yet he didn’t ask, or even look at Billy like he was trying to figure out his injuries, or find his scars.

He just held Billy’s eyes a beat longer, then looked down at the map still spread out on the table between them. “Planning a beach trip?”

Billy almost laughed, surprising himself, and shook his head. “Call it moonlighting. Helping out with a police investigation.”

The need to prove himself was dumb, especially to someone he’d never meet again. He’d never been the guy who cared about what other people thought. Not until recently. Look at me, I’m still a useful member of society. You’ll regret benching me.

Alex didn’t keep looking at the map, sitting back against the booth. “I’m sure they’re grateful for the help. There are a lot of places in the city that simply aren’t safe anymore.” That caught Billy’s attention, a swelling pause that hung in the air. “And it’s not just violent crime, although that gets all the attention. We lose emigrants every year, which shrinks the tax base further. People are frightened, and the Defense Corps can’t fix that.”

It was one thing for Billy to say it, another thing entirely for a civilian to look at him as though he was personally responsible. “The PPDC is doing what it’s meant to do,” he replied hotly. “We haven’t had a city-level attack in three years, and that was barely a minute before Goliath took it down.”

Alex’s hands flattened against the table, but his body didn’t move. “There’s always collateral damage, especially right along the coast. The Shatterdome tends to be isolated from all of that.” There was a flicker of some new fire in his eyes, one that sputtered out to be replaced by calm a heartbeat later. He clasped his hands on the table. “It’s not just the property damage either. Did you know that high school graduations in the state are down over forty percent? Who wants to go to school if the world is going to end before you finish?”

That made more sense than Billy liked to contemplate. Of course things had changed. Everyone knew that life was never going to go back to the way things had been. But part of him had assumed that the front lines were taking the brunt of it. That the strike groups fought so that everyone else didn’t have to worry, so that the fear could retreat into being background noise for everybody inside the lines. “I never thought about that,” he admitted.

“And now you have.” Alex’s eyes glinted in the light. He didn’t move but something about him had shifted, an intensity that seemed to draw the air out of the room. “So what do you plan to do about it?”

“Why are you asking me these questions?” Billy recoiled, caught in the uncertainty of the moment. Not quite confrontation, no longer entirely kind —what did Alex want from him? What answer did he need to hear?
“Because you look lost. And we help people find themselves again.” And then the tension bubble was gone, the background noise of the cafe rushing back in to fill the hollow silence that Billy had been imagining around them.

Alex patted down his pockets, just a guy again, and Billy rubbed his eyes to get rid of the fog. “Here. The card’s a dumb affectation, but they come in handy for moments like this.” He handed over a plain white business card, heavy stock, with his name and the address of his church printed below in tidy capital letters. “You should come to a service sometime. I think you’ll be surprised at how much clarity it can bring.”

And that just figured. This whole conversation, for a conversion attempt. How very fucking typical. Billy shook his head, tapping the card restlessly on the table. “No thanks. I’m Jewish. It tends to frown heavily on ‘any other gods before Me.’”

“It’s not about God.” Alex shook his head, rising from the booth. “It’s about reconnecting with your spiritual self. You’ve heard of Unitarians, and non-denominational groups,” he prompted, and Billy nodded. There was something about him, a calm reassurance and... and a feeling of capability that made Billy want to agree. Alex believed in what he was saying, at any rate.

So he didn’t agree, but he didn’t crumple up the card and toss it toward the garbage can, either, even when Alex didn’t actually finish his sentence. “Thanks. I’ll think about it.”

“Take care.” Alex’s smile was friendly when he turned to go. “We’ll see each other again.”

“Because that’s not creepy at all,” Billy muttered under his breath.

Once the cafe door closed behind Alex, Billy took another look at the card. He glanced at the address and ran his finger down the map, looking for one street in particular. Wait. That... was interesting. More than interesting.

Exhaustion was creeping up behind his eyes again, the familiar warning. But he’d skipped out halfway through physio today, and had just spent an hour sitting (resting) and thinking... he had enough oomph left to do a couple more things before tackling the long drive back to the Shatterdome. Probably.

He folded up his map and tucked his phone away in his pocket. He still had Playa del Ray to check out, but now he had another stop to make first.

The sun was sinking into the ocean by the time Billy stopped the bike in the long, lingering shadows of the quiet street. One foot on the ground, he stayed seated and surveyed the church on the other side, the almost gothic spire soaring high above him. It looked too delicate to be real, the stone arches pierced through with stained glass windows, modern versions of buttresses rising up along the sides. An eerie light filtered through some of the windows picking out the oranges and blues of the glass.

More than half the height of a Jaeger, the building rose out of the residential neighbourhood like a jutting fang, the sunset reflecting gold and red off the tip casting a bloody illusion. A cloud slid across the sky and it was gone, only to spill bright down the side again when the light returned. The vast front doors opened, spilling yellow light across the sidewalk. A figure stood in the door, an indistinct robed black shape with the light at its back. Whoever it was looked out over the lawn, paused and stared directly in Billy’s direction. He shrank back into the shadows, counting on the distance and the growing darkness to block the view of his face. Just another tourist, indistinct in the dark, doing... tourist things. Nothing to see here. The figure stayed there for a moment longer,
Billy shook off the crawling itch that travelled up his spine. He was getting weird and morbid (his brain filled in Tommy’s line — *getting*?), and he had things to do.

Someone had put a shit-ton of money into the building, and not just on the avant-garde architectural design. Everything stank. Permits, land, the speed at which it had been constructed... And if it was that well-funded for the obvious things, what was going on behind the scenes?

It wasn’t a coincidence that, when he’d found the church’s address on his map, it lay at the epicentre of his other marks.

He slid his phone out of his pocket, guilt settling thick in his belly at the notice of two missed calls from Teddy. He’d apologize later.

Billy snapped pictures—the church, the street, the lit windows in the arcing spire above—anything that might end up being useful somehow. And then he filmed for a minute just for good measure. “Gotta remember,” he said quietly, counting on the phone’s mic to pick up his commentary. “See what I can find about the BuenaKai Church’s financials. Taxes are public, I think. Or they should be. If they’re completely clean, I will eat my helmet.”

He waited while the sun finished setting, the bike cooling between his thighs and a damp chill settling in around his bones. Nothing interesting happened, except a couple of lights going off and then a couple more going on—someone moving offices, or a janitor on rounds. Sliding in the back door and poking around wasn’t going to be an option. If the girls were in there somewhere, it would take half a day or more just to look in every room.

Brute force and panic weren’t going to win him this one. He was going to have to be strategic.

Surfridge might not be abandoned wasteland anymore, but the newly-built industrial park wasn’t exactly welcoming to the casual visitor. The old chain-link fence still surrounded the property, strands of barbed wire rusting away across the top. There was a driveway, a traffic gate down across it and a bored security guard sitting in the booth, but Billy didn’t have an easy excuse to talk his way in. Not this time around.

Further down the road, through a section unlit by streetlights, around the corner with the ‘restricted area’ sign, and he found the gap in the fence right about where America had said it would be. Not that he’d explained why he’d been asking, but she hadn’t asked, either. One fewer person he’d have to lie to later.

He parked the bike out of the way and piled some brushwood against it, leaving it half-hidden from the casual observer. Good enough. There didn’t seem to be anyone around, no bobbing flashlights of security goons on their rounds, the only engine sounds a distant rumbling from the highway. A faint haze of light hung over the space, spotlights on the fronts of some of the long, low buildings adding to the overall gloom. The fence curled back from a hole just big enough for him to slip through, a dark shape against the night.

The area was bigger than he’d really realized at first, streets crossing each other, bisecting lawns where houses had once stood, their foundations cracked and overgrown with scrub and weeds.
Most of the light was concentrated to the east, further in from the beach, and he headed toward it, keeping to the shadows as much as he could. There didn’t seem to be anywhere to mount security cameras in here, the empty space not punctuated by as much as a palm tree, but there was no sense in going out of his way to attract attention.

Even walking at a reasonable pace, though, his breath started to catch in his chest. The first warehouse loomed up in front of him and he ducked in behind it, paused to gauge his options. The adrenaline rush from sneaking in was starting to wear off. The longer nothing happened, the more his energy would keep sinking. He had a protein bar shoved in his pocket, one of the last from Tommy’s little break-out escapade, and Billy unwrapped it and shoved it in his mouth. It was better than the shakes, even if it really didn’t taste anything like actual chocolate.

He was taking care of himself, and he was doing just fine without Tommy nagging at him. Or Teddy doing that thing where he was watching Billy and frowning, or worse yet, pouting. Like he thought Billy couldn’t see him, didn’t know he was worrying.

Teddy had said they were a team.

Except that as far as the world was concerned, now Billy was nothing more than dead weight.

Time to prove them all wrong.

The first building had a sign out front that identified it as the pharmaceutical company’s warehouse. He managed to boost himself up on one of the sills, got a glimpse through the barred window and the safety glass, but even with his little LED flashlight, all he could see was darkness. The next window was a bit better, the reflected light showing him pallets of boxes on shelves... and nothing else exciting. If someone was holding prisoners there, or doing secret experiments, it was down in a basement or in a secret room, and nothing he could see through any of the windows suggested either.

It didn’t prove anything, but it didn’t disprove it, either. Human-kaiju hybrids? More like morning sickness drugs and insulin.

He tucked the flashlight back in his pocket and moved along down the road, hauling out his phone quickly to check the map. It was hardly accurate anymore, based on one of those ‘explore your local ghost town’ websites that had been so popular a decade ago, but at least it gave him a sense of where to look next.

Two blocks down, one over. Three cars were parked outside the next building: another long, low warehouse, this one without windows at all. Yellow halogens illuminated the front of the building, spotlights to catch any motion. The crunch of Billy’s feet on the gravel rang too loud in his ears. Keeping low, he darted across the street and into the shadow at the side of the warehouse, pressed himself flat against the wall.

Voices rose and fell inside, the faintest possible hum of sound. Who, how many? There was no way to tell.

The first warehouse had had a sign out front, name and address, easy identification. This one had nothing, not even the glint of a street number on the wall. But the cars—he might find something there. Pressed close to the building, rough concrete plucking at the back of his jacket, he crept forward a few more feet, toward the cars. Toward the light.

Nondescript sedans like the gray and green ones in front of the warehouse didn’t give him a whole lot to go on. The license plates were a better bet. Two were generic white California plates, but one was one of those custom black jobs, and —more interesting again—it was decorated with the
swirling, jagged-point symbol that had been blazoned across Alex Wilder’s red and orange scarf. BuenaKai.

A door opened. Billy stopped moving, flattened himself against the wall. More voices; two men, their words indistinct, and falling silent when they reached the path. “You go that way. Meet you back here in an hour.”

Security patrols? But why here when the only other authority figure he’d seen so far had been the sleepy guard at the driveway post? Did the church own this warehouse? He’d assumed the BuenaKai’s property would be another chapel, but given the size of the church he’d just seen, money was hardly their problem.

Billy slipped his phone out of his pocket, swiped to turn on the camera. One step, another, he just needed to get a little further forward to get all three license plates in the same shot.

He snapped the picture, the flash brilliant against the dark. Damn! With any luck, no-one would notice it given how close he was to the floodlights. He held his breath until his lungs ached, eyes half-closed, listening. Nothing moved. There could easily be another door around the back; didn’t fire codes require two exits? Time to risk it.

Sliding back into the dark, Billy turned, took a couple of steps toward the rear of the building.

“You there!”

Fuck.

He took to his heels, not stopping to look. Footsteps crunched on the gravel behind him, the security patrol giving chase. He couldn’t outrun them on speed alone, not with his joints aching, his body exhausted and his lungs already burning. Turning, he veered off the road and leapt the ditch running behind the pharma warehouse. He stumbled, hit his knees, forced himself back up and kept moving.

The fence reared up in front of him, shouts to “stop!” coming from two guys behind him now. No ‘or I’ll shoot,’ thank God, but he wasn’t going to slow down or turn long enough to find out. The gap in the fence was too far to the east. He couldn’t make it without running right into their path.

Fine.

He and Tommy had done more, lived through worse. He needed Tommy in his head right now, hear his voice cursing out the monster of the month, draw on his strength to fuel Billy’s fight.

He didn’t have Tommy. He only had himself.

Broken or not, his body was going to have to do what he told it to.

Billy didn’t turn. He ran for the fence, grabbed the metal links, shoved his toes into the gaps and hauled himself up and up. Breath rasped harsh in his ears. Fingers snatched at his ankle and he kicked, making contact with something solid.

A string of shouted curses followed him as he hoisted himself over the top, the sagging barbed wire catching on Tommy’s jacket, on his jeans pockets, snagging tight. He wrenched himself free. Stitches popped, something gave.

He started to climb down the other side, the guard’s hand reaching through the wire to grab for his leg again. Billy pushed himself away from the fence and let go.

The earth came up to meet him faster than he’d expected. He ducked and rolled, felt the ground a
whole lot harder without Magnus’ armour in between him and the rocks. But he was up and on his feet, and running for the bike.

Billy hauled the motorcycle upright, flung himself across it and kicked it into gear while the guards were running down the length of the fence toward the gap.

He spun out, tires kicking up rocks and dust, and headed for the highway.

It should have hurt more; he was half-aware that it really should. He was going to feel *everything* tomorrow once the adrenaline wore off. But for now, the motor thrumming beneath him, the road open ahead and the bike eating up the tarmac at eighty miles an hour—he was goddamn *invincible* again.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Billy makes some decisions on his own.

Billy felt a lot less invincible and unbreakable by the time he’d signed the motorcycle back in and was slowly slinking his way back towards his quarters. It wasn’t just the bruising that was definitely developing along his side, or the cuts on his hands from the wire fence, or even the developing headache, but the bone-deep and brutal exhaustion that had settled deep into his bones the moment he’d stopped moving.

Resources? What were those? He’d used up every last ounce of motivation and willpower simply getting himself back onto base.

Still, he was almost there. He’d missed dinner and couldn’t bear the idea of hitting the cafeteria now, but he had snacks stashed in the room. That would get him through until morning. Assuming he could slip past the open ready room door without being spotted, mind you. Bare minimum, he needed five minutes to get back to the room and shower.

The tv was on, some movie with explosions, and he could hear Eli making running commentary on an action sequence as Billy crept by. There! A few more feet and he’d be around the corner, and wouldn’t have to explain to anyone where he’d been, why he’d been out, and what was going on with him. He didn’t have a good answer yet for that last one.

“Hey, dumbass.” And he hadn’t quite made it far enough. Billy hesitated at the sound of his brother’s voice, which gave Tommy enough time to catch up and smack the back of his head.

“Hey!” Billy recoiled, affronted. “What was that for?”

Tommy’s frown was irritated rather than truly pissed. “Not telling me shit.”

“I can’t take an afternoon away from here without checking in with you? Are you my brother or my jailer?”

Tommy fell in step with him as Billy started moving again, keeping pace and not letting Billy duck away. “What the fuck is wrong with you today? I swear the coma gave you brain damage.”

Normally it wouldn’t matter. On a normal day he’d take what Tommy was handing him and serve it back with an extra helping of mockery for his troubles. But nothing about today had been normal, and Billy’s sanity was hanging by that last single thread that remained of his ability to cope. “Go to hell,” he said instead, but without the energy for any real heat.

“When I do, you’re coming with me.”

“If that was meant to be endearing, you missed the mark by a mile.”

“More of a threat.” Tommy grabbed his arm and stopped Billy in his tracks halfway down the hallway to their quarters. “Teddy told me about this hero quest you’re on. Was that why you were off base this afternoon?”
Tommy’s face was so closed off that Billy couldn’t read him at all. Fear raced through him, worse than when he’d heard the security guards coming for him, worse than bracing for battle. A sour lump formed in his throat, his headache getting worse.

“Yeah, kind of,” Billy admitted, only a little bit of the truth. Cassie came down the hall but kept moving on, giving them a look of concern as she walked by. Billy waited until she was mostly out of earshot and shook Tommy’s hand off his arm. “I wanted to check out some things.”

“Kind of,” Tommy mocked him. “Some things. You’re not James Bond, dipshit. There’s nothing you have clearance for that I don’t, so pull your head out of your-”

He was cut off by Cassie’s yelp. Billy snapped his head around and spotted her, standing in front of her door, a dozen or more helium balloons floating out, bumping into her, trailing ribbons down like a swarm of mylar jellyfish. He couldn’t see in her room from where he stood, but every time one more floated by her, a handful of others appeared at the doorway to take its place. She pointed down the hall at them. “I hate you both.”

“I was off base! I wasn’t even here!”

“Nice try. Like you don’t do everything together.” Cassie pulled her multitool from her belt and cranked open the small blade, stabbing it violently into the balloons as they bumped and buffeted her, eventually fighting her way through the falling shreds of latex and mylar until her door slid closed behind her.

“How many balloons did you blow up?” Billy asked, distracted from the fight they were almost having.

The muffled sound of popping made it through to the now-quiet hallway.

“They come in packages of two hundred. Half an hour with a helium tank, and away we go. Kate helped, for the record, since you fucked off without telling anyone.”

And they were back on that. “Why do you even care? It’s not like you were sitting around on base doing nothing. You guys were all out in the Jaegers.” That was skirting too close to home, the reminder shooting pain straight into his chest.

“I care.” Tommy stepped around to make eye contact again, get up in his face, his green eyes bright and hard. “Since when do you hide shit from me?”

Billy lied. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Everything about this was hurting: knowing something Tommy didn’t, watching their connection fade a little bit more each day. Every time Tommy drifted with Teddy, every time Billy went off on his own – nothing would ever be the same, and now he was never going to get the chance to fix it properly. He was driving a stake into both of their hearts with his own two hands.

I’m so sorry. I’ve failed you too.

“Bullshit you don’t. I know you, and right now you’re sitting on something important. You don’t want to tell me, fine. But at least have the stones to admit that to my face.” Tommy stabbed a finger at Billy’s chest, his jaw set and working.

He’d arrived at the moment of choice, the idea he’d been running away from since this morning’s revelation.

What would Tommy do if he knew Billy was only here on borrowed time?
Once he heard Billy was going to be sent away?

He’d self-destruct worse than he had when Billy was out cold.

Fine. Another distraction. A different secret. One that meant Billy didn’t have to say the words out loud. They stuck in his throat anyway, shooting spikes into his voicebox. He wouldn’t be able to get it out even if he wanted to. I’m too broken. I’m never coming back.

Tommy held his gaze steady, not letting him pull away. Prickles of unshed tears started up in the corners of Billy’s eyes and he drew in a deep breath, deep as he could, to try and push them all away. “Yeah,” he said finally.

The hurt that lanced through Tommy’s eyes was too much, and in that moment Billy knew he would never, ever be able to break Tommy’s heart for real. Let them do it. When they transfer me, I’ll make them say it. I’m not going to do their dirty work.

“I’ve been working with Nate. And with the pons rig, for about a week now.” The words tumbled out of him faster, truth used to cover up another, far worse reality. “We’re trying to get me used to drifting again. But Tommy—the first try didn’t go so well. And I didn’t want to say anything until I had the hang of it again.” Because I thought my mind was the problem I had to beat. I didn’t realize it was my body that was the failure point. “Just in case it didn’t work.”

“You and Nath?” Tommy burst into motion, his hands against Billy’s shoulders and shoving him backwards. “The fuck, Billy? Does Teddy know too? Am I the only one you’ve been lying to?”

Billy stumbled back a step, his hands snapping up into guard before he realized his reflexes had taken over. “I haven’t lied! I just didn’t tell you about it. I haven’t told anyone.”

“You’re lying by omission is still lying. I’m the one who used to get grounded for that shit, remember? I wrote the book on not-talking.”

“Sure doesn’t feel that way right now,” Billy snapped back, finding more solid ground beneath his feet. “It would take a muzzle to make you shut up.”

Detente. Billy stared at Tommy and Tommy stared back at him. A breath, another, and the hurt in Tommy’s eyes faded, jammed back into a box somewhere inside his head, not to be looked at again. “I can’t believe you went in the simulator without me, you unbelievable asshole.”

The fight was over. Billy dropped his hands, shook his head. “I haven’t even made it to the simulator yet. Just the headset, and I can still only hold it for a couple of minutes before something fritzes out.”

And now none of it matters at all.

Tommy stood down as well, brushing past Billy to head for the door to their quarters. “I’m coming with you when you go from now on.”

And do what? Billy couldn’t drift with him, not now. Not ever again. The moment Tommy got inside his head, he’d know everything. “I told you, I’m nowhere near ready for the simulator.” And what was the point in trying anymore?

“That’s not the point. I’ve got a stake in this too, or are you forgetting that you have a co-pilot? What happens to you and me affects the entire strike group. This isn’t just about you.” Tommy keyed the door lock and it slid open. He waited for Billy to catch up, his hand on the doorjamb. “That, and I owe Nate a punch in the teeth.”
Billy slid past him and headed in to the room, the shower beckoning with its sweet siren song. “It’s just about the strike group?”

He could hear Tommy’s eye roll behind him before he turned around and caught the tail end of the gesture. “Yeah, just that. Because I’ve disowned you for being so dumb.”

That was better, sort of. The rest of Billy’s secrets still gnawed a hole in his gut, bile that was consuming him from the inside out. “I’m sorry, for what that’s worth.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tommy grumbled. “Tell it to someone who cares.” He looked at Billy, scanned him from head to toe, the scratches on his hands, whatever dirt and dust were on his face, his clothes. He took in the bedraggled mess of his brother, every joint aching, bruises growing under his skin, and Tommy’s brow furrowed one last time.

“What is that my jacket?”

Billy dreamed that night; another black and tremulous thing filled with images of dark warehouse windows, black tentacles rising from the ocean, and a stained-glass spire dripping with blood that soared into the moonlit sky.

He struggled into wakefulness when the alarm went off, dragged his ass down to the cafeteria for breakfast, every muscle and joint in his body hating him for his expedition the day before. There were at least four messages from Michael and Faiza on his phone, which he deleted without listening to.

He couldn’t avoid everyone. He and Tommy were the first ones to the table, Tommy still giving him the hairy eyeball, but it wasn’t long before the others started filtering in. Kate brushed a hand along his shoulders and exchanged a look with Tommy that definitely meant they’d been talking about him. But she didn’t say anything, and either did Teddy when he slipped in beside Billy, his tray loaded high.

So Billy nursed his coffee and let the swelling noise of a hundred conversations wash over him. He watched Kate and Cassie laugh at one of Scott’s stories, memorized the way Eli and America’s voices rose and fell in their argument, soaked in the warmth of Teddy’s thigh resting solid against his.

And he tried to fix every single one of them in his memory, to keep always.

Trying to identify the cars from the warehouse didn’t give him much of anything. Without access to the police computer systems, he couldn’t exactly run license plates. On a hunch, he cropped the photo down to just the black church plate, did an image search on that.

That netted him more pictures of the car, a couple of traffic cams, and – jackpot. A newspaper clipping with a wide-angle picture of a church gathering, and a familiar blonde woman getting out of the car. She’d been at that first press conference, her arm around the grieving mother.

Her name was Leslie Dean, according to the caption, and she was dressed in the same red robes as the other BuenaKai monks.

The name didn’t mean anything to him, but he added it to his growing file anyway.

He should have gone to physio. He didn’t. He did go to the gym instead, to push himself through the exercises on his own.
Billy was an hour in, his hair damp with sweat and his shoulders aching, when Michael appeared at the door to the weight room. Billy didn’t stop his workout, meeting Michael’s gaze with a raised chin and a challenge of his own. A beat, then two.

Michael turned and left, the door closing quietly behind him.

It didn’t feel like much of a victory.

The day’s manoeuvres had been scheduled to go through the afternoon, but the alarms for the bay doors were already blaring by the time Billy was on the move again. “Goliath’s stabilizers fried again,” Tommy bitched, stripping off his sweaty undershirt. “So the NATO commander got pissy and called a halt while the brass have a slap-fight.”

“Could be worse,” Teddy said on his way towards the showers, a towel wrapped low around his hips. He glanced back and caught Billy admiring his shoulders and the slope of his back, then looked away. “At least we end up with a lunch break.”

“How can anyone enjoy a good grouchy session with Mr. Ray-of-sunshine adding his two cents in all the time?” Tommy had started speaking while Teddy was in the locker room, leaning precariously back on the bench to continue yelling at him through the open door.

Teddy’s hand reappeared in the doorway, middle finger up.

Billy couldn’t help the laugh, even as his heart ached. He knew he was getting hopelessly maudlin when it seemed like he was even going to miss the gym-socks-and-old-sweat smell of the prep room. For fuck’s sake. “When are they projecting you’ll be back out?”

Tommy shrugged expansively. “Magnus is ready to go whenever. It all depends on whether Tony can get Goliath back up to speed, or they decide to move on with only three Jaegers. Not to be all silver-lining about it—” he raised his voice, shouting back to the other room, where the shower was already running, “but it does mean you can’t sneak down to Nate’s chamber of horrors without me.”

“I wouldn’t!” Billy objected, but Tommy glared at him. “Fine, maybe I would. But it’s not like you can do anything other than watch me sit there with a rubber hand on my head for half a minute.”

Tommy just rolled his eyes. “Sometimes you can be so dumb that I seriously question how we can be related.” He whipped his stanky briefs at Billy’s head. In the moment it took Billy to kick them over to the other side of the room, Tommy had exited through the same door as Teddy.

Three men enter, two men leave. It was probably supposed to be a sign from the universe. There was some slim comfort in knowing that he wasn’t going to be the reason Tommy and Teddy lost their partnership. At least that was one less thing to feel guilty about, even as he heaped more on his own shoulders.

Billy turned to go, making it out the door and halfway down the hall before that same guilt pulled him back. Groaning at himself, Billy leaned against the wall and waited for Tommy to find him.

Teddy had been the first under the showers but Tommy was the first out, shaking his wet hair all over Billy like a bleach-blond golden retriever. Clock still ticking relentlessly in the back of his mind—how much longer do I actually have here—Billy didn’t even try to hit him.
They hadn’t made it very far down the hall before the door opened and closed again, and he heard Teddy’s footsteps coming up behind. They were easy to recognize, the particular beat of his gait one of the pieces of *I know you* that Billy had woken up with. “Speaking of lunch,” he drew even with them, his smile for Billy fainter than before. “Are you heading down now?”

“Not right away. I’ve got to go see Nate. For a thing.” The wounded look that flashed into Teddy’s eyes then—the knowing one in Tommy’s, because what one of them knew, the other saw—that stabbed into Billy worse than anything. Then softer, because he needed to apologize and make it better but there was no clear way how, “it’s no big deal.”

“Sure.” A crease had appeared between Teddy’s eyebrows and his jaw twitched like he was trying not to say something, or maybe trying not to frown. “Mind if I tag along? Now that the beans have been officially spilled and all. I’d like to help, if I can.” Teddy’s eyes darted over to Tommy and they locked gazes, the air rushing out of Billy’s lungs.

Billy shook his head. The thought was too much, sitting there in the chair, his brain waves spooling out across Nate’s projection screen for all of them to see. *I can’t stand both of you looking at me like that, like a project or a problem or like I just need a hug. It’s so much more complicated than you could ever understand.*

“I don’t- that is, it really isn’t a big deal. It won’t take long. And the fewer witnesses to my abject failure the better, frankly.” He tried to make it a joke, but Teddy wasn’t laughing. “Save us seats in the caf?”

He didn’t have to turn around to know the expression that would be on Tommy’s face to go along with the hiss of breath, but fuck it! Billy had every right to say who could or couldn’t be here during what was essentially another rehab session and even if Tommy had pushed his way in...

