Project Freelancer's Alpha squad did not die during the war. Instead, they are scattered throughout UNSC space and they see Epsilon's broadcast from their respective hiding places. They realize Washington is still alive on a tiny little planet in the middle of nowhere.

And he needs their help.

Meanwhile, Chorus is struggling to survive after the war. Remnants of the pirates and mercenaries are still on the planet causing chaos, and the Chorus soldiers are still at risk. People are dying, food is scarce, and the end doesn't feel like it's any closer than it was before.

Old enemies and new friends fall together in this journey to pick apart Chorus's mysteries, work together, survive, and maybe make a friend or two along the way.

-This fic is a work in progress. It is Freelancer heavy with a LOT of Chorus interaction-
I have this head canon that none of the Freelancers are actually dead, and they're all just hiding out somewhere trying not to be found.

So, they would all see Epsilon's message...
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Where are they now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Project Freelancer was a military program designed with the goal of a creating a magic bullet to stop The War. It was an impressive effort built on incredible tech, highly trained soldiers with interlocking skillsets, and a whole that was truly greater than the sum of its parts. The Project was most successful when all the pieces worked toward a common goal, and when they were allowed to do what they signed on to do they were a formidable force.

They were better than good.

They were the best.

But the guiding mission of Project Freelancer changed without the knowledge of nearly all its participants. When the missions became experiments, when their very existence seemed to be designed to tear them down, the project and the soldiers naturally fell apart. The soldiers, the scientists, and the very people in charge forgot that they were trying to save humanity. They ignored what was good about what had been created in favor of selfishness and cruelty. The Director was not much better than a child pulling the wings off of butterflies in an effort to stop tornadoes.

It was only after the team was thoroughly broken that the survivors realized just how much they needed one another to survive.

By then it was too late.

They were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle scattered across the stars. Running, hiding, trapped, imprisoned, with no hope, no light, and no mission.

Until a strange broadcast was sent out by a familiar voice.

Wyoming and Florida

On a tiny, little backwater planet in the middle of nowhere Wyoming stretched himself out on his thousand thread count sheets. He’d had an excessively long day of teaching idiots to use guns at the shooting range he and Florida co-owned and, with his tablet in at hand whenever he was ready to read the news, he watched Florida do one handed pushups out of the corner of his eye.

Florida was still just as much of a ham as he ever was and couldn’t help but show off especially for this particular audience of one. It was good to let your partner know every now and again that you
were still plenty interested and also capable of breaking them in two should the need arise.

Wyoming switched from one news page to another, hardly paying attention to the sites in favor of watching the love of his life’s muscles flex when a video stream forcibly popped up on his screen and blocked the content. The visual was enough to keep Wyoming from immediately closing it out of frustration at what he thought for a brief half a second as a popup ad.

An icy chill flooded his spine and he reached for Florida, beckoning him to the bedside.

“Hi there. You may not know me, but my name is Epsilon. Some time ago, my friends and I were shipwrecked on a planet called Chorus.”

“I say,” Wyoming’s voice trembled ever so slightly, “get a look at this.”

Florida popped to his feet and laid a gentling hand on Wyoming’s shoulder, leaning over Wyoming to get a look at the tablet.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!”

North and South

South was curled up in the lone dining chair that the scuzzy motel room she and North had called home for the past three days so kindly provided them. She was tucked into the most itchy and uncomfortable sweater ever made as she watched some weird cartoon in a language she didn’t know and was fairly certain that the subtitles didn’t actually match what was being said. Her head was fuzzy with exhaustion, and her stomach twisted angrily while her brother (who had wrapped himself up in the one threadbare blanket in the room) slept like a baby on the stained and lumpy mattress, oblivious to her discomfort and frustration at just what had become of her life.

Some magical girl in a school uniform was doing a twirling costume change complete with hearts and sparkles when the screen flashed, and something South had hoped to never have to deal with again took over. South was at her wits end.

She hated this spy movie bullshit and every fucking minute of her life that was taken over by Project fucking Freelancer. Weren’t they done with this shit, yet? Hadn't they fucking done enough?

Clearly not, if the message on the screen was to be believed.

“North! Wake up!”

North shot out of the bed and pulled his gun, eyes wide and ready to kill.

One day, South thought he might pull the trigger without a proper assessment and blow her fucking head off. She’d almost be ok with that. There wasn’t much point in existing the way they did, floating from place to place. Maybe death would be a nice break. It’d be better than spending the rest of her life in disgusting, bedbug infested motel rooms with her paranoid twin breathing down her neck and clinging to her like a damned koala when he wasn’t hovering over their stolen goods and smuggled tech and desperately trying to keep it going for just a little longer.

The only downside was that he’d probably shoot himself right after he killed her out of guilt, the big
suck, and if there was an afterlife South was sure she would be fucking stuck with him as punishment for all of the horrible shit she’d done and would continue to do right up to the day she died.

Instead of shooting, North caught himself and laid the gun down on the floor. He snapped his attention to the blinking lights of their stolen tech and once he was sure that South hadn’t woken him due to another potentially catastrophic failure, rubbed at his eyes and moved over to South to get a good look at the terrible quality tv. It was a tiny, janky set, so she didn’t blame him for hovering in her space, even if she knew the real reason he was doing it had more to do with his constant fear of abandonment more than his lack of ability to see.

“What is this?”

“If you haven’t heard of it, I don’t blame you at all. But, all of us who survived the crash as well as the planet's inhabitants are in dire need of help.”

South scrubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands and let out a deafening yawn, well aware that she wasn’t going to be sleeping any time soon, despite her turn coming up in less than twenty minutes.

“Unfinished business.”

Maine

Normally, the UNSC nurses wouldn’t allow him to watch or do anything that might cause him stress. They said the physical damage was still too fresh, his body had only barely started to heal enough for him to move around the hospital with any amount of freedom and exciting himself would only slow the process down.

Months of medicine and physical therapy and Maine was still too weak to do much of anything useful aside from eating on his own.

It didn’t help his case that he was still not able to give the hospital his name, given that he had no idea who the person was that he was supposed to be. Maine was just thankful that the man hadn’t had a family to immediately blow his cover when they came to check on him, and apparently was a soldier with no friends, loved ones, or debt collectors to come calling on him while he was trapped in the hospital.

He just sat in the little private room he’d been granted, watched harmless daytime television, and felt his body slowly knit itself back together. 'Amnesiacs' weren't expected to do much but recover after all, and recovery was his primary goal. The doctors and nurses had no idea that he was leaps and bounds ahead of where they expected him to be. With even the smallest bit of luck they wouldn’t ever find out. No one needed to know that Agent Maine was still alive and relatively well considering he’d nearly died among all the other things that had happened to him.

The inane trivia shows that played throughout the night normally bored Maine to tears, but he was thankful that insomnia had him watching, because he was awake and aware when the screen changed and images of soldiers in familiar armor took the place of the contestants at their podiums.

His whole body screamed, but Maine hauled himself up enough to get a better view of the screen
mounted to the hospital room wall. There, in crystal clear view, was an AI. An AI just like…

“If this is transmitting to your computer, please examine the files that I have attached to this transmission.”

Maine clutched at his head as it throbbed in agony. A half dozen ghostly whispers caressed the inside of his skull and buzzed around the soft meat of his brain.

Fuck. FUCK. He knew that voice! He’d only heard it once, but he knew that voice.

He needed a computer. He needed to get out of the hospital. If the AI was still alive, that meant there was a chance. Where was the AI? Was it still with…

York

York shoved his less than appetizing reheated takeout to the side and threw open the lid of his laptop. As soon as it was awake, the computer was immediately flooded with an un interruptable data stream.

He was lucky, if he’d had a crappier model, it might have frozen up from the sheer size of the download. He couldn’t stop it even if he wanted to, but if the download was in any way related to what was playing on his muted television, York wasn’t interested in stopping the download. If anything, he had to force himself to not try to mess with anything while it was making itself at home on what should have been a heavily encrypted laptop.

This was the most exciting thing to happen to him all year. He was glad that he’d invested in excellent wireless transmission for his shithole of an apartment.

Once the computer was well into the download, a video stream matching the muted television popped up and started to loudly play. York shifted popup to one side of the screen and started to skim through the information that had been forcibly downloaded to his laptop.

It was all datafiles on Charon industries and their dastardly deeds. Holy shit, it was insane, the amount of shit Charon had been involved in. Corporate espionage and traitorous acts that made what they’d done during the project look like kindergarteners playing spy games. If a single thing in this could be verified, Malcolm Hargrove and every single person he’d ever worked with would hang for crimes against humanity. The UNSC wouldn’t have a choice.

It only took a few minutes to get so engrossed, York almost missed the most important bit as it flashed unobtrusively on his screen. If he’d blinked, he would have missed the best fucking news he’d heard in a very, very long time. A familiar paint job with an even more familiar name next to it.

“They include our coordinates, as well as information on the survivors of the crash, who you may recognize as the heroes of the UNSC that went missing during their flight home.”

“Holy shit. Wash?”

York knew that paint job anywhere, even if the armor was a different model. He’d been there the day Washington had first gotten his yellow accents (at risk or a severe reprimand for altering his colors without permission), he knew how the younger man’s relaxed posture in armor looked, and
York was willing to bet his good eye that, that was *fucking* Washington!

Washington wasn’t dead.

Holy shit! Washington wasn’t dead!

Their Rookie was alive!

Four Seven Niner

It didn’t take five minutes before Niner was wheeling herself to her phone. The link to a chain of events she’d never quite managed to properly put together had fallen into her lap like a gift, and with it, the universe suddenly made sense again. She’d found them, her missing link, and through them she’d found *him*.

God, it was like Christmas had come early!

*“Most importantly, however…”*

Before she could give herself a chance to second guess or talk herself out of it, Niner started making phone calls. Every favor she’d managed to hoard was called in, every piece of need to know information and embarrassing state secret she’d held onto was used, every credit she had to her name and in the many fake accounts she’d accumulated while hoarding and hiding the remaining members of Project Freelancer was spent in a matter of hours.

She needed a bird, supplies, and her team, and she needed them fucking months ago. Years ago. Half a lifetime ago. Niner would settle for them now though.

It took a lot less work than she’d expected to convince the powers that be to give a crippled pilot access to the model of ship she wanted, but with all the dirt she’d managed to gather during her time as Recovery Coordinator on top of the juicy tidbits she could connect to the data the funky little AI was feeding the whole galaxy, she knew that those in the know would be happy to send her off somewhere where she was likely to die, to disappear, or at least to become a thorn in someone else’s side and away from their fancy donors and the money that came from lobbyist bribes.

One by one she contacted her people and filled them in on the plan that had begun to piece itself together in her head. It was a sudden, slapdash plan, but it was all they had if they wanted to get there before the UNSC got their heads out of their asses and actually did something. She was finally ready to call her team together, her Freelancers, who she’d carefully separated and hidden until the time was right.

Two days and several thousand credits later, Niner said her final goodbyes to her tiny apartment and geared up to play pickup. Broken hearts and betrayal would have to wait, one of their own (their *Rookie*) was finally in the light long enough to be tracked. For all their flaws and follies, the Freelancers would do what it took to protect their own. After everything the Project had taken from them, they couldn’t do anything less. They would set aside their differences for the chance to bring him home safe.

Florida’s old armor fit just like it used to, despite the less active lifestyle he’d had since he died and was resurrected.
“...are the files that prove the undeniable guilt of Malcom Hargrove.”

Wyoming’s helmet was newer than the rest of his armor, but he’d modified it enough that he didn’t hate it.

“Orchestrating our shipwreck was just one of an impressively long list of crimes the dear Chairman has committed in the past few years.”

North and South helped each other into their gear; their colors unchanged after all the time that had passed. They looked after the blinking electronic units scattered around the room and sighed in unison at the thought of hauling them again. It was going to take a good seven trips to get everything moved safely.

“Once we are rescued, we’d be happy to discuss the list in greater detail as well as answer any other questions that you may have, so long as it ensures that Mr. Hargrove never sees the light of day again.”

Maine snarled at the nurses that invaded his room and attempted to placate him back into bed with pleading and needles filled with sedatives. He was done waiting for them to say he could leave. The time for action had come, and Maine would be damned if he failed his friend again.

“Thank you for your time,”

York packed as much equipment as he could get his hands on and ran out the door to where his ride waited with an idling engine and familiar faces.

“And please - hurry the fuck up, and just come get us.”

Niner looked over her team, gathered together for the first time since everything went to shit and saw the picture. Their puzzle was missing pieces, so many pieces, but she finally had a section (Freelancer, Alpha Squad, Living) complete. They just needed one more piece.

One more person.

“Ok, here’s what we know.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was most recently updated 12/07/2018. Minor changes were made to content, but not to the continuity, mostly grammatical changes and fixing up the prose.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The gang’s all back together...mostly, and there's some chafing as they try to fit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Niner had her bird in record time. All it took was a little blackmail, a lot of bribery, and a meeting at an out of the way warehouse where the military stored the older models of transport ship’s that had been retired but not busted down for scraps. The ship was a beauty, once the top of the line, and still in perfect repair despite her not being likely to be needed again. Bigger than the standard she used to play with, plenty of space in holding, it was perfect.

Someone was smiling down on them.

Once the ship was fully stocked and ready to go, she set out to pick up Florida and Wyoming, since she was physically closest to their location, and they would cause her the least number of headaches if she was forced to be stuck with just them for an extended period of time. Niner always thought that Florida’s aggressive perk and Wyoming’s knock-knock jokes would drive a woman insane, but she had to admit, she could use a little bit of cheer in her life.

She was less than a day’s travel away from where she’d hidden them away, but by the time she made it to their little backwater planet, they’d already completely stripped their apartment down, packed it into boxes to put on the bird and were set to move.

Both men were surprisingly happy to see her. They clapped her shoulders happily, careful of smacking her too hard, and Florida stuck a heart shaped sticker that said ‘U R 2 Cute’ like it was a fucking piece of candy to the side of her wheelchair with a grin.

Niner had been ecstatic to help Florida and Wyoming get out of the program alive after the shit went down at the training base they’d been dumped in, not only because that was two more people the Project couldn’t fuck over.

She’d always liked these assholes.

It did take her off guard that they were so happy to get themselves tangled up in a rescue operation since they had managed to make a life for themselves that was financially stable and unlikely to ever really draw unwanted attention from the UNSC of the bullets and handcuffs variety.

Maybe it shouldn’t have.

Florida was the type to remember who his friends were, and Wyoming followed Florida’s lead. If someone needed help, it really should have been obvious that Florida would be the first to ask about a barn raising, since he was the big proponent of ‘we’re a team, let’s work together’.

Of course, life was never that easy. Getting Wyoming and Florida was a simple stop, but getting Maine proved to be a much larger challenge.
Their big guy had tried to bolt after seeing the message on the TV, which Niner had known about when she managed to get in contact with him. He’d neglected to inform her that the doctors had moved him to a more heavily monitored area of the hospital, an area Niner didn’t have the clearance to get to him or the ability to bust through the walls without drawing some serious negative attention to them, which made getting him out more of a challenge. Sure, he was willing to fight his way out, Maine rarely needed much provocation to get into a fight, but punching your way out of a UNSC hospital was not exactly an easy thing to do without power armor and backup that was actually at your back.

“This looks like a job for the good doctor.”

Luckily, Florida was more than willing to do a little infiltration to get the team heavy out. It was amazing what a lab coat, a stolen id badge, and an aggressively friendly smile could get a man. Seriously, Niner wanted lessons on this shit.

It took Florida twenty-three minutes to get Maine out of the building, without triggering a single alarm, and only mildly injuring two people.

They saved a bit of time thanks to York being willing to abandon the contents of his apartment to meet North and South in a timely manner at a prechosen location near them to help them transport the gear they’d been hiding. The twins had been convinced that they would need firepower, and Niner completely agreed, they’d had some very important assets to protect after all.

Niner was all for not making an extra trip, the ship wasn’t gargantuan, but it did cost money and time to dock, and it didn’t exactly keep suspicions low, flying an outdated bird with defunct military markings.

York meeting the twins turned out to be the best plan, because as soon as York caught sight of Maine, he lost his shit. Maine was still shaky from whatever the doctors had given him and didn’t so much as attempt to dodge the fist thrown at his face.

Maine rocked as York’s fist smashed into his cheek, but didn’t move other than that, which seriously pissed the other man off. He shoved at Maine’s chest and snarled impotently.

“What in the fuck is he doing here?!”

South squeezed herself between the two men and shoved York back hard. He stumbled a little bit and glared at South, like she’d personally stabbed his cat, but didn’t move to retaliate. Niner knew he wouldn’t throw a punch at her, he was angry, not stupid. Say what you want about South’s attitude or her placement on the leaderboard, she’d kick your ass three ways from Sunday if you fought her out of armor.

And if you managed a good hit on her, everyone knew that North would be on your ass faster than you could knock her onto hers, and that was game over. The twins fought together, and they fought dirty.

“York, sit down.”

“He fucking KILLED Carolina! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

South caught North’s eye and cocked her head slightly, using the kind of body language that the intimacy of close quarters and years of knowing someone automatically seemed to grant them. Niner knew that South wasn’t particularly interested in keeping York in one piece, North’s friendship with the other soldier was the only reason South hadn’t punched the man in the throat
and just been done with it. York’s mere presence was often enough to piss South off, even when it wasn’t his fault.

_This motherfucker is a cocky, brash, idiot who does fuck all right, and yet somehow manages to get second to top slot? It’s fucking bullshit, Niner!_

North moved into position near York, close enough to grab him should he lunge, but didn’t reach out.

This was…a different dynamic. Niner couldn’t remember a time that North actually let South take lead on anything without intervention from on high, but here they were. South planted her feet, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared York down like a stone cold badass. Niner couldn’t help but approve.

Still, when his face crumpled in despair, South relaxed just enough to not seem completely vicious and laid a hand on his shoulder gently. His heartbroken expression was enough to temper South’s anger.

Niner couldn’t help but feel a thrum of affection for the only other surviving female in the group.

York had been separated early on from everyone on the team, and after shit went down with Tex, Niner had squirreled York away where he would be safe, just like she did with every one of them standing there except for Maine.

Still, that safety came with the price of total isolation. They knew about each other, in that they knew there were survivors, but Niner didn’t keep them updated on who or what their statuses were. She didn’t want to take the risk of them trying to track each other before the heat was well and truly off.

They didn’t talk to each other.

It was safer that way.

Still, it meant that York didn’t know half as much as he thought he did, and Niner felt like shit for not warning the man.

“He didn’t kill Carolina, Sigma did, Maine was just the body Sigma wore while he did it.”

South waited for the rage to taper off of York’s face and turn into horror and confusion as the implications of what she said sunk in, before she spun around and tapped her fist lightly on the heavy’s shoulder.

“How you doin’, Big Guy?”

Maine shrugged and growled slightly, which could have meant anything or nothing. He was paler and thinner than Niner had ever seen him, and she was well aware that he was trying to hide how upset he was at the other man’s attack. He made a vague motion with his hands that kind of reminded Niner of a ‘so-so’ motion, only with less of the positive so…if that made any sense.

“I’m guessing that means you’re good to fight?”

He nodded and tapped a gentle fist on her shoulder in camaraderie and smiled.

Shit, Niner hadn’t seen Maine smile in years.
That was a goddamned crime, because the man’s face was made for smiling. He had a great smile and fucking dimples for f**ks sake, but after the accident and Sigma’s implantation, joy was a few and far between expression on his face. On all of their faces.

“Good, because we’re going to need you.”

York’s shoulders were tense, but at least he wasn’t flipping his shit anymore. North wrapped a hand around York’s bicep and pulled him off to the side, away from Maine and the temptation to attack the man at least a foot and a half taller than him.

“Come on, I’ll fill you in a little better.”

Niner rolled herself through the main area of the ship and gave each and every member of her team (and they were her team at that point) a sharp glare. They knew she wouldn’t do much more than yell at them and call them names, but they had always bowed to the power of the glare and the grownup voice in the past.

“We gonna have a problem here?”

Wyoming shook his head and locked the last of the crates into place for transport.

“I am sure that everything will be just fine. Now, how are we to proceed from here?”

Niner herded the team out of the cargo bay, happy with the supplies, but pissed at the state of her people. They scattered themselves around the common area and started to make themselves as comfortable as they could in the cramped space that would be their home for an undetermined period of time.

York and North were curled up at the far end of the room, York pressed his face into North’s shoulder and shook as North whispered to him. It was clear that he hadn’t reacted well to Maine’s presence or the news that his friend might not have been responsible for the murder of the woman he had loved, and she hoped that North’s soothing and the information he had would be enough to get them working together.

Niner should have known he would not be ok around Maine. She should have thought of that.

Then again, there were a lot of things she should have thought of. If she’d been smart, she’d have gotten them all out of Freelancer before they’d started actively killing her team. She would have found a way for them to interact whenever they wanted and still be safe.

Florida made himself comfortable on York’s other side and placed his hand on the other man’s back carefully. On the other side of the room, South practically sat on Maine as the man tried not to look as if he wanted to eat his own gun. He wasn’t any happier about the shitstorm that was Sigma being brought up than York was.

Wyoming was the only one who seemed interested in Niner at all. She positioned herself at the head of the room, near the cockpit entrance and locked her wheelchair into place.

“Ok, here’s what we know.

“Washington was responsible for the destruction of the majority of the digital files for all of Project Freelancer. He destroyed all of the fragmented AIs stored in the facility as well as those that comprised The Meta, as well as the Alpha.”

Maine dropped his face into his hands, his shoulders shook, and he made an aggravated choking
sound that Niner pretended wasn’t a sob. South laid a hand awkwardly onto the back of his neck and squeezed lightly.

“After this, he spent time in a UNSC prison cell, until one day when he inexplicably had information on the Epsilon AI fragment. He was sent out with Agent Maine to retrieve it, and in the process, was believed to be killed in action.”

South scowled and elbowed Maine in the side gently, in a clear attempt to bring him out of his depressed funk.

“Ok, I still don’t get that. I mean, yeah, ok, all of our digital files in our base were destroyed, but the UNSC didn’t have a single picture of any of us? A physical file? Fingerprint? Anything?”

Niner shrugged. Honestly, the explanation for this shit made the whole thing make even less sense, given that she knew how government organizations were supposed to work.

“Carolina told me that The Director was paranoid as hell. He had eidetic memory and didn’t want to risk data falling into the wrong hands, so he memorized everything.”

Florida held up a hand like a kid in elementary school, desperate for his turn to speak. Niner pointedly did not laugh as she pointed to him. She had no desire to encourage his obnoxious behavior, no matter how entertaining.

“That I completely understand but Wash and Maine were in prison. How is it possible that no one realized what they looked like? You boys had to take your armor off at some point.”

North scratched the back of his neck, clearly proud and doing his best not to show it, while South grinned cockily and preened.

“Well, I don’t know about Wash, but we…South took care of Maine’s identity.”

York looked up, his expression was scrunch in disbelief.

“How?”

South shrugged, going for nonchalant and failing. It was obvious that she couldn’t help but be a little pleased with this one, and it was hard to blame her when she’d gotten so much accomplished.

“Freelancer always had me on fucking stealth missions, never thought about putting me at a computer terminal. ‘Agent South, that is what we have Artificial Intelligence for’. Guess what, douchebag, I’m still a damned good hacker. Fucking asshole. All I had to do was watch the cleanup. When they found Maine, I gave him a different name. It helped that you switched armor.”

Niner fucking LOVED South’s ‘Director’ impersonation back in the day, and it hadn’t lost any of its bite or sarcastic tone, though it had taken on a much more sinister turn. She waited a beat, and Niner watched as everyone except North finally realized what Niner had known all along.

They all had skills they kept hidden and secret. Things that, for one reason or another, they hadn’t revealed to the team. Why wouldn’t the others have secrets? Why wouldn’t they have skills that the others didn’t know about? Things that they might have underestimated?

If the Director had managed to keep South in a position where her skills were not being utilized (and the ability to hack military computers with access to the best firewalls and anti-hacker tech that money could buy was a skill Project Freelancer could have used, even if the AI had all been functioning properly), had the others been artificially limited as well?
What else had been hidden? What else had been ignored? And more importantly, why artificially limit your soldiers? Why introduce a ranking system that clearly didn’t work properly when your soldiers were not being properly utilized? What purpose did it serve other than pitting them against each other and nearly get them killed?

Niner rolled a shoulder and coughed to bring everyone’s attention back to her. She needed to get them filled in, so they would hopefully focus on that instead of killing each other while they were flying.

There was nothing quite like the thought of a rescue mission that has everyone killing each other before they even arrive on site.

“From there, Washington is off the radar. No official sightings. I did track down that article ‘Colorful Space Marines Stop Corruption’, the expose on Freelancer. It was mostly garbage, nothing really useful, but the picture caught my attention.”

At the round of blank faces, Niner sighed. She knew they were obsessed with news and information, so the information shouldn’t have surprised them, but for all the mystery and cool factor Alpha team had, they could be idiots. Niner pulled out her tablet and brought up the main picture for the article that showcased a group of simulation troopers in brightly colored armor. She zoomed in on one particular soldier in teal armor and held the tablet out in front of her.

Delicately, Wyoming took the tablet and his eyes shot open wide at the suddenly familiar armor on the screen.

“Dear god in heaven!”

“Yeah. My guess is the blue with yellow stripes is Wash, he was always a sucker for the accents, but there’s another soldier who’s not identified. The one shaking Hargrove’s hand. The one in Carolina’s armor.”

York shot out of his seat and snatched the tablet from Wyoming’s hands. His eyes were blown wide as he stared at the image he’d clearly never bothered to take a look at seared itself into his brain.

“What?!”

“I can’t guarantee it’s her, York. It looks like her armor, has all the same markers, but that doesn’t mean that it’s her. They don’t identify her in the article. We won’t know until we get there.”

Wyoming motioned to the tablet that York had clearly decided to bogard to himself, but Niner waved him off. She wasn’t worried about getting the tablet back, it wasn’t like York was going to try to steal it from her or anything stupid like that.

“We’re headed to the planet Chorus, it’s a two-day trip from here, but we should beat the majority of the military crowd simply due to the bureaucracy of sending out ships into hostile territory. It’s likely that Washington will want to stay behind and help the planet, so we need to decide if we’re sticking around to help, or if we’re grabbing our guy and booking it before anyone else shows up.”

Florida grinned and stowed away the last of the packs. His voice had his signature brand of bright, unassuming cheer, that seemed to cast a lightening charm on everyone around him.

“Our Wash is a bleeding heart, he’s not going to be willing to abandon anyone. We should be prepared to fight or throw him over our collective shoulders and run like the wind. I’m good either way.”
Niner had missed the man, missed all of them really. The energy in his bounce brought a smile to Maine’s face, loosened York’s shoulders, made North comfortable enough to lean back in his seat, and even made South roll her eyes amicably and collapse onto Maine more fully.

Wyoming snorted, waved off Florida’s happiness, then winked at the man as if they were sharing a dirty secret.

“Of course, you are, old chap. Any excuse to get the boy under hand, eh?”

North huffed a laugh and shook his head, clearly amused by the two men.

Florida had always had an off-color humor, but Wyoming was always the one that surprised people. People who didn’t know him well, those only on the periphery of their intimate little group, often assumed that he only enjoyed knock-knock jokes. It wasn’t a fair assessment of his humor. Sure, he got more laughs out of them than the rightfully deserved, but he also had an interesting perspective when paired with Florida’s antics.

“Considering we’re all supposed to be dead, I can’t imagine that an investigation from the UNSC would fall under our favor.”

South hopped to her feet and flexed her shoulders back and forth, likely to work a kink out of her spine, then patted Maine on the shoulder and planted her feet next to him.

“We don’t know anything about this planet, the people on it, or what’s going on other than they’ve been in the middle of a civil war and being attacked by Charon industries. I say we hit the ground with the intention to stick around and help, but make sure we’re prepped to run if things go… poorly.”

Niner nodded and wheeled herself into the cockpit, more than ready to get off this planet and get back into the sky. Less than ten hours planetside and she was already aching to taste the stars again and feel the glow of moonlight on her skin through the windshield.

“As long as we’re all on the same page. I’m going to check our flight path again. Everyone, check your gear, eat, and get some rest. The time’ll pass quick.”

South grinned and threw a wink of her own at her brother, who grinned back. As Niner moved out of easy visibility, she heard the playful grin in South’s normally biting voice.

Things had started to look up. For the first time in a very long time, things had finally started to feel like they were heading to smooth territory.

"Oh, man, hang onto your hats boys, because North and I have got something that we think you'll just flip over."

Niner didn’t trust it.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was most recently updated 12/25/2018. Contents were not really changed, mostly it's grammar corrections and a little bit of fleshing out, but only a little bit. No plot points were changed during this update.
Niner rolled herself into the cockpit and shut the door, a clear sign that she wanted to be alone for a while. The woman always preferred to fly uninterrupted by the others, though she would tolerate one person in her cockpit if she absolutely had to. This gave South the perfect opportunity to hand out some very special equipment to the others. The kind of equipment people would and had killed for.

South pulled one of the big metal boxes out and started to enter passcodes.

“So, did you guys ever really think about the AI fragments?”

York, Florida, and Wyoming all shared a look, but didn’t respond. Maine looked pained and tried to shrink in on himself, but being as large as he was, it didn’t do much.

North shook his head at South, who made an apologetic noise.

“It’s important, or I wouldn’t bring it up.”

She popped the lid on the box, freeing the AI storage device inside along with all of the power cells hooked up to it. York stood and sauntered over to it, no doubt interested in what she’d managed to smuggle or steal. South’s heart began to race in her chest, and she took a breath to try and bring the pumping and whirring back to a manageable level.

“So, we know that what Wash blew up was where they stored the rejects, the AI that weren’t functioning, and the like. Sure, whatever, that makes sense, but the facility didn’t have any spaces for the AI from Alpha squad, so what gets me is this. What did the AI back up to?”

York froze.

“What?”

His voice was soft, weak, like someone who’d been deprived of air for too long. He’s started to make the connection.

“The AI would back up pretty often right before or after a big fight. I didn’t really notice it myself until Niner mentioned that Delta had done it on the mission with the huge drop. On the Mother of Invention, I can see backing up on a schedule. No one expected her to fall right out of the sky and there was plenty of space to store the AI.”

South worked the storage device free and started to press several buttons in an activation sequence. The thing about a storage device was that it was not meant to be permanent, wasn’t designed for it. The thing needed a shit ton of power and needed constant maintenance. She growled as it gave her
a warning for disconnecting one of the power cells.

“Fucking ass! Stupid, dumbfuck, piece of go shi!”

North put his hand on her shoulder and tugged her back from the delicate electronics.

“South, please stop cursing in nerd. Let me take this one and you can finish explaining, it always gives you trouble.”

South let out a frustrated huff but handed the tools off to North. He settled in and plugged in the contact to get a better idea of what was making it behave so poorly this time around. Most of the others she could handle, but that damned unit in particular gave them both more trouble than it was worth.

“Right. Thanks. Anyway, the MoI had plenty of space for backing up, but that’s not the case in one of Niner’s birds.”

South stepped away from the unit to give North some space to tinker and rolled her right shoulder. It started to tense up while she hunched over the storage unit and suddenly spiked into ‘may need a proper massage’ territory.

“There is nowhere inside of one of these ships for the AI to back up to, and a lot of our missions were too far away from the Mother of Invention for a transmitted backup. Our suits don’t have a backup location inside them, that’d be stupid if the enemy managed to get a hold of our armor. Not to mention that there’s enough space for an AI in these damned things, but that doesn’t mean that there’s space for a backup copy. Even though our AI were fragments, that doesn’t mean that they didn’t take the same amount of storage space.”

Florida leaned forward and grinned.

“Alright, South darling, you’ve made your point. Where did they back up to?”

South motioned to the units that she and North had hauled to the ship. She kept an eye on Maine’s reaction, but the man simply buried his face in his hands. He knew what they were looking at without her saying a word. How the man recognized a proper storage unit, she didn’t know.

“These little puppies are not ordinary AI Storage Units. These are remote units designed for temporary storage in case of the worst, one of the soldiers with an AI is killed or destroyed and their AI can’t be recovered. The AI is supposed to delete itself, and the backup recovered right here. They’d install these before the mission while Niner was distracted as a precaution. The Director could have literally made an army out of one of the fragments if he could have afforded more of these units. The big problem is that these are finicky at best, and they are incredibly costly to build and maintain.”

Wyoming’s placating expression morphed into a frown that was excessively British and completely him, with just a hint of desperation in his eyes. South knew that he and Gamma had been extremely close, the way all of the AI were close to their partners, even if the two preferred to work with Gamma outside of Wyoming’s head.

He’d loved Gamma like Gamma was his family.

“That is not how that works. You cannot copy an AI, South, everyone knows that.”

South decided not to do the sympathetic thing, and instead grinned and sauntered over to Wyoming’s side. She gave him a pat on the arm and leaned in to his face, close enough to ruffle
his mustache if she’d wanted Florida to gut her as soon as she dared.

“Wy, baby, what do you think a backup is? It is an exact copy of the files you are trying to protect stored somewhere safe and awaiting being overwritten or used. Why would a backup copy of an AI be any different? It’s essentially a complete replica of the file including all of the bits that you can’t normally copy because they are constantly running. No, you can’t copy an AI the way you copy a picture, they’re too complicated, but that’s not exactly what this is. It’s way better.”

North smiled as the unit made a happy beep and ejected a small, familiar chip.

“The problem with these is that they take up an enormous amount of power and are prone to falling to pieces without constant maintenance. Luckily, we won’t have to worry about that much longer.”

York made a pained noise.

When South caught his eye, she realized he was about to cry.

“You have…”

South gave a solemn nod and gestured to the chip in North’s hand that he cradled delicately. He didn’t need to be so careful, it wasn’t going to fall to pieces if you breathed on it, but there was something about the ritual of the whole thing that North enjoyed and South learned early on not to tease him about it if she didn’t want to spend a good hour getting him to stop pouting like a kid.

“The main reason you can’t copy an AI is the same reason these storage units are so prone to falling to pieces. AI are like organic creatures, they need to move, to grow, to process, and a straight up copy doesn’t usually get treated with the right kind of care to keep it from immediately unraveling when it tries to do what an AI naturally does. North’s getting him out for you right now York, but these units aren’t going to last much longer without some serious work. We need to get a wireless link going somewhere with the processing power and the energy to keep them going so they can keep functioning, otherwise this is it. The ones we can plug into us are fine, but the ones in the units are in danger if the unit fails.”

York didn’t look like he processed anything she’d said, but then again, the others didn’t look like they really cared either. AI theory was something they’d covered in classes, as far as they were concerned, they’d learned everything they needed to know.

Shows what they knew.

“But you have them. That’s Delta? That one, right there, that’s Delta?”

York’s voice shook, his hands trembled, and there was such hope in his eyes that South wanted to turn away. She wanted the thinly veiled hostility back.

“Yeah, that little fucker is Delta. Go get him already, do you really expect North to stand up and present him to you? Lazy bastard.”

York scrambled to North’s side and tried to take the chip, only to fumble it several times. North simply placed a hand on York’s back and pushed him gently forward so that he could see York’s implant site. With a gentle hum North reattached the chip, and York burst into tears.

“Fuck! Fuck! Oh god!”

South moved over to the line of units and got ready to push buttons.
“Well, Wy? Gamma next?”

Wyoming shared a look with Florida, his face absolutely wrecked once he realized exactly what she was offering. Florida’s normally happy go lucky default expression became completely neutral. She’d be scared if she didn’t know that the happier Florida looked, the easier it was for him to start popping off kneecaps with no remorse.

“Gamma can stay until he has somewhere safe to back up to. He comes out when we have sex. That’s not an option.”

Wyoming fell into Florida’s arms and kissed him eagerly. The painfully expressionless expression disappeared and became bright and chipper again. Florida was back to himself.

South just rolled her eyes and pulled the access panel up on Gamma’s storage unit.

“Ugh, get a room, you two. No one wants to see your free-love debauchery.”

Florida pulled away from Wyoming with a grin and shooed him over to the unit where North had already begun the delicate process of transferring Gamma to his chip. Florida stretched himself out and spread his legs wide.

“There is nothing ‘free-love’ or ‘debaucherous’ about it, dear, though there is nothing wrong with either of those things. No, no, Reggie and I are married now.”

North, South, York, and Maine all looked over at Florida with surprise before they turned to look at Wyoming, who flushed red, but couldn’t keep a small, goofy smile off of his face.

York was the first to recover. He slapped a hand on Wyoming’s back.

“Hot damn,” he said, voice still watery, “Congratulations! Sorry we missed the wedding.”

Wyoming shook his head.

“It’s all well and good, though if you had been there it might have been a little easier.”

Florida laughed loudly and settled in to tell the story.

“We had a civil service while Reggie was still recovering. I had to hold the judge and the witnesses at gunpoint because they refused to give a marriage license to unregistered individuals on that planet! Can you believe that? Just because we weren’t citizens they tried to refuse to marry us!”

Wyoming sighed heavily, but it was clear he was amused.

“He dragged this poor couple into the judge’s house in the dead of night, the stolen license tucked into his back pocket, then put a gun to the judge’s head and told him if he didn’t sign it, they were all dead. I cannot say how legal the whole thing is, what with our real names not being on it, but it’s the thought that counts.”

North gave the two men a bewildered look, then shook his head with a sigh.

“That is just so…so very you, Florida. The only thing that would have made it better is if you’d kidnapped the judge to an undisclosed location and literally had a proper ceremony with the witnesses and judge at gunpoint.”

Florida shrugged.
“Maybe when we renew our vows. I’ve always wanted a suit with a train.”

Wyoming grinned.

“I look forward to it.”

The storage unit pinged, and North gently pulled Gamma’s chip free. Wyoming took it lightly and walked back to Florida. He handed the other man Gamma’s chip and maneuvered so that Florida could slot it into place. Wyoming rocked on his feet as soon as it was slotted in and collapsed into Florida’s arms, allowing himself to be held as he adjusted.

York, fully recovered, looked at North.

“Please tell me you have Theta.”

North nodded and smiled softly.

“Yeah, he's here.”

South breathed a sigh.

“We thought about plugging more than one in at a time, they'd be relatively safe powered by the suits, but then we'd be stuck in them all the time, and powering the suits is just as hard as powering the storage units without the right hookups. Plus, we just didn’t want to try doing what…what Carolina did, and have multiple AI in one person. It looked painful when it went wrong.”

A soft sound ripped its way from Maine's chest and the man moved to huddle in a corner, his eyes filled with a haunted expression she’d never seen before. York looked at the man, his teammate, with an expression that South couldn't place.

South sat next to Maine, who looked at her with a pitifully wrecked expression. It was a lot for the big guy, of all of them, South knew best.

“It’s ok to not take one. Literally no one would blame you.”

Maine’s face scrunched up, his eyes were desperate, and he shook his head slowly.

“It’s ok to want one, too. You don’t have to take Sigma.”

Maine had held all of them in his head at one point, so maybe it wasn’t just Sigma that was the problem. South watched his hands tense and relax several times, before Maine ran a hand over his head and buried his face in his knees.

York made a soft noise, the realization that things were not as they seemed before finally clicking in his brain. Gently, South put a hand on Maine’s back.

“And it’s ok to not know what you want right now. That’s fine. We still have some time before we're planet-side. North'll be happy to play the ‘pro’ ‘con’ game with you. He's good at that shit.”

They sat in silence for a moment, only the sound of the engines and the breathing of so many bodies in such an enclosed space remained. It was broken by the sound of Florida’s throat clearing.

“So, forgive me if I’m wrong here, but there are seven units there. North already has Theta implanted. Who’s the extra?”

South looked at him but didn’t take her hand away from Maine.
“No one. I don’t have one. We have Gamma, Delta, Eta, Iota, Theta, Sigma, and Omega.”

Florida gave South a gentle, fatherly grin that sent a shiver down South’s spine. The only time he ever looked like that was when he was going in for the kill or when he was making inappropriate comments to unsettle his prey. Either way, she wasn’t going to enjoy it if she said the wrong thing.

“Why carry around a unit for Theta if he’s already in North? You did say that these units are delicate little power whores that fall apart if you so much as breathe on them wrong. Don't tell me you brought Epsilon for Wash.”

South looked at the ceiling and went for a flippant tone.

"Epsilon was broken, you know what it did to Wash. Why would we bother wasting the space on a non-functioning AI?

Florida's gentle, cheery expression made it clear that he didn't buy it, and Wyoming's stern face took on a more suspicious expression.

North and South caught one another’s eyes. They needed to come up with an answer, and fast.

North cocked his head slightly. Do we tell them?

South shrugged. I don't fucking care.

North frowned. It’s important.

South rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Don’t lay this shit on me, I genuinely don’t care.

With an expression that looked a great deal to South like constipation, North pointed to one of the units.

“That’s the backup of the Beta AI. That’s Tex.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter most recently updated 03/06/19.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

An old friend comes to visit and Wash ugly cries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“See you on the other side, Church.”

Time slowed down as Church began to prepare for the second hardest thing he’d ever had to do.

“Not this time, buddy.”

The Delta part of Epsilon blinked into awareness next to him, the logical part of him no doubt there to try to change Church’s mind.

“Are you... sure about this?”

He nodded. The motion was unnecessary since Delta was literally just an extension of him, but the gesture felt right. It didn’t really matter if Delta was real or not, he felt real and he deserved the respect for helping Epsilon get through his own shit.

“I’m sure... start a recording for me, D.”

“Recording.”

“Hey guys... if you're hearing this then it means you did it. You won. You kicked the shit out of Hargrove's forces. I knew you could. But this is my last stop. See, when I came into this world, I was really just a collection of somebody else's memories. But with your help, these memories... they-they took form! They became my voice, my personality. And, after a while, I... I began to make brand new memories of my own. All of these things are what make me who I am... but they're also holding me back. I can't run this suit as Epsilon, but if I erase my memories, if I... deconstruct myself, the fragments I'll leave behind will have the strength to get you through this. I believe that. I wish that there was another way. But I’m leaving this message, as well as others, in the hopes that you'll understand why I have to go this time...hehe, it was actually Doyle who made me realize something that I've never thought of before. There are so many stories where some brave hero decides to give their life to save the day, and because of their sacrifice, the good guys win, the survivors all cheer, and everybody lives happily ever after.

“But the hero... never gets to see that ending. They'll never know if their sacrifice actually made a difference. They'll never know if the day was really saved. In the end, they just have to have faith.

“Ain't that a bitch.”

As he paused for one final moment to prepare himself for his own deconstruction, Epsilon’s attention was caught by an unexpected motion ping in the far corner of the ceiling.
He pulled up a scan of the room and saw that there was something in the vent. Something small, thin, and moving fast. Something that the guys wouldn’t be able to catch in time.

“Delta, what the fuck is that?”

“It appears to be a soldier. She’s approaching quickly, likely to be in the room before the guards break the door.”

Epsilon’s thoughts raced, he needed a plan, he needed to know what to do.

“Odds of the guys turning to stop her before getting shot?”

“There is a 57% chance that she will get shots in before they notice her presence without warning, and at that angle, the shots will likely be fatal. If we deconstruct now, there will be no way to warn them.”

“Fuck!”

There was no time. Church dropped back into real time and shouted.

“Everybody down!”

The sim trouper dropped to the floor as the soldier fell from the ceiling and catapulted herself across the room, over their heads. A rain of knives flew from her hands just as the door flew open.

There were screams of panic as the men in the doorway went down. There were fewer than the Reds and Blues expected, but more than enough to have given them trouble.

The soldier landed hard, but whipped around and held her hands up. Her armor was brown with several white accents and an EOD helmet.

Tucker’s brain froze for a moment. He knew that armor. He knew, but it wasn’t…wasn’t possible, was it?

“C.T.?”

Tucker choked out.

A voice he didn’t expect came out.

“That’s me, Former Agent Connecticut of Project Freelancer. I heard you boys could use some help.”

Church sputtered on Tucker’s shoulder, his tiny arms flailed wildly and more than a little angrily.

“How? You’re dead! Tex killed you!”

C.T. rolled her shoulders and pulled a knife from…well, Tucker wasn’t exactly sure where the knife had appeared from. That was a neat trick for a knife that wasn’t made of glowing energy.
“Do you want answers now or do you want to live?”

Grif growled out.

“Listen Lady, we haven’t had the best luck with you or your buddies in the past. How do we know we can trust you?”

She rolled a shoulder and threw a knife out the door into the helmet of an approaching soldier, who howled in pain, then fell to the floor dead.

“I guess you can’t. Just try not to shoot me in the back while I’m helping kill Hargrove’s men, and when we get done here, I’ll be more than happy to regale you with stories.”

She chucked two more knives through the door and two more soldiers scream in agony while she quickly snapped up her weapons from the dead bodies on the floor.

“You guys play with Wash and Carolina, right? Ever hear the story about him trying to skateboard on the Mother of Invention and how he accidentally ran over The Director? That was a laugh riot.”

The next two soldiers got knives to the groins. Tucker knew that their horrified and pained screams would haunt the dreams of the colorful space marines for years to come, Tucker knew it was going to haunt his.

Then C.T. turned to them and pointed to the doorway with a peppy bounce.

“We’re going to need to move forward at some point, or they’ll corner us with the big guns. You boys ready to pull out?”

Tucker couldn’t help himself. He grinned.

“Baby, I’m always ready to pull out, Bow Chicka Wow Wow.”

She turned to look at him but said nothing.

Tucker started to sweat in his suit. If he’d used that line on Carolina, she’d have smacked him. Tex would have shot at him or punched him with his own fist until he promised to wash Sheila or something stupid. This woman threw knives at people’s dicks. Maybe he should have tried harder to keep his mouth shut.

Eventually she tuned back to the hallway.

“That line was terrible, and you should feel terrible for using it. You and York would have been great friends. Come on.”

C.T. led the charge out of the room and down the halls. The Reds and Blues followed, increasingly nervous as the woman seemed to know exactly where she was going.

They ran through the ship fast, and Tucker for one was glad that C.T. was at the front. The woman’s throw with the knife was deadly and incredibly precise.

She managed to hit more than she missed and favored sinking knives into the crotches of the enemy soldiers if at all possible. Tucker was not the only one to wince in sympathy as the woman breathed a laugh at a soldier squealing on the ground and clutching at what once was his genitals.

She was terrifying in a way that reminded Tucker of Tex. Scary, lethal, and not afraid to go after a man’s happy spot if she was pissed or in a hurry. If she really was a Freelancer, it would explain
the terrifying knife trick and how she knew about Wash’s skateboard story.

They were nearly at the hanger when the Reds and Blues radios crackled, and Wash’s voice broke through.

“GUYS! Is anyone there?!”

Tucker grinned.

“Fuck yeah, man! Where are you?”

C.T. heard Tucker’s response and skidded to a stop. Caboose nearly barreled into her and began bouncing up and down with excitement, or maybe a need to pee. Usually he went before a battle, but there wasn’t exactly time on Hargrove’s ship.

“We just landed and we’re on our way in. I can see you guys on my display, we’re twenty seconds away. Is anyone hurt?”

Carolina’s tense voice broke the chatter.

“I’m seeing an extra body with you.”

Tucker traded a look with Grif, who managed a ‘I don’t fucking know, man, this isn’t my department’ shrug. This was bad. Wash was a shoot first ask questions later kind of guy, but Carolina was a shoot first, shoot second kind of person.

“I don’t think any of us have a scratch. Listen, don’t freak out, ok?”

Carolina and Wash rounded the corner at top speed, guns raised. Wash stumbled and barely managed to keep on his feet. Carolina froze on the spot.

“What the FUCK?!”

Wash’s voice was hot and heavy and so very, very dark. It’d have been a turn on if Tucker weren’t convinced that Wash was about to put a bullet through Tucker’s skull. Carolina’s low voice washed over the group, flat in fury.

“Explain. Now.”

Tucker waved his hands back and forth in front of him, desperate to not be shot.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, it’s me! Church, tell them!”

C.T., to the confusion of the Reds and Blues, dropped delicately to her knees and raised her hands above her head, the weapons held loosely. She tilted to look at Wash and spoke.

Her voice was surprisingly soft, brittle and delicate, like she hadn’t just killed twenty men in the last ten minutes by cutting off their dicks.

“Hey, Wash.”

Wash’s armor stiffened, and Tucker would have given anything to know just what was running through his head at the moment.

He strode forward, gun pointed directly at C.T.’s head and didn’t stop until the weapon nearly touched her helmet.

Donut delicately plucked the knives from her hands and backed up. None of them quipped. There wasn’t time, and for once, they didn’t want to say the wrong thing.

-Tucker, we’ve got to get moving. Talk to him.-

Tucker nodded.

“Wash—"

“Shut the FUCK up, Tucker.” Wash snapped. “Take off your helmet.”

C.T.’s hands moved deliberately to the catch on her helmet and she slid it off.

She was…not what Tucker expected.

Her skin was paper white, Tucker could see some of the veins under her skin, her hair was limp and greasy, and she was gaunt.

On a bad night, Carolina had gotten shitfaced with some bathtub moonshine the Chorus soldiers had made and told the Reds and Blues about her deceased teammates. She’s said C.T. was a waif. She’d said nothing about the other woman being a skeleton.

“Holy shit.” Simmons breathed out.

C.T. looked directly into Wash’s visor, face blank, eyes red, and spoke again.

“Hey, Wash.”

Carolina strode up to Wash and grabbed his shoulder.

“We don’t have time for this. Everyone onto the bird, this ship is going down.”

Wash stared at C.T. for a moment, then nodded and pulled his gun away. C.T. grabbed her helmet but made no move to put it on.

Carolina cocked her hip to the side in that way of hers and held out a hand.

“If you hurt them, I will make you wish you really were dead.”

C.T. smiled wide and bright.

“You got it, ‘Lina. I am so fucking happy to hear your voice.”

C.T. took Carolina’s hand and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. She put her helmet back on and Donut delicately held out her knives.

“Wow! You are really pale! Have you considered spending time in a tanning booth? Not all the time, because it is bad for your skin, but a little bit of light would probably be good for you!”

The sound of C.T.’s laugh was like a wind chime made of broken bottles. She took back her weapons and rolled her shoulders to loosen up.

“Tell you what, Buttercup, if we survive this and I don’t end up in a deep, dark hole for the rest of my days, you and me can go tanning.”
Donut clapped his hands together in excitement and both Grif and Simmons groaned.

“Awesome! I’ve wanted a tanning buddy for a while! I can’t take Simmons because he just burns and peels and it’s really gross, and Grif is already a perfect shade of caramel to go with his hair. Lopez agreed to tan with me once, but since he’s a robot, it didn’t really do anything for him except heat up his metal.”

Church projected himself closer to Grif.

“He volunteered?”

Sarge scoffed and pointed his shotgun at Donut.

“Ah think Donut just discombobulated Lopez with all his talk about fancy hand creams and such.”

Tucker looked up at Wash as best he could without looking directly at the man. Wash’s armor was still tensed, and he was silent, which was a bad sign during a battle. Wash was the type to chat, bark orders, and reassure unless radio silence was necessary.

Just as Tucker was about to switch over to the Blue team channel, Caboose’s voice broke the silence.

“Agent Washington? Are you ok?”

Wash didn’t move, but his voice came across the channel, shaky.

“No, I’m not alright. I’m…really not alright.”

Shit.

Tucker’s voice cracked the tension in the room like a bullet.

“Ok, seriously, did no one hear Carolina? Lets go! The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can get help. I for one, do not want to be on this ship in this fucked up armor any longer than I have to be!”

C.T. led the group back to the bird that brought Carolina and Wash, always in someone’s line of fire, should she turn out to be a threat. The few soldiers that managed to get in the way were quickly and efficiently dispatched with headshots by the Freelancers.

Once the group was loaded and far enough away from Hargrove’s ship, Carolina sent a message to Kimball to take the ship out.

Tucker made sure to settle himself at Wash’s side for the descent, and Caboose pressed into Wash’s other side. It was weird that Caboose would snuggle against someone while they were both wearing full armor, since you didn’t get the human contact he was clearly going for, but it kept him calm and not shooting people accidentally.

Tucker clicked over to the Blue channel.

“Hey, Wash.”

“Tucker.”

Wash didn’t move his head. His eyes and gun were firmly fixed on C.T., who’d once again removed her helmet and turned all of her weapons to Carolina. Donut perched himself directly by
C.T.’s side, and started to talk her ear off about tanning oils and contouring make-up and…Jesus, Donut, what the hell?

“Wanna talk about it?”

Tucker didn’t expect a positive response. For all Wash’s speeches and attempts at camaraderie, getting him to open up was like pulling Junior’s baby teeth.

“I…Tucker, if I start to hallucinate…you’ll tell me, right? You won’t just let me walk around, talking to invisible dead people?”

Caboose cocked his head.

“What if they are dead people like Church? Tiny ghost people.”

“Caboose, you guys can see me when I project. I’m not invisible.”

“Well you are right now! Maybe the other dead people will be invisible sometimes!”

Tucker put a hand on Wash’s shoulder and squeezed. It occurred to him that Wash wouldn’t be able to feel the gesture any more than he could really feel Caboose’s cuddling, but when Wash lowered the gun slightly, Tucker figured that the gesture was appreciated.

“Wash, I swear, if you start talking to people who aren’t actually there, I will step in. She’s real, dude. She’s really real.”

It was only his hand on Wash’s shoulder that clued Tucker in to the fact that his friend had started to shake.

Fuck. This was wrong, this was so fucking wrong. It’d taken Tucker and the rest of the guys ages to help put Wash back together right.

Carolina’s random reappearance after her supposed death had been enough to send Wash into a spiral of fear and anxiety, convinced that he was seeing things. He’d spent hours that first night hiding in a closet, scratching and chewing at his own arms, convinced that he was still strapped down to a bed in one of Project Freelancer’s emergency locations, being mentally taken apart over and over until they were sure that he ‘wasn’t hiding anything’ and was ‘ready to be a good soldier’.

It was the first time Wash had really scared them.

He’d recovered quickly for that kind of shit, Carolina told them later that Wash was the kind of guy who always bounced back, but they fucking hated trying to figure out where the line was between ‘fine’ Wash and ‘falling to pieces’ Wash.

“What if you’re not real? What if all of this has just been a lie? A hallucination or a simulation?”

Tucker took his hand away.

“Well, fuck, dude, I don’t know.”

Church projected out of Tucker’s armor and settled himself in Wash’s vision. He was turned to watch C.T. and Carolina, but his voice filtered across the private channel.

“If you’re still there, it means I am too. We’re still in each other’s goddamned heads trying to find a way to fit. It means neither of us ever met the guys or had crazy adventures or really lived in the way that we have. Personally, I don’t think my imagination is good enough to think up this many
people to piss me off at one time, so I’m pretty sure this is real.

“But…even if it’s not…that doesn’t make this any less important.”

Caboose turned and wrapped his arms around Wash in a loose hug.

“Everything will be ok, Agent Washington. We will land soon, and then we can make everything better again. We will go to the park, and eat ice cream, and watch movies, and play board games, and drink soda, and just have a really good time all the time! Because we are friends, and friends take care of each other.”

And when Caboose put it that way, it was really fucking simple.

Connie was handcuffed to a chair in Kimball’s favorite conference room.

As soon as they landed, the Reds and Blues marched her to where Kimball and Doctor Grey were waiting. Carolina stripped Connie of her armor and cuffed her to the chair by her wrists and ankles. Wash managed to peel himself away from Tucker and Caboose, who had both seemingly turned into octopuses (or was it octopi? Carolina didn’t know.) from the way they’d wrapped themselves around him.

-Either works.-

Right. Anyway, they’d clung to Wash the whole way, the three chatted on the Blue team channel as if they’d forgotten she was there. She’d been made privy to all of the private channels, some with permission, and some just thanks to Church being a nosy worrywart.

-Fuck you too, C. If I wasn’t listening in, Grif would have gotten himself caught ten times over trying to raid the kitchen, and Simmons would have moped for months if Wash made Grif run until he died. Really, I’m doing everyone a favor.-

Carolina hid a smile.

Connie bowed her head and didn’t look at anyone. Her undersuit for her armor was very loose, clearly not made to fit her as she was now. It made Carolina worried to see her that way.

God, Connie was thin. She’d always been tiny, Project Freelancer’s pixie, but now she was hardly more than a skeleton with just enough muscle to allow her body to move. Her face was gaunt, and Carolina could see that some of her hair had fallen out while Connie wore her helmet.

What had Hargrove done to her?

Kimball moved to stand directly in front of Connie, arms crossed. Kimball was a formidable person, capable of so much strength and dignity it made Carolina wince sometimes at her own weaknesses.

-Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re not her. You’ve lived through some pretty impressive shit all on your own.-
“So,” Kimball’s voice boomed through the room, “Carolina and Wash say you’re another member of Project Freelancer. Care to explain how you managed to survive?”

The group was small. Carolina, Church, Wash, Kimball representing the New Republic of Chorus, and Doctor Grey representing the interests of the Federal Army of Chorus until someone could be properly elected so that the two political factions could actually work out their disagreements without mercenary interference.

The Reds and Blues, particularly Tucker, were unhappy to be excluded from the meeting, but Carolina didn’t want to overwhelm Connie any more than she already was. She’d sounded cool in the armor, but it was easy to sound like you didn’t have a care in the world when you had a helmet to hide the blood, the sweat, the tears, and the desperation.

Connie looked up, her eyes stopped just below Kimball’s visor.

“It’s a little…complicated, and I’m not entirely sure that everything I know is accurate based on the source of the information. How much do you know already?”

Carolina could feel Kimball’s scowl from under her visor. She’d been there when Carolina spilled about her teammates, when Carolina cried over how guilty she felt for letting things deteriorate the way that they had. Kimball had been the one to hold her, to pull her back from the tears and snot and self-reprimandings and remind her that she could only take so much blame for what happened. Carolina had enough on her plate without taking on guilt that didn’t belong to her.

“Enough. Lets start with how you survived having an axe shoved into you.”

Connie shrank in on herself, tried to make herself smaller, and looked close to tears.

In all her time at Project Freelancer, Connie never once pulled the ‘I’m just a little girl’ card. Carolina did it a few times during training to teach the men to never underestimate a woman, a lesson that only Florida and North didn’t need. Even South had pulled the ‘I’m weak and helpless because I have a vagina’ thing, usually to prove a point by kicking the sucker who fell for it in the balls and stealing something from him. Tex hadn’t spent any time with the group, and after her introduction, no one dared underestimate her, so Carolina had no idea if she’d played that way or not.

Connie never tried to be underestimated. She could have easily, she’d never looked like a fighter until she shaved her head, and even then she was considered more cute than deadly.

She’d told Carolina once that she’d always hated being underestimated, even if it was a deliberate tactic. Her pride got in the way.

Either she’d changed her tune in recent years, or Connie was close to her breaking point.

-Either way, we have to see this through, C. She’s gotta talk, or Kimball really will lock her in a dark hole.-

I know, Church.

Carolina cast a glance at Wash, but the man was stock still and wearing his helmet, so it was useless to try and read him. Not that she was any good at it anyway. Never had been. Carolina was always too wrapped up in her own thing to learn his more subtle tells, and now it was too late.

“After Joe…The Insurrectionist Leader…after he got us out…I was hurt. We both knew I was dying. We…”
Connie squeezed her eyes shut.

“Hargrove told me that I lost consciousness, but my eyes didn’t close. Joe thought I was dead, and he had every right to. There were a few cryotubes in the shuttle, which I still think was weird, but I can’t say I’m not grateful for it. He tucked me inside one and turned it on, probably hoping it would stop my…decomposition.

“I woke up in a hospital room, strapped down to a bed, tubes stuck into me in all sorts of places you don’t want them when you wake up.”

Carolina saw Wash clench his hands into fists. He’d been in that position on more than one occasion during Project Freelancer and had mentioned that no matter how gently they tried to wake you, it never stopped being traumatic and awful.

“He came to see me personally. He told me that I’d been in there for a long time, that I was legally dead, and that Joe was literally dead. They recovered his body when they got my armor. He had Joe wheeled in, just in case I thought he was lying. He made me.”

Connie cut herself off with a shake of her head.

“He made he see that it was real. Said they’d invested a lot of money in my medical care. I’d lost nearly all of my muscle mass and the blood loss caused damage to my brain that took a long time to fix. I’m still not all there, brain wise, probably won’t ever be.”

She looked up to meet Kimball’s visor head on for the first time.

“I was in physical therapy for a long time. I saw The Councilor from the Project occasionally, though only through a monitor. He told me some of what happened, evaluated my readiness. I think if what happened today had failed, he would have rubber stamped me to be released to take out your soldiers.”

Doctor Grey stepped up to Kimball’s side. Her sweet voice chimed like a bell.

“And would you have? Come down to our surface and killed the stragglers? Slaughtered children, teens barely old enough to be considered adults?”

Connie shook her head.

“There’s not a good answer to that question. If I say no, you would never believe me, and you’d have every right not to. If I say yes, then you throw me in a cell and wait for me to die.”

Connie growled at the two women.

“I am so fucking sick of people waiting for me to die.”

-Hot damn, I don’t remember her being this assertive.-

Carolina stayed quiet. Of course, Church didn’t remember. Carolina barely remembered, and she’d actually been there.

Kimball took off her helmet and rolled her neck. She and Connie locked eyes for a few moments, the two women tried to read each other through the fear and betrayal to see what was underneath.

“Be honest with me. It’ll get you a hell of a lot farther, even if we don’t like it, than if we find out you lied later. We’ve all been lied to enough.”
They stared a little longer before Connie let out a small huff of laughter and nodded.

“There’s no way the attack today had been successful in wiping out everyone on the planet. I still call bullshit on it. I wouldn’t have done what Hargrove wanted.

“Even if I killed, it would have been because I had to, for my own survival. I would have fought until I had proof that Wash and Carolina were dead, or until I found them alive and could beg for forgiveness.”

Connie’s face hardened, her lips curled into the most disgusted and furious expression Carolina had ever seen on her face before.

“I would NEVER follow Hargrove if I had a choice. NEVER. That man deserves to die a slow, painful death that lasts for YEARS.”

Kimball and Doctor Grey looked to Carolina, who moved just out of Connie’s line of sight. Carolina nodded. She trusted Connie, even though it probably wasn’t smart. The Reds and Blues had taught her the value of doing things that weren’t always smart.

-And fuck you too, again. Jesus, you’re being bitchy considering that we won.-

The two women standing for Chorus turned to Wash, who hadn’t moved from his position against the wall behind Connie since the whole thing started. Other than his clenched fists, he hadn’t moved at all.

Carolina wished she knew what was going on in his head.

-Lots of fear. He’s afraid for her, he’s afraid of her. He’s afraid that this isn’t real, and in some ways I think he’s afraid that it is, and what it means for other people we thought were dead.-

You think there might be others still alive?

-If you’d asked me a few hours ago? I’d probably have said no. Now…fuck, C, now I’ve got no fucking clue. I’m basically discounting any death that we didn’t see a body and check its fucking pulse.-

So…you’re saying everyone we’ve ever known or killed.

-Probably not Felix, and not the Director. Sharkface is toast. I’m…running numbers on the others.-

I didn’t stay to watch.

-Well, the reports said they found a body…but ok. The Director may not be dead either. Fuck. And we sent out a fucking message into outer space with our goddamned pictures all over it, telling people to come here.-

Being alive is more important than being subtle. We can always go into hiding. Let’s take care of this problem first.

Carolina switched over to hers and Wash’s private line.

“Wash?"
There was nothing for a moment, and then a quiet wheeze.

“Yeah, Boss?”

"What's your verdict?"

Wash looked up at Kimball and Doctor Grey.

He gave a brief nod.

Carolina stepped forward and uncuffed Connie’s wrists as Kimball laid down the law.

“You are under 24-hour observation at all times until we can determine your loyalties. Your armor will be under lock and key, and should you attempt to steal it at any point in time for any reason, you will automatically be branded a traitor and killed on the spot. Do not pass go, do not collect $200. Are we clear on that?”

“Crystal.”

Kimball nodded.

“Good. Doctor Grey?”

Doctor Grey knelt down into Connie’s line of sight but didn’t bother to take off her helmet. Her cheerful tone always managed to set Carolina into a less than pleasant mindset at first, but she’d grown used to it as time went by.

Despite Connie’s flinch, Carolina knew it would grow on her too.

“I know you probably aren’t too keen on hospitals right now, but you look like you’re about to fall over and die! I’d like to get a look at you and see where you’re at, health wise, and get some more nutrients into you. Would you be more comfortable by yourself or with escorts?”

Connie looked like she’d swallowed glass, but she squared her shoulders.

“If it’s at all possible, I would prefer to not be alone with anyone right now. I…Carolina,” and Connie turned as much as she could to look in Carolina’s direction, “…I had a Hard Candy kind of time.”

Carolina’s blood turned to ice. She looked at Wash, who hadn’t seemed to notice the turn of phrase.

“24-hour guard. Wash and I will split it. You will have armed guards wherever you go, and no one will be allowed to get near you without permission from one of the four of us in this room.”

Wash suddenly jerked himself away from the wall and stepped into Connie’s line of sight. He whipped off his helmet, showing the clear tear tracks on his face and his blood red eyes, and stared at Connie hard. His mouth opened and shut a few times.

Connie burst into tears and threw herself into Wash’s arms. The room echoed with the sound of her bones smacking into Wash’s armor, but Connie didn’t seem to be phased by it.

“God, Wash, I’m sorry! I am so, so sorry!”

Wash pulled Connie in tight. They sobbed in each other’s grip, faces snotty as they ugly cried all over each other, and Carolina remembered how close the two of them were right up until Tex
showed up and suddenly no one was close anymore.

“It’ll be ok. Shh. You’re here. You’re really here.”

With careful movements Wash scooped Connie into his arms, princess style, and Doctor Grey led the way to the infirmary. Outside the door, the Reds and Blues along with the Lieutenants and a group of soldiers mixed of New Repubs and Feds blocked the way until Carolina shooed them off.

Only the Reds and Blues followed to the infirmary.

Carolina watched with a smile as Wash leaned in close and whispered to Connie. She’d always thought they were adorable, much cuter as siblings than North and South managed on most days.

“You’re going to love the sim troopers. You’ve already made a lifelong friend in Donut. They’re all hilarious. Sarge might try to recruit you to Red team to even up the number of Freelancers to non-Freelancers, just so you know. He’s loud, and makes a lot of threats to shoot people, but he’s harmless. Grif and Simmons are totally in love, but they won’t admit it, Donut’s like having a kid brother that’s totally into ribbons and unicorns unironically, and Lopez is a Spanish speaking robot. Caboose is just ridiculous and he’s got Maine’s strength, and Tucker’s going to flirt ceaselessly, but he’s not a threat.”

Once they had Connie settled on an infirmary bed, Doctor Grey shooed out the extra people. Nothing like observers to make medical procedures even more stressful than they would already be.

“Out everyone! I’ll let you know when she’s ready for visitors! Out, out, out!”

Wash and Kimball herded the Reds and Blues out of the room while Doctor Grey began Connie’s physical and Carolina stood watch over them, gun at the ready.

Chapter End Notes

Most recently updated 03/07/19, minor grammatical changes and edits made for clarity.
Chapter 5

Niner yawned and rubbed her eyes.

She knew she could leave the console at any time, the auto pilot would keep them on track and well away from hitting anything that might damage her bird, but that didn’t stop a thin thread of paranoia from creeping up her spine and around her shoulders like a particularly unpleasant constrictor snake, whispering in her ear that a single moment, a single minute, was all it would take for everything to be for nothing.

Autopilot was basically just a proximity alarm and computers always had a way about them of dismissing the cost of human life. She didn’t trust the autopilot.

Not with them.

Not with her team.

Not when she finally had them together, mostly together, and as safe as she could get them.

Not when they were finally alive and finally had a chance.

“Niner?”

Florida stood in the doorway, leaning casually into the jam, for all intents and purposes completely relaxed. His general easygoing expression that masked any and all actual feelings to those who did not know him well had been traded in for something a little bit more intimate, a little more real. Niner met his eye and was surprised by the amount of open concern he wore.

The trick to reading Florida was knowing that everything on the top layer was a façade. The man was perfectly capable of talking to you every day, sharing stories, laughing, and making you genuinely care about him. He preferred it that way, because people who liked you were less likely to suspect a knife about to be buried deep in their belly.

She’d managed what felt like an actual friendship with the man over the years. He still spoke in his over the top manner, still made his awkward comments and puns, but there was an undercurrent of flavor to his words when he spoke to her that she’d managed to decipher.

Still, it had been a while since she’d had the opportunity to practice physically reading him, and Niner was tired of trying to read people.

“What’s up? Trouble in the back?”

“No more than the usual. South is trying to convince Maine not to eat his gun, Wyoming and Gamma are trading knock-knock jokes with increasingly bad punchlines, North and York are doing that thing where they lean into each other and pretend that they’re not over the moon for each other. It would be adorable if it wasn’t so frustratingly depressing.”

Florida slipped into the cockpit and shut the door behind him. A flare of unease flickered low near her groin, and Niner tried to bite back the expression of panic that no doubt had managed to creep onto her face. It wasn’t his fault. She’d become much less eager to be trapped in a small room with
an expertly trained assassin that she didn’t fully understand the motives of since the fall of Freelancer. Call her overly concerned for her personal safety these days.

Of course, he noticed. Florida saw everything.

With a rueful smile that Niner was seventy percent sure was real, Florida leaned against the closed door and gave her as much space as he physically could. The cockpit was really only built for two, it was a freighter ship for non-human cargo and a minimal crew, but the assholes who’d designed it didn’t think about a pilot tied to a wheelchair.

She wanted to complain but, considering the sheer amount of shit she was hauling it was worth the aggravation for the extra crates.

“I’ve come to relieve you of the wheel for a while. You need to sleep at some point, and we will likely need you in top form when we get close to the target. Who knows what kind of ships might be lurking near the tiny planet of Chorus? The only person I trust to get my darling Reggie through a firefight this far away from the ground is you.”

Niner attempted a confident smirk and rolled herself back from the console as best she could without bumping the man or the equipment around her. Alone, Niner was perfect, confident, solid. With other people in her space, it just reminded her that she wasn’t nearly the leader they were allowing her to pretend to be.

“You know, there’s not many people I trust with my ships.”

“Or the people inside of them,” Florida pointed out with a leonine smile.

“Or the people inside them,” Niner agreed.

He shuffled forward and to the side a bit, to give Niner a clear path to the door. She would have appreciated it, if she wasn’t completely aware that she would still have to be well within his grasp to escape the tiny cockpit.

Though, escaping would be pointless on a bird in the middle of space.

Still, it was expected, so she wheeled herself to the door. Niner would attempt to sleep surrounded by people for the first time in many years, and likely fail, but she would try. Florida was right, she did need the rest.

As soon as Niner reached for the door release, Florida’s hand shot out and caught hers.

Niner tried to jerk back, but Florida laced their fingers together and gripped her tight enough that she wouldn’t be able to pull away without some serious help. She bit back an indignant shout, tried to keep her breathing even, and gave Florida a raised eyebrow that said, ‘do you really want to go down this route?’.

It was a look she had perfected over the years.

“What’s going on, Butch? We goin’ steady or something?”

Florida smiled, and Niner hated it when he did that, because his smiles were damned hard to decipher. He could be sincere or he could be lying through his teeth and she would be hard pressed to tell the difference.

“I never thanked you for saving us. I don’t know that any of us ever did.”
Niner shrugged, but carefully didn’t so much as tug her hand in his grip. He’d see it as a challenge and she didn’t need her hand accidentally broken.

“I just did my job.”

“No,” he shook his head “After. You swooped in and saved us one by one, as many as you could. You rescued us and hid us away where you knew Freelancer wouldn’t bother to look, at great risk to yourself, I might add. I’ve wondered for years now why you did it.”

Niner stared at her hand caught in his grip. She had never been a small woman. Niner was tall and broad and had been for as long as she could remember. She’d been able to overpower bullies since she was five years old, and even in the chair that hadn’t changed. Now she was able to run them over after she punched them.

Florida’s hand still managed to dwarf her own.

“I had a big family. I wasn’t the oldest, and I wasn’t the youngest, but I was the one who made sure that everyone was taken care of. If one of the little ones got hurt, it was my responsibility. If one of the older kids needed something, it was my job to make sure they got it.”

He smiled and leaned in, always excited for new information to manipulate.

“I had no idea you had siblings. You’ve never mentioned them.”

Niner tugged a little, hoping this would be enough to satisfy the man, but his grip didn’t loosen.

“By the time I was in Freelancer, most of them were dead, married off, or just didn’t want anything to do with me. It happens.”

This, surprisingly, seemed to be all the information he wanted her to surrender. Florida released Niner from his grip that reminded Niner of a much younger man’s, a man she missed desperately, and a painful jolt shot through her chest. She almost wished for the crushing grip again but knew better than to delude herself.

The past is done. The dead are buried. No point in disturbing the dust.

“You lost all of them?”

“That’s the way of things. When I joined the military, I was basically disowned. The only sibling who stuck by me, my brother, walked into an army recruiter’s office and got KIA. The rest of them don’t want anything to do with me.”

Florida placed a heavy hand on Niner’s shoulder, and this was a good deal more comfortable than his attempt to hold her hand. Niner idly wondered if he’d actually been trying to be comforting, but just wasn’t good at it in situations that mattered. With that excessively eager persona, maybe he’d just never had the opportunity to be properly emotionally there.

“And so, you took us all under your wing. Younger or older didn’t matter, because it never had before. We became your surrogate siblings. People who you hoped wouldn’t abandon you.”

“I always expected you all to leave. People always leave. Always. It just hurts more when you care.”

Florida frowned, actually actively frowned, and knelt down to be on Niner’s eye level. After being in the chair only god remembers how long, she could count the number of times someone bothered
to get on her level on one hand and still have most of her fingers left over.

“I am so very sorry that we put you through that. I wish I had insisted you stay with Reggie and I.”

She snorted.

“Yeah, no, that wouldn’t have gone over well. Besides, I’m not one for staying in one place too long.”

When Florida didn’t respond, didn’t move, Niner consciously softened her expression. He liked playing the father figure, the caring older man who swept in and took care of the little people running around. Not giving him the opportunity to be in his element was probably not a smart move.

“I do appreciate the offer, though.”

Florida gave her a wide grin, too wide to be real on anyone else, and moved out of the way.

“Get some rest. We’ll need 479er at the helm come morning.”

Niner rolled out of the cockpit and saw that, sure enough, things were just as Florida described.

South had an arm around Maine’s shoulders and a hand gripped onto one of his wrists to ground him. The large man was pressed into her side, clearly trying not to cling, as he stared at the storage units that still blinked off to the side. Maine looked like he’d been through the wringer. He looked like an alcoholic, desperate for a drink and just as desperate to keep away from it. He looked like he’d been starving in the desert and was confronted with a poisoned oasis. He looked like he was in love.

South looked like she was ready to start killing things with her teeth.

She didn’t speak much, didn’t need to. Maine shifted, and South’s grip tightened. Maine flexed, and South dug her fingers into his side in punishment. Maine gave a whisper of a growl and South told him to shut the fuck up and deal with it. She wasn’t going anywhere until he had his shit together.

York and North had squeezed themselves into a small corner side-by-side and whispered back and forth. Their heads were pressed together, much like children sharing secrets, though Niner had a feeling it was more of them playing catch up and checking in on each other’s mental states.

York hated being alone, always had, too much of a people person to live well in isolation. With Delta, York had been connected. He’d loved having the AI around to keep his head straight, York was never alone with Delta, and the AI’s personality fitted with York’s in all the right ways.

North hated not knowing that his people were safe. He didn’t need to be surrounded, but he did need to take care of people. North was the type of man to bring you hot chocolate if you had trouble sleeping, who wanted to make sure you ate a balanced diet and took your vitamins. He was a man who loved to play den mother without any kind of prompting. If must have driven him crazy to live in isolation with South, who absolutely could not stand letting her brother take care of her the way he wanted.

As if being cared for made her weak.

Niner got it. There was so little respect for women in the military already that having a big, strong man following you around and taking care of you (even if he was your brother) would not be good
for your already uphill battle to maintain a reputation of strength. Sure, South was capable of ripping a man’s testicles off and shoving them down his throat before he could blink, but the mere notion that she needed a man’s help, any man’s, would kill her rep.

Wyoming was the only one speaking with any real volume, and it was thankfully familiar, if one sided.

“Who’s there? Cholera who?”

Niner rolled over to her duffle and pulled out her sleepwear. She was not looking forward to changing in front of everyone, if only because she still struggled with the process of undressing while in the chair.

“Do you need help with that?”

North had apparently jumped to his feet while Niner’s back was turned and rushed to her side. He had his gentle ‘let me fix it’ expression on his face, the one he used most often with South when he desperately wanted the two of them to get along. Niner sighed and geared herself up for a fight.

“I’m perfectly capable of dressing myself, North. I do it every day.”

North’s expression fell, and Niner tried to remind herself that he was a master of guilty manipulations. He didn’t use puppy eyes, that was Washington’s territory, but he was fully capable of making a person feel like garbage when they wanted to do something for themselves. She didn’t need help changing clothes at this point. She’d found ways around the things that needed an extra hand, hadn’t had a choice after being put in the chair, and Niner didn’t think she would be comfortable with someone dressing her at this point.

Still, if it would make North stop looking at her like that.

“Jesus, fuck, fine. Help me get my boots off, I can do the rest.”

North didn’t say a word. He just grinned like he’d been given a basket of puppies, dropped to his knees like a pro (that was a thought Niner didn’t want to have), and started unlacing her boots.

“York and I have been discussing where we will all go from here. Even though there have been some official pardons handed out for people involved with Project Freelancer, we’re not likely to see any of those.”

Niner shook her head as North slipped off her right boot.

“Yeah, I doubt they’re going to be scrambling to pardon the people who were being fucked over by the government funded program.”

“And we were thinking it might be a good idea for all of us to stick together.”

Niner scoffed as North took off the left boot and moved the pair to the side.

“Do you honestly think the lot of you can live together without killing each other? I remember when the program first started, and all of the posturing you guys did.”

North took the bundle of clothes off of Niner’s lap and shook out the pants. She wanted to be annoyed at him for deliberately ignoring her instructions, but she could see he was just trying to be useful from the frown lines on his face.
She hated that he was such a nice guy to her. If he would just act like the asshole she knew he was more often, Niner wouldn’t feel so bad about putting him in his place.

“Yes, we had a growing period, but the team was legitimately solid until we introduced the leader board and the manipulation tactics started being designed primarily with destroying our group dynamics rather than actually make us better soldiers. We are fully capable of working together, and maybe it’s time we started taking care of each other, too.”

“Mind giving me my pants back, Champ?”

North actually managed a slight flush and returned the article with an admonished grin. Niner smirked back and rolled over to the wall and away from the group.

“I get that you’re trying to help, but I don’t let strange men undress me, and you’re not the type I make exceptions for.”

York grinned as Niner started to change, his expression not quite a leer, but only because everyone there knew what his leering actually looked like.

“So that means there is a type you make exceptions for? Niner, you sly dog.”

“Can it, pipsqueak, or you’ll be riding on the outside of the bird.”

The former agents of Project Freelancer shared a laugh at their teammate’s expense, and Niner felt the faint buzz of pleasure thread through her for the first time in an age.

“I’m not the settling down type, North, but if you can convince everyone else that we should all live in a former Freelancer commune growing beans or whatever, I’ll learn how to fly a crop-duster and buy us a fucking farm.”

Maine pulled away from South long enough to help Niner into her cot, and she couldn’t be mad at him, since he was clearly looking for something to do to make him feel a little more grounded. Niner thanked the tank and watched him shake his head at South with a smile.

South clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it tight.

As Niner closed her eyes, well aware that she would be out like a light in just a few moments, a thought crawled into her brain and made a home for itself there. These were her people. For better or worse, these were the people she wanted in her life to watch her back and everyone else’s.

Chapter End Notes

So...this is basically just rambling at this point. If there was a plotline, it has long since been slept on and disappeared. No one is in character anymore, and nothing makes sense. It has been a very long time since my last update, but hopefully not nearly as long to the next one.

I’m hoping to actually get the Freelancers onto Chorus at some point in the very near future...eventually...

Updated 03/10/19, minor grammatical changes, a few small removals and additions, nothing plot oriented changed.
Connie submitted to the doctor’s poking and prodding without protest. She smiled wanly through having her blood drawn, laughed when Doctor Grey accidentally brushed the underside of her arm, and allowed herself to be moved and positioned by the squeaky voiced doctor.

Carolina and Kimball watched over the process equally still as Doctor Grey charted vitals, scraped skin, took fluids, and flitted around the room like an overeager moth surrounded by a dozen candles. The doctor’s idle chatter about what she was doing was enough to fill the quiet as she worked on Connie, and none of the other women felt compelled to speak. Connie spoke when necessary, but otherwise she kept to herself.

After everything she’d done and been through today, Carolina didn’t blame her for the quiet.

Doctor Grey didn’t insist on restraining Connie to the hospital bed when she was finished with her examination, for which Carolina was sure Connie was infinitely thankful, but she did insist on an IV to get fluids and nutrients into the emaciated woman as efficiently as she could. The words ‘you look like a walking corpse’ had been thrown around.

It didn’t take long for Doctor Grey to get Connie settled into her bed, and once Connie closed her eyes, despite the foreign location and people hovering over her, she fell into a deep sleep, not so much as twitching on the hospital mattress.

Doctor Grey carefully removed her gloves with a quiet snap and the cheer in her voice could only be described as strained.

“Well, she’ll need to be bedridden and on the IV for a minimum of three days, I would prefer five, I am going to tell her ten. If she’s anything like you, Agent Carolina, that should get her to stay still long enough to actually make it to three.”

Carolina blinked.

“That’s clever. You do realize that trick will never work on me again, right?”

Doctor Grey deposited her gloves into the bin and spoke to Carolina with a much more sincere squeak as she tidied her space.

“Well, then I guess you’ll just have to start listening to me when I give you medical instructions, won’t you, Agent?”

Doctor Grey pulled up Connie’s chart and pointed to the fluctuating lines of data on the holopad that Carolina didn’t understand without Epsilon in her head to translate for her. Kimball looked as if she understood exactly what was written, though Carolina had no idea if the other woman actually knew how to read Grey’s medical charts, her breath was sharp and deeply unhappy.

“General?”

“Agent Connecticut is severely malnourished, and her muscles have atrophied to the point I am genuinely surprised that she’s as functional as she is.”
Which Carolina had already known. There was thin and then there was whatever had happened to Connie to make her look like she was a skeleton wrapped in skin. There was thin and there was barely alive.

“Her immune system is shot. Her major organs were near failure not too long ago. It’s a miracle of modern medicine and science that she’s still alive.”

This woman had been her friend at one point. Her teammate. Someone she had relied on with every fiber of her being.

Doctor Grey nodded along as she put her tools away.

“The only reason I don’t have her unconscious and being pumped full of vitamins in a ‘medically induced’ kind of way is the fact that she seems to be fully functioning even at this level of deterioration, and I doubt that she would be very happy about being put into a coma without her consent! We don’t want to upset the skittish ones!”

Even after the lies and betrayal and blood and death, Carolina didn’t want to see Connie hurt. She didn’t want to see her dead. In fact, seeing Connie alive made her want her teammate happy and healthy more than ever.

Kimball idly poked at the chart, a thin layer of confusion on top of the already unpleasant mix of emotion coloring her tone.

“Hargrove just let her rot while she was comatose. Why even bother keeping her alive if this is the condition he was going to leave her in?”

Carolina clenched a fist and took a slow breath to calm her furiously racing heart. Why keep Connie alive if he was going to do this to her? Why keep her at all? She had some suspicions, but none she wanted to bring up without her friend being awake enough to refute them.

Hargrove wouldn’t get away with what he had done to her. To any of them.

“What are her odds of full recovery?”

“Weeeeeeeell,” Grey dragged the word out, scrunching over as she concentrated on the chart, “I would be a little more confident if we had some supply replenishment. We have been on the cusp of total collapse for years at this point and are dangerously close to the end of our medical supplies.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring.”

“I didn’t intend for it to be, Sweetie! She needs vitamins, supplements, and some good old-fashioned physical therapy to get to a point where I would even begin to consider her healthy! She was left to rot for months at least. Her body is on the brink of total collapse!”

“But?”

Doctor Grey took a deep breath herself and zeroed in on Carolina with laser focus.

“While I am confident that she will survive, and she’s doing well enough that she’s going to be functional as time goes by, I have no idea how she is going to recover down the line without the proper medical treatment, that I can’t give her until we have some help from the outside.”

Doctor Grey caught Carolina’s eyes and held them.
“The damage might be too extensive.”

Carolina’s stomach filled with ice and the ground seemed to rock beneath her feet. Too extensive. Too much. Connie needed treatment and she wasn’t going to get it on Chorus.

“That being said, while she may never be at the level she was during Freelancer, that doesn’t mean she won’t recover to the point where she’s running circles around the soldiers. As long as she takes care to allow herself to recover and actually listen to my instructions, I don’t see why she wouldn’t make a solid recovery, if not a complete one.”

“Jesus, Emily! Thank you for that completely unnecessary scare.”

Kimball gave Carolina a small, small and tense but also sincere, squeeze to her shoulder. Carolina tried not to lean into the contact she could barely feel through her armor, and instead tensed her muscles in an effort to keep her control and not collapse in a puddle of relief at the positive news.

She was iron. She was steel. She was strong enough to get everyone through this. She would not fail again.

This time she would keep her people safe.

She had to.

Grif watched Wash’s face as the door slid shut behind Carolina and Kimball. He had agreed to stay outside to offer Connie some privacy while Doctor Grey checked her out.

It was weird, actually seeing Wash’s face. The man was almost never out of armor if he could help it, he even ate in his helmet if he could, and was twitchy as hell when he couldn’t. Today, the freelancer didn’t even seem to notice that he was without his protection and Grif could count the stress lines on his face.

Wash was wrecked.

There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Wash’s head was all kinds of scrambled. For him to find out that someone he knew and, based on the wet tracks on his cheeks someone he cared about, was still alive had to be completely jarring. Grif would feel the same way if he heard Kai died only for her to show up looking like the actual living dead.

Combine that with his already less than perfect mental stability from years of Freelancer mindfuckery and all the general shit they’d managed to keep in check up to this point, Grif was really fucking concerned about the man.

Simmons clicked over to his and Grif’s private channel and tilted his helmet just slightly toward the hospital room.

“So, what do you think about her?”

Grif shrugged one shoulder and nodded.

“She’s dangerous, even being half dead. I’m more worried about him at the moment. I’m pretty sure he’s going to start scratching at the door and meowing to be let in soon. Or talking in a funny
accent and insulting us again. That’s always fun.”

Wash stared hard at the door, like he expected it to open any second, and he didn’t want to miss the moment it did. His eyes were wide and wild and on the cusp of being very, very dangerous. Grif thought he saw one of Wash’s hands twitch.

Nope, not happening.

Grif swaggered up to his side and patted his shoulder.

“Hey Wash, I get that you’re all gooey eyed on this chick and shit, but we’re calling dibs.”

Tucker squawked loudly off to the side and flailed his arms in a desperate attempt to seem bigger and more imposing than he actually was, while Sarge let out a cry of victory that nearly made the walls shake.

Grif laughed as Tucker practically flew across the hall to get into his face, his dreads had long fallen out of their band and begun to flap around his face. If he wasn’t sure he’d get punched in the face, Grif would have tugged the one that smacked into his hand.

“No way! You can’t just call dibs on her! She’s definitely a Blue!”

“Are you really going to fight the international dibs protocol?”

“Fuck yeah, I am! She’s not a Red!”

Simmons scoffed and crossed his arms, clearly ready to give the other man shit, and Grif couldn’t hold a wicked smirk back. Wash finally managed to pry his eyes off of the med bay door and turned around to look at the group behind him with confusion.

Good, they had his attention.

“Um…what are we talking about?”

“Oh please,” Grif nudged Tucker out of his way, “You don’t even have a case for this one. She’s totally a Red.”

Tucker puffed himself up and thrust his chest forward, eager to engage in some pointless male posturing. Grif just leaned against the wall next to Wash to keep an eye on the man while the distraction went underway.

The man’s hands had already relaxed and his face was at least 10% less ‘everything is awful and the world is ending’. That was practically a day at the beach as far as Wash went.

“Bullshit, dude! She’s definitely a Blue! She’s got the Blue Team angst fest going!”

Caboose jumped happily and clapped his hands together. The blue dork was so damned excited it was ridiculous.

“Yay! More scary girls!”

Simmons held up a hand and started listing off his reasons on his fingers.

“One, Blue Team has two of the three remaining Freelancers. It’s only fair that she goes to Red Team to even things up. Two, she’s wearing brown armor, just like Lopez, who’s a Red.”
Church burst out of Tucker's armor in an explosion of light and snarled, waving his arms exactly like Tucker had. Blue team was so predictable.

“Dude, Lopez is a fucking robot! He doesn’t count!”

Sarge turned to Church and barked good naturedly. As far as Grif could tell, it was a done deal in Sarge’s mind, which was awesome. He wasn’t going to point out that it was his idea and make Sarge choke on it until CT had officially agreed to be a Red and won them a little street cred.

“Can it, Tinkerbell! You’re just jealous of Lopez’s sleek robotic form, what with you being all tiny and transparent.”

“Third,” Simmons continued, “She’s a woman, and Blue Team has two women currently on its roster already if you count Sister. Red Team needs the diversity. Logic dictates that she belongs on Red Team. Suck it, Blue.”

“And she’s the right kind of girl too!” Donut piped up, “She’s interested in more than just killing things, beating people up, and talking about oppression! She actually cares about celebrity gossip! I can’t wait to get her opinion on the color scheme of the base!”

“Extra scary girl!” Caboose cheered.

Grif groaned loudly.

“Ugh, do we really need another Donut? I’ve changed my mind, let the Blues have her.”

Wash crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at Grif, who grinned behind the safety of his helmet. No one liked a mopey Washington any more than they liked a mopey Caboose, and it had been going on for too long. Bad things tended to happen when the former Freelancer frowned like that.

Bad things like extra laps and a lack of extra portions from the cafeteria. And also depressive episodes and potential guilt hallucinations and nightmares. And things that Grif didn’t want to think about. Those weren’t fun either.

“Do I really need to remind you of how many people she’s castrated and killed today? Connie may have never been on the leader board, but that had more to do with how they ranked us than her actual skill level. She was the best we had when it came to infiltration, and she didn’t have the cloaking that Tex did.”

Wash’s face took on a far-away expression.

“She was better than we gave they credit for, for sure.”

Aaaaand the grin was gone. Wash was about to end up trapped in his own head again if someone didn’t do something. Grif groaned even louder and sighed dramatically.

“UUUUUGH! Fiiiiiiine. We’ll take the girl.”

Tucker stomped his foot and tried to crowd into Grif, which was hilarious since Grif was twice Tucker’s size and Tucker was only half in his armor.

“Hey, no one said you could have her!”

Sarge surged to Grif’s side to defend him from Tucker before Grif even needed to puff up and knock Tucker back a bit.
“Can it, Blue! That little lady in there is a Red! Through and through! You could see it in her eyes when she RUTHLESSLY MURDERED THE ENEMY! Only a Red is capable of something so vicious and incredibly painful!”

Clearly frustrated, Tucker turned to Wash and pointed angrily at the others.

“Come on, man, help me out here! Don’t you want her on our side?”

Wash glanced at the door. The man was going to sit and stew in his own brain for days if they let him. Grif knew overthinking when he saw it, even if he wasn’t as used to Wash’s face as he was to others.

Tucker’s face flickered with concern for a moment, and Grif knew that they were on the same page.

“Look, Tucker,” Grif waved a hand around and nearly smacked Tucker, “At the end of the day, this one is going to be a Red. She’s totally Donut’s best friend now. Do you really want to get in the middle of the nail painting and boy talk their going to do?”

Donut gasped loudly and slapped his hands against his helmet, as if he were greatly surprised, and probably had an expression like ‘The Scream” behind his visor. Grif could practically see Simmons’ dramatic eye roll behind his face shield.

“Oh Grif! Do you really think we could be best friends?!”

Grif shrugged, but Wash nodded slowly, life slowly bleeding back into his face.

“Yeah, I think she likes you, Donut. She doesn’t talk to just anyone about tanning.”

Donut squealed and clutched at Wash’s arm like some squealing teenage girl in a mall.

“Oh my gosh! I can’t wait! Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had someone to really sit down and talk to? Doc is sweet and all, but he just sits there and tells me that my diets are ‘unhealthy’ and I’m going to ‘give myself cancer’, and the others are just hopeless, I swear! Oh sure, Lopez is a pretty good listener, but half the time I think he just speaks nonsense!”

Wash gave Donut a soft smile, and Grif could see the years melt off his face. It was hard to remember when they were in uniform that Wash was actually pretty fucking young.

You’d never guess based on his voice, but when he smiled it was like he was sixteen and new in school and desperate to make people like him so he wouldn’t be so fucking alone all the time, except he totally expected to spend his days fielding wedgies and swirlies and all sorts of teenage bullshit.

It was possible that, in that moment, Grif empathized with the other man a little too well.

“Tucker, there’s no point in arguing. Connie’s going to choose where she wants to go, and no amount of bribery or protest is going to change her mind.”

“Yeah, but if you said ‘Hey, CT, come join Blue Team!’, you know she’d do it.”

Wash shook his head and gave Tucker a grin.

"She’s probably going to join the Reds just to have an excuse to kick my ass. Connie is competitive, and she’s just as entertained by dick punching as Tex was. Being…my friend didn’t
stop her from going after me during training. Having us on opposite sides would just be an added incentive.

Grif, Simmons, Tucker, and Sarge collectively winced and moved to protect their more vulnerable bits. Yeah, Grif was definitely happier to have the crazy cockstabber on his side.

He liked not having things punched or kicked or punchkicked or stabbed. Thank you very much.

“Why are the chicks so freaking aggressive around here?”

Tucker whined and crossed his arms over his chest petulantly. Wash rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know, Tucker. Maybe because they’re constantly dealing with guys who assume that being a female means that they’re less competent, no matter how good they actually are. Gender bias is still alive and well in the military.”

Tucker blinked in confusion for a moment.

“You guys seriously had people thinking chicks aren’t fucking brutal in Freelancer? Did they… never actually interact with a chick soldier?”

Wash sighed heavily, but a small, gentle smile actually graced his face.

“Between Connie, South, Carolina, and Niner, the men of Alpha squad were educated. Ask Carolina about the soldiers significantly lower on the food chain than her who tried to tell her how to do her job and you’ll get to hear all about the sexist bullshit she and the others put up with on an almost daily basis. Microaggressions are a thing.”

Epsilon flared to life at that, clearly annoyed for his partner. Wash looked unimpressed by the temper tantrum Epsilon had begun to throw on Tucker’s shoulder but inched himself away from the irate AI.

Yeah, Church was not helping.

“Who gave C crap?”

“No one still alive, I’m sure. When the MoI crashed, it took a lot of people with it, and the soldiers on Chorus aren’t stupid enough to think Carolina isn’t the better soldier of the two of us.”

Wash managed an amused grin.

“But you learned quick when you went against CT or South or Carolina to take them seriously, or they would wreck you for days, and no, Tucker, not in a fun way.”

The door slid open and the assorted Reds and Blues stood straight and tall as Carolina peeked her head out of the room.

“Wash? Kimball and I need to make some rounds, I need you to take watch for a while.”

“Of course.”

Kimball and Carolina strode out of the room and Wash ducked inside with an anxious face and hands that wouldn’t stop twitching, to no doubt hover over CT’s beside and watch her sleep like an obsessed creeper. Grif wasn’t that worried about it, Grey would keep Wash from acting like a complete idiot, and hopefully being able to see that his friend was actually alive would help Wash’s equilibrium. They didn’t need him losing his touch any time soon.
The door slid shut behind him, a clear sign that the Reds and Blues were not yet welcome in the room, and Carolina nodded at the gathered soldiers.

“Connie’s sleeping for now. Once she’s awake, Grey will let you guys in to harass her, I’m sure.”

With that, the two scariest women on the planet walked off, practically arm in arm, or as close as they were going to get without actually talking about their feelings. Sure, Grif could mention to one of them that the other is totally panting after them…but once again, he liked his balls unpunched, un kicked, unpunchkicked, and unstabbed.

The Reds and Blues settled back in for a long wait.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I swear, at some point in the near future the story about finding Washington will actually include some people finding Washington, and also eventually with Wash having a moment of brain time to process just what is happening in his life at the moment.

I realized as I was writing, I apparently don't have a mental voice for Wash, so now I'm sitting here going 'gee, maybe Wash should get to do something?', but NOPE! Not today apparently.

On the plus side, I do actually have ideas now, which is more than I normally have at the end of a chapter.

Edited 03/18/2019 small grammatical changes.
Maine and York dropped off to sleep not long after Niner, and Wyoming made his way to the cockpit and shut the door behind himself, leaving only South and North conscious and alert in the back. They made quick work of checking the remaining AI’s status, and ensured that the pods were hooked into the ship’s power, just in case the internal batteries failed while their caretakers were asleep. It would be the first time in ages that both North and South could sleep at the same time, since someone needed to constantly be aware of the pods status and any potential enemies that might set upon them.

North was more than happy for the task; Theta was a throbbing mass of agitated nerves in the back of North’s mind, and he needed something to keep himself distracted until the AI was able to wind himself down a little.

Once South was sure the AI pods would survive a few hours without being stared at, she stripped herself out of her armor and into an oversized sleep shirt that North had no idea where she’d picked it up. They spent enough time in each other’s presence that she shouldn’t have had anything he couldn’t account for on her person, and the shirt was long enough on her that it was definitely meant as a sleep shirt and not something she’d nicked from one of the other Freelancers.

Unless she’d borrowed it from Niner, but that didn’t seem like the kind of thing the pilot would wear. It was purple, for starters.

-She looks angry, North.-

South moved sharply and economically as she packed up her clothes for storage. North caught South’s eye and, with no small amount of frustration, realized that Theta was right. She was furious with him; he recognized the ‘you fucked up’ glare in her eyes. Sighing as softly as he could manage, he moved in close with hopes of not disturbing the sleepers.

“Now what have I done?” North whispered.

South shifted away from him with her head ducked and her shoulders slightly hunched. It was an odd look on her, defensive instead of offensive, and it made North nervous to see her so small when things were finally good for the first time in forever.

“Nothing, aside from you being yourself.”

He snorted.

“Come on, South, talk to me.”

She grumbled under her breath and ran her fingers through her hair to encourage it to loosen up.

It had gotten long, they hadn’t had a chance to get their hair cut in a good while, and her purple streaks had grown out and faded into a shadow of what used to be. She had rings under her eyes and wrinkles forming in the corners that North knew hadn’t come from laughter. She looked exhausted.

She looked older.
“There’s really no fucking point in talking to you about anything, is there? You’ve already decided for the lot of us.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, you never actually talk to people, you just decide what’s in their best interests and assume they’ll go along with it because you’re so fucking smart.”

North expected South to get right up into his face, her favorite spot whenever they fought because it meant he couldn’t ignore her. Instead, she took a step back.

“You’re such a fucking asshole. Everyone looks at you and thinks you’re just this nice guy, but nice guys don’t murder people by bisecting them in half with bullets starting from the crotch.”

She crossed her arms and leveled her glare firmly at North’s shoulder. The wrinkle of her brow lacked the heat it typically held when South was upset with North. She didn’t meet his eyes, an odd choice for her, since she was big on dominance fights and that sort of posturing started with eye contact.

She was angry, sure, but there was something else. Something underneath. Something that worried him.

-I don’t get it.-

Me either, Theta.

“South, what is this about?”

He could see the fury building in her shoulders, the signs that she was holding back that urge to fight she’d always had in her, like she could punch away the things that upset her if she tried hard enough.

“Since when are we all joining up and singing fucking kumbaya? I don’t want to spend the rest of my fucking days surrounded by York’s smug face, Wyoming’s goddamned knock-knock jokes, Washington’s fucked up death threats, and you cockblocking me at every turn! You don’t get to be the one to decide where I go or who I go with!”

What?

All of this because she didn’t want to spend time with the others? Generally, she saved her tantrums for more important things.

“Where is this coming from?”

“It’s been a long time coming.”

-She’s shaking.-

North couldn’t see it, but he trusted Theta’s sensors more than his own eyes. If Theta thought she was shaking, she was shaking.

Maybe she was cold.

South rubbed at her eyes and turned away from him. The move felt definitive. Final.

He didn’t like it one bit.
“I’ll help you guys get fucking Washington to safety, but after that I’m bouncing. This is me telling you I’m leaving.”

Leaving?

-South can’t leave! She’s our sister! We need her.-

South isn’t leaving, Theta. I don’t know what this is, but she’s not leaving us.

“It’s not like you need me around, you’ve got York and Wash to get all protective and shit over. Let them play wounded bird for a few months and see if they still wants to stick around after that bullshit.”

North turned South to face him and felt his stomach twist when she flinched under his hands. South had never flinched from him in her entire life. She always held her ground. It didn’t matter who got in her face, in her space, in her way, South backed down for no one. Not even when they were pointing a gun at her. Just what was happening?

-She’s scared.-

I get that Theta.

-Why is South scared? She’s never scared of anything.-

I don’t know, Buddy.

North reached out, with hopes of grabbing her hand, only for South to pull back. Her expression was as aggressive as ever, but her posture told another story, one that North couldn’t read for the first time in forever. If she were anyone else, he’d think she was afraid.

But this was South. What could she be afraid of here?

“You really think would be happy to let you go off on your own without me? After everything we’ve gone through? I don’t know or care where we go, but wherever that is, I’m going with you. Wherever we go, we go together. That is not up for negotiation.”

Her shoulders bunched together as she tensed, before her spine snapped straight and she glared right into his eyes.

It wasn’t their usual disagreements coming out, this was different, there was something so…not right about all of this.

“No, it’s not. I’m not negotiating with you, North, I’m done. You don’t fucking need me to keep you sane, and I’m done paying penance by babysitting the fucking AI’s. You want to take this ragtag group of assholes to some remote moon and spend the rest of your days in fucking isolation, be my guest, but I’m not interested. Hell, I’m glad for that distress signal. It gives you other people to glob onto. Seriously, if that message hadn’t fucking broadcasted everywhere, I’d have been long gone by now.”

The world tilted for a moment, like Florida decided that they didn’t need to fly level. Theta’s fear lit up North’s nerve endings like fire. North’s voice was small and soft.

“What? South…you don’t mean that?”

It came out as a question.
“I don’t mean that? North, you make my life miserable, you drag me along behind you all the fucking time, I don’t have a life of my own. I’ve NEVER had a life of my own. You’re always talking about us like we’re a unit, a pair. I’m a fucking person in my own right, without you! I. Am. A. Person. And I’m tired of not getting treated like one! I am not your property and I am not just a detached piece of you!”

He didn’t know what to do with her anger.

“I’ve never thought of you as being an extension of me. I just…my life doesn’t really have a point if you’re not in it.”

South searched North’s face for a moment. He had no idea what she was looking for, but he wanted her to find it. South was angry and impulsive, prone to dramatics, but she backed them up with action. If she said she was going to leave him, North fully believed she was ready to walk away.

He had to convince her to stay.

“You know what,” South waved a hand dismissively, “I’m not in the mood to deal with you right now. Get the fuck out of my face.”

He couldn’t lose her. Not again.