It was *complicated*, that was all, and his brain and body were both too bruised and aching to figure out the edges of why.

“Sure,” was all Teddy said. Billy hated himself the moment it was done, Teddy already turning and walking away with his hands shoved deep into his pants pockets.

Tommy slapped the back of his head and Billy yelped. “What was that for?”

“Don’t give me that. You know exactly what that was for. Idiot.” He capped it off with a snort of disgust.

“Don’t start.”

“Don’t start.”

“I’ve only just begun, little brother. Count on it.”

Nate was obviously surprised when Tommy walked in with Billy, shooting Billy an incredulous look, but he shrugged, pushed an extra chair Tommy’s way, and got on with things. Until he had the pons rig in his hands, Billy sitting in front of him. Nate looked back and forth between the twins, and Billy’s spine tightened with the incoming rush of dread.

“Since you’re both here,” Nate suggested, “why don’t we try adding Tommy into the test? Your issue is oversensitization, and the whole purpose of two pilots is to split the neural load. I’d like to see those readings, actually.”

A week ago, two days ago, Billy would have been clawing at the walls to get this chance, to re-establish the connection that even now was slowly fading from his mind. Except now, how could he? There was no way to hide. The grief and anger permeated too many of his thoughts, the
countdown in his mind a burning brand across his neurons.

*If we drift, he’ll know.*

And then what would happen? It would break Tommy’s heart almost as much as Billy’s. Or if it didn’t, if he was fine with it because Teddy had already filled that space in his soul, then Billy would be crushed and die under the weight of that loss.

Worse—or maybe not worse, but as well—there’d be no time to fix anything. Not before Tommy had to get back in Magnus this afternoon and drift with Teddy. Then everything would be over between Billy and Teddy forever.

Because if Teddy knew Billy was all but gone, why would he even consider trying to keep their relationship alive? There was no knowing where the PPDC would send him. Alaska was the closest possible option, and there was every chance that Billy was going to end up being mustered out... and sent home. New York, literally the other side of the country, as far away from Teddy as he could get.

He was going to lose Teddy once the truth came out. He had to hold on to what he could beg, borrow and steal just a little while longer. With salvaged scraps of happiness all he’d have left to live on for the rest of his days... he just wanted a little more time.

“Not today,” Billy pleaded, shaking his head. Tommy leaned back in his chair, acting like he didn’t care one way or the other, but his eyes were fixed on Billy and Nate. “I’m wiped out. I don’t think I can handle juggling someone else’s memories at the same time as my own right now. Tomorrow?” he offered, and Tommy’s shoulders settled down from around his ears. “Once I’ve had the chance to get some more sleep. I think I might be coming down with something.”

That part was a lie, but he knew what he looked like. The mirror had shown him the deep bags under his eyes and the pale cast underneath his skin.

Nate seemed to buy it, even though he frowned as he arranged the pons rig on Billy’s head. “If you’re sure. I still think it would make things easier.”

“I’m sure,” Billy insisted. Nate finished his prep, counted him down, and flipped the switch.

On impulse, Billy reached out and Tommy’s fingers curled into his. Billy held Tommy’s gaze as he slipped into driftspace, the stars falling from heaven to surround them both. Even like this, it was easier. In the moment, in the quiet, he wasn’t alone.

Teddy wasn’t in the cafeteria by the time Billy got down there. Joe had given Billy one of those penetrating looks and suggested he try the maintenance bay. Billy had been going to go anyway, but the level of ‘I’m disappointed in you, son’ that seemed to be rolling off of Joe —when he and Billy barely knew each other, for crying out loud, and Joe was not his father—was enough to send Billy back out the door anyway.

He was on his way down in the elevator when one of his alerts sounded. Checking his phone got him the bright red flash of a news update. Amber Alert, Klara Prast. Another kid who fit the profile, another disappearance on his watch.

And at least one of the guards who’d chased him away from the unmarked warehouse in Surfridge was connected to the BuenaKai Church.

The same church that had members comforting the parents of the missing kids, whose financial records were not, it turned out, available on the public record, and who had sent Alex Wilder to
keep an eye on him.

The sinking sensation in Billy’s gut wasn’t from the elevator grinding to a halt. By the time the door slid open, he’d made up his mind.

First point. He had no future left with the Jaeger program.

Second point. All Carol had done when he’d broken restriction before was shout a lot and park his butt on base for a few days, and most of that had been because of the media attention.

There wouldn’t be any media this time.

He couldn’t get off-base during the day. It would have to wait until tonight, ideally around the security shift change. The church had been open late the night before and it would be open late again. This time he’d get inside, do some proper reconnaissance, and get the truth.

There was one important thing—or, make that two—that he had to do before he left. And both of them revolved around Teddy.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Billy makes some good choices, and some dumb ones. Luckily the good choices involve getting naked.

Billy found Teddy in the maintenance bay just like Joe had suggested. Scott and Cassie’s Jaeger was still hooked up to about a dozen leads, the opening in the floor sitting at waist-level. A railing surrounded most of the hole, painted olive-green and toning in with the industrial gray of the rest of the space.

Teddy leaned against it with his back to the door, the olive-drab and black of his uniform making him look like part of the base. He had a tablet in his hand as he scrolled through schematics and power readouts, Magnus’ silhouette bright on his screen. The door slid closed behind Billy and Teddy turned, already calling across the open space. “Kitty? I wanted to ask about—” He stopped.

There should have been a smile on his face when he saw Billy. Not this time. Teddy wasn’t frowning, exactly, but he rearranged his face into an expression that was carefully blank, and he waited for Billy to cross the concrete floor and join him.

Metal clanged against the ground and techs shouted somewhere behind Stinger’s massive yellow-plated arm, the reverb not helping the nerves that were quickly frazzling away inside Billy. Every step that he took with Teddy just standing and watching —each one was a beat in the same rhythm. *I screwed up.*

But he could fix it. It wasn’t too late for that. *Fix it so that I can break it all over again.* Billy pushed that reminder aside, tuned it out, shoved it into the box in the back of his mind that grew bigger with every feeling that he tried to ignore.

“But I hurt your feelings, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Hey,” he said, stopping before he reached Teddy’s side.

Teddy turned off the tablet and tucked it under his arm, shoving his hands into his pants pockets. “Hi.”

“About earlier—” Billy started to say, his attempt at an apology interrupted.

“Heads up!” The cry echoed from the catwalk above them, followed by more metallic sounds and a spanner falling past, down through the opening in the floor. It clanged off Stinger Goliath’s legs and landed noisily twenty feet or so below.

“Fuck,” came the resigned sigh from somewhere above their heads.

“Come on.” Teddy gestured with his head toward an alcove away from the door, a small locker area with a bench and chairs. It wasn’t exactly soundproofed, but at least they weren’t likely to get hit with tools. Unless he’d really, really pissed Teddy off.

Billy dropped into one of the chairs, his aching frame glad for the relief of sitting. At least for a little while. “About earlier,” he repeated, looking up at Teddy. Teddy leaned against the lockers instead of sitting, his hands still in his pockets. “I hurt your feelings, I know. I’m sorry.”
“It’s fine.” Teddy shook his head, some of his hair flopping across his forehead. Billy needed to stand up, to brush it aside, to make contact somehow and prove – to himself – that things would actually be fine. He didn’t. “I get it. Tommy’s your brother—he’s your twin, for crying out loud. Of course you’d want him there with you.”

And not me, the rest going unsaid.

“It’s not that.” Billy sunk his chin into his hands and sat there for a moment. “I didn’t tell you or Tommy about the pons tests because I didn’t know what was going to happen. I still don’t. And I didn’t want to start problems if Nate’s plan didn’t work.”

“So instead you decided not to say anything at all.” That wasn’t fair! Surely Billy was allowed some things that were private. But then, that wasn’t the real issue. Teddy raised his head to meet Billy’s gaze, his face half in shadow, his body tight. “I thought that things would get easier as you got better, but something doesn’t feel right. I know that you know it too. We’re closer physically but we’re farther apart than we were at the start. It’s the same with you and Tommy.”

The bench poked hard corners into Billy’s back and he fought the urge to shift around until he got more comfortable. He deserved the irritation. “Growing pains,” he suggested and hated himself for it. “We’re trying to get used to everything all over again. You guys had just gotten into a good rhythm when I woke up and threw a wrench into it.”

Teddy shook his head. “That’s not even remotely true, and you know it.”

“But things aren’t the same anymore.” What ‘things’? Try everything. “And as soon as we figure out a new normal, it’s all going to turn upside down again. I’d hoped that Nate would have an easy answer, but he doesn’t.”

And any day now I’m going to be reassigned.

The truth he hadn’t confessed to Tommy was right there on his lips. Telling Teddy first would fix the balance—one secret for each of them. The words stabbed anchors into his tongue instead, keeping themselves inside.

“It was supposed to be something that I could do on my own,” Billy confessed that part instead. “The pons trials, the missing kids-some things to prove I can still do something useful. That I can be useful here, and not just a sad sack of dead weight.” The last words came out in a rush, unrehearsed and unintentional.

Something in it triggered an equal something in Teddy, though, and he crossed the space between them to sit on the bench beside Billy. He dropped down easily, his movements so graceful and smooth that Billy yearned for him—to touch him, to be him—and he ran one hand carefully down Billy’s upper arm. “You are not dead weight,” Teddy told him firmly, killing the self-pity before it could start. “So knock that off right now. I’m mad at you for not telling me, when I thought we trusted each other. This is the kind of thing partners are supposed to be there for.”

“That’s fair. I am sorry.”

“I’ll say,” Teddy grumbled. But he glanced sidelong at Billy and bumped him with his shoulder, a gentle point of contact that suggested his apology had been accepted after all.

“One request,” Teddy said after a minute or two of quiet.

“Anything.”
“Stop turning off your phone?” Billy was ready to bite back, his hackles rising at the same time as the guilt and claustrophobia came flooding back- but Teddy’s eyes were shining, and the corners of his lips were turned up in a wry smile. “Tommy gets really bitchy when he can’t even yell at your voice mail.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Billy grumbled, sliding down until his head rested comfortably on Teddy’s arm, his hand drifting higher on Teddy’s thigh. “He can suck it up.”

“He worries about you.”

“Yeah, I got that part.” The rise and fall of Teddy’s chest, the faint beat of his heart, the warmth of his thigh under Billy’s hand – each one alone was more than enough to make his mind settle on much better ways to spend their time. “I wish he’d let it go. I’m not hovering at death’s door anymore.”

Teddy shrugged, his arm moving under Billy’s cheek. “It’s hard to shake off a habit like that. But do you really want him to? Maybe we’re coming from different places on this—but the idea of having people looking out for me, who think I’m worth protecting? That feels an awful lot like love. And obnoxious as he is about it, your brother loves you a lot. That’s why he stresses out.”

There was an opening there that common sense insisted Billy shouldn’t take. He was having a reckless kind of day, and ran with it anyway. “What about you?”

Either Teddy deliberately misunderstood or he was avoiding the answer, frowning down at him instead. “Do I worry about Tommy?”

“How about me. Anymore.”

Okay, so it was a dumb question. Teddy didn’t need to side-eye him quite that hard. “Stop doing stupid things, and maybe I’ll have the chance not to.”

More clanging and shouting came from across the bay and the clamps around Stinger Goliath started to open, the mechanized platform underneath starting to shift the Jaeger back out towards the Shatterdome proper. Teddy watched the activity for a moment before pulling himself to standing. “Looks like we’re back on.” He leaned down instead of running off immediately. He cupped the back of Billy’s head in his hand, and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I’ll see you later?”

“Okay, so it was a dumb question. Teddy didn’t need to side-eye him quite that hard. “Stop doing stupid things, and maybe I’ll have the chance not to.”

Teddy kissed him again, lingering on his mouth. Offer understood and accepted? “I won’t be.” It seemed so.

Billy watched him leave, then sagged back against the bench with a groan. Had anything actually been resolved? He still wasn’t sure. Maybe they’d skirted a little closer to some kind of answer.

It was fine, everything was fine. The PA system blared out a call for all Rangers to report, and Billy pushed himself to his feet. A few hours in LOCCENT, a long hot shower, and then seize the moment. Before he ran out of moments at all.

Billy stood in the hall outside Teddy’s door, unaccountably nervous. There was no reason for it. Teddy had invited him, they’d messed around already (even though it hadn’t been awesome), he’d showered, shaved, was even wearing cologne for once. And his heart was still thumping in his chest like he was knocking on the door to ask Teddy to prom.
Grow up.

He pushed the button instead of typing in the code himself, and a moment later the door slid open. Teddy stepped back and let him in. He’d changed into jeans and a t-shirt, the lack of uniform almost making him seem naked, armour-less and vulnerable. His hair curled against the back of his neck, still damp and a little too long for regulation.

Billy stepped close. Teddy smelled bright and clean, of soap and aftershave, and when Billy reached up to kiss him, his lips were warmer than anything.

There was nothing to hold him back now, no resentment left in him anymore. Billy was out of the running, and it had nothing to do with Teddy after all.

From the moment he’d been hurt, Magnus had stopped being Billy’s to lose.

And with all that drama suddenly so inconsequential, Billy had never wanted anyone in his life as badly as he wanted Teddy in that single moment. He’d wasted too much time already.

“I need to make things up to you,” Billy murmured against Teddy’s lips. Teddy’s hands fell to Billy’s hips and tugged him closer, his kiss turning from something careful and searching to fierce.

“You don’t need to,” Teddy replied, that husky warmth rolling underneath his voice. “But I’m certainly not going to stop you.”

Any minute now something was going to go wrong. It was inevitable. But the door didn’t burst open, no calls came over the PA system. Billy set his fingertips against Teddy’s chest and prodded him back toward the bed. Teddy went, laughing, graciously allowed Billy to topple him backwards to land entwined on the single bunk.

There, he wanted this: this feeling of Teddy underneath him, his thigh between Billy’s legs. The wanting broke over him in a surge. Billy laced his fingers between Teddy’s and tugged his hands up, pinned them against the pillow above his head.

Teddy went, and Billy bit his way down the firm curves of muscle along his arms, tucked his face down in the crook of Teddy’s neck and breathed him in, his hands, his mouth, his senses already full to bursting.

Teddy wiggled his hands teasingly, bit at Billy’s lower lip and kissed away the bright sting. “You’re going to have to bulk up some more if you want to really pin me down,” he suggested, the light in his eyes dancing.

“Is this incentive to spend more time in the weight room? Because you make a convincing case.” Billy pushed himself up, pressed Teddy’s hands down into the pillow, caught the gasp and the way Teddy’s hips jerked. Heat pooled in his abdomen, Teddy’s cock a hard ridge nestled against his hip.

Kissing Teddy was electric and soothing at the same time, the itch and the scratch together. Billy groaned into his mouth, licked in, tasting mint and the faintest hint of coffee. Hot, his mouth was so hot inside; Billy needed—

He wanted to ride into that mouth, to feel Teddy’s tongue on him, Teddy’s lips around his cock. God! He wanted everything all at once and had to slow down for a minute, get his brain together. Teddy shifted, closed his thighs together to trap Billy’s in between, and all thoughts of planning fled his mind for good.
Billy rolled his hips, grinding down. Teddy groaned against his lips, and Billy laughed, low and intent. “You’re amazing. And I’m going to make you see God.”

Mine. I’m going to make you mine.

There was something desperately intoxicating in the way Teddy’s eyes went wide, his breath hitching. Teddy worked his hands free and sat up, scrambling to grab the hem of Billy’s shirt and haul it up and off as Billy straddled his lap. The chill air hit his skin and for a moment Billy wanted to bail out, cross his arms over his skinny, scarred chest and pull his shirt back on-

But Teddy looked at him like he was something amazing, his hands solid on Billy’s hips, his pupils blown wide and his lips parted. He ran his fingertips gently across the largest of the raised white lines along Billy’s ribs, pressed his mouth to it like a benediction.

Fingers in his hair, Billy tugged slightly and tipped Teddy’s head back. The look Teddy gave him from under his lashes—open, wanting and needy—set a million gorgeous images screaming through Billy’s imagination. And yet kissing him still wasn’t right, Teddy’s hands on his hips not firm enough, his shoulders tight with strain.

“You’re holding back,” Billy murmured against his lips, hands tangled in Teddy’s shirt, trying to show him just how unnecessary his caution was.

Teddy’s fingers tightened on him, drew Billy’s hips in close. “I can’t help worrying,” he replied, the apology embedded in his voice. “You’ve been getting better, but what if-”

Billy laid his thumb across Teddy’s lips. “Then trust me. Trust that I know my own limits.”

Teddy nodded, drawing in a shuddering breath. Billy got his hands under the hem of Teddy’s shirt and pulled it off in an easy sweep, his thumbs finding Teddy’s nipples, pebbled and tight. Impulse took over and Billy sucked at Teddy’s mouth, drew his bottom lip between his teeth.

He bit down and Teddy made the most delicious groan, so Billy pulled back, tugging, and did it again. This time down his throat, scraping the edge of his teeth across the tendon, sending shudders through Teddy’s body.

Passion surged in, Teddy giving up on that rigid control. His hands moved restlessly on Billy’s back, his hips, his ass—and his kisses got more desperate. Billy dug in his nails and Teddy cried out, the hot sweep of his tongue pressing Billy’s lips apart.

“There’s the real you,” Billy exulted, memory flooding back in—the things they’d done and dreamed about doing to each other, the touches that had made Teddy come apart in his hands.

“What about this-” He popped the button on Teddy’s trousers, got his hand down between them, under the elastic of his briefs. Teddy rocked up against his hand, silk and steel, his cock a burning firebrand against Billy’s palm.

No – not so fast, not after the way Billy had embarrassed himself last time. He teased instead, danced his fingertips across the tip. He kissed Teddy, licked at the corners of his mouth, stroked at him with light pressure, the zipper pressing sharp against his wrist. Teddy ground up against him in what felt like desperate reflex, Billy’s weight pinning his thighs down to the mattress.

“Oh, I like this,” Billy murmured against Teddy’s lips. Teddy bucked and Billy closed his hand tight, didn’t move despite the amazing groan he made.

I’m gonna make him beg.
The power rush at the thought made his head swim. “I was never sure how much of what I remembered was fantasy and how much was actually you. Would you bottom for me?”

“That was definitely me,” Teddy replied, looking up at Billy with hungry eyes. “Yes. Hell yes.” His hands were on Billy again, his lips hot, the world narrowed down to this—the taste of Teddy’s mouth, Teddy’s cock jumping in Billy’s hand, the sweet gasps as Teddy chased the sensation Billy was dealing out in tiny doses.

“I’m going to do all kinds of filthy things to you,” Billy promised, closing his hand tight, just for a moment.

“Like what? And the talking – that’s a thing for you?” Teddy murmured the question against Billy’s mouth, his breath mint-sweet.

Billy flushed hot, not that Teddy would be able to tell the difference. “Yeah. It’s definitely a thing. Problem?”

“Everything about you is a problem.” Teddy chased the kiss, catching Billy’s jaw in his hand, holding him steady while his tongue swept along Billy’s throat.

Teddy’s naked chest and shoulders was a landscape that Billy explored with fingertips, lips and teeth. Teddy chased Billy’s mouth with his own, running his hands along Billy’s ribs, teasing out the places that made him laugh, or better yet, gasp as the air was pulled from his lungs.

“You are beautiful,” Teddy murmured, Billy straddling his lap and Teddy’s hand closed around his aching cock. “Even if you can’t see it right now. You’re like condensed starlight.”

“You’re insane.”

“That’s entirely possible.” Teddy sank his fingers into Billy’s hair, pulled him down for a kiss, his tongue tucking in and tasting every corner. Their cocks slid against each other, skin against skin and kept tight between their stomachs. Pre-come slicked between them, Billy’s skin burning and too tight.

A moment later and Teddy had flipped them both over, settling down between Billy’s thighs. His hair stuck to his forehead, damp from sweat now as well. Billy tangled his fingers in it, his eyes locked on Teddy’s, falling into that perfect blue.

Teddy’s mouth sank down on him, taking him deep. Billy cried out, the sound ripping from his throat, the jolt of pleasure going straight to the base of his spine.

His hips jerked up despite himself and Teddy only hummed around him, a vibration that rippled, magnified everything else. Billy couldn’t look away from the sight of Teddy’s lips, stretched red and slick around his cock as he rose and fell.

Until it was too much, too much and not enough at the same time. “Stop?” Billy asked and hated himself for it. Teddy let Billy’s dick slip from his lips, spit gleaming on his lips and trailing on the head of Billy’s cock.

He could finish like this then suck Teddy off again – better this time – and it would be so very good-

But that hadn’t been the plan. Teddy had condoms and lube in the bedside table and Billy grabbed for them, kissing Teddy long and deep as he slicked his fingers up.

Billy knelt between Teddy’s thighs, a prayer and an answered plea all at the same time. He traced
slippery circles around the tight pucker of Teddy’s hole, Teddy’s leg crooked over his arm, everything else spit-slick and primal. “Are you ready?” Teddy groaned and nodded, his chest flushed pink. Billy pressed his fingers inside.

Fuck, fuck, heat and slick and Teddy so snug around him — Billy could feel his heart racing. Teddy’s cock jerked, jumped as Billy drew his fingers back out, and he took Teddy in his mouth. Just the tip at first, just in case — then more, so thick, the salt-sour taste exploding across his tongue.

Teddy arched and cried out, so goddamn tight that Billy almost abandoned the idea altogether.

Except Teddy wrapped his hand around Billy’s wrist and refused to let him pull away. “I want this. Want you. I just need a minute.”

They found their rhythm, Billy opening Teddy up, the heavy weight of Teddy’s cock pressing on his tongue. And when Billy pushed himself up over Teddy and slid inside—Teddy’s knees over his arms and his cock hard against Billy’s stomach, the tip wet and gleaming—the world tipped on its axis.

More than heat and the incredible tight pull-drag-

More than the white-hot intensity of sensation firing lightning bolts through his body-

He remembered.

Remembered doing this before, the overwhelming magnitude of being inside Teddy’s mind as well as his body in an endless feedback loop of pleasure and desire.

Stars wheeled behind his eyes and he forced them open, locked gazes with Teddy, his chest tight and tears prickling along his lashes. More than naked, deeper than vulnerable, Teddy saw him and Billy fell headlong.

Rippling echoes of connection

Feel me inside you as though I was you feeling me

Break me open and mark me; I’m yours

This is just the ghost of a drift; it’s not real

It feels real enough to me

He blinked and it faded, blue clearing from his vision. Teddy still moved with him, an echo of sensation filling Billy up as though Teddy were buried deep inside his body. He surged forward, pressed deep and caught Teddy’s mouth with his own, making a new bridge between them as the other slipped away.

The grand-ness, the hugeness of it all caught him with a clenching in his chest, an agony so sweet that he had to stop to catch his breath. His scars burned pink on his arms and his chest, a permanent reminder.

“Are you okay?” Teddy asked softly, hands on Billy’s shoulders, stroking down his arms. “Do you need to stop?”

Billy shook his head, hair flopping down over his eyes. Teddy pushed it aside and Billy turned into his touch, following the caress. “Not a chance,” Billy insisted. “Just give me a second.”
Whatever he thought he’d felt, it was over. Less than a memory, only a dream.

“You’re not allowed to have a heart attack.” Teddy pushed himself up, all but folding himself in half to kiss Billy, bite at his lip, the hot brand of his erection caught tight between them. “I refuse to be known for bottoming someone to death.”

He felt Teddy’s laughter vibrate through his own chest, and Billy tugged at his hair until Teddy tipped his head back. Their lips met again and tongues slid against each other, messy and breathless.

More; Billy thrust up into Teddy hard and fast, Teddy urging him on with his body and his voice, nails digging hard into Billy’s arms. Teddy moved with him, eyes on him, tight friction and heat—

Billy wrapped his hand around Teddy’s cock and stroked him, the triumphant laugh bubbling out of him when Teddy convulsed and cried his name. Come spilled hot over Billy’s hand as he worked Teddy through it, then the aftershocks, until Teddy stopped trembling and there was nothing left.

“Go,” Teddy urged him onward, grabbing for Billy’s ass and pulling him in.

Billy went, as deep as he could, held in Teddy’s arms and the fire at his core. Teddy could take it, was strong and solid enough for Billy to lose himself completely, chase the burning promise that was there—just there—

_Hah!_ He came, head bowed and his arms trembling, knees slipping on the sweat-soaked sheets.

He came deep inside Teddy, inside him and within him and part of him—and it was so much better than anything had ever been.

Muscles giving out, Billy slipped out of Teddy’s body and regretted it in an instant. He ditched the condom over the side of the bed and collapsed into Teddy’s arms. Head cushioned on Teddy’s chest, he closed his eyes and listened to the rapid beat of Teddy’s heart, the rise and fall of his breathing.

The world was warm and smelled like Teddy. Billy’s limbs draped around Teddy, leg over his hip, arm falling across his waist, His own heart slowed, pulsed in time to the sound in his ear; synchronized. A vague sense of propriety nudge him to suggest cleaning up, but he ignored it and the faint whisper faded away. He could float like this forever, lost in Teddy’s skin, the tickle of hair against his nose, the gentle trails Teddy’s fingers drew across his back.

“I like you like this.” Teddy’s voice was more of a rumble beneath Billy’s ear, a soft murmur that slipped in around the edges of his hazy almost-sleep. His fingertips kept up their caresses, drawing circles on his shoulder. “This is one of the few times I think I’ve ever seen you look peaceful.”

Billy smiled against Teddy’s chest. “Because usually I’m so warlike?” The single bed was too small, Billy’s back up against the wall and most of his weight on Teddy, who didn’t seem inclined to complain.

The reply he got was less of a laugh and more of a huff of breath, Teddy’s hand spreading out warm against his side. “At war with yourself, maybe. Stressed out. Anxious. But you’re not, right now. You’re soft-” Teddy pressed his lips against Billy’s forehead, “and sleepy,” and against his eyelids, “and maybe even happy,” he finished, a teasing, affectionate lilt in his voice.

“Shh, don’t jinx it.” Billy snuggled in closer, no pretence left or energy to try. He wanted to be held, and Teddy was holding him. Too simple a thing to matter so much—and yet.
Time slipped by again, or maybe it didn’t. He didn’t open his eyes to check. The only markers he had to judge by were the sweet and tender kisses that Teddy left on his forehead, his jawline, then traded back and forth lips to lips. The first half of the night disappeared, long after Billy had lost track of where he ended, and where Teddy began.

Peeling himself out of Teddy’s bed in the darkness was one of the hardest things Billy had ever done. But he’d run out of time. The church wouldn’t be moving people around in broad daylight, and waiting until the following night only gave them more time to set more plans in motion.

He could ask Teddy and Tommy for help — they were a team, right? Almost one, anyway. But the guys had exercises for the next two days, and they’d only get in trouble trying to follow him. No. This recon was one he had to do on his own. He could come back with the information he needed, and then he could ask them to help him work out a proper plan.

Billy gathered up his scattered clothes, and scribbled a quick note on paper from Teddy’s desk. *Going off base for the day; getting an early start on the ride. I’ll see you when you’re off duty.* And he added an *xoxo* at the bottom for good measure.

Teddy rolled over, made a soft noise in his sleep, and Billy hesitated. It wasn’t too late. He could still put everything down, crawl back into the little bed and stay.

No. He couldn’t let himself get used to that. And he had a job to do.