“South-“

“North, I swear to god, I will not hesitate to punch you in the dick if you don’t get the fuck out of my face. Go to bed. It’s not like I can just jump out in the middle of fucking space travel.”

South turned her back on him and pulled out her cot from the wall on the opposite side of the room from where she’d put her bag. The opposite side of the room from North. If that wasn’t telling, he didn’t know what was.

Theta twisted in North’s head, sending tingling urges to reach out and grab her back all the way down to his fingertips.

-North! Fix it!-

He watched her as she pulled a blanket and pillow free and tersely curled up on the mattress.

She’d be cold with just the shirt. South was not a fan of the cold, she always complained that the places they stayed never had good enough heat. North could hardly remember the last time they hadn’t shared bedding, if only for the extra layer of warmth.

“South…”

She let out a frustrated groan.

“Go the fuck to sleep.”

Why did she want to leave?

-North?-

“You were going to leave me there? Back in that hotel?”

When did his throat get so tight? When did his eyes start to burn? His whole body ached and his
head swam, just a bit. Was that Theta’s panic or his own?

South rolled over and looked North in the eye. Her expression was blessedly normal, a combination of furious and constipated that meant she regretted something rather than her being angry.

“Look,” she groaned and rubbed at her eyes, “I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m fucking sorry I opened my mouth. Go the fuck to sleep.”

“And what? We ignore it until I wake up one day and you’re just gone?”

The thought of waking up in one of the horrible little hotel rooms alone, of being on Niner’s bird without South, was enough to make North feel physically ill.

“You aren’t replaceable to me. If…If you really don’t want to be around the others, we’ll do what we did before. We’ll keep moving, keep running, keep below the radar. You and me. We don’t even need to cart around the AI anymore. Theta is fine where he’s at. We can teach someone else to take care of the others and just go. You and me against the world, just like when we were kids.”

South sighed and flopped onto her back.


“Carolina?”

What did Carolina have to do with anything?

“Did you fucking forget her armor is there? I seriously doubt Wash is going to let just anybody wear her fucking suit. Not ‘Boss’s’ armor, that’s for sure. You gonna tell all them, ‘later bitches, I’d rather run around with my sister’?”

For her, it seemed like a ‘gotcha’, but the answer was obvious to him.

“If that’s what it takes—“

“Bullshit! You’re chomping at the bit to have a whole flock of wounded ducks to follow you around! Don’t fucking lie to me, asshole. First off, you’re too fucking good at it, and second, you don’t fucking need me.”

“Of course I need you, South!”

She closed her eyes and sighed. The room was quiet for a moment, but only for a moment, before South whispered.

“You don’t need me. You’ve got that glowing kid in your head. You don’t even want me, you just want someone you think will stick by you. If you want that, stick your tongue down Wash’s throat. The kid’ll probably still fall all over himself trying to impress you, and I could finally get a good night’s rest without you pulling a fucking gun on me.”

“South—“

Her voice didn’t catch, didn’t break, but sounded broken all the same.

“Stop. Just stop. Go to bed.”

“Not until we talk about this! I can’t lose you!”
South turned over and tugged her blanket up to her shoulder, effectively cutting off the conversation.

“Look, nothing’s going to happen until we’re off of the podunk little shitstain of a planet Wash managed to get in trouble on. Worry about it later.”

-She needs to listen. Why won’t she listen?-

It was too bad for her that her brother was more than used to continuing conversations she’d tried to end.

“I can’t. And neither can Theta. He’s really upset, and I don’t blame him. He doesn’t want to lose you, either.”

“Theta doesn’t fucking know me, and I don’t really give a shit about his feelings. He’s your AI, not mine. He’s your friend, not mine. This life, this bullshit, it’s yours. I don’t want it. I never wanted any of this. This was all you, and I am so fucking tired of following you around like a dog on a goddamned leash.”

“South—“

She snapped into a sitting position so fast that North took a step back to right himself. Her eyes were red, and a furious snarl warped her face.

“Stop! Stop fucking calling me that!”

She flung herself to her feet and threw her blanket at North’s head. He barely caught it and avoided being covered completely.

“If you’re not going to let me sleep, I’m going to make myself useful in the goddamned cockpit!”

And then she was gone, through the door and as far away as she could possibly get on the ship.

-North? South isn’t really going to leave us, is she?- 

Not if I can help it.

-I don’t understand what’s happening.-

That makes two of us.

He folded the blanket gently, feeling his whole face twist and wear his feelings as sure as if he spoke them allowed, and laid it down on South’s cot. She’d need it later, when she was done being mad at him.

South hated the cold.

York sat up on his cot and motioned North over with grabby hands and wordless noises, like a toddler who wanted a toy. The man’s hair was mussed and his good eye was bleary with interrupted sleep.

“Sorry about that.”

York shrugged and yawned as North sat down next to him, wrapping himself around North and pulling him in for a hug. North’s hands felt shaky. His stomach churned.
“Shit happens. It’s not like there’s a lot of space to have a private conversation with the layout of this ship. You need to get try to sleep. We’re probably going to need it, and if you aren’t conscious, I’m sure she’ll come back and get some rest all on her own.”

North put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. A massive headache was building behind his eyes as Theta’s fretting only got worse.

York poked North in the side and reached up to rub at North’s temples. Theta was worth any amount of pain, but that didn’t mean that North enjoyed the pounding and throbbing.

“I think she hates me.”

“I think South’s a brat who’s used to getting her way.”

North shrugged and leaned against York. He had missed his friend more than just about anything.

“Maybe she’d be better off on her own. She’s always been better at adapting than me.”

“I cannot see that. South was always whiny and temperamental during the project. She throws fits and fists and makes no apologies about it. You’re the only thing that kept her from being kicked out of Freelancer for her goddamned attitude.”

“Well, when you’ve spent your whole life trying to prove that you’re just as good as someone you’re literally forced to be with every day, it takes its toll.”

North relaxed into York and tried to breathe deeply as the man worked the area around North’s eyes. He tried to breathe a little easier.

“I can’t lose her, York, I really can’t. If she leaves I might die.”

He felt like a child learning about death for the first time. Hadn’t they all suffered enough already? Why was she making this so difficult for them?

York wrapped an arm around North’s shoulder and allowed the other man to just rest in his space. They synchronized their breathing, a long habit of extremely close quarters and a need to regulate their emotions, and just rested.

Theta’s fearful buzzing in the back of North’s brain finally started to smooth out.

North knew Theta trusted him to figure things out with South, but that didn’t mean the little guy wasn’t concerned. Worry was a constant with Theta, so much so that North was used to a low level of persistent fear just existing in the back of his mind. Still, this was a bit much.

North didn’t know how long they laid together before his breathing evened out and York nudged North with a grin.

“So,” York started, in that purely ‘I’m about to say something stupid’ tone of his, “Don’t hit me, but I’ve got this idea of why things are so rough with you and South all the time. See, there’s this belief some people have, that in your life you get one great love.”

North elbowed York in the side, already feeling leery about what York had to say. It wouldn’t be the first time someone saw North and South’s relationship and decided to speculate.

“York, I swear to god, if you say what I think you’re about to say—“

“I didn’t say it had to be romantic or sexual or anything like that, just, you know, all consuming.
The *big* one. The one person in the whole of the universe you don’t want to live life without. Maybe South’s yours.”

North smacked York’s shoulder, and York laughed and shoved North back.

“What? It’s not creepy if you’re not fucking.”

North couldn’t reign in a heated glare.

“You’re disgusting.”

“And you love me anyway, what does that say about you?”

“That I need better friends.”

He laughed and York laughed with him and eventually the quiet overtook the room again.

God, North felt terrible.

“It’s always been the two of us for as long as I can remember. We joined the service together, trained together, but we were separated for two years serving in different units before Freelancer. When she signed up she had no idea I was going to be there, and she was pissed. Serving without her was probably the worst experience of my life, and that’s saying something, but I don’t think she felt the same.”

York wrapped his hand around North’s, threading their fingers together, and gave a gentle, centering squeeze.

“The thing is, North, she might be your one great one but that doesn’t make you hers.”

North really did not want to hear that.

“York.”

“I’m not saying she doesn’t love you, but I think you might be smothering her. You were pretty good at cutting her off from people.”

North didn’t believe that for a single minute, South wouldn’t stand for being cut off by anyone, not even him.

Though, that could have been why she was pulling away so hard.

“She has no tact,” North gently reminded York, “People don’t tend to like that.”

York snorted and started to waggle his eyebrows.

“Well, yeah, she’s kind of being a bitch on purpose. Not only is it a good shield to get people the heck away from her, it’s like how she flirts. She’s aggressive and mean and it totally turns some people on.”

Both North and Theta felt a thrill of discomfort at that.

“That’s not something I’m really comfortable thinking about.”

“Because a girlfriend might take her away from you?”
“Because thinking about my sister in the context of sex is really gross.”

York laughed and patted North on the shoulder.

“Fair enough.”

He tugged them both down so they could lay on the uncomfortably small cot together.

North had missed this. The casual intimacy of being with someone you knew and trusted to watch your back. The easy knowledge that there was someone who cared enough to see to your comfort when the world was too much. It was something North had desperately missed.

South was good, but she wasn’t the cuddling type unless she was feeling extremely comfortable or incredibly sick.

They laid together for a while, absorbing only in the sound of one another’s breathing. North tried to puzzle out how to fix the emotional mess he and his sister somehow managed to land in, but kept coming up blank.

Maybe she’s right about leaving it alone for now. It’s not like we don’t have a little time to get this figured out.

-She can’t leave without us on Chorus. She would need her own ship.-

And a pilot. She can’t fly for anything.

-That’ll take time. We can change her mind before she can leave. Or we can come up with another plan.-

Wyoming and South eventually made their way out of the cockpit. Wyoming shook Niner awake and helped her into her chair. The woman was cranky as shit, but allowed herself to be manhandled long enough to get settled. Niner changed into her uniform and Wyoming took over her cot and laid down. Florida wandered out of the cockpit a few minutes after Niner went in, long enough for her to have taken over and for them to chitchat. He stretched his arms above his head, let out a yawn, and climbed on top of Wyoming. The two men looked ridiculous together, but North supposed that he and York didn’t look any different.

South walked by North and York, with a deliberate lack of eye contact.

He watched his twin as she crawled into her cot and threw her blanket over herself with far more force than necessary. It made the blanket tangle and not cover her properly, but North recognized this as her normal snit behavior, and she would not bother to fix it until they were away long enough for her to fix it without being seen or if they were unconscious. It was actually a relief, because it meant she was probably less angry than she’d been before.

Thank you, Florida, for being easy to talk to.

North carefully extracted himself from a now dozing York’s grip. He grabbed his own, unused blanket and carefully draped it over her. South’s eyes were squeezed shut, in a clear attempt to pretend unconsciousness, but he knew better. If she wanted, she could pretend that she was sleeping, it didn’t really bother North as much as it could have.

York snuffled and looked up to see what happened to North, but once he realized that everything was fine, he laid back down on his cot and fell asleep almost instantly, they were all well used to catching catnaps whenever and wherever they could. As North sat back down on the cot and try to
rest, South’s voice caught his attention.

“Thanks.”

He smiled, but didn’t respond.

She didn’t want it, and he didn’t need to. They’d talk later, once things were more settled, and he’d be better about listening. Maybe she’d be better about saying what she actually meant.

-Sisters are strange, aren’t they?- 

They sure are kiddo, but well worth the hassle.

One by one the Freelancers woke up.

They crammed unappealing ration bars into their mouths, cleaned themselves up as best they could without proper showers, and geared up in the lethargic way of people who had more than enough time, but still needed to be prepared. They would be on site in a matter of hours. Niner made sure everyone was ready for landing and everything was secured, well aware that they were likely to run into trouble along the way.

And she was right.

The planet was surrounded by a hodge podge of ships, all shapes and sizes with some interesting tags on the sides. All were weaponized, and luckily for Niner’s bird, they were also shit for maneuverability. Even the smaller crafts clearly designed for flying out for combat were pathetic. They clearly hadn’t been expecting anyone to come any time soon.

The firefight was almost laughable. A rookie pilot could have gotten them through the blockade easily, and Niner would have been insulted by it if she wasn’t so fucking happy for the incompetence.

Niner’s bird didn’t have the firepower to take the enemy ships out, but the UNSC would when they got off their asses and showed up. Niner had it figured that by the time anyone bothered to show up and do their jobs, the Freelancers would be well hidden on the planet and everything would be smooth fucking sailing.

Of course, life is never that fucking easy.

The proximity alarms went off just as the ship smashed into something and rocked hard.

South toppled into Wyoming, who only managed to keep standing by grasping the support bars, while North grabbed South’s wrist to try and help her keep her balance.

Niner’s furious voice carried through the bird as she tried to set them to rights.

“What the hell was that?!”

“I think it was a window?”
Wyoming let out a slightly hysterical laugh and poked South’s side before he staggered off to grab his helmet. South’s clearly unamused glare heated the back of his head.

“Knock, knock!”

“She said window, not door.”

Florida smirked off to the side, relatively unruffled by the impact, and watched York pull himself up off of the floor where he’d landed.

“A window? Just on its own? I mean, not attached to anything?”

“What the hell’s a window doing in the middle of space?!”

Niner’s aggravated voice echoed through the bird. South managed to find her footing just as a blast shook their tail end and she careened into the floor face first.

“I don’t know! Just keep flying!”

“Keep telling me how to do my job, South! That’s really attractive!”

“Fuck you, Niner! I’m not trying to get into your pants anyway!”

The ships surrounding the planet finally started to maneuver themselves and began firing erratically at Niner’s bird. Lucky enough for the Freelancers that not a one managed to punch it quickly enough to actually manage a hit. The ships shot wildly around her for a few moments before they all pulled back and headed towards the larger ships.

Which Niner realized immediately was a bad fucking sign.

Niner tried to pull up, she wanted to get a better look at the land beneath her, only to realize that the controls were not working they way they were supposed to. The ship was going down, not up, and was actively dropping at a much more rapid pace than it should have been.

“Everyone, get into your seats and lock in! We’re hitting choppy waters, and I do not have the time to deal with you if you get a concussion!”

She slammed her hand down on the console and searched for a frequency that came from the planet.

“Mayday, mayday, this is 479er. We are an aid ship on route for the planet Chorus! We are caught in some kind of unnatural gravitational pull. Respond!”

The radio crackled for a moment before several voices burst through the static.

“Uh oh,” an exceptionally deep voice whispered.

“What do we do?”

“I don’t-“

“Hold on.”

“Give me the mic-“

“Back off Palomo! Um hello, thish is Katie Jenshen of Chorus Red Team, I hear you 479er.”
Niner tried to keep her voice calm as the ship rattled insanely around her. The Freelancer’s were silent as they put themselves into the relative safety of their secured seats.

“Jensen, this is 479er! We are an aid ship caught in some kind of unnatural gravitational pull! Please advise!”

The woman’s voice sounded slightly distorted as well as being exceptionally distressed. If Niner didn’t know better, she’d think she was talking to a teenager.

“That’s the planet’s protective shield. It crashes enemy ships to keep them from landing and attacking.”

“That’s something you should have mentioned when you ASKED FOR HELP!”

“Shorry! It’s just supposed to protect us! No one realished we were going to get help so fast!”

Niner tried to engage the stabilizers and forcibly slow their descent, but it didn’t do much. The panel lit up with error codes and Niner swore.

“Well, we’re not a fucking enemy ship! We have rations, medical supplies, and support troops! Turn the fucking thing off!”

“Hold on, let me talk to Shanta!”

Niner blinked.

What the fuck?

“He shays you’re too close to the planet, and if you don’t pull up you’ll hit the ground!”

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? THE WHOLE POINT IS THAT I CAN’T PULL UP! IF WE SURVIVE THIS, SANTA IS FUCKING DEAD!!!”

“He shays head west from your location, and there will be a safe plashe to crash land! We’ll shend out a team to meet you!”

“Are you FUCKING KIDDING ME?!”

Niner adjusted the ships trajectory as best she could for the ‘safe place’, and slammed her hand down on the comm to the main area of the bird. She hoped they’d already strapped in, because time was not on their side. York’s voice caught her attention.

“Niner, did you just say you were going to kill Santa?”

“EVERYONE BRACE FOR IMPACT! PLANET SURFACE COMING IN HOT!”

Niner grabbed the controls, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

South dashed over to the AI units and jammed her fingers against the buttons on unit 5. There was
a sour taste in her mouth making her face twist in all sorts of ways that she knew North was trying to make sense of. She didn’t know how she was going to convince him to let her do what needed to be done, they didn’t have the time to fight.

“South,” North’s voice was low and tense, “what are you doing?”

The unit whirred and beeped unhappily, the lights blinked as it began the transfer to the chip. Unit 5 had always been a bit finicky, and South’s efforts only seemed to make it less happy than normal. It didn’t matter much. Once she had the AI plugged in, it wouldn’t need the charging station anymore. They were close enough to getting them all a proper place to back up to.

“Your suit and mine are identical besides the size and the color. I am equipped with and fully capable of doing anything you can do, including activating the bubble shield.”

York made a shitty, disbelieving sound and and locked himself into his seat. God, she hated his smarmy ass.

“South, you’ve never actually managed to do that in simulation, let alone real life.”

“York!”

North gave York a betrayed look.

The unit released the chip and South cradled it as gently as her gloved hands could.

“Yeah, well neither did North. Besides, I’ll have help.”

North snarled and grabbed South’s shoulder. Her muscles froze for just a few seconds before she shoved at his chest. She was well aware that the wild fear in his eyes was for her sake, and frankly, she was tired of seeing it.

“You’re going to get yourself killed trying, South! Just sit down and strap in!”

South pushed North off angrily and slammed his helmet into his hands.

“We don’t have time for this! If I don’t do it we will ALL DIE, North!”

Theta materialized on North’s shoulder. The little kid AI normally only appeared these days when he was trying to keep North’s spirits up, but this was different. His body language looked completely terrified, like a little kid cowering in a corner.

South’s gut twisted. Theta was a child. Sure, he was an AI child, but he was still a fucking kid that had seen and done too much.

North used South’s distraction to grab her wrist and yank her toward the seats.

“I am the one with the AI that has done this before!!! If anyone is going to do it, it should be me!”

She snarled and backed away from North, holding the chip out of North’s reach. If he snatched the AI from her hands it was all over, she wouldn’t have the chance to grab a different one.

“For once in your goddamned life, Adrian, listen to someone else!”

He looked startled by her using his real name. South was thankful it was still so effective. North didn’t fight South as she snatched his helmet back and slammed it on his head. Years of training and muscle memory made him secure it before he started yelling again.
“You’re the one who always says we’re different! What makes you think you can even do this?!”

South looked behind North and saw Maine standing by, ready to grab people and start throwing them into seats. Wyoming and Florida looked ready to lock themselves into safety, but had not yet done so. South weighed her options.

“Maine!”

Maine grabbed North by the shoulders, flung him into his seat, slammed the bars down over his head, and locked them into position. North wouldn’t be getting up without the release catch, which he didn’t have access to while they were in the middle of a crash scenario unless Niner decided to have mercy and leave them access to the override. South hoped he’d forget about it until the ship landed.

“NO!”

Florida gave South a nod of respect as he and Wyoming locked themselves into place. Wyoming gripped the shoulder bars hard, like a kid at an amusement park.

“I certainly hope you know what you’re doing, my friend.”

Florida patted Wyoming on the knee as North raged in his seat, limbs flailing, words devolving into incoherent screams.

“She’ll be fine,” Florida cooed, “Worst case scenario, we don’t survive to find out she screwed up!”

South rolled her eyes at that, ignoring North and Theta’s matching wails of terror.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence there, Butchy.”

“Of course, darling!”

South held out the chip to Maine, ignoring the pained expression as he slipped his helmet on.

“Help a girl out? We’re running low on time.”

He grunted and slotted the chip into the port on South’s neck, then locked himself into his seat and clutched the harness.

“South! SOUTH! NO!”

A cool sense of awareness flooded her veins, just like when Delta first stretched himself out inside her head and made himself at home. South wished she had time to get acquainted with this one before hitting the ground running, but as her dad used to say if wishes were fishes we’d all eat sashimi.

“What’s going on in there?! South, why aren’t you locked in?!”

South yanked her helmet on and dashed up the ladder and to the hatch. She knew she had seconds left before it would be too late to make a difference, and she was not going to get stuck inside the ship after pissing North off.

“I’m gonna try to pull a North. If I screw up and we all die, I’m sorry I’m a fuckup.”

The line was quiet for a brief moment.
“South, even with the shield, you’re probably going to die out there. If the impact shakes you, if the ship rolls, if literally anything happens, you’re toast. I don’t know if you can actually survive, even if the ship does.”

South grinned as she locked her feet to the hull of the ship and got into position.

“Yep, but what a way to go.”

Ok, little dude, time to get to work. Sorry about the trial by fire.

-What’s happening?-

Long story short, we need a shield around the ship to absorb some impact and we need it now.

-I’ve never done that before! I’ll screw up! Where’s Iota?!-

Still on the ship.

South watched the surface come closer and felt…peace. It was a hell of a view.

Look, we’ve got seconds and you and I are probably going to die, but if you don’t even try or we screw up, then everyone is dead. You, me, Iota, my brother, everyone. I hadn’t intended for it to go this way, I wanted to get to know you before I stuck you in my fucking skull, but we don’t have the time. Either help me or shut the fuck up so I can concentrate.

South started the sequence for the shield. She felt a flicker in the back of her mind, almost like an itch on the inside of her skull. She shook her head, and tried to reign her focus back in.

Let me do it if you’re not going to help.

-I’ll help. We’ll protect our family. Let’s do it together.-

Awesome. Hope this works.

With that thought, South attempted to activate the shield.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so we're not as close as I expected to be by the time I was...this many chapters into this story.

Still, we're getting super close, we're practically on the planet's surface!

If this chapter was less than your favorite, I apologize. I'm having brain issues with this one. I do not have anyone's voices down super well, and I thought it was about time I tried playing with North. Before I realized what happened, I'd spent an entire chapter on him being clingy and South being done with his shit.

Still, thank you for sticking with me for all of this. It means so much to me that you've bothered with or possibly even been interested in the things that somehow made it out of my brain and onto my computer screen!

Updated 04/13/2019
Minor grammar and spelling changes, some content edited or expanded on for clarity. No plot changes.
Katie yawned and propped her head in her hand. Since all the excitement had ended with the destruction of Charon's ship, the Lieutenants had taken over their earlier duties in an effort to keep the planet running while they waited for help from the UNSC. She had volunteered to monitor interplanetary and ship communications, with the hope that she’d be able to trade the easy job with someone in the motor pool, but so far there were no takers.

On top of that, Captain Simmons had been caught up in the whole ‘super special Freelancer woman’ thing, and was so busy he didn’t have any time to spend with his squad, which sucked and meant she and her team were so bored.

Still, it could have been worse. Things were quiet at the moment, but Katie had faith that soon the UNSC ships would fill the sky and any straggling pirates would be obliterated or scared away, and life as she knew it would drastically change for the better.

That hope didn’t stop her job from being mind-numbingly boring, though.

“Hey, Jensen, where do you want it?”

Matthews grunted as he attempted to open the door with his foot. He had a box in his arms that looked far too heavy for him, and his face was flushed with exertion. Katie stood up to help, only for Bitters to snatch the box from Matthews’ grip and balance it with one hand, the other held a bag that looked weighted on the bottom.

“Get the door, Matthews.”

“Right!”

Katie pointed Bitters to a corner, where he dropped the box and tossed her a glass mason jar.

“Oooh! Ish thish what I think it ish?”

“Contraband alcohol?” Bitters said with a grin, “Absolutely not. If it was, we’d have to destroy it or share it, neither of which sounds like an appealing plan to me.”

Matthews pulled out another jar and held it up with a grin.

“Andersmith and Palomo are bringing snacks.”

Katie smiled back at her friends and tried to hold in a giggle. It wasn’t terribly effective, but neither of the others seemed to mind.

“Can I jusht say, I am sho happy that thingsh are finally on the upshwing?”

Bitters bumped Katie with his elbow and leaned back against the control panel.

“There you go, jinxing us. If the world ends or the war starts again, I’m blaming Katie Jensen and her famous optimistic statements.”

Katie blew a raspberry at Bitters and unscrewed the lid to her jar. The contents smelled terrible, but
she’d never been one for the smell of alcohol, any kind of alcohol, in the first place. Still, it would get the job done, and that was really all that mattered.

The door slid open and Andersmith entered carrying a multitude of bags, and grunted as he put them down. Palomo swaggered in behind him, carrying nothing.

Bitters raised an eyebrow at his aqua clad friend and scowled.

“Thanks for all your help, Palomo. I can see Andersmith really needed you to go with him.”

“He totally did! I mean, you should have seen some of the snacks he was trying to grab! Seaweed bars, for goodness sake!”

Matthews shrugged.

“Hey, I like the seaweed bars, high in fiber, calcium, and iron, and low in fat. They just take a little getting used to.”

Bitters gently cuffed the back of Matthews head.

“You need the carbs to absorb the alcohol. Besides, there’s no amount of Stockholm Syndrome to your tastebuds that can make those things taste any less like ass than they do the first time you have them.”

Katie bounced a little in place and tried to see inside the bags Andersmith brought in.

“Did you bring it?”

He straightened up, crossed his arms over his chest, and gave Katie a very satisfied smile. She’d always thought he had a nice smile, gentle and content and it went all the way to his eyes and made them crinkle.

“Of course. What is a birthday party without cake or a cake substitute for food allergy related reasons?”

Andersmith started to unpack the bags and Katie thought idly about how it was really a shame that he was so much older than her. If he’d been a few years younger, Andersmith would have been exactly the sort of guy she’d like to date. Instead she ended up with guys like Palomo, who wasn’t a bad person, he was just...so immature. You could tell he was the baby of the group.

“Man, Matthews,” Palomo grinned and shoved the younger man lightly, “How’s it feel to be old?”

Matthews huffed.

“I’m not that old.”

“Dude, you’re nineteen! In a few years you’ll be as old as Kimball!”

Bitters rolled his eyes.

“Ignore him, he just can’t handle the fact that he’s the youngest of us. Sucks being the low man on the totem pole, doesn’t it? Just because we’re all legal adults and you’re not, doesn’t mean you need to be a brat.”

Katie grinned and waggled her jar of contraband alcohol at him.
“Yeah, Charlesh, be nicshe to the birthday boy or we might decshide that you’re too young to drink!”

Palomo sighed dramatically and fell against the wall.

“Old enough to die for my planet, but too young for booze! How cruel life is!”

Andersmith shook his head and handed Palomo a jar.

“We really shouldn’t be drinking anyway, the human brain continues to develop well into your twenties, and I’m fairly certain that sixteen is too young to be consuming the amount you do on a regular basis.”

Palomo lifted the jar in a toast.

“Well, the war’s over, the bad guys are beaten, maybe I’ll cut back on drinking. Not tonight though, because tonight we celebrate our friend surviving to nineteen! You’re old enough to work in the war room now! You could be a bureaucrat!”

Matthews smiled, pleased, and took a drink from his jar. Katie knew he’d never actually try for a position, Matthews had too much to prove coming from a family like his where everyone was ready to die for their planet (and had done so), but she could definitely see him walking behind Kimball with papers in his hand, organizing the food supply or something. Matthews had a head for numbers and organization. Katie thought it was a good thing that he’d always been kind of sickly, because it meant that good leaders like Agent Washington and Captain Grif kept him in positions where he could be useful and was less likely to die from his own body giving up on the battlefield.

Bitters rooted through the bags, pulled free a small box, and lifted the lid. Inside was a perfectly frosted, tiny chocolate cake, just big enough for their little group. Everyone watched reverently as Bitters pulled the cake free and sat it on the flat box. He managed to get it out without mussing a single bit of the delicate decorative frosting.

Palomo and Katie both made intelligible hunger noises while Andersmith admired the frosted creation. Matthew’s eyes were wide as Bitters decorated the cake with tiny birthday candles and lit them.

Katie couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a cake so pretty, or a cake with birthday candles that were brand new. She had no idea where he’d even managed to find birthday candles. She hadn’t seen them since she was little, before her family had really joined the war efforts.

“Bitters,” Andersmith looked a little concerned, “What did you promise Almira to get her to release this much rationed sugar?”

He presented the cake with candles with a cocky grin.

“I’m running interference for the kitchen against Captain Grif for a month.”

They all looked at him like he was crazy. No one was able to really get in between Captain Grif and the food rations, and Bitters knew better than to try. Katie shook her head with a grin.

“You’re nutsh.”

“Yeah,” Bitters said with a wry grin, “I guess I am. Make a wish, loser.”
Matthews closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Mayday, mayday, this is 479er. We are an aid ship on route for the planet Chorus! We are caught in some kind of unnatural gravitational pull. Respond!”

Katie’s eyes flew wide and she slammed her hand onto the console, dropping her jar of alcohol in the process. The alarms started to sound loudly. Matthews face turned panicked in a fraction of a second as he blew out the candles and jumped to check the monitors with her.

“Uh oh,” Andersmith whispered.

Palomo looked around the room “What do we do?”

“I don’t-“ Matthews hands started to shake.

Bitters put the cake down, face dark and unhappy, “Hold on.”

“Give me the mic-“

“Back off Palomo! Um hello, this is Katie Jenshen of Chorush Red Team, I hear you Four Sheven Niner.”

There was a lot of crackling and distortion.

“Shanta, can you clean this up for me?!“

Santa’s AI form materialized next to Katie.

“Of course, Lieutenant Jensen.”

The crackling faded.

“Jensen, this is 479er! We are an aid ship caught in some kind of unnatural gravitational pull! Please advise!”

The woman on the other end sounded angry, and it took everything in Katie to keep from buckling under the pressure.

“That’s the planet’s protective shield. It crashes enemy shipsh to keep them from landing and attacking.”

“That’s something you should have mentioned when you ASKED FOR HELP!”

“Shorry! It’s just shupposed to protect us! No one realished we were going to get help sho fast!”

“Well, we’re not a fucking enemy ship! We have rations, medical supplies, and support troops! Turn the fucking thing off!”

“Hold on, let me talk to Shanta!”

Katie took her hand off the transmission button.

“Shanta, what do we do?!“

“The ship is coming in at an exceptionally fast speed. I will lift the pull for their ship, but they will still crash at the speed they are going. They will need to pull up and head to the Temple of
Procreation, where I will attempt to cushion their fall.”

“Oh-my-god-oh-my-god-oh-my-god!”

Bitters laid a hand on Palomo’s shoulder and tugged him back toward the door.

“Shut up, Palomo!”

Katie activated the comm.

“He shays you’re too close to the planet, and if you don’t pull up you’ll hit the ground!”

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? THE WHOLE POINT IS THAT I CAN’T PULL UP! IF WE
SURVIVE THIS, SANTA IS FUCKING DEAD!!!”

“He shays head west from your location, and there will be a shafe plashe to land! We’ll shend out a
team to meet you!”

“Are you FUCKING KIDDING ME?!”

The woman’s communication cut off and Katie looked at Santa, terrified.

“Shanta?”

“The ship is redirecting itself. I will attempt to contact the ship once it lands. Odds of survival have
increased by 20%.”

Palomo ran to the door and screamed.

“Agent Washington!”

Andersmith, Katie, Bitters, and Matthews all chased after him.

“AGENT WASHINGTON! AGENT WASHINGTON!”

Palomo ran screaming down the hall like he was on fire, arms flailing, the other lieutenants ran
directly behind him. Soldiers dived out of the way left and right.

“AGENT WASHINGTON!!!!!!”

Wash had no idea where to go from this point. It was hard to watch Connie’s face. It was hard to
even acknowledge her existence. Staring at her face made part of his brain itch.

When Carolina had reported in that they’d found C.T. and Tex had shoved an axe into her chest,
Wash had hidden in a nearby broom closet for an hour just to try and reign in his panic attack long
enough to make it to his quarters without drawing attention to himself. He still did, but he hoped
that it would not so obvious to the Director and the Councilor.

They’d drifted apart by the end, that wasn’t a lie.

But…

But…

It was Connie.
She’d been Wash’s first real friend in Alpha squad. She’d shown him the ropes and helped him train and taught him how to play all those stupid card games that no one in real life ever seemed to play outside of the military and casinos. York used to tease him about getting into Connie’s pants, until she threatened him with her signature dick stab technique.

They’d practically lived in each other’s pockets. She was the only person he’d ever trusted with the code to his door, because there was literally nothing in his life that he wasn’t willing to share with her. He had nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of and he’d have given her anything she wanted without asking.

And it was all a lie.

“Was it a lie?”

Wash blinked into awareness. Connie’s expression was groggy, but she had her eyes locked on his.

“Was…what?”

She tried to smile, but it was honestly worse than her blank expression. Her cheeks were so thin and gaunt it was like looking at a skeleton.

“You said ‘it was all a lie’. Was it?”

He frowned. He’d told her about the boy he’d smashed into a mirror in school, and the loss of his parents, and the sheer relief of being chosen for Alpha Squad, because even if he was never the best in the squad he was still a part of it. And she’d shared her fear of being weak enough to be kicked out, her irrational hatred of the Director’s accent, and how much she loved having someone who knew her and accepted her. He’d known everything about her, from the name of the first boy who’d ever treated her badly (Jason Lipson) to her favorite seasonal breakfast cereal (Frankenberry all the way). From her pet peeves and personal joys, to secrets that she’d kept since childhood. He’d known everything about her.

And maybe he’d never known anything in the first place.

“Everything about Freelancer was a lie.”

“Nothing.”

Connie reached out and put her hand on his wrist. She didn’t grab, didn’t squeeze, just…rested her hand there. It was something she used to do, back before it all went to shit. She’d just…hold onto him without weight, but with intent.

They’d both had enough insecurities about people and touch that they were constantly touch starved as well as leery of being touched.

“Con- C.T.-“

She gave the gentlest squeeze. The barest hint of pressure while still loose enough to keep him from being distressed by the hold.

He’d never liked being restrained.

“You don’t have to call me that. I…I was angry. I never thought the leaderboard was fair, and I kind of…threw a snit.”
“It wasn’t fair. They gave points arbitrarily in the hopes of setting certain people off. South and North were just an experiment in pitting siblings against each other.”

“And leaving you on the board?”

Wash scratched the back of his head and ruffled his hair. It was getting long.

“I…it made me more loyal, I think. Stupid loyal. I never would have believed a higher rank, but I was willing to do just about anything to stay there. You weren’t, so they didn’t bother.”

Connie looked off to the side and stared at the monitors.

“…god. Wash, I am so sorry…that I didn’t trust you enough. I should have…”

She trailed off, eyes downcast. Wash turned his wrist and tangled their fingers together. Connie looked back up and smiled, and Wash could feel the memories creeping through his brain. He didn’t want to hurt this woman.

“You shouldn’t have. I don’t think I would have believed it at the time. I would have believed you, but I would have tried to justify it, or thought you didn’t have the whole story, or…I don’t know. I had my nose pretty firmly attached to the grindstone.”

“Yeah, and your whole head up Carolina’s ass.”

Wash could feel his whole face twist like he’d bitten a lemon. Him and Carolina?

“What?!”

Connie laughed, high and bright.

“Don’t think I didn’t see you following her around like a puppy dog! It was always ‘yes boss’, ‘of course boss’, ‘whatever you need boss’. It’s nice to see that some things haven’t changed.”

He could feel some heat on his cheeks.

“They have, actually. I still tend to defer to her judgement, but she has earned a lot of that. We’ve both done some growing.”

“I can’t wait to hear about it. I…I’ve really missed you.”

“Me too. I’ve missed you too.”

Wash shifted uncomfortably.

“I…do not have romantic feelings for Carolina.”

Connie shook her head.

“No, but you did always think she was the best thing since sliced bread. She was perfect and could do no wrong.”

“To be fair, she’d been in charge since before I joined Alpha Squad, and everyone treated her that way.”

Connie just gave him a smirk.
“In…the effort of clarity,” Wash stuttered out, “I don’t…have romantic feelings for you either.”

Connie laughed again, this time more a cackling than a shiny giggle. She laughed and squeezed his fingers until tears tumbled down her cheeks and her breaths came up short.

Wash grinned.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it’s just-“

She started to howl with laughter.

“Oh my god, your face!”

“So, I take it I have your permission to deny all jokes about us dating?”

“Oh god, please! That’s hilarious! No! No! We’re not like that! I love you, but not like that!”

Connie flopped back and took a deep breath.

“I love you, but not like that.”

Wash squeezed her fingers gently. He wanted to say it back. Wanted to reach out and bridge that gap, but something made him hold back. Kept the words stuck in him. In his head, in his throat, in his chest, in the spaces between their fingers and the quirk of his smile and the hood of his eyes.

Me too.

-----

Wash stepped out of Connie’s hospital room with a yawn. She’d mostly slept since they’d brought her in, but Wash was unwilling to let her wake up in an unfamiliar place by herself. The only big problem with the plan was that he was not capable of sleeping in the infirmary without some significant medicinal intervention, and he was exhausted.

She’d passed out, and Wash noted that she had a sedative that was automatically administered at certain times, with a note next to it on her chart saying she gave her consent. He was ready to have Doctor Grey sit in for a while so he could get a little bit of sleep himself.

“AGENT WASHINGTON!!!!!”

Palomo rounded a corner and slammed into Wash’s chest with a resounding clang.

Wash managed to catch the teen as he started to fall to the ground, though Palomo himself was no help. The younger man was in civilian clothes, and struggled in Wash’s grip, his face pale and panicked. Wash wasn’t entirely certain that Palomo recognized who was holding him up.

“Lieutenant Palomo, calm down.”

The other lieutenants and Matthews rounded the corner, all of them in varying states of fear, concern, and casual dress.

“Agent Washington!” Palomo cried out.

“We found you!” Katie squeaked.

Wash could feel his face heat with anger and was thankful that he had put his helmet back on. This
particular group responded better to quiet instruction rather than raging anger.

“What are you doing running shrieking through the medical wing! There are people recovering here!”

Clearly his voice hadn’t heard the memo.

“A ship! A ship!”

“What?”

Matthews panted heavily and leaned against Bitters for support, but was determined to get his point across. Bitters steadied Matthews with one hand and pointed back to the communications room with the other.

“A rescue ship just crashed! Santa didn’t catch it in time!”

Wash looked them over with concern.

“Please tell me you left someone behind to make sure they didn’t radio for help after landing?”

The five all looked at each other with varying degrees of horror.

“Oh no.” Andersmith whispered.

“Because the only reason people couldn’t call for help before was the communications tower jamming the broadcast.”

“Oh no.” Katie’s voice quivered.

“And if there are survivors they might not survive long without help, since there are still pirates on the planet, and they probably have some injured from the crash.”

“Oh NO!” Palomo wailed.

He looked ready to run back to the communications room, but Matthews beat him to it and bolted down the hall. Wash tightened his grip on Palomo as the young man looked ready to bolt anyway.

“Oh no, you don’t. You four are staying here, I want answers, not the least of which is why you are all in civilian clothes and reek of moonshine when you’re supposed to be on duty.”

Jensen wilted under his glare, nearly started to cry, but spoke up.

“I wash the only one on duty, Shir. We were cshelebrating Matthewsh birthday.”

Wash let go of Palomo and sighed.

He wanted to be furious at them, was furious in fact, and he would definitely be taking it out of their hides during their next training session, but did understand that they were all just kids. Despite, or maybe because of, spending their childhoods in an active war zone, the younger Feds and New Repubs were very childlike in their thoughts and actions. The fact that lives depended on them keeping their heads while working wouldn’t stick until they actively lost someone to ineptitude.

“Next time, wait until you’re off duty. You know better than to bring alcohol into restricted areas, but that’s not even the worst of it. You broke one of the biggest rules when it comes to alcohol on
They all looked nervous at that. What could have possibly been worse than breaking the rules?

"Shir?"

"Don't get caught."

They looked taken off guard by that.

"Go put your armor on and meet me back here. You are no longer off duty, and you four can fill in Kimball about the situation."

Chapter End Notes

I wish I could say something reassuring like 'we're almost there, guys!' or 'just a few more chapters 'til endgame' or something...but well...

I have a good two and a half chapters in the works ahead that are...if not finished, they are mostly finished and ready for a quick read through to make sure that there's nothing glaringly stupid I missed.

But after that, I literally have no idea where it will go from that point. This whole fic has been a 'fly by the seat of your pants' endeavor, but this feels exceptionally like I have no idea what I'm doing.

I will say that I'm having a great time writing, and I'm loving that people are so kind and commenting on this to let me know that there are things I've done well and areas I can play in. I've gotten pretty far from where I'd started, but I have to say I'm loving where we are.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Plans are made to rescue the rescue ship, Doc finally appears, and Wash talks to Matthews.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wash, Carolina, Grey, and Kimball stood outside Connie’s hospital room, backs to the door, with the Lieutenants lined up in front of them at attention. The Reds and Blues were stationed on either end of the hallway, supposedly for the purpose of keeping the wrong ears from hearing, but based on their blasé attitudes and letting people past, it was more likely that they were all there for the sake of gossip.

Carolina glared the four down through her helmet and Vanessa would have laughed if they’d been alone. For someone who claimed to be a badass space marine who took no shit, she’d managed to pick up a good deal of the Reds and Blues body language. It was legitimately adorable.

“What happened?”

Andersmith moved forward slightly to speak. He and Bitters were both straight backed and secure, while Jensen looked nervous and kept glancing toward Simmons, and Palomo fidgeted and kicked at the floor. Andersmith was always the consummate professional, but Vanessa knew that Bitters at least was trying to keep a professional air and distract everyone from the fact that Matthews was nowhere in sight.

“Santa saw that there was something going on above. We happened to catch a transmission from someone saying they were an aid ship, they were under attack and they’d been caught in the tractor beam. The ship was coming down.”

Vanessa’s shoulders tensed, she could feel her throat tighten. An aid ship sent so soon, destroyed by them instead of the enemy forces. Ignoring the completely pointless loss of life and destruction of much needed supplies, that would look absolutely horrible for them when the UNSC proper came knocking.

“Did Santa cut off the beam?”

Palomo nodded.

“Yeah, but he said they were too close to the surface to avoid crashing.”

“Oh my god, we killed an aid ship?!”

Tucker’s voice echoed down the hall. The entire hallway full of soldiers turned to look at him with a mixture of frustrated expressions on their faces. Bitters piped up.

“Well, Santa did say he lifted the pull and they were headed to an area where they could crash more safely.”
Caboose cocked his head to the side then bounced excitedly.

“They might not be dead! We didn’t die!”

Epsilon made himself known on Carolina’s shoulder.

“Yeah, seven fleshy survivors out of how many thousands who’ve crashed on Chorus over the years?”

Caboose nodded seriously.

“Point taken.”

“To be fair,” Simmons pointed out, “There were mercenaries being paid to take out survivors. We don’t know how many managed to survive the crashes only to be killed by Felix or Locus. There’s not enough data to make an accurate judgment.”

Tucker, Grif, and Epsilon all pointed at Simmons.

“NEEEEERD!!!”

Vanessa sighed.

“Do we know where they landed?”

“Shomething happened during the landing that pushed the ship into more densh area. Shanta put their coordinates at approxshimately shix hoursh to the north northwesht, near the Temple of Procreation.”

No one had to look at Tucker to know exactly what he was thinking. Vanessa didn’t want to give him the chance.

“Fantastic. Alright, we need to evaluate the wreckage, see if there is anything salvageable, and see if there are any survivors. The odds are slim, but who knows, we might get lucky.”

Grey nodded along happily. Palomo relaxed his stance enough that both Carolina and Wash turned to look at him, and didn’t snap back into position. He’d be getting a few extra laps for the rejection of protocol, she was sure.

“I hope stuff survived. It sounded like it was a pretty useful thing. She said food rations, medical supplies, and extra help!”

Carolina turned to Vanessa.

“Alright, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll go out with a small team, we’ll take some of the jeeps and a hauling truck, see what we can find out there, hopefully there will be enough to scavenge to bring back. Wash can stay on site here.”

She paused for a moment.

“If that’s alright with you, of course.”

Wash looked at Carolina, clearly indignant.

“Why are you going and not me? We’re not out of the woods yet, and if there’s an attack, the soldiers need you to lead the charge.”
Carolina shifted in a way that signaled she was uncomfortable. It wasn’t an obvious tell, the roll of a shoulder and the shift of weight to one foot over the other, but Vanessa was used to Carolina and her mannerisms. She hoped Washington would back down, step off, accept that Carolina was feeling concerned.

“I have my reasons, Wash.”

“I’d like to know why you’re leaving me behind.”

Carolina took a deep breath.

“The soldiers are afraid of me, Wash, but they respect you, they trust you implicitly, and they trust you to lead them.”

“They trust you.”

Carolina shook her head.

“They don’t know me well enough to trust me. That’s ok. That’s not the purpose I serve here. Besides, if something happens, we need a Freelancer here to lead the defense, and Connie is going to work best with you, not me. I’ll need you to reassure her, and I may need you to arm her.”

Vanessa was taken aback by that. She looked to Grey, who didn’t react in any visible way, then to Wash who seemed perturbed. He’d reacted…pretty significantly to finding the other Freelancer, and Vanessa thought he’d be happier knowing they’d decided to put faith in her.

“You trust her enough to give her a gun?”

He didn’t sound confident.

Which was fair. Carolina’s drunk night confessions often turned to her inability to trust people and the loss of life that resulted (pretty much everyone), or her faith in people who consistently let her down (her parents). It wasn’t pretty, and while Wash had never made an appearance when there was group drinking with Carolina, he seemed to recognize pretty well that there were some…issues there.

At this rate, nothing was going to happen without some assistance. Vanessa knew her voice was steady, which was the only reason she spoke up for Carolina instead of letting the other woman try to hash it out herself.

“No, but we trust you to give her a gun. She stuck her neck out for the Reds and Blues on Hargrove’s ship, so I’m hoping that means she’ll be willing to stick her neck out for the planet if necessary. Even as wrecked as she is, she managed to do some pretty serious damage, if half of what they said is true.”

“Um,” Donut leaned in sassily, “All of what I said was true.”

Carolina snorted.

“Still not buying the musical number, Donut. I can believe she stabbed a bunch of men in the crotch, but I doubt Connie did a tap number while you guys were escaping. The point is, we may need her, and Washington is the best bet for getting her to do what we need safely.”

Wash shook his head, but less in denial than mystification.
“Ok, I’m staying behind not because you think I’m not in fit condition for a scouting mission, but because you need me to be the Connie wrangler and make sure she’s on our side.”

“I’m hoping that we won’t actually need her because she needs the rest, but yes. You’re my ace in the hole.”

“Bow chicka wow, wow!”

Wash slapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation.

“I swear to god, Tucker, I will end you.”

Vanessa could practically see the cheeky grin on Tucker’s face at Wash’s exasperated utterance.

“But what a way to go!”

She decided to step in and redirect the conversation, or it would never improve. Soon they’d all be trading insults and innuendos, and no one would check to see if anyone had survived the crash.

Dear god, she hoped there were survivors.

“Ok, so who do you plan to take with you? Scavenging requires bodies and vehicles.”

Donut shrieked and waved his hand in the air in a ‘Pick me! Pick me!’ wave.

“Oh! Oh! We should go!”

Sarge gave a loud shouting noise that could only be agreement.

“Damned right we will! The Red Army takes no prisoners!”

Simmons looked confused and defeated.

“We’re not trying to find prisoners, Sarge, we’re trying to save lives.”

Simmons shifted away from Sarge and Donut.

“And think about it, if we don’t get to the crash before they do, the place is going to be swarming! You probably want someone else going, someone competent.”

Grif shook his head at Donut as the pink clad soldier bounced where he stood.

“No! No! We should definitely go!”

“Why?”

“Because of the plot!”

Grif looked slack jawed, an impressive feat while wearing armor.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Donut leaned forward and held out his hand like he was presenting an object for some reason, and Grif took a step back. Even Sarge gave Donut a funny look.
Vanessa really wished she was in a position to eat some popcorn.

“Well, Red Team hasn’t gotten a lot of chances to show off how awesome we are yet, and this would be the perfect time to break into the plot!”

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying. It sounds like words are coming out of your mouth, but it’s like nonsense! This is worse than trying to have a conversation with Lopez!”

Donut waved a hand at Grif dismissively.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’ll all make sense eventually.”

Simmons gave Donut a hard stare and leaned in, as if he could look deep into Donut’s visor and suddenly understand everything that was happening inside the other man’s head.

“Is this one of your fanfiction things? Should I be worried that you’re going to start describing Harry Potter characters in increasingly scandalous situations?”

Carolina shook her head.

“The Reds can come with me, and I should probably take a medic, as well as some soldiers. I don’t expect trouble yet, the fighting is too fresh, but it doesn’t hurt to be prepared, and if we do actually find something salvageable, I’m going to need the extra hands.”

Wash looked over at the Red team and watched as they devolved into bickering.

“Do you really want to take them with you?”

“There are worse people I could have on my side. I can’t think of many, but I’m sure they exist.”

Grey watched Tucker and Caboose move in closer to be part of the conversation and pointed at them.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take those two as well?”

“Hell no. Do I look like I’m willing to put up with the sheer unadulterated amounts of pointless bitching having all of them would entail? Tucker and Caboose can stay on base.”

Tucker crossed his arms indignantly.

“Wait a minute why are the Reds going on this and not us?”

Carolina gave a deep, put upon sigh and put her hand to her visor as if she could rub her temples through the metal.

“Because the plot says so.”

“That excuse doesn’t work coming from you! You’re the straight man! You actually have to have logic and shit!”

Carolina huffed a laugh and pointed over her shoulder to Wash.

“Then because I want Washington to have someone to back him up with specialty skills. We are not going to activate a temple, so we don’t need your sword, and I’m really hoping that we’re not going to need Freckles, but both you and Caboose are more than capable of handling the protection of the base.”
Church snorted. Vanessa…didn’t exactly disagree with him, but she didn’t want to undermine Carolina.

“Shut up, Epsilon.”

“Then we have a plan. Wash, you’re in charge of defenses while Carolina is gone. I want someone in the communications room 24/7 while we’re monitoring. And Wash? I would appreciate it if you’d put the fear of god into them, to keep them from slacking off.”

“I can do that.”

Kimball pointed to the Lieutenants and made sure that they were well aware all eyes were on them.

“And you four are going to be Carolina’s first wave of support on this. If I hear than any of you have been slacking off I will stick you with latrine duty for a month. Don’t think I won’t. Carolina, see me in my office before you leave.”

The Lieutenants all snapped to attention. They knew Vanessa was not joking, and there was not a person on the planet who could make *latrine duty* any more pleasant than it sounded. A military base full of teenagers and young adults…who in their right mind would want to clean up after that?

They wouldn’t give Carolina any trouble on this. And if they did, Vanessa knew that Carolina would be just as eager to put them in their places.

With the Lieutenants doing their best to ensure that everything went smoothly, the small caravan of vehicles and participants were ready in practically no time at all. They had six jeeps, a hauling truck, two medics, and a total of 15 soldiers including the lieutenants, the Reds, and Carolina herself.

The vehicles were packed, the soldiers were armed and ready, and Carolina felt a measure of confidence that everything was arranged to plan. Wash came to see the group off, nerves buzzing. He’d agreed to leave Connie in Caboose and Tucker’s hands long enough to see the caravan off, and then he would head back, and assign watch on the communications room from his tablet.

It was nice to have him on her side. She didn’t always think about it, even after their first big fight involving the Reds and Blues and following orders, Carolina recognized she took Wash’s eagerness to help for granted sometimes.

The man hadn’t changed much in some ways.

That…wasn’t exactly true. If you put Project Freelancer Wash next to Chorus Blue Wash, you would see enough differences to wonder if they’d ever been the same person in the first place. But he was still an emotionally constipated dork who tried too hard, really wanted people to like him, and had no idea how to people without drama and grandiose statements.

Really, he belonged on Blue team.

“Agent Carolina! Agent Carolina!”

Carolina took a deep breath and tried very hard not to roll her eyes at the irritatingly kind voice that
echoed through the loading bay. Several soldiers froze in place, a few backed up in terror, and one medic even dove behind Sarge’s Warthog with a squeak.

“Oh, for gods sake. Hey there Doc, what can we do for you?”

The purple clad medic raced up and skidded to a stop right in front of her. He looked far too eager for Carolina to want to deal with him. She could see Wash’s shoulders tense at the sight of the man. She still wasn’t entirely sure why Wash was uneasy around Doc, she knew the man was annoying, but so was Tucker. There was definitely a story to the whole thing she was not privy to, but she knew better than to pry. Wash wanted to bury his past deep, and so far everyone had let him.

“I heard there was a crashed ship with potentially injured people!”

“Potentially dead people.”

“Or injured! They might be alive, you don’t know yet.”

Wash hovered at the side of Carolina’s vision, clearly wanting to be dismissed, and unable to make himself leave without her direction. Carolina waved Wash off, and he ducked out of the loading bay with vigor.

“No, we don’t know yet. Why? What are you thinking?”

The man’s incessantly chipper voice grated on Carolina’s nerves. She tried to remind herself that he wasn’t doing anything wrong, and he was messed up, but he wasn’t a bad guy. She tried to think of him as a more unhinged and less helpful version of Doctor Grey, but so far it was an ineffective act.

“Well, potentially injured or dying people, sounds like you need a medic!”

Simmons scoffed and waved a hand dismissively.

“Except you’re not even good at doing that. You can’t even make people comfortable when they die!”

“Hey, I’ve done a pretty good job so far!”

Church popped up on Carolina’s shoulder and pointed an accusatory finger at Doc, who seemed to glitch out for a moment before he came back to himself.

“You lost Caboose’s toe!”

“Well, you did kind of shoot it.”

Grif snorted.

“And you thought orange juice would fix it.”

“Well, alternative medicine is worth applying, it just didn’t help reattach his toe.”

“Alternative medicine that works,” Simmons said gravely, “is just called medicine.”

Doc hand waved dismissively at Simmons who became flustered at the returned gesture and sputtered incoherently.
“I also delivered Tucker’s baby and didn’t have a lick of trouble that wouldn’t have happened anyway when dealing with Sangheili. Apparently Sangheili parasites are not very friendly to their human hosts. Did you know Tucker is one of the only humans in the universe to survive the implantation and birth? Fascinating stuff!”

Church flickered directly into Doc’s face. The man’s posture seemed unflappable. Carolina wondered how he managed to do that when his brain was all kinds of swiss cheese and multiple personalities. It was an admirable trait, being able to be unaffected by tiny floating people.

“Yeeeeaaah, maybe don’t ever call Junior a parasite around Tucker? I’m the only one who can get away with stuff like that, you he might stab until you stop living.”

Doc watched Church for a moment before he nodded and turned his attention directly back to Carolina again, and why was this still happening? Weren’t there other people he could go bother? People who weren’t her?

“Well anyway, I have actually been doing a little training with Doctor Grey, in between the electroshock therapy and psychological evaluations and I even helped a soldier stop dying! It’s pretty great!”

Carolina watched him nervously. She didn’t…really get Doc. The Reds and Blues all said he’d been Omega’s host for a while, but…that didn’t explain how he acted.

Omega had been all business, intense and dark and angry, as far as Carolina could flush out. The over the top, cheesy, Saturday morning cartoon villain personality didn’t really make sense for one of the AI. Or…it didn’t make sense as a functioning AI for the Director to give to his favorite agent.

“I don’t know, Doc. We have a few medics assigned already.”

The man actually wilted, shoulders slumped, eyes downcast, and normally Carolina wouldn’t care but she felt like she’d just kicked a particularly pathetic puppy. She didn’t understand it, she made tougher calls than this on a semi-regular basis. She’d turned Wash away for goodness sake.

-I’ve got this, C.-

Epsilon poked the center of Doc’s visor as hard as one could when they were a holographic projection of a tiny person. She dared to think it was cute, only for Epsilon to hiss furiously in the back of her mind.

“Look, you come with us, you can’t talk to anyone. I don’t mean just being quiet, I mean you can’t talk.”

“Well that’s rude.”

Doc looked at Epsilon with disappointment, but less like he was sad and more like he was disappointed in the tiny glowing AI. It was an interesting shift. Carolina could understand how the man managed to get along so well with Donut, the innuendos must roll right off his shoulders.

“Yeah, well, if I have to hear your voice I might…Do something. I don’t know what, but it won’t be pretty.”

Donut waved his hands in the air with excitement.

“Oh, oh, Doc, you can ride with me! I want to tell you all about my new friend, Connie! She’s a
Doc tilted his head in what Carolina recognized as ‘slightly confused, slightly unhappy’ and shook his head.

“Um, I was there, Donut. I met her.”

And Carolina did not want another ‘we forgot you were around’ conversation with Doc.

“Great, well, let’s go team. Let’s see if we can round up some supplies.”

Doc crowed with delight.

“And survivors!”

Grif leaned out of the driver’s seat of the Warthog and cheered.

“And Little Debbie’s!”

Carolina rolled her eyes.

Wash couldn’t handle another moment in Doc’s presence unless it was absolutely necessary.

Unlike Donut, who had no tact but also seemed to recognize that Wash wasn’t ready to deal with his monumental fuckups, and didn’t bring up the fact that Wash had shot him and Lopez and left them both to rot. Simmons was still too afraid of him to bring up being held captive, and so far Grif and Sarge seemed to have just decided to let things be. Tucker and Caboose didn’t call him on things like that either.

He had no idea how they’d managed to coast so long, but he was going to take every spare second granted to not think about how close he’d been to losing his soul.

Doc, on the other hand, always wanted to talk out their feelings. The man didn’t particularly care where they were or who was watching/listening. He just jumped right into ‘Hey, Wash! Do you feel up to talking about the Meta and you kidnapping me?’

Which was not a part of his life he was particularly interested in dragging up without force.

He hated to think about before. Before Blue team, before Prison, Before Recovery, Before Freelancer. He liked to imagine that his life had started on Chorus. The person he was had finally caught mostly up with the person he wanted to be. Everything from before was someone else, someone too damaged to insecure, to…broken, to be salvaged. Too much pain, too much loss.

But here? Chorus was filled with people who didn’t know dip about Freelancer except what they were told, and Wash and Carolina were tight lipped. They didn’t care that he’d done horrible things before.

These kids cared that he could keep them alive. They cared that he wanted them to live in a way that Locus and Felix had never pretended to and their leaders never tried to hope for. They cared that he was a hardass, but he genuinely believed they could be get stronger, be smarter, do better. Some of them even cared that he used to skateboard back in the day. Who he was didn’t matter,
And as Wash made his way back toward Connie’s room, he realized that the person he was at that moment in time was someone who would check on people, and make sure they knew they were cared about, even if they didn’t necessarily need it. And there was someone who’d been suspiciously absent who probably needed looking in on.

Wash changed direction and headed to the communications room. He slid the door open and was confronted with the sight of Matthews on the floor scrubbing and the distinctive smells of moonshine and bleach. Matthews’ eyes snapped up, wide-eyed and fearful, and he scrambled to his feet.

The group had clearly intended to stay for a while. There were snacks, drinks, and even…dear god, was that an actual cake?

“It must have taken a lot of effort to hide that from Captain Grif.”

Matthews nodded.

“An-Bitters made sure that it was a secret. They had to bake it while making fish to mask the smell of chocolate.”

“And I certainly hope that you weren’t one of the people drinking in here, were you?”

Wash crossed his arms and watched Matthews as he stood in the middle of the room and fidgeted nervously.

“If I remember correctly, Doctor Grey warned you that mixing alcohol with your medication was a dangerous enough combination that it could kill you.”

Matthews shrugged, and kept his eyes firmly planted on the floor. He looked tired, like he’d spent the day running rather than relaxing with his friends on his birthday. Wash wondered if he was getting adequate rest.

“It’s not like I’m going to live that much longer anyway. Grey says six months without serious medical intervention and all new internal organs.”

He knew that the younger man’s health was fading quickly, but he hadn’t realized it was so serious.

“So, your solution is to send yourself into an even earlier grave?”

Matthews shrugged again, but his face was heartbroken, and his bottom lip actually quivered.

Wash knew that it wasn’t a ploy; Matthews didn’t have enough guile in him for that. This was a kid who’d gotten in trouble from a respected authority figure for the first time in a very long time, and didn’t know how to deal with it.

No. That wasn’t right. This wasn’t a kid being called out for being stupid. This was…

“I just…they were so excited, and I just wanted to feel normal for a while.”

This was a kid who felt hopeless.

He’d managed to snub death for years, only to find out that he was basically at the end, and he wanted whatever happened on his own terms.
“I understand that, but Matthews, do you really think they’d think you were weird if you said that moonshine upset your stomach? Or that it would make the bribe cake Bitters worked so hard to protect taste bad? Or even that you can’t drink with the medication that is keeping you alive? You don’t have to drink to be accepted.”

Wash nodded and put a hand on Matthews’ shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. The younger man smiled at the contact.

“‘I know.’

Matthews looked hurt, and Wash didn’t blame him. The biggest flaw he’d seen with the soldiers of Chorus, from both sides, was their impulsiveness. Most of the soldiers were young because the older generations had been pretty well wiped out, and when you had a series of leader that hadn’t managed to live to thirty, it made sense that the soldiers didn’t necessarily look at the long term effects of their actions as much as they should have.

And when someone handed you a literal date of death, it was easy to become even more impulsive. What was long term for someone who wouldn’t live to see their next birthday?

Wash could definitely sympathize.

“But there’s a difference between knowing something and feeling it. The feeling that you don’t belong, the people who you care about don’t actually care about you, feeling like you have to do or say all kinds of things just to get them to tolerate you.”

Matthews looked at Wash, really looked at him, and he got it.

“None of that is true. You need to know that all of those horrible things you’re telling yourself are just your brain deciding to be a fucking asshole.”

Matthews gasped in surprise then burst into giggles. Wash didn’t bother to hide his grin.

“If no one else, Bitters is over the moon about you, and he would never forgive you or himself if he was inadvertently the cause of you dying. Neither would the others. Doctor Grey doesn’t just hand out medical advice because it’s fun, although for her that is a part of it. She wants you to live long enough to get that medical attention. She’s letting you know that she wants you to live long enough for that to happen. Honestly, I’m tempted to tell Sarge about all of this, because he’d probably give you part of Lopez’s body and turn you into a cyborg like Captain Simmons.”

Matthews looked at Wash with wide-eyed horror.

“Please don’t let him turn me into a robot man. I’ve heard that Captain Simmons has…male troubles because of all the metal parts.”

Wash laughed and shook his head.

“I’ll make you a deal. You be more careful and take care of yourself, and I won’t have Sarge turn you into a robot. And I won’t tell Captain Simmons that there are apparently rumors going around the base about his virility.”

Matthews nodded eagerly as a flush started to creep down his neck.

“Now, I say we pack all this up, and convince someone in the kitchen to let us hide the cake in the back of a freezer until you guys want it. I’m going to assign some people in here, and it’s probably best they don’t know there was a party.”
“It’s going to smell bad for a while.”

Wash gave Matthews his most playful mischievous grin.

“Well, they’ll just have to be thoroughly warned about what happened to the last group who tried to have a party in here. They ended up on a full day mission with Agent Carolina.”

Chapter End Notes

So...has anyone guessed that I really like the unnecessary drama and talky bits yet? I'm not so good at the jokes or the action, but you give me people standing around and talking to each other, and I am ready to throw my hat into that ring!

Also, next chapter may actually have Freelancers meeting people! Like, for realsies! Maybe this story about finding Washington will FIND WASHINGTON! It just depends on how willing the chapter is to cooperate.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Carolina doesn't do Disney sing-a-longs, everyone wakes up, and Maine makes some new...friends?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You wanted to see me General?"

Vanessa snorted and shook her head.

"Shut the door."

Carolina let the door slide closed behind her and meandered to Vanessa's desk overflowing desk.

God, even in a world with digital screens and supercomputers, paper never really went out of style, did it? You'd think it'd get outdated at some point, the Director had certainly tried to have as little of the stuff as possible on the MoI, but even he hadn't been able to escape it. Vanessa's desk was littered with stacks upon stacks upon stacks of...well, Carolina wasn't really sure what most of it was.

Important stuff, she was sure. Vanessa would have lit it on fire already if it wasn't.

"I just want to make sure you're...ready...for a mission like this."

Carolina's whole body buzzed with unease.

"I've run missions with an exceptional number of soldiers before."

"I'm not worried about the numbers, 'Lina. I'm worried about...the age range. They're all...well, they're all a little on the young and rambunctious end, and I just want to make sure you are ok taking lead on this. I probably should have asked before I ordered."

"You have every right to order me around, General Kimball, you are running this operation, after all."

Vanessa laughed and slipped off her helmet.

It was always a pleasure to see Vanessa's face. She was probably the prettiest girl Carolina had ever seen.

-Prettiest girl, C?-  

Shut up, I'm allowed to think that inside my own head.

-Gosh, you gonna take her to prom, too?-  

God, I wish. Prom was a disaster of epic proportions. They called the police.
Carolina had no idea how she managed to fit all of that gorgeous hair inside the metal ball comfortably, it was long and thick, in dozens of tiny braids that danced around her head when she laughed. The black hair was accented with tiny threads of tan and blue, just like her armor, and accented the warm brown of her skin in a way that just made Carolina's whole head spin. Vanessa never complained about the fit, so it couldn't have been too terrible.

She was dating the prettiest woman on the planet.

Vanessa took Carolina's hand and pulled her around the desk.

"Well, then. I'm taking that as permission, soldier. Just, be gentle with them? The Lieutenants will keep the rest of them in line, just talk to them, let them know exactly what you're looking for, and you'll be fine."

She smiled, and it was like the whole room was filled with light.

God, Carolina could look at that smile all day.

She sat herself down in Vanessa's lap and grinned when the woman wrapped her arms around Carolina's waist and gave her a good, firm squeeze.

"What did I do to get so lucky?"

Vanessa pulled Carolina in for a quick kiss.

"You crash landed on a war-torn planet on the edge of colonized space, Carolina. You survived, and the universe is compensating you for your troubles."

They laughed and sat there for a few moments.

Carolina loved when they had these snatches of time together. Loved to see this smile on Vanessa's face, the tension finally falling off, even for just a few moments. Loved to see her out of her helmet, with her hair free and loose around her shoulders. She was stunning always, armor, no armor, helmet, no helmet, but actually getting to see her and not have to survive on the sound of her voice alone? Getting to brush her fingers across Vanessa's freckles, tuck her hair behind her ear, and press her lips against that warm, lovely skin?

Bliss.

Carolina could hardly say it, Vanessa would get embarrassed about it, and tease her about spending too much time inside her tin can of a suit. Still, she loved those moments when they could strip off Agent Carolina and General Kimball. When 'Lina and Nessa could turn off their responsibilities and radios and just be together.

"Ok, ok, if we do this for too long, nothing will get accomplished. Off with you, Agent. Remember, play nice."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"
Carolina deeply regretted agreeing to ride with the younger soldiers at the back of the caravan instead of in the front with the Reds.

“HAKUNA MATATA!”

She thought the kids would be easier to deal with than Donut gushing about his nails.

“AINT NO PASSING CRAZE!”

Or Grif constantly moaning about food and missing his third nap of the day…

“IT MEANS NO WORRIES!”

While Simmons whined about the long trip shaking his cyborg parts uncomfortably…

“FOR THE REST OF YOUR DAYS!”

And Sarge threatened everyone with shotguns and death.

“IT'S OUR PROBLEM-FREE!”

She had not anticipated that the younger soldiers would be worse.

“PHIIIIIILOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOPHY!”

- Carolina, make it stop! -

“HAKUNA MATATA!”

They were loud and excited and eager, and it would have been cute except for how they were still in an active warzone, and none of them seemed to care anymore.

“THE SEAWEED IS ALWAYS GREENER!”

It also would have been cute if they hadn’t been singing goddamned Disney for the last two hours.

“IN SOMEBODY ELSE'S LAKE!”

-I swear to GOD, if they don’t stop, I am going to start screaming! -

“YOU DREAM ABOUT GOING UP THERE!”

They’d destroyed Charon’s main forces on the planet’s surface, seen the death of Felix and disappearance of Locus, and managed to issue a call for help that had actually received a response.

“BUT THAT IS A BIG MISTAKE!”

So, Carolina got it, ok? She did. They were riding high on the taste of a well-earned victory. That seemed to be enough for so many of them to forget that there were still enemies everywhere. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

“Alright, everyone, enough!”

It sometimes blew her away how young the majority of the armies were. Some of the soldiers were barely into their teen years, which horrified Carolina to her very core. The fact that the average age
wasn’t even legally old enough to drink was…horrible.

Palomo leapt to his feet in the passenger side of the jeep, held a clip to his helmet, and threw his head back like he was singing into a microphone.

“DARLING IT’S BETTER!
DOWN WHERE IT’S WETTER!
TAKE IT FROM MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

“OH MY GOD! MAKE IT STOOOOOOOP!”

Carolina issued a loud horn blast and swerved her jeep to the side. Molten heat shot up her spine and made her lungs collapse in on themselves, and she had no idea if the rage caused by perpetually perky, repetitive childhood memories, or by the tiny AI fragment that at one point was modeled after her emotionally abusive, absentee father.

No thoughts about that right now. Escape the Disney.

The silence from the soldiers as she leapt out of the jeep and stalked to the front of the line was enough to sour her mood even further. How many times did she have to tell them to shut their fucking faces and stop assaulting the ears of every soldier and mutant scarlet macaw in the vicinity.

Palomo made himself as small as he could as she passed, and nearly disappeared into the jeeps seats. Carolina only felt a little like a complete bully.

“I think we made her mad, guys.”

The Reds stood by their jeeps, weapons at the ready, their soldiers spread out with guns pointed into the surrounding trees.

“What’s happ’n’?”

Sarge’s southern tone both grated and soothed the frayed nerves, Carolina hadn’t even realized were exposed.

“If I have to listen to one more song, I am going to hurt someone. Grif, Simmons, switch into the back.”

“Uh, yeah, no.” Grif crossed his arms and leaned back against the jeep, as unbothered as could be. “We’re pretty happy with how things are right now, Carolina.”

Simmons nodded along next to him, gun already back inside the jeep. The soldiers, well used to the random stops along the way anywhere with the Reds and Blues, relaxed their grips on their weapons and began to chat happily.

A few even started taking pictures for Basebook…

“Besides, it’s hurtful for morale to have us constantly switching back and forth.”

Deep breaths, Carolina. We do not murder our friends. We do not murder the baby soldiers. Murder is not on today’s agenda.

-It’s not on anyone’s agenda, Carolina.-
No, it’s not mine. Just not until next Thursday. Kimball has a schedule.

-Scary woman. No wonder you like her so much.-

“Either someone else goes back and monitors them, or I am going to end up snapping and scaring them for life. Do you want them to be even more afraid of me than they already are? Because I swear to god, if I have to hear one more fucking Disney song-“

“Oh! Disney sing-a-long!”

Donut leapt out of the jeep with Doc in tow, toward Carolina’s abandoned jeep in the back. She waited for a moment.

Two.

Blinked.

“Um…well…good. That’s settled.”

-We’ll have to remember that for the next time they get annoying.-

Way ahead of you.

Grif and Simmons grabbed their gear and grumbled, but did climb into jeeps in the middle of the caravan. Sarge tipped his helmet amicably and surrendered the driver’s seat.

There was blessed quiet again as everyone resettled and they headed back underway.

Carolina could faintly hear Donut and Doc belting something about love and doors, but between the sound of the vehicles and the distance between them, she could finally, blessedly, ignore it.

Sarge’s helmet kept flicking toward Carolina, like he didn’t want her to notice she was being examined.

Sarge…was something of an oddity. There was something in the man’s air that made him difficult to be around. It wasn’t the accent, they weren’t nearly similar enough to actually trigger her, she was sure. Still…

“You doin’ ok, Little Missy?”

She wanted to be mad at that.

Instead, the pet name triggered the part of Carolina’s brain that was still tiny, ten-year-old Carolina’s need to be acknowledged, and that child brain caused her face to heat light up like a neon light. Thank fuck for full coverage helmets.

Epsilon snickered in the back of her mind, and she wanted to be mad at that as well.

It was funny, the things she wanted to be mad at these days, as opposed to the things she was actually mad at. She should make a list. Take it to Doctor Grey.

‘Look, progress. I’m not a homicidal maniac.’

‘Oh really, so Disney music made you want to kill people before now? Was that trained into you or a natural reaction?’
“I’m fine it’s just…They’re just so…”

Her hands gripped the wheel a little tighter.

“Bright and shiny?”

She glanced over at the man, who’d turned his whole body in her direction, like whatever she said was the most important thing he’d hear that day.

“Yes, actually.”

Sarge nodded and took a quick look behind their jeep, then patted the console near Carolina’s hand, but didn’t actually make contact. Carolina wondered if she was about to get some ‘Sarge Sanctioned Life Advise’. It didn’t happen to her very often, and the experience was always…interesting.

“Ya know, it’s downright discomfittin’ how an army of children manages to function so well as it does. The official youngest serving is sixteen years old, but there’re plenty of ‘em younger than that wearing armor, cause those what don’t end up dead a heck of a lot faster than those what do. Ain’t right in my mind. Children ain’t built for war.”

“Yeah.”

A sick, twisting feeling took over Carolina’s midsection. It was viscerally excruciating to remind herself that the people she was trusting to watch her back, who were trusting her to watch theirs, were these…tiny little people wearing their dead parent’s clothes.

When she was sixteen, she was still worried about things like dates, grades, kendo matches, and trying to make her dad proud of her. Sixteen was too young for war. Hell, all of them were too young for war. Carolina had enlisted the day she’d turned eighteen and she’d been far too young.

Andersmith was one of the oldest frontline New Republic soldiers with them at twenty-four years old, and he was still too goddamned young for this shit.

There were scatterings of people much older than that, of course, the oldest person on the planet Carolina was aware of was seventy-three…but there were so few people over twenty-five left that they weren’t statistically relevant.

“Course, when yer leader ain’t much past her mid-twenties, it ain’t much work ta imagine how young the soldiers gotta be.”

So, not life advise then. Consolation? Commiseration?

It blew Carolina away how a woman nearly ten years her junior managed to do so well with the fate of an entire planet on her shoulders. Carolina’s comfort zone barely included leading ten people, and she didn’t have to figure out how to produce food, clothing, and shelter from thin air for them.

“I keep forgetting they are as young as they are, then they act their age, and I end up wanting to throttle them.”

“Yer used to professional soldiers. Even pallin’ around with those dirty Blues cain’t stop the mem’ries of fightin’ with the best.”

That twisting, uncomfortable feeling intensified. She didn’t know if she should nod or shake her
head, and ended up doing both.

She thought about Wyoming’s goddamned knock, knock jokes that were only 50% because he enjoyed them and 50% because he knew they annoyed other people, and Florida’s passive aggressiveness that knew no bounds. She thought about South’s temper tantrums and the endless barrage of dick jokes wherever North and York were because they just couldn’t get enough of them. Connie and Maine spared together half the time so Maine could pick the tiny woman up and toss her into the air like she weighed nothing, screaming laughter the whole time. Wash and his skateboard and his high, squeaky voice, and his complete gullibility when it came to pranks.

Pinpricks of pressure built up behind her eyes, and she could hear her heartbeat pound in her ears.

“Yes and no. In Freelancer…it wasn’t all that different. We had specialists that acted like children.”

Sarge gave her a hard look, like he understood, really understood, and damn it, the man might have.

“But they weren’t children actin’ like children.”

He’d been serving with Red team long enough to see children grow into adults that act like children.

“No. They really weren’t.”

He nodded, tapped the console again, and allowed Carolina her deeply needed peace. Her fuse was remarkably short at the moment and she didn’t know why.

-We gettin’ near that time of the month?-  

**FUCK YOU, EPSILON!**

-Well, if that’s not it, what is?-

Do not ever bring that up again, unless you’d really like to talk about the bloody shedding of uterine lining. I can make this really uncomfortable for you. Don’t make me.

-Gross.-

Something…just doesn’t feel right.

-How?-

It’s been less than two weeks and we already have an aid ship?

-That is pretty quick.-

For the UNSC? Yeah, it’s insanely quick. The bureaucracy alone should have taken longer. Not to mention, Kimball is in talks, and the planet is still considered an active war zone.

-I take it that means help is slow?-  

It means help may not come at all until both sides figure their shit out and we deal with the threats from on high.

-Are you fucking joking?-
I really wish I was.

-What is the fucking point of asking them for help then?!

We hope they’ll get their shit together quickly.

The speculated landing site was empty, which was not surprising so much as disappointing. Carolina surveyed the area, but couldn’t get a good view for where the ship might have actually landed.

There were no obvious signs. Carolina idly wished for something she could fly overhead to search the area, if only to keep their time from being wasted. Six and a half hours should not have been enough to obscure a crash landing. Just their luck that when things are finally turning around, they still cannot keep their machines in functioning capacity.

It was just her, the troops, and good old-fashioned searching that would find this one.

Kimball had issued enough soldiers and vehicles for each of the Reds, the Lieutenants, and Carolina to have four-man teams, each equipped with a medic. It felt unwieldy until Carolina was made aware that the ship had crashed in a less than well mapped area, and that having Santa or Epsilon just pinpoint the ship was out.

Six and a half hours since contact.

It didn’t seem like much time. Carolina remembered mission preps that took longer than six and a half hours. She remembered training sessions and painfully awkward family nights that had lasted longer than that.

The aid ship survivors could make it a little longer. They could keep themselves alive until help arrived. They’d have to.

“Alright, people, this is about where the ship should have crashed. We’re going to spread out and see what we can find. Make sure to stay with your team. Do not approach anyone or anything without checking in. We have not vetted these people yet, and we don’t know anything about them. Be careful and be safe.”

“Um, Agent Carolina?”

Epsilon’s groan of frustration in the back of her brain was enough to force Carolina into civility. Someone had to be the mature one in their relationship, and it was usually her.

-You are the worst human being on the face of the planet.-

Aww, that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.

“Yes, Doc?”

The effort it took not to sigh and to keep her tone level was nearly Herculean. She felt the weight of her restraint on her shoulders like Atlas holding the world, but she did not give in.

Look at how much she was already improving.

-Yeah, just wait. I give you an hour before you break.-

“Where should I head off to?”
Doc clutched his medical bag to his chest and watched the groups split off into different directions on by one with a wistful sort of posture, and it occurred to her suddenly that she hadn’t assigned him anyone to work with.

Shit.

She did not want to play the ‘I forgot you’ game, they’d never get anything accomplished and she’d feel like absolute garbage for forgetting him in the span of a few hours.

Where in the hell was her head at?

Her team was set, and standing to the side, a little jittery and a little eager. Carolina called them over.

“You four will go directly west, towards the temple and see if they managed to veer in that direction. Comms are up and running, but tracking is still a little messed up out here, so if you do find anything, make sure to call in. You’re in charge Doc, Sadhana, Jones, and Palomo will guide you through the trees.”

Carolina didn’t actually need the baby soldiers for scouting, and she knew Kimball was aware of her preference to work alone. She’d probably be more effective without them, anyway, and she could practically see Doc’s face light up through the visor at the thought of having an actual team to go with.

The man swelled with joy, and even lifted to his tiptoes in excitement.

Nope. No, no, no, no, no. There would be no excited cheering, no hugs, and no extended talks of adventures or friendship or anything like that. Carolina did not need to deal with it.

“You have your orders. Get moving.”

“Ok! Come on, gang!”

And just like that, she was alone. The vehicles were well hidden, and their coordinates were clearly marked for an easy return. They would find the ship, hopefully with supplies and survivors, and it would be enough to stir the hope a little more.

She wanted those fucking kids to be humming Disney under their breaths for weeks from sheer happiness…just so long as she didn’t have to listen to it.

Alright Epsilon, where to first?

-Lets try north. There’s some dust dispersal that looks promising.-

York wondered for a moment as he came into awareness if he’d gone blind in his good eye.

The world around him was pitch black, not even the tiny glow of emergency lights to show a path. He shifted in his seat, and realized that he was still secured in Niner’s ship. The security bars cradled his torso protectively, which was probably the only reason he wasn’t lying on the floor with a broken neck or something. His whole body ached something terrible, but if he managed to walk away just feeling bruised he’d be the luckiest son of a bitch there ever was.
Nearly the luckiest.

-You have no broken bones, all of your internal organs have escaped relatively unscathed, and do not have a concussion, but you were shaken quite a bit during our landing. Please be careful as you stand, your body will need some time to adjust.-

D, have I told you lately that you’re the best? Because you are.

-Perhaps I missed a concussion.-

After a moment, York’s suit properly powered up and he could at least see readouts, so…good, not blind.

’Lo?”

A voice croaked pitifully in the darkness. York shifted towards it and bit back a whine. He wasn’t in nearly the amount of pain he expected to be in, what with the crashing into the ground from outer space thing, but he was all kinds of unpleasantly sore.

Remember, no broken bones, no broken organs. You’re fine.

“Florida?”

“Mmm.”

York fumbled for the flashlight on his armor. The tiny light wasn’t perfect, but it was enough to cast an eerie glow over the group all still strapped in, and allowed York to see how his teammates had fared. Florida’s helmet was on the ground by his feet, a puddle of vomit between his legs, and a long streak of blood running down the side of his head that managed to discolor the blue of his armor’s shoulder.

“I…Think I’ve got a head wound.”

“You do, it’s probably not as bad as it looks. Head wounds are gushers.”

“Mmm. Can’t wake…Reggie up.”

Wyoming and North both sagged against the seat restraints, but according to Delta, their suits were registering them as alive, so that was something. Maine was moving just a little, but he had an arm curled protectively to his chest in a way that Maine didn’t typically bother with unless he was in a great deal of pain.

“ Anything from Niner yet?”

Maine shook his head slowly, attention focused on Florida, who’d begun to slowly rock in his seat and halfheartedly fumbled for the seat release.

York hadn’t had to use the manual release on this model of bird before, but Delta, ever the helpful little glowbug, walked him through the process. He forced the manual release catches open and shoved the security bars over his head.

“ Anything from South?”

“Nope.”

He bit back the sigh that threatened to creep out and made his way to Florida to release the
Florida smiled and nodded a little, only to grip his head and groan.

“Pretty sure... concussion. Hurts.”

York freed him from the security bars and helped him to the ground away from the puddle of sick as gently as he could. The other man’s head swayed from side to side, and he looked a little bit green around the gills.

“Slow, deep breaths. You’re not wearing your helmet, so it’s ok to puke again if you need to.”

-It looks like there are some injuries, but most of them are relatively minor. Maine’s shoulder is dislocated and swollen, but Wyoming and North both seem to be uninjured, though unconscious.-

Great, D. Any word on Niner?

York shuffled across the tiny room to Maine as carefully as he could. His legs were jello beneath him and there had been some personal possessions that weren’t strapped down correctly scattered all across the floor. York swallowed hard at the sight of South’s electronic brainteaser game.

-I do not have her, and I cannot pick up on South’s suit either.-

North’s gonna shit bricks.

-Indeed. It should be noted that without her assistance, we would likely not have survived the landing.-

Preaching to the choir, D. Preaching to the fucking choir.

York pressed and pulled and tugged at the bars, but something must have broken in the landing, because Maine was well and truly stuck.

“Hold on, I’m gonna grab the toolkit. Hang tight.”

Maine gave a low grumble and flipped York off with his good arm. A cheery grin crept onto his face, despite the crash and potential death and destruction around them. It was just nice to have his friend behave normally.

Well, as normally as an eight foot tall, mute, behemoth, with a serious addiction to chocolate covered coffee beans can be.

The kit was exactly where it was supposed to be, and it was strapped into place, which meant all of the tools should have remained inside. A bonus, because there was nothing less fun than crawling around on the ground with only a dinky flashlight and a prayer to find a goddamned screwdriver.

-It is unlikely that we will find South alive. The odds of surviving a descent to the planet’s surface wearing only her suit are less than 0.11%, even with the shield.-

He froze midway through the process of freeing the kit, a curl of unease flicked around in his belly. Do you think she knew that?

-I have no doubt that South was fully aware of and accepted the risks. Knowing the odds has never
York tried to shake the thought out of his head and dragged the tools over to Maine and got to work freeing the man.

The jam was simple, another lucky break, York didn’t think he would have been able to get the release to work otherwise.

Maine didn’t tumble out of his seat, but it was a near thing. The man looked highly uncomfortable, and made a great deal of aggravated noises as he slid to the ground and attempted to stand himself up. It was weird to see him in armor that wasn’t his.

Do you think she’s dead?

-The odds are not in her favor.-

York felt something like an itch in the back of his head that signaled that Delta was holding something back. Kind of like a person shifting back and forth, only inside his brain.

But?

-If there is anything I have learned, it is that humans are very good at defying the odds. If there is a possibility of survival, I believe South will find it.-

York shuffled back to give Maine the space to stand, and looked at his still unconscious teammates.

“I think we’re just gonna let them hang out for a while. Delta says they don’t look hurt, and I don’t want to just drop them.”

Florida nodded slowly, his gaze was unfocused enough that genuine fear started to bubble in York’s chest.

“You check…check on Niner and see…see…lights. Look for lights. Maine and I can get them out. I’m just going to sit here and rest for a while.”

Maine finally managed to pull himself to his feet, threw his helmet to the floor, and vomited.

“Shit. You have a concussion too?”

He shook his head and pressed a hand to his stomach.

“Yeah, I feel you. That was a rough ride. Don’t let him fall asleep.”

Maine grunted a nod, turned on his own flashlight, and moved slowly over to Florida. His legs didn’t seem to be any happier than York’s about moving.

York tapped on the door to the cockpit with a grim grin.

“Niner? Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, York.”

Her voice was muffled through the metal, but she was awake and coherent enough to recognize who was speaking, so that was a plus.
“Are you hurt? Can you move?”

“Well, I can’t feel my legs, but other than that I’m alright. The emergency power in here failed, can you manually crank the door? We can get out through the window, but I’m a little stuck at the moment, and I can’t climb out...Shit.”

“Niner?”

Niner’s voice became more difficult to hear.

“I’m thinking sooner is probably better than later, there’s a lot of blood in here.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Delta’s panicked buzz took over his brain for a moment.

“Yeah, ok, yeah. Let me grab the toolkit and see if I can’t pop the hand crank free. Just...don’t move.”

“Not goin’ anywhere.”

Florida and Maine had released the others from their restraints, both Wyoming and North were still unconscious, but they were laid out on the floor with their helmets off, and even in the pathetic light of the flashlights, York could tell they were breathing.

He snagged a few tools and started messing with the panels around Niner’s door, already more steady than he’d been just a few minutes before.

Delta pulled up the plans for the ship model and streamlined the process of which pieces to mess with and which to avoid. It was delightfully convoluted in the way that spaceships always seemed to be, while still functioning in a way that a skilled layperson could figure it out.

York loved the older models of ships.

The new ones were completely dependent on power being available, as if something catastrophic couldn’t happen and kick the power off. As if sometimes power didn’t need to go off so things could be properly repaired. So many people just assumed that robots would do the fixing, and didn’t bother making newer ships in a way that was easily accessible to humans. Most people assumed that technology would just make everything better and wasn’t very likely to backfire on them.

Most people, York was well aware, were idiots.

He could feel Delta’s hum of agreement in the back of his mind as he pulled the door crank loose and gave it a good turn. It didn’t budge much, but it did move. York didn’t even have to ask Maine to come help, the tank just appeared behind him and used his good arm to force the crank.

It took them a while, far too long, but York and Maine managed to get the door open enough to get inside.

Niner was pinned to the floor at the hips by part of the ship’s control panel, her chair was on the opposite side of the cockpit, completely mangled beyond recognition. If it weren’t for the chunk of fabric and foam with ‘PILOT’ written in sparkly glitter on it, York might have mistaken it for one of the bolted in seats that...seemed to be missing?

At least it was just the chair.
"I believe Niner has stored a secondary chair in the lower compartments."

She was right, there was blood everywhere. Lots of blood. How much blood was a person supposed to have in their body before they died? How much was on the walls?

No, don’t tell me, D. If it’s going to freak me out, I’d rather just live in the futility of my ignorance, thanks.

York swallowed and tried very hard not to be sick at the sight. Of all of them, Niner was the one that wasn’t supposed to get hurt. She was their eyes in the sky, a non-combatant, the pilot. It was…

-Unsettling.-

“Fuck. OK. Ok. We can do this. We need to…move the pieces off you slowly. Right, and make sure that as we move that we aren’t cutting off circulation anywhere else or releasing pressure vital to your survival.”

Niner huffed, but she seemed in better spirits than she had before the door was opened. She still had her helmet on, but York could practically feel her grin on him.

“Really fucking reassuring, York. Wanna get me someone who did a stint in medical?”

“If I had someone to play doctor with you, Niner-Babe, I’d have them in here in a heartbeat.”

She snorted and flipped him off. At this point, it was practically a sign of endearment.

“I will count it as a personal favor if you don’t ever call me that again.”

Florida and Wyoming entered the cockpit, Florida’s weight was mostly taken over by his pale faced husband, both with concerning expressions on their faces.

“Hey, look who’s awake! Your mustache is all out of whack.”

Wyoming flipped York the bird.

That’s three.

“Good god, old girl, there is an awful lot of blood in here. How are you feeling?”

“Aside from feeling like a bug spinning on a pin? Peachy.”

Florida knelt down next to Niner and peered as best he could under the console. He turned his head and dry heaved, then looked around the cockpit once.

“Good new or bad news?”

She huffed and snarled. York knew that Niner got loud when she was scared, it was a trait most of the women he’d ever known had. Carolina had been the only exception, preferring to go cold and quiet and soft when it mattered.

“Out with it!”

“Bad news. We probably shouldn’t move this without better lighting, just because I don’t want to crush anything attached to your body. Good news. I’m pretty sure most of this blood isn’t yours. There’s fur and feathers in here, I bet you we killed some poor, innocent forest creatures.”
“Great, we killed Bambi’s mom, you’re bleeding, I’m trapped under a fucking console. What else?”

Niner’s head rocked the way it did when she rolled her eyes aggressively, and York’s fear rolled off him like water off a duck’s back. She couldn’t be in much pain if she was able to give them Ninerisms.

“South’s not responding.”

The room turned as one to the doorway where North stood, propped against the jam. His face was scrunched up with pain, and he looked paler than normal. Maine offered out a hand to help steady him.

North’s expression told the room to back off. Maine lowered his hand.

A few desperate steps forward, and North collapsed on himself into a pile of armor and sobs. His voice quivered. Theta popped up on North’s shoulder, anxious and desperate.

“We can’t track her, and she won’t answer the radio. South is out there and she might be-”

“She’s probably pretty hurt.”

Theta began to make these weird noises that sort of sounded to York like a combination of hyperventilating and a high-pitched whine of distress. The AI’s voice kept pitching higher and higher, and York shifted in discomfort. Delta’s unease at the sound didn’t help.

Niner closed her eyes and blew out a deep breath.

“We don’t give up until we find a body.”

Wyoming shook his head and placed a gentle hand on North’s shoulder. His eyes were unsettlingly kind at that moment. When did Wyoming get close to North? They’d both been sharpshooters competing for top slot on the team. When had Wyoming really cared about anyone except himself and Florida?

“Of course not, mate. She’s probably out cold; I imagine that the bubble shield probably bounced her around a bit. We will do everything in our power to find her and bring her back to you.”

York gave the cockpit a once over and winced at the sheer destruction. This bird would never fly again.

“Ok, Wyoming? Why don’t you go down into the storage bay and try to track down the emergency lanterns and Niner’s spare chair. Oh, and a med kit, while you’re at it. We should get as much of our stuff as we can out of here, and get ready to move. Florida, just…try not to push that head injury too far.”

North managed to pull himself to his knees and started to crawl toward the shattered cockpit windshield. The screen was mostly gone, though some jagged edges desperately clung to the edges in a way York was pretty sure safety glass shouldn’t, and he was immensely thankful that the majority of the shattered remains had not ended up on, in, or very close to Niner.

D, are we sure he’s ok?

-North’s emotional distress combined with Theta’s is likely causing him some difficulties at the moment.-
“I’m going.”

Maine made a rumbling growling noise that York didn’t know how to interpret. Given the looks from the others, York didn’t think they understood him either. The man hadn’t been easy to understand before he’d been shot in the throat, but after that, it seemed like the only person who’d understood him consistently was Washington.

Or at least, that’s what Maine wrote out when they’d talked about it.

God, York missed the kid. It’d be nice to have the Rookie back, if only because North would have someone else to fuss over. Maybe South could get a break and North wouldn’t smother her so badly with the brotherly love.

Wash had always appreciated the fussing, anyway.

North managed to get himself to his feet, and from there seemed to find a second wind, though as he stumbled toward the windshield, each step looked like fire and agony.

“North, look at yourself. You are walking like your body is broken, do you really want to do this right now?”

“South is out there. If we’re bumped and bruised, she’s got to be hurt badly. I need to find her, York. It’s not up for discussion.”

He wanted to scream at the blond idiot.

Three out of six people were significantly injured to varying degrees. They had crash landed on a planet they had very little intel on as far as actual terrain and locations went. He had no idea how much of their supplies had survived, or if it was even safe to still be on the ship.

And yet, there North went, all Captain America determination and blind, stupid love. The man would get himself killed and leave them all to die while doing it, and South would hate him forever for it.

“Will you at least take someone with you?”

North looked around the room. His face was still twisted, but it had an expression York wasn’t used to seeing on North’s face. He was pretty good at keeping his pleasant, neutral face on. At not letting that one out for the world to see. For people to look at him and become wary.

North was pissed.

“Florida is hurt, Wyoming’s not leaving him, Niner’s trapped, and fuck you if you think I’m taking you or Maine, you fucking traitors.”

Maine flinched in the corner and tried to make himself small. It should have been funny, someone that large wasn’t meant to fade into the background. Instead, York was just...sad. Sad. He was sad.

God, he wanted a fucking drink. Something hard enough that he wouldn’t have to think anymore. He needed his flask. He needed a smoke. He needed a fucking gun the ability to time travel.

-York, please focus. We need to ensure the safety of everyone on the ship and attempt to make contact with the locals before we can rest. We will need North for this, as Florida is out of commission for the moment.-
Why?

-He is the next least likely to discomfit strangers. You are third on the list, but given that you are you, the odds of immediate assistance are higher with him in the lead.-

“What did I do?”

“You didn’t even bother trying to stop her! None of you did!”

Wyoming reached out again.

North backed up to be closer to the exit, and Wyoming stopped, well aware that he was on this ice with the other man. Well aware that the other man’s balance was as frayed as his nerves.

“If we had, old chap, we very well might have all died. The odds of surviving a planetary crash are less than 30%, and that’s not including life-threatening injury. Gamma made me very aware of the risks, as I’m sure Theta did for you.”

North snarled and moved to shove Wyoming, only to groan in pain and take a knee. Theta buzzed on North’s shoulder, clearly in distress and crying about administering pain relievers.

“You guys don’t get it.”

“North, she made her choice. You can’t make it for her.”

“Go to hell, York!”

A bang like a shotgun blast sent the soldiers to the ground in fear.

Maine stood in the corner, eyes wide and wild. He’d dipped his fingers in some of the still drying blood pooled and spattered and dripping all around the room, and written a message on the wall.

One crisis at a time.

Florida’s responding grin was enough to make York swear not to piss the man off ever again. He had no idea if he could accomplish such a lofty goal, but he was going to fucking try.

“Ok, one crisis at a time. North, help us get Niner free, and we’ll send you, York, and Wyoming to search for South.”

Wyoming’s face scrunched unhappily.

“Butch.”

“Baby, I will be just fine. I’ve had concussions before, and I’m already feeling a heck of a lot better. We need someone to stay behind and start calling for help, and given the sheer amount of vines and shit I can kind of see out there in the dark, I don’t think Niner’s going to be a heck of a lot of help on the search party.”

It could work. York would really prefer to wait for some better light, but if South was alive, she probably didn’t have that long.
They were gone.

Niner was freed and in her new chair. It was...scary.

“Niner,” Florida grinned, “What in the world is that thing?”

She groaned and rolled around the room to get used to the heavier burden.

“It’s a more...outdoorsy kind of chair.”

“It looks like something you’d take to a battlefield. Are those spikes?”

“Jesus.”

Maine had never seen a chair quite like it, the tires were beefier, the plating (according to Niner) was bulletproof, and the thing looked like it was capable of surviving an explosion.

He hated it. Hated that she was in it. Hated that she had to be.

He could only imagine how she felt.

The sun had started to rise with little contact from the others and no sign of South so far. Maine and Florida had cleared the common area of their personal possessions and moved the AI units outside. One was dead, hopefully Eta’s unit, and two more had blinking red error lights flashing.

None of those left behind had any clue how to fix the delicate machines. They’d all had some general instruction on modifying a storage unit, but this was very, very different. It didn’t help that North and South had apparently modified them already with unknown bits and pieces, some that Maine was pretty sure had started their lives as a microwave.

Maine had no desire to touch the things enough to try.

Instead, he busied himself with getting supplies ready. Medical aids, food, water, tents and blankets. With no idea where they were on the planet, or where the nearest friendly base was, he didn’t want to risk them wandering. Which meant, the ship was their new base until they could get help.

Rescuing the rescue ship.

Wash would have laughed about that, back during the project.

Recovery One on the other hand…

There wouldn’t be a way to keep it a secret much longer, that Washington probably hated him, that he would want Maine dead the moment he realized Maine was still alive. He’d sided with the idiots. Tex’s idiots. And Maine had hurt them.

Worse, Maine had abandoned him. Maine had turned on him.

The thing people seemed to only remember when it was too late, Maine was no exception, was that Washington, while loyal to a fault, had a very limited tolerance for betrayal. His friendship, goodwill, and kindness, once lost was lost forever.

Maine didn’t intend to try and earn forgiveness. There was no point in it, but…

But Wash…
Washington threw open the door to Maine and York's quarters, his hair was a wild mess and he had a backpack in his arms stuffed to the gills.

‘Hey Maine! York! Quick! Whatever happens, whoever comes knocking, I’ve been here for at least an hour!’

York dropped his datapad to the bed and swung himself into a sitting position. The rookie had been on the team for a few weeks and he'd already caused enough chaos during down time that the Director was considering giving him a minder. He must have been especially poorly behaved if the sparkle in his eyes and the tiny, bright little giggles he tried to hide behind his hand were any indicator.

‘Washington, what did you do?’

‘I may have snitched some things from the Councilor’s secret snack shipment!’

‘You’re insane.’

‘I know, isn’t it great?’

York shook his head in mock disappointment, and Maine's hackles raised. Did Washington not realize there were cameras everywhere, or did he just not care about getting caught?

‘I taught you how to pick locks and this is how you’re using your skills? I trusted you.’

‘Well then you can’t exactly blame me, can you? It was your mistake. Here, your cut.’

Washington tossed a bag from his backpack at York who made the most obscene moaning sound.

‘Oh my god, are those real marshmallows?’

‘Yup, and I saved this for you. You like chocolate covered espresso beans, right?’

Washington was worth saving. Niner had set to directing the two men on what needed to be put where for what reason, and Maine didn’t bother to try and explain that his arm was all kinds of fucked up. It still worked, it didn’t feel broken, and he was not nearly a bad off as Florida, who stopped every five minutes or so to dry heave before forcing his increasingly thin smile back onto his face.

A rustling sound to the right caught Maine’s attention. He ducked back behind some recently stacked crates and watched as four people wearing power armor and holding weapons stared up at the ship. The soldiers were in various styles of armor, no real rhyme or reason to it. Two of them had what looked like a complete set, white with green accents and white with red accents, but the other two looked like their armor had been pieced together from several different sets. Neither of them had a tan paintjob that matched all the way through. One wore orange highlights, the other had purple.

“Oh my god.”

“Wow! Did we seriously find it first?”

“Dibs.”

“You can’t call dibs on a rescue ship, you asshole!”
“Are you telling me you’re going to fight the International Dibs Protocol?”

“SCREW YOU! THERE IS NO SUCH THING!!!”

Maine felt a hand at the small of his back and flinched, only relaxing when he heard Florida’s soft voice announce his presence. He’d been damned lucky Maine was off his game, or he would have ended up flat on his back.

“Guys, what if there are still people here? They’re going to think we’re crazy and then they might shoot us.”

“He’s the one calling dibs on a rescue ship!”

“And you’re the one who wants to violate the no takebacks accord.”

“I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS!!!”

Florida curled into himself and laughed.

The soldiers clearly heard the noise and scrambled their weapons into their hands. They were disorganized and jittery, less like soldiers more like civilians. All but the orange one looked around for where the noise came from. He zeroed in on the crates immediately and had proper form holding his gun. It was familiar, but Maine couldn’t quite place the stance.

“Hello? Is someone there?”

Maine gritted his teeth and squeezed his fists tightly. He didn’t have a weapon on him, and just because they weren’t well trained didn’t mean they couldn’t be out to do damage. If they intended to kill off the survivors to take the ship, he hoped they were really lousy shots.

“Hi there, friends! Mind putting the guns down?”

The one with orange markings seemed to be the leader, which made sense based what Maine had seen of him. The other three soldiers fidgeted and looked at his body language, but didn’t move. He cast a glance over the clearing.

“My name is Lieutenant Bitters and I am a representative of the United Armies of Chorus. Were you a passenger on this ship?”

“We are, though some of us have gone to play in the jungle for a while. I don’t suppose you’ve seen them?”

“Fuck!”

“Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!”

“I knew it, I fucking KNEW we were dealing with fucking PIRATES!”

The sound of Niner’s new chair behind him caught Maine’s attention. The woman was decked out in her full, blood spattered armor, with several large guns on her lap and an explosive in her hand. Maine didn’t hesitate to grab one, though Florida just shook his head.

Niner shifted and grabbed Florida’s arm.

“Ask them who they are. The girl we talked to was Jensen.”
“Hi there, can we get your names and the name of the person who caught the transmission originally?”

Bitters stepped forward just a little, but didn’t bother to lower his weapon.

“Lieutenant Katie Jensen talked to your pilot!”

“And our pilot threatened to kill Santa for some reason I still don’t properly understand! Looks like everything’s checked out here. I promise you we’re not pirates, we are part of a small rescue team that has come to help out. We heard your message.”

The three as yet unnamed soldiers seemed to wilt with relief, but the lieutenant, Bitters, didn’t so much as twitch.

“If it’s ok by you, we’re going to come out from behind these crates, and we can have a nice little chat. I promise we’re not here to hurt anyone. In fact, if you happen to have a doctor or a medic nearby, that would be fantastic, a few of us are in some rough shape.”

“Weapons on the ground. If you shoot, we will not hesitate to kill you.”

“Bitters?!”

Florida just nodded and motioned to Maine to put his gun down where they could see it.

“That’s good to know upfront. Ok, no weapons.”

It wasn’t like Florida couldn’t kill them all with vines and rocks and metal shards from the ship. If they shot Maine, he’d take the shot, and Florida would just have to do the rest.

But they didn’t shoot. They watched, wary, as he came around, arms raised in surrender. They made weird oohs at the sight of him, but other than that were fairly calm until they saw Niner’s armor splattered with blood.

The purple clad soldier squawked unhappily and flapped their hands when they took in everything.

“Oh hell, you weren’t kidding! Bitters! Let everyone know where we are and tell them to get the rest of the medics here quick! And make sure everyone knows we’ve got friendlies in the trees!”

Florida grinned.

“I don’t think it’s quite that bad, dear.”

The medic whipped around and shoved a finger in Florida’s face. Maine honestly couldn’t tell if the man was amused by it or was contemplating biting the finger off. It was probably a mix of both.