*I’m sorry.*

Billy washed as quietly as he could at the tiny sink, dressed, and slipped back out the door.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Billy tries some break and enter, and (naturally) gets more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

I feel the need to note that I originally wrote and posted drafts of this on another site in the summer, long before I saw the Runaways series currently airing on Hulu. So while there may be similarities, the characterizations of the Runaways cast are predominantly based on the comic series instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Klara Prast’s last-known-sighting was a glaring red light this time, almost too obvious in its neatness. Maybe the church was getting careless, maybe they were closing in on whatever it was they were trying to do, or—and he had to give the idea at least a little bit of mental air time—maybe someone was trying to frame them. It certainly wouldn’t be the first or even the tenth time blood libel had been used against a non-Christian mainstream religious sect.

Billy parked the bike around the corner from the towering spire, tucked it in out of sight between a delivery truck and a massive SUV. Tommy’s jacket hadn’t been a total lost cause, a couple of small nicks from the barbed wire lending it a bit of extra ‘character.’ Yeah. It gave him somewhere to put his hands, anyway, shoving them into the pockets as he stopped beneath the arching tree and watched the door.

Klara had been right here when she’d been taken. A twelve year old girl had crossed the street only yesterday, and vanished off the face of the earth.

Tall stained glass windows lined the walls and lights still flickered inside, despite the lateness of the hour. Or was it officially early morning yet? The huge red doors stood closed, spotlights picking out splashes of yellow on the sidewalk and stairs. The rest of it was dark, a silhouette of horn—or a fang—jutting up to pierce the black velvet of the sky.

He could still turn back. Get back on the motorcycle, sling the helmet on his head, and ride the long empty highway back to the Shatterdome.

And then what? Watch as more news reports pinged off his filters, more names of missing kids, more bodies turning up on the beaches? And all the time knowing that if he’d sacked up and had the courage to do something now, it could all have been avoided?

*If not me, then who? And if not now, when?*

William Maximoff was no coward.

The front door was a bad idea, no matter how satisfying it might be to rock up and knock, just to say, ‘hi, fuckers — turn over the kids.’ Outside of a Jaeger he didn’t exactly have the kind of
firepower he needed to back up that kind of approach. Back door it was.

Billy crossed the street, keeping out of the light from the streetlamps. The neighbourhood was a quiet one, only a few cars slipping by, the occasional burst of muffled music pulsing behind the window glass. An old man pushed a shopping cart full of bottles and cans down the other side of the street, muttering to himself. He didn’t seem to notice Billy, lost in his own private world.

Casing the place before meant that Billy had a basic idea where he was going this time, the small, unassuming back door set in the wall, framed by dumpsters and leftover building debris. Even the little sound from outside seemed to be muffled when he turned down the back alley.

The darkness curled around him, oppressive. Almost warm. Cut off from the ambient glow of the street, it was too dark to pick out much of anything. Billy fumbled for his keychain, for the familiar shape of the chibi Magnus Echo and the tiny LED flashlight strung on the ring. A faint, comforting red circle touched the ground when he set his thumb against the pad.

Something scuffed the ground behind him. Billy flinched and spun around, the red circle of light darting this way and that, trying to pick out a face, a hand, a gun-

A plastic bag caught the breeze and scraped gently on the concrete, bouncing and twisting away.

The alley was empty.

He was gearing himself up for drama with his overactive imagination, that was what he was doing. Billy shook it off.

He stepped up the two stairs, and reached for the door handle. He was half-prepared to find it locked, to have to come back later with Tommy and his lockpicks. But the latch sank down under his thumb and made a satisfying click.

And when Billy tugged on the handle, the door swung open.

The alley had smelled faintly of urine and garbage, the layered semi-sentient funk of the urban core. The hallway was fresh by contrast, the tinge of new paint and an acrid cleanser cutting up into his nose and drowning out the tang of the city in summer. It glowed faintly orange, emergency lights set into the wall above the back door.

He tucked his keys back into his pocket. Music was playing somewhere in the distance—or singing? Something faintly melodic and indistinct.

A sign on the wall suggested offices were down and to his right, washrooms to the left, a chapel somewhere above.

And somewhere in here, the information that he needed.

The offices seemed like the best bet. Even if there were still worshippers in the chapel, no-one in their right minds would be at work at this time of night. And if you were going to store secret plans for selling people or ritual murder, you’d want a computer and a filing cabinet. Right? Sure. Why not. It gave him somewhere to start.

Billy turned right, his footsteps quiet on the pale linoleum. Something scuffed behind him again.

There weren’t any bags in the hallway. Or any wind.

He whipped around, but there was no-one there.
“You’re losing your mind, Maximoff,” he murmured to himself, and let out a long slow breath.

He turned back, the hallway just as empty as it had been before. The first door loomed on the left, a black void in the already-dim corridor. Billy fumbled with his light, shone the faint red beam into the lingering dark. It picked out shapes: a desk, a computer monitor, the arm of a chair.

He stepped inside.

*It’s only an office.* The reminder didn’t stop the prickling unease up his spine. That was probably because he was committing a *crime*, and if he got caught then Carol and the PPDC as a whole would be publically disavowing him on every major news program in the country.

*Focus.*

A faint yellow light gleamed at the base of the monitor. His light picked out the shape of a mouse and he tapped it gently, on the off chance that his luck was about to become awesome. The screen lit up, bright enough to force his eyes closed for a second while they adjusted.

A login screen blinked at him, username and password- that figured. Without knowing whose office this was, there wasn’t much hope in hell of guessing either.

Billy took the chance and flipped over the keyboard. No convenient post-it note there, and nothing in the top desk drawer except a pair of scissors and a handful of loose paperclips. Entering ‘admin’ and ‘admin’ only got him a ‘try again’ and ‘two tries remaining.’ Better to quit while he was ahead.

Filing cabinet, filing cabinet... there, the heavy metal drawer sliding out on well-oiled casters. Billy stared down into it, ran his light over the file labels. Phone bills, electric bills, garbage pickup, insurance contracts... old copies of church bulletins... boring.

The second drawer looked more promising. One of the first folders held land rental agreements, and Billy crouched to page through them, tucking his flashlight between his teeth. The church had a hell of a lot more property than he’d realized. The land this building occupied was only one of a dozen plots in the city. Old Scientology sites, warehouses... there was the Playa del Ray building, classified on those pages as long-term storage.

What did they need all that land for? And, more interestingly, how were they getting the money to pay for all of it? The cathedral he was in was impressive enough, never mind the millions it had to be costing the organization just to hold the land.

*What are you up to?*

Billy grabbed for his phone, ignoring the handful of texts that had popped up on it in the meantime. He snapped photos of some of the more interesting pages, and set it down on the floor beside him while he put the folder back.

The next few weren’t much of anything: old press releases about Kaiju attacks and the pamphlets about safety protocols and public sanctuaries that the city put out by the thousands.

But then there were the membership rolls and that was much more interesting. Billy spread the folder out on the floor and started snapping pictures again.

There was no way to know what any of it meant, not until he got back to base and could go through it properly, but oh—there were names he already recognized.

Oh God. How had he missed that? It hadn’t been random at all. And the numbers pencilled in beside the family names and addresses – they were big.

They hadn’t just been members. The families of the abduction victims had been donors.

Maybe they’d donated more than just their money.

The sound of the building changed. The silence was absolute. Cold; the blood went sluggish in his veins, air slowly leaving his lungs.

*The air just turned off, that’s all. It’s just the air conditioning.*

He forced himself to breathe again, knees trembling and the ache building from holding his crouch for so long.

Billy snapped the last few pictures, shoved his phone back in his pocket, papers back in the folder. He had to put everything back the way it had been, or they’d know.

He stepped back and surveyed his work. Had the mouse been slightly more to the right? Would the failed password attempt be visible when someone came in to work the next day? Maybe they’d chalk it up to a co-worker with bad memory, or a janitor getting nosy.

He needed to get out. It wasn’t a smoking gun, not in the literal sense. But now he could tie at least some of the victims to the church, and maybe that was enough of a trail that the police could follow it back. And if Molly Hayes’ parents were on that list, then he’d have his answer there as well.

Billy slipped out of the room, LED flashlight still in his hand, and headed back the way he’d come. Retrace his steps, get back to his bike, and -

A dark shape stood in the hall in front of him, silhouetted in the emergency lighting. Taller than Billy, in long red robes, his features blocked out by shadow.

His chest seized, blood rushing in his ears.

The shadow man stepped closer, his hand rising.

Billy was going to be shot, his body dumped in the ocean, and no-one would ever find out who was behind any of it.

The figure reached out and flicked on the lights, a switch on the wall that Billy hadn’t noticed before.

Alex Wilder stood in front of him, no monster or terrifyingly efficient security guard at all. Just a guy in red church robes, empty hands, and a knowing smile playing over his lips.

“Ranger,” he nodded at Billy like he’d been expecting him. Like somehow, he’d known. “Nice to see you decided to accept my invitation. Would you like that tour of the place now, or later?”

Billy’s heart jackrabbited inside his chest, the surprise and adrenaline burst making his tongue thick in his mouth.

How the hell – Alex had known, or he had guessed, or had somehow been waiting for Billy to show up?

Or- they’d had an alert in the office, a motion detector or his failed password attempt, and he was
caught for real-

Alex’s eyes flicked up and to the side, a subtle tic of movement Billy might not have caught if he hadn’t been looking at exactly the right moment. A faint red light shone in the darkness.

Security camera.

Comprehension dawned on him through the moment of panic.

For some reason, Alex was giving him a warning—and an out.

Come on. Where was all that strategic brilliance Billy was supposed to have? He could see an opening in a fight telegraphed a mile away, but when it came down to simple things, forget it. Some tactical officer he’d make.

“I, uh,” Billy said brilliantly. “The door was open?”

“I’m glad you could make it,” Alex replied, with a smile that was all surface sincerity. Something lodged deep under Billy’s skin and gnawed there, the sense of wrong-ness a distant drumbeat.

Play it cool. That was all he needed to do until he could make a smooth exit. The phone rested warm against his hip, the stolen data an impossible extra weight.

“We’re open to anyone who needs comfort,” Alex continued. He started moving and Billy went with him, drawn along in his wake. “We wouldn’t be much good as a sanctuary if we kept the doors locked.”

A faint hum grew louder when they turned the corner into a fully-lit hallway, a new and curious pungency adding to the mix of smells. Otherwise the church was free of the usual sounds of the Shatterdome or the academy. Billy’d gotten used to the tang of oil, the distant noise of massive machines.

The silence here closed in on him again, Alex’s words falling into muffled cotton wool. The distant chanting took on a more distinct shape, a handful of rhythms that sounded like words catching at the edges of his hearing.

Mercy... almighty powers... paradise below...

Since when was paradise ‘below’ anything? He’d probably misheard. Or poetic license? Anyway, Alex was talking and Billy had been so busy listening to the sound of his own internal panic alarm that he’d missed some of it already.

“The mainstream churches have missed the real importance of what’s been going on. They refuse to see the truth.”

The music died away as they moved into a more open space, a lobby with a central ramp that headed up toward vast double doors.

“And what is that?” Billy asked, turning to look around at the deep red velvet curtains, the carpet that matched, the deep brown wood with red at its heart carved into banisters that framed the open space. “The truth. I feel like you should be putting that in finger quotes.” The commentary slipped out, despite the fact that he was supposed to be keeping his fat mouth shut. Ugh.

“It’s cute that you pretend like you don’t already know.” Alex’s dark eyes shone, but maybe his smile was a little too wide, his eyes on Billy just a little too manic.
“I really don’t.”

The double doors swung open on silent hinges. A handful of worshippers shuffled out, long red robes closing in any hint of their bodies, red headdresses sliding blinders alongside their eyes. The group broke into two when they reached the bottom where Alex and Billy were standing, splitting around them like a stream dividing around a rock.

And when they passed Billy, each one turned their head and stared at him with knowing eyes.


Billy swallowed, the drums louder now and more constant. The carpet was too soft underfoot, the world too red. He needed out, back to the fresh air, the sickly-sweet hum of incense curling in and around under his brain.

“Come on. I want you to meet someone.” Alex took him by the arm and Billy flinched away. So much for the pretence. Alex let go, but he stepped away like he expected Billy to follow.

Billy didn’t. “If it’s your pledge drive team, I’m all tapped out of cash this month.”

Alex only smiled. “You’ll want to speak with her. You have questions, don’t you? That’s why you’re here.” And his eyes met Billy’s, the look in them as secure and knowing as the congregants who had filed past without a word. “If you want to leave now, I could always let her know you stopped by.”

And where I caught you, was the unspoken addendum.

He had a split-second to make his choice. If he said no and ran – would he regret it later? This was the kind of moment save points were meant for.

WWTD – What would Teddy do? (Asking what Tommy would do was never the way to make a rational and mature choice.) He’d make sure he had all the information he could get before pushing on. So Billy nodded, spread his hands wide. “As long as I don’t have to get my thetans audited, lead on.”

Alex laughed, a chuckle that had no warmth to it. “Your thetans are safe from us, I promise.” Somehow it didn’t feel reassuring.

Alex led him to the opposite side of the entrance hall, drawing aside one of those long red velvet curtains to let Billy pass through. He hesitated on the threshold of what turned out to be a small-ish vestibule, the high ceiling entirely overwhelmed by the massive stained glass window that took up most of the wall. Candles flickered in a graduated box attached to the wall, one of the women who had been comforting the weeping mother at the press conference – tall, slim, Black, beautiful, not Leslie Dean – lighting some of them with a long white taper.

From the inside, Billy could actually make out the images on the glass, the shades of blue and green resolving into the ocean waves. They seemed to roil and churn as he stared, the painting viscerally vivid and the flickering of the candles lending the water life and motion. Jagged red lightning ran through the center, light spilling out from the hard slash of colour.

“That’s the Breach, isn’t it?” Billy glanced at Alex and the woman who joined them, but he didn’t need their confirmation to prove it.
“Will, meet my mother, Catherine Wilder. Mom, this is Pan Pacific Defense Corps Ranger William Maximoff, formerly one of the pilots of Magnus Echo.” It had the ring of a formula to it, and Catherine’s expression didn’t change. Serene, that was it, serene and settled, with a smug little smile. Like she was totally at ease with everything going on around her.

It was the kind of look you expected to see from a viper, right before it struck.

“Ranger.” She nodded politely, didn’t extend a hand to shake. She tucked her hands into the wide sleeves of her robe instead. “Welcome to the Church of the Breach.”

Billy frowned up at the stained glass, Alex stepping aside and out of his way. “Excuse me for asking, but isn’t that a strange name for a church? I mean, I know you’re into the end of days type of prophecies—at least one of your guys is—but why would you want to glorify something that’s caused so much destruction?”

“Maybe it’s not about glorification,” Catherine suggested, moving to stand behind Billy’s shoulder and look up at the stained glass window with him. “What could be a more potent sign of the mysterious powers of the divine than what’s been happening over the past six years?”

She rested her hand on his shoulder, her grip stronger than he’d expected. Billy tried to turn aside, but Alex had him flanked. There was nowhere to go but out the same way they’d come in.

<i>Shit.</i> Heart pumping, his adrenaline rose – but what was he going to do, clobber a clergy member? She wasn’t doing anything except intimidating him and that was ridiculous. He was a highly trained fighter and she was-

“Come into the sanctuary,” Catherine urged him.

She was steering him toward the curtain, her fingertips sinking hard into his shoulder for a moment before releasing him again. The throb of the pressure points lingered, and he rubbed at his shoulder to get rid of them.

Alex’s grin turned smug and he kept himself between Billy and the front door.

“And see what we’ve been building out of the wreckage of the old world. I think everything will become clear in a moment. Unless Rangers are less educated than we thought.”

The dry condemnation in her voice nailed the coffin closed as far as Billy was concerned. There wasn’t much point in playing nice anymore. Alex had been pleasant enough, welcoming enough, but now every pulse in Billy’s head was beating out Danger, every step toward the sanctuary door a fight against his own better instincts.

But. If he ran now, he’d never get the answers. She was dangling the bait and... yeah.

He was just dumb enough to take it.

There were only two of them, after all, and once he’d seen inside the sanctuary, gotten the clarity she was promising, then he could take off, hit the doors running, and be gone.

Good plan, Billy. Solid plan. This was a recon mission, and he was re-conning.

The doors to the sanctuary swung open when they approached, the room beyond filled with a flickering light that could only come from a thousand candles, racked in glass jars, hanging in vast bone chandeliers. The space opened down toward an altar, the walls breathing with the dancing shadows.
A statue loomed over everything, flowers, candles, wreaths laid at its feet. Honne-Onna, foul and terrifying, half life-sized but still dreadful beyond any capacity Billy had for description.

She loomed over them, loomed above and looked down on them, sapphire eyes glowing with reflected light, her vast maw opening and closing as she lurched forward-

He flung his arms up, hitting a battle stance without thinking, too easy and too light without pulling Magnus and Tommy around himself

where were they

He was alone and this time he was going to die.

She rears up, dodges Hawker’s shot the way the last one didn’t, the way none of them have before. That manoeuvre had been foolproof until now, what’s changed? Billy’s running through a dozen different scenarios in his head, and he can’t see how this one is going to play out, not now.

The waves crash cold over their legs, the kaiju turns – and she looks at him. Not at Magnus’ sensors, not at the cockpit in general, she looks at him, and he knows.

She knows.

They’re intelligent. And humanity is in deep shit trouble.

They know what we are, now. It’s only going to get worse from here.

The moment of realization is followed immediately by the hit and the pain – that’s his mistake, not seeing it coming, his pause a half-beat too long-

The scream echoed around him, hoarse and raw. The sound snapped Billy back into himself, his arms up to ward off an attack that wasn’t coming, not from a statue standing in the cavernous semi-dark.

“Kaiju,” he blurted out, incredulous and embarrassed and was it possible to be both terrified and on full fighting alert at the same time as those two feelings all at once? “That’s a kaiju statue down there.” And kaiju bones hanging from the ceiling, fire making them dance.

Movement down by the statue caught his eye again – now what? – two worshippers in red robes rising to their feet from the pews. His first glance had missed them entirely. He could hear them now, their prayer rising louder, echoing in the vastness of the space.

“Look how you crucify our false prophets, man-made tyrants who fear what they do not understand. You are not the scourge. You are the salvation.”

Billy swallowed, backed up a step toward the doors. “What is this place? Who are you?”

Alex slid in behind him, blocking his path. Okay, fight or flight reaction – now was the time to pick which one was happening.

“The question you should be asking, is ‘who are you,’ Ranger Maximoff.” Catherine circled him, stood between him and the aisle down to the altar. “And what is your role in the world to come. You were chosen. The Kaiju kings chose you, unworthy as you are, to be their Holy Martyr. To be the beginning of the end of the false prophets and those freaks of technology that force humanity to remain mired in the poison we’ve created.”

She came in close, anger building over that preternatural calm, the whispers of her robes against
the carpeted floor the susurrations of a snake.

“And. You. Refused. Your continued existence thwarts the will of heaven.”

“Yeah, well.” Billy found his voice, retreated to get out of her space, slammed his back up against the doors. “I try and make a habit out of thwarting the plans of crazy people. And giant monsters. It’s pretty much the basis for my career choice.”

“And now it’s time to right that wrong. The sacrifice will go forward.” Catherine smiled, her tone matter-of-fact, like she did this sort of thing on a daily basis, and wasn’t that just a fantastic realization to have at this precise moment? “Prepare yourself for the end of days.”

Billy fumbled for the door handle behind his back. “I’m going to have to pass on that one. I’m sure it’ll be a great ceremony, very meaningful, but my leave’s just about up and I need to get back to base.”

Something grabbed his wrist, hard. Billy whipped his head around and Alex was right there, one hand locked tight around Billy’s arm, and the other holding – oh fuck him right in the nuts – a syringe. “This is for the good of everyone,” Alex said, as calm and bright-eyed as his mother.

He plunged the needle into Billy’s neck.

Sharp, a bright spot of pain overtop of the constant underlying thrum of aches and pulls.

Billy slapped him away, stamped down on Alex’s foot and smashed his elbow into something soft. There was a sound like air leaving a balloon, and Billy grabbed the syringe, pulled it from his neck. More pain, pain and wet – blood, my blood – and he flung it aside.

Glass smashed, he realized his mistake halfway through the motion. Should have kept it, get it to Faiza, find out what-

He realized, as he stumbled, that Catherine hadn’t moved. She stood and watched as his knees buckled, the world swimming around him. He stumbled – gotta move, gotta get moving- and fell again, his feet numb and the cold spreading up his legs.

“Call the others. Tell them it’s almost time.”

Ears, his ears were ringing, the rising chant the only thing he could hear, the only words that penetrated the thick wool filling up his skull.

“Let the blue blood of the archangels wash away our iniquity, that we may start life anew in the world before.”

Teddy, Tommy, I’m so sorry.

The world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

The kaiju prayer taken from the Pacific Rim novelization by Alex Irvine. Chapter 27, Page 273.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Wherein Billy wakes up, finds someone he's been looking for, and digs a deeper hole.

~Billy ~

~Wake up~

The world swam back into focus a small piece at a time. His head hurt. No, his head was on fire, a thousand sparks burning across his skin, needles sharp in his flesh.

Needle. A needle. There had been one in his neck. That was important. Who had put it there? That was important too. Faiza? More tests? More tubes and lines and holes for draining out the bad and putting in some good.

Nothing about this felt good. He was lying down. Yes, start there.


Could he move? He wasn’t tied down, just sore, and gravity felt three times as strong as usual. Like trying to move Magnus without her power plant ramped up, everything much too heavy for him to lift alone.

The air smelled dry, dusty rather than damp, none of the comforting familiar overtones of engine oil, none of the creaking or banging sounds of the Shatterdome at work.

Not there, then. Wherever he was, he hadn’t been rescued yet. Something brushed cool against his skin, and he grabbed for it. He opened his eyes, his hand closing around a slim wrist, and all he got in return for the gargantuan effort was a yelp, the hand roughly yanked free, and a flurry of movement too fast for his bleary gaze to fix on.

“Ow.” Billy tried to focus, but the ceiling kept spinning sideways. A face lurched into view (or maybe his view lurched into her face), and he must still be out of it, because he could swear that he knew her.

“You move pretty fast for a dead guy,” she said and while his eyes still wouldn’t lock on her properly, her voice was young. She kept talking. “Not that we really thought you were dead, because you were breathing, but seriously you might as well have been for all the good you’re doing. How could you be so dumb to let them drug you? We’re kids, we have an excuse. But you’re a grownup. You’re supposed to be smarter than that.”

A softer, quieter voice broke in. “Molly, be nice.”

Billy wet his lips, tried to find his voice, his mouth dry and throat closing up. “Yeah, well. Obviously I wasn’t.” He pushed against the floor and managed to sit up, the world spinning around him even after he squeezed his eyes shut and hung on.
“Duh,” said the first voice again, thick with disdain. “And you’re supposed to be some big hero, too.”

Okay, that did it. Billy dug deep, tried to find every extra scrap of strength that Michael kept trying to convince him he had. When he opened his eyes again the world settled into a holding pattern – canted to one side, but steadier.

_Sitrep, Ranger? Thoroughly screwed._

The room was small, longer than it was wide and the ceiling higher than both, only a single solid grey door breaking the monotony of the concrete walls. A row of shallow, dark windows lined the upper corner of one wall. Either it was still night outside, or they were covered with something. What light there was came from a caged-over bulb in the far corner, a weak thing spreading spidery shadows across the space. No sink, no facilities other than—oh God, was that a _bucket_?—and a couple of ratty blankets on the floor.

And he wasn’t alone. One girl stood scowling down at him, arms folded, a pink knitted hat pulled down low over her ears and holes in her unlaced sneakers. A second girl, much slighter, sat against the wall, knees drawn up to her chest and her arms around them. A long brown braid lay over her shoulder. Her light flower-patterned dress had probably been fine outside in the sunshine, but now she looked like she was shivering.

Billy lifted his hand to try and rub the fog from his eyes, his arm heavy and slow. “I know you,” he said, frowning at the kid who was glaring at him. Tried to imagine her with no hat, a wide, unabashed smile- “Molly,” he found the name, the cotton wool slowly unravelling from behind his eyes. “Molly Hayes. I’ve been looking for you. Everyone thinks you’re dead.” And that- he focused across the dim room. “Klara?”

“What’s a Ranger doing looking for lost kids?” Molly snorted, unimpressed. “Aren’t you supposed to be monster-hunting? If you’re in here getting captured, you big dummy, then who’s out there protecting the city?”

“Molly,” Klara remonstrated with her again, but she didn’t move from where she was huddled. “They have more than one Jaeger. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, because if he’s in here with us, then he’s not out there getting us free, is he?”

“Can you keep the noise down?” Billy pleaded, his ears already ringing and the buzzing under his skin a distraction hard to ignore. “Just give me a second here.” An itch along his neck proved to be dried blood, his fingertips coming away stained with flecks of dark brown.

“You’re hurt.” Klara rose to her feet and padded across the room toward him. “If you let me take a look-”

“It’s fine, I’m fine, thank you.” Billy grabbed the wall and pushed himself slowly to his feet. His knees hurt, no surprise there. Who- “Alex Wilder,” he said aloud, memory filtering back through the haze. “He stabbed me in the neck, that bas-” he cut himself off before he swore in front of the kids.

“That bastard,” Klara supplied helpfully. “That was what you were going to say, wasn’t it? That’s not a nice word.”

“I know that! That’s why I- you know what?” Billy sighed. “Never mind. The question now is … no, I have so many questions. First off, are you girls okay?”
Was he okay? That answer was a lot less clear than the tumbling affirmations he got from Klara and Molly. He took a step, tested out his knees and his balance, managed to make it away from the wall without keeling over or stumbling. So that was progress.

His mouth was dry, but that looked like it was going to be a long-term problem.

Food. What about food. He’d shoved a couple of protein bars in his pocket the last time he’d come out. The girls had to be hungry, and- he patted down his pockets with increasing horror. Every one of them was empty. They had everything, his keys, his wallet-

“My phone,” Billy groaned. “They’ve got my phone.” Along with the photos of the files, the proof he needed for Carol to believe any of this, and his only lifeline to reach Tommy and Teddy. “Shit.”

“And that’s definitely a bad word,” Klara told him loftily.

Billy tried the door, because it would be just like him to plan some elaborate escape and not realize the door was unlocked. No luck. The handle rattled, locked tight, and Molly snorted behind him. “You think we didn’t try that? We’re kids but we’re not stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were,” he replied, half-offended. Were he and Tommy that kind of pains in the ass when they were younger? The sheepish answer that came back was probably worse.

Okay. Focus. “How long have you been here?”

It was Molly who answered, hands on her hips and a ‘just try it’ in her eyes so bold and vivid it might as well have been written in neon. “Klara’s only been here a day, but I’ve been here forever and ever.” And the veneer cracked, just a little her lower lip trembling. “I don’t wanna be part of their stupid sacrifice. Why isn’t my mom here to get me?”

“They’ve been looking for you,” Billy scrambled to find an answer that would satisfy them both. Molly looked like she was near tears, Klara silent and more stoic, but they were still just babies who needed an adult to make everything better.

Oh God, he was the grownup in the room. Not good.

“And believe me, I’m glad that it’s me who figured it out first rather than her being in here with you. Because we’re going to get out of this dump and get you two home.”

Big talk, Maximoff. And how the hell did he plan to do that? At least his head was clearing up the longer he kept standing, his new bruises and aches settling into the background hum of pain that had been his normal for the past four months.

Billy took off Tommy’s jacket, his shoulders screaming at the rough backwards pull. Klara stood halfway behind Molly and she just looked up at him with big eyes as he approached. “Here,” he offered, moving to drape it around her shoulders. “They took my snacks, but at least it’ll keep you warm.”

“Thank you.” She curled her fingers into the sleeves, pulling the jacket tight around herself. “They’ll come back with food at some point. They did before.”