“Now, you listen here! I know that bloodstain on your shoulder! You have blood pouring out of your skull! That is not a thing that is supposed to happen! Until I’m sure that none of you are going to fall over and die on me, I will be as panicked as I want! Sit!”

Florida sat down right there.

The soldier in white and green looked around.

“I don’t suppose we can get a description of what your people look like so we know not to shoot them on site?”
Niner gave Bitters a quick rundown of what to look for and the man stepped out of the clearing to relay the information.

The medic was efficient, she checked Niner out, declared the visible body parts to be in decent condition.

“Still can’t feel my legs though.”

Folami looked at Niner with concern, her voice became slightly higher pitched.

“Oh my god, how long have they been numb?”

“A few years at this point. I doubt there’s much you can do for them, kid.”

The medic, Folami, screeched at Niner for a moment about playing jokes on people with very sharp knives, and moved on to Florida, who Maine knew was an expert in very sharp knives. She was not gentle in the slightest, but Maine didn’t think that bothered him. The man seemed to enjoy being manhandled by the brisk medic.

“What’s your name, sir?”

Florida gave a happy grin as her fingers threaded through his hair and poked around at his bleeding skull.

“Albert Flowers, Butch to my friends, but you, my duck, can call me Daddy.”

“You fucking pervert,” Niner ground out, “She sounds like she’s twelve, and your husband is in the goddamned jungle, for fucks sake!”

The medic made a gasping, choking noise and jerked away from Florida like he was covered in maggots.

“Yeah…No…I don’t play with married people. Also, you’re old enough to be my grandpa, which is really gross. Your eyes don’t seem to be unfocused, but we’ll want to get you properly looked at pretty quickly. Once the caravan arrives, we’ll get you escorted back to base.”

She hopped to her feet and made her way over to Maine quickly, likely just to get away from Florida, who seemed to make it his goal in life to act like that pervert uncle that never gets invited to pool parties. Still, Maine was defensive and jumpy from the sheer amount of shit he’d gone through in the past twenty-four hours. He flinched back, and she threw up her hands defensively.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry! Did I startle you?!”

She just wanted to help him. She was a medic, and she was a quarter of his size. If he wanted to he could snap her like a twig. He was not defenseless. Maine grunted and tried to make a dismissive gesture, only to wince and groan. Like an idiot, he’d completely forgotten to avoid using his injured arm again.

“We need to get you out of armor. Can I take a look at that?”

The medic stripped Maine’s torso free of the armor, and hovered over Maine’s arm in silence, occasionally prodding and looking at a scanner she had on hand.

“It looks like you popped it out of socket, but there are no breaks that I can find. We’ll have to pop that back in place and then we need to immobilize it. Bitters, can you help me please?”
Bitters came closer, slowly, carefully. He didn’t trust them to be safe, saw something in the three survivors that he didn’t like.

He was smart.

“Ok, he’s going to hold onto you while I move your shoulder back into place. He’s really just a wall with a little give. It’s about all he’s good for out here.”

“Fuck you, Folami.”

“No thanks, bitch, I’ve got better things to do and I’m pretty sure Matthews would finally lose it and turn my face into a decorative mask.”

“Don’t fucking even.”

The white and green soldier grunted, arms filled with boxes Niner directed him to move. Maine couldn’t help but laugh a little. She loved her power plays. Before they knew it, Niner would be running the camp like she was their chieftain.

“Isn’t Matthews the one that’s all obsessed with making Captain Grif like him? He’s as vicious as a gerbil.”

“The man’s a freaking cyanide laced cupcake. He may be a precious gay cinnamon roll that should be protected at all costs, but he’s also one good heartbreak away from The Audition. Do you want to be cut in half with wire, Bitters? No? Then keep your dick in your pants and do your fucking job, you fucknut.”

She arranged Maine so that he was slightly pressed against Bitters, who muttered ‘I don’t think this is how you do this’, but obediently pressed his hands against Maine’s back to keep him in place. Maine hated having the suspicious soldier behind him. This would be the perfect opportunity to slip a knife somewhere lethal. Bitters wouldn’t have a better chance to take out the larger man.

“Alright, now, please don’t punch me. On three. One. Two.”

The medic yanked Maine’s arm into place, and he yelped, but didn’t attempt to swing. Folami rooted through her bag for a few moments.

“Okay! That feels right! Now, sling. Sling, sling, where is the sling?”

The medic ended up pulling out a medical wrap and making him a makeshift sling, all the while muttering about how much not having the supplies she needed sucked.

She really did sound young. All four of them did.

Demir, Ramirez, and Bitters hauled boxes and crates while Niner barked at them, happy and carefree as if they were on a picnic rather than waiting for their teammates to drag back South’s dead and broken body, and possibly her brother’s if he found her first.

Folami seemed content to flit around and poke through the supplies they’d brought. When she saw an internally cooled box marked as antibiotics she burst into tears.

Clearly, things were more desperate than they had realized. Maine wished they’d had the ability to bring more along.

Maine only tried to assist with moving boxes once.
Demir and Ramirez were having the worst time getting a crate free, at some point it became wedged between a support beam and a wall, and while Maine did think it was hilarious to watch the two young men struggle, there was only so much grunting and whining and ‘god, why?’ he could take before he had to step in.

He slipped in behind them, reached over, grabbed the crate’s edge with his good hand, and yanked. The box screamed as it was pulled free, and the two soldiers along with it.

Folami threatened to chain him to the outside of the ship if he strained himself again, and Bitters had a tense look to him. Maine tried not to show that he was upset and settled himself next to Florida, who’d taken to braiding some vines he’d found into a sturdy looking rope, and took up one of their guns to keep watch over the clearing.

“Scaring the kiddies, are we? You know, I don’t think a one of them is thirty.”

Maine shrugged and grunted.

“I know it doesn’t bother you, mister. You’re from a family of soldiers. It’s expected. I guess it was probably expected of them too.”

The sound of a gunshot echoed through their little camp, and several people in armor that didn’t match the four little Chorus soldiers raced in, weapons ready, shots spraying.

Maine whipped his gun up and shot three of the intruders in the head. Florida managed to impale two in the throat and one in both of the knees.

The Chorus soldiers managed to dive for cover, Niner had managed to organize plenty of it with the offloaded crates, while still managing to protect their more valuable supplies from damage. Folami’s screams echoed and then cut off.

Maine ran around the corner, only to see Bitters overtop the medic, applying pressure. He looked up, clearly rattled.

“She’s hit!”

Maine shoved his gun into Bitters hands, yanked Folami’s kit to his side, and shoved the younger man out of the way. He whipped out a knife and tore apart the Kevlar around the bullet hole on her leg to better see the damage. She’d been hit.

Folami had been hit.

She was so goddamned small. How was someone so small allowed to wear armor? He could practically wrap his hands around her waist and have his fingers touch.

Maine managed to clean the wound enough to realize that it wasn’t anything serious. He let out a sigh of relief.

Demir and Ramirez crowded in behind Bitters, each one jostling the other like a pair of overexcited puppies. Bitters stood just enough in the way that he managed to hold them back without actually seeming like he was doing it on purpose.

He’d be a good match for Florida if the man was interested in an apprentice. He had the art of being unremarkable down.

Maine bandaged her up just as Niner and Florida checked in. Both of them had picked up enough
weapons to look as dangerous as they actually were. Niner looked in on Maine’s work.

“We’re clear for now. No stragglers. How’s she doing?”

Maine held up his hand and pinched the air.

“Awesome. Slap some disinfectant on it and call it good.”

“It’s not that bad, right?”

Demir’s voice shook enough that Maine was concerned he was about to pass out. Maine shook his head and pinched the air again. Ramirez mimicked the move, clearly confused by what it could possibly mean, and Maine wanted to cry.

These were the people taking care of Washington?

“He’s saying it’s small. It’s a small injury.”

Bitters arms were crossed over his chest. Florida came right up beside the young man and clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to make him lose his balance. Maine laughed, though he recognized that it sounded more like a barking growl these days.

“He’s saying it’s not a big deal. It’s a small injury and it didn’t hit anything important. Small problems, small worries. We’ll keep it clean and Folami probably should stay off her feet for a while, but I don’t think you’ll even need stitches for that booboo.”

Florida held out a hand and wiggled his fingers eagerly. Maine just knew the man was grinning ear to ear under his helmet. He must have gotten something good.

“Munchkin, you will never guess just who these guys belong to! I was pretty surprised when I recognized the tags on the armor.”

Maine allowed Florida to ‘help’ him to his feet and they both examined the dead bodies.

They were mercenaries, but they were clearly bankrolled by someone, and if the marks meant anything, they were funded by the same person funding the Insurrectionists. He growled, low and hot. Florida unhooked the coil of vine rope he’d made from his belt and snapped it twice.

“That’s right friend. Someone we don’t like very much has a presence here. I’m thinking that it’s fate we came when we did. Between the lot of us, we’ll have the planet well and truly cleaned up in no time.”

Maine looked over Florida’s shoulder and saw soldier that had been struck in the knees trying to drag himself into the trees. Florida cocked his head to the side.

“Yeah, I figured it couldn’t hurt to keep one around for information purposes. Why don’t you play guard dog and keep the kids from scaring up their lunches? I’m gonna go play twenty questions with my new friend here.”

The three uninjured soldiers were suddenly right by Maine, all looking at the bodies, as if they could figure out what Maine and Florida were up to from the corpses.

“Hello, Sunshine! I hear you’re one of the people giving these poor kids a hard time.”

“Fuck you!”
Maine turned to the Chorus soldiers and made a shooing motion back toward the ship. Demir bounced back and forth, his red marks honestly reminded Maine too much of bloodspots for him to be comfortable, while Ramirez thought he’d be able to sneak past Maine’s grip and get closer to what would soon become carnage.

Maine latched onto Ramirez and used his bulk to force Demir back to the relative safety of the crates. Bitters, clearly the smart one, walked on his own and did not need to be manhandled back to the ship.

“What’s going on?”

“Is Mr. Flowers going to be ok?”

Maine cocked a head at Niner.

“Guys, Maine doesn’t think you need to see what’s about to happen, and since we’ve worked with Butch for a few years now, I can tell you it’s not a pretty sight when he gets working.”

Bitters gave them a hard look.

“I feel like we should be scared of you guys.”

Horrible screams suddenly filled the air and the Chorus soldiers flinched. Folami whimpered on the ground, Demir and Ramirez clung to each other like limpets, and Bitters shrank into himself. Maine patted the young man as gently as he could and did his best ‘grumble, grumble, everything’s fine, grumble, growl’, as Wash used to call it.

Niner pulled out a tiny radio and turned on something peppy and loud to hide the noise.

“It’s not an unhealthy instinct. Just, don’t go overboard. We really are here to help.”

Chapter End Notes

I ended up doing a complete revamp of half of this, because as much as I love writing North’s bitching and moaning and whining, it was getting to be too much for one setting, so now he can go screw off in the jungle for a while and cool his heels. Also, York was getting a butt ton of screen time and I’ve barely touched on the Reds and the Blues.

Are you excited for potential movement forward? It feels like the plot train is actually starting to chug along! Maybe we’ll pick up momentum! At some point, everyone is going to get some character development. What do we think the inside of Florida's brain is like, I wonder?

It may be a week or so before the next chapter pops up. Holidays are rough on writing time, and I will be making a trip upstate to visit family for a few days. I'll do what I can, but I can't promise that I will have time for much.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

York finds a pretty friend, South is frustrated with her clingy friend, Doc makes a new friend, Wyoming tries to make friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Delta’s sensors were on the alert, sweeping the area constantly, scanning for any sign of South or potential allies/enemies hidden in the dense jungle tree line. So far they hadn’t found her, hadn’t even seen a sign. No life. No noise. Not a crackle or an alert from Eta.

-North will not accept defeat.-

And we won’t either, but at some point if we can’t find her…

-If we do not find her, North will not be able to function. He will spiral even more out of control until his erratic and irrational behavior causes him to take actions that cannot be fixed. Alive or dead, we must find South.-

Well, on the plus side, there’s only so far she could be from the ship.

-Considering how much distance she could have been flung in, and the density of this jungle, that is not a reassuring statement.-

Delta calculated that they’d been in the thick of the jungle for at least a good two hours, and York was just done. His body ached something terrible, and the pain only seemed to ramp up as time went by. He needed pain medication, a stiff drink, and a proper bed.

The chances of getting any of that seemed further away the longer he moved through the trees. Still, at least it wasn’t an ugly walk. There were all these weirdo plants and animals just sort of chilling and watching him. He debated whether or not it would be safe to eat the things that looked like a cross between a Lisa Frank poster and a squirrel with massive eyes. Not immediately, just as a general thought.

At the three-hour mark Delta’s sensors picked up a ping of movement too large to be one of the small chittering things hidden in the trees.

He froze.

Whatever had been moving stopped, changed direction, and disappeared from Delta’s sensors. York felt the tension in the back of his neck squeeze him tighter.

They were being tracked.

His sensors couldn’t see anything, but they had. Someone was definitely there. They were being tracked by someone who could hide from Delta. Someone who had the tech to hide from him.
Silent, York shallowed his breathing and listened to the ambient noise of the jungle. Birds, creaking trees, flowing water. The birds went quiet.

York spun just as his stalker leapt from the trees and fired. He missed, but so did they. Instead of striking him on the back the blow hit his chest, which allowed York to flip over and land in a crouch, head to head with-

“Carolina?”

A blow to the side of the head threw him off, and York was sideways on the ground.

-York, another blow like that will take you out. Get on your feet and out of the range of her fists.-

“’Lina! ’Lina, stop!”

She wrenched his arms behind his back with a snarl and shoved his helmet into the dirt. York recognized the move, how could he not? Carolina was furious and completely done playing, and one wrong move on his end would leave him with broken arms at the very least.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, walking around in this armor calling me that?!”

Holy shit, it was really her. York recognized the dulcet tones in her angry snarl and went boneless in her grip. Any tension would feel too much like fighting, and fighting might get him snapped in two.

-York, she is behaving erratically, you must get away and regroup.-

Easy, D. I’ve got this.

She wrenched his helmet off, and jerked his neck back painfully in the process. Her movements sputtered and her grip loosened just a little.

Recognition.

“Oh my god.”

“Hey there, Gorgeous. If I said I like your armor, would you hold it against me?”

Carolina moved off of York and pulled him carefully to his feet. She examined his face, looked him over this way and that, and made a soft, choked noise.

York unbuckled Carolina’s helmet, gently slid it off, and let it fall to the ground. Her face was almost exactly what he expected. She had a few scars now, but that hair, those eyes, the twist of a previously broken nose. It was her.

If there was a god out there, whichever one brought them back together deserved a cupcake or something.

-That is a highly illogical thought, York. I still believe you have a concussion that I cannot find.-

D, don’t spoil the moment.

Carolina gripped York’s shoulders tightly and slammed their faces together. York couldn’t help but moan into the kiss and pulled her closer at the waist. He pulled back and pressed their foreheads together with a giggle as Carolina chased his lips.
“I didn’t think that line would actually work.”

“Shut up and kiss me, before you disappear.”

York threaded his fingers into her ponytail and gave it a gentle tug, just the way he remembered doing back in the day when he teased her for being too serious. She was amazing. She was gorgeous. She was fucking resplendent, and goddamn it Delta needed to stop shoving fancy words into his brain.

“Fuck. I’m not going anywhere. It’s, god, it’s so good to see you.”

Carolina groaned and shoved her face into the crook of his neck. Her shoulders shook, just a little, and her voice moved to a deeper, choking, octave.

“I don’t know if I can handle losing you again. I don’t want to wake up.”

York tugged her hair a little harder and pressed a kiss into her forehead. He wondered how many times she’d dreamed him and woken up only to be disappointed and bereft, if she’d dreamed him alive half as often as he’d dreamed her.

“You’re not asleep, I’m right here.”

A soft, whispered plea and a sob. Arms tightened. Her weight shifted more to his arms.

“Please don’t. Just, just let me have this for a little while longer.”

He’d give her all the time she needed. Hell, he’s stay in rooted in place in the jungle for as long as it took for her to see him and know he was real. Carolina was worth it. She was worth everything he could give her.

“Ok, Carolina, I’m sorry, but enough’s enough! I’m not just going to hang out in your head while you’re fucking your ex-boyfriend.”

Carolina’s head snapped up and she flung her whole body backwards and into a tree. Perched on her shoulder was a tiny glowing figure, an AI.

-Epsilon. The insane one. He sent the broadcast.-

Just to clarify, that’s the one that hurt Wash, right?

-Indeed, though he must be functioning properly at this point, or Carolina would be unable to fight and move as she does.-

“What the fuck?” She ground out furiously, “What is happening here?”

“What’s happening is you found a fucking Freelancer in the jungle and instead of capturing him, you’re trying to figure out how to get him naked! It’s fucking gross, and I’m not going to be a part of this!”

“So get out of my dream, and go bother someone else!”

York held his hands up in defense, but stood his ground. He wasn’t afraid of her, and maybe that made him an idiot, but at least he was consistent. She didn’t ask him for space, so he wasn’t making it.

“Carolina, I’m real. This, this is real. The aid ship? It’s us.”
Sadness washed over her face. She slumped over and put her head in her hands.

“This is a nightmare.”

“Carolina-“

“Shut up! Shut up! Epsilon, get me out of here! Wake me up!”

“Carolina, you’re not sleeping.”

She snarled and slammed her fist into the tree behind her. There was an echoing crack, and the tree shook. More Lisa Frank abominations York didn’t recognize screamed and flew or ran away. Delta busied himself with exit strategies and assessments of her weaknesses.

“Bullshit!”

York just wanted to memorize the color of her eyes.

“Carolina, he’s not lying! Fucking AGENT NEW YORK is standing RIGHT THERE! He’s here and you were going to make out with him! While I was still in your head!”

She locked eyes with York. Her hands twitched at her sides. York…really couldn’t handle much more. He moved back into her space, more careful than he’d been in the past, and took her hands in his.

“I hoped, you know. I didn’t think I’d find you here, but I really, really hoped.”

He wished they weren’t in armor; he really wanted to feel the heat from her fingers and brush her skin.

“You…”

“We got the transmission and Niner showed us the picture with your armor, and I just…I was so happy.”

Her eyes narrowed sharply and she surged close, near enough to feel the heat of her breath on his face, and ok, that was less sexy because she’d probably been in that helmet for a while and needed to get some mouthwash or something. The kiss had apparently distracted him pretty well.

“I thought you were going to learn to let things go.”

York blinked, the non sequitur more than threw him for a loop.

“What?”

She jerked her hands from his grip and shoved him back, face furious, eyes filled to the brim with hurt and distrust.

“I saw your journal entries, when you were looking for me. You said you wished I’d learned to let things go and you were…”

He’d forgotten all about that.

After Niner picked him up and packed him away, York spent most of his nights trying to forget. Forget Freelancer, forget Carolina, forget Delta, forget happiness and pain and hate and anger and desperation and…love. If he remembered, if he thought too much, his will to live tended to take a
nosedive, and York wasn’t ready to go to the great safe in the sky just yet.

So, repression.

It was less effective without Delta in his brain to help out, and more nights than not he laid on his shit bed in his shit apartment, bit his shit pillow, and screamed himself into unconsciousness. He wasn’t cut out for the lone wolf life.

York tried not to sigh as he ran his fingers through his hair. He…honestly had no idea how he looked at the moment, but he doubted it was pretty. Well, as pretty as he normally was. He hadn’t cared in a long time about bothering to clean up, but now he wished he’d put some gel in his hair or something at least.

-Hair product would not have survived your sweating.-

Gross hair and sweat. Mmm. Making a great impression here. No wonder she’s all over making out.

“Well fuck, Carolina, nobody ever said I had good follow through. Also, I’m pretty sure I was in an emotionally vulnerable state right then. You were dead.”

“And then you were dead.”

There was no point in arguing; he didn’t want to fight.

York leaned in to kiss her, wanted so badly to feel that connection after all this time trapped in a tin can. Wanted to feel that she was real, stare into her eyes and share her breath even if it wasn’t that great. In all honesty, his mouth kind of felt like he’d been holding a dead rat in it, so he probably wasn’t much better off than she was.

They could keep looking for South in a minute, could let the others know that she’s alive, but just for now, he needed this. Just needed to feel that connection.

Carolina didn’t let him get that close.

She put her hands on his chest and locked her arms, the fire and fear she’d had so clearly presented on her face melted into a cold, calculated stare that he didn’t know what to do with.

“I can’t do this, not now, now here.”

“’Lina-“

“What are you doing out here? Why are you here?”

-York, I believe that honesty is the best policy here. It won’t take more than one conflicting story for Carolina to immediately distrust all of us.-

I read you loud and clear, D. It’s not smart to lie to Carolina on a good day, and today is a fucking fantastic day. No point in seeing if I can lie to her now.

“We came to get Wash.”

“Wash?” She flinched. “We?”

“We. I was in hiding when the message for help went out, and I saw Wash’s armor pop up in the pictures. We got together to come and rescue him.”
He recognized that inquisitive glare and tried to calm the mischievous flit in his stomach that told him to hold back and play with her a little. She didn’t get it yet, and it pissed her off. Carolina was not the kind of woman to come in second place in any department, but especially not intelligence gathering. It used to be fun to hold back and dangle bits of information, watch her face, and wait for her to snap. She’d pin him to the floor or catch him in a headlock or twist an arm behind his back and threaten to rip it off.

Good times.

“There is a very real possibility of him being found on planet by the UNSC and being taken into custody. No members of Project Freelancer are supposed to be released if found alive, and his signature armor was flashed over a shit ton of screens across the galaxy. He’s not cut out for prison, ‘Lina, and he doesn’t deserve it anyway. So we packed up our shit and decided to go.

“The ship got caught in the planet’s gravitational pull, and South decided to be a big damned hero. She climbed onto the outside of the ship and used the bubble shield. We’re pretty sure it’s the only reason we’re not all dead. North’s flipping the fuck out, since we can’t find her and he can’t track her.”

She didn’t so much as twitch, but her AI, Epsilon, popped up and pointed an accusatory finger in York’s direction.

“Wait, wait, wait, back the fuck up! South’s alive? Washington fucking blew her up!”

He couldn’t keep the cocky grin off of his face. That was a story he hadn’t heard yet. They must have done a real bait and switch to pull something like that off, and once South was safe and sound, and North was finally out of his manic mode, York would gladly sit down and force the magicians to reveal their secrets. He lived for that kind of shit.

“Yeah, maybe don’t say that near North, he’s still a little touchy about that.”

“But how could she have survived that? Her armor was destroyed!”

“Was it really?”

“YES!”

Carolina shook her head and picked up her helmet. She dusted off the visor with her hand, but didn’t slip the protective piece back on. Her eyes refused to look at York’s face, but she couldn’t manage to keep them off of him entirely.

She wants me.

-Or she still recognizes you as a threat.-

No, D, she definitely wants me. I recognize the come hither stare being directed at my shins.

“She used the Meta as a distraction, didn’t she? She knew that he’d get away, and Wash would be too eager to catch him to follow proper protocol and check the serial numbers and the actual body. After she stabbed him, he wouldn’t care all that much about bringing her in alive.”

York grinned wider, even as his stomach twisted. That…didn’t sound good at all.

“That sounds like a South plan. Hoping for incompetence, rather than actual skill. Didn’t know she actually stabbed him though.”
Carolina’s gloved hand rubbed delicately at her brow, a pinched expression in her eyes, even as she fought for neutrality.

“Fantastic, exactly what we need. More guilt fodder.”

“I’d think her not being killed would be the opposite of guilt fodder, myself.”

She huffed an exasperated laugh and shook her head.

“Oh, trust me, if Washington can feel guilt about something, he’s going to. The drama has only gotten more intense with time. Who do I need to prepare myself for?”

“Well, North, hopefully South, Wyoming and Florida, Maine and Niner, and me.”

Her whole body went rigid for just a moment, every inch of her blank. Delta’s fear ramped up and he started pointing York in different directions to get himself to safety.

Then…she laughed.

“Jesus Christ. Oh my god. Fucking hell! We’ve got a full set!”

York shifted a foot back to brace himself a little better. Something was definitely off.

“What do you mean?”

Carolina gripped his shoulders hard and yanked York in for a hug. It was weird, but so nice.

“I mean Connie’s alive.”

Aaaaand, nice was gone.

Delta burst into life in York’s brain, already caught up in trying to solve the mystery of how she’d survived a Tex axe to the chest. York took the direct route.

“What, seriously? How?!”

“It’s complicated but basically, they thought she was dead, she wasn’t dead, they put her in a cryo pod, and it kept her alive long enough for medical attention.”

“That’s scary as hell.”

“Yeah, she’s not really ok.”

“No, I bet not! Holy shit! We…oh my god, we all made it. That doesn’t seem physically possible!”

“Well, if we don’t find South, it may not be.”

York reached up and laid a hand on Carolina’s shoulder as gently as he could. She finally, blessedly, looked him in the eye again and smiled.

“Shit. Please, I am begging you, don’t say shit like that near North. He and South were fighting before the crash and he’s having a meltdown.”

“They always fight, why is this any different?”

“She threatened to abandon him, basically called him out on his passive aggressive ‘I’m the older brother and therefore the boss’ mentality.”
The AI floated a little behind her, head cocked inquisitively to the side. He should have looked like Delta, the AI were mostly all variants of a soldier in armor, but there was something about Epsilon that made him stand out. He was ridiculously expressive, about as active as Theta with twice the sass.

“That…would probably do it. He as always unhealthily obsessed with her health and wellbeing.”

The blue glowing figure’s voice seemed to snap her out of whatever train of thought she was in that allowed her to relax against him, and York hated the little fucker for it.

Carolina gave him one last squeeze and stepped back, her gaze already off in the trees.

“Look, I…I need a minute my head is spinning.”

And look how much she’d grown. Carolina actually admitted that she was not at her peak. Who was this strange, beautiful forest creature? Some nymph, trying to tempt him?

-York, I am actually very concerned about this concussion that I cannot find. You are being ridiculous at this point.-

“Ok, I’m going to take a few steps over here and just let everyone know that we’ve got company, yeah? We wouldn’t want to accidentally shoot each other out here.”

She nodded and slipped her helmet back on with a quiet, breathy sigh. York closed his eye for a moment and visualized the color of her eyes.

South’s whole body felt like one giant pulsating, gaping wound. She was pretty sure she wasn’t dead, if only because death shouldn’t feel like pain. The visor of her helmet was spiderwebbed to hell and she vaguely wondered if it would break and fall into her eyes.

-Do not move, you are damaged and in need of repair. Your armor is twisted in ways it is not supposed to be, and your elbow is bent the wrong direction. Your left leg is broken in multiple places, it would be unwise to attempt to stand. Your organs are damaged, but I do not see internal bleeding at this point. Please do not move.-

Great.

-I have issued an emergency beacon to the suit you are linked with as well as a general beacon, and I am administering painkillers now. I have not received a response. I have not received a response. I have not received a response. I have not-

Little dude, stop. I am in fucking pain here, and I don’t need the play by play.

-I’m sorry. I am…at odds with myself. This is the first time I have been in an actual situation of this sort. I’m sorry I didn’t protect you better.-

Hey, we survived. It’s more than I expected and that probably means the ship made it. Iota’s fine. North’s fine. Everyone’s peachy.

-That is not how I would describe this, you are severely injured. I am running the odds of your survival based on the provided parameters and I am unhappy with the results. We have to get you
to the others so they can take care of you. I can’t fix a broken bone. I have issued another emergency beacon. I have not received a response.

South took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. There was definitely some damage to her torso.

Who am I linked with?

-I…am unaware of the end location, only that you are linked.-

I fucking hope I’m not linked to myself, then.

-WHY WOULD THAT BE A THING?! THE WHOLE POINT OF LINKING ARMOR IS TO CONNECT YOU TO SOMEONE!!!-

Jesus, fuck! Calm down! I’m probably linked with North, that asshole’s idea of a funny joke.

-I have to do something. You need medical attention immediately.-

There’s not really much you can do, little dude.

-I am casting a wider net for people to contact. I see movement not too far away. I’m going to set off an emergency beacon.-

We don’t know who they are.

-We don’t, but I am not just going to sit here and wait for you to DIE! I’m sending out the beacon now. I have not received a response. I have not re-

Fuck, you’re impatient.

-You’re bleeding. Do you know how much blood the human body holds? Not enough for the amount you are losing as we speak. Do you know how little damage a human body needs to take in order to die?!-

Yeah, but we are also resilient as fuck.

-My data shows- -

Fuck your data. I’m fine.

-You are not fine! YOUR BODY IS BROKEN!-

I’ll live.

-You don’t know that! You don’t know what’s going to happen! We don’t know the climate on this planet, or how long you may need to survive with no supplies, or if anyone else is even alive!-

Oh my god, you are such a fucking worrywart. Please, just stop. And can I get some more of whatever you’re shooting in me? It’s not doing much.
The jungle was dense, but the actual walk was very manageable. It was nice to have people to do this sort of thing with, even if Doc didn’t know them all that well.

Doc liked the kids on Chorus, they were all so passionate about things! Sure, they took time to train and fix armor and weapons and stuff, but it was amazing the sheer amount of effort they put into…well, anything really! Jones had spent the entire hike taking really artsy photographs of the jungle and all the weird looking animals and plants, while Sadhana described a play they’d been writing for the past few months. Apparently there was a thriving theatre community among the Feds that was growing with the New Repubs, and several different straight plays and musicals were being practiced during down time for the entertainment of the troops.

A crackle came over the radio.

“Hey guys, we’ve found the ship, and I’m sending the coordinates now. Please be aware, we have a total of seven members of the rescue team, but four members of the crew in the jungle. One member is missing and the others are searching for them. Whoever is closest to the hauling truck, please start plowing down a path so we can start bringing supplies and people home. The rest of you, start in on the coordinates, and we’ll start assisting in the search. I’m thinking the sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

Palomo crowed loudly and slapped Jones with a high five.

“Awesome! Let’s go!”

Sadhana and Jones eagerly nodded and changed direction, just as Doc’s armor registered a distress ping less than a twenty-minute hike away. What were the odds?!

“This way, guys! I just got a distress ping!”

Palomo dropped his shoulders with a whine.

“Doc, we’ve been out here for forever!”

Jones collapsed against a nearby tree and slumped down it.

“The others have already found the ship, and it’s in the opposite direction!”

Sadhana dropped cross-legged to the jungle floor and crossed their arms over their chest.

“I don’t want to go in any more circles. I want to get this ship taken care of so I can go back to base.”

Doc blinked at the three soldiers. They were lucky Carolina didn’t usually take a team with her, if they’d acted like this around her, she might have throttled them. As it was, Doc did understand their feelings, he really did, but there was a person out there, not too far, that needed help. And Doc was going to help them.

He was a medic after all.

“Oh, but, I know there’s something this way.”

Palomo and Sadhana crossed their arms and shook their heads.

“We aren’t going any further. We’re heading back. If you want to get lost out here, that’s your business.”
Doc’s mood snapped.

“Fine! If you little idiots want to play ‘lost in the woods’, who am I to stop you? Just make sure that when the giant rats gnaw on your carcasses, you’re far enough from me that I won’t have to try and stop the bleeding!”

The soldiers all scrambled off in what Doc hoped was the right direction as he pulled himself back into control. Man, he hated when that happened! It made making friends so much more difficult! He wished he could contact Agent Carolina and let her know that his group had wandered off, but for some reason, he didn’t have access to anyone’s personal channels except Donut and Caboose, and the general channel in the trees were spotty at best. The fact that they’d been able to understand Bitters at all was a minor miracle.

Still, no sense crying over spilled milk! He had a distress signal to follow!

The area was maneuverable enough that Doc wasn’t nearly as worried as he could have been about the terrain. Still, even with the lovely flora and fauna, jungles were not high on his list of places he’d like to spend time walking in. It was higher than a swamp, but far lower than a peaceful beach with soft sand. Doc wondered idly if Chorus had nice beaches or if they were all ugly and rocky and not good for picnics.

He kept himself entertained easily enough until he was practically on top of whoever was in need. Boy, they sure were setting off all kinds of emergency alerts!

Doc neatly stepped onto an overturned log and finally saw what was causing the distress ping. A soldier wearing purple armor and green accents was sprawled along the jungle floor in a very unpleasant position. Doc was pretty sure that limbs were not meant to bend like that. Eww.

“Oh, my goodness! You look like you could use some help.”

The soldier groaned loudly, and gosh they weren’t dead! A real live survivor!

“Ugh. Fucking hell. Understatement of the year…Reg?”

The voice was scratchy and wrecked, and Doc could clearly see that there were limbs definitely twisted in ways that limbs should not be twisted. He made his way over slowly, well aware that this could have been a trap. It probably wasn’t a trap, but it could have been.

“Oh, nope! My name is Frank DuFresne, but my friend’s call me Doc.”

“Yeah, whatever…fuck. Please tell me they call you Doc because you’re a doctor.”

Doc shrugged and pulled out his scanner.

“Close, I’m a medic. But don’t worry, I’ve gotten really good at not helping people die!”

She didn’t say anything as Doc fidgeted. He wondered if she felt the same way about medics that the Reds and Blues did.

“I’m just going to kneel down and give you a quick scan, ok? I need to know how badly you’re hurt.”

He scanned the soldier quickly and noted that there were a good deal of injuries, though the worst by far was the right arm. Or…maybe the left leg since it was pointing the wrong way like a rubber legged Barbie. The soldier tilted their head up to get a better look at Doc, though from the noises
they made, it was probably really painful.

“Is there anyone else?”

“Mmm, nope, just me.”

The soldier flopped back down and keened.

“Fuck.”

“Well, I mean, there are other medics who were deployed, but none of them are anywhere near here. I doubt they would have noticed your emergency beacon this far out! You’re in the middle of nowhere!”

Doc looked at the results and looked at the soldier. He was glad that he didn’t have to take his helmet off. He had no idea how his face looked, but it probably wasn’t happy. Someone in that much pain did not need to see his upset face!

“Alright, well, so far so good. It looks like your suit has administered painkillers and everything seems to be ok as far as that goes, but I think, yep, your arm is definitely broken, and I am really concerned about that knee. In fact, I’m kind of surprised that you’re not unconscious right now. You have more breaks than you do bones!”

The soldier huffed in frustration.

“Great.”

“So, what I’m going to do is I’m going to lock your arm in place, which won’t be super comfortable, but it should keep you from hurting yourself any further. Then I’ll immobilize your leg, and then I’ll get you out of here and to a clear enough area that we can get a vehicle to come pick us up. We’re a good several hours away from the nearest hospital, so I would like to keep having your suit administer painkillers. You’re going to need them.”

“That’s reassuring. Mind pulling off my helmet? I can’t see for shit.”

Doc released the catches and pulled off the helmet. The soldier was a woman with bleached blonde hair and faded purple streaks. There was a knot on her forehead, but her eyes were clear and focused.

“Just until we get moving, now. It’s too dangerous out here to be without your armor, and gun shot wounds to the head are not very easy to treat!”

Doc set the helmet aside and moved to start bracing the most injured areas. He made sure to warn her before he moved her arm, but that didn’t stop it from hurting her very badly. She screamed loud enough to make his teeth ache, then gritted her teeth and made some of the worst noises Doc had ever heard, but he got the arm strapped and immobilized to her chest.

The leg was a bit trickier. If the Chorus soldiers had stuck around they could have made a cot or something and carried her back, but by himself, he had to make sure that her leg didn’t move while he moved her, which would be a challenge.

Still, Doc wasn’t about to make her wait any longer than necessary. She didn’t look to be on death’s door, but he knew that she could be without proper medical help. Her Kevlar body suit was ripped open in a lot of places that weren’t covered by the purple armor, and there was blood still oozing. Open wounds got infected very quickly in Chorus’s more…damp areas, and he had no idea
how long she’d been waiting there, hoping for someone to come into range.

Not to mention, more break than bones.

It was enough to make his naturally empathetic nature twist in sympathetic discomfort. Everything about her struck him as pitiful, so sad, she would probably benefit from Donut and Connie’s spa day! He’d have to remember to suggest it when he had the chance.

Her armor lit up for a moment and she sighed in relief. Huh. Must have been another dose of painkiller. Wow!

“You know, you’ve got some really fancy armor!”

She grunted and glared at him. Her voice was thready and weak, but still very snarky. Grif would probably like her. She looked like the type that really needed more friends, anyway.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Not much of a talker, huh? That’s ok! I’m enough of a talker for the both of us. The good news is that your ribs seem to only be a little broken, and none of them are shifting into your organs right now, the bad news is we are much too far away and too deep into the jungle for me to call for a vehicle and have them come get us. It’s just too dense in this area.”

Her look hardened.

“So, I guess I’m carrying you!”

Doc expected a lot of things. He expected to be punched or slapped or yelled at. He expected to be called names, or lots of grateful exclamations, he even expected tears. He did not expect a resigned sigh and the soldier closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

“Are you physically capable of carrying me?”

“Oh absolutely! I’ve been working out! Emily says a healthy body encourages a healthy mind. I don’t know if that’s exactly true, buuuuuut I have gotten stronger than I was even a few months ago!”

The glare came back, this time with a good deal more fire.

“If you drop me, I swear to god, I will make you suffer.”

“Hahaha you fool! You have no idea what suffering is!”

Doc clapped an embarrassed hand over where his mouth was, well aware that he didn’t actually stop his mouth from making noises, what with the helmet being in the way and all, but unable to stop the automatic response. The soldier’s face took on a more…contemplative was the wrong word, but Doc didn’t know what else to call it, expression.

“What was that?”

Doc gave a sheepish shrug.

“Sorry, about that. That’s O’Malley. He’s an alternate personality I developed after some pretty severe brain damage and complete isolation from humanity. He’s mostly harmless.”

“Ha ha! You fool!”
“Mostly.”

She blinked rapidly, a trait Doc had seen Carolina do any time she hung out with the Reds and Blues out of armor, then shook her head with a grin that only felt a little mean. It wasn’t even as mean Wash’s face when Caboose put condiments in Tucker’s blankets. Heck, if she was like his friends, that kind of smile was practically an endearment!

“Right. I cannot believe I am putting my faith in the hands of someone with an alternate personality that sounds like a cartoon supervillain.”

Doc stood up and brushed some of the dirt off of himself. Donut had a new friend in Connie, and Doc was totally winning over this purple haired lady! They were even color coordinated! Gosh, Doc hoped that she liked yoga!

When she wasn’t suffering from some pretty life threatening injuries of course.

“Alrighty, now I just need to get ahold of someone on my team and let them know we’re coming in, alright?”

“Sure, Doc. Whatever you say.”

Doc gave the area a quick scan, but didn’t see anything. It didn’t mean much if they were being watched by someone with cloaking, but he doubted there were many people out there who really had a viable cloaking system going anymore.

“This is Medical Officer DuFresne, does anyone copy?”

The radio was quiet for only a moment before-

“Oh, heeeeeeey, Doc!”

Doc grinned. His favorite karaoke buddy!

“Donut! Hey! I found a person out here! A live person, even! She’s hurt but not dead!”

“Awesome! Did you get the chance to do any medic stuff?”

“Not as much as I would like, but I’m going to bring her to the ship with me. The soldiers I was with turned back a while ago, you should see them pretty soon. Would you turn on your transmitter, so I can see you? This map is all kinds of confusing!”

There was a muffled sound, like something was being shuffled around. Donut huffed and grunted.

“Ok, hold on. Um…This one? Nope, that just makes fun vibraty things happen. How about… Nope! That turns on Lopez’s mix tape! Oh! Ok, how about…Here!”

And just like that, Donut’s location lit up on Doc’s map. He loved seeing that little dot! Hello dot!

“Gotcha! Oh wow, you’re really close! I thought I was going to have to try and find a path, but I’m pretty sure I can just walk straight to you!”

“Great!”

“Try not leave the area if you don’t have to, she’s in power armor and the trees are really dense here. I can’t deviate too much from the path or we might both get trapped in the jungle and starve to death!”
“Don’t resort to cannibalism! It’s not good for you.”

“Oh no, I’m still a vegetarian, why would I want to eat a person?”

Donut’s voice was full of his infectious smile, and Doc didn’t even bother to try keeping his own grin down in response. It wasn’t as if anyone was around to scold him for it, and the soldier was too busy trying to breathe through the pain to care all that much!

“Well, I should probably let Carolina know that you’re coming, and I should tell her to keep a lookout for those Chorus kids. You know, it was pretty rude of them to leave you behind.”

With that, Donut clicked off, and Doc turned back to the soldier.

“Good news! I can get you to the cars pretty quickly. We’re not that far from one of my friends and he was totally in a jeep!”

She made a pained sucking/huffing noise, and Doc wondered for a minute if she had fluid built up in her lungs that his reader didn’t see.

“Look, be straight with me.”

Doc bobbed his head up and down eagerly.

“Am I going to make it to the site?”

“Of course you are. Look, you are very, very hurt, but your organs are still intact and you don’t seem to be bleeding internally. Honestly, I think you must have a guardian angel or something.”

Her eyes flickered off to the side and slightly behind him. Doc turned to look, but there was nothing there other than the trees and some very large ants or antlike creatures dragging a mouse.

“Or something.”

The idiots were on the move again. They were slow, ridiculously so, though not for a lack of trying from the majority of the group. When one’s leader was useless, the whole group became less effective.

A well learned, hard earned, lesson. One that Wyoming would not ever forget.

Eight brightly colored soldiers trudged through the dense jungle, most seemed fairly used to the terrain, but the two he remembered, Grif and Simmons, seemed to trip and flail at every opportunity.

They had abandoned their vehicles not too far back. There was some serendipity that they’d found a previously cleared path to follow for a while, and were now en route to search an abandoned base not too far ahead. Not that they seemed to realize that was where they were headed, if their conversations were anything to be believed.

The base had been taken over by some suspiciously well-armed individuals that certainly did not speak as if they were friends with those who took care of this planet. He doubted the idiots knew that either.
The orange moron stopped, which caused some of the others to bump into him, and fell dramatically to the ground. He huffed and moaned pathetically, then starfished on the dirt.

“This is my life now. I have climbed this hill and now I will die upon it.”

Simmons allowed his arms to fall limply by his side, sighed, and tried to tug the orange one to his feet, with absolutely no payoff. The other soldiers, six of them with similar armor designs, simply stood around them and watched the show. They must have been used to it.

“Grif, we’ve only been hiking for twenty minutes.”

“Shut it Simmons, you don’t get it! My body can’t take this much effort!”

“How is it possible that you’ve gotten even more fat than when we were in Blood Gulch and we never actually did anything?!”

-How long do you expect this will continue?-

Well old bean, based on past experience, this could go on forever if something more interesting doesn’t catch their attention.

-We should give them something more interesting to do. I do not wish to watch the morbidly obese one flop around like a dying whale.-

Grif flailed his limbs a bit and knocked the maroon moron’s grip.

“Ugh! Siiiimmoooons!”

“Grif, for god’s sake, you fat tub of lard! Stop wriggling!”

One of the unknown soldiers pulled out a…cell phone? Odd choice on a planet with no phone towers. They began to circle the two former Blood Gulch residents and snap pictures while the others laughed and pointed.

Simmons scowled at the laughing soldiers. Wyoming was well aware that there was a twisted, unhappy expression on the man’s face underneath his helmet. His body language had not changed overly much over the years.

“Stop standing around and help me pick him up!”

One with purple accents cried out and waved their arms back and forth.

“No way!”

Another crossed their arms and pouted as much as anyone could while wearing a helmet.

“He’ll make us carry him the whole way!”

The rest made vague sounds of agreement, except for the one taking pictures, who simply continued to circle around.

This…was utter foolishness of the highest degree. How their Washington could stand to be around the soldiers of this planet for more than ten minutes without pulling out his hair or committing mass murder was beyond Wyoming’s scope of understanding. He’d been out in the jungle less than twenty four hours, and he was convinced that he could survive longer and happier in there than in the location these little soldiers were playing army.
They needed someone to whip them into shape. Someone to make them be serious.

Can’t they see their lives are at stake?

-I am fairly certain that those in this group are not capable of thinking that far ahead.-

Then perhaps we ought to steal a ship and get off of this planet as soon as we find our dear, missing friend. I am not willing to put my husband at risk, not again.

A rustle, just enough to catch the group’s attention, sent the eight soldiers into silence. It was almost funny how after a good ten minutes of flailing and flopping, Grif leapt to his feet with the barest whisper of noise. Simmons was already well armed, and the soldiers immediately dropped their good cheer for a more protective circle. No back was exposed, all sides were protected, and weapons were trained.

-This is unexpected.-

It certainly is.

They were…significantly better prepared than Wyoming had thought to give them credit for. His biases had clearly fooled him in this.

They were still idiots, of course, but perhaps they did actually have better survival skills than koalas. Perhaps they were actually sloths, capable of caring, but stupid enough to mistake their arms for branches and fall to their deaths.

-You have read far too much Douglas Adams.-

Wyoming readied his rifle and scanned the surrounding trees.

Two of the soldiers looked particularly ruffled. Edra was the exceptionally short one wearing white armor with pale blue accents. Her partner, Habisch, was exceptionally tall wearing tan armor with dark blue accents. They’d spent the entire trip on edge, snipping and sniping at each other in a way that just made Wyoming want to slap them until they understood the value of silence.

“Sir, there’s movement in the trees.”

Now, they had eyes on the trees, weapons drawn, and were prepared to fight.

“Markings look like mercs to me.”

It was almost adorable in a way.

“I’ve got at least two on this side, they think they’re sneaky, but they’re really not.”

It was more like two children playing soldier, rather than two trained soldiers. The rest were much the same, but these two struck him as exceptionally out of place.

The mercenaries moved closer, but did not fire or make any aggressive movements.

An unusual choice, to give up the advantage for no foreseeable reason. Gamma, be a dear and give them a quick once over?

-Based on their movements, it seems that they have been in the jungle for some time.-

We know that from observing their little sad, little base camp, how about we speculate a bit?
Grif shifted his feet and readied himself, but did not fire. He’d learned to hold his shots, it seemed. What else the man had learned in the time between Blood Gulch and now was yet to be seen. Wyoming wished that he’d learned to be less annoying, but there were some things that could not be learned without help.

“This isn’t good.”

“How can you tell?”

“See how they’re slowly surrounding us? And how they all have guns and knives and I think that one guy there is carrying a machete? I’m gonna make a guess and say that they’re not here to invite us to a pizza party.”

-They are out of ammunition, or very close to the end. Most of them are favoring blades rather than guns, despite their weaponry being superior to the armor the soldiers are wearing.-

Habisch leaned over to Edra.

“We have five people trying to kill us right now, what are we supposed to do?”

“Actually it’s more like eight. No, wait, I’m picking up stragglers. Like nine of them.”

Habisch’s voice reached a shrill pitch that managed to throw off the mercenary closest to Wyoming. He could barely contain a smile as he dropped down behind the person and slipped a blade silently through the base of their neck.

“Oh, sorry I wasn’t specific enough!”

Simmons leaned forward and nudged Grif with his shoulder. He was surprisingly confident. Time had done him well, it seemed.

“I have a plan.”

Grif tightened his grip.

“Is it a good plan?”

“I have a plan.”

“Great.”

“Well, if you have a better plan, why don’t you speak up!”

A mercenary close to the group hauled up a massive cannon.

-Wyoming, please move behind the tree six feet to your right, and once the blast has cleared, be prepared to climb.-

Ah, I see we’re doing the hero’s path rather than the spy’s path, eh?

He slipped through the shadows and tucked himself behind the tree just as a concussive blast from the cannon threw the colorful soldiers off their feet. Their weapons flew out of their hands, and they were startled, but relatively unharmed.

“OH MY GOD! WHAT WAS THAT?!?!”
“My ribs!”

“Just take a deep breath or something!”

“TAKE A DEEP BREATH?! If feels like my insides are being RIPPED OUT?!”

The climb was quick work, and it only took a few seconds to hide himself in the foliage and achieve the best angle to kill everyone below before they could spot him and shoot.

Wyoming watched the idiots scramble for their weapons as the mercenaries filtered into the clearing and surrounded them. There were far more than eight standing there. Fourteen. With the one that Wyoming had already taken out and the ten he’d killed while watching the merry band of idiots, that was all of the mercenaries camped at that particular base.

-I believe the best course of action would be to protect the planet’s inhabitants, if we wish to be allowed to stay on this planet.-

Well, considering the state of our ship, and my husband, it’s probably best to make a good impression, is it not?

-Reggie, why did you marry the psychopath? He has no regard for the wellbeing of others.-

He’s not really a psychopath, it’s more that he turns off his moral code and true personality while wearing his uniform. He’s quite sweet when he’s not committing atrocities of the highest orders.

-That is a lie.-

Well, sweet is perhaps not the most…correct word for it.

“Looks like we’re in the right place, guys. Get on your knees and take off your helmets. We don’t want bullet holes in our new uniforms.”

One of the soldiers, Garza, if Wyoming remembered correctly, managed to sit up and look at the mercenary looming over him.

“Uniforms?”

“How else do you think we’re gonna get into the city?”

Edra reached for her gun slowly, only for a mercenary to brutally stomp her hand. She screamed and tried to yank her hand out from under the merc’s boot. He just laughed at her and ground his heel down harder.

-Not yet.-

I know.

Grif snarled at the mercenary nearest to him who had drawn their gun and pressed the point against his helmet. The man was clearly scared. Good.

“What makes you think our armor is even going to fit you?”

“It only needs to fit one of us. Take off your fucking helmet or I will shoot you in the face!”

That’s all I needed to hear. Please fry their communications. We don’t need anyone talking about our presence, do we?
Wyoming aimed, and with Gamma’s help, put clean shots through all but one of the mercenaries throats. It was far too simple for his taste, but he was going for impressive, but not flashy with this one.

He leapt onto the final mercenary, boots first, and heard a sickening crack.

The soldiers all gaped at him as the mercenary screamed. Habisch turned her gun on him, but she was the only one out of the eight soldiers. As she looked at her comrades and the realization that they were not moving dawned on her, she lowered her gun with a slump to her shoulders.

Wyoming gave a full belly laugh. How could he not? She looked so disappointed in them all, just like his Sargent in basic training a lifetime ago had, and it was well worth it to see them startle.

Simmons stepped forward.

“Oh, wow, that was impressive! Who are you? Based on your armor color I’d say you’re Federal Army, but the helmet is all wrong!”

Wyoming strapped his rifle to his back.

“I am part of the crew of the aid ship that crash landed. I assume that you are part of the assistance team sent out to liaison with us. You’re going the wrong way.”

Grif looked at the wailing mercenary underneath his feet as Wyoming placed a bullet between his eyes. The cloying scent of fear overwhelmed the clearing. It was still fine, they would respect him more than fear him, but fear was good. They needed to be afraid of him right now.

“How long were you hiding in the trees?”

If they were afraid, they would listen. Once he proved that he was on their side, that fear would become a sturdy foundation of respect to build from.

“Longer than you’d like, I’d wager.”

Simmons shot to his feet like a rocket and fumbled desperately for his gun. The soldiers around him all jumped into action.

“Holy shit. I know that voice!”

“Yes you do,” Wyoming strode to Edra’s side and held out a hand to her. “I believe at one point during our early acquaintance, you called me a cracker. Dear, may I see your hand? I would like to make sure you have no broken bones.”

Several of the soldiers look at the man in what Wyoming assumed was bewilderment until he heard one speak.

“You didn’t.”

They were angry with him!

“It was a heat of the moment sort of thing!”

Simmons squawked and flailed his arms. The soldiers did not seem sympathetic to the man.
“And that makes it better?”

“That’s a shitty thing to call someone.”

“It was because his armor is white! I’ve never seen what he looks like underneath it!”

“Oh wow, so you’re willing to throw racial slurs at people without ever having looked at them?”

“Oh my god, it’s not like that! He was trying to kill us!”

Wyoming shrugged.