“Before I got thrown in here?” Billy asked, his curiosity surging to the fore.

From the pieces he remembered from before everything went hazy, he was supposed to become some form of human sacrifice. And it sounded like Molly and Klara were in the same boat. Did you need to feed sacrifices? What were they being sacrificed to? He really didn’t feel like waiting
around long enough to find out. But if someone had been feeding the girls, then maybe there was hope of figuring out an escape.

That was the drill, right? Wait until the guard comes with the tray, bang him over the head, and run.

There wasn’t much in the room that was useful for head-bashing, unfortunately, not even a stray wooden plank. Just a tin bucket, which was as last-resort a weapon as he could imagine. Still, it would be better than nothing at all. *The Academy fight instructors never talked about a scenario quite like this.*

“Mmm-hm. But the food is bad and there’s not enough and I just want to go home.” Molly scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes, and Billy’s uncertainty and his panic faded away.

A few more questions teased some answers out of the girls. The guards came two or three times a day, two of them at a time, and Molly didn’t remember seeing guns. That was a great sign. On the more negative side of things, it could be hours until the next check-in. It would be a lot harder to get out of the building and away in broad daylight. Wherever the building was.

Billy paced out the room, counted his steps, Molly striding behind him and Klara’s huge dark eyes watching from the depths of Tommy’s leather coat.

It wasn’t scientific data, nothing Nate would approve of, but the building didn’t smell like the cathedral. And when he stopped near the windows – underneath them by a good three feet, damn it all – he didn’t hear anything in the way of traffic. So maybe they weren’t downtown anymore. The warehouse? Possibly. Or any one of the half-dozen other BuenaKai properties he’d found in their papers.

The windows were too high for anyone to reach, quite probably why the kidnappers had figured it was safe enough to leave them there, but the darkness outside didn’t seem quite as all-encompassing. Billy stepped back to get a better look, squinted at the black of the glass. Was it his imagination, or was there a little more light than there had been before?

If the sun was rising, they didn’t have a whole lot of time.

He’d left the Shatterdome intending to prove that he could still be a hero. So it was hero time.

He looked up again, tried to do an estimate. “You two could fit through those windows,” Billy said, the first things he’d spoken in a while other than the comforting noises filling in the reply-pauses in Molly’s running commentary.

Molly stopped beside him and squinted up at the window, a frown on her face. “Maybe. Klara can for sure, ‘cause she’s skinny and short. But how are we going to get up so high?”

“I’ll lift you.” Billy held her gaze, trying to project all the confidence he absolutely wasn’t feeling. “If I put you on my shoulders, you’ll be tall enough to reach. Then you open the window, I boost you through, and then you can help pull Klara out.”

Molly’s frown deepened. “But then what about you? An escape plan doesn’t count if not everyone escapes. Everyone knows that.”

*Think fast.* “Then you two run and get help. The police will come and set me free after.” He put on his most comforting sort of smile, trying to channel Teddy’s kindness and warmth. It must have worked, because Molly puffed up her chest and nodded firmly, apparently sold on her important role.
Billy, on the other hand, was a whole lot less certain. But he could figure out the next step once he’d gotten the girls out. Maybe there’d be a highly convenient rope left nearby and he could shimmy out that way, or he could try scaling the wall to get to the window himself. There were options, there had to be.

He cracked his knuckles, the pain that shot through his shoulder at the sudden movement reminding him of just how functional he currently wasn’t. *What have I been doing all this physio for, if not to make it work for me now?*

“Okay,” he nodded to Molly. “Let’s do this.” He crouched down and she swung a leg over his shoulder, hanging on tight to his hair – “Ow! Let go!” – then grabbing on around his forehead as he slowly rose and half-staggered half-lurched toward the wall.

“Don’t tip over so much!” she ordered him, and he grabbed for the wall to steady himself. How could one little kid weigh so much? She had to be all muscle. She certainly wasn’t height, as she strained and stretched for the desperately narrow windowsill despite her high perch on his shoulders. “I still can’t reach!”

“Stand up,” Klara suggested from her corner on the blankets, watching the whole thing with those big wide eyes. “Stand on his shoulders, then you can reach.”

Stand on his- yeah, sure. Why not. Billy reached up to give Molly somewhere to lean, and between his grip and the wall as a support she dug her heels into his neck and his shoulders and pushed herself up to wobbly standing. Billy struggled to keep balance, grabbing her ankles and hanging on. “Can you reach it?” he asked, his voice strangled.

“Get closer to the wall!”

“I can’t get any closer, I’m leaning on it.”

“Then stop moving so much!”

Billy bit his tongue. Metaphorically, because if he actually did he could pretty much bet that would be the moment she’d slip or drive her elbow down on his head and there’d be more blood down his shirt than the spots left behind from Alex’s sneak syringe attack.

He leaned against the wall, the cool concrete oddly soothing, Molly’s toes wiggling under his hands as she shifted and moved above him. Scraping sounds followed, then a shower of fine dust that got his nose twitching with the torment of an almost-sneeze. Either she was getting heavier or he was still weak, his thigh muscles starting to complain under the strain of the extra weight.

“It’s locked,” Molly’s dismayed voice came down to him. “All of them are.”

Shit. “Can you tell how they’re supposed to open?” He tried to look up and got more dust up his nose as a reward.

Molly shifted her weight and he had to lean against the wall quickly to avoid sliding, the pressure of her shoe heel cutting in to the sore spot right where his neck and shoulder met. He hissed, trying not to wince too visibly.

“It looks like they swing in,” Molly reported. “From the top.”

“Hinges,” Billy urged her, running through their options in his mind, series of different permutations of events, from most to least likely. Probability that they were all going to get out of this one intact? Less and less with every new obstacle that cropped up. “Can you see the hinges? Are they on the inside or the outside of the window?”
Molly wriggled again and the pain shot down his arm this time, his fingers flexing involuntarily. “Yes! They’re on the inside and the wood’s all funny around one side like it got wet or something. I bet I could dig it out, if I had a knife, but I don’t.”

“Come on down.” Billy dropped to his knee, bashing it against the concrete and muttering curses under his breath at the almost electric zap on the nerve that followed. Molly slid off and put her fists on her hips, staring up at the window with a scowl that was becoming familiar. “Okay,” Billy continued aloud, looking around the room. “We need something sharp. A stone, a nail, a trowel that just happens to be conveniently lying around…”

The universe unkindly failed to comply.

“What are you going to do with it?” Klara asked, moving closer.

“Dig out the hinges. We pop them free, the window comes off, we bail out as fast as humanly possible.” Billy checked his pockets again, on the off chance that he’d missed something useful the first time, but no.

Then his eyes fell on the only metal object in the room with them. Molly and Klara turned and followed his gaze to the bucket against the wall. “Something sharp. So all we need is the handle.”

“Grooooooss,” Molly declared. “I’m not going near that unless I hafta.”

It wasn’t so bad, as long as he didn’t breathe. Billy peeled off his overshirt and wrapped it around his hand to help his grip. The bucket’s wire handle looped around and through holes punched in the rim, and if he bent and twisted it at just the right angle-

Billy braced the bucket and yanked, the muscles in his back protesting. Some yanking and bending the metal wire back and forth, and eventually it sprang free, the spiked broken end bouncing back toward his face. Billy recoiled, the other end still attached to the bucket, and narrowly missed spilling the entire thing over his pants.

“Fuck everything about today,” he growled, and Klara put her fingers in her ears.

A few minutes of work later and he had the stiff wire handle in hand. He ditched the shirt, already warm, and looked around for his pair of fellow prisoners. “Molly? Do you feel up to taking a crack at it?” The idea of hoisting her up again was not his favourite plan, but staying put was even less of an option.

“I’ll do it,” Klara stepped forward, handing Billy’s jacket to Molly. “I haven’t done anything useful yet, so I’ll do it.” She did glare at him, though. “But don’t look up my dress!”

Billy’s hands flew up to ward off the accusation and he shook his head. “Absolutely not. On my honour as a Ranger.”

“Then okay.”

So down Billy went again, and up with Klara on his shoulders this time, the wire clutched in her hand like a dagger. She was shorter than Molly and that was more of a problem, because even standing on his shoulders didn’t give her quite enough height to reach the hinges far above his head. Billy grabbed her feet and he lifted, just that extra inch, and she squeaked before scrambling to grab on to the window frame and balance.

“Can you hold her?” Molly asked, fluttering anxiously around behind him.
“Yeah,” Billy grunted, closing his eyes. Every indignity he’d inflicted on himself over the past few weeks was coming back to haunt him, scraped knees and his aching back, the burn searing down his triceps from every last damn exercise he’d suffered through, right down to the persistent thrumming soreness deep inside his bones. Michael would say-

Damn him, anyway.

But Michael would say to focus. To find his center. To concentrate on the task and not the strain.

Billy breathed in, deep and slow, and tried to find that point of light deep inside. The stillness that felt so unnatural and was so vital at the same time.

Neither Billy nor Tommy had ever been what someone might call ‘steady and calm.’ When one of them wasn’t going off half-cocked, the other was dragging them both into some kind of new disaster. Their impulsive nature, their fire—it made them the best and signed their doom at the same time.

Teddy, where are you? It’s your strength I need now.

The faint sounds of scraping echoed in the holding cell, and tiny flecks of painted wood started to tumble down over Billy. The dust followed, getting in his hair, in his nose when he breathed, down the back neck of his t-shirt.

Time passed, and with his eyes closed and everything narrowed down to keeping Klara up and his breathing even, he had no idea how much.

But he could hold on.

They had no other choice.

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The rig chafes in weird ways, the drivesuit bulky and restraining. Billy shifts and wriggles into position, trying to shake off the new strangeness. Magnus is different from the simulator—duh—but in ways he didn’t expect, and it’s not just about the Vulcan mind-meld.

It’s worse when they link up and he can feel Tommy’s fears alongside his, electric sparks running up and down nerves already naked and exposed.

~Knock it off~

Which one of them is that? Tommy’s voice inside his head sounds almost the same as his own.

~You knock it off, butthead~

/Rangers, you have a go./

David’s voice on the comms oozes confidence, even when it’s the last thing Billy can possibly feel. Magnus is too heavy when they move, every step a struggle. The rig cuts in to his shoulders, the weight of everything pressing down on him.

There’s dust in his nose along with the engine oil and rubber smell of the drivesuit, a scraping sound that fills his ears. A trembling starts up in his limbs and his hands are frozen where they are, clenched tight around the grips (ankles). He has to do this. There is only him.

~I can’t make it. It’s too heavy. I hurt.~
Yes you can. We do this together. You’re not alone.

Tommy’s in his head and he’s there, the weight somehow less just from the knowing.

~We’re coming for you. Hold the line.~

“Something’s wiggling. It’s really loose now.” Klara’s voice cut through Billy’s fogged-out brain, down through to the space of stars that was his retreat.

He came back to the now, Klara’s feet digging in where the rig’s straps had been, his hands wrapped tight around her ankles to hold her in position. He wanted to sag, to collapse under the weight, his knees already shaking from however long he’d been holding her high.

“Can you pop the hinges?” he asked, his tongue thick and dry in his mouth and his voice catching on it.

“I think so.” Her voice floated down to him from above, and he didn’t dare look up, splinters of wood falling from his hair. “Boost me higher?”

He couldn’t, until he closed his eyes and found the stars again. He could. He did.

The creaking sound that followed was the best thing he’d heard all day, even as Klara’s toes cut into him, her weight pushing down on him. More wood fell, bounced off his head and shoulders, small shards that were all that still stood between them and freedom. “Got it!” Klara yelped, reeling backward. Billy let go of her ankles and caught her in his arms as she fell, the window flying out of her hands to smash into shards of glass on the concrete floor. Fresh air poured in, the dim grey light of approaching dawn streaming down on them.

And somewhere in the hallway, an alarm started screaming.

“Go, go,” Billy urged, panic screaming through his exhausted muscles and filling them with new life. He hauled Klara up again, propriety be damned, and all but launched the kid in the direction of the open window. She grabbed the frame and hung on, his hands grabbing for her kicking feet. “Faster! And get ready to grab Molly!” She wiggled her shoulders out through the tiny window frame.

Shouting echoed outside the door. It burst open just as Klara’s feet vanished into the daylight beyond, two armed guards blocking their only other chance for escape.

Change of plans. “Run, Klara,” he yelled, “Go, go go! Call the PPDC, get help! Molly, get behind me!”

He didn’t have all that many illusions that she was going to listen, but it was the best shot he had at keeping her safe. One kid out, one kid to go.

The room was narrow and the door small enough that only the first guard could reach him. He didn’t look much like hired security, but the muscles poking out from under the rolled-up sleeves of his black t-shirt were enough of a warning. He raised a nightstick above his head and tried to bring it down on Billy’s skull.

Billy ducked and rolled, avoiding the strike. He brought his clasped fists down on the back of the guy’s skull, aiming for the jacked-up tattoo of a dragon. The guy stumbled but didn’t go down. He spun instead, grabbed for Billy’s shirt.

What he wouldn’t give for a bō right about now.
Billy threw a punch, a right hook that sang through him, Teddy’s memory a voice in the back of his ear. His fist made contact with squishy flesh, the bone underneath giving way. A look of surprise flashed into the guard’s eyes. He stumbled and went down on a knee, just in time for the next dude—less biker this time, more gym rat, still a problem—to take his place.

“Hey Ranger!” Molly cried out and Billy glanced her way. She scooped up the first guard’s nightstick and threw it at him. He caught it out of the air, reflexes taking over while his brain still lagged a step or two behind.

His fingers slipped around the curved guard and it wasn’t Magnus Echo’s rig, it wasn’t his staff, but it clicked home that same perfect way.

Billy ducked the incoming strike, dodging aside and spinning on his heel. Billy’s arm came up, the nightstick along his forearm blocking the hit coming down on him again. “Nice try, but no.” The grin spread on his face, even as the first guard staggered to his feet and dude number two came around for another hit.

Billy jumped back, and let his body take over. He followed the movement, let momentum and muscle memory take him. Crack across the head, and one was down. Nightstick to the stomach, backstroke carrying it across the skull, and there went number two.

“Come on, Molly,” he urged, holding out his hand for her to grab. She took it and he pulled her along behind him out the door. The alarm kept shrieking and in the distance he heard more sounds of running feet, and shouting. Upstairs. There was an upstairs, and they needed to be far away from it. The hallway beyond went both ways, concrete basement walls without markings—or really useful things like Exit signs. He skidded to a stop, looking one way and then the other. “Well, at least we’re out of the cell.”

“But now where do we go?” Molly practically vibrated beside him, pulling his hand first one way and then the other as she took a couple of steps in each direction. “Which way is out?”

Yeah, he was wondering that himself. “Pick one and we’ll worry about the rest later.” Eenie, meenie... Billy kept Molly’s hand tight in his and bolted down the hallway to his right. It was shorter, so if it was wrong maybe it would be easier to go back.

Shouts followed them down the hall and Billy didn’t stop to look. Molly careened along behind him, the pair of them half-bouncing off the wall as they skidded around the corner and—oh, thank God—into a stairwell heading up.

“Yes!” Molly cheered, breathless. She charged ahead, grabbing the wooden railings and hauling herself up the stairs two or three steps at a time. “We’re gonna get out and I’m gonna see my mom and sleep in my bed and eat real food and never ever have to go pee in a bucket—”

“Stop right there!” A man’s shape filled the top of the stairs, silhouetted against the light bulb hanging from the ceiling behind him.

Shitshitshitshit.

Billy charged up ahead, nightstick in hand, ready to push Molly back and get between her and the guy-

The light glinted off of something grey in his hand.

He had a gun.
Billy brought the nightstick up anyway. If this was going to be it, at least he would go down fighting.

*Now would be a really great time to get bullet-deflecting force powers. Just in case the universe is listening.*

“Go back down the stairs, nice and quiet.” The tall goon with the salt-and-pepper beard wagged the gun slightly, advancing another step.

“I like your confidence in yourself, it’s a nice touch,” Billy sassed back, because why the hell not, at this point? “But I’m not really into taking orders.”

“You’re a goddamned mouthy little punk, and I don’t care who thinks they need you alive!” He levelled the gun, and Billy braced himself.

*I’m sorry, Molly.*

One more person he’d failed today.

*I don’t want to die.*
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Wherein Billy gets rescued, gets in trouble, and has a revelation.

A burst of noise came from outside, new sirens overtop of the wailing of the alarm. Blue and red lights flickered on the wall above the stairs, reflecting through some window Billy couldn’t see. “Out, get out—” someone shouted down the stairs. “It’s cops!”

“Klara!” Molly whooped, pressed back against the wall. “She brought help! You’re gonna get it now, you dumb jerk!”

The goon turned tail and made a break for it, and Billy thundered up the stairs after him. He’d lost his momentum, had stopped too long, and his knees seized up. Traitors! He grabbed the banister, managed not to fall on his face. But the guy he was chasing vanished around the corner and was gone.

“Come on,” Molly urged, tugging at Billy’s arm now. “Keep moving. In case he comes back!”

The next burst of noise sounded like explosions, but the building didn’t tremble. Billy staggered down the hall on the ground floor, pushing his body to move—just that little bit more to make it to the door.

The warehouse flashed red and blue, lights coming in half the windows. The door slammed open and Billy tried to grab her, pull her back behind him, but the shape filling the open space, silhouetted against the grey dawn, was the best thing he’d ever seen in his life.

He knew I needed him.

“Billy!” Teddy holstered his sidearm and broke into a run, half-skidding across the open space until he was at Billy’s side. Billy sagged against him, his joints finally giving way, Teddy’s arm there to catch him as he fell.

Molly kept going, careening into Tommy, barely two steps behind Teddy. Tommy grabbed her and passed her off to someone in riot gear behind him, the warehouse echoing now with shouting and the crashing of steel-toe boots.

“Klara,” Billy grabbed Teddy’s sleeve and hauled himself back to his feet, unsteady and weak but dammit, on his feet. “Did you find her?”

“The other kid? We spotted her as we got close to the compound,” Teddy reassured him, sliding his arm under Billy’s and around his back. “She’s with the cops now.”

“As you got close?” Billy pulled away and frowned back at Teddy, barely registering Tommy coming up on his other side. Both of them were in uniform, both of them armed. “How did you know where we were?” Did you hear me call? “And for that matter—where are we?”

“Playa del Ray. One of the warehouses.” Tommy studied Billy for a beat, then smacked him in the head. “Asshole.”
“Your computer search history,” Teddy answered his first question. “And Tommy put a locator app on your cell phone yesterday after your last idiot stunt. I told him he didn’t need to, that you definitely wouldn’t do this again. Shows what I know.”

His hold was warm and safe, but his voice was cool and hot at the same time, anger and relief and all kinds of things warring it out as they emerged from the building into the early morning light.

A couple of police cars were parked next to the warehouse Billy had been caught investigating before, Molly standing by one of them and gesturing very excitedly to the officer in charge. It looked so much less ominous in the daytime. Almost pathetically normal.

Teddy’s answer didn’t make sense. Billy’s head was spinning again, exhaustion and relief washing away all of the adrenaline that had carried him this far. “They took my phone.”

“Lucky for us they didn’t think to turn it off. It’s the only reason we found you this time.” Tommy’s voice was full of daggers and Billy flinched away. Teddy stayed solid beside him, but nothing about him was soft. “Come on, dumbass. We’re going home.”

Despite his desperate attempts to stay awake in the back of the car, Billy’s body and his mind betrayed him and he fell asleep on the way back to the Shatterdome. He woke up with his head throbbing, his joints aching, and his eyes raw and red. Medical staff met them at the door and Billy was shuffled off down to the infirmary, Tommy trailing behind and Teddy splitting off to talk to Carol alone.

By the time the fuzz had faded from around his brain and he could think clearly again, Faiza had him in a blood pressure cuff on one side, was tapping an artery for more blood samples on the other, and Billy was very thoroughly stuck. At least he was able to give a report, even with Faiza and her nurses buzzing around and checking various parts of him. Tommy lurked in the corner, his arms folded and cool anger flooding off of him in waves.

Billy seemed to be the only one who could feel that, ever aware of Tommy’s eyes boring in to him, of his faint reactions when Billy described the membership lists, the kaiju statue in the sanctuary, Catherine and Alex Wilder and their schemes and needles full of sedative.

And when he was done explaining everything, after he’d had to admit that he couldn’t give them any proof other than what they’d already found, once Rhodey had been and gone and Billy and Tommy were finally semi-alone-

He didn’t say anything. Tommy just looked at him, and the silence was worse than any words.

They’d grown up side by side, had a few years where they had shared a link so profound that the language to describe it still didn’t exist. And now Tommy was so far away that no bridge, physical or neural, could ever cover the span.

“You promised me once,” Tommy eventually spoke, moistening his lips like he was anxious, like he was the one with a dry mouth and nervous tremors. “That you wouldn’t leave me behind. Do you remember that?” His voice was cool and steady, coming at Billy from lightyears away.

It took too long for Billy to find his words, to force them around the lump in his throat. “When I wanted to go to the Academy. You weren’t sure. I remember.”

“I was hoping you didn’t,” Tommy’s reply cracked at him, faster than whiplash. “Because that makes this even more of a dick move. I’d ask what the fuck you thought you were trying to prove, but honestly? I don’t think I care anymore.”
That was a lie, it had to be, but he delivered it with such conviction, his eyes so unreadable, that Billy floundered and fought for something to say to fix things again.

He could always fix things. Until the moment he couldn’t.

And his secret still sat unspoken, soaking in its own bile at the back of his throat.

“I’m never going to pilot again.”

Billy spat it out, tasted the sour defeat the words brought with them. He clenched his fingers tight around the edge of the hospital bed they’d left him on, knuckles white on the bar.

“No fucking shit, after this latest greatest stunt.” Tommy snarled at him, emotion finally coming back into his face, colour to his cheeks. He’d looked dead inside before. This was better.

“No, before this. Michael knew. He sent a report out over a month ago, and never told me. My knees are fucked, Tommy. I won’t ever pass a physical. No matter what I do with the simulator, or the pons, they’ll never let me in a Jaeger again.” It got easier to keep talking the more he said, words spilling out, tumbling overtop of each other now that the dam had been unblocked.

The colour drained from Tommy’s face again, everything going tight, his voice strained. “How long have you known?”

“Two days. I swiped my file from his desk while he was on the phone.” Billy could see him doing the mental calculations, hopefully putting ‘idiot’ and ‘panic’ together and coming up with ‘Billy’ as the final answer. “I couldn’t say anything,” he begged and apologized in the same breath, Tommy not moving closer and the IV drip tethering Billy to the bed. “I couldn’t get in the simulator with you.”

Billy drew in a shaky breath.

“I couldn’t have it be real.”

Tommy’s hands had curled in on themselves, halfway to fists, but he used his voice as a weapon instead. “So instead you decided that the best course of action was to take your fucked-up knees and pretend to be a one-guy SWAT team? This would have been stupid as shit to do without backup when you were in good shape, never mind—”

Cool anger washed over Billy now, and he narrowed his eyes. “Never mind what? Now that I’m broken?”

“Yeah, Billy. Guess what. Five months ago you were in that room over there with your organs ready to shut down.” Tommy stabbed his finger out toward the hallway. “And now you’re sitting there with the shit beat out of you, because you thought you could what—be a superhero? News flash, kid. Things have changed. They’re never going to be like they were. Get used to it.”

“I’m never going to be like I was, you mean.” Billy stood. The fucking machines beeped at him and he yanked the IV line out of the clamp on the stand.

It was what Michael had been saying all along, only Billy had been too hopeful, too desperate, to hear it. Why was Tommy agreeing? He was supposed to be on Billy’s side. Maybe he was happy now that he wouldn’t have to give up Teddy.

He was supposed to love me best.

“Say it. Because I’m weak, because I’m crippled? Isn’t that the word? And I should just accept it,
let you park me on a shelf somewhere out of the way and watch as the rest of the world keeps going without me?”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Tommy snapped. “If you want to get yourself killed, go right ahead. Only remember that you’ll take Mom down with you this time, and you won’t be the one left picking up the pieces. Again.”

He looked on the verge of—not tears, Tommy didn’t cry. Not where anyone else could see. But something visceral, his hands **shaking**—until something buzzed him and he looked down at his phone. “I have a briefing. Stay here,” Tommy insisted. And then, because the world wasn’t confusing enough as it was, he crossed the room in three long strides, and wrapped his arms around Billy, tight and suffocating. “Or I’ll put a goddamned bullet in you myself. Jesus Christ, Billy.”

Was it forgiveness? It didn’t feel that way.

But Billy held him as long as Tommy would allow it—all of a second and a half—before Tommy pulled away and left the infirmary, not looking back.

Eventually satisfied that he wasn’t about to drop dead, or have some kind of adverse reaction to whatever drugs he’d been injected with, Faiza released Billy from the infirmary with both instructions to rest and dire warnings about what she would do to him if he didn’t. Some of her threats had involved catheters, and he was not about to find out if she was bluffing.

Still… Tommy had gone to a briefing, and it had to be about Billy and what he’d discovered about the BuenaKai. He could help there, at least, answer questions and clarify things that he’d only managed to skim over while he’d been panicked and half-insensible.

So he slipped into the back of the briefing room, closing the door quietly behind him while Carol was speaking down at the front. Everything about the setup was so familiar that it ached, like the socket for a newly missing tooth.

“...new protocols with regard to kaiju salvage. Assuming the BuenaKai obsession with the kaiju is part of their doctrine, we can expect pushback with regard to their first amendment rights. That freedom of religion clause is going to be a bitch.”

Billy leaned against the back wall of the angled theatre, the ten rows of seats canted down toward the open space at the front holding the rest of the strike group – all eight pilots, present and accounted for—Rhodey and a handful of his jumphawk pilots filling in the remainder of the space. There was no seat left open for him.

Carol stood firm in front of a couple of dark screens. She glanced up and saw him, and any second now she’d beckon him down. He knew better than anyone what the BuenaKai were like, after all, and he’d been in not one but two of their buildings, could speak to security and what he’d gleaned about their psychology-

In the middle of the fuck-up, he could at least salvage this. He could still be useful.

Carol looked away, not acknowledging his presence beyond that first inscrutable look.

America raised her hand in a desultory, lazy wave and asked a question, tension starting up a quiet buzz in Billy’s ears. Tommy and Teddy sat down at the front, Tommy sprawled back in his chair, arms folded defensively in front of him. Teddy canted forward, elbows on his knees and a hunted, haunted look creasing his forehead. Tommy leaned in to speak quietly to his co-pilot, Teddy’s
head moving as he answered. Neither of them looked back.

“I’m authorizing a helo sweep of the harbour, all the little islands. If there’s anything out there that we missed, I want to know about it.” Carol started to wrap up, nodding to Rhodey. “And I want a Jaeger on ready-5 at all times, in four hour rotations. Papa Valentine, you’re up first, Hawker will start the next shift at 1600 hours.”

Joe and Eli stayed down to talk to Carol as the briefing was dismissed. Cassie was the first to spot Billy lurking by the door, the first to come straight to him and confirm that he was real after all and not a ghost all out of phase.

“What happened? The Marshal only gave us the quick rundown, but it sounded like you were in it up to your neck.” A few of the jumphawk pilots brushed past them to get out, Billy and Cassie halfway blocking the way to the door. She tucked her arm in his and tugged him out into the hall, and Billy numbly followed.

The air in the hall was the same stuff being piped in to the briefing room, but it felt fresher. Less stagnant, anyway. “It’s a case I’ve been chasing for a while,” he told Cassie, and her eyes flashed wide. He filled in the broad sketches and her eyes never left his face. “I had to do something,” Billy finished. “Find proof so that someone would believe me and be willing to throw some resources behind me to finish the job.”

“Well, you sure got everyone’s attention now,” Cassie leaned against the wall, letting go of his arm and clasping his hand in hers. “I know Carol’s peeved, but you did a good thing, Billy. You saved both those kids this morning, and with any luck we’ll be able to save the rest of the people on your list.” She squeezed his hand gently and he squeezed back, her support grounding him and warming him through.

“We’ll need more than luck,” Billy replied ruefully. “But as awful as it is, I can’t help feeling like this was something I was meant to find.”

“Marshal.” Cassie snapped upright, looking at something—someone—behind Billy’s shoulder. Judgement day. Billy turned and found himself all but nose to nose with Carol. She wasn’t angry anymore, at least not judging by the nod she gave him, so that was a good sign. The tension in his shoulders began to ebb, and he was able to focus on the next steps.

“Marshal, I’m sorry I missed the beginning of the briefing,” Billy started to say. “I want to be in LOCCENT while the recon is going on. I know what to look for, and I can take that tactical station next to David’s-”

“Stand down, Will.” Carol set her hand on his shoulder in a gesture obviously meant to be companionable and kind, but all he could do was frown in response. “You’re done.”

“What are you talking about?” Billy stepped back, shaking Carol’s hand free. “This was my catch, right from the start. I have to see it through.”

She shook her head, sympathy in her blue eyes. “I know what it’s like to be down for the count. I know what it’s like to be restless enough that clawing your own skin off feels like it would be a better option. Believe me. I’ve been where you are. And I’m telling you, go back to quarters and get some rest. Take a sleeping pill if you have to. But you’ve been through a hell of a lot in the last twelve hours, and you’re still on medical leave.”

She was being kind, compassion in her eyes, but God! That made it sting even more. “I’m not a child,” Billy snapped at her. “I don’t need to have an afternoon nap. What I need is something to
“And I’m telling you this as a friend as well as your commanding officer. Let us handle it from here.” Carol folded her arms and set her feet, the immovable object he’d seen so many times before.

Billy narrowed his eyes, irritation chafing at every already-raw edge. “Come on, Carol! No-one was looking for these kids before I picked up on the patterns. I did the research. If it weren’t for me, Molly and Klara would still be in that holding cell—or worse. I’ve earned the right to be a part of the cleanup.”

“You’ve done more than enough. You may be too damn stubborn to call in backup when you need it, but the cavalry’s here now.” She stabbed a finger at his chest. “Leave the work to those on active duty.”

Billy threw his hands up in the air with frustration. “You’re seriously benching me again. Now.”

“You never got off the bench, Will. Let it go, or I’ll have Faiza’s squad of muscle-bound orderlies pick you up and put you back in the infirmary for the rest of the day.” Carol stared him down, unflinching, and while Cassie was making sympathetic faces behind her, she didn’t step up and fight for him.

No-one was going to.

“Fine!” Billy snapped, turning on his heel before Carol had officially dismissed him. “This is Will Maximoff, signing off. Next rotation on the schedule? When hell freezes over.”

He stormed off, pushing past David and Kitty in the hallway. They paused in the middle of their heated debate and Billy heard Kitty calling out to him. “Billy, wait!” He didn’t stop, couldn’t deal with anyone else being well-meaning or sympathetic at him. He broke into a jog until he was around the corner and out of sight.

Billy flung himself across his bunk, refusing to acknowledge the relief in his body when he hit the soft mattress. He didn’t need to rest, he wasn’t broken, and he was not about to give any of them the satisfaction. A shower. He’d take a shower and go down to the kwoon for a while, and show them what he was actually made of. Michael and Carol and ... and everyone could go fuck themselves.

He didn’t answer the door when the alert beeped, still sprawled on his back, looking up at the bottom of Tommy’s bunk. It didn’t end up mattering, because the lock blooped and the door opened for Teddy anyway. Fucking keycodes.

“If you’re here to yell at me, take a number.” Billy glanced over to see Teddy with his arms folded, staring him down. Yeah, that was a yelling face. “Tommy already covered the basics.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he did. But now it’s my turn. Should I start with the ‘what were you thinking,’ or jump straight to the ‘how could you’?”

Billy sat up, his entire body protesting the motion. “Why don’t we start with the ‘I was trying to do the right thing’ part and go from there? I think at some point I’ve earned the benefit of the doubt.”

“Benefit of the doubt is one thing,” Teddy replied, and he wasn’t budging, an immoveable object in the middle of Billy’s room. “But what happened to honesty? I thought we were actually getting somewhere, but every time I turn around you’re hiding more things from me.”
The pain in Teddy’s voice cracked through the wall Billy had been trying to build around himself, fractured the ice that had been taking hold of his heart. “This wasn’t about you,” he pleaded. “I didn’t do it to hurt you.”

That had been the wrong thing to say, Teddy’s anger flashing bright and the tops of his cheekbones flushing red. “We slept together and then you snuck out of my bed in the middle of the night—I don’t see how that isn’t to do with me!” He paced a few steps then ran out of floor, swinging back to face Billy again, his hands dragging though his hair.

“You and Tommy have your own issues to figure out, I get that, but why do you keep shutting me out of things? You keep saying that you miss being part of the team, but you’re keeping secrets from everyone. You didn’t need to do any of this by yourself!”

Billy gripped the edge of the bed, his knuckles going white. “So I tell you, and then what? Get pushed to the sidelines and treated like I’m still useless and broken.”

Teddy took a breath like he was about to argue and Billy barrelled on through without giving him a chance to speak. “I was the one who started the investigation, and now that they believe me, it’s ‘run along and take your meds while the able people handle it.’ How am I supposed to feel like part of a team if no-one gives me the chance to do anything?”

Teddy blew out air, his whole body tight. “I get that you’re feeling left out, but Billy, no-one’s treating you that way. If people are acting differently around you lately, it’s because you’re behaving like a child!”

“Bullshit.” Billy grabbed the rail of Tommy’s bunk and swung himself up to his feet. He stabbed a finger at Teddy as he spoke, the words flying fast and thick now that the bottle had been uncorked. “Look at Carol just now, sending me to my room ‘to rest.’ All the hovering you and Tommy have been doing. ‘You’ve been hurt, you don’t know your limits, what if you break-’ and then add Michael and Faiza lying right to my face over and over again. Nate’s the only one who believed I was still capable of anything other than taking up space.”

Teddy didn’t flinch, even when Billy got up in his space. “Maybe we’re trying to help the best we can. And maybe we have been getting it wrong, but whose fault is that? You can’t expect us to be able to read your mind!”

“... no, that’s right.” Billy fired back, bitter bile leaking out in every word, regret pounding wordlessly in the back of his mind, trying to claw back what he was about to say. “That’s you and Tommy now.”

“Billy! That’s unfair.”

“It’s still true.” He set his jaw and folded his arms, refusing to back down. None of this was fair, and now Teddy was blaming him for it? The betrayal compounded on betrayal until every cell of his body screamed with it.

Teddy took a step back this time, shaking his head. “There’s no talking to you while you’re like this. Forget it.” He turned and headed for the door, the mechanism sliding open obediently when he slammed the keypad.

“Sure, great – walk away.” Billy shouted after him, his words echoing off the concrete of the hallway. “Better get that practice in now!”

The tears started once the door closed and the echoes of Teddy’s boots had vanished into memory.
The headache set in eventually, his eyes swollen and his chest clenching tight with grief, nausea and exhaustion. He had fallen asleep somewhere in there, his dreams jagged-edged and hazy when he tried to remember them, mists seeping out from between his fingers.

Billy sucked in breath and pushed himself slowly, carefully, achingly, off his bed. He couldn’t stay there, not in the room where Tommy or Teddy could come back and find him. Where anyone could walk in and tear another strip of skin from his raw and burning flesh.

Solitude, that was what he needed. Alone time and fresh air and a chance to figure out what to do now that he’d burned every bridge he’d ever crossed.

If Teddy ever talked to him again, it would be a miracle.

The stairs to the roof were unlocked and he took them two at a time, ignoring the pain firing jagged lightning bolts along his limbs and the dried salt streaks from his tears that itched on his cheeks.

The sun was almost gone below the horizon, the day passing him by without measure or mark. He should be hungry, should be tired, should be anything other than the numb that swam up and wrapped him in thick cotton wool.

No-one else was around, the concrete roof empty of life. Pebbles crunched under Billy’s feet as he walked across to the railing and looked out over the ocean. Grey waves rolled across the bay below, reflecting the last warm colours of the setting sun. The wind snatched at his jacket, tugging at the edges, and he wrapped it close around himself.

How had everything gone so wrong?

“I meant to fix things, not make them worse.” His words fell into the breeze, carried out toward the indifferent sea. The waves kept rolling in, the clouds drifting across the sky, the sun an edge of yellow on the horizon.

Standing on the roof of a building filled with thousands of people, Billy had never felt more alone in his life.

“Come on,” he spoke again, grabbing the railing with both hands and propping himself up against it. “That was the deal, wasn’t it? I stop sulking about the things I can’t fix, I take action instead of letting the world push me around, and I get a new path. I get a real life back. Maybe we didn’t shake on it, but it was implied.”

Billy buried his head in his hands, pressed the heels against his eyes until spots of white and red appeared in the darkness. “I saved lives today,” he said, lifting his head again and staring out at the horizon. The anger welled up inside him and he gave up fighting to keep it down. “Klara and Molly are home because of me. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

His eyes stung, salt tears drying the corners tight. The only thing moving out on the bay was a cluster of coast guard boats. A sound like a whip-crack followed, a flag down below flapping in the breeze. God, if any such entity existed and was listening, didn’t answer back.

“What do you want from me?” He yelled out into the twilight, not expecting any kind of reply. He was powerless, his hands empty, his body unrecognizable, his heart broken into a hundred different pieces. “Everything I touch falls apart. If there’s some grand plan in motion, a fucking sign would be great right about now.”

He dragged in a deep breath, tried to force the air past the hard lump in his chest. His hands
clenched on the metal bar of the railing, his knuckles white. “Or was that my sign all along? Is that it? I’m supposed to retire? Walk away and leave them to be happy without me?”

A deep breath in, focus and centre. He didn’t want to use Michael’s techniques, or admit that anything the physiotherapist had taught him had been useful. Except that holding on to all that anger wasn’t doing him much good either.

What did he expect? A moment of divine clarity? A burning bush to appear and give him his next set of instructions?

“All I wanted was to help.” Billy’s voice came out in a whisper, a plaintive, hopeless cry to the single bright star hanging low above the horizon.

Driftspace had always been stars.

Those stars were out of reach forever now, and he’d never be able to look up in the real night’s darkness and only see the sky.

He was spoiled in both directions, condemned to live the rest of his life knowing exactly what he’d never have again.

The colours faded from the sky as the sun disappeared. A flash of red caught Billy’s eye. He raised his head.

There it went again, a blink on the horizon that lasted a second too long to be an air traffic light or a plane. If he looked right at it and squinted, he could see it go for the third time—a shooting star that started too low to be from space, a meteor that blazed a narrow trail of red fire across the sky.

The light pulsed, flared, and vanished into the sea. Rhythmic, regular, almost like a blinking code.

What was out there? A ship? A handful of islands so small they barely made it onto maps, the Breach—a throat between this world and the hellscape next door...

That’s it.

Billy’s head jerked up, a hundred data points coalescing into the outline of an image that made sense.

A beacon. The signal that David had picked up during the false alarm, the remnants of campfires on the Channel Islands, the red pulses firing out into the Pacific Ocean.

Someone was sending a message.

The rest of it snapped into place with brutal clarity. Tandy Bowen. He smelled incense, heard the chanting voices of the members of the Church of the Breach, saw the flickering shadows giving a grotesque mockery of life to the statue of the monster that still haunted his dreams.

Let the blue blood of the archangels wash away our iniquity, that we may start life anew in the world before.

They’ll dangle me over the Breach as Kaiju bait.

The sacrifice will go forward. The Kaiju Kings chose you.

The red beacon started pulsing faster, each burst of light sent across the sea another encouragement, an invitation—but for whom?
To the monsters resting below the deepest deep.

Oh God. That’s it.

He knew what they were trying to do.

And unless he could convince everybody else, it was going to be much too late.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Billy tries to explain, and things go from bad to dire. Not his fault this time.

Billy took the stairs down two at a time, stumbling when he missed the bottom one and his toe stubbed against the edge. He caught himself on the railing, wrenching his shoulder, and he hissed against the sharp and painful reminder of his vulnerability.

Maybe they were right to bench me. I can’t even go down stairs properly.

Never.

He bolted down the hall, skidding out around the corner and jammed his finger against the elevator button impatiently until finally, finally, he heard the vast machinery grind to a halt, the doors sliding open.

The babble of competing conversations and raised voices washed over Billy when he made it into David’s blue-washed world, LOCCENT already in an uproar.

“Signal gaining strength, ma’am.”

“I can’t isolate the exact frequency.”

“Hong Kong’s reporting back—they see it, but can’t get a fix.”

Billy pushed through past the various workstations, heading for the front bay windows where David, Carol and a handful of others were huddled over his displays. “The pulse is increasing,” David was reporting, even as Billy tried to get around the wall of bodies and get close enough to weigh in. “In speed as well as strength. All we can tell from here is that it’s aimed—”

“At the Breach,” Billy blurted out. “It’s aimed at the Breach, isn’t it?”

The room fell mostly silent. Carol frowned at him, her brow furrowed. “What do you know about this?”

“I’m pretty sure- no, I’m sure. I know what’s going on.”

Alarms burst into a cacophony over Billy’s head. David pushed himself off the wall, careening down the bank of workstations in his wheeled chair, and slammed his hand down on a switch to cut the noise.

Carol moved past Billy, putting him behind her again so that all he was staring at was her back. He scowled and caught up, inserting himself between them.

David spoke before Billy could, his display flaring up—the blue wire outline of the Breach, red bleeding out in all directions. “We’ve got movement.”

“Alaska is confirming.” Khan leaned over her workstation, her eyes fixed on the holographic display. “But no fix on the details yet.”
“It’s them,” Billy insisted, but no-one was listening. “It’s the BuenaKai church. They’re doing this.”

David shook his head, but frowned at the same time. “The timing’s right for an event, it’s been months since the last one. But the signals are all weird.”

Carol braced her arms on the desk. “Define weird.”

“Jumbled. The throat isn’t opening the way it normally does.”

“That’s because it’s not natural,” Billy insisted, and this time they looked at him for real. “I know I’m in the doghouse right now, and you have no reason to rely on anything I say, but I’m asking you to just. Please. Listen.”

Carol straightened up, her eyes on him. Billy met her gaze, held it steady, tried to push all the urgency and all his certainty through that moment of connection. I’m not crazy. I’m not making this up for attention. Please. Eventually, she nodded.

“I said the BuenaKai church were kaiju freaks, but that’s not the end of it, is it? It’s not just the statues and the freaky hate-on for the PPDC. When I was attacked, Catherine Wilder said that I had been chosen to be a sacrifice to the kaiju. That even though I’d defied them by surviving, she was going to make sure it happened anyway. Molly said the same thing. That she and Klara had been kidnapped to be sacrifices. I thought they were maybe being creepy or metaphorical, but they’re not.

“The dead girls in the water were trial runs. They’re trying to call in the kaiju. To bring about the end of the world. Somehow they’ve figured out a signal that can get to—maybe through—the Breach. And they’re using people for a catalyst... or some kind of bait.”

He ran out of breath and words around the same moment. Carol’s attention immediately switched over to David. “Alleyne?”

David sat for a moment and Billy could practically see the thoughts whizzing around in his brain at a million miles an hour. “It’s possible,” he granted, and Billy sagged with relief. “It’s not a normal event, that’s for sure. The signal’s doing something, and the Breach is responding. The throat’s sitting open,” he stabbed a finger at and through the projection. “Like the last time, when there wasn’t a kaiju after all. I’d be willing to bet that was a test run.”

More pieces snapped into place and Billy nodded rapidly. “And Tandy Bowen’s body washed up on shore the next day. Whatever they tried that time didn’t work, and now they’re making another attempt. I’m right, Carol. I can feel it.”

“Which means,” David cut in, nodding at Billy with something that looked and felt an awful lot like respect, “that there’s every chance they’re on to something. I’ve got a trace on the pulse. Give me a minute and I’ll have the origin coordinates down to the inch. Marshal—they could be bringing something through.”

Carol didn’t hesitate this time. She grabbed for the mic and called down to the flight deck, Colonel Rhodes’ face flashing dark on the monitor to her right. “Rhodey, I need four jumphawks, a ground squad and a search-and-rescue. Alleyne’s sending you the coordinates. We’ve got insurgents, and probably more kidnapped kids.” She cast a glance at David and Billy as though looking for them to confirm, and Billy nodded once.

“Roger that. But you’re giving me the full story once this is over.” The call window closed.
She nodded at David, turning off the mic. “Send the Jaegers. If there’s anything out there, we’re bringing them down.”

The buzzing energy in LOCCENT intensified and Billy slid back out of the way. David hit the intercom, and the speakers in the hallways of the base flared to life. “All Rangers report to drivesuit rooms. All pit crews, prepare for Jaeger deployment.”

Billy’s heart pounded in his ears. He was back on the upswing, a contributing member of society, his purpose justified. “Is there room for me on the mic?” he asked the back of David’s head. He got a thumbs-up and a wave down the console in response, David already on the phone with someone else.

It wasn’t a ticker-tape parade, but he’d take it.

Billy slid into the seat just as the Jaeger docks started powering up, life flooding back into the vast metal behemoths. Lights flashed up and down Magnus’ thighs, her chest, her arms, echoed in the answers from the others.

The air was electric, the bay below springing immediately into swirls of carefully conducted chaos.

Then it wasn’t.

Silence fell.

The lights went out.

“The hell?” David pushed his chair back, barely visible in the sudden dark. LOCCENT, the bay, the Shatterdome itself were plunged into blackness as thick as night.

One, two, three—the backup generators spun on, the faint orange glow of the emergency systems barely giving off enough illumination to see by.

A single green light appeared, an LED on the front of the intercom. The base PA system flared noisily to life, the voice immediately, painfully, infuriatingly familiar.

“It looks like we’ve come to the right moment to introduce ourselves,” Alex Wilder’s smug voice echoed through the concrete halls of the Shatterdome. “The Church of the Breach sends our best regards to the heralds of the last, dead age. Don’t bother trying to restore your computers. My trojan has been in there long enough to bring all of your systems under our direct control.”

“Where the hell is he logging on from? Trace that signal back,” Carol snarled, heading for the computer array on the wall behind her. “Get that guy off my comms!”

“The Shatterdomes are officially dead in the water,” Alex gloated. “You can’t stop us. Your preoccupation with the before-times has done nothing but delay the inevitable. The old world will fall and the new paradise will rise. All blessings to the kaiju kings.

“Let the Breach be opened.”

“Status report!”

“Backup generators are holding steady, all necessary functions are being restored. We’ve got
internal comms back, air and water, but anything data-reliant is down for the count.”

“He’s fucked us, Carol.”

“Tony-”

“There’s no way to say that politely, so I’m not even trying. Parker’s started flushing him out of the main processors, but archives, databases, anything that has contact with the central mainframe, it’ll all have to be flushed, checked, and restored from backups. Manually. Hire the co-op students and teach the janitors to code, ‘cause we need all hands on deck.”

“Fuck,” Carol repeated, leaning forward on stiff arms, hands braced against the tabletop. “What about the Jaegers?”

David shook his head, his glasses nothing but yellow sheets of plexi now, the data stream gone. “Their systems are separate, he didn’t get inside.”

“So why aren’t they working?” Billy asked, staring out the window at the orange-glowing bay below.

“He accessed the kill switches and shut them down from the admin access points,” David admitted, his voice laced through with guilt. As though there was any way he could have predicted it! “It’ll take a lot of time to reboot the Shatterdome systems, check them and get everything back online.”

“Days,” Tony replied from the internal comm.

“ Forget days, we don’t even have hours,” Carol fired back, her jaw set and her eyes focused on something in the middle-distance. “Start running the reboot protocols on the Jaegers. Get them functional. Kamala, see what you can do with external communications. Get Alaska and Hong Kong talking to us. And send those Jumphawks out. At least tell me we can get some of them airborne.”

“What can I do?” Billy asked, on his feet and the urgency of the moment sweeping him up along with the others.

“Stay out of the way,” Carol snapped, then stopped. She turned and gave Billy a faint rueful and apologetic smile, one that faded almost as soon as it had appeared. “Round up the other rangers. Fill them in on what you told us. I need everyone prepared to ride the moment we have a Jaeger ready to go.”

It wasn’t heroic, but it was something. Billy dodged out of the way of a couple of techs hauling a generator in to LOCCENT, and he went.

It was taking way too long. That was the general consensus anyway, about fifteen minutes later when David had the sensor arrays back up and everything was going berserk.

Red flashed everywhere on the screens and projections piped through into the briefing room, flickers appearing and then vanishing again. Not kaiju rising—probably not—but the circling helos could only get so far out into the ocean before they had to turn around and come back, nowhere close to getting any kind of visual confirmation. Hong Kong was still dead in the water, and none of the other Shatterdomes were even responding to comms.

“The problem isn’t the kill switch,” David explained, jabbing a finger at the readouts on the screen behind him. “That’s just the failsafe in case of weapons overload or – sorry, guys,” he glanced up
They were all back in the briefing room for the second time that day, Billy sliding in behind Faiza and Nate. This time it was senior staff and the tech crowd in the front rows, drivesuited Ranger teams—and Billy—crowded into the back. Teddy had stopped to ask Billy, quietly, if he was okay, guilt impressing itself deep in the creases at the corners of his eyes.

Tommy was still seething. It was progress.

“So if they’re back up, why aren’t we deploying?” Rhodey asked, looking from Carol to Tony.

“Because it’s not the Jaegers that are the problem,” Tony jumped in, his face and arms smeared with streaks of what was probably engine oil, his shirt unbuttoned over his old black tank top.

“On their own, the Jaegers are nothing but really, really big, super-awesome Hot Wheels toys. We can’t use them without bridging in pilots, for which we need the AI. And we can't link any of the Jaegers back into the Shatterdome’s mainframe without the risk that the BuenaKai will take control. Not until we sweep out the virus.”

Carol glared at him, a look that seemed to slide right off of Tony’s Teflon exterior. “So we've got four Jaegers that we can't use.”

“We’re dead in the water, just like Wilder said,” Cassie muttered from the back row.

“We’re going to be dead in more than just the water if the brain trust down there can’t figure this out,” America replied quietly from her other side, her arms folded and her brow furrowed.

“I don’t think that’s true.”

The rising hum of tense conversation in the briefing room died away as Kitty pushed her way to the front of the group.

“Pryde?” Carol greeted her, eyebrow raised.

“Marshal.” Kitty nodded to her, glanced at Rhodey and did the same thing. “Colonel. I—we, actually-” she nodded to David and glanced over her shoulder to beckon, and Nate stepped up beside her, a tablet in his hand. “Have been working on something, and it’s a long shot, for sure, but it’s our best shot at getting a piloting team synced right now.”

Rhodey tapped his pen on the binder in his lap and gave her a knowing look. “And given that you’re involved, I’m going to assume this is about Magnus Echo.”

Kitty nodded, a rueful smile on her face for a moment, Magnus’ logo emblazoned on the breast pocket of her pit-crew coveralls really the only explanation necessary. “Will, specifically.”

Oh shit.

The room buzzed again, noise kicking up, people turning to look up the stairs to where Billy was standing, his eyes still feeling warm and a little swollen. He shook his head. “I’m not cleared to pilot,” he replied, his voice coming out too small, too scratchy. Faiza’s expression was unreadable, and Billy cleared his throat. “I can’t do anything.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Nate broke in to the conversation. He aimed his tablet at the infrared receiver on the dock and a new set of charts sprang up on the screen—images of brainwaves and graphs labelled ‘Magnus energy output’ and a long list of scientific symbols Billy didn’t
recognize. “Billy, you were inside Magnus for six months. Your consciousness bonded with that Jaeger in a way that every branch of physics would swear is impossible.”

“Not every branch,” David muttered softly.

“Quantum,” Kitty elbowed Nate from his other side. “Get over it.”

Nate scowled at them both. “Thank you for undermining my authority. The point is,”

“The point is,” Kitty interrupted, “Magnus responded to Billy’s subconscious commands while he was in a coma and she was in powered down in drydock. We’ve got witness corroboration—and quantitative data to back that up. David and Nate have been doing some serious research on the interface. Billy’s alpha and delta waves have changed substantially since he regained consciousness...”

Carol put up her hand to stop the speech even as Kitty gained momentum. “Executive summary, Pryde.”

Kitty traded looks with Nate and David, and it was David who spoke. “We think Billy can act as the conduit. He can be Magnus’s bridge.”

Faiza was shaking her head, moving forward to stand at the railing that circled the back level of chairs. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there’s no way he can pilot right now.” Her look at Billy was full of apology, and not a little bit of regret. “You and I both know that’s true,” she said more quietly, directed at him alone.

David stabbed the table with one finger, his point emphatic. “That’s the beauty of this. He doesn’t have to. The first two-person drift ever was done remotely, when Dr. Caitlyn Lightcap connected to Brawler Yukon’s pilot from the observation tower. We use an isolated pons rig rather than a drivesuit, and set Billy up in LOCCENT with Ted and Tommy in Magnus and ready to go.

“If Billy can synchronize with Magnus without the AI’s help, then he should be able to activate the Jaeger’s own on-board systems and bring the two of them into the drift with him.”

“For the record,” Nate grumbled, “I hate this and none of it makes logical sense, but I’m relatively sure it will work.”

Billy moistened his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. Everyone was staring at him, some expressions more readable than others.

“I haven’t been able to hold the connection for more than a few seconds,” he reminded Nate aloud, ignoring the cresting wave of murmured emotion that swept through the room.

“You’ll be sharing the load. Three ways, this time.”

Drifting with Teddy and Tommy. It was everything he’d wanted, wasn’t it? That and piloting again, riding the lightning into battle. This wouldn’t give him that. He’d be a tool, only a bridge to let the others do the actual work.

But none of it could happen without him. He might not be able to pilot again, he’d screwed up on his solo recon, but maybe he could still do this.

So Billy nodded, ignoring Tommy’s hissed intake of breath. “What are the risks?”

Faiza, her arms folded across her chest, stared him straight in the eye. “Neural overload. Brain bleed. Stroke. Do I need to go on?”
“No,” Tommy snapped, the first thing he’d said since the meeting began. “It’s too risky. There’s got to be some other way.”

“And if there isn’t?” Billy turned on him, mind made up, and out of the corner of his eye he could see the surprise registering on many of the faces in the room. “If there’s any chance at all that this will work, we have to try it. If there are kaiju coming through the Breach, we’re the only strike group with any chance in hell of turning them back. And right now all we’ve got is Magnus.” We’re all there is.

“Are you willing to give up on all of humanity on the chance that I could get hurt? I’m willing to play those odds.”

Tommy stared him down, their eyes locked. Billy expected to see anger, distance, everything from this morning’s fight fired back at him. None of that was there. Tommy’s eyes were red-rimmed, almost like he’d been- but that wasn’t possible. Tommy didn’t cry.

“I can do this,” Billy urged him. “We can do this.”

“Two days ago you were willing to lie right to my face rather than drift with me again.”

“I’m not lying to you about anything anymore.”