“Dear Richard, if I had been trying to kill you,” he motioned to the literal ring of bodies, “I think I would have.”

A soldier in tan and purple sidled up to Edra and stripped her glove off.

“Look at this. You can’t use your gun. You’re going to need surgery, he fucked you up something awful.”

“I really wish I wasn’t wearing a helmet, because I’d like to spit on that fucker’s corpse.”

Wyoming liked her.

Vicious little things, aren’t they?

-You admire that about them.-

Of course I do. Survival is not about being kind, it’s about being fierce.

Grif gave Wyoming a hard look, then waved an arm around the conglomeration of the living and the dead.

“Look, I don’t want to hang around here much more. I can tell you five things better than hanging around these bodies. No, you know what? 10 things. 20. 30.”

Simmons sighed and put his head in his hands.

“Are you going to keep increasing that number until we leave?”

“Yes!”

Wyoming nodded.

“Wonderful. I would like to offer my assistance in escorting you.”

Simmons let out an unpleasantly high pitched squeak.

“What?”

“And perhaps you would be willing to assist me. One of my traveling companions, a young woman, has become quite lost out here, and we are unable to raise her on the radio or track her. Her brother is quite distressed, and I am not entirely pleased by the turn of events myself.”

The medic finished wrapping up Edra’s hand and shoved her gun into Garza’s arms.

“Of course we’ll help!”
“Danvers!”

“Hey, he saved our lives, he’s part of the aid ship—“

Simmons wailed at that point.

I wonder if his face is getting red?

-He seems to be in a great deal of emotional distress.-

Am I a horrible person for wanting to laugh at him?

-Yes.-

“We don’t know that!”

“Do you really think those bloodsuckers would sacrifice that many people to make us trust one
guy?”

Danvers shifted her feet and crossed her arms in defense.

“The Bastards Who Shall Not Be Named killed a lot more than this.”

“Also, he’s fucking evil! He tried to kill us! He kidnapped Tucker’s son! He’s a Freelancer!”

The tide shifted dramatically. Instead of defending him, the soldiers all stumbled back as if
Wyoming was some sort of diseased monster. It was not the most pleasant of shifts.

Garza’s shoulders twitched unpleasantly.

“You’re a…Freelancer?”

Wyoming shrugged. There was no point in trying to deny or defend.

“I was at one point. I was given the name of Agent Wyoming, and I still use it most days. Still,
Project Freelancer is defunct, its creator is well and truly dead, and those of us who have survived
are simply trying to continue to do so. I will admit that I committed terrible crimes in my days of
service, but I and my people are not your enemies. We came here because we saw your distress
signal, and we saw that Washington was living amongst you.”

“You’re friends with Wash?”

“I don’t know that he still considers us so, but I think of him as a dear friend.”

The soldiers all shared a look.

“Ok.”

“Ok?”

“You’re Agent Washington’s friend. That’s good enough for me. Just…don’t do anything he
wouldn’t want you to do, and we’ll call it good.”

Simmons stomped his foot angrily.

“Are you **insane**?!”
“Chap, I hate to tell you this, but if we are going to get out of here, away from potential murderers, and out of this rather unpleasant technicolor jungle, we’re going to have to work together. After that, we can go back to killing each other.”

Grif huffed.

“Oh, fine.”

“Grif!”

“Simmons, I don’t particularly want to be shot today. Edra’s hand is all kinds of fucked up. We need to get to the aid ship. He knows where it is. He’s not being paid to kidnap babies right now, so I’m all for letting the scary Freelancer defend the tribe.”

“Are…are we calling dibs on him?”

“FUCK NO!”

“I feel as though I should be insulted by that.”

Habisch tentatively patted his arm, timid, well aware that he could snap her wrist before she could blink if he so chose. She was afraid, but she was also attempting to create a bond.

-If we like her, we are less likely to kill her. She is not unintelligent.-

No she is not. It would serve us well to make connections with the soldiers now, before even more of our crimes come to light.

He moved slowly, angled his body, well aware of the full body flinch the younger soldier tried to hide and patted her shoulder in return. She huffed a small laugh. Grif motioned in the direction of where they’d left the jeeps.

“Ok, we need to get moving, Edra’s hand isn’t going to get less broken the longer we stand around.”

“I didn’t agree with this! I’m running at least half of this squad!”

Habisch growled.

“Sir, don’t make us mutiny.”

“You wouldn’t!”

She put a hand on her hip and popped it out aggressively. It once again made Wyoming think the soldier’s on this planet were more like adorable children playing soldier rather than actually being soldiers.

“I’m New Republic, we’re totally rebels and stuff. Come on, Wy, lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, originally I had a good deal more with South and other people planned for this chapter, but nearly 10,000 words seemed like a good place to stop. There will be a
second post in the near future to check in on some other people. I'm really excited, guy! Things are happening, people are meeting, and there are feelings in the air!

I thought about a more platonic relationship between York and Carolina, but every time I tried to pull them in that direction, I swear they wouldn't let me! It was a struggle man!

Also, I know this is kind of weird and not super appropriate for the story, but I have to crow a little bit because I'm so excited and the only people who I think would actually care are my two friend's teenage sons and you guys! I've got nearly all of my Red vs Blue pop figures finished! Carolina took a spill and broke her head a while back, but she's been all patched up now, and Maine's tattoo needed to be fixed, but that'll get done tonight I think. Now I just need Wyoming and Florida for the Freelancers, and I need Doc, Sister, and Tucker finished for the Blood Gulch Crew! Then it's gonna be sculpy stuff. I really want to have a bite sized Junior, a Laser Face Church, and the Feds and New Repubs too.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Florida has conversations, Katie gets nervous, Doc eats dirt, Church casts his vote.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t take long for Florida to regret his hands on approach to dealing with the pirate.

Oh, not because it was unpleasant, or because he was squeamish or anything like that. Just…now he had a mess to clean up if he didn’t want to terrify the baby soldiers. They seemed pretty skittish, and the last thing the Freelancers needed were more people afraid of them.

Well, it wasn’t a bad thing for them to be afraid, but it was probably not super helpful at this point in time. Too much fear would keep them from trusting, and right now, they needed the trust if they wanted to get where Washington was being kept.

Maine had managed to keep the soldiers a good distance away from the dirty work that was happening, but they were close enough to have heard the screams echo. Ramirez had tucked himself against the ship with poor Folami. Bitters stared him down, gun in hand by the crates marked ‘first to transport’, and Demir simply stood by himself.

Demir actually trembled as Florida approached him, the poor lamb.

“Is that blood?”

Florida glanced down at himself. He needed a hose and some soap. The blood wouldn’t necessarily stain, but it would be a pain to get out later. Also, the longer it lingered, the more likely it was that the kiddos would start to cry.

“No?”

“That’s not a question you’re supposed to answer with another question.”

“Oh no, it’s definitely blood, but why are you asking?”

The young man curled himself backwards with a cringe. Florida could hear the quavering whimpers in his voice. He sounded broken already. What did he expect? Thin red mud?

It took everything Florida had to not roll his eyes. Clearly the rescue team was all wet behind the ears rookies.

“I thought…you were supposed to be the good guys.”

Florida swayed forward and patted the young man on the shoulder. Demir whimpered pitifully, but didn’t flinch again, which was a point in his favor. He could forgive the naïveté of youth if they were willing to try.
“Oh Sweetheart, we are the good guys, and they are very, very bad. They have made it no secret that they want to kill you, right? We needed to know their plans, and now we do. Let’s not worry about the wartime atrocities until after we’ve gotten rid of the baby killers, hmm?”

Then he turned and dry heaved onto the ground.

Demir actually scrambled to hold Florida up by his shoulders as he ineffectively expelled bile. It was good, even if the act was unpleasant. Demir would assume it was because of the dawning realization that he’d committed a vile act against another human being, rather than the concussion.

The Chorus duckling made soothing noises and rubbed the back of Florida’s neck until the heaving stopped.

“Come sit down. I’ll get…water. We should probably get you clean before anyone else shows up.”

Demir leaned Florida carefully against one of the crates and gently squeezed his shoulder. It was kind of adorable actually. The man was clearly afraid of him, terrified, and yet he went out of his way to be reassuring and kind. As if it would matter if Florida was really interested in killing him.

A flicker of…dear god, compassion for the man…lit up in his chest. That damned tactic was actually working! He’d been out of uniform for too long. Domestic life had taken a toll. Oh, it wouldn’t stop him from stabbing them or slitting their throats in their sleep, of course, but Florida knew he’d feel really bad about doing it!

And Florida hated to feel guilty.

Bitters stood across from them, arms crossed over his chest, clearly going for nonchalant and only failing a little bit. The man had a way of presenting himself as uncaring, and yet managed to be the most invested of all of them.

The two of them did their best to make quick work of cleaning, though Demir ended up taking his helmet off to vomit twice. The poor soldier likely hadn’t had to deal with a great deal of gore in his time. It took an age, but eventually Florida was at least visibly clean.

Maine walked up, grunted, and handed Florida and Demir each a meal replacement bar.

Poor Demir took one look at Maine and scuttled off to parts unknown. The other man’s face twisted in pain.

It was pitifully obvious the heavy was hurting something fierce. It wasn’t surprising; Florida had seen his charts. Sure, Maine was well enough to walk around and do a little lifting while he was in the hospital, but the crash had added a whole extra set of unpleasant elements to the whole thing, not the least of which was his dislocated shoulder. The fact that he was still standing was probably a miracle of some sort.

The man eventually wandered back to where Niner and Folami were and sat down, but only after the medic screamed at him that he wasn’t allowed to be on his feet any longer.

Bitters kept silent through the whole of it. Florida couldn’t help but like him. He had moxie.

“Something to add, Sugarplum?”

“Just trying to think of the best way to take you out when you turn on us.”

When, not if.
Florida grinned. He stopped right in front of Bitters, crossed his ankles, and sunk to the ground cross legged. Bitters looked down at him for a moment, before he mimicked the move. It was smooth, a pretty good recreation of Florida’s own glide to the ground. Not perfect, but good.

“And? Any luck?”

Bitters shook his head.

“Most of us would never see it coming.”

“That’s true, but that’s not what we’re discussing. You’ve already figured out that I’m a traitor. How do you get rid of me?”

Bitters gave Florida a once over.

“You’d be on alert immediately if I tried to get you by yourself. You’re really good about not letting people get behind you. My guess is we’d have to use a sniper, but I’m sure you’re pretty good at spotting them at this point.”

“You wouldn’t try to kill me up close? I’m a little disappointed.”

“You’d never accept food from us if it could be tampered with, so poison is out. I’d never be able to get a good blow in. If I pulled a gun, you’d disarm me. If I tried to stab you, I’d have to miss your armor and your very specialized defensive training. You move like Agent Washington does, but smoother, like you’re really used to people being up close and personal.”

That…was unexpected.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Ramirez gave a loud groan and flopped down next to Bitters, a bar of his own in hand. He flipped his helmet off and took a bite.

“What’re we talking about?”

Goodness, Ramirez looked like he’d barely hit is last growth spurt. Florida couldn’t easily tell with the armor, but he got the distinct impression that Ramirez was a gangly little thing. He was so tiny it was ridiculous.

“How your Agent Washington and I walk similarly.”

“Oh.”

Ramirez scrutinized Florida for a moment, looked up at the sky, then nodded.

“Yeah, I see it. When he’s doing his whole ‘don’t look at me, I’m harmless’ thing.”

Florida cocked his head to the side and smiled cheerfully.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but if he’s going by the name ‘Agent’, he has to have some fighting skills. Why would he be harmless?”

Bitters shook his head and gave what was surely a disappointed look to the other man.
“He’s not.”

Ramirez snorted and took another bite. It was less cute that the man insisted on speaking with his mouth full.

“Agent Washington is all adorable and stuff though, when we’re not training or fighting. Do you remember the day he cried when we showed him the video of kittens meowing and climbing people’s legs? And you can’t have forgotten him chasing Lieutenant Grif down the hall after ‘The Great Pudding Cup Caper’?”

“That was pretty funny, but it doesn’t help your case.”

“No, it totally does! Agent Washington was all high pitched and flailing and stuff!”

“That does not make him harmless. It means he’s hiding how dangerous he is. The fact that you can’t see it means you need more training.”

Ramirez groaned and flopped onto his back.

“Oh, come on Antoine! Not everyone’s as into that spy movie crap as you are. So he walks like he’s happy, that doesn’t mean-“

“No, no, it’s important that he trusts his instincts! That sort of insight could save your life one day. You’re moving out of the war movie territory and into political intrigue. Knowing people and how they operate is an vital skill. You never know who your enemies actually are.”

Ramirez looked at Florida upside down, and whatever he saw in the man’s deliberately gentle grin caused him to jump to his feet and scramble backwards.

“I…uh, I have to go.”

The boy looked positively terrified, which threw Florida a little, since the comment wasn’t one he expected to chill anyone to the bone. He’d actually been trying for amicable and friendly on that one.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Yeah. You did.”

Bitters managed to look furious, even with his head still covered. They really were adorable, they practically wore their hearts on their sleeves.

They wouldn’t last a day if the UNSC decided to infiltrate them.

“You had someone you thought was a friend?”

“Yeah. Both sides. Turns out they were mercenaries being paid to get us all to kill each other off.”

“Icky, but effective, I take it?”

Bitters stared Florida down. It was impressive! He’d have to see if the younger man could pull it off when they weren’t both wearing protective headgear.

“They nearly killed us all. The war could have ended years ago, we could have made peace, so many kids could be going to college and living normal lives with their parents in houses if those bastards hadn’t been here.”
It was the first real emotions Florida had managed to catch from the man. Up to that point, he’d managed to keep a pretty good façade in place.

“I see.”

Bitters startled ever so slightly, clenched a hand, and smoothed himself back out.

“So, yeah. Sniper seems best for you.”

“Which is a good portion of why I married one. He’s excellent at spotting assassins. If I manage to miss them, he doesn’t.”

Bitters paused for a moment. Florida didn’t bother to hide his grin.

“Back to the drawing board, Cupcake?”

Katie didn’t know how long they’d been walking. She was sure it wasn’t as long as she thought it was, but she felt miserable. Her feet were so sore.

It didn’t help that she was really bummed about Matthews birthday being ruined. She had a feeling that Agent Washington had only gone easy on them because of that, but she was willing to bet that the five of them would find themselves with some particularly unpleasant changes to their training schedule soon.

Luckily, her team was pretty great. Jessica Smosna, Paolo Marconi, and Cissy Yacavone were an awesome group, and just super fun to be around. It made the really boring process of searching from place to place sooooo much more fun when you had friends to chat with! Well, Jessica was fun for her. Yacavone and Marconi really kept to themselves, giggling and swapping increasingly ridiculous stories.

Still, they listened well enough.

They ended up a little off track from where they were supposed to be, but there were enough recently fallen trees to suggest that it was the correct direction to find the aid ship, so Katie wasn’t worried about that.

Katie startled hard when Smosna reached out and tapped her shoulder.

“Lieutenant Jensen?”

Katie stopped and turned to the other woman. Woman. It was crazy to think that she and Jessie were completely grown up! Honestly, Katie didn’t expect to get to nineteen, let alone get to nineteen and see so many of her friends alive too!

“What’s up?”

“Movement.”

The four pulled together and crept forward, hyperaware of any noise they could make. It didn’t take long to hear the sounds of a struggle and some yelling. No gunshots, which was a blessing, but still enough noise to cause her some concern.
They managed to find a small clearing where a bunch of trees had been blown over enough to clear some space.

There was a person wearing purple armor with green accents standing surrounded by six pirates. They all had their guns trained on him, and his arms were in the air.

Yacavone shivered and started to hyperventilate. Honestly, she was sixteen and still having panic attacks? She was a shame to the glory of the red team. Captain Simmons would be so disappointed in her.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

Really, it was just sad.

“Shh. Shtop panicking.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

Then again…Captain Simmons was pretty understanding about this sort of thing. He always had nice things to say about people and even though his voice got squeaky sometimes, he’d always have a way of calming people down when they got worked up. He really worried about everyone and didn’t try to make anyone be different than who they were.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

Katie nodded at Marconi, who laid a hand on Yacavone’s shoulder and squeezed. Smosna gave him a look and made a jerking off motion that Katie was so embarrassed by! Like, what the hell, Jess?!

“You know what they say, panicking burns a of calories.”

“What? Who even says that? Why do you think I need to burn calories? Are you saying I’m fat?!?”

Yacavone managed to snap out of her panic enough to turn around and slap Marconi’s visor.

Katie closed her eyes and tried desperately to center herself. Maybe she’d spoken too soon about how awesome her team was.

“Be quiet, guysh.”

Yacavone took a shuddery breath, and readied her gun.

Katie motioned for them to surround the bad guys and took a deep breath. They moved quickly, and didn’t startle a single one of the pirates! She was so proud!

The purple person turned their head this way and that to look at the pirates.

“So0000, I take it this means you lovely fellows can’t help me?”

“Get on your fucking knees, asshole!”

“Ok then.”

Katie got the distinct impression that ‘purple’ was mocking them. He didn’t move, and one of the pirates cocked his weapon, ready to fire.
“NOW!”

They leapt out of the trees screaming. Jessica and Katie were able to take out three of the pirates before they turned, but Marconi and Yacavone both managed to miss everything.

Or, Katie thought they’d missed. When she went to fire at the remaining pirates, their helmets had perfectly centered bullet holes, and they all collapsed.

The person in purple straightened as the last of the pirates fell, gun in hand, and yep. Yacavone and Marconi couldn’t aim for anything, but this person certainly could.

Katie felt a thrill of fear glance down her spine.

“Well, I certainly wasn’t expecting that.”

Definitely a man.

A man with exceptional aim.

Exceptional aim and a very smooth voice.

Katie straightened up and held her gun at the ready, and hoped that the man didn’t see her hands shake. It wouldn’t be enough to save her if the man decided to end her, but hopefully the others would be able to kill him before he had the chance to turn and kill them.

He laid his gun on the ground and held his hands up.

“It’s alright, I’m not going to hurt you. You four did a pretty good job.”

The purple armored man looked them over, much in the same way he’d looked over the pirates. Katie realized he was probably fully capable of taking all four of them out without his gun. He looked the type. Fancy armor and cocky stance. She’d seen guys like him before, one in particular that the thought of made her stomach sour.

“You’re part of the planet’s military?”

“Yesh, shir. Um, who exshactly are you?”

“Name’s North. Have you seen a woman wearing armor very similar to mine? Her color scheme is just a tad more on the lilac side.”

They all shook their heads.

“No, shir. We were looking for a crashed ship. You’re the firshft person we’ve sheen sho far.”

“Well, I can tell you where the ship landed, but I can’t go back right now. One of ours is missing.”

Katie’s heart sunk. He was part of the UNSC?

No. No, something wasn’t right about that. They’d never send someone out by themselves to look around, and purple wasn’t a traditional color for rescue teams. He was something else.

“Oh no!”

“Yeah, and I need to find her, she’s probably in rough shape.”
“Oh! Well, I can let our people know we need to start looking for a person instead of the ship, since we know how to find it! We’ve got some pretty good trackers in our mix!”

His stance shifted, still cocky, but also a smidge defensive.

“Well, I have a team looking.”

It was uncomfortable, how much information he was able to hide while seeming to give up. Distract, misinform, keep him off his balance.

Keep everyone safe.

“How many? We’ve got almost thirty people, and we can get more deployed if necessary.”

“That’s…a lot of people.”

She shrugged, well aware that he didn’t answer her question. She hoped that Jessica at least caught what she was doing, the two of them could run interference for the younger soldiers. Just enough not truths to surprise him. He didn’t need to know they had more than thirty out there, rather than less than thirty.

“We didn’t have much to go on for the aid ship, sir. We had no idea how many or who or anything like that.”

“That’s fair.”

“Besides, there are still pirates out here!”

Marconi made his exuberant exclamation and bounced in place, and Katie could have slapped him herself.

She couldn’t see his face, but she imagined that the man’s expression was one of disbelief based on the sound of his voice. That one word was all Katie needed to know he was dangerous. His voice was smooth and silky, soft, fond, and filled with incredulous disbelief.

If he was a good guy, she’d go on a date with Charles and wouldn’t complain once about him talking about Pokémon as if she hadn’t played the games before he could walk.

“Pirates.”

A bright burst of light appeared in a blast of tiny explosions and the four Chorus soldiers fell back with varying levels of shrieking.

“Pirates!” A child’s voice exclaimed.

Katie blinked. Hovering above the man’s shoulder was a tiny, glowing purple and red soldier jumping up and down, clapping their hands.

“Oh, you have an AI?”

She…hadn’t meant that as a question, but it tumbled out all the same.

“Yeah, I do. His name is Theta. What’s yours?”

Katie watched her squad titter like birds. Marconi actually brushed dirt off of his suit and attempted a casual lean against one of the trees. It was a really sad attempt.
Were they seriously being taken in by this guy? Did they not remember the last charismatic man from the sky? The one who ended up being a complete psychopath and tried to murder the entire planet?! A psychopath with an immoral mass murderer as his best friend?!

Did they not remember Agent Washington’s warnings about strangers? Stranger danger is still a thing, even if the big fight is over!

Did they not remember the Reds and Blues stories about people with AI’s who’d tried to kill them?

“North! There are pirates here!”

Smosna made an ‘ok’ with her left hand and tapped her thigh twice. Katie saw it, and she was pretty sure Yacavone did as well, but she was 99% sure that the man saw it too.

This was the opposite of good.

“I’m jusht going to call in and let everyone know what’sh going on. If you’ve got friendsh in the treesh, we don’t want them to accshidentaly get shot.”

Katie turned on her radio.

Nothing.

Katie pulled up her trackers.

Nothing.

Katie brought up her map.

The map was dead.

“Shmoshna, try your radio.”

Jessica fiddled for a moment. Her voice was even, but tense.

“I’ve got nothing long range.”

The tiny AI ducked behind the purple soldier, who hadn’t so much as shifted since they started talking. A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, like really icky medicine, or that time she’d gotten stuck in the mountains and ended up eating a lot of snow to keep from feeling too hungry.

He’d taken out their communications.

Yacavone flung herself against a toppled over tree and wailed.

“They fried our maps and trackers! We’re lost! We are going to DIE out here!”

“Calm yourshelf down! We are not going to die out here! We have a whole team of people who can come to find ush if we can’t make our way back.”

Marconi started to breathe heavily.

“Katie, Katie, I don’t want to die.”

Katie grabbed his helmet and pulled him in close so he’d have to stare directly into her visor. It wouldn’t work as well as eye contact, but like hell if she was going to whip off her helmet with
death and his glowing parrot standing five feet away.

“We all have to die shometime, Paolo. You jusht need to make shure it’ sh worth it. Now calm down. Freaking out doesn’t help anything.”

“You’re not lost. I know how to get back to the ship. I can get you there, but I need to keep looking for my sister.”

“The…missing woman is your sister?”

“Yes. My twin.”

Smosna gave a soft, fluttering sigh. Katie knew she recognized that little tidbit. He probably didn’t think it was much of a giveaway, but it was everything Katie needed to turn her hypothesis into theory.

Between the colors, the armor, the AI, the name the AI had shouted, and the twin, Katie didn’t have a doubt that he was one of the Freelancers. She was willing to bet a movie of Charles choice that he was North, based entirely around rumors spread from Agent Carolina’s drunk night ramblings before General Kimball or one of the Reds or Blues could pull her into a private room. How he was still alive was anyone’s guess, but she wasn’t stupid enough to think that dead was dead without proper proof. Clearly Agent Washington and Agent Carolina had made a mistake.

Two, if his sister was also there.

Katie tried to make herself look bigger, stronger, and more intimidating. She really hoped that her petiteness didn’t negate that and make her look silly instead, but if he worked with Agent Carolina and his sister, he’d have to be stupid to assume that girls were less good at being soldiers than boys. This North guy was a hard read. She had no idea how successful she was.

“We’ll be more than happy to help you find your person. Sho, you help ush and we’ll help you. We need to connect with the rescue ship.”

She couldn’t get a good read, but he seemed very displeased. Still he nodded and motioned into the trees, the same direction they’d been heading before.

Yacavone and Marconi took the lead, pinkies linked as they walked. Katie wanted to make them split up, but Yacavone was left handed so it didn’t actually impair her ability to fire her weapon all that much, and at this point Katie just wanted to get them to safety. Smosna took up the rear, and Katie knew that if her friend couldn’t save her life, she would at least avenge her death.

And hopefully she’d remember to burn Katie’s diary. No one needed to know how badly she’d had a crush on Captain Simmons when he’d first come along, and no one needed to see her…personal fiction.

Katie felt North’s shoulder brush hers and a shudder ran through her. The man had his arms loose at his sides and had started to hum lightly under his breath.

On one of her people, she’d know she was safe. From him, a Freelancer, and an unknown, Katie was pretty sure it meant he could kill them without a fuss.

The AI, Theta, popped up and sat on North’s shoulders. He swung his legs back and forth and his head dipped from side to side like he was moving in time to North’s humming. Oh my goodness, that was the cutest thing!
No! Katie! Focus! Evil death man!

“So, not fun pirates?”

Katie shook her head.

“Nope, they’re all pretty awful.”

North sighed.

“I guess there’s really no point in you not talking to people anymore, is there, kiddo?”

“Sorry, North.”

“It’s fine. He’s not freaking you out or anything, is he?”

“No, we’ve all worked with AI before to a certain extent.”

He looked over at her briefly before he had Marconi and Yacavone change directions. Katie wondered if she’d managed to surprise him.

“You have?”

“You, our big planetary protector ish an AI named Shanta.”

“That…actually explains a question I had.”

“Santa? Like Santa Claus?”

“Yes! Cause he’s big, and red, and givesh giftsh and judgesch you. One of our captains named him.”

He chuckled.

“Cute.”

They walked in near silence for a while, and Katie could hardly handle it. She wanted to scream, and it was taking everything in her not to shake and cry, knowing that the man next to her could break her neck at any moment and she was powerless to stop it.

Maybe she’d been too hard on Cissy and Paolo.

“So,” North drawled, “I can’t say I remember getting your names.”

“Can’t say I heard you offer up yours, stranger.” Smosna’s voice took on a cocky drawl of its own, and thank all the gods for Jessica, who could make sarcasm sound like seduction and fear sound like relaxation.

“Sorry, guess I skipped that. I’m North Dakota, and this guy is Theta. I’m part of a seven man rescue operation.”

Yes! Katie knew it!

Wait…

Rescue?
Not aid?

Was he really bad at his cover story, or did he just not care? If he didn’t intend for them to live, it
didn’t matter how consistent he was.

“I’m Lieutenant Jenshen. Those two are Privates Yacavone and Marconi—“

“And I,” Jessica purred softly, “Am Smosna, but you can call me Jessica. Or Jess. Or Volleyball.”

“Volleyball?”

“It’s a fun game and a great way to keep in shape. I have fantastic core strength.”

Katie slapped her forehead.

So, not sarcasm then. Just sheer horniness.

Gross.

“Shmoshna, you are just the worsht.”

“Love you too, Katie-Kate.”

Doc crouched down and helped her back into her helmet. He had a deft touch, which South
appreciated, but she’d appreciate it a lot more if she had better painkillers in her. At this point, she
wasn’t even sure that Eta wasn’t stuffing her full of a nice, healthy, placebo. There was no way that
the suit’s supplies were this shit.

“I’m going to do the best I can not to hurt you, but I’m not going to lie, this is going to be the
suckiest piggy-back ride you’ve ever had. Alright, get ready. One, two, three!”

And all of the pain medication in the world could not have prepared her for the feeling of being
hoisted onto someone’s back when her body was this fucked up.

“Oh, FUCK!”

-Your pain levels have spiked! I am sending a distress signal! I have not received a response! I
have not received!-

She felt the need to vomit and bite down at the same time.

“Oh my god, calm the fuck down!”

“It’s ok to be in pain. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

He adjusted his grip on her thighs, and South wanted to punch him. GOD! She wanted to kick him
until he stopped fucking breathing! No one should sound as fucking happy as he did!

-We need to get you proper medical treatment!-

She tried to breathe her way through the pain, but fuck if she wasn’t dizzy as shit.
“That’s where we’re heading.”

Doc started to make his way through the distressingly dense trees, and every single move he made was an extra ripple of agony. South didn’t know a person could feel this much pain and not die. Or at least pass out.

Fuck, she wanted to pass out. She wanted out of her armor. She… She wanted her big brother to fix it.

Fuck. Stupid fucking brain. Apparently, independence and freedom mean shit when confronted with pain and strangers. It was like she was fucking five again and she scraped her goddamned fucking knee.

-If we don’t get you help, you COULD DIE!-

“Yeah, I know, but I can’t make him walk any faster.”

“Are you hallucinating? Because I don’t have anything I can use to sedate you until we have you in a better position to be examined and I really don’t need you hitting me because you think I’m an evil coconut or something.”

Eta flared up next to South.

“DO NOT MIX MEDICATIONS WITHOUT CHECKING THE SIDE EFFECTS! DO YOU WANT HER BRAIN TO LIQUIFY?!?!”

“Oh! You have an AI! Well, that makes more sense, I’m glad you’re not hallucinating! Say, is it going to try and take over my brain? Because I’m not a big fan of that.”

“Don’t think so. Little guy can’t…get very far…chipped in.”

“She is in great pain!”

“Yeah, I get that, but um…I can’t really give her a proper exam until we’re somewhere safe. There are still enemy soldiers and space pirates and mercenaries on the planet, and they might just decide to kill us because we’re here. She is hurt badly enough that I’m a little worried, but honestly, it’s safer to move her than try to fix her in the middle of this nasty sepsis inducing environment.”

Eta twitched back and forth in front of Doc before finally nodding, though South could practically hear the discontent at allowing someone else to watch over her.

“I will continue to scan the area for hostile forces. Can you properly defend her while carrying her? What if we are attacked by space mercenaries and pirates!”

“Bitch, I am right here. Doc, Dufresne, what the fuck ever your name is. Give me my pistol.”

The man actually froze while walking, and South had to bite back a pained moan at the sudden stop. She’d finally managed to make it through walking, and he fucking stopped.

“That…seems like a bad idea. You’re injured.”

She leaned into Doc’s ear and hoped that she still sounded intimidating rather than weak. She needed him to be afraid enough to do what she wanted. She needed to be in control of this.

“I can aim just fine with my non-dominant arm. Give me my pistol. If Eta sees anyone, he’ll let me
know and I’ll shoot them.”

Doc handed her the pistol and went quiet for the first time since he stumbled across her. Every now and again he’d stop to adjust South on his back and shift direction, which was just as fucking brutal every time he did it.

- *His pulse rate has spiked. I am not receiving any response from any of the emergency beacons I have sent.* -

So, stop sending them, then. Communications were probably knocked out. I’m more concerned about our ride here. Any clues?

- *He mentioned being afraid I would take him over.* -

“Any reason you’re freaking out on me, Doc?”

He gave a soft, high pitched giggle. South could feel his shoulders start to shake and it was fucking uncomfortable.

“Oh, um...you can tell, huh? Well, I mean, I guess you can. Makes sense since you’ve got an AI. Um...they’re pretty rare, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

“Oh, cuz see, I know someone who has an AI. And I had an AI for a while.”

South... didn’t know what to do with that.

“Bullshit.”

“No, no! It’s true! And um, please don’t break my neck or anything like that, but um...were you in Project Freelancer?”

“Warning! Warning! Adrenaline levels have spiked to dangerous levels! Stop moving! Stop it! South! PLEASE!”

“FUCK YOU! WHAT DO YOU KNOW?!”

“OH, MY GOODNESS!”

Doc toppled over and managed to land on his face as well as keep South from landing on her injured limbs, but it was a near thing. She didn’t know what he knew, but she was not going to let him touch North. There was not way he was going to get anywhere near her brother!

She’d fucking die out here first.

- *WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!?!* -

He KNOWS!

“*YOUR PHYSICAL FORM IS DAMAGED! STOP STRUGGLING IMMEDIATELY!!!*”

“TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW!”

“Ok! Ok! Please don’t shoot me! I know Agent Washington! He’s a friend of mine! I was stationed at a training base that Freelancer used to train soldiers and there were AIs all over the place!”
Omega jumped around like crazy!”

South slammed the point of her gun into the back of Doc’s neck and pressed down hard.

“You met Omega?”

Doc nodded and squirmed underneath her and South bit back a scream and the excruciating pain. She could do this. She could kill him and drag herself back to North if she had to! He had to be out looking for her.

“Yeah, he was a real jerk, too! He was all obsessed with taking over the world and building armies and being evil and stuff!”

“…What?”

South…blinking. Unsettled.

“Yeah, I don’t think he was all right in the head, you know?”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

Doc nodded again.

“I don’t know, but that’s what happened! When we get back to the others you can ask any of the Reds there, they were all in Blood Gulch when it happened!”

South pulled the gun away from his neck and bit back a whimper. She reeeeeally wanted to not be awake right now.

She wanted North.

“Are you ok?”

“Of course she’s not ok! She’s hurt!”

Doc tried to look at her, but it was difficult since she’d pinned him face first into the dirt. Still, the fact that he was trying, knowing what she was, knowing what she would do to him…it wasn’t nothing.

“No, I get that, I mean emotionally. I know that Project Freelancer was pretty awful for everyone involved.”

South just shook her head. Words had become impossibly hard.

“I am administering more painkillers. Don’t do that again!”

Eta buzzed around South’s head like an oversized worried bee. She idly wondered how much of the suit’s…whatever it shoved into her, it would take to kill her.

“Ok, well, I’m going to try and stand up. Why don’t you wrap your good arm around me, and I’ll do my best not to jostle you too much. There we go, just like that, ready? On three now!”
Church kept his sensors on York. There was something about the man that was just off, something…familiar. He didn’t know what it was, but he was going to find out. He had to, because this? This was all kinds of fucked.

Carolina’s hands trembled.

Her stats were all over the place. Heart rate and breathing were both through the roof, her stomach was clearly bothering her, and he could track her thoughts like a goddamned mind reader.

Carolina’s hands trembled.

Thoughts were flying, spinning, twirling around like goddamned ballerinas made of broken glass and broken dreams, and he wanted it to stop. She didn’t deserve the kind of shit she was flinging at herself.

Carolina’s hands fucking trembled.

I don’t know what to do.

-Well, the options are take all of them to base, take some of them to base, or leave all of them here.-

We can’t leave them here. Forget about what they could do to the soldiers if left unsupervised. When we find South, she’s going to need help right away, real help, Doctor Grey levels of help. And if we take her, North will have to come along. He’s not going to accept being left behind.

-And if North goes, York’ll want to go too. Those two are waaaaaaay too close for being just friends.-

Church really wanted her to take the bait, but she didn’t bite.

Not to mention that I’m not comfortable giving them free reign with the soldiers. I did notice that Kimball gave me some on the less well-trained end. The babies that Wash has been training up are on the battlefield now, and I am not splitting the group so Wyoming, Florida, and Maine are without guards and with the impressionable youth. That’s…a recipe for disaster.

-So we send them all, and we go with them to guard.-

I can’t leave the soldiers here, there is too much activity in this area, and we don’t have the time to go back to base and come back here. That’s a twelve hour round trip. By the time we get back the place will be stripped or swarming, and we need supplies.

Carolina’s stress levels were through the roof. She needed a game plan, something to focus on, to keep her distracted from the asshole staring at her like…Church didn’t even want to think about that.

-Call Kimball.-

Epsilon.

-Look, you’re twisting yourself up like a crazy person, and you need someone to tell you what to do. She’s really good at doing that, and it’s not like you don’t enjoy it.-

Epsilon!

-Hey, I’m not judging, you do what makes you happy. My biggest concern about all this is you. How are you going to handle the York situation?-
What situation? He chose Tex over me. There’s no situation. There is nothing.

-Ok, ok, chill! Seriously! I just know you’re still really hung on the guy.-

I am not hung on York.

-Yeah, that’s why you had the angsty make-out session and you apparently have repeated erotic dreams about him, because you’re sooooo over him.-

I AM NOT HUNG ON YORK!

-Fine, fucking whatever. See if I try to talk to you about boys again.-

Dear god, you sound like Donut.

-Oh please, like Donut would ever actually give up.-

With that, Church manually sent out a ping to Kimball. He knew the other woman would respond immediately, she always did when Carolina was out on a mission. The woman was nearly as clingy as Carolina herself, and it was honestly funny as shit watching them dance around each other.

Though, he was less happy about the around part of that, now that there was competition.

Still, getting Kimball involved was the best choice. Carolina was way too close to this, and she needed an outside eye. Someone who knew enough to make an educated decision, but wasn’t so close they’d miss details or options.

-You can do this, C. You’ve got it.-

Carolina breathed deep and tried to center herself.

I’m fine. I am not going to freak out.

“How goes the search?”

She broke.

“Vanessa.”

“Carolina? Talk to me. What happened? Are you ok?”

Carolina laughed brokenly and shook her head.

Church could hear her self-doubt pouring out of her like a leaky faucet, drip, drip, dripping. She was losing it.

Unraveling.

Coming apart at the seams.

“Really not ok. No one’s dead, so far as I know. We found the ship.”

“What did you find on the ship?”

He could feel the flood of relief at having the other woman’s voice in her ear. Kimball was strong. A steel beam. Carolina could lean on her, at least a little, and not resent it. Kimball was good about
getting people to not resent her. Except Doyle, though that man had, had his own problems.

-See, C? Smart. She’s got this.-

Church stood on Carolina’s shoulder and stared down the cyclops standing just a few feet away.

Carolina did not need him distracting her. York had already finished his call and was staring at her with absolutely no restraint. He’d crossed his arms and leaned against one of the trees, his eyes were trained on her like he was doing what he could to enjoy the view.

-Fucking perv.-

“Shut up, Epsilon!”

“Carolina, you’re talking out loud.”

“Shit.”

She shook her head and tried to bring her body back under control. He sent a quiet apology through her brain.

“Sorry. I haven’t actually laid eyes on the ship, but I’ve found a survivor. The aid ship wasn’t sent by the UNSC.”

“More of Hargrove’s people?”

“No, no! Nothing so simple. They’re…well, they’re Freelancers.”

“Mercenaries?”

“No, like, like me and Wash.”

Kimball’s voice was sympathetic and clear, calm, gentle. It was what Tucker liked to call her ‘pep talk’ voice. Church was surprised to hear it being used on Carolina, but he guessed even bad bitches needed reassurance sometimes.

And that was why Church liked her so much. She always knew exactly what people needed. What Carolina needed.

“You know them?”

“I…Kimball, I…it’s my old team. All of them. They’re all here, and they’re hurt and I think I’m losing it a little bit. I don’t know what to do.”

“You do exactly this. You call in and let someone more removed from the emotional side of the situation make decisions. This was the right call, Carolina. Are they planning to hurt you? To hurt us?”

She shook her head again, more of a nervous gesture than anything else.

York looked like he wanted to get closer, but Church was not going to fucking let him. He puffed out his chest a little and pointed his (admittedly useless) rifle at the man. York threw up his hands and leaned back against the tree again, this time his smile was a good deal wider.

-Something’s off with him.-
“As far as I can tell, they’re here to kidnap Wash and take him somewhere safe. That’s not happening now, their ship is completely destroyed.”

“They weren’t coming for you too?”

“They didn’t actually expect me to be alive, which is fair. I didn’t expect them to be alive either.”

Kimball’s voice was solid and firm, her no nonsense voice.

“Well, they can’t have Washington and they can’t have you. That’s not up for negotiation, and Chorus will fight for you if we need to.”

That weird tightness in Carolina’s chest loosened and Church lit up fireworks in the back of Carolina’s mind.

This! This was why Church voted Kimballina all the way, man.

Vanessa could make C’s heart race just as easily as she could make it calm down. She was great, and she knew exactly how to make Carolina feel safe and connected. Carolina needed her.

Besides, that fucker over there wasn’t good enough for C.

“Thank you.”

“We don’t have any planes available, or I’d send one to you. We need to get you lot home, quick. Santa has picked up on some movement in your area, and I’ve already sent out a secondary team to help defend the site and strip it. Just get me the landing coordinates and I can have them march to your exact location instead of the guestimate one.”

“Once I have a proper location, I’ll get back to you. Vanessa…I have to bring them in.”

An unsettled thought flickered in the periphery of Church’s ‘vision’. Carolina was hiding something from him. Whatever she was thinking, she did not want him to see it…

What the fuck?!

-Carolina?-

“Of course, we can get them to Banjeeerese, it’s a little out of the way, but I can have a crack med team meet you there.”

“No, I…we need to bring them home.”

-What are you doing?-  

Trust me, Church.

“Carolina? Talk to me.”

“These people…they’re like my family. They are my family and I lost them and they were gone.”

“And this is your second chance?”

“Yes. We need them to be invested, to care. For that, we need to bring them home. Sending them to a smaller base is only going to make it harder to bring them in later. We want them close by to
learn. To…Just…Trust me. Please.”

Kimball’s silence on the other end made Carolina’s anxiety spike. Church didn’t blame her.

-Only an idiot brings the untested into their inner circle, C. There’s no way she’s going to go for it.-

Shut your goddamned mouth.

-I don’t have a mouth to shut, bitch. What are you thinking?-

Kimball’s voice cracked the silence.

“’Lina, are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Ok. I trust you. Send them in.”

-And now I’m pretty sure Kimball is actually a moron.-

“And we can’t tell Washington.”

What?

-What?!-

“What?”

Carolina rolled her shoulders and pressed a hand hard into a nearby tree. She was stable, so it was for dramatic effect. She’s definitely her parents’ child.

“Wash is finally stable, but he’s going to need help to process this, and I’m going to need to be there to do that for him. He can’t know they are coming.”

“I am not comfortable blindsiding one of my best people like this, Carolina. I’m not comfortable blindsiding anyone like this.”

Church could feel her sigh of relief. She was going to win. She was going to fucking win Kimball’s dishonesty!

-C, he’ll never forgive you if he finds out you lied. He’ll never forgive her either!-

Just trust me. I know Wash.

“I know you’re not, but I need you to trust me on this.”

“I trust you.”

Carolina clicked off, a weight lifted from her shoulders. Half a weight.

-You do realize you’ve doomed us all, right? The planet isn’t going to survive Washington’s rage when he finds out there’s a conspiracy to keep him in the dark. Everything about this screams recipe for disaster.-

You’re acting like this is a bad idea.
"Oh my goodness, I am so rude! I forgot to ask what your name was!"

Doc could feel her shift uncomfortably on his back and tried to support her more firmly on his back, but gosh darn it her armor was just so heavy. She heaved a sigh and then made a pained noise.

“I’m…kind of in between names right now.”

Huh, weird. Ok.

“Oh, that’s not one I’ve heard before, but I totally I get that!”

“You do?”

Doc nodded eagerly and took an extra long step over what he hoped was a vine and not a weird Chorus snake. He’d heard that they could bite through body suits!

“Oh yeah, you’re on a strange planet, coming to rescue the poor inhabitants and make a name for yourself as an intergalactic hero! Gotta make sure the name you give out is one you’re happy with, because you’ll be stuck with it for life! New identities are awesome.”

She shifted and leaned her head against Doc’s. He knew that just being carried with that many injuries must have been painfully exhausting.

“Oh, you know, we have this problem on this planet with pirates and mercenaries always trying to take these poor people and murder their faces. If we had something to call you, it would probably humanize you enough that they could have a conversation with you before someone decided you were a threat.”

She made a soft humming noise.
“If you think I’m a pirate or a mercenary why are you rescuing me?”

“Oh, I know you’re not. You’re a Freelancer, which is worse in some ways, because sometimes the Reds and Blues like to talk about their fights against you guys and they make you sound really scary, and I also know that some of the people in our group are a liiiittle twitchy right now. Agent Washington is much more tense than usual, something about one of his old girlfriends being dead except not being dead except now she’s a zombie or possibly a drug addict. I’m not really sure what’s happening here, nobody really tells me anything, just that things are happening.”

The AI flitted around, and it took everything in Doc not to flinch from it. Omega didn’t really do much of the hovering thing, but it was definitely weird to have a tiny glowy ghostlike person bumping into your helmet.

“You know Wash?”

Doc paused.

“You know Wash?”

She snorted.

“Yeah, that’s kind of why I’m here.”

He…didn’t really know what to do with that. So far, the Freelancers Doc had encountered were mostly the violent angry type. That white mercenary who kidnapped Junior, Tex, The Meta, Carolina, and even Wash himself were all beaty uppy types, but…aside from Wyoming, they were less interested in murder and more interested in goals…unless their goal was murder, in which case…Wyoming would have fit into that.

“I just assumed you were from a different group of Freelancers. Are you here to kill him?”

She snorted again.

“Fuck no. He might want to kill me though.”

“All the more reason for us to have something to call you.”

“So, he can kill me faster?”

“Or you know, so we can distract him for a while until you get your side of the story out. It’s easier to convince people to listen to you when you have a name!”

She tapped Doc’s leg with her gun and he started walking again. Her arm dangled at his side, but the gun was held tightly enough that he wasn’t afraid of her dropping it. At this point, if she did, he’d leave it where it fell. It wasn’t super fancy or anything, and bending down with her on his back would be stressful!

She sighed and her voice got quiet again.

“My side of the story is that he’s a fucking asshole who decided that instead of listening to me he was just going to fight me, and after I stabbed his ass to make sure I didn’t die, he tried to blow me the fuck up.”

“Uh huh…yeeeeeaaah, I’m gonna need a little more than that because now I’m concerned about taking you back to the group. Because, you see, Agent Carolina is more volatile than Agent
Washington, and she’s the one we’re meeting.”

“Carolina is alive? Oh man, this is going to be amazing. She is gonna be so fucking pissed.”

“Why?”

The woman giggle-snorted and readjusted herself.

“Her ex-boyfriend is on that ship.”

“Oh no.”

She nodded.

“Oh yeah.”

“Well, that’s…really not good.”

“He’s the ex that left her to fight with Tex, her rival for first place and The Director’s affection. So gross.”

Doc did his best to speed up, hoping against hope that Agent Carolina would get to the crash site much, much later than everyone else. They needed a plan or there would be a bloodbath!

“Oh no!”

She laughed again, this time soft and sarcastic.

“Oh yeah, this is gonna suck.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok guys, next chapter for sure is a Wash chapter! It may also be a stressful chapter for the away team, but it will definitely be a Wash chapter! I hope you're as happy about that as I am, because for Wash basically being my favorite thing ever, he has been a little neglected.

I intend to fix that. (insert evil grin here)

(Or don't, because I'm a really just a marshmallow wearing people clothes.)

Thank you so much for coming so far with me, I really appreciate every kind word and acknowledgement that I'm doing ok. It means a lot to know that you guys are still enjoying what I'm putting out, and I love it when you let me know where things seem like they're going or where things can be improved.

0m3g4: I did promise to try. I hope this actually works.
Donut's head has disappeared! I don't know what happened to it! Grif has the cone of protection, Sarge looks at the camera incredulously, and Simmons just wonders why this is his life.
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/435793701434655129/

Tucker's head is ready to go on his shoulders! Also his sword glows in the dark! Church and Tex are hanging out, and Caboose is waiting to be finished. I'm getting there. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/435793701434655135/

So, apparently I broke more than Carolina's head last time. I went to attach her new head and her arms fell right off! Wyoming is still just a head. Connie and Wash are hanging out too. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/435793701434655139/

Felix and Locus in Season 14 uniforms.
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/435793701434655149/

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Kimball spills the beans, Maine gets a new nickname, Washington is not ok, Palomo gets scared, Washington IS NOT OK, Bitters calls for help.

Chapter Notes

There is a very brief moment in this chapter speculating about the possibility of sexual assault in reference to torture and several references to suicidal actions. Please be aware of things that cause you distress, and if this is something that is a trigger for you, skip the section where Wash refers to himself as Agent Washington. The mentions are brief, but I know that it sometimes only takes a brief mention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kimball stalked down the halls with purpose, shoulders square, spine straight, stride even. Her strut was on point, and there wasn’t a damned person in the whole of Chorus who could ignore it.

When she was out amongst the troops, in her element, there was not a bit of her that wasn’t in complete control.

Which was exactly how she liked it.

Eventually the Federal Army would pick a proper figurehead, and they could get on to negotiating a treaty amongst the two divided political factions. Kimball had no idea who that person would be, and as such, intended to show nothing but her complete core of strength when out of her quarters.

And part of her strengths was her transparency and her refusal to keep her people unnecessarily in the dark or throw them to the Desert Gnash Wolves.

It didn’t take long to find her target. He was meticulous with his schedule and made sure that anyone in the know could find him at any time. Itinerary changes were made available the moment he knew one was happening, and Vanessa could feel the tight thread of anxiety pulse behind her eyes at how well he would have fit in with the Feds had things gone differently.

He would have really liked Doyle if they’d had the chance to be friends.

She wouldn’t lie, it made her a little jealous.

Washington was putting the troops through their paces. His voice echoed and boomed through the training area as he had them running around, dodging attacks, and trying to ‘survive’ the simulation he’d crafted.

The quality of the soldiers performances spiked after Agent Washington took over their training. His challenges were always technically beatable, but never easy, there was never a victory that
wasn’t well earned. He was harsh, but always fair. Every single person who had ever worked with him knew that Agent Washington was invested in their survival, not just as soldiers of Chorus, but as individuals with futures ahead of them.

He was just as eager to talk to the soldiers about their ‘homework’ and ‘extra curriculars’ as he was about their training, which was no small source of amusement for the teens of Chorus.

The knowledge that he wouldn’t let them die, if only from sheer stubbornness, was the kick in the pants the morale of the troops needed.

Sure, they loved the Reds and Blues. It was nearly impossible not to. Most of them were so goddamned endearing, even as they tried to make themselves look like unlikable assholes that they had fans who flocked to their favorite flavor of crazy every day of the week.

Still, there were people who you respected as friends, people you respected as idols, and people you respected as protectors.

When the Reds and Blues eventually passed, there would be chaos and tears and drinking, and someone would probably deface statues/monuments in their honor or something completely ridiculous.

When Washington died, there would be planet-wide mourning. His name would end up in the annals of Chorus’ history, perhaps not as the reason the war was won, but definitely as the reason so many people survived. Babies would be named after a state on a planet their parents had never even seen, because no one knew the man’s real name, and even if they did, it wasn’t the name the man had taken for himself. When the music of this age was crafted, Washington would inspire the war songs that told you to never leave a man behind and never surrender to evil.

The Reds and Blues were a game changer, but Agent Washington was a gift from the gods themselves.

Or so the underground fanfiction trade told her.

Kimball liked the Reds and Blues. She liked them as people and as soldiers. She loved how much they cared and how none of them treated her people like they were expendable. They were quirky, and strange, and nothing like any of the armies of Chorus were used to. They spouted off weird advice and pop culture references from ages past, and managed to make everyone around them feel weird and simultaneously feel completely normal.

They were also very good at taking care of people.

But they were a fairly insulated group. It took giving Tucker, Caboose, Simmons, and Grif specific lieutenants to make them really integrate in any meaningful fashion. Even now, they still stuck to very specific groups to hang out and around, even if they were willing to talk to the other soldiers.

Washington always had eyes and an ear for anyone who wanted one.

It was no wonder there was so much of said underground fanfiction being traded with his name attached. It also didn’t hurt that he was cute under that helmet of his.

Kimball held back a snort as one particularly inept private tripped over their own feet and Wash hollered out a string of expletives and threats that Kimball knew would end up in the next series of adventures the trio that totally wasn’t Matthews, Jensen, and Andersmith were writing under pennames.
Oh look, there was Matthews, totally not taking notes.

Washington jogged over to the fallen soldier and helped them to their feet. He leaned in and offered, what Vanessa knew would be, gentle admonishments mixed with encouragement. He knew just how to apply the kid gloves, and it was something to see when he really got going.