And over Tommy’s shoulder, Teddy- watching them, watching him, anticipation crackling between them. “I’ll go along with whatever you decide,” he said quietly to Tommy. “But for what it’s worth, I think we need to try.”

“On one condition,” Tommy said, loud enough for Carol and the rest to hear him on the other side of the briefing room. “We run a test first, Billy and me.” His gaze flickered back to Billy and held him there, Billy all but paralyzed in the intensity of Tommy’s stare. “If we can’t sync now, just us, there’s no way we can send you into the machine.” And for someone who’d raised holy hell about lies of omission, he was holding something back of his own. Something huge that made his green eyes dark and his jaw set tight.

Billy nodded anyway, letting out the rush of air that had sealed itself tight inside his lungs. “Makes sense,” he conceded.

Holding his breath, Billy waited. And Carol nodded. “I’ve seen you three work a miracle before. I’m willing to see this through. With,” she added, “proper medical supervision, none of this ‘locking people out of LOCCENT’ pseudo-coup bullshit like last time.”

The hugeness of it all crashed down around Billy as the meeting broke down into smaller groups, the rest of the plan being hashed out around him. The only thing Billy could see was Tommy and Teddy in front of him, the only thing he could focus on was what was about to happen.

Do we still fit? Are we still compatible or have I broken our bond past all repair? Has Teddy taken my place inside, or is there still a little corner of your mind where I can fold myself small- and stay?

Or will my mistakes make this the end of the world?
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

If at first you don't succeed... it's time for a heartfelt confession.

It all moved too quickly after that. Minutes later, Billy and Tommy were being put in chairs in Nate’s lab, the orange emergency lighting still the base’s only glow. “Older style,” Nate was explaining to Carol and Faiza behind Billy’s back as he moved around them, attaching electrodes and wires to the twins’ heads. “Isolated system, we don’t need to give it any access beyond the quarantined server.”

Billy couldn’t focus on the words, his body practically vibrating with the tension in the room. Not all of was his, for once, Tommy’s stress obvious in his taut frame. Teddy—he wasn’t strung out like the twins, but he was hovering like some armoured-up broody chicken. “And you’ll pull the plug immediately if something goes wrong,” Teddy prompted him.

Nate nodded. “This is simply to see if Billy’s capable of carrying the neural load long enough to re-establish Magnus’ systems.”

“And if Billy starts to have trouble-”

“Billy is right here,” Billy snapped at the pair of them, instantly regretting his tone of voice. But argh! He was supposed to be trying to relax, and this was not helping. Not in the least.

“How can we please get this over with?” Tommy added, his arms folded tight across his chest. It was so strange to look over and see him geared up for battle, but with his helmet off and the pons rig stuck in place. So odd to think that seconds from now Billy would be behind Tommy’s eyes again, after almost a year spent apart.

A lot had changed in that year. Too much? Drift compatibility wasn’t a given. It started with trust, but people could grow apart, build walls, break down that connection until there was nothing left to hang a link on.

Please don’t let that be the case.

The warm pressure of Nate’s hand on his shoulder had to mean it was time. “Ready when you are.”

Billy turned his head to look at Tommy, but his brother’s eyes were already closed.

Fine. See you on the other side.

He nodded. A split second later the snap of the neural bridge popped into place and he was Elsewhere. His stars. There they were, the whole sky bright with them, a rush and a pull and a push all at once.

The blue-tinged memories started to swirl around him, that surge of a presence that wasn’t him. Tommy burned warm in the distance, the brightest star of them all. Billy wanted to reach for him-
The images dissolved into mist, tendrils of fog wafting through his fingers the moment he tried to
grab hold. Barbed wire sprang up in that space, Tommy’s memories and emotions a jagged mess
of hard edges and the iron tang of blood.

The drift evaporated. Billy was jerked back into his own body with a jarring metaphysical thud,
his core hollowed out with a longing so desperate that he could barely breathe. The babble of
voices above, behind, around him drowned out his thoughts.

“For the hell happened?”

“They never got above fifty percent.”

“These two? They used to hit ninety-eight, ninety-nine percent every time.”

“Things change.”

Billy ripped the pons rig off his head, the air cold in his lungs. His fault. He’d had doubts. He
hadn’t even gotten close enough to Tommy to hear his thoughts, their contact the briefest brush
before the barbed wire had sprung up and shoved them both away.

His doubts. His failure.

Maybe they’d all been right after all. Maybe he was too broken to be any good to anyone.

Maybe-

“Are you okay?” Teddy’s voice cut through the muffled screaming inside Billy’s skull. He was
kneeling in front of Billy, and when Billy looked down and met his eyes, his head still swimming
and disoriented, it was concern he saw reflected back at him.

He touched his upper lip, the bottom of his nose, but there was no tell-tale wetness there, no
blood. Small mercies. “I lost the connection,” he admitted dully. “I could see him, but I couldn’t
hang on. It’s my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Tommy broke in. He sat forward in his own chair, elbows on his knees and his
head bowed, his fingers in his bleached-white hair. “That was me, not you. Don’t you start with
the self-blaming shit on this. Not again.”

“You know it was, Tommy,” Billy replied, already getting hot under the collar. “Don’t you start
with telling me what I do and don’t know-”

Teddy muttered something under his breath that Billy barely caught, something along the lines of
“and there’s our problem.” He squeezed Billy’s knee and he stood, the armour plates on his arms
and legs clinking quietly together as he rose. “Marshal, can you give us a few minutes?”

“We don’t have ‘a few minutes,’” Carol replied, her tones clipped and short.

“Please,” Teddy replied, and there was a solidity and confidence in his voice that Billy
recognized. “If I can talk with them. Three minutes, maybe four?” he bargained, and Carol
nodded.

“Three minutes. Then we test again, or not, and move on to plan B.”
“We have a plan B?” Nate asked, Tommy’s pons rig still in his hands.

“Not yet. We’ve got three minutes to come up with one. Richards, Faiza, with me.” Carol gestured to the door. She paused before following them out, lingering in the doorway. “Figure this out,” she said softly, and for a moment she was the friend that Billy remembered, before her own world had gone to hell, before she’d come back as their Marshal. Then she was gone and the door slid closed behind her, leaving the three of them alone.

Teddy’s entire demeanour shifted, his jaw setting square, only a faint twitch betraying his emotions. “Okay. Now we’re going to talk about this like grownups.”

Tommy sat upright and glared at him. “There’s nothing here to talk about.”

Teddy held up his index finger. “Don’t. Don’t even try.” Tommy shut his mouth. Teddy swivelled and pointed at Billy. “You either.”

“Fine,” Tommy groused, folding his arms and trying to glare at Teddy. He only ended up looking... lost. “Lay down the truth, preacher man. Save our souls.”

“The way I see it,” Teddy started. He stopped talking, grabbed a chair and spun it around, straddling the back to sit down. “What I’ve seen, and don’t tell me I don’t know anything, because I’ve been in both of your heads,” he added, pointing from one twin to the other.

“Billy,” he turned in Billy’s direction first. It wasn’t fair that in the moment that was certainly going to be the end of all things, his eyes were so perfectly blue. “All of this bullshit lately—the lying, the sneaking around—it’s not just because you’re enjoying being a pain in our asses.”

“Are you sure about that?” Billy shot back. A faint smile tugged at Teddy’s lips and Billy let himself echo it.

“Most of the time.” Teddy poked him in the shoulder and Billy rocked with it. “Seriously. Look at me. Letting people help you doesn’t make you broken.” Billy did, his pulse a slow drumbeat and his throat thick. Teddy was getting too close, hitting parts that were too sensitive, a war kicking up inside him between curling up and hiding from Teddy’s too-knowing gaze, or lashing out and getting away. “You used to believe that I was on your side. When are you going to start trusting that you don’t have to fight this battle alone?”

“Good luck with that,” Tommy snorted, his arms folded tight in front of him, armour over his armour. “Fucking bonehead.”

“You’re not helping.” Teddy turned and did the same thing, poking a finger at Tommy like he was a stubborn child. “Billy’s injuries weren’t your fault.” Something thrummed between them, old arguments Billy hadn’t heard and could barely imagine. It was like watching them drift, a conversation happening with only their eyes, one that left him on the outside again.

No matter what Teddy said, this was the reality now. Teddy and Tommy, and Billy far away.

“And you can’t protect him from getting hurt again.” Teddy continued, Billy’s pain and confusion not seeming to register. “If you keep trying to keep him under glass, you’re going to lose him for real. And not just Billy, but everything that’s ever been important to either of you.”

“Who the hell is going to keep him alive if I don’t,” Tommy protested, and Billy spoke overtop of him. “I don’t need either of you hovering.” They glared at each other, gazes hot.

Teddy groaned, burying his face in his hands. “What did I do to earn you two idiots in my life? I’m about ready to crack your heads together and see if brute force will help.”
They were at an impasse again, and Tommy finally looked across and met Billy’s eyes. The void stretched between them, empty and vast, the barbed wire flickering into Billy’s mind’s-eye. How could they cross the no-man’s-land that he’d—that they’d—built between themselves?

“Talk to each other,” Teddy said firmly. “Now. Billy, you first. Whatever it is you’re choking on, spill it.”

Billy looked away. “This is stupid.”

Tommy spoke up, agreeing. “You’re not going to tell me anything I don’t already know. I’ve had it with all of this.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” The tension built up too high inside and Billy exploded. “You will be happy to see the back of me. Once I’ve been transferred away it’ll be just the two of you again, and you won’t have to spend all your time worrying about your stupid little brother. Fine. After today none of us will have anything to worry about at all, will we?”

Tommy only stared, his mouth open, and he half-surged out of his chair, his face flushing red. “Are you fucking kidding me with this? You’re my family. You don’t get to go away and leave me, Billy. Not again.”

Billy was on his feet as well, facing down his mirror image, the seal broken and the pain pouring out of him. “What do you care about family? It sure as hell hasn’t mattered when it comes to Grand-dad. You cut him out just fine. Besides. You’ve got him now.” He didn’t dare look at Teddy, the only one of them still sitting. He couldn’t face him, see the look in his eyes, or find out how deep he’d just made this final cut.

“They’ll both be happier without me.”

“That’s different.”

“How?” Billy’s agony poured into the single word, all the complicated, swirling feelings bubbling up with nowhere else to go but that. He couldn’t explain them, could barely begin to count and name them, a tangled mess that had been crawling black through his veins since he’d woken up and learned that he was nothing.

Tommy just shook his head, like this was the first he’d heard any of this, like he hadn’t been listening to anything Billy had been trying to say for months.

I haven’t had the words.

Tommy hadn’t heard him.

“Grand-dad... that’s got nothing to do with this. You’ve never disappointed me.” That got him an incredulous noise from Teddy, but he shrugged it off. “Okay fine, yes, but not that way. And you won’t. You’re a dumbass, but—” Tommy gestured feebly between the two of them like he couldn’t find the words either. “Dude. You can’t seriously. You can’t go.”

Tears spilled from the corners of Billy’s eyes and he dashed them away with the back of his hand. “Why not? You won’t be alone. You and Teddy have each other.”

It was Tommy’s turn to flinch, the words torn out of him, his whole frame surging forward like he was going to grab Billy, maybe shake him. “What do you think that means without you?”

He was trembling, his hands shaking, and Billy felt the same shudder along his spine. He froze,
caught in bonds so tight and terrible that he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move or everything would shatter.

Something poked him in the back. “Now kiss,” Teddy said firmly, and the command was so ridiculous that the moment did break. It broke forward, Billy stumbling the step ahead he needed, his arms circling Tommy. And Tommy didn’t hesitate this time, not like before. His arms came up around Billy, his face buried in the crook of Billy’s neck, and Billy folded in as well. They held each other up, the tears flowing down Billy’s cheeks. He didn’t bother trying to stop it.

“How?” Billy asked again, but it was a different question this time. “How can you belong to two people?”

And this time Tommy seemed to hear him, his reply muffled in Billy’s shirt and his hair. “It’s not as complicated as you think.”

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe it was time to try and believe him.

Tommy’s fierce hug didn’t let up, holding Billy strong. And Billy... Billy held him up too, until the trembling in Tommy’s spine faded and stilled.

“I’m not going to break,” Billy said firmly, pulling away just far enough to look Tommy in the eye.

“I’m not going to let you walk away,” Tommy replied, and he grabbed the scruff of Billy’s neck because he was still Billy’s asshole brother and some things, at least, didn’t seem to have changed. “Butthead.”

“Jerk.” And that was so brightly familiar that Billy could almost let himself believe. But there was still a piece missing.

Billy turned, and he reached out a hand.

Teddy took it, his grip cool and strong, and he let Billy tug him up out of his chair and into the circle.

“You’re up,” Billy said, scrubbing his face dry again before grabbing on to Tommy’s hand once more. “Honesty time, right? If we’re going to link, all three, we need everything on the table. Tommy and I are good-” he broke off for a second and glanced at Tommy, who squeezed his hand tight in reply. “Your turn.”

Teddy blanched a little, and he looked at Tommy first. “Tommy-”

Tommy just made a disgusted noise and took his hand back from Billy. He rolled his eyes at them both. “Dude, I know. Talk to him.”

The moment hung there, the sounds of the base under emergency a distant background din.

“I hate you for this, just for the record,” Teddy told him. Tommy only grinned and clapped him on the back.

“A deep sigh later and Teddy spoke, directly to Billy this time. “I’ve been jealous,” Teddy admitted, the words falling in measured doses from his lips, each one carefully weighed before he let it free. “It’s not fair, and not all the time, but there it is. You two will always come first for each other. And that is important, before you try and tell me it isn’t. But sometimes...” and he trailed
off, looking everywhere but at Billy’s face.

“You want to belong to someone like that,” Billy guessed, the inches of space between them growing and narrowing again in the space of a heartbeat, or a breath.

“To have the kind of bond with someone that you and Tommy have, knowing that it will be there with me for life.” Teddy finished the thought, and then he did look at Billy, so open and vulnerable that tears urged themselves up into the corners of Billy’s eyes again, just after he’d finally gotten rid of the worst of the embarrassing wetness. “The same thing you’ve been trying so hard to throw away.”

“That’s not exactly.” Billy objected, but Teddy just raised an eyebrow and Billy shut up.

Teddy bit his lip hard enough to turn it white, then kept going. “We had that, you and me. For a little while. Then there’s Tommy and Magnus and I. But that’s not complete either. He’s also got you. And in some ways neither of us knows you at all anymore. And it scares me.”

Tommy applauded, a sarcastic little golf clap that meant he was most of the way to feeling better about everything. “Well done. Billy’s turn before Carol comes back in to kick all our asses.”

Billy reached out and took Teddy’s hand, holding it between his own. “I want,” Billy started.

*I want to drift with you while I’m awake and feel everything that you are flood through everything that I am. I want to be under your skin and in your veins and know you the way a star knows a supernova. I want to run away with you and have an apartment somewhere high above the city where we can lie in each other’s arms and forget about the world. I want to love you until the end of time itself."

“I want to be that person for you,” he said instead, which covered all of those things he still assumed he’d never have. “And my feelings for you and for Tommy are completely different things.”

“That’s for the best, because that would be very wrong.”

Teddy’s joke broke the tension, the air moving more easily into Billy’s lungs. “Not to mention illegal.”

Teddy watched Billy, that awful, careful blankness gone from his expression. “I hate it when you hide things from me, but it’s not all because I’m keeping tabs on you. It’s because you’re important to me, and I want to know what’s on your mind. And be there for you. With you. All that.”

“Part of my world?”

“Yes- no. Do not break into song. This is not the appropriate moment for a Disney interlude.”

“It’s always the appropriate moment for a musical interlude,” Billy replied loftily, and held the almost hysterical laughter in until Teddy caught his eye and cracked a grin.

“I take back everything I said about wanting to know your thoughts.”

“Too late now. You’ve broken the seventh seal.”

“I’ll brace myself for the incoming apocalypse.” End of the world jokes? Teddy had to be feeling better.
“Speaking of which,” Tommy said pointedly, looking at the door.

Billy nodded, slowly, his head aching from the aftermath of the tears and everything that had been said. “We’re out of time.”

Teddy pulled him into a hug, his armour bumping against Billy and keeping their bodies from pressing close the way he wanted, but it was a start. “This conversation isn’t over,” Teddy said as he pulled back, reluctantly letting Billy go.

“I know.” Billy nodded, glancing away. “I’m so sorry.”

Teddy’s hand cupped his cheek as Tommy found Billy’s hand again, lacing their fingers together. And Teddy smiled at them both. “We’ll work it out. I have faith. God knows why, with you two idiots in my life, but I do.”

“Is that the way to go into a world-saving mission?” Tommy mouthed off at him, but Billy could hear the happiness in his voice without having to turn and look. “With insults and sarcasm?”

Billy laughed, he couldn’t help it, and he held them both tight. His boys. The missing pieces of his heart. “When have we ever done it any other way? Call Carol back in,” he said, letting go and straightening his uniform, his eyes dry and his head held high. “We’ve got work to do.”

Plugging in this time felt different, right from the beginning. The warmth of Tommy’s embrace still lingered on Billy’s shoulders—or at least it seemed to—a lifetime’s worth of weight lifted from them in an instant.

Nate counted down, Teddy chewed on his bottom lip as he watched them, and the stars appeared in the heavens as Billy was swept up into the power of the drift.

It was so much simpler this time, easier than the simulator.

_He’s in his drivesuit, helmet under his arm, alone in the starscape. He could float here forever, unattached, unbothered, whole._

_Nothing hurts._

_Tommy — his brother is supposed to be here. Where?_  

_A red spark flares below him, impossibly far down into the void. Too dim to see, too faint to hear, it’s potential more than anything and the distant memory of someone humming a forgotten tune._

_He begins to sink, to let himself fall towards it — Tommy? — but driftspace changes and he forgets._

_A bridge extends underneath his feet, the arc looping over the nebulas and galaxies below. He begins to walk. There’s another figure there, himself in his drivesuit, helmet on. The other-him takes his helmet off and it’s Tommy, walking up his side of the bridge to meet Billy in the middle._

_Billy takes his hand._

Memories flooded in, new ones, ten months worth of Tommy’s life bursting over him in white-cresting waves. Tommy as a child, opening pages of a scrapbook, the photographs inside spinning up into flashes of unfamiliar moments frozen in time. _See, see? Look at my pictures. This was what happened while you were gone._
Tommy’s at his bedside, the unfamiliar names tangling in his mouth.

Glorfindel? What the fuck kind of name is ‘Glorfindel’?

Your taste in books sucks, little brother.

Fine. Don’t breathe at me that way.

“Glorfindel was tall and straight; his hair was of shining gold, his face fair and young and fearless and full of joy...”

I knew, I heard you, I felt you beside me all the time.

Tommy’s falling asleep in the chair, the plastic poking hard into his ribs, his thighs. Teddy’s there and he’s hauling Tommy to his feet, shooing him out the door.

Get rest. It’s my turn to stand watch.

He took care of you as well.

We owe him more than you know.

I can’t give him enough; he already has it all.

See this. Let me show him to you.

Grief and emptiness flooded through Billy, loneliness, a longing so raw and visceral... yet at the same time distant. These were Teddy’s feelings, filtered through Tommy’s memories, frosted glass muting the impact even as the thunder pounded against his heart.

Like this, it was like this, then-

Broken and we healed each other

He needs you

He needs us

neither of you need me

Tommy and Billy are running, hand in hand, the sand warm under their feet. Summer and the sun beats down, Mom’s on a towel watching.

Careful boys, don’t go too near the water
Tommy’s in the waves

~this never happened~

Tommy’s sinking under, water crashing over his head,

the bleak darkness swallowing him whole

Billy grabs him, hand around wrist, pulls him out

~not this way~

The only one who can find me / always here

Until you weren’t

I’m here now. Let me in. Show me there’s still room

for me in the world that was ours. Please.

Always. Always. Always.

I miss you so much \ I miss you so much

I’m here \ I’m here
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Wherein things almost go right - but there's one more obstacle to deal with.

“IT’ll be just like the last time,” Nate reassured Billy, tweaking the last few settings on the display in front of him. “Only Teddy will be along for the ride, you’ll be connecting through Magnus herself rather than the simulator, and we probably only have enough juice for one shot.”

Billy stared at him and Nate stared back, seemingly unimpressed by Billy’s glare. “So in other words, absolutely nothing at all like last time.”

“You’ll be drifting with Tommy,” Nate pointed out, but he didn’t argue the point further. “We’re ready here, Marshal.”

Ten minutes after Tommy and Billy’s successful drift they were all gathered in LOCCENT while Nate, David and Kitty ran in circles, checking contacts and taking triply-redundant readings. Teddy brushed the back of his gloved hand against Billy’s arm.

The bay outside the window was unnaturally quiet, too much still running on emergency power. LOCCENT’s systems had been pulled free from the main computers, individually purged and running virus-free. Or so Tony promised.

“Hey,” Teddy said softly, catching Billy’s eye. There were nerves there, but also pride, and Billy’s tongue felt thick in his mouth.

“Hey yourself,” Billy replied, that smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Better get ready. If this works I’m going to have a ringside seat to every uncharitable thought you’ve had about me over the last few days.”

“As long as you don’t pull a Bobbi and sucker-punch me, we’ll be doing okay.” They had a second of peace while Nate and Kitty argued about something, and Teddy leaned in. His mouth tasted sweet, his kiss gentle and searching. “I’ve said pretty much everything out loud already, so I don’t think there are too many surprises waiting in there.”

Billy swallowed hard, tried to center himself inside his feelings and name them one by one. No hope.

I’m still so desperately in love with you.

He almost said it, then chickened out. Teddy would know it all in a few minutes anyway.

Teddy almost seemed to understand already, holding eye contact through those last moments of stillness. Then Tommy bonked Billy on the head, there were a couple of embarrassing hugs, and Kitty shooed the guys out to go load in to Magnus’s connpod.

Cassie and Kate didn’t leave, flanking Billy instead, taking up the spaces where Teddy and Tommy had stood only moments before. Kate ruffled his hair before Nate started attaching ledes, and Cassie squeezed his shoulder, tight. He covered her slim hand with his, letting her warmth and
her support sink into his bones.

“Are you going to be okay?” Kate asked him. The thought that she had doubts didn’t rankle as much as it might have only hours ago, his whole self inexorably altered from the man he’d been. Tommy still sat in his brain even though the drift had ended, the memories and the feel of his presence almost physical in their intensity.

Kate loved him, loved Tommy too. He saw it through his brother’s eyes.

“Do I have a choice?” he dared to ask, the gel sticky in his hairline as Nate dabbed it on.

“You’ve got this,” Cassie replied from his other side, squeezing his shoulder tight again. She didn’t say the rest, letting the obvious words—we’re all relying on it—hang in the space between sentences.

The feel of Teddy’s lips lingered on his mouth, Tommy’s final words in his ear. See you on the other side. Billy headed for the chair set for him by the big bay window, and watched Tommy and Teddy move along the catwalk that circled Magnus’s immense frame.

Billy swallowed hard, the doubts and fears circling up from the dark well entirely on their own. “What if,” he said, his mouth dry and words trailing off into nothing.

Cassie’s arms slipped around his neck, and when she pressed her head against his he could smell the sweet floral of her shampoo and the faint chemical tang of drivefluid mixed in with canvas, leather and sweat.

“Don’t ‘what if,’” she said firmly, and he flashed back to years of hearing her over the mic in the middle of battle. They’d started out as cadets at the same time, Cassie and her dad, Billy and his brother, too many of them grown up together in the middle of shit too big for kids to be dealing with at all.

She still had his back. She always had. Billy curled his fingers through hers and squeezed them tight.

“Looks like they’re in,” Kate reported from where she was watching through the window. “Get ready to make history.”

“First three-person-one-Jaeger combo, coming right up.” Billy joked, his voice shaky.

David was on the mic, images of Teddy and Tommy flashing up onto his display. The video feed blurring out here and there from weak points in the hastily jury-rigged systems. Colours blurred under his fingertips, and finally he nodded in their direction.

Billy gave him a thumbs-up. Nate flipped the switch.

Stars rush over him, different this time. The abyss opens up beneath his feet as he sinks.

/Aligning neural signatures./

David’s voice echoes from nowhere and everywhere all at once, easing him down into the black.

/Bringing Magnus online./

It’s just Billy right now, in the vast emptiness. There’s nothing at all in the space where Tommy should be. He’s by himself, inside himself, and the familiarity and the fear hits him all at once.
Just like the pons tests. It’s okay that I’m alone. If this works, it won’t be for long.

The starscape shifts; it’s the ocean now, grey and unyielding. The waves ripple in a soft breeze that he can’t feel. He’s in his drivesuit and body armour, his helmet under his arm, his heart numb.

Something shifts beneath the water’s choppy surface. The shape is green and chased with red, lying on the sandy ocean floor.

Billy settles his helmet over his head. It fills with the salty taste of seawater.

I want Tommy and Teddy to be here.

The only way to get to them is to finish this.

He steps off the Shatterdome roof. He falls forever, the sky flickering through every shade of grey and black and blue until he hits the water feet-first. He sinks, the ocean closing over his head, but he can still breathe. The trench opens up beneath him, the deepest place in the ocean, made deeper by a tear in the fabric of time and space.

Billy falls toward the Breach. He passes through. He’s engulfed by the dark.

Not even water surrounds him now. He’s deeper than he’s ever been, and there’s no landmark, no light, no sensation to be a point of reference. It’s only Billy, floating in the endless void.

Billy doesn’t fight. He’s so tired of it all. Even just living is a struggle now, each day a battle to earn the things that used to be as invisible and natural as a heartbeat.

He falls through despair and loss and doubt and the plummet seems never-ending.

A red light flickers in the distance. Below him, down so far that it would take a thousand years to fall. Nothing but a pinpoint, a single spark, but that’s enough.

Billy opens his eyes and heads for that, the tiny beacon, a miniscule campfire in the endless night. Blood pounds through him as he speeds toward it, faster and faster with each heartbeat. Wind rushes in his ears, the stars burst cold against his skin.

Until he’s there. And he knows it. One tiny spark of awareness that’s so familiar, a shard of his own soul left behind to mark his place. He reaches out and cups it, surrounds the light with his hands. It bleeds between his fingers, a flicker and a glow, a soothing heat. It expands, fills the sky with red. His pain is gone.

~?~

The query floats to him from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

~I~ he sends back and out to the light that surrounds him, the heartbeat that pulses with his own.

~I’m here.~

~I am I.~ he receives back. His own voice, cryptic and framed in feelings not words, his thoughts an endless reverberating echo.

~It’s time.~

Billy reaches out and finds the places where he used to fit, handholds in the darkness that once moulded to his hands and feet. The helmet sits around his head, his hands close on Magnus’
controls. She’s around him, a whisper and a thrum summoning up from beneath his feet.

He is the ghost in the machine. And Magnus is with him.

/We have activity./ David’s voice cut in, an echo from another world. Billy focused, slid between the here and the then, LOCCENT resolving around him. His awareness of Magnus’ presence never faded but now he could see the lights gleaming on the console in front of him, hear the pounding of boots running on the catwalk.

And there, at the same time, something snugged tight around his arms and legs, the sounds of the Jaeger bay spinning up around him, the thick oil-tinged tang of the conn-pod’s air.

There was no smell of drive fluid this time but he could feel the machine anyway. The ghost of his rig, that part was memory. The pressure on his arms and legs, on his hips and the base of his neck, that was new, and solid and real. Magnus. He was feeling Magnus, her docking bolts and restraints holding him steady.

He closed his hand.

Through the window, across the bay (around his fingers and his wrist, a firm metallic hug), Magnus’ hand curled closed as well.

Insistent beeping had to be an alarm going off, his heartbeat pulsing fast and loud in his ears. He was two and one at the same time, sensory overload imminent.