Several of the soldiers around them stopped what they were doing and crowded in, eager to be a part of the pep talk, and Vanessa had no idea when this had started, but she would encourage it until the day she died, if not for them, then for him. He loved being useful, but more than that, Washington adored being liked.

She knew that Washington was…not always right. He loved working with the soldiers, you could see it in his body language, but some days he was just…not capable of much. Usually the Blues kept good track of his bad days, but even the Reds kept a close eye on him when they thought he wasn’t looking.

It was sweet.

Or, she’d thought it was sweet until one day when he’d walked in on her and Doyle, voice, posture, and gait completely opposite of how he’d always presented himself, and reamed them both out for their complete inability to do their jobs correctly with a twang to his voice that she would later learn was a Georgian accent.

“I must say, for two generals determined to keep the planet alive, you both seem to have your heads firmly buried in your posteriors. I suggest you either learn to work together or shoot yourselves and save everyone the trouble of your incompetence.”

Then Tucker had swept into the room and managed to corral Washington out of the room and send out a blanket message to avoid Agent Washington as he was on a very important assignment.

It was Sarge who’d approached her and Doyle afterwards and spoken in hushed whispers about trauma, PTSD, brain damage, and torture. About a fractured mind forced together with rubber bands and glue that the Reds and Blues were only partially able to start piecing together. Something in him had been broken so many times, it was a miracle he was still a person, let alone the person he was.

She and Doyle had agreed that day, one of the few things they’d managed to be completely on the same page about, that they would do whatever it took to keep from breaking any further.

Because Washington was more than just a soldier, more than just an asset or a commodity. With his presence, he’d managed to redirect the Reds and Blues far more effectively than Kimball ever had, taught the armies to fight together, and had made himself a friend to everyone on the planet. He wasn’t just their ace in the hole, he was their beacon to come home to. He made everyone better just by being there.

And yeah, sure, maybe she was laying it on a little thick. He was obviously just a person, just a guy, but in a few scant months he’d managed to make himself not just a figurehead, like the Reds and Blues were to those who didn’t know them well. He’d made himself responsible for the first line of defense for the planet. He’d made himself important to her people. She was allowed to pontificate his virtues in her own head.

She needed Washington to feel safe, to feel a part of Chorus. The others might want to leave, but she knew that if Washington felt safe, the others would be less inclined to wander off. Hell, they might actually bring more people to the planet. She knew Grif had a sister, and Tucker had a son.
She…wasn’t entirely sure that Captain Caboose actually had seventeen sisters or if that was just another thing he was confused about. None of that was actually what mattered in this decision though.

What was important was that Wash was her friend.

Kimball didn’t want him damaged.

It was more than just what he could do for the planet, as far as Vanessa was concerned, he’d done more than his fair share. Washington deserved the world. He certainly deserved better than he’d been given.

And Carolina wanted her to risk all of this. His comfort with the troops, the feelings of safety he was finally developing on base, his friendships that weren’t entirely attached to the insularity that was Red vs Blue. Everything Vanessa had worked to build, the trust she’d managed to carefully seed and nurture into growth, because in the end, Carolina didn’t trust Washington.

She didn’t trust him to take the news and move forward.

Kimball honestly didn’t know what Carolina expected to happen if they didn’t tell him until after the Freelancers came strolling into their base. She didn’t know why the other woman thought lying to the man with some pretty significant trust issues was anything other than asinine.

Sure, he’d probably forgive Carolina eventually, but the minor players like Vanessa who weren’t as important to him as he was to them…they’d never get that ground back.

“Washington.”

Wash turned around and saluted and the rest of the soldiers followed suit. The New Republic soldiers hadn’t really bothered with proper respect before Washington came along, and after the armies were joined, it took a good bit of work to convince both sides to respect the respective chains of command.

It only took a few weeks under Washington’s iron fist to bend all the soldiers into something resembling proper behavior.

It was like magic.

“General Kimball.”

“With me.”

She spun on her heel, well aware that he would follow her, and that the soldiers would continue their training without his presence simply because they did not want to disappoint him.

No, she was not going to wreck the little ground she’d gained with him on a hunch from Carolina, who was a good friend, a fantastic soldier, and an excellent spy, but was terrible at knowing her people and what they needed.

Especially Washington.

Vanessa motioned Wash into her office and locked the door behind them. If she did manage to trip or trigger something, she was going to be damned well sure that he was safe while they worked through it.
And no one was going to watch him while he did so.

“Is something the matter?”

Kimball pulled off her helmet, dropped it onto the desk, and took a brief moment to ruffle her hair and wipe at her face so she didn’t feel completely like she lived inside her armor. Wash took a page from her book and slipped his own helmet off, and Vanessa had to bite her tongue to keep from showing how flattered she was.

Wash didn’t take his helmet off in front of just anyone, after all.

“Possibly. Carolina has checked in, and so far no one is hurt, but there is something I need to talk to you about, and I don’t think it can wait.”

She motioned to the chair in front of her desk and pulled her own around so they were sitting knee to knee, rather than across the desk. She needed the informality of it. The idea of using her authority to crack him open like an oyster was…just awful.

They were friends, chain of command or not, and he needed her to be his friend in this moment. Not the commanding officer, not the general, not the queen of the goddamned planet or whatever the fuck the soldiers were calling her behind her back.

He sat, uncomfortable, spine ramrod straight.

“I know this is an area that may be difficult for you to talk about, but I need answers and Carolina is not likely to give them.”

“This sounds ominous.”

“Tell me about the Freelancers.”

Wash froze. His face twisted into something that was like pain and constipation, and it would have been funny if it came from anything other than deep-seated trauma.

“All of them?”

“All of them. The group dynamics, the goals of the program, were they trustworthy people? How did they treat the lower ranks?”

“Can I ask why you want to know?”

Kimball tried to think of an answer without telling him right away. She had no idea if he would try to gloss over their mistakes or vilify them, and she needed a less biased answer. She needed his perspective, which was only truly cloudy when he was trying to adjust to other people’s needs.

She must have waited too long because Wash started to twist his hands in his lap and stared at the ground.

“Is this about Connie?”

And now Vanessa felt like a piece of shit.

Of course he’d be worried about his friend, the Freelancer, who’d popped out of nowhere. This kind of conversation could only lead to bad things.

She tried to smile gently, and bumped Washington’s ankle with her own.
“Washington, I promise you I am not asking out of morbid curiosity, but I need answers before I can give you any.”

Wash picked up his helmet and tried not to fiddle with it. She didn’t move. He would speak in his own time and pushing would not help.

“The program…was not what we were told. I think it was originally, but once the Director got ahold of the original AI, Alpha, it became about trying to resurrect his wife. We were…expendable. We had to exist to convince the government that we were fighting their fight while he was busy torturing the AI. Fracturing it into pieces in a desperate attempt to resurrect the dead.”

“Obviously it didn’t work.”

“No, it didn’t. Not the way he intended. There was a lot more to it than just that. I think in the end he was so…lost and broken, that we didn’t even seem real to him anymore. He was on a campaign to break us the way he broke the AI. He succeeded.”

His face was so downcast, not the repressed mask he wore most days when you got him out of his helmet. This was the face of a man long since broken.

She wished he was more tactile. Vanessa really wanted to give him a hug.

“Before Alpha, before Tex, we were a fantastic unit. It was the closest I’d had to family since I’d enlisted. Maybe none of that was real, but it felt that way. Connie reminded me of my sisters.”

That was news.

“You have sisters?”

Sisters. How many? How old? Did he take care of them? Did they take care of him? God, it never even occurred to Vanessa to ask about Wash’s family. Did he have a good relationship with them?

“Mmm hmm. Growing up it was me, my mother, and my sisters. I learned to fight from them.”

Suddenly, so many behaviors he had made absolute sense.

“Connie ended up being a little sister by proxy. It drove me crazy that York would ask if we were…in a sexual relationship. He thought it was funny, but it just…”

York, the (boyfriend) safe cracker. Carolina’s (ex) second.

“Was York always like that? The kind of guy who made mean jokes?”

She was impressed, her voice didn’t so much as crackle. Wash caught her eye and gave a commiserating smile though, so she must have let something show. He normally didn’t bother trying to be reassuring with her unless she blatantly needed it.

He respected her too much to coddle her.

“He wasn’t intentionally. It’s…I guess it’s just a thing guys do. They find what looks like a weak spot and they exploit it for humor. The Reds and Blues do the same kind of thing. It just bothered me more than other guys.”

Which was not a factual statement, and she would be coming back to that eventually, but right now she needed information on the Freelancers more than he needed a conversation about toxic masculinity.
“And the others? The Meta?”

“Maine? God, when Maine was out of armor he didn’t have a mean bone in his body. Well, that’s not entirely true, he had a competitive streak. He hated to lose, hated being shown up, and it only got worse after he got hurt. By the end, I don’t think the Meta and Maine were the same person anymore.”

“Would he have hurt my soldiers?”

“Maine would never without orders. Even with orders, he wouldn’t touch them if he knew how young they were. I can say that confidently for everyone in the project.”

“Except Wyoming, right? The one who kidnapped Tucker’s son?”

Wash’s face twisted into something guilty and sad.

“I…don’t think Wyoming saw Junior as human enough for that consideration. I wouldn’t have in his place.”

Vanessa nodded and allowed her head to drop to the side, just a little, the way Emily had shown her. She’d noticed that the head move encouraged him to speak a little more freely in a conversation, but only if it wasn’t overused.

“Of course, by that point you were already hurt and Freelancer had fallen apart.”

“That’s right. Is…are you concerned I’m going to crack?”

“Are you?”

Wash put his helmet beneath his seat, took a deep breath, and met Vanessa’s eyes.

She thought he’d be calm, collected, that he’d have another layer to scrape through before she got to the soft, vulnerable, fleshy bits he kept so carefully hidden. Instead, his eyes were red and glossy, and his breathing became increasingly erratic as he spoke.

“I am the most stable I have been since before Freelancer. I am a good soldier and I can continue to do what needs to be done, even with Connie here. Kimball, I swear, I don’t know what Carolina said, but I’m stable. Please Vanessa, don’t- don’t take this from me.”

Kimball stood abruptly, smacked her hand to the juncture where his neck met shoulder, and gave a tight squeeze. She knew it would sting, but he’d need it to pull himself out of his head. His eyes widened to a ridiculous degree, and his jaw began to tremble.

Jesus Christ on a bicycle, where in the hell had this come from?


He curled into himself a little and shuddered, like he was holding back sobs.

That was fair, she was asking him to drag up some of the most painful memories of his entire life without properly preparing him beforehand or explaining why she needed to know.

“I…am…”

She took a knee and met his eyes again. His eyes kept darting around the room, clearly trying to avoid contact, probably marking exit strategies. Eventually he met her steady stare.
“You’re fine.”

Wash let out a shuddering laugh and ran a hand through his hair.

He’d started going grey.

“I’m really not. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You are an excellent soldier, an effective leader, and a good man, Wash. You’ve done nothing but right by the people of this planet, and even if you weren’t ok, we would not abandon you. You’re going through some pretty emotional shit right now, and processing is not easy on the battlefield. I’m sorry that I scared you, that wasn’t what I was trying to do.”

It took a moment, but Washington gently pulled her hand off his neck, scooted his chair back, and stood, forcing Vanessa to stand as well if she didn’t want to stay in a…rather uncomfortable position.

They stood together in silence. He shifted back a little, then planted his feet.

“What is this?”

Vanessa took deep breath and let it out slowly. This was going to take some honesty, and hopefully the trust he had in her would hold out against the distress she was about to put him through.

“This is…me trying to figure something out. You two…there’s so much that I can’t see, a bigger picture that makes it hard to know what you need, and neither of you talk to anyone until it’s too late.”

“Is Carolina ok?”

“I think so. She’s not hurt but she…Wash. Carolina has asked me to keep something from you, because she thinks it will come better from her. She’s trying to protect you, but blindsiding you never goes well for anyone, and I think you’d be better off if you have some time to prepare over hearing it from her.”

He looked horrified. She could see the thoughts running through his head. How many people were at risk? How many had died? What did this have to do with Connie?

God, she didn’t want to make this worse for him.

“Oh god, what happened?!”

“Wash, you’re going to be upset. Would it be better or worse if I call Caboose and Tucker in?”

Wash put his chair between them and squeezed the back hard. His breathing sped up again.

“How upset am I going to be?”

She didn’t come around the chair or push. He needed the distance from her, and Vanessa could respect that.

“Based on past experience with you, discussions with Carolina, and stories from the Reds and Blues, I can say you’re probably going to need a hug and you might need someone to keep you from making a very stupid decision.”

She could see his knees weaken underneath him. His hands started to shake.
“How badly hurt is she?”

“Physically, she’s fine Wash. Better or worse?”

“I don’t know.”

Kimball moved over to her desk and called for Caboose and Tucker to come to her office for a conference with Agent Washington. They’d developed the code after the incident with Washington’s disassociation, and honestly, Vanessa had hoped to never have to use it.

It only took a few minutes for there to be a loud pounding on Kimball’s door. Both Vanessa and Wash jumped, neither particularly liked sudden noises, and both managed to share grins as “Agent Washingtub! We are here!” cut through the silence.

She unlocked the door and jumped to the side as Captain Caboose barreled through the door, Captain Tucker hot on his heels. Neither man hesitated to move into what Vanessa recognized as crash positions.

Caboose threw himself around Wash’s shoulders and gave him a tight squeeze. Wash’s expression froze, then melted into something gentle and fond.

She probably should have called them here in the first place. Wash always seemed to find his equilibrium faster with the Reds and Blues around. It was funny, because everyone else ended up off balance with them, but he always managed to come back into himself.

Or maybe he was just mirroring. It was hard to tell.

“Everything will be ok, Agent Washington. Our friends will be home soon. Santa promised. Would you like to hold Freckles? I always feel better when I have a cuddly friend!”

“Caboose, I think if I tried to hug Freckles, he’d just shoot me.”

“He would not do that! Freckles is very well behaved now that he is much smaller!”

Tucker looked at Wash, then turned to Kimball, arms crossed. Even with his helmet on, Vanessa could see the disapproval in his stance.

“You already know what’s going on, don’t you?”

“I know that shit’s going down, and Santa’s losing connections left and right. We’ve got at least three teams that we can’t contact, and it’s growing.”

Kimball shook her head. That was new. That…that pretty much invalidated the ‘everybody’s fine’ that Carolina told her.

Maybe she was right about not trusting Carolina’s judgment after all.

“Less than an hour ago, Carolina called to check in. She says that no one is hurt, and they are in the process of stripping the aid ship as quickly as possible.”

Wash shifted, but Caboose didn’t let go. He managed to maneuver Wash so that he was wrapped firmly in his arms, and propped his helmeted chin on Wash’s shoulder.

“If no one is hurt?” Wash prompted.

Vanessa turned away from Tucker, she was not unaware that he and Caboose both chose to keep
their helmets on, and looked Wash directly in the eyes again.

He didn’t shift his gaze away, which was good, but his expression became more and more bleak with each passing second.

“She called in because the aid ship had people on it she knew, and she was upset.”

Wash tensed in Caboose’s grip.

“Oh no.”

“Members of Project Freelancer’s Alpha Squad.”

“Please stop.”

Vanessa did her best to soften her voice into something gentle.

“I made the decision to tell you now, despite Carolina’s concerns, because I feel that you especially will need time to mentally prepare yourself for this. She should check in before they head in, but if communications are going out they may already be on the way here.”

Tucker growled and threw his hands into the air.

“God damn it, Kimball! Why tell him if Carolina didn’t think he was ready!”

“Tucker, if I could have, I would have shipped Wash off to another base immediately, but I can’t. We need him here, and we need him to be able to make tough decisions.”

Wash’s eyes hardened.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Vanessa tried to keep the bubbling anxiety as restrained as possible. This was the moment where she would find out just how much her hard earned trust was worth. “If they are a danger to my people, I need to know how to deal with them.”

Tucker stepped back. She could imagine the expression on his face, she’d seen it enough times. He was furious with her.

“You…you want Wash to kill his friends? WHAT THE FUCK?!”

“I never said that, Tucker, and I’m not asking him to kill them, but if they are not his friends we need to-“

“No! Kimball, this is fucking bullshit! You can’t ask him to-“

“Why not? I did it before.”

________________________

Something was off.

Folami shifted against the ship.
Teams had begun to trickle in for a while and started to load the hauling truck, even as others were pulling out physical maps to check the surrounding area for their missing soldier. They’d also realized fairly quickly that their radios were in less than perfect working condition.

There was a level of tension in the air as people came out of the trees, each claiming that their sensors and radios had become non-functioning.

Still, they’d all said they heard Bitters transmission before the final failure, so she tried to hold onto optimism, even as the little amount of pain medication she’d allowed herself wore off and left her with a throbbing sensation in her leg.

For such a small wound, it managed to be really annoying.

Her oversized giant man friend brought her another ration bar and patted her shoulder delicately, despite her having just polished one off an hour before. He watched her like he was afraid she would crumple into dust and blow away if he didn’t feed her.

Honestly, it was kind of adorable.

The poor guy clearly didn’t know what to do with himself if he wasn’t being active, and since Folami was injured and forcing him to rest, he’d made it some kind of sacred duty to take care of her.

Whatever worked to keep him from using that damned arm.

“So, Crooked Mick, any particular reason you aren’t talking to us?”

The man, who Folami still hadn’t gotten the name of, made a handgun with his fingers and pointed it at his throat. She stared at him, hoping that he wasn’t doing what she thought he was doing. He made a few popping noises and dropped his arm into his lap.

“Oh my god! You were shot in the neck?!”

Mick (and that was now his name, god help him) nodded.

“Holy crap! How did you survive?!”

He stuck a finger into the dirt and wrote out a message. His writing was surprisingly neat, considering he was basically finger-painting with mud.

Very dedicated doctors.

“Well,” She smiled drolly, “if you have a speech problem, there are worse planets you could have ended up on.”

Her hands flew in a complicated pattern that anyone from Chorus would instantly recognize. Mick just cocked his head to the side with a bemused sort of expression, and Folami stopped.

“But you’re not from Chorus,” she grunted out and slapped her good leg, “So you wouldn’t understand Chorisian Sign Language. Well, now I feel like an asshole!”

Niner, who’d only just rolled up after spending a good ten minutes yelling at Andersmith’s team, gave Folami a funny look, like she’d just said that rain fell up or that vegans ate beef.

“You speak sign language?”
The question was beyond baffling. Folami squinted at the other woman, and wondered if there was an inside joke she wasn’t getting.

“Of course, I know sign language, why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, you’re not deaf.”

Folami gave Niner a hard look, then turned to Ramirez, who’d stopped hauling boxes to take a drink and made a few motions. Right hand.

(Hand talk.)
Left hand.
(Weird?)
Ramirez made the letter ‘n’ with his right hand and shook it twice.

(No.)

“Was that an insult? Are you insulting me with things I don’t understand?”

Folami snarled and flipped Niner off. The woman was a real piece of work, crashing on their planet and ordering people around like she owned the place. That was Folami’s job! She kicked dirt at Niner’s chair for good measure. Being grounded fucking sucked!

It was no wonder Crooked Mick over there kept trying to sneak off and shear sheep or whatever the fuck he thought he’d be able to do if he could get more than ten feet from Folami’s sharp gaze.

“I don’t know! Why would I know, it’s not like it’s important to know sign language or anything!”

“Geeze, sorry. Wasn’t trying to insult you. You got a family member who’s deaf or something?”

And again with the weird questions. Folami gave Ramirez a questioning look, but he just shrugged.

“We all understand sign language to a certain extent. It’s stupid not to.”

Niner’s expression changed into something more contemplative, and Crooked Mick straightened up a little.

“You all know sign language?”

Ramirez eased himself over to Crooked Mick, like he was afraid the man was going to bite him, and offered the giant some water. Mick reached for the bottle slowly and nodded in thanks.

There was no posturing or flinching this time, which was frankly a goddamned miracle. Niner seemed to think so as well, because she did her best to conceal a conspiratorial wink that was definitely directed at Folami.

“We all learn it when we’re babies, just like we learn English. Why wouldn’t we? This is an active warzone there are explosions day and night, or there used to be at least. A lot of people end up with some kind of disability. Hearing, vision, amputations, organ removal, health in general. Might as well learn things to make your life easier when your brain is all mailable and stuff.”

Mick nodded, and Niner gave her another look, this one Folami didn’t recognize. It didn’t seem like a bad look, but she was wary all the same. It almost looked…proud?
Why would Niner be proud of them?

“That makes sense. It honestly didn’t occur to me, but that does make sense.”

A thought crossed her mind. One of those little flittering things that could either be spectacular or could blow up and bite her in the ass later. It was hard to imagine how it could possibly come back to bite her, but the feeling was there, and she’d learned years ago to go with her gut.

It had saved more lives than it had lost after all.

“Alright, well, you guys are gonna be here for a while, right?”

Niner shrugged.

“It’s not like we can just take off anytime we want, now can we?”

Folami grinned.

“Ok, well here, I’ll teach you some Chorusian Sign Language. That way you’ll have a way to communicate without taking the time to write everything out, and you’ll be able to recognize some of what’s going on when things get quiet. Ok?”

Crooked Mick’s whole face changed. His eyes got wide, and a little bit soft, and he nodded very deliberately. Folami wondered if anyone had really tried to find a way to communicate with him like this since his…accident was probably the wrong word, but whatever.

“Alright, so, this one is hungry, this one is tired. Food and sleep are really basic, but you’ll need them. Right hand is for statements, left hand is for questions, but if you forget, a questioning expression works just as well as using your left hand. People will either understand or ask for you to repeat yourself. So if you say food with your left hand, you’re asking if someone is hungry, if you say sleep with your left hand, you’re asking if someone is tired. Ok so far?”

Mick and Niner both copied Folami’s motions, and it was pretty cool. She didn’t have a whole lot of opportunities to teach people things, she was relatively low on the medic totem pole of education, and it was nice to share knowledge.

“When you combine the two words like this,” She made the CSL signs for sleep and food in the same hand motion, “that’s the word we use to say we trust a person. It’s people specific. It’s mostly used by the New Repubs, but it’s catching on pretty quickly among the Feds. It’s used to show someone is a friend, since you don’t sleep around or take food from people you don’t trust. Left hand is asking if someone is trustworthy.”

Crooked Mick pointed at Folami and made the motion Sleep-Food.

(Trustworthy.)

“Well, don’t start handing that one out like crazy, or it’ll lose its meaning. We have codes that are kind of separated along party lines, but they’re pretty much being integrated or tossed at this point. If you don’t recognize something, all you have to do is make this sign.”

Folami motioned the letters ‘q’ then ‘a’ with her left hand.

“On the left, that’s saying you have a question. On the right, it’s answer. Q and A. Easy peasy.”

Niner chuckled.
“Wow, are you ten?”

Folami flipped her off again.

“I think you both know what that sign means. My last name is Folami, but there’s not a universal 
sign for that. We tend to have individual signs for people we know, and of course there is finger 
spelling, and finger spelling has actually carried over from ASL, so if you know your ASL you can 
use that to spell things out for us, though if you have to use Sign Language for that you might as 
well just use a tablet right?”

Mick canted his head from side to side in what looked like a ‘whatever you say’ sort of motion.

“So, this is my name sign.”

She made the letter ‘f’, pressed the shape to her right cheekbone and twerked it twice. Niner 
laughed at her.

“That’s adorable.”

Ramirez snorted and grinned.

“Yeah, nothing like she actually is. Folami’s got a face only a blind man could love.”

“Hey, I may be ugly as shit but at least I’m not a moron!”

Crooked Mick and Niner both looked offended on her behalf, which was sweet, but not necessary.

“Oh, I’m Folami, I know everything! I’m desperately compensating for the lack of a decent face!”

If her leg wasn’t fucking paining her, Folami would have jumped up and kicked him in the nuts.

“Bitch, I know a shit ton more than you do, that’s why I’m wearing the fucking medic stripes. Shut 
up and suck it.”

Ramirez stuck his tongue out and rolled his eyes mockingly.

Crooked Mick started to pull himself to his feet, likely to scare Ramirez into compliance. She 
grabbed his armor and tugged at him to come back down.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s just jealous that I can get my ugly mug into bed with all kinds of 
sexy bitches and he’s stuck with his left hand.”

Folami held up her hands and grinned at Crooked Mick, completely ignoring Ramirez, who’d 
dstarted making chicken noises behind her back. He would be getting swamp mud in his bed pretty 
soon.

“You wanna keep going?”

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The world seemed grey around the edges. Wash gently pried at Caboose’s grip on his shoulders, 
only for the other man to cling tighter. He whimpered softly into Wash’s ear, and Wash wished he 
could reach his helmet.
“I hunted my teammates like animals. I murdered them. Why is this any different?”

Tucker turned to him, clearly furious at the very accurate depiction of past events, arms slashing at the air like he was trying to cut away the bullshit. Bullshit which was not present, because Tucker hadn’t even been around when all of the Freelancer stuff happened and barely had third hand accounts of the events.

So, he really had no right to be angry and in denial.

“Wash, you were in survival mode and they were trying to kill you, too. This is totally not the same thing!”

Vanessa’s expression was hard to read. She was always hard when she took off her helmet, it was like she thought facial expressions would be enough and her body language became significantly less pronounced. It was like she forgot he’d spent the past many years dealing almost entirely with people in full body armor and helmets, and had almost no real skill at reading facial expressions anymore.

That was half of what made the Reds and Blues so great. They spoke, moved, and expressed facially all the same shit. Helmet or no, Wash always knew exactly what they were trying to tell him as long as they weren’t deliberately covering it up.

Still, he focused in on Kimball. Her voice was quiet and strong, the way she always was when there was more than one person in the room with her. When she wasn’t sure who she could trust.

“I’m not asking you to kill them, I’m asking you if they can be trusted or if we need to stick them in a deep, dark hole until we can get them transported off our planet. Carolina thinks they need to be here, with the troops, instead of in a smaller base where we can more easily contain them, and I want to make sure that we are making this decision because it is the right decision to make. Not because she loves them.”

Wash tried to shake Caboose off again, but the blue soldier just readjusted and squeezed him tighter. He was too close, it was hard to breathe.

He needed his helmet.

“Let go of me.”

Caboose shook his head. Wash could feel the metal brush the back of his head and ruffle his hair.

It was too long, well past the regulation length. He should get it cut before someone said something and the hair was forcibly removed.

“You are in a sad place.”

“All the more reason for you to not try to restrain me.”

“If I let you go you will do the scary thing again. You will go very far away and we will not be able to find you anymore. I do not like it when you talk funny. I will stay with you, and you can be angry and scared and it will be ok, because you are safe. Please do not go to the bad place.”

Wash reached up slowly and put a hand on Caboose’s arm. He could twist and snap the man’s wrist to get free if he needed to. There were ten different points Wash could feel from position alone that would be useful in incapacitating him.
It wouldn’t take much to force the other man into compliance.

“Who did she find?”

“There were seven. One of them was a pilot, 479er. That’s who Jensen spoke to. Carolina didn’t actually give me names for the rest.”

The color had completely drained from the room. Wash could feel the rotation of Chorus under his feet.

Was he listing to the side or was Caboose pulling him over?

“Niner made it out of the program without prison time? Good for her.”

Kimball stared hard at Wash. Her expression shifted again. He couldn’t tell what it meant. Was it angry? When the Director looked like that, it usually meant someone ended up with punishment training on their schedule.

He really wished she’d left her helmet on.

“Wash? Are you going into shock?”

“I’m fine.”

“Washington, you are not fine. You can’t see yourself, but you look sick. Your skin is turning grey.”

When did the Director end up on Chorus?

She moved around her desk, and Washington could feel his heart rate spike. She was calling a doctor? Why was the Director calling a doctor? What had he done?

Had he given himself away?

The soldier at his back (Caboose. Michael.) squeezed him. It was too much.

Washington dropped to the floor like a bag of rocks; Caboose made a squawking noise and fell with him. He curled himself into a ball on the floor as tight as he possibly could and screamed. His head was on fire!

He struggled, tried to knock Caboose off his back, and knew the only reason Caboose managed to hold on was because there was still a part of him that didn’t want to hurt this man. Didn’t want to just hurt people. They were going to lock him up and he didn’t want to hurt them.

Caboose didn’t know any better.

He bucked and got loose only for Tucker to slam into his front and shove him onto his back.

Wash howled. His voice sounded like some awful dying thing to his ears, but he couldn’t make it stop. He slammed his face into Tucker’s helmet again and again and again until Tucker put his hand on Wash’s forehead and shoved his head toward the ground.

Wash managed to knock the hand off, latched onto the Kevlar protecting Tucker’s neck, and bit down hard. He pulled at the material and screamed into it, tears dripped down his cheeks.

It wasn’t FAIR! Everyone was fine, everyone made it and he was still fucking broken! A fucking
useless fucking weapon that didn’t even fire properly!

What was he?

WHAT WAS HE?!

“Wash! WASH! Jesus, man!”

“Oh goodness! This was certainly not what I was expecting to stumble across today!”

Wash saw the medic, a woman with a chipper voice, and since when did the Director hire anyone who sounded like a person for the medical wing? She knelt down with a needle in her hand, and Wash knew that if she got him with it, it was game over. He was trapped.

They’d lock him away with the others in a deep dark hole.

He’d never be free.

They’d stick him full of needles and drugs and ‘retrain’ him until he didn’t know who he was anymore. They’d wind him up and send him out and he’d never know who or what or why, just the mission mission mission mission mission mission mission mission mission

He’d never get away. He’d done too much, burned too much, he was not going to let them in his head again!

He would kill himself first.

“NO!”

He thrust his hips up and managed to bump the teal soldier off of him. The armor was unfamiliar. Florida liked teal, but this wasn’t Florida, the voice was all wrong. Why pretend to be someone if you weren’t even going to disguise the things that give you away?

He bolted for the door only to be pounced on by the Director. He could feel her hands, heavy on his shoulders, and wailed.

“Washington, stay still!”

She shoved a knee into the small of his back and wrenched an arm back. He was trapped!

Trapped!

Trapped!

Trapped!

“I don’t think he can really understand you right now, just keep him still for me. There we go. There. Ok, hold him for just a few minutes, it shouldn’t take long.”

He felt a firm grip on his head, the needle in his neck, and a cool, numbing sensation flood his veins.

“Please,” Wash sobbed. He couldn’t stop himself, couldn’t control it. “Please don’t put me back in there. I’m a good soldier. I’m a good soldier! I won’t disobey orders!”

The teal one ran a hand through Wash’s hair.
“Fucking hell.”

Wash’s body started to go numb. He sobbed. This was it. He couldn’t get away. Tears dribbled down his cheeks, and his limbs were numb, he could feel his chest tighten and snot start to dribble out of his nose.

It was over.

The blue soldier rolled Wash onto his back and wrapped him in a tight hug.

“Shh, it is ok, Agent Washington. You are having a very scary awake dream right now, but no one is going to hurt you. My name is Caboose. The stupid one is Tucker. The Nice Lady is Principal Kimball and the scary Doctor Lady is Miss Grey. You don’t remember us right now, but that’s ok. We are your friends.”

Wash could feel bile creeping up his throat. He hoped they’d tilt his head to the side so he didn’t drown in his own vomit.

“Oh my goodness, I haven’t seen a dissociative episode quite like this before.”

It was over.

“Please do not talk doctory right now. Agent Washington has had too many scary doctors.”

It was over.

“Ok, ok, dude, we’re gonna take care of you. Caboose and me are gonna carry you to your room, ok? We’ll wait this shit out.”

There was no point in trying to fight it.

“I’d really prefer to keep him in the infirmary until I am sure he’s fully back to himself again.”

They were going to stick him in a cell until he died.

“Yeah, well, I guarantee if you stick him in there he won’t get back to normal. You want our Wash back? Let him wake up where he’s safe.”

Still, better to rot in a prison than end up back on the table.

“I think I know a little bit more about PTSD and psychotic episodes than you do, Captain Tucker.”

If he was broken, they wouldn’t try to fix him.

“Yeah, but I know Wash. You put him in the infirmary and he’s gonna just crawl deeper into this. Someone will get hurt, and he’ll blame himself when he wakes up, and we have too much shit going on without making Wash half crazy.”

God, don’t take him to the infirmary.

He didn’t want them back in him.

Just let him die.

“Captain Tucker-“
Just let him die.

“Look, Doctor Grey, I know you want to help, but you don’t know what they did to him.”

No more drugs.

“And you do?”

No more cutting.

“I know enough to know that he will not be ok if he wakes up strapped to a bed.”

No more electroshock.

“Agent Washington is a danger to himself right now.”

No more therapy.

“He’s too doped up to do anything right now.”

Someone help.

Help.

Please.

There was the ship, big and broken and beautiful. It made Carolina think of Niner in all the best ways. This was a ship she’d love to fly, a little bit older, but no less functional than any of the newer ships.

Well, this one was less functional now, but it wouldn’t have been if they hadn’t crashed it on accident.

Little groupings of soldiers were scattered around hauling boxes. Andersmith’s team had picked up the hauling truck and between his squad and those that had finally made it in, she could see they’d made a little bit of headway.

They’d really come through though, if the boxes were nothing but food, Chorus could survive for weeks with no troubles, even taking Grif’s insane eating into consideration.

York patted Carolina’s shoulder and mentioned checking in.

That was fine, she needed to talk to her soldiers anyway. She didn’t need him close the whole time.

-Yeah, you really don’t.-

Is there a reason you don’t like him?

-Aside from him being king of the smarmy jackasses?-­

Something…niggled the back of Carolina’s brain.
Church, are you, trying to protect my virtue?

A thrum of embarrassment flooded through her.

-Hey, someone’s got to look out for you.-

I appreciate you looking out for me, but I feel like I need to tell you that if you’re trying to defend my virginity, that’s long since past.

-Oh my god, that’s fucking gross! Jesus, C! I’m just trying to make sure that you make smart dating choices!-

You know, you don’t really have the right to be dictating who I’m seeing.

-I’m not trying to dictate, I’m just, you know, trying to make sure you don’t make a stupid decision and regret it.-

Church. Epsilon. I’m going to make stupid decisions. I’m going to, that’s kind of my life.

-I’d like you to make fewer of them.-

That’s not going to happen.

-I’d like to help you make fewer of them.-

That’s still not going to happen.

-Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do, then?! Sit here and watch you ruin your chances?!-

“OH MY GOD WE SURVIVED!!”

A group decked out with red accents came bursting through the tree line. Carolina had no idea who most of them were, but she did manage to recognize Lieutenant Jensen and-

Carolina’s brain froze for a second. Standing there, right in front of her, looking good and fresh as if not a day had gone by since the project, was North fucking Dakota whipping his helmet off.

“North?”

“CAROLINA!!!”

And there was Theta, tiny little glowing purple offspring of the Alpha, waving and jumping on North’s shoulder like he’d just found a friend.

-That’s impossible! Theta was destroyed! If he hadn’t been, Wash wouldn’t have gone to prison for killing him!-

She stumbled a little, but only a little, as she dashed forward and gripped his face between her hands.

“Oh my god. Oh my god! You’re alive!”

“Cahonia! Yow squishing mah faahse!”

The world condensed for a moment and Carolina threw her arms around North. York had said people were alive, but hearing and seeing were two completely different senses, and now she could
breathe a little bit easier.

One less person to make her feel like she’d ruined their lives.

“Well, this is new. Since when do you displays of affection that don’t involve hitting or sarcasm?”

She snorted and pulled back in time to notice his pained wince. York jogged over, also sans helmet, with a wicked grin on his face.

“I’ve made some new friends, they’re the touchy feel type. Are you hurt?”

“I’ll live. Look, this is fantastic, but I don’t have time for chatting. I need to look for South.”

Epsilon burst forward with a snarl.

“Oh, fucking bullshit man! Wash blew her up! We know that happened!”

York sighed and slapped a hand to his forehead.

Carolina winced, but didn’t say anything. There was really nothing she could do that didn’t look like picking sides, and she was not picking sides here when she could finally start to bring all of her people together. When the people she lo- cared about were all in one place and safe, then she’d start mediating.

North glared at him.

“You must be Epsilon.”

Carolina clapped a hand on North’s shoulder. He’d always been on the tactile end, and she’d learned during her time with the Reds and Blues how to met that out to those that needed it.

“South’s here?”

“Yeah. And Wash didn’t blow her up. He’d have known that if he’d followed procedure and checked the body. The ship was going down too fast, she tried to put up the bubble shield to soften the impact.”

Carolina felt her stomach twist. She’d never thought of South as the person to lay on the wire for the team.

“Which explains why you guys are so far from your expected landing site. Look, you can’t go out there by yourself.”

“You’re not going to stop me.”

Epsilon started to curse like a madman on her shoulder and Theta pressed his hands to his…where his ears would be, as if he could block out the sensory input.

“North, the jungles are dense and you’d end up lost. We’d have to track two people instead of one. I know this because less than a month ago, we were hunting a band of pirates that managed to disappear into thin fucking air out here.”

“My sister is-“

“If she’s out there, we will have a much better chance of tracking her down, North. I have enough people to send out scouts and these people know the terrain a hell of a lot better than I do.”
North scrubbed his hands through his hair, and Carolina suddenly realized he had stress lines on his face. He still looked good, still like himself, but he hadn’t escaped the hands of time.

“She could be dying, right now, because you people keep wasting my time!”

Carolina snarled and slammed her face right into North’s. Their foreheads bumped against each other’s hard. He winced, and she realized she’d just head-butted the poor man with her helmet still on.

“Do you want her found or do you want to have a dick measuring contest, because I promise you mine is fucking bigger!”

“Carolina, you are so lucky Tucker wasn’t here to hear you say that.”

She whipped around and saw Donut off to the side, along with what looked to be fifteen Chorus soldiers all around them.

“Shut up, Donut!”

North shrank back a little, and Carolina saw the red rimmed, wild-eyed expression on his face.

It’s not like she didn’t get it. She understood the half insane need to do something, anything, when someone you lo-cared about was out there and you had no stats. No spark, or sign of life. That drive to go out and do something was all consuming.

“Look, my people are all converging on this site. As soon as they come in, I’ll send them right back out. We will find her.”

“Hey, Carolina?”

She sighed, the mood was broken. She’d be lucky if North didn’t just disappear into the trees while she was dealing with this.

“Yes, Donut? I’m a little busy.”

“Sorry, but I thought you should know, Doc found an injured soldier in the jungle not too far from here. He’s bringing her in.”

North’s eyes flew to Donut. He practically shoved Carolina to the ground in an effort to get around her. Epsilon’s indignant squeak was only drowned out by Theta’s fireworks of happiness going off everywhere and sending the Chorus soldiers into mini panic attacks.

“What was her name? What did she look like?”

Donut put one hand on his hip and wagged a finger at North.

“Look, crazy face, I don’t know what you’re hoping to accomplish, but just because she exists does not mean she owes you anything.”

Carolina groaned and put her face in her hands.

“Donut, his sister is missing. His sister would have hopefully landed nearby.”

“OOOOOOOOOOOH! He’s looking for his SISTER! Doc didn’t give me a name or a description, just that she was hurt, but not dead, and he was going to have to carry her back because his team left him behind!”
Everyone in the vicinity, from North and Theta, to York, Carolina, Epsilon, and the Chorus soldiers who were doing a terrible job pretending they weren’t eavesdropping, froze.

Four voices raised in varying levels of incredulous frustration.

“What?”

“Yeah, I thought it was kind of weird that Palomo was here when Doc wasn’t.”

“What?”

“But I just figured he’d gone off to look for more of that funny edible moss that makes it so you can smell colors!”

“What?!”

Donut flinched.

“Jeeze guys, no need to yell!”

Tucker watched, horrified as Wash desperately struggled for control of his body and cried on the floor. He flopped and twitched and hiccupped and sobbed, and Tucker just could not take that.

This was Wash, fucking Wash! He wasn’t supposed to be the one freaking out. He was supposed to be the one pulling everybody’s shit together.

Kimball’s face was all kinds of fucked up. She looked like she wanted to cry herself, she looked like she wanted to hit things, she just…

“Fuck me, man.” Tucker choked out.

She stripped off a glove and wiped the tears off his face. Wash flinched and made this horrible choking/gagging/gasping sound, and she flinched back. Tucker didn’t remember the last time he’d seen that much guilt on someone’s face.

“Emily, I don’t want to send him to the infirmary. Tucker is right, he won’t feel safe there.”

Doctor Grey was quiet for a moment, then sent out a call to have a wheelchair delivered to Kimball’s office.

“He is going to have cottonmouth when he wakes up. Side effects. You will have to monitor him for the next two hours to make sure he doesn’t vomit or have a seizure.”

Tucker felt heat flood his spine.

“You gave him a drug that causes seizures?! Are you HIGH?!”

Doctor Grey gave him a hard look, clearly insulted. She knelt down and adjusted Wash so he looked a little more comfortable, pulled a tiny cushion out of Kimball’s desk to prop his face on, and wiped his face off with a handkerchief.
“I gave him a heavy paralytic sedative because of the high risk of self-harm during his dissociative state. Agent Washington has a history of seizures under extreme mental duress, likely caused by neurological damage from the AI assault on his brain or whatever it was that Project Freelancer did to him afterwards. He won’t talk about it, either because he can’t remember or because it is too traumatic, and I have not pried to the extent that I probably should have, because I do respect his privacy on this matter, and I am aware that he is more likely to pull away than surrender when you pry. He’s like a turtle that way.”

Caboose made a weird noise and curled up on top of Wash. His arms were wrapped around the other man, tight, and he looked like he was going to hit the next person who upset Wash.

Tucker didn’t blame him. He was ready to start punching people, himself.

“You’ll want to get him out of his armor when you lay him down.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ll take care of it.”

The chair arrived, and Tucker made sure that the soldier that dropped it off couldn’t see in the room well enough to know that Wash was the one they were transporting. He hoped that they wouldn’t camp in the halls and wait.

Wash hated anything that might undermine his authority with the brats.

Caboose wouldn’t let Tucker get close enough to help. He just shifted his grip and loaded Wash into the chair. It was high backed with straps, and it made Tucker want to puke, but he knew they’d have to strap him in to move him, or he’d just end up on the floor.

Fuck.

His eyes were all unfocused and he looked like shit. Tucker really hoped Wash was too out of it to know he was being strapped down.

Caboose wouldn’t let Tucker get too close. For whatever reason, he’d decided that everyone was out to hurt Wash and gone non-verbal. Normally, Caboose was all about the talking. It was weird and freaky, and they had already had too much of this shit, ok? Thanks!

Things were getting way too fucked for Tucker’s taste. Seriously, the story was supposed to be fucking over at this point! They killed the baddies, saved the day, and that was supposed to be that!

But no, of fucking course not, because life fucking hates them!

Now they’ve got enemies from the past apparently on their fucking doorstep, Carolina’s lost her goddamned mind and is bringing them in, Wash’s brain is all kinds of extra fucked, and everything is falling a-fucking-part.

What were they gonna do?

Tucker walked in front of Caboose and Wash to make sure the halls were clear.

Originally, he’d wanted to get off planet as soon as he could. He wanted to head off to where Junior was and actually get to spend time with his fucking kid, who he loved and was awesome.

But Junior was safe and happy and well taken care of, what with being basically Alien Jesus. They would protect him out there.
He wouldn’t be safe on Chorus, not right now. Not with everything going down.

It fucking sucked.

The halls were clear, at least, all the way to the quarters the Blues had taken over when they were reunited. Wash didn’t sleep well, never had as long as Tucker had known him, but seemed to do a heck of a lot better when there were people noises around him that he trusted.

So Tucker learned to put up with the lack of alone time, and Wash learned to give Tucker alone time or he’d end up getting an earful.

Caboose allowed Tucker to unstrap Wash, then brushed him backwards and as far away from their slumped over friend as he could manage. Tucker wanted to be pissed about it, but he did get it. Something was very, very fucking wrong, and Wash had fucking bit him and cried he was so goddamned scared.

Caboose’s hands were gentle as he pried Wash out of his armor, a hell of a lot gentler than he was at any given moment.

Tucker leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. They needed a goddamned plan.

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Palomo, Sadhana, and Jones were off to the side with several of the other members of the United Armies of Chorus, in the process of manually mapping out the directions they’d come from. Andersmith had taken Palomo under his arm and was partially shielding the younger man with his body, but that was not going to stop Carolina.

She stalked up to them and slammed a hand down on the crate they were using as a table.


Jones stuttered.

“He…wouldn’t come with us?”

Epsilon flung himself into Jones’s face.

“You left him behind?!?”

“He kept saying he was getting these emergency pings but none of us saw them. We just kept circling the same area.”

North surged up behind Carolina with a snarl.

“YOU LEFT HIM BEHIND?! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!”

“He would have made us stay out there for hours!”

Carolina slammed her hand onto the crate again, and felt the metal dent underneath her.

“Then you use that radio you’re equipped with, report in, and have me call him back in. You don’t just ABANDON PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE JUNGLE! He’s got a wounded soldier with
him that he’s apparently DRAGGING THROUGH THE JUNGLE because you couldn’t be bothered to STAY WITH YOUR PARTY! You three are going to be scrubbing toilets for the REST OF YOUR LIVES!”

He didn’t know how long they left him on the floor. It could have been minutes or hours. Maybe they were going to leave him there and brick up the door. He could just stay put and die in peace. Starvation and dehydration weren’t exactly high on Agent Washington’s wish list, but if it was that or the table, he’d take the long, lingering starvation death. Nothing in the universe was worth what the table would take from him.

Then there was a chair, and the blue soldier strapped him in, and Agent Washington felt the world shift slowly underneath him. The walls changed, and the Director and Councilor were gone. Did that mean they were going to execute him, or just put him on ice until they wanted him for something?

He wouldn’t let them. The moment he had enough control of himself, he’d bite his tongue off and choke to death on his own blood. He would not be a puppet anymore.

They finally unstrapped him in a room that…clearly wasn’t designed as a cell. He couldn’t see the cameras, or even anything that might hint at being a camera, but he knew that didn’t mean anything.

The Director was always watching.

Agent Washington’s whole body was numb. The blue soldier managed to strip him down to his body suit without trouble, while the teal soldier just watched, arms crossed and silent. They both laid him out on a bed, and the teal one used the corner of a sheet to wipe at the drool Agent Washington was apparently incapable of preventing.

The teal one moved around outside of Agent Washington’s vision as the blue one stripped out of his armor. He’d never seen this one before, was he new? The Director had taken on new staff after Tex and York crashed the ship and left everyone inside to die, but Agent Washington had been very good at memorizing their faces when he could and their slight armor variations when he couldn’t. They must have been brought in while the Director had him under, while he tried to suss out just how much Wash had picked up from Epsilon’s suicide.

He thought he’d done a good enough job. He thought they’d started being lax and trusting him.

Clearly Agent Washington was not as good an actor as his surviving counterparts.

The teal one started to strip as well, and…what in the hell was happening?

Once the blue one was stripped down to his underwear he climbed into the bed and curled on top of Agent Washington with a contented sigh, before he started to wiggle and shift around, like he was trying to cover as much of Wash as he could with his own body.

Agent Washington’s stomach tightened with fear. This was…unexpected. He’d never heard about Freelancer…torturing people this way, and he’d certainly never expected to experience it, and he didn’t know what he was supposed to do about it because his body was still not under his control
A pained whine managed to slip out of him, and both men froze.

The teal one came over quickly and pushed the blue one off of Wash a little.

“Holy shit man, you’re freaking him out, get off! Jesus! You know he doesn’t like being laid on!”

The blue one huffed, clearly put out, but allowed the teal soldier to drape a blanket over Agent Washington before he draped himself back across Agent Washington’s chest and snuggled in. If he’d been more in control, he would have fought. Would have kicked and screamed and torn out their vulnerable throats and proved to the Director that he was capable of doing what needed to be done.

Except he couldn’t move, and neither of them did anything. The blue one just hugged Agent Washington while the teal one sat next to him on the bed.

“Hey dude, I know you’re freaked right now, but I’m not like, making a move or anything, just so you know.”

The teal one just propped Agent Washington’s head up a little and wiped away more drool that managed to pour out of his slack jaw.

It was disgusting and humiliating and he hated everything about this. What was the Director’s game plan? Nothing about this made sense as far as retraining him, torturing him, or testing him.

Maybe this was the Councilor? The man always seemed like he had plans underneath plans underneath plans…but what benefit did having two strangers get naked and cuddle with Agent Washington’s numbed body have?

If the Director was playing chess, the Councilor was playing 3D chess, and he knew all the rules better than anyone. If anyone was willing to manipulate the Director’s master plan, he would be the one to do it.

“You are thinking very loudly, Agent Washington. I can hear your brain squeaking.”

“Dude, stop pushing. He’ll come back when he’s ready.”

The teal soldier placed a hand over Washington’s eyes and stroked his hair away from his forehead.

“Get some rest, man. We’re on guard duty.”

Jones and Sadhana ran screaming. Andersmith couldn’t really blame them for being afraid, since Agent Carolina was terrifying on a good day. He was proud of Palomo, who’d stood his ground, even though he was clearly terrified of being reprimanded.

Then Palomo squealed as the purple guy grabbed him by the chest plate and hauled him off the ground.

“YOU LEFT MY SISTER TO DIE IN THE FUCKING JUNGLE BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T BE BOTHERED TO FOLLOW A DISTRESS SIGNAL!”
He grabbed at the man’s arms and tried desperately to free himself, flailing and kicking and screaming the whole while.

“North, put him down!”

“Man, seriously, it’s gonna be ok!”

“Oh my god, Palomo’s gonna die!”

“PLEASE! I’M SORRY! DON’T KILL ME!”

The man raised an arm like he was going to hit Palomo, and that was it.

Enough was enough.

Andersmith grabbed the man and punched him in the side of the head as hard as he could.

The man barely flinched, but it was enough to mess up his balance, so that when Jensen dove for his legs, he toppled backwards on top of her and released Palomo. Katie howled, voice terrified.

“RUN CHARLES!”

Palomo scrambled back as far as he could, but the purple soldier’s grip didn’t loosen, even as his face was swamped with confusion. Andersmith grabbed his chest plate and threw him off of Jensen just as a shotgun blast echoed through the clearing.

“What in the sam hell is goin’ on out here?! Ah leave you idjuts alone for a few hours and this is what I come back to?”

Andersmith let out a sigh of relief. Sarge was there, with Bitters just off to the side, Captain’s Grif and Simmons flanked him, and their soldiers spread around, all armed and pointed at the stranger who’d threatened one of theirs. Everyone was frozen.

Palomo looked as if he was about to collapse and cry.

“Put the boy down, now.”

He let go of Palomo and turned around. Captain Grif held his gun a little higher and pointed it directly at the asshole’s head. Andersmith could see the people from the aid ship shifting for their weapons, tapped his thigh twice, and rotated his right hand a few times.

(Surrounded.)

The Chorus soldiers all turned to focus on the nearest outside and assure that if they moved, they wouldn’t be moving far.

“Alright, asshole, who the fuck are you?”

Private Donut crept over and pulled Palomo out of the range of fire. The purple soldier’s face was rueful.

“’Colorful Space Marines Stop Corruption’, huh?”

Captain Grif snarled, stepped forward, and jabbed his gun in North’s direction.

“Answers! Now!”
“I’m part of the aid ship.”

Captain Simmons met Captain Grif shoulder to shoulder. His hands shook a little, and his voice quavered, Andersmith had a great deal of respect for the man for working through his fear and doing what needed to be done. He was a fine example to the younger generation of soldiers that fear was not the end all, be all.

“An aid ship that beats up teenagers. Great, why do we always get stuck with the assholes?”

Palomo held up his hands and waved them back and forth. His knees were shaking, and he’d dropped his gun, but he seemed to be unharmed.

“I’m ok! I’m ok! Nobody’s hurt! There was just a misunderstanding! It won’t happen again!”

“Palomo, get your ass over here.”

Palomo dashed across the small space and hid himself behind the solid colored soldiers. Donut started to check him over and made cooing noises as he patted at the shaking soldier.