“Get Maximoff and Altman online, now!”

“How the hell is he doing that?” Nate, as disbelieving as ever.

“No fucking clue, but it’s not going to last unless we can split the load. Guys? Guys!”

“We’re ready.” Tommy’s voice cut in to the buzz, right in Billy’s ear. “Do it already.” He sounded strained and tight and Billy struggled to open his mouth, to say something—his ears were already ringing, the pressure building behind his eyes. Any second now it would turn to pain, the load too much even as he started to resurface.

“Engaging pilot to pilot protocol now.” And there was David, his calm rattled. Billy watched him from a distance, across the room and staring into LOCCENT’s small raised window, but so close he could reach out and touch— Billy closed his eyes and tried to filter out the extra information, his brain starting to come apart at the seams.

Come on, come on—I’m running out of time. Hold it together. That was the only thing he had to do, hold the strain. Like he had in the BuenaKai warehouse, Molly and Klara on his shoulders.

Like Tommy, when Billy had left him alone in the middle of the cold ocean.

The AI’s voice replied. “Pilot to pilot connection protocol sequence initiated.”

“Magnus Echo ready and aligned.” Billy said it at the same time as Teddy’s reply piped in over the radio, two voices lining up as one.

“They’re in.”

Carol made the call. “Prepare for neural handshake.”

“Handshake starting in ten seconds. Nine.” This time the countdown was shorter, and this time
Billy was already engaged.

“Two. One.”

“Neural handshake initiated.”

Billy expected the rush to come again, the burning of stars and the graviton wave pulling him along in its wake. But he was already where he was supposed to be. His breathing echoed ragged inside the helmet that wasn’t really there, sense impressions layered three realities deep.

There—above in the black, two lights that burned brighter than he ever had. Blue and green. The drift moved, curled around him, space folding and time stilled.

Billy hung suspended in the starscape, galaxies slowly turning and nebulas glowing in the distance. Magnus was around him, containing him, behind him. In front of him was a junction.

On the one side, the green grasses and fields, a perfect clear sky arcing overhead. Pastoral, calm, still—all the words most people never thought to associate with his brother. Tommy stood there anyway, in the landscape that had always been driftspace for him, the world open and the road endless beneath his feet.

On the other, the beach, the grey-blue ocean churning beyond the waterline. Small waves broke over each other, whitecaps curling over and bursting into small explosions of foam. The wind toyed with Teddy’s hair, the air thick with salt-spray.

Power hummed behind him, sounds in the distance so unimportant.

Billy moistened his lips. “You’re here.”

Tommy fixed him with a scornful look as brilliantly awful as it was welcome. “Not yet we’re not.”

“Are you ready?” Teddy asked from the other side, their voices impressions rather than words.

“No,” Billy replied, his voice shaky. Everything, from the moment Honne-Onna had hit him and he’d gone under—all of it had been leading to this. And he was scared.

“You’ve got this,” Teddy urged.

“What if,” Billy started to say again and no-one stopped him this time. “What if we all get stuck? What if I’m not strong enough to make this work.”

Teddy nodded, like he understood. “Then we fix it together.”

“That’s the deal, little brother. None of us has to fight alone anymore.”

“Since when did you get sentimental?” Billy sassed him back, but his heart swelled warm.

“Since I started drifting with this guy.” Tommy nodded toward Teddy, standing in his drive suit on his beach, the waves nibbling at his feet. “He’s a walking Hallmark movie.”

He could feel it, time beginning to move, the voices of the real world more insistent in his ears.

/What’s going on in there?/

/Synchronization in progress. Twenty percent and climbing./
Billy took an airless breath. He reached out his hands, one to each. Two hands took his.

He pulled.

Reality snapped around him, a rubber band pulled to the limit and then released.

/Synchronization in progress. Fifty percent and climbing./

There was a moment of perfect clarity, the two men he loved best in all the world flooding into his brain. Here, hesitation and fear—but also love, so primal and fierce and all-encompassing. Any suggestion he might still have held that he didn’t deserve it washed away in the oncoming tide.

Memories tried to drown him—Seattle, New York, the Academy, Nevada—Tommy’s life, Teddy’s life, a hundred-thousand thoughts and experiences ricocheting through his mind, some moving too fast to catch, others he’d sit with forever.

~how could you think that~

~don’t you leave me again~

~I love I love I love~

~I never meant to hurt you~

~things will be different from now on~

The thoughts could have been any one of theirs, or all at once, voices indistinguishable in the maelstrom that surrounded them. The void shifted, changed, grabbed at them with a thousand little fingers of wind. Billy held them tight and they, in turn, held him. As broken as he was-

Tommy echoed through the link. ~You’re not broken, don’t ever think that.~

~ Kintsukuroi~ Teddy sent instead. An image of a vase, shattered and rebuilt, gold marking the edges of every once-fractured shard. ~Broken doesn’t mean destroyed.~

There. Billy took the image and made it his own, the fractures in driftspace his open wounds.

Opposite him, Tommy and Teddy took each other’s hands. Gold curled up along the raw edges of space, solidifying around the splinters, filling in the voids. The dome of stars closed over them, the grass green beneath their feet, the salt-sea air a friend again.

~Broken doesn’t mean destroyed.~

~It means a chance to get stronger.~

Teddy’s palm pressed solid against Billy’s, and when Billy looked up and met his eyes, he couldn’t argue anything anymore.

He saw the truths in the lines of his face: Teddy’s worry and his yearning, the desperate grief that time had barely begun to soothe, the memory of love. His mother’s perfume.

The parts of Tommy that had imprinted on him.

The space he had reserved for Billy, tucked in beside his heart.

Billy nodded. He brought Teddy’s fingers to his lips.
Brothers, partners, lovers—a triangle with three sides, complete and stable.

~I love you. Always.~

~You’re my forever.~

~Gross, guys. Can you hold the mushy stuff until after we’ve saved the world?~

The AI’s voice cut in, the real world and the drift overlaying each other now in a breathtakingly familiar way. /Kinesthetic synchronization is complete. Three pilots engaged in neural bridge./

The rest of the noise followed, David and Carol’s excited voices, Cassie’s hand squeezing tight on his shoulder.

Billy’s body sat in the chair in LOCCENT and in Magnus’s connpod at the same time. He rode between and behind Teddy and Tommy’s eyes, and something more. Magnus’s alloys were his skin, her motor strands his muscles, and the empty space in his head

~Like I always said...~

~Shut up, Tommy~

Was filled again, his heart overflowing.

“A hundred and five, a hundred and six – a hundred and eight percent of normal synchronization. They’ve done it!” David cheered, pushing back from his console and grinning at Billy in amazement.

/Right hemisphere, calibrating./ There was Tommy. Time for Teddy now-

/Left hemisphere, calibrating./

“Whatever the fuck I am now, calibrating.” Billy answered with an unrestrained and giddy laugh.

“Don’t start confusing the issue,” David ordered, pointing a finger at him, though his grin didn’t falter.

“That’s impossible,” Nate argued, peering out the window at Magnus’s vast bulk, the grind of the retracting docking clamps muffled through the plexiglass.

Carol, on David’s other side, shook her head and the smile she gave Billy was somehow knowing and apologetic at the same time. “And yet. They’ve done it. Now get Magnus launched and get Will out of there,” she ordered, and Billy’s exuberant joy popped, the balloon jabbed by an unforgiving needle.

“What? No!”

Carol looked at him, her eyes full of understanding and compassion, and that just made the shock so much worse, reverberating down the connection. “You were the link we needed, Will, and your part’s done. They need to get out there before the BuenaKai can finish the job, and there’s no way to keep you attached wirelessly.”

~I hadn’t thought of that~

~None of us did~

Tommy and Teddy’s surprise and comprehension softened the blow, waves of reassurance
flavoured blue, Teddy’s colour, wrapped in the warmth of the blankets on his bed, the sheen of his skin still damp with sweat) pervading and soaking in, a shield against the pain of loss. A bandaid over the gaping hole still knitting together inside his heart.

“That’s—” Billy took a breath, the air sterile and flat, the base’s compressors still on quarter-power. Kate leaned against the wall, watching every exchange of words, and Cassie squeezed Billy’s shoulder one last time before letting her hand drop away. He grabbed it and squeezed it back, trying to send his wordless thanks across the void of real space. “That’s fair,” he finished reluctantly. “But this isn’t the end of this experiment,” he pleaded, looking at Nate for confirmation.

Nate squeezed Billy’s shoulder. “Not a chance. You’re going to get me a Nobel Prize,” he added on, and Billy (and Tommy and Teddy) wasn’t entirely sure he was joking. Like, at all.

/Roger that, LOCCENT,/ Tommy replied over the comms, brisk and efficient even as the feel of his mind shifted between annoyance and reluctant understanding. /Magnus Echo ready to deploy./

“Let me stay in a minute longer,” Billy craned his neck to see around Nate, to catch Carol’s eye and hold her there. She knew how it felt, she’d been a pilot once. And he had the chance to be the colossus one more time.

“ Granted.”

David’s voice cut in overtop of the conversation, echoing through the speakers in the bay and right beside Billy in stereo sound. “Releasing docking clamps on Magnus Echo. Techs, clear the path.”

He felt the clamps retract, the scrape and slide against his metal skin, more sensation ricocheting through a brain that was full-to-bursting already. Power surged through his legs/Magnus’s legs, muscle fibres lighting up one by one, and the burning glow of fusion settling warm inside.

More than it had ever been, sensation of the machine and himself, edges blurring recombining with the new awareness-

~Don’t go too deep~

~You’re not escaping us that easy~

And they were there again, hands in his, pulling him back from the edge. Billy stood on the cliff in driftspace, the stars wheeling by in the heavens overhead, the gestalt echoing his movements. Magnus responded even though he wasn’t in his rig, her limbs his limbs, power rocketing through his sitting body. His knees ached, his back sore and not at the same time.

~This is so weird.~

There was the shock of the drop, the water splashing cold around his legs, Tommy and Teddy running their checks.

“Magnus, this is LOCCENT. We have confirmed target, coming from the west, seventy miles out and closing fast.”

The sound faded in and out, driftspace feeding him the sensation of fog clouding over the sharp edges of the link.

/We’re losing Billy./ Tommy’s voice through the comms was louder than the feel of him inside Billy’s mind, his fingers turning to coiling mist, his grip just as insubstantial.
“Bring him out gently,” Carol ordered. The disconnect was soft, necessary, cushioned by the waves of affirmation being fed down along the last lingering threads of the bond. Billy hated every last instant, the phantom weight of Magnus’s titanium frame pressing down on his limbs even as he resurfaced in LOCCENT, alone inside his head.

And back in a body that felt less like his own than it had before. Billy wiggled his fingers, his toes, tried to recenter himself. It had been like this after the coma, trying to remember what impulse moved which muscle, how to get his nerve endings back in sync with the skin they belonged to.

“Oh, okay,” he sighed under his breath, opening his eyes to a scene of near chaos. “I’m back.”

“Sixty miles,” Kamala reported, her eyes on her station and the red blip moving at top speed toward the Channel Islands and the beacon flashing bright across the screen. “Air wing on route, report they’ll be at the beacon site in ten seconds.”

“Blow that transmitter off the surface,” Carol ordered, leaning forward on braced arms and ignoring Billy as he came back to himself piece by piece. “Magnus, sitrep.”

/Having response issues, Marshal,/ Tommy replied curtly. /I don’t think she’s happy with us right now./

/That’s putting it mildly./

“Pilot synchronization dropping.” David’s voice rose over the calm intonation of the AI.

NINETY-EIGHT PERCENT. NINETY-SEVEN. MAGNUS ECHO AI NONRESPONSIVE.

“We’ve got problems, Marshal. Ted and Tommy are dropping their connection.” He scooted his chair back, talking rapidly at her as he moved. “The system’s not stable without Will.”

“Great,” Carol scowled at the readouts, the gears behind her eyes spinning at a hundred miles an hour. “We have a Jaeger we can only use as long as it stays within a quarter-mile of the Shatterdome? That’s not going to work out.”

“Put me in the connpod.” Billy pushed himself to his feet, his joints complaining from the punishment he’d given them over the past few days. “I can’t pilot, but I can still ride.”

“Magnum is already out there.” Tony’s voice cut in from the comms, the channel still open. “Even if she were still in the bay, there’s no time to do that kind of rewiring job. We’re ten minutes away from having Stinger ready to launch and I can’t pull anyone back.”

“Cass, get geared up and down to your jaeger. What’s the longest range you can pull out of a pons set?” Carol pointed at Nate, who blinked back at her before answering.

“That’s about it, unless we put an amplifier in the middle. Just sticking one on this end wouldn’t be enough to keep the signal strong. They were only ever designed to work in tandem with a dedicated computer system and a hard-wired connection, and we’ve made a lot of compromises to the setup just to get Billy and Magnus talking in the first place.”

“Fifty miles.”

“Magnus?”

SYNCHRONIZATION STABLE AT 95 PERCENT.

/We can hold it, but Magnus is sluggish as hell,/ Tommy reported, his image flickering in and out
of focus as he messed with something on his control panel. /Fighting like this is going to be a bitch./

“Amplifier,” David repeated, jumping from his chair to start pulling wires from something under one of the computer cabinets. “One here isn’t enough, but we’ve got the communication relays and the helicopters. Put someone in the air near Magnus and they can intercept the signal, bouncing it to the jaeger’s arrays.”

Billy leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. David had been right when he and Kitty had suggested the pons experiment in the first place, and as crazy as any of this sounded, he liked the idea of his team being out there only partly functional so, so much less.

“Eliminate half that work,” he urged. “Let me ride out there with the pons. Then the only thing we need to worry about is the pilot keeping me close in enough that a single amplifier can keep the signal strong.”

That wall of resistance came up again, he could feel it pouring off Carol in waves. “I can do this,” he insisted, standing tall. Sure, he hurt already, and he was going to feel it in every inch of his body tomorrow. But if he didn’t do this, none of them would have any kind of tomorrow to feel terrible in.

“We’ve got the best pilots in the world, and I’ll be just as safe in the copilot’s chair in a helicopter as I will here in LOCCENT. Safer even, because you won’t have to worry about me in case of an evacuation. And when Tony gets the Shatterdome’s systems back and the rest of the strike group up, we’ll come back in.”

He expected her to fight him, to send him back down to the infirmary again with his tail between his legs and another stain on his record. Instead, Carol nodded. She looked from Billy to David and Nate, then at Kamala’s screen and the track of the approaching kaiju, and she nodded.

“Get your ass down to the flight deck,” she ordered, a flicker of a smile touching her lips. “David, get me Rhodey. If anyone can pull off this bullshit move, it’ll be him.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Where the day is saved. But at what cost?

There wasn’t any time to overthink things, not this time around. Billy bolted for the elevators, pons rig and the amplifier in hand. He peeled in to the flight deck in time to catch Colonel Rhodes suitting up. One of the techs handed Billy a G-suit and he hauled it on over his uniform, ignoring the helmet. He wouldn’t be able to wear it and the pons at the same time anyway.

Rhodey gave him the slow once-over, his expression plain.

“Don’t ask if I’m up for this, Colonel,” Billy begged, zipping the suit up to his chin. It had been made for someone taller than him, and maybe a year ago he’d have had enough shoulder mass to fill it out so that it wasn’t bagging on his arms. Not anymore. There wasn’t any time to go hunting for a smaller size, so he set his chin square and—he hoped—determined rather than stubborn and childish. “I have to be, because we’re all there is.”

“All I was going to say was that you look like a twelve year old playing in his dad’s closet,” Rhodey joked. At least Billy was pretty sure he was joking. “The Jaeger armor suits you better. C’mon.” He clapped Billy on the shoulder, half companionably, half pushing him in the direction of the waiting helicopter. “We’ve got some butts to kick.”

Billy was no stranger to high-velocity and high-powered travel, but the feeling of lifting off in the combat helicopter was nothing at all like bolting in to a jaeger. Beyond the obvious differences — no psychic connection, one twentieth the size, etc. whatever—the engine sounds were vibrations through his skin instead of a heartbeat behind his ribs. It didn’t hurt that Rhodey was coaxing the controls along with sure and practiced hands, calm on the radio as he guided them into the air. Liftoff was so light that Billy could almost imagine he was the one flying, without any kind of machine around him.

A jaeger was power. This was more like... freedom.

It was a new vantage point as well, hanging on to the oh-shit handle above the open door at his side, the safety belts cradling him close to the seat as they tipped into a turn. Grey ocean water rushed by below them, and they had to be getting close now. Rhodey was on the radio again and he signalled to Billy. Go time.

The amplifier setup was easy, David had done all the hard work already. All Billy had to do was turn it on and jack in, and somehow, supposedly, LOCCENT and the on-board systems would do the rest.

He could see Magnus on the horizon now, a massive black silhouette in the dark. She was moving, but even from outside he could see the hesitation, feel the strain bleeding through her slow and sluggish steps.

And beyond her, a familiar rippling disturbance in the water that extended out toward the black horizon line. The raised voices over the radio confirmed it, and as he lifted the pons rig to his head, the night sky lit up. Magnus’ stingblade slid out of her arm and locked into position. Billy
didn’t realize he was already copying the motion until he glanced down and saw his hand clenched around nothing, the pons dangling free.

He arranged it on his head, a strange fit when his senses expected either the drivesuit helmet or nothing at all. Rhodey dropped the helo to fifty feet above Magnus, and Billy settled the earwig in his ear.

“I’m ready,” he said, the transmitter hopefully on the right frequency. Had he even checked before they’d taken off? What if the guys couldn’t hear him, and-

“ Took you long enough.” Tommy’s complaint sent a burst of relief through him, so familiar and right.

Colonel Rhodes’ voice broke in to his moment. “You planning on starting that thing up any time soon, Ranger? Because I’m not out here for the joyride. I could be watching the fight from my lounger, putting my feet up-”

Right. “Sorry, sir.” Billy breathed out, low and slow. “Here goes nothing.”

He hit the switch on the hand-held controls. He fell into the drift. The starlit sky covered him over with the blue rush of memories, the presences on either side of him, the knowing more intimate than words or touch or thought itself.

Teddy and Tommy were with him and he was with them, but offset somehow. He couldn’t be their arms and legs, not like this, not ever again. But he was eyes and ears, a bridge in their minds, and—he realized, opening his eyes as Magnus began to pick up speed and Rhodey adjusted to follow—he had a new vantage point they’d never had before.

It had always been David who saw the bigger picture, more information than Magnus’s sensors could accumulate and deliver. Now Billy saw the battle’s start from above, felt the familiar rising surge of adrenaline as the waters churned and pulsed. And at the same time, he could trace out the probabilities, the possibilities, as the information flow coalesced into a single certain whole.

“She’s coming up on our four-o-clock,” Billy blurted out. “But the tail end’s curving to the left, so watch your six.”

“You sure?” That was Rhodey—Tommy and Teddy were already responding, seeing through Billy’s eyes.

/He’s sure./ Teddy replied over the radio, the cresting wave of love-pride-team washing away any doubts that still might have had their hooks in some deep part of Billy’s heart.

The waves broke, water sheeting off the towering shape, lines of blue fire cutting through the kaiju’s craggy black hide. Mountain and lizard all in one, the creature had three grotesquely curling horns on its face, a tongue that lanced out to stab and pierce, and—swinging fast towards Magnus’ back—a tail that ended with a wicked, sharp and dripping hook.

Billy saw it, Teddy and Tommy reacted.

Magnus ducked and avoided the blows, spinning to slice her stingblade through the end of the kaiju’s tail. The blade cauterized the flesh as it went, searing the veins and arteries closed to keep the acid blood contained.

Billy whooped aloud, Tommy’s victory yell echoing in Billy’s ears and his mind.

“Don’t get cocky, boys.” Rhodey cautioned, and Billy drew a deep breath, refocused. The tail
came up again, missing its hook but still long and still vicious, and this time it aimed at the helicopter. Rhodey veered off, tipping them sideways over the turbulent grey waves.

David’s voice called out to them over the channel. “One-oh-five, one-oh-four, Magnus, you’re slipping.”

“Get us closer,” Billy urged.

“This is a delicate balance, kid,” Rhodey shot back, but they turned back and Billy could hear Teddy and Tommy inside his mind again, louder and clearer the closer they got, thoughts careening around inside his head faster than light itself.

~Breaking out the new moves~

~Go for the head this time~

~No, the throat. She’s guarding her throat, it’s got to be a vulnerable spot.~

~Billy, show us the top view~

~Here—see this as I’m seeing it now~

~There’s the opening~

The helo swung around, buffeted by the wind, salt spray flinging up and as high up as they were, still splashing in the open door. Billy tasted oil and sweat, and when the kaiju started to rear up, he called the moment.

“I’m taking the shot,” Teddy said as Magnus moved.

~Fire~

The first plasma charge went wide, the second connected in a spray of lightning-intensity. The kaiju reared back and screamed, a deafening roar that sent terror racing down along Billy’s spine and sank claws into his brain.

_Honne-onna, just like it was-

~Stay with me~

~We got this, dorkface~

They were there again, voices in his mind, pulling him back from the brink of that tight black panic. ~Guess I still need to work through some things.~

~You think?~

~Don’t start.~

The kaiju backed off, dove beneath the water, only the waves breaking over its scabrous, oily hide giving a clue as to what it was doing. Running, but not far. It paused, turned in circles at it regrouped to make another pass.

In the moment Billy had to catch his breath—still engaged in the drift, still indulging in the pure revelation that was connecting with Tommy and Teddy while they were piloting—he became faintly aware of excited chatter over the radio. He tuned back in at the right time to hear Tony’s voice confirming some of the best news he’d had all day.
“I’ve got a workaround that’ll hold one team. Goliath’s on her way out now, Langs are buckled in.”

“Roger that, Tony,” Rhodey replied with a satisfied smile. “Nothing like a little life-or-death crisis to get the juices flowing, is there?”

“Keep your flowing juices away from me. And I’m going now. While you’re flying in circles, I have two more jaegers to resurrect like the god among engineers that I am.”

“We’ve got backup coming,” Billy reported unnecessarily. They knew, they could hear it in his thoughts.

A flash and a rolling boom halfway between thunder and a low-bass explosion sounded from the nearby, the third vertex of the triangle made by Magnus, the kaiju and the BuenaKai island base.

“We’ve got more activity,” Teddy reported, Magnus turning to sweep the coastline with her sensors.

Tommy chimed in. “I’m picking up all kinds of energy bursts from over there. Something’s going down. I want to get a better look.”

“Stay focused, Magnus,” David corrected them from LOCCENT. “The kaiju’s going to come back around any moment.”

“Here come the Langs.” Rhodey veered, the helo drifting sideways and around, and Billy caught sight of the immense red jaeger in the middle of her airlift. The jumphawks released the cables and she fell, plummeting down to land thigh-deep in the ocean. The water surged around her, rushing out and then back in from the displacement, the waves racing towards Magnus only to die out halfway.

“We’re good to go,” Scott’s voice sounded over the radio. “Magnus is running point. What’s our status, kids?”

Back to work. Billy stopped craning his neck to see if he could catch a glimpse of whatever was going on at the island, taking in the scenario below instead. “One pissed-off kaiju with minor injuries and some wicked-looking horns, starting to head back in our direction. Colonel Rhodes and I are on your nine.”

“Looking good up there, Billy,” Cassie broke in, the exhilaration and anticipation in her voice the familiar way they’d begin a half-dozen other fights just like this.

“Kill the chatter on the channel.” And there was Carol, to make this just like old times. Billy sank into the link, reached out for Teddy and Tommy, and slipped his view of the fight into their minds.

Another explosion rocked them from behind, a shock wave flattening the waves rushing toward the shore. The kaiju reared up, shedding water in crystal sheets, only to be slammed back by Goliath’s solid titanium uppercut.

“We’ve got this,” Scott called out. “We’ll keep it busy while you check the island. You’re closer.”

“I can see something burning,” Billy grabbed the handle above the open door and leaned out as far as his safety harness would permit, spotting the red fire licking up into the air from the ground installation. A pair of jets screamed past, silhouetted in the flames.

Teddy turned Magnus’ head and gave Billy her eyes, sensor data mapping over visuals. There
were people down there, their body heat signatures dark against the white of the heat. The missing kids, or more cultists? Or were those the PPDC ground troops, in a fight for their lives?

“They need ground support,” Billy urged, pulling himself back inside, his eyes stinging from the wind.

Rhodey shook his head. “You guys need to focus on taking down that thing. My people are handling the island.” He caught Billy’s eye and held it, flipping a switch to kill the radio for a moment. “You’ve proven yourself, Will. You don’t need to do it all. Your job is to help them-” he pointed out the window towards the pair of jaegers sliding into a familiar guard pattern, “-kick that mangy lizard back to the stone age. Get me?”

And despite the anxiety gnawing low in his gut, Billy nodded. “I get you.”

"Good. Now hold that thought." Rhodey turned the radio back on and he hauled on the stick, bringing the helo back in tight proximity to Magnus Echo. Tommy and Teddy’s relief and anticipation flooded Billy’s mind as they got in tight, Billy’s blood pounding and his head swimming with the remembered/imagined scent of drive fluid and metal.

Goliath held in close, Magnus running at the kaiju from the side. A couple of bursts from the plasma cannon and it would be over, kill number nine to add to Tommy’s armoured chest.

The wounded tail thrashed, churning up the black water. The kaiju swung around, claws, horns and fangs slashing through the air where Magnus had stood only a moment before.

“Hold her steady!”

“Watch your side, she’s coming around.”

Something rippled off to the side, but when Billy whipped his head around to see, it was gone – nothing but the crashing waves and the black of the ocean. “David, how many kaiju signs have you got out here?”

“Just the one, but it’s hard to tell. That last explosion sent something into the waters off the coast of the island that’s muddling all your heat signatures. What have you got?”

“Maybe nothing. Water currents.” Magnus moved in to the fight again and Billy’s attention slid back to the sliding of pistons and the feel of kaiju flesh and bone giving way beneath Magnus’ fist.

He was getting better at this, at splitting his attention up two ways, the him in the helicopter and the him riding in the jaeger. Magnus’s power plant hummed in his spine, turning and ducking as Goliath went up and over, their perfectly executed flip as graceful in a hundred tons of titanium as Cassie had been in the kwoon.

Goddamn gymnasts.

Goliath dragged the kaiju down, spine breaking over Goliath’s knee and the water spraying up around them all in an infant tsunami. Magnus raised her fist, Tommy’s exultation and Teddy’s anticipation layered over Billy’s giddy joy. Goliath ran back to open their line, give them room to fire. Pulse cannon, once, twice-

“Shared kill for Magnus and Goliath,” Cassie called out, to cheers from the listeners on the open channel.

“Heat signature is gone – we have confirmed kill,” David began. Then “what the hell is that?”
The water erupted in a fountain, there and twenty feet beyond there, a second roar breaking overttop of David’s renewed shouts. “Second heat signature, we have second kaiju rising.”

“Yeah, we kind of noticed that!” Tommy shouted back, Magnus backing away from the wrecked corpse of the first.

The first kaiju’s body started to settle, sinking slowly beneath the rolling, crashing waves, the weight of it pulling the current hard against Magnus’ legs. Billy could feel it now, the way Teddy had described the movement of the water, the sudden undertow slowing her down and making her fight for every step.

Goliath was between them and the second kaiju, bringing her weapons up, massive thighs planting her firm on the shifting ocean floor. Nothing could move her if she didn’t want to be moved.

The second kaiju roared again and it didn’t stop, it kept on coming, more and more length of blue-streaked muscle and carapace rising up in serpentine coils above the waves. Vast jaws opened.

Magnus’ plasma cannon was recharging, but Teddy had emptied both barrels into the first monster. There’d never been two at once before, never any fight like this.

Tommy snapped the stingblade out and they ran. Billy sank into the link and the three of them ran, pushing into the steps, driving against the current. “Come on, come on,” Billy yelled, echoed shouts in his head and on the channel.

Cassie and Scott slammed fist after fist into the unbreakable side of the new, vast monster. It barely flinched, coiling itself around Goliath’s legs. Its triumphant screech mingled with the shriek of tortured metal.

“Fuck this, fire already!” Teddy yelled, the charge on Magnus’s cannon inching forward, nowhere near fast enough.

The kaiju opened its jaws wide, lower jaw detaching and dropping low. Black teeth ripped into Goliath’s skin, tearing away plates of metal. Sparks sprayed in a burning arc and cut red through the night sky.

“NO!” Tommy swung, they all swung and connected, three sets of hands on the stingblade hilt. It glanced off a scaled plate and they struck again. This time the blade sunk deep and kept going, driving rough through alien flesh and bone.

They backed off a step, dragged the blade free. A vast head swung around, Goliath’s wires dangling from its dropped jaw. Curving fangs jutted down from above, dripping poison ichor as it flung itself toward Magnus. The tail arced out behind and slammed into Goliath, already disabled and still.

Goliath screamed and shattered, the jaeger’s side folding in on itself, armour crumpling.

Billy gathered up everything he had, called deep to the red spark drifting down inside Magnus, and he pushed. He pushed it out through the cannon’s power converter, diverted systems that weren’t needed and brought it all to bear. A ball of energy formed in his mind’s eye and he handed it to Teddy, glowing and red. Teddy grabbed it and sent it flying, the plasma cannon charging to full in one last desperate race.

They grabbed the neck in one hand and Magnus’s cannon fired. Twice, three times, more than it should have been able to. Energy exploded through both combatants, Magnus’s hand closing. Billy felt flesh crushing in his fingers, bone breaking in his grip.
“Heat signature gone. Kaiju down.” That was LOCCENT, but David’s voice seemed so terribly far away. “Stinger Goliath, respond. Scott, are your comms functional?”

Dread, terror, dawning understanding that Billy didn’t want. He couldn’t feel this three times over, he couldn’t. But he couldn’t leave his team alone to feel it without him.

Stinger Goliath didn’t move.

“Cassie! Scott!” a raw and desperate cry echoed in his ears. Himself, Teddy, Tommy, all three and more, he didn’t know and didn’t care.

Goliath stood amid the wreckage and the sinking kaiju bodies, and she didn’t answer.

Slowly, one knee buckled. She fell sideways, crashing hard into Magnus as they reached her, grabbed and cradled the jaeger close. The ocean wouldn’t take her. Not today.

In a moment, they’d fix whatever the problem was. They’d pop the escape hatch. Scott would give Tony shit about installing airbags, and Cassie would be laughing at the panic she’d caused.

Any second now.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Denouement. A number of endings, and a beginning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*People around the world gathered today to mourn the deaths of Scott and Cassandra Lang, veteran jaeger pilots based out of the Los Angeles Shatterdome. Father and daughter were killed in action last week during an unprecedented double-kaiju attack, an event that some are predicting could be the first of a new wave of bigger assaults.*

*The Langs were buried this morning with full honours at Arlington National Cemetery, as befits members of the armed forces killed in active duty. The top echelons of the Pan-Pacific Defense Corps were in attendance, and Rangers from the Los Angeles Strike Group acted as pallbearers for the funeral.*

*Scott and Cassandra are survived by Cassandra’s mother, Peggy Rae Burdick. She has asked that the family’s privacy be respected during this difficult time. Donations in lieu of flowers can be sent to the Cassie Lang Memorial Trust at the Children’s Heart Foundation.*

*We go now to the international desk—*

“Turn that off.”

Kate’s voice wobbled on the request, a crack in the awful blankness she’d been wearing as a shield ever since Stinger Goliath had been hauled back home.

Eli started to object but Joe’s hand came down to cover his, and Eli reached out to flip off the in-air tv instead. Kate settled back in her seat two rows behind, her head drooping to rest on America’s shoulder again. The silence that followed was worse than the fake-solemn of the newscaster’s voice, the thrum of the airplane’s engines increasing to a roar in Billy’s ears.

The flight back home from D.C. had easily been the longest in Billy’s living memory. The way there, he’d just been numb. None of it had seemed real, not since the fight; it was a bad dream that he was going to wake up from eventually.

Except he hadn’t. None of them had. Scott and Cassie would never wake up again.

Even now, the nine—the seven—of them huddled in the first-class section of the jet... and there weren’t any words to say.

The quiet laid over them, soup-thick and making it hard to breathe.

Billy curled in closer to Teddy’s side, the weight of Teddy’s arm around his shoulders keeping him back in his body, stopping his mind from spiralling too far down along destructive paths.

Except not, his ears still ringing with sounds the silence couldn’t touch.
Peggy’s anguished cries, her own heart being torn out of her chest as Cassie was lowered into the ground.

The creaks of the winches.

The patter and hollow thud of the first shovelfuls of earth hitting the tops of the coffins.

His eyes filled with more sharp tears, the first he’d let get that far. None of them had cried at the graves, not with the cameras around, the media vultures circling. Rangers had been hurt before, sure, but to lose a full team and the jaeger all at once? They wanted the clicks and the photos they could blow up to billboard-size. Peggy’s agony would be on every front page tomorrow, every blog by tonight.

Teddy squeezed his hand tight, the one not still curled around the flower. There’d been so many of them, wreaths and vases full; one by the door had been filled to bursting with golden yellow chrysanthemums. For sorrow, Joe had commented quietly. All Billy could think was that they matched Cassie’s hair.

He’d slipped one out of the arrangement afterward and now he turned it over in his hand, slowly spinning the stem and counting the number of tiny petals around the bottom edge of the bloom.

They’d forgive me, they’d forgive me not.

If he’d been faster, if he’d thought of the trick with the plasma cannon sooner—

They’d all be back at base right now toasting their successes and admiring the new patches on each other’s jackets. Cassie would be planning her next prank on Tommy, and-

“This is bullshit!” Tommy exploded out of his seat, slamming his hand against the ceiling of the cabin with a sharp crack. Pain, fury, helpless grief- the desperate cocktail was in all their blood, only Tommy was the one to boil over first. “Such fucking bullshit.”

“Sit down,” Eli half-rose out of his seat, knuckles tight on his headrest. “You’re going to freak everyone out.”

“We’re already freaked out,” Kate snapped back, her eyes hollow, purple bags sunk deep beneath them.

Tommy turned on Eli, a new target for all the feelings he’d never been good at letting out—and now, that he wasn’t able to keep in. “What the hell do you care, newbie? You barely knew either of them.”

Eli wasn’t about to back down, pushing himself fully to his feet and facing off. “We’ve been here a year, Tommy. Scott and Cassie are- were – my friends too. My teammates too. You don’t have the monopoly on grief just because you were friends longer. Now sit down. Before the pilot makes an emergency landing in Bumfuck Arizona and makes us walk the rest of the way.”

“Oh, shit,” Teddy sighed under his breath, Billy the only one close enough to hear him. Billy hovered somewhere an inch behind and to the right of his own body, watching everything through a Vaseline-coated lens, the sound muffled. *Disassociating*, the part of him that had paid attention during therapy helpfully filled in. *Avoiding dealing with stress and trauma.*

That was fine. He could use a little numb right now.

Teddy got up, which forced Billy to sit up as well, and he strode down the narrow aisle toward Tommy. Joe rose to his feet behind Eli, looking intent on the same sort of move.
“Sit down, Elijah,” Joe repeated Eli’s own command. “Blowing up at someone isn’t going to make you feel better.”

“Wanna bet?” Eli mumbled, still seething.

“Come on, Tommy, leave it,” Teddy coaxed. He reached out to take Tommy’s arm but Tommy flinched. His hand flew up fast, stopping right before he hit Teddy’s face. Teddy’s arm came up to block, reflex action, and they stared at each other, Teddy’s eyes wide.

“Hey!” Billy’s paralysis snapped and he hurtled up out of his seat. Whether he was heading for Tommy or Teddy, he wasn’t quite sure.

“Touch him and you’re going to be eating my fist,” Eli snapped, taking Teddy’s side. Of course he would. They’d been friends for years, the same as Billy, Tommy and Cassie (and Scott, but he hadn’t spent as much time hanging out with the younger crowd)—from the Academy on up.

“You think you’re fast enough to make contact? Try me.”

“Knock it off!” Billy ended up shoving his way between them to stand by Tommy, his choice made for him. “This is just great; you’re going to fight him because he’s upset? Scott and Cassie are dead, Eli.”

“At least that way they have some fucking quiet,” Kate snapped at them from the back of the cabin.

The silence that fell with the echo of her words was worse than the muffled grieving of before. This one was sharp-edged and bleeding, punctuated by Kate’s gasp as she sucked in air.

America pulled Kate in close, wrapped her arms around Kate and pressed her lips against Kate’s hair before turning to glare at them. “The fuck is wrong with all of you? Besides the obvious.”

“Don’t—” Billy warned, but she kept talking.

“Don’t what? This is bullshit, of course it is. But throwing down here is only going to end with someone getting arrested when this plane lands. And that’ll be a great memorial for the Langs, won’t it? ‘Fistfight on funeral flight, news at eleven.’ Is that what they deserve to have attached to their names? Be adults, apologize, and sit the hell down.”

Billy had to hand it to her. America didn’t always jump in to serious conversations, but when she laid it down, she chose her words to hit home.

Tommy started to say something but Billy grabbed his shoulder and he shut his mouth. His eyes—they were haunted, full of pent up anger and fear and guilt, and Billy knew exactly how that fetid brew felt.

“We got this, alright?” America was back to talking to Kate now, “we got this.”

She did look up again as the group slowly started to disperse. Teddy stayed with Eli and Joe, catching and holding Billy’s eye with an apology as Billy locked his arm through Tommy’s and pulled him back to the other side of the aisle. “Maybe not right away. But we’re a team. They wouldn’t want us falling to pieces, so we’re not going to.” As if by sheer force of will she could make it so.

If any of them could, mind you... Billy had faith in her.
Billy should have been asleep, but midnight jet lag and unshed tears found him across the hall in his uniform pants and t-shirt, his feet bare, knocking on Teddy’s door. There was no answer, hadn’t been the first time either, and Billy’s shoulders sagged in defeat. Where was he?

The smart thing to do would be to go back to bed, try again to sleep. He knew from experience it wouldn’t work.

A faint noise echoed from somewhere and Billy padded quietly down the empty hall to follow it. Light spilled from the open door of the ready room, a golden puddle on the cold grey concrete floor. Billy paused at the door. Teddy sprawled on one end of the overstuffed couch, looking as haggard and exhausted as Billy felt. Eli and Joe sat in chairs that formed a tight group with the couch at the far end of the room. The murmurs of conversation stopped when Billy paused in the door, hesitation clear on Eli’s face.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought- If I’m interrupting, I’ll go,” Billy said, dragging his hand through his hair to push it back off his face.

“No, don’t.” Teddy sat up, setting aside the mug he’d been cradling between his hands. “Join us?”

After a beat, Eli nodded as well. “There’s plenty of room,” he offered. When Billy looked at him again, he didn’t see anger in Eli’s expression any more. He was too soul-tired to pick at the scabs of the afternoon’s fight, so Billy just nodded and took him at his word.

Curling up against Teddy’s side again was better. Joe passed him a mug a moment later, the smell of the dark whiskey inside (rather than the coffee he’d been expecting) hitting Billy like a ton of bricks. “It’s medicinal,” Joe prompted him, while he sipped at a glass of ginger ale.

The turpentine burn seared down his throat and settled warm in his gut, the extra five hours of being-awake that had been piled on top of the jet lag and the awful, horrible morning at Arlington not erased, but soothed.

They talked about everything except the day—the news reports about the BuenaKai leadership under investigation, about David, Nate and Kitty’s technological miracles, about cafeteria food—avoiding the elephant in the room until Billy was ready to scream.

As though he knew, as though he’d timed it, Tommy slipped in right when Billy was about to lose his mind. America and Kate followed not long after, all three of them in sweats and looking like they’d just gone six or seven rounds in the kwoon. Maybe working off the wretched ball of grief would have been a better idea than sitting, even with Teddy’s hand laced securely through his.

Kate had a bag over her shoulder and she brought out a bottle, letting out a soft half of a laugh when Eli raised theirs in return.

One by one the room filled up, conversation still dancing around the subject—but at least there was light and life poking around the edges of the black space inside him. Billy found his phone and punched in a text. Kitty half-dragged Nate in ten minutes later, both their eyes swollen red from tears.

It was almost right.

It should be Scott coming in the door next with a bowl of popcorn the size of a bathtub. Cass should be there too, laughing in the middle of the room in her pajamas, her long blonde braid swinging.

David came in the door and headed for the only empty seat. He slowed and stopped, staring at Scott’s favourite half-busted recliner. He turned, no-one having to say anything, and he perched
on the arm of the couch next to Nate instead.

The chair stayed empty.

Kate was the one who said their names first, halfway through some dumb story about her first week in L.A. Her voice caught, skipping over the second syllable, America’s hand resting still in the small of her back. The room went quiet, a different kind of silence again.

“So Cassie,” Kate continued, drawing in a breath that shuddered its way down to the bottom of her lungs. “She grabbed his tray and said ‘fine. In that case, I’ll eat it.’”

“She would.” It was the first thing Nate had said since he’d collapsed next to Billy, his voice cutting through the tension and melting it away. He was the one to start laughing, Billy following a second later, then the others one by one. Catharsis, so desperately needed, and it rippled through the group until half of them were howling and half were crying, some of it impossible to tell which was which.

It got easier after that, turning to stories and memories, laughter easing out the pain.

“You should have seen Scott the first day they brought Goliath online,” Billy couldn’t help the smile, the ache around his heart easing and tightening at the same time. “He’d have polished every inch of that jaeger by hand and slept in the conn-pod if he could. It was like watching someone fall in love.”

“Was that before or after Tommy soaped ‘kick me’ on her backplate?”

“No-one could ever prove that was me.” Tommy replied, toasting Kate with his empty glass.

“How did the last round start, anyway?” Nate uncurled somewhat, David’s hand resting solid on his shoulder. “She wasn’t really clear on that.”

Teddy groaned, shaking his head. “The newspaper articles she taped on Tommy and Billy’s door – ‘go, go rainbow rangers’? She went to a lot of trouble on that one. There must have been seven or eight clippings in the collage, all annotated.”

“There were nine, actually.” America’s voice broke in, smug and utterly unexpected.

Billy whipped his head around—and America only smirked back at him. “You did that?”

“Things needed a little livening up around here. And you guys were so quick to make assumptions and retaliate that the funny pretty much made itself.” She cracked her knuckles and laced her hands behind her head, legs stretched out in front of her on the floor. Eli nudged her leg with his toe and she elbowed him lightly in return. “The balloons were a nice touch.”

Cassie would never get them back for that one. The realization stuck in Billy’s throat, Tommy’s weight leaning against his legs more solidly now, as though he’d just come to the same realization.

“You let me help Tommy blow up all those balloons when you knew Cass was innocent?” Kate glared at her half-heartedly.

“The balloons were in retaliation for the oil bath-”

“Which she wouldn’t have done if it wasn’t for the glitter bomb-”

“Is that why Doug’s still finding glitter in the drivesuit room?” Carol asked from the doorway. She was in civilian drag, same as the rest of them right now, her hair down around her shoulders and
grief lines etched deep into the contours of her face. “I heard there was a wake happening. I came by with a donation.”

She passed the closed bottle to Kate, nearest to the door, and Billy tensed until he caught sight of the label. Gin; that was alright. Bourbon had been Carol’s drink of choice after she and Jess had retired as pilots, in the months before she pulled herself out of the darkness and passed the torch to America and Kate.

She wasn’t their marshal, not now. She was just Carol, just a friend, and Billy slid over on the couch to make room.

Joe lobbed a can of his ginger ale her way and she caught it out of the air, waiting for Rhodey to settle in and other glasses to be refilled before she popped the top with a bright spray of carbon fizz.

Everyone was in there now, Doug and the rest of Stinger Goliath’s pit crew, Dr. Hussein and Tony, Kamala from LOCCENT sitting quiet next to David, every mostly-horizontal surface in the room used as a seat or a drink table. Every surface but one, Scott’s chair stubbornly, silently empty.

Friends, all of them, the still-beating hearts that powered the Shatterdome, that turned the squat grey buildings into a place that felt like home. Jaeger techs, computer geeks, even Tony’s new protégé who looked like he was still in high school—just by virtue of their presence here, every single one of them was a hero.

Not flawless, God no. As wrong and as crazy as Alex had turned out to be, he’d made some valid points. Ones that deserved thinking about, when the rest of Billy’s anger and sorrow had faded into something more manageable.

Not flawless at all, but maybe they were better for it. More of a family. And even though the hole inside him ached, the empty chair across the room a fresh and bloody wound, Billy still felt, deep inside, a faint whisper of hope.

“How about some words, Carol?” Joe prompted her, his voice a bass rumble that commanded attention.

“A toast?” Carol asked, tasting the words carefully before letting them out. And after a beat, she raised her can. “To Scott and Cass. We knew them, we remember them, and they will not be forgotten.”

“Short and sweet,” Tommy muttered down by Billy’s feet, but he lifted his glass anyway and they drank. The whiskey went down smoother with every sip, the warmth inside him spilling out along his arms and legs, tingling in his fingers and toes.

Teddy shifted beside him and Billy moved only far enough to let him resettle, a sigh on his lips. “They’re going to keep coming, aren’t they?” Teddy asked.

“Yeah, kid. They are.” Rhodey answered, and he was someone else who seemed to have aged ten years in the last couple of days, exhaustion settled heavy on his shoulders.

Carol followed up. “And we’ll keep stepping up to fight them. Whatever it takes.”

Eli shifted in his seat, elbows resting on his knees. “What’s the plan now, marshal? What do we do?”

She smiled, that same old determination in her eyes, the look that had made Billy willing to follow
her into battle a dozen times before and would a dozen times more. “What we’ve done since this war started. We hold the line.”

The ocean stretched out behind the concrete slab of the Shatterdome’s helicopter pad, the summer sun glinting in diamond sparkles on the small, regular waves. The cool breeze tugged at Billy’s hair, shorter now that he was officially back on duty, the nape of his neck feeling somehow exposed. Tommy stood beside him, hands in his pockets, the mid-day warmth reflecting off the ground and soaking deep into their bones.

“I can’t help thinking.” Billy continued, the melancholy still a tangible weight inside, though the passing days had slowly lightened the load. “If I’d figured out how to grab the controls sooner, reroute the power faster, Teddy could have gotten off that shot in time.”

It wasn’t exactly a new thought, but maybe saying it out loud would make it easier to change the station.

He turned the yellow chrysanthemum around in his fingers, the leaves and petals dried and crisp against his skin. It had lasted three weeks, more than he’d thought, but there was no sense in keeping a dead flower in a vase in his room. No matter how important it had been.

“What this again. We can’t think that way,” Tommy replied firmly. He turned his head to look Billy in the eye, the wind tugging at his bleached-blond hair. “It wasn’t your fault, or mine, or Teddy’s. Cass and Scott were killed in action, and we all signed on knowing that was the deal.”

“We got too used to winning, but everything’s changing now.” Billy lifted his chin and looked Tommy in the eye right back. “The bad guys are supposed to lose.”

Tommy shook his head. And since when was he the voice of reason? Speaking of things changing. “The bad guys did lose. We got both kills that day; the five of us nailed those scaly sons of bitches. And you heard the news, the trial’s a slam-dunk. The BuenaKai are going down. Cassie and Scott—and the kids the cult killed—they’re all getting justice.”

Billy leaned closer, bumping Tommy’s shoulder with his own. He didn’t say anything out loud for a while, standing there in the sun and staring out at the water. The waves didn’t care how many bodies had sunk below, or washed on shore. The ocean was forever, impatient and uncaring. It had been there long before humankind and would be there long after they were gone.

Somehow, that actually felt comforting.

“Do you think they know?” Billy asked after a while, curling his hand around the dried flower’s still-yellow petals.

“Yeah.” Tommy nodded, one corner of his mouth curving up into a smile. “I’m sure of it.”

Good enough. Billy closed his hand. The chrysanthemum crumbled into pieces, petals falling into his palm. He lifted his hand and opened it, the wind snatching them up and carrying them high. They spun away, towards the moving water and the sunshine, specks of green and gold in the forgiving summer sun now cast away to the depths of the sea.

The sun was out again the next Sunday, except this time Magnus wasn’t on call. Billy followed Teddy through the crowds at the Santa Monica farmers’ market, ignored entirely by almost all of the passers-by.

A flea-market table had been set up in the shade of a vegetable booth, and Teddy stopped with a
laugh. He held up a box, turning to show it to Billy with a triumphant grin. “Check this out— knockoffs!”

The box he handed Billy was a travesty on about sixteen different levels. The green robot in the packaging looked sort of like Magnus, if you squinted, the bold text across the top and bottom proclamation HUNTER-BOT: SERIES MEGA. BIG PICKLE.

“Big pickle?” Billy started laughing, even as Teddy was diving back into the box to search for more. “Is it because Magnus is green? Seriously, that’s the best they could come up with?”

Teddy stood triumphantly, another box in his hands. “Oh it gets better.” The distorted blue plastic jaeger inside looked like Papa Valentine, if Eli and Joe’s jaeger had been melted around the edges and left to cool in mud. “Father Christmas!” Teddy reported with almost unholy glee. “Eli’s gonna have a stroke.”

Billy flipped the box over to see if there was some other explanation, pictures of others in the series running down the side. COLLECT MANY! Big Pickle. Father Christmas. Yankee Doodle. Stinky Gorilla.

“They’re fantastic, I want twelve,” Billy replied, the laughter bubbling up inside him without any checks or hitches. Teddy paid, getting to his wallet faster than Billy and refusing to let him fight for it, and a few minutes later they were strolling easily along the busy street, hand in hand and a large plastic bag bumping gently against Billy’s thigh.

“How’re your knees feeling?” Teddy asked, glancing down at the bag and, by extension, Billy’s jeans-clad legs. The new braces didn’t show at all from the outside, the gentle hug around his joints thankfully unobtrusive.

“Good. The neoprene’s kind of sweaty, but I’ll get used to it. Especially if it means I won’t have to ice anything later.”

“If you need to stop-”

“I need you to stop asking that.”

Teddy smiled sheepishly, ducking his head and conceding. “Sorry.”

Vegetables, fancy mouldy cheeses, fresh breads, a taco stand—there was one benefit to living in a port city and in California, despite the ever-present threat of another kaiju attack, and that was no worries about food rationing. And as long as not all of the coastal lands burned out or were abandoned, the markets like this one would be going strong for years to come.

Teddy made a beeline for a booth selling a dozen different kinds of hot sauce, Billy pausing at a different one halfway down toward the bakery. Racks of handmade necklaces and bracelets competed for space with gorgeous painted scarves, one of which burned in a cascading series of vibrant reds.

“That one?” Billy asked, and he was running the gossamer-soft silk through his fingers when Teddy caught up to him again.

Teddy’s arm slipped around his waist, the kind of easy casual affection they’d fallen into still catching Billy deliciously off-guard from time to time. “What did you find?”

“I’m getting this for Mom—her birthday’s coming up. It’s perfect, small and easy to mail.”

“Why ship it?” Teddy asked, while Billy paid and the artist wrapped the scarf in delicate tissue
paper. “You may as well hang on to it until we see her.”

“True. You’d better watch out, though.” Billy grinned, nodding his head in thanks and taking the paper bag when she handed it to him. “This visit could get interesting.”

A frown creased Teddy’s forehead. “Why? She liked me well enough the last time she was here. Granted it wasn’t under the best of circumstances, but still.”

Billy shook his head with a rueful grin, already imagining how some of this was likely to go. “That’s the problem. Since Tommy’s not showing any signs of settling down with anyone any time soon, you’re her best hope of getting one of us married off.” He patted Teddy on the chest in commiseration and advance apology for the pointed comments and sugar-sweet questions that were likely to start coming his way. “I’ll run interference if it gets too bad.”

Teddy fell quiet for a moment, not a worrying quiet, but one of the easy pauses he tended to take when he was thinking something through. When he did reply, it was paired with a smile and a squeeze of his hand around Billy’s. “Not that I’m running out to buy rings right now,” Teddy cautioned with a fond look at Billy that sent whatever the warm version of chills might be vibrating up and down Billy’s spine. “But that’s not the worst fate I can imagine.”

_Hunh._

Billy squeezed his hand back, the echoing smile and look back lingering for a long, perfect moment. One that only lasted until they got yelled at for blocking the sidewalk, and had to jump aside to make room for a double-wide stroller, the energy building between them dissipating. At least for now.

They carried on, hands linked, the conversation and easy laughter flowing. And he was happy. Something Billy knew deep in his heart that he probably hadn’t earned—but that he was never, ever going to let go.

Chapter End Notes

Carol’s toast is the short form of the Canadian military’s Toast to the Fallen.

The Jewish rite of tashlich is part of our high holiday rituals, and it involves symbolically casting our sins and transgressions into moving water, to be carried away and forgiven as the new year begins. This isn’t that, but Billy and Tommy are Jewish and the symbolism isn’t accidental.

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Thank you so much to everyone who’s come along on this ride with me. I adore you all.

Click through to the final chapter for an MCU-style post-credits teaser.
“See if we can’t increase the output by five percent.”

“I can get you seven if we switch architectures.”

Billy leaned back in his chair in LOCCENT and laced his fingers together behind his head. Nate and Kitty would be muttering at each other for a little while longer, at least, which would give him just enough time to run off the report David had asked for.

The new ops position Carol had wrangled for him came with more paperwork than just being a pilot. But she had to give him something, she’d said with a grin, to keep him busy and out of trouble, since he wasn’t expected to pull six hour training sessions in the kwoon anymore. And it turned out he had a decent mind for combat analysis, something both Carol and Rhodey had been quick to jump on once he was reinstated.

It kept him in the loop, that was the main thing, at least until the brain trust could figure out a clean way to integrate a wireless mode into the neural bridge hardware and jack him in to Magnus Echo outside of the Shatterdome’s walls. “The trouble is keeping the signal coherent,” Nate muttered, swiping his hand through the display in front of him and sending the images spinning. “A direct laser prevents scatter, but it can also be blocked.”

Kitty frowned up at him from where she was kneeling, recalibrating the complicated blinking and softly whirring device that was currently pointed through the window at Magnus Echo. “If we can-”

What Kitty wanted to try got cut off by the door sliding open. “And this is LOCCENT. David Alleyne’s the Chief LOCCENT Officer but he’s off duty right now. I’ll make sure you’re introduced later.” Wendy, Carol’s aide, stepped inside, followed by another young woman about Billy’s age.

The newcomer was a civilian, a badge clipped to the waist of her grey slacks proclaiming her Guest status on the base. Her smile was a little too wide for her face, but in that cheerful sort of way that suggested she laughed a lot. A mass of dark, wavy hair was temporarily restrained by bobby pins, and the tablet tucked under her arm suggested she was there on business.

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“Hey there.” The guest gave a friendly half-wave with her free hand. She looked around, dark eyes taking in everything. “I’m Darcy Lewis. And I’m here to coordinate the jaeger upgrade program. It’s long past time these old girls got a total overhaul.”
Earth Sing Green.

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