Sarge stepped forward and got into the man’s face.

“Alright, now, we ain’t interested in games. We came ta help y’all out, not let ya beat the snot out of our people, no matter how much of a Blue lover that boy may be. Yer gonna calm yerself down and yer gonna cooperate or I won’t hesitate to introduce you to my second favorite shotgun here. Ain’t like you’re in need of both your kneecaps.”

A tiny AI lit up on the man’s shoulder and waved his arms.

“North, please don’t get shot. We’re in a really scary place, and we don’t know where South is, and you’re not helping! Please, don’t hurt anyone.”

“I’ve got this, Theta.”

“You don’t!”

The purple soldier, North, ran his hands through his hair.

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry. It has been a long and stressful day, and I’m a little freaked because my baby sister is out there somewhere and I cannot track her.”

Captain Grif shifted his stance just a bit and scanned the trees. He looked freaked, even as he kept a cool voice.

“Look, I get it. I’ve got a little sister too, and if I didn’t know if she was hurt or not, I’d be flipping out, but you will not go after our people. Not if you want us to work with you.”

North sighed.

“Look, I really just want to-“

Carolina knelt down next to North and put a hand on the shoulder his AI wasn’t perched on.

“No, North. Just no. You’ve done enough.”

“Carolina?”
“South is on the way, you heard them, and honestly, I think you’ve done enough damage today. You’re going to come over here, let a medic look at you, and then you’re going to wait.”

“Carolina, I am not just going to sit on my ass-“

“And what will you do when you find them? The trees are too dense for a vehicle, or they would have been driving. You’d either get lost, or you’d slow them down, and you have no medical training, so you’re not going to help her that way. The best thing you can do, as someone who loves South, is wait and get yourself taken care of.”

Carolina stood up and took in the soldiers all standing with their weapons at the ready and waved a hand.

“Ok, come on, you’ve seen bigger fights in the cafeteria. Stand down and get back to work!”

One by one, the soldiers moved, but Andersmith could see the problem brewing, even if Agent Carolina did not.

They didn’t move immediately.

Instead, they looked to the Reds and the Lieutenants to see what they were doing. They’d mirrored the people they thought they could trust, followed the non-verbal cues, and acted accordingly.

And those did not come from Agent Carolina.

Jensen made her way over to where Palomo was still being cooed over by Donut and hugged him. He buried his helmet into her chest plate, and Andersmith knew he was not the only one who could hear the young man’s sobs.

He…had not been well since the final battle.

None of them really had.

Agent Carolina herded the aid ship soldiers off toward the ship, where Andersmith noticed Bitters was perched on a crate. He looked angry.

“Bad shit’s going down.”

Bitters had one hand on Andersmith’s shoulder and the other on his gun.

“I agree. The question is now, what do we do about it?”

“I think we need to call in for reinforcements.”

Wash shook his head. It was fuzzy and hard to think. He could feel familiar fingers threaded through his hair and lightly scratching his scalp.

“Tucker?”

His eyes finally opened and he saw his friend wearing nothing but his underwear, sitting on the bed right next to his face. Wash supposed he should be thankful that Tucker was even bothering to
wear underwear.

“Hey man, how are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a car again. What happened?”

Tucker stopped playing with Wash’s hair and he tried not to feel disappointed.

“You had a PTSD fueled flashback and scared the shit out of Kimball and Grey.”

“Oh hell.”

“Yes, but it is ok, Agent Washington. We are your friends and we will take care of you.”

Wash looked down and realized the heavy weight he felt on his chest was Caboose literally laying on top of him. The poor man’s face looked wrecked. He hated it when Wash had an ‘episode’, didn’t understand it half the time, and felt guilty the rest for reasons Wash still didn’t understand.

“Hey there, Buddy. Did I scare you?”

Caboose looked away from Wash and hugged him tighter.

“You were very upset, and I do not think you remembered us anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Caboose.”

Tucker watched Wash with weary eyes and reached for his under suit.

“Do you remember why you freaked out?”

“Honestly? Not really.”

Tucker slipped his legs into the under suit and started to gear up.

“Look, I don’t want to push you, and I think Kimball gets it now. Why don’t you and Caboose just hang for a while until Carolina gets back?”

Wash gently shifted until Caboose was less on top of him and more clinging to his side, and sat up. He was a little dizzy.

“Tucker, I need to know.”

Tucker ran a finger through his dreads and let out a sigh that Wash was sure the man was too playful and carefree to be letting out at this point. He was barely thirty, the war was over, and Tucker did not need to sound so world weary.

“Look, there are some dead people who aren’t dead, and you weren’t ok.”

“I…is…shit. Tucker, is Connie?”

Tucker clapped a hand on Wash’s arm, before he even realized he’d been moving.

“She’s here, dude, sleeping in the infirmary. Doctor Grey has her on some crazy antibiotic and painkiller regimen right now. You’re not crazy, she’s real, and she’s here.”

The relief that flooded him only lasted a moment.
“Who else is alive?”

“Dude-“

“Tucker, Kimball wasn’t wrong. I need to know so that we can start getting things taken care of, and blindsiding me isn’t helpful. It sounds like I’ve lost a lot of my prep time at this point.”

Caboose sat up and scooted away from Wash, face full of frustration and fury.

“The big ship fell from the sky and now there are ghost people on the planet, and I was right and Tucker keeps calling me names!”

“Basically, all the Freelancers are alive and we can’t get ahold of the rescue team.”

Wash shook his head. That…did not make any sense.

“All of them?”

“All of the ones you worked with.”

Wash scooted and pressed his back into the wall, which meant that Caboose shuffled until he was settled onto Wash’s lap with his head pressed into Wash’s shoulder. It felt ridiculous to Wash, since Caboose was not a small man by any stretch of the imagination, but he didn’t try to move the other man. He was clearly stressed out, and no amount of male posturing would make him feel more secure.

Besides, Wash wasn’t opposed to hugs as long as there were clothes involved, and he was not naked.

“Tucker, there were hundreds of people involved with Freelancer, and I remember all of them. I need names if you have them.”

Tucker snarled.

“I don’t fucking know! Carolina said her ex was there and that all her people were alive but we haven’t gotten a word to anyone in hours! We’d lost three teams when you blacked out, now we’re not in contact with anyone!”

Wash sat with that information for a moment.

“Ok. I’m pretty sure I’m not going to think about the hows or the whys of this. We should be preparing for an attack. How far away is the actual crash site?”

“Dude, Carolina said they’re friendly. She wants us to let them in.”

Wash…blinking.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard in a very long time. These people are highly trained infiltrators and assassins who have attempted to kill either you or me in the past without remorse, and we have no idea where their loyalties lie. Why would we let them into our main base without vetting them?”

“Fucking A, I know man! But Carolina and Kimball are like fucking and shit, so Kimball’s letting her do whatever!”

Wash scrubbed a hand through his hair and glared at Tucker, who looked pissed and completely
without remorse.

“Do not say that around the troops. The last thing we need right now is a lack of faith in Kimball. She’s the planet’s standing leader, and basically the last line of authority that the UNSC can contact. I vaguely remember something about Carolina thinking I shouldn’t know?”

“She was afraid you’d flip. She was right.”

Wash nodded. He’d gone a few weeks without a bad episode and then this shit happened. It made his life very stressful, and Wash did not need any more stress.

“I think it was probably a good idea to tell me when she did. If I’d done that in front of the Chorus soldiers we would have had some very serious problems in regards to trusting my stability. I need to get up now, Caboose. We need to plan for their arrival.”

Tucker shook his head.

“Wash-“

“Tucker, if Carolina really is compromised, we need to have a defensive strategy in place. This is a team of infiltration experts, sharpshooters, long and short range combatants, and at in short very dangerous people.”

Caboose pulled a sheet free and wrapped it around his shoulders like a cape.

“And they are your friends.”

Wash shook his head and patted Caboose on the arm. The larger man finally shifted back and allowed Wash off the bed. His legs were shaky, but stable. He needed a shower, ten gallons of coffee, and to never have that happen again. At least one of those things was attainable.

“They are the people I served with. They lied to me, hurt me, abandoned me, and left me for dead. South and the Meta both actively tried to kill me. As far as I’m concerned, they are hostile captives until they prove themselves otherwise.”

“What makes them any different from your girlfriend in the infirmary?”

Wash glared at Tucker, and picked up his under suit.

Nope. That’s…not going back on his body. That’s going in the garbage. What the fuck had Doctor Grey given him?

“First off, if you call her that again, I will make you run laps until your calves go from glorious to godlike, Captain Tucker, and don’t think I won’t. Second, there isn’t. She’s just as much a suspect as the rest of them. I allowed sentiment to cloud my judgment. It won’t happen with them again. I’m going to correct that problem first, and then I’ll figure out what to do with the incoming problems.”

“Wash?”

“My job is to protect you guys and the people of this planet. They factor in only as how much of a threat they are.”

Caboose whimpered and pulled the sheet all the way around himself until he looked like a giant lump of fabric with a face. The anger was gone, and Caboose looked much more like a frightened
child than a fully grown man.

“Agent Washington, will you hate me too when we are not friends anymore?”

Wash’s heart sunk.

He scooted closer to Caboose and reached out to pull the man back in for a side hug, only to be denied.

“Oh god, Caboose, no. Why would you think that?”

That hurt a lot more than he’d have thought it would.

“You are very angry at your friends.”

“They are not my friends. They are people I worked with. You and I, we’re friends, even if I’m not always very good at it.”

Caboose shook his head, hard, his face twisted with grief.

“Maybe your friends did hurtful, bad things because they didn’t know better. I am not very smart. What if I do a bad thing because I don’t know better?”

“Like the time you killed Church.”

Tucker needled Caboose with a forced grin on his face. Caboose didn’t respond with a smile of his own.

“That was an accident!”

Wash reached out and put a hand on Caboose’s knee.

“Look, I… Caboose, there is probably nothing in the universe that could make me hate you. Not even the obnoxious Taylor Swift karaoke you and Donut do. I don’t always like the things everyone does, and I don’t always agree with them, but I am not going to suddenly hate you. You and I are friends.”

“I let them put you in the bad place where they made you want to hurt people.”

He scrubbed at his face, hard. This was not a conversation Washington wanted to have, ever, let alone just after waking up from a really shitty mental break.

“Well, it’s not as if you knew I was going to prison. You thought I was going to get a shiny new base like you and the Reds did. I don’t blame you for that.”

Tucker shifted uncomfortably.

“Anymore. You don’t blame us anymore.”

“I… right, fine. The point is, we’re friends. I’m not going to let them come in here and hurt us.”

“You do not think they are here to help us?”

“No, I don’t. I can’t think of what possible reason could they have to come here, as a group. Why now? Why Chorus?”
Tucker shrugged and tossed Wash some clean sweatpants. He was pretty sure they were Donut’s, what with them being pink with JUICY written in glitter on the ass. Still, they were clean and would cover him until he could scrub off the sweat and stink of fear.

“We did kind of send a big fucking message into space.”

“And that made them all come together to help out this poor little planet? While they’re all still considered criminals?”

“Maybe they came for you guys? You and Carolina?”

“Yeah, that’s a thought that worries me.”

“You…you think they’re being paid by Hargrove?”

“Or someone else who doesn’t like Freelancer, or who doesn’t like us. Connie was on Hargrove’s ship, and honestly, the only reason no one is calling bullshit on her story is because she’s in rough shape. Maybe they’re here to help, maybe they’re here to hurt us. The point is, friend or foe, we need to be prepared for the worst.”

“Santa, you still there?”

“Yes I am.”

“What’s it look like?”

“Someone has attempted to disrupt our communications. I am currently shielding you, as we were connected beforehand, but I have lost the ability to protect the communications of others without being noticed.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic. Do we know who’s causing it?”

“The disruption appears to be coming from the gold, white, and purple soldiers and blanketing a quarter mile in any given direction. You will need to create some distance for long range communications.”

Bitters looked over to where the others were strewn about. They had a total of seven of the fuckers just wandering around, fully armed, messing with the heads of the soldiers. If Bitters had to hear one more ‘they’re so cool’ he was going to puke.

It didn’t make it better that the babies mostly hadn’t realized they were dealing with actual Freelancers. They knew Carolina knew them, because she couldn’t keep her fucking hands off of them, but no one seemed to make the connection that these people were not the good guys.

Bitters tried not to cringe as Ramirez and Demir practically had a rotating door of soldiers meeting Butch, the Giant, and Hot Wheels.

The Chorus soldiers had managed to keep the ‘aid ship soldiers’ occupied as Bitters looked for the cause of the disruption, but it wasn’t going to last forever. The gold one kept trying to come over and talk to him, and it was a pain in the fucking ass forcing him to keep his distance while trying
not to show it.

It’d be easier with Matthews there. They could just start making out, and they’d end up with plenty of space to actually work.

He toyed briefly with the idea of making out with someone else as a distraction, but that would give the game away to the other Chorus kids…and there was a very real possibility Matthews wouldn’t be happy about it.

Still, Jensen, Andersmith, and Palomo were doing a fucking awesome job of redirecting the soldiers without setting anyone off. Or mostly anyone, he knew that Butch guy had eyes on him constantly, and the white guy that Captain Simmons kept freaking out around was doing the same. He needed to get far enough away that he wasn’t going to pick up too much suspicion and ruin the whole fucking plan.

He needed a smoke break.

“Ok, Santa. Deep hiding.”

“Confirmed.”

He swaggered over to where Folami was seated, bracketed on either side by this giant guy that Bitters had some really unpleasant suspicions about, the pilot in the fucked up death chair, and Butch, who’d been told to sit down after his fourth round of vomiting in Carolina’s presence.

“Hey, Folami.”

“What?”

Bitters made a sideways ‘w’ and scratched at his left cheek twice then tapped the left side of his head.

(Agent Washington? Check in?)

Folami’s face scrunched up. She made an ‘n’ with her right hand and shook it back and forth.

(No.)

Niner leaned forward in her chair to watch, and Bitters realized that she was puzzling out what the signs meant.

“Don’t leave us out of the conversation, Orange Boy. What happened to making our lives easier by teaching us shit?”

Teaching? Fucking hell, Folami! She at least managed to look concerned as the knowledge that she might have shared vital information with the enemy actually clicked. It was a good thing that concerned on Folami managed to look more like pissed off than anything else.

Bitters made an ’r’ with his left hand and tapped the top left of his head.

(Radio?)

“You’re the one who thinks only deaf people should know sign language.”

Folami repeated the previous gesture.
“Oh come on, I apologized already! What’s going on that you guys need to keep secrets?”

Butch leaned over with a sunny grin, his voice a cheerful singsong that immediately put Bitters on edge.

“Secrets, secrets, are no fun, unless they are for everyone, kiddos.”

Bitters made a ‘ф’, an ok sign, and tapped his left thigh twice.

(Freelancers?)

She made a ‘y’ and shook it.

(Yes.)

The big guy leaned over and tapped Folami’s shoulder. She was damned lucky she was looking at Bitters, because her eyes widened like crazy.

“Jesus, he’s asking me to cover for his smoke break alright!”

Bitters sighed, like he knew he was blown at that point. Several of the Chorus soldiers looked over and snickered loudly.

“God damn it, Folami.”

“Hang loose, asshole. Everyone here except the newbies knows that you’re asking to go take a smoke. Matthews is gonna know within ten minutes of you getting back, and then you will get no mack time. Do you want to get your dick sucked or do you want to get a smoke, because Matthews isn’t gonna touch you if you smell like ash.”

“You fucking suck, Folami.”

Bitters pulled out his half empty prop pack of smokes and made like he was pulling one out.

“Bitters, I will hoist my injured body up and break your dick in half if you don’t get the fuck away from here with those death sticks, don’t think I won’t. You want to die of black lung, that’s your choice! Me, I’m gonna die of old fucking age, you just watch!”

“You’re gonna die of a heart attack at this rate. You look like you’re about to bust a blood vessel.”

The gold one, York, sauntered up and clapped Bitters on the shoulder way harder than necessary. Clearly bullshit male posturing.

“An attempt has been made to destroy communications. Primary systems destroyed. Secondary still intact. Assault ended.”

“I’m not going to lie, a smoke break sounds fantastic, mind if I join you?”

Bitters didn’t have much of a plan for this part. He didn’t figure the guy for a smoker.

Stupid, rookie mistake. He didn’t have to be a smoker to know that Bitters was sneaking off. What was the fucking plan here? It was like his brain just…fucking stopped. How do you get someone off you that’s basically a super soldier/spy?
The day was saved when Agent Carolina strode up behind him with her arms crossed.

“You picked up smoking again?”

York dropped his arm like it was on fire and sprung away from Bitters.

“Nope! No! Uh, uh, absolutely not!”

“Because I remember what you were like when you were smoking regularly, and I’m not interested in dealing with that.”

“It’s all good, Carolina, I don’t need a smoke!”

“Smoke? Smoke break? Dude, where?!”

Captain Grif barreled past York and Carolina and grabbed Bitters arm.

“Quick dude, before Simmons catches us and starts screaming about how I’m damaging his pretty, pink lungs!”

Captain Grif hauled Bitters into the trees a good distance from the camp. Sure enough, Captain Simmons voice started to get high and screechy as they melted into the trees.

“The interference has lessened here. We will not have much time once I establish contact before we are noticed.”

“Well?”

Bitters handed a half empty pack of smokes and a lighter to his Captain while Santa started establishing a clear line. Grif lit up a cigarette and made a face. They were probably stale, and definitely shit since he didn’t actually smoke, but no one believed a full pack, and no one believed an empty one.

“So,” Captain Grif said while taking a drag, “When did you start smoking?”

“When I need a private conversation. I’m calling in and I didn’t want the freaks up my ass.”

Captain Grif’s face was nervous and twitchy. He wasn’t any happier about the Freelancers invasion than Bitters was.

“Your radio’s working?”

“Long story. Basically, I’m paranoid as fuck and Santa’s a badass.”

Grif nodded and rolled his shoulder.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Don’t blow smoke on me. Matthews is my roommate, and he can’t stand the smell. Makes his lungs seize.”

“Damn, and I thought Simmons was just being a bitch about it. So I really can’t smoke inside?”

“No.”

The sounds of radio static picked up.
“Plus, Folami’s right. If I smell like cigarettes I’m not getting my dick sucked when I get back.

Bitters smirked as Captain Grif let out a strangled, choking gasp at the improper inhale.

The patch lit up and Santa pinged Wash.

“Agent Washington, this is Lieutenant Bitters, over.”

“I read you, Bitters. Good to know you’re not hurt, I heard comms were down.”

“Sir, we’ve got Freelancers on us, they fried our radios, maps, and trackers. I only have anything because Santa and I are fucking awesome.”

“You’re sure the Freelancers did it?”

“Positive. Santa says the circle of fuckery is coming from the assholes walking around with AI. We don’t have much time until we’re noticed.”

“They…what? No, nevermind, that’s not important. Are they acting aggressive?”

“Looks like they’re trying to get into everyone’s good graces. Some of us are seeing through it, but most of the babies are in love. We’ve got two visible AI, but I’m willing to bet that the guy in gold armor that Carolina’s all over either has an AI of his own or he’s got some kind of jamming tech.”

“That guy is York, her ex. Bitters, as of this moment, I am taking remote command. Inform Agent Carolina to strip the Freelancers of all weapons, equipment, and armor and prepare for immediate evacuation. They are to be considered armed and dangerous, even outside of armor, and are capable of killing you even unarmed. Don’t restrain them, but do keep guns trained on them at all times. No one is exempt from this rule.”

“Fucking hell, Washington. Wanna tell me what’s happening?”

“I’m on my way to Kimball as we speak. She’ll issue new orders. Until then, Agent Carolina is no longer in charge.”

And with that, Bitters radio died.

He looked up and saw the soldier in white staring at him from the branches.

Fuck.

“I think it’s high time you came back to the group, isn’t it, Chaps? There are all sorts of dangers in these trees.”

Captain Grif stomped out the remains of the cigarette.

“Dude, we are so fucked.”

Chapter End Notes

If you managed to get through the slog that is this chapter, congratulations! Please don’t give up on me just yet! After this, I’m pulling in some fun and humor, but I
needed to get a lot of this out and done in order to move forward.

I've decided that I'm really more suited for nonsense than novels. Plot? Bah! Angst? Boo! Mindless conversations and jokes that only five people will even realize are supposed to be funny? Count me in on that! Stay tuned for more jokes stolen from pinterest, my own personal head-cannons rambling along as the plot, and people behaving wildly out of character!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Simmons writes (kind of), Wash sees places he didn't want to see, Carolina lays down the law, Doctor Grey hands out stuffed animals and advice, Palomo stands up, and nothing goes well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Simmons stopped chasing Grif after he and his damned Lieutenant disappeared into the trees. There was no way he was going to be able to catch the other man once he was out of sight. For being a fatass, Grif could really haul it when he wanted to.

Instead of futilely getting himself lost in the trees, he looked over to where Private Folami was sitting, surrounded by Freelancers all by herself. Three of them! The other Chorus soldiers had gotten back to work, loudly laughing as they stripped the ship down as best they could.

She was going to get eaten alive over there!

He jogged over as quickly as he could, panicked wheezing filled his ears, then immediately froze when he realized that meant everyone was looking at him.

“Uh…hey…everybody. I, uh…”

The man in dark blue armor (Butch maybe? Simmons wasn’t entirely sure) grinned eagerly.

“Are you feeling poorly, Captain Simmons?”

“Oh, um, no, I uh, just ah.”

What was he going to do?! They were all watching him, varying expressions of cruel amusement on their faces. They were going to laugh at him! And in front of the medic, too.

“Oh, he’s just looking for something to do, now that Grif is hiding in the trees! Hey there, I don’t know if we’ve gotten to properly introduce ourselves yet! I’m Donut.”

Saved by a dumb knight in pink armor.

Donut managed to appear out of thin fucking air and was standing at Simmons shoulder with a cheery wave for the small group. He hopped up on one of the crates stacked around them and started to kick his feet back and forth.

“So, you guys are Freelancers, right? That’s cool. I started my military career on a base with a Freelancer, you know? Well, she wasn’t exactly on our team, but I blew her up! She earned that though, she did kind of stick an exploding spider to my face.”

Simmons slapped the forehead of his helmet. Talking about how Tex tried to blow Donut up, and how Donut actually did blow Tex up, was probably not the best way to make friends with the
people who were trained to kill everything everywhere.

“Donut, please stop talking.”

“And now, I’m like totally friends with another Freelancer! She’s really skinny and really pale, but I think a few tanning trips should fix that! We don’t exactly have tanning beds here, but there’s nothing like climbing up a hill and spending some time out of armor to get that color back in your cheeks! Mine are a heck of a lot rosier now that it’s safe to just strip down and enjoy the sunshine!”

“Donut, please. I am begging you.”

“And I know that Wash says if he tans he just gets more freckly and burns, but I think he’s just trying to avoid being alone with me. He doesn’t want to talk about how he shot me and left me for dead for a few weeks, which I get. That was a really hard time for him, what with being in prison and all that nasty psychological trauma, but if we want to have a solid relationship we really don’t need any elephants hanging around, am I right?”

“Oh my god, Donut. Why don’t you just tell them your Basebook password and where we store all of our backup supplies while you’re at it.”

Donut took a breath, and holy shit, was he actually going to do it? JESUS, Donut, what is wrong with you?!

The woman in the wheelchair maneuvered herself closer. Simmons hadn’t gotten to see a lot of people outside of armor out of the base, but the ‘injured corner’ was all at least helmetless and in varying states of disassembled armor.

She was…kind of pretty actually.

Maybe it was just that she was a more age appropriate person to be looking at while out of armor, what with a lot of Simmons soldiers being almost ten years younger than him, and it was not ok to look at his subordinates like that.

Or maybe she was actually just pretty.

Her hair was short with streaks of shiny silver and dark grey woven through it, her eyes and mouth had small stress lines, but she had a smile that was…confident? Yeah. That sounded right.

Simmons narrowed his eyes a little and tried to get a better first look. When he submitted his story to the writing group on base, he wanted to make sure he described her right. There was also something…weirdly familiar about her? Maybe her face shape? Her eye color? Her nose looked like it had been broken a few times, so that might have been it. These days Simmons knew more people with broken noses than without.

“Well, that was a lot to unpack. You guys all know people from Project Freelancer?”

Simmons shrugged.

“Well, we do, but the people from Chorus haven’t. Or, if they have, the Freelancers are trying to keep it quiet, but I think it’s just you guys and Wash and Carolina. They’d notice the outsiders around here.”

Man, he could not wait to get to his tablet and start writing all of this out.

She leaned forward and smiled in such a way that our hero, Richard, felt as if his very life were in
danger from just the gleam of her teeth and the crinkle of her eyes. Another woman, fair and…

Wait, not fair. Fair means white skin, right? Her skin color isn’t important anyway…

Simmons cleared his throat.

Another woman, possessing beauty and a natural charm, who also seemed to have a natural talent for danger-

“-and so I said, ‘Look, if you can’t catch a chicken, how the heck do you expect to catch a greased up hog?’ So I ended up jumping in and wrestling that guy to the ground!”

Wait, what?

“Donut stop bothering them! No one cares about your weird Iowa farmboy stories!”

The guy (Buuuuuutch? Sure, he looked like a Butch) leaned toward them and waved a hand around like he was motioning to the whole of the crash site.

“So, do you know why everyone looks at us like we’re simultaneously terrifying and amazing? Other than our good friend Folami here, I feel like everyone keeps expecting us to snap and beat them up or something.”

The woman, lovely and graceful, gestured firmly with her left hand to young Donut.

“Well, he did say something about a…exploding spider?”

“It was a bomb. She shot a bomb at him and it attached to his face.”

Donut rocked side to side, cheerily.

“Well, in all honesty, I don’t blame anyone for being nervous. They have heard some crazy stories about you guys, and not just about Tex! Honestly? I’m a little nervous myself. Are you a Freelancer too? Which state are you?”

Her grip on her one person carriage, was sturdy and confident, just as she presented herself. She made sure to turn her pleasant form to whomever she deigned to grace with the melodious tones of her verbal expression.

Oh yeah, Simmons had this down.

“The call sign’s 479er. I’m the pilot, not a soldier. I was on payroll, but I didn’t get a gun, or any of the super fancy armor.”

Donut shook his head.

“I don’t believe that for a minute! I think you’re some kind of badass ninja who can murder people while in a wheelchair which is awesome but also all kinds of fucked up! And you, who are you, Big Guy?”

Simmons couldn’t hold back a sigh. Maybe he should just leave Donut to it. It didn’t look like Folami was in any distress, she actually seemed pretty amused by everything going on around her.

The freaking huge guy tapped his throat and shook his head. Donut slapped his hands to his cheeks as if he were surprised.
“Gasp! Oh no! You have a sore throat? Well, once Doc gets here, I’m sure he’ll have some lozenges or something, he’s always prepared like that!”

Butch chuckled darkly.

“Well, our friend Folami over here has given him the nickname of ‘Crooked Mick’, but since you’re all in the know at this point, there’s no reason to hide it. I’m Agent Florida, and this is Agent Maine.”

Simmons choked loudly and terrified, and no one in WORLD could blame him!

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re THE META?!”

His voice reached octaves usually out of the range of human range.

Several of the Chorus soldiers screamed in terror. Guns were immediately pulled and trained onto Maine. Private Yacavone began to wail and cry out.

“Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!”

“The Meta is here?!”

“We’re all going to die!”

“He’s unstoppable!”

“THE META IS A KILLING MACHINE!”

“Oh my gosh! He has the strength of ten bearsh!”

The META curled in on himself, clearly in distress, which…was not what Simmons expected. What happened to the unstoppable killing machine that ripped through soldiers like paper?

Folami’s face contorted into an enraged snarl. She pointed to Agent Florida and jabbed her finger at him repeatedly.

“You fucking piece of shit, asshat, mother-humping, cowbell tuner! Get your fucking garbage brained, cock garbling, pixie stick snorting ass over here and help me stand up or I swear I will piss on your pillows!”

Agent Florida hopped to his feet, and maneuvered Folami so she wouldn’t have to put pressure on the leg with the gunshot wound and helped her hop around the protection of the crates to look at her fellow soldiers still panicking and fumbling for their weapons.

Carolina and the other Freelancers just looked at them all like they were idiots, which...was probably fair.

Folami let out a massive whistle that cut through the terrified chatter like Tucker’s plasma sword through pretty much anything, and once people were relatively quiet, she pointed an accusatory finger at the crowd.

“All of you are weenies! This man’s arm was nearly ripped off! He’s in rougher shape than a merc after a session with Doctor Grey! If you can’t stop him at this point, you all deserve to fucking die! Shut the fuck up and get back to work!”
Off to the side, Lieutenant Andersmith coughed politely.

“What she said, only nicer. Come on now, the truck isn’t going to load itself!”

Niner, lovely Niner, grinned far more pleasantly and moved her personal carriage next to Folami, who’s face was still clenched into bitter disgust.

“Nicely said.”

“If it turns out I just used my screams for evil, and you all end up murdering us, I will haunt you worse than the STI’s your dumb asses got from cousin fucking without protection. Hey Andersmith! Get me over to the medic huddle, I’m being wasted over here and if I have to spend another minute sitting on my broken ass tailbone being useless, I may actually scream!”

Lieutenant Andersmith jogged over and shook his head.

“Agent Carolina requested we keep everyone who’s injured over here. You’re hurt, no matter how much you pretend you’re not. Those bandages are still seeping blood.”

This was not what the woman wanted to hear, clearly, as she gripped Andersmith’s chest plate and hauled him so that his helmet was at level with her face. Agent Florida just started laughing as she shook the other man, one fisted, and practically spit onto his face.

“Then where the fuck is Edra? Her hand is basically a fleshy glove filled with paste and bone splinters!”

He glanced around before he visibly winced.

“Um…moving crates, it looks like.”

She paused, her expression washed clean of irritation. She let go of Andersmith’s chest plate and turned to look at the truck he’d looked at.

“…Moving crates?”

“Poorly.”

The fire in her voice seemed to shoot from her eyes as rage blinded her. She swung wildly in Agent Florida’s grasp and nearly toppled them both over as she howled.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! EDRA! YOU GET YOUR SORRY ASS AWAY FROM THOSE CRATES, YOU LITTLE BITCH! I SWEAR TO GOD, I WILL EAT YOUR YOUNG! DO YOU HEAR ME?!”

Niner blinked and cocked her head to the side slightly very prettily, but…it was also weirdly familiar and it didn’t send those happy titters up Simmons’ spine the way that sort of thing usually did.

“You…you’re a smaller, louder version of me. How did this happen?”

Clearly Edra didn’t move fast enough, because Folami snarled and pointed an accusatory finger over to where the soldiers were working.

“I AM NOT KIDDING YOU TITLESS ARSE COLLECTOR! DROP THE BOX OR I WILL SHOOT YOU IN YOUR GOOD HAND AND RIP OUT YOUR OVARIRES!!!”
“GO TO HELL, FOLAMI!”

“DON’T THINK I WON’T DO IT JUST BECAUSE I FUCKED YOUR SISTER!”

Niner nodded appreciatively and moved out of the way as Agent Florida bodily dragged Folami back into the circle of crates, despite her even more erratic flailing. Holy hell, how was her leg not hurting her?

“Yup, you tell her, Mini-Niner.”

Folami flipped her off, which only served to amuse the woman.

It was only a minute or two before Andersmith himself grabbed Edra and brought her over to the ‘injured corner’. She sauntered over with an easy gait, her mutilated hand hung limply at her side, and Simmons was pretty sure should still hurt something awful.

“Heeeeeeeeyy, Folami.”

Folami growled, low and deep like some kind of primal creature and wrenched Edra’s helmet off her head. Edra’s pupils were blown wide and her face had a broad, toothy grin. Definitely stoned out of her head.

“You,” Folami snarled, “Are high as a fucking kite. Why did you think it was a good idea to move crates when you’re this fucked up?”

Edra giggled, stumbled away from Andersmith, and leaned into Florida, who was still holding Folami up. The man’s face looked so amused at the fight he was physically in between.

“It’s all good, G. Danvers gave me the good stuff!”

Edra waved her arm around and patted Folami’s ear, likely in an attempt to pat the top of her head. The pure, unadulterated fury on the medic’s face was enough to make Simmons wish for an escape plan.

Then Edra’s face scrunched up in pain.

“Oooooowww. My aaaaaaarmmmmuh.”

Folami jerked at Edra’s arm and pulled it across her chest.

“That’s because your hand was CRUSHED, you little idiot! And you won’t be getting any more of the ‘good stuff’, since that is supposed to be rationed for AMPUTATIONS DANVERS! WE ONLY USE THIS SHIT WHEN YOU LOP SOMETHING OFF! Fucking morons! Andersmith, get me the medical tape and a water ration for the dumbass!”

“Bitters? Bitters, respond.”

Silence.

“Lieutenant Bitters radio is no longer in contact, Agent Washington.”
“Fuck.”

Wash locked eyes with Tucker, the other man’s face was twisted in fear. He understood completely, his own face probably matched, considering the level of anxiety that was ramping up.

“Jesus, Wash.”

“We need to get this taken care of.”

Caboose shuffled back and started to struggle back into his armor.

“She is going to be very mad when she comes back, Agent Washington. Agent Carolina does not like surprises, no matter how nice the balloons are.”

“And I’ll deal with her when the time comes. For now, we need to get help out there, now.”

Tucker suited up and helped Caboose into his gear.

“Santa, fill Kimball in on what’s happening. We need to get into help mode, now. Do we have any planes yet?”

Wash stood up, ready to get back into it, only for Tucker to shove him back onto the bed firmly.

“Nu uh, Dude, you’re staying here.”

“Tucker-“

“Don’t you ‘Tucker’ me. You just woke up from the shittiest brain break you’ve had in months, and you need to rest. Lay your ass back down, or I’m going to make it my personal mission to tire you out to the point you can’t stand!”

“Hey chika bump bump.”

Tucker froze, eyes wide in horror. He turned slowly to look at Caboose, who seemed pleased as punch. Tucker took a step back from Wash, nervous.

“That…was not what I meant.”

“I get it, Tucker.”

“No, I mean it, Wash! I’m aaaaall about the ladies!”

“Tucker. I know.”

“Fuck! Is Donut rubbing off on me?”

“Not at the moment, but I’m not always around when you two are together.”

Tucker’s face took on a look of betrayal. Wash tried to give him a cheeky grin, but had no idea how successful he was.

“You’re terrible. Come on, Caboose. Wash, stay.”

And with that Tucker and Caboose were gone, and so was Wash’s barely scraped together good humor.

Ok.
Ok.

He could do this.

He could just rest.

He could let them take care of it.

He could…

Shit.

He couldn’t.

Wash sat back on the bed, rocked himself a little, stood up, paced, pressed a hand to the wall, and took a deep, slow, breath.

He was barely able to maintain his cool.

He had to trust the Lieutenants, trust the soldiers, trust the Reds and Blues, trust the people of the planet to take care of themselves. They weren’t helpless. The best thing about the baby soldiers was that their cheerful faces and blinding hope hid some very sharp claws and teeth and the knowledge that they would use them.

They had training now.

They could take care of themselves.

Still, the people trying to kill them this time weren’t just pirates or off brand mercenaries, they were Freelancers. One member of Project Freelancer was worth 100 soldiers on a good day, no matter their rank on the leaderboard.

They needed a plan.

He sent a quick message to Kimball’s office to let her know he was back up and moving, and ditched the ‘JUICY’ pants.

They needed a plan.

Carolina was sending them here. To their home.

She was bringing liars, thieves, killers, people who’d betrayed them, into the place where their friends were.

Proteger, the city they moved the people in Armonia to after it was destroyed, was where the largest portion of the population was just…sitting. There were children there. Not too many under the age of twelve, but they still existed. There were sick and injured and mentally incompetent, and this was not a holding facility.

Why would she do something so blatantly dangerous to the people of Chorus? All bringing the Freelancers to Proteger would do is put them at risk.

He armored himself quickly, thankful he’d managed a shower and a very brief rest to decompress, and headed toward Kimball’s office. She hadn’t pinged him back in response, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t there. The amount of time she spent doing paperwork in that dark little cave alone was enough to make Wash feel a little claustrophobic. He had no idea how she handled it.
Soldiers were wandering the halls at their normal, even paces. Some stopped to salute, but most just waved or completely ignored him. They’d been lax on protocol, but Kimball had said she wasn’t worried about it in the main base, as long as they jumped into compliance when they given the command. So far, her method had managed to work, and Wash didn’t feel the need to mess with a good thing.

There was no clear indicator of how much time passed when Wash blinked and realized that he was standing in a disused stairwell, and not headed anywhere close to Kimball’s office. At some point he’d started to go from the main level down to the secondary storage. What was he doing there?

Carolina was not an unintelligent woman.

She had to have a plan of her own.

Just because she wasn’t telling the soldiers what was going on didn’t mean she didn’t have something in motion.

His feet carried him the rest of the way down to the door.

Had he screwed up? Telling Bitters to take command and get the Freelancers underhand?

Probably. It seemed like Wash couldn’t do anything but screw up these days. Screw up and get people killed, or almost killed.

Screw up.

Fucking idiot.

Goddamned fucking idiot.

Wash pushed open a heavily fortified door with ‘armory’ spray-painted onto it. He’d only ever been in this particular room once, and hadn’t felt any desire to go back. Wash couldn’t be sure he was feeling desire now either, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself.

Carolina could have told the Lieutenants what her plan was.

If anyone needed to know to keep the peace among the troops, it should have been them.

If she had a plan, and her lone wolfing got the soldiers killed…

Wash didn’t know what he would do.

He didn’t think he’d be able to forgive her.

Something in him was still sour about Kimball’s comment.

‘Carolina has asked me to keep something from you, because she thinks it will come better from her. She’s trying to protect you.’

Was she though?

Or was she protecting someone else?

The downstairs armory was little used location, not due to a lack of arms or armor (the tower of armaments pretty much fixed that), but because the main levels had an incredibly spacious location
that was already perfectly prepared for weaponry. The location downstairs was more like a dimly lit warehouse sparsely filled with dusty crates and old, broken weapons yet to be properly disposed of or destroyed.

It was cold, dusty, and vaguely disgusting.

He spotted a filthy looking mattress and several bottles and jars ‘hidden’ from view, and realized exactly why this area wasn’t completely locked up in the first place.

Ew.

“Oh, Agent Washington, what are you doing here?!”

Wash startled, but managed not to try to pull a gun he was not carrying.

Matthews was sitting in a corner out of armor, knees practically up to his chin, a tablet clutched to his chest. He looked guilty and fearful, and Wash did not have the time to get on his ass again about taking care of himself. This room had to be freezing and it was not a place anyone should be just hanging out.

“Matthews, do I want to know why you’re here?”

Matthews scrambled to his feet, eyes wide, and not so subtly tried to hide his tablet behind his back.

Wash…really didn’t want to know what he was doing.

Seriously.

He really didn’t want to know what he’d just walked in on.

“No! No sir, I’m not doing anything that you would want or need to know about or even really care! Really!”

“Oh huh.”

He expected the young man to keep rambling.

“Because I’m totally not a rule breaker, Agent Washington! I’m not on duty! I just…”

Wash held up a hand.

“You needed some personal time. I get that. In the future, please take ‘alone time’ somewhere where there’s a door with a lock. I suppose I should be grateful you’re wearing pants at all, Captain Tucker doesn’t if he can avoid it and I’m pretty sure he’s encouraging others to follow in his footsteps.”

Matthews stuttered and sputtered incoherently.

Wash turned to properly look through the bars of the weapons cage.

The cage was…not bad. The walls were gray solid concrete, the vents were too small for a person to fit through. It was dimly lit, dreary looking, and not the kind of place you’d want to stay for long. Wash tested the bars, grabbed them and shook them hard.

The cage groaned unhappily, but didn’t actually move.
Wash was in power armor, it didn’t surprise him that he could make the poorly maintained bars groan, but someone out of strength enhancing armor would probably be pretty effectively trapped.

“Matthews, are you off because of your rotation or because you were in trouble?”

Wash turned around to catch Matthews eye. He may have been removed from the communications room, but he should have still been on shift, and based on his rambling, Wash was willing to put money on him playing hooky.

The younger man looked sheepishly at the ground.

“I ah…made a bit of a pest of myself when the radios started dropping. I was told to get out of the way and someone would tell me when they needed me again.”

Wash’s face scrunched unhappily. With the sheer lack of soldiers left on Chorus, especially when they were short thirty extra people on top of the normal amount of people on missions, every body counted. No one should have just dismissed him for the day.

“Who authorized that?”

“Private Langley Carters.”

And just like that, Wash’s panic that had been simmering on the backburner melted away into annoyance.

It was actually a bit of a relief. All things considered, Wash knew he couldn’t stay in that terrified headspace forever without making himself sick or worse, and there was nothing quite like an abuse of power to get him pissed off.

“Junior Private Langley Carters?”

Matthews tucked his head a little lower and clutched tighter at his tablet, but nodded quickly. He looked like he was expecting someone to hit him or something.

Wash thought he’d finally trained that response out of the orange soldier, and there was a very visceral response to seeing it crop back up. When did he start acting like he was getting bullied again? Was he being bullied? Normally Wash would ask Bitters, since the man had made it his life goal to look out for his roommate and friend, but comms being what they were meant he would have to wait.

Wash really hoped Bitters was ok.

He hoped they all were.

“You do realize that you outrank her, don’t you? She can’t actually take your duties from you.”

Matthews scuffed his foot on the floor, expression defeated.

“I know, but I really was in the way.”

Something…shifted in the back of Wash’s head.

Something angry.

His throat tightened, and his fists clenched, and it took everything to grind out his words instead of snarling them at the young man in front of him.
“She can’t authorize that. You’re skipping out, and Carters is a weasel. She’s probably trying to get you in trouble on purpose, because that’s what she does when she’s on a power trip. You cannot let her push you around like that or she’ll keep doing it.”

Matthews eyes were wide and doe-like. He trembled, ever so slightly, and Wash nearly bit his tongue at the warring parts of his brain. Part of him wanted to tell Matthews to stop freaking out, man up, and be strong. Part of him wanted to put a reassuring hand on the boy’s shoulder, tell him that he was ok, bolster up his pitiful self-esteem into something resembling a grown adult instead of a kicked five year old. The warring impulses swirled together in his head and kept Wash frozen in place.

“Should…should I try to go back to work?”

Wash shook his head. His hand twitched.

He awkwardly patted Matthews shoulder, and desperately ignored the terrified squeak the man made.

“No, I need you for something else. We have enemies incoming, and we need a plan in place to protect our people.”

He had one.

Kind of.

Maybe.

A quarter of a plan.

Half of a plan, if he was really lucky.

“Gear up, and get anyone who might have also been ‘dismissed’ for the day by Junior Private Carters, tell them they’re on assignment for me now.”

Matthews whole face brightened considerably.

“Yes sir! What will we be doing?!”

Wash motioned to the storage cage behind him.

“We need someone clearing this area out. The cage needs to be emptied of all the contents, and then we need to drag seven cots into here as well as any other supplies you’d need to not freeze to death in here.”

Matthews looked confused.

“Sir?”

“Agent Carolina has decided to bring seven potentially dangerous people here, and I am not entirely comfortable putting them in the general prison. This should hold them for now.”

Matthews peeked around Wash into the armory.

“Sir, this is a…storage unit. For weapons.”

“And they are very dangerous weapons. We also need to start an evacuation of anyone underage,
injured, or incapable of defending themselves immediately. I don’t know how much time we have before they arrive, and I would prefer to have our vulnerable somewhere safe before the enemy is on us.”

Wash gave Matthews a hard look.

“Can you do that?”

Matthews face went from afraid and unassuming to something stony. He readjusted his tablet to poke at the screen.

“I can do that. I’ll send out a memo, but I think I know exactly who we need. We’re keeping this… quiet, right? I mean, keeping them down here isn’t something everyone should know?”

He looked…nervous. Upset, maybe?

“I suppose not. It’s a temporary solution, anyway. Just until I’m sure that we can house them somewhere else, or get them off our planet.”

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Carolina was getting antsy.

They’d had enough encounters with pirates that she knew she was expecting something serious soon, and she had too many goddamned injured taking up space.

They needed to get the Freelancers cleared from the crash site.

Carolina pulled the Lieutenants, minus Bitters, away from the other soldiers.

“Ok, you three. We should hopefully be seeing Doc and South soon, and as soon as he gets here, we’re taking everything we’ve loaded and sending the Freelancers in. The four of you are going to be in charge, and the Reds are going to stay on site here with me. I know you’re scared, but I need you to take charge on this.”

Palomo looked completely horrified, in the same way that Tucker did when he panicked. It was kind of adorable.

-Don’t say that where Tucker can here you or he’ll take that as a come on.-

“We’re taking charge of the bear man?!?”

“You’re taking charge of all of them. If we clear the site and don’t leave personnel behind, by the time I leave and come back, the site will have been attacked and raided. For what it’s worth, I don’t think they guys are going to pull anything. Too many of them are injured for it to be a smart idea, and these are people who are built to survive first.”

Jensen looked to Carolina, clearly distressed, as she clutched her gun tight to her chest. Her voice was watery and soft.

“What happensh if they try to hurt ush? Agent Carolina, I don’t want to die like thish. I want to live to shee twenty-five.”
Carolina tried not to roll her eyes at the frankly ridiculous fear that the kid had, tried to be sympathetic. As if any of the Freelancers cared enough about the people of Chorus to want to hurt them.

It was hard to remember that they were both simultaneously very mature and perpetually twelve, and even harder to remember to be gentle with them when they wouldn’t listen to her.

“What in the heck have the Reds and Blues been telling you guys? Look, they’re strong and dangerous, that’s true, but they don’t want to hurt you. They’re here because they want to help.”

Andersmith stared at Carolina for a moment, and it was amazing how well he managed to do that when so many people couldn’t manage to meet her eye at all.

She wanted to take him seriously, she really did, but the man thought that Caboose hung the freaking moon. She liked Caboose, liked all the Reds and Blues at least a little, but she was well aware of the man’s…interesting view of the world around him.

The fact that Andersmith couldn’t see that made her question Kimball’s decision to let him be a Lieutenant.

“I do not feel comfortable taking them home where our sick, our wounded, and our young are just for them to kill us all in one fell swoop. Agent Carolina, this is why we have bases like Banjeerese in the first place.”

She could feel a tension headache forming behind her eyes and huffed a breath.

Was he seriously questioning her right now? Really?

Carolina managed to keep her words civil, but her tone was so full of spite she could hardly hold back.

“Why do you trust Wash? Why do you trust me? We’re both Freelancers, just like them.”

The three Lieutenants looked at each other and Carolina wished she’d had Wash around for this part. He got these people in a way that she just didn’t.

She gave orders and they were followed and that was how she liked it. Them not listening to her was a sure fire way to get her pissed and he should know that. Andersmith stepped forward, his tone and posture both showed his earnestness and it was so freaking…juvenile.

“Agent Washington has proven himself, along with the Reds and the Blues. When you arrived we had grown to trust our Captains and the Feds had learned to trust those they had, and they all had faith in you. These people are people we do not know, and of all of the Reds and Blues, you are the only one who seems confident in your assessment. We know that you have mixed feelings about them, we know that at least one of them has no problem with attacking people randomly, and we know that you are emotionally compromised at the moment.”

“Compromised?!”

-Carolina, if you kill him, Caboose will never forgive you! Calm down!-

“Your friends have come back from the dead, and it is clear that is affecting you. It would cause anyone to react, Agent Carolina. It is not a reflection on your skill as a soldier or a leader, but it should be addressed.”
Carolina snarled and pointed back to the clearing.

“Ok, that is it. You will not question my decisions! You’re going back to base and you’ll get a formal reprimand from Kimball when you arrive. I don’t know what in the hell you think you’re doing talking back like that, but I’ve had it. Gear up and load up and get ready to move! We are done here!”

Carolina stormed off just as Palomo’s voice stuttered out.

“Sh-sh-she can’t just do that, can she?”

Emily noticed new orders to lock down Agent Connecticut’s room from Agent Washington, while she was still trying to draw up a new treatment plan. So much psychological trauma in this group!

Clearly, he was up and moving, though towards what end, she honestly had not a clue.

She would be the first to admit that she hadn’t expected much out of Agent Washington as far as traumatic instances. Dramatic? Yes, absolutely, the man was built for Shakespeare. Or melodrama. Something like that.

But compared to Captain Tucker’s PTSD involving his child, Captain Caboose’s brain damage, Captain Simmons’ dealing with a body that is only half human, Captain Grif’s body being only half his, Corporal Sarge’s delusions, and Agent Carolina’s…everything…well, Agent Washington had seemed to be holding up well for everything he’d gone through. The man had his own share of idiosyncrasies to be sure, but he’d managed to fly under her radar!

Still…she hadn’t realized his disassociations were quite like that. The poor man must have hidden his trauma very deep, and she was eager to get the chance to really figure out what made him tick!

But first, a conversation.

She had Santa send a ping and gathered up her paperwork on her desk. It always amazed her that in a time when technology was so advanced, they still managed to need so many paper copies!

Washington took a whole eight minutes to knock on her door.

“Agent Washington!” Emily threw open the door. “I’m glad to see you up and about, could you come in here for a moment? I have a few things I would like to discuss with you.”

He came in and pulled his shoulders in a little bit, nervous and not exactly excited to be with the doctor, but obediently pulled off his helmet when she motioned for him to.

Smart boy.

“First off, can you tell me why we’ve suddenly had a jump in security on Agent Connecticut’s room?”

“We put down instructions for guard, and we couldn’t keep them up for even a week. Agent Connecticut managed to kill no less than twenty men, by herself, while escorting the Reds and Blues out of Charon’s ship. She managed this in the physical condition she is in right now.”
Trust issues were back.

“Agent Washington, do you think this level of paranoia you are exhibiting has anything to do with your earlier panic attack and dissociative episode?”

She motioned to the soft chair she had in front of her desk for him to sit. The thing was a pink paisley eyesore, but it was the most comfortable chair on the entire planet, and she needed it to be. It wasn’t just the physically injured she wanted to feel comfortable in her space.

He sighed, as if she were being especially trying or stupid, but sat down. It was good, it meant she was getting under his skin.

“I assume you know what’s going on?”

“With the Freelancers? Oh my, yes! Isn’t it exciting?”

“That’s one word for it. Suicidally stupid is what I would call it. Carolina is bringing them here, not to one of the smaller bases where we can properly vet them, and we don’t have the kind of protections built into this area to properly hold them. I…”

Now this was interesting.

Washington’s whole body seemed to relax into the chair, but the lines on his face grew even harsher. He looked like he hadn’t slept well in weeks, which was very possible.

He looked physically defeated and not a little afraid. Emily wondered what his resting heart rate was at this point, if he was eating properly, and what she would find if he allowed her to give him a proper assessment.

“I’m clearing out the vaults in the lower armory to store them in.”

“Store them?” Her tone was incredulous. “Agent Washington, they aren’t guns or rations, they’re people.”

He shifted in the seat, leaned forward, and stared at her hard.

She made sure to keep her kindest smile etched into her cheeks, her brows tilted into the perfect sympathetic arc, and her posture as open and welcoming as was physically possible while wearing armor. He must have liked what he saw because he rubbed his face and turned his scowl to her desk instead of to her.

“Doctor Grey, you are the most intelligent person I have ever spoken to in my entire life, and before you brush me off as an uneducated grunt, I should remind you that while I was not a lead scientist, I was an integral part in a science team that developed some of the most advanced weaponry and AI integration that the galaxy had seen to that point. If I was an idiot, they would have never trusted me with an AI.”

Progress! Self esteem issues coming to the forefront! Oh, if only she had the time to focus on that properly!

Later, Emily. There will be plenty of time once the bomb is diffused.

“Agent Washington, I am not going to disparage your intelligence! You’re clearly very bright. Still, I think in this case you are being a little irrational. People do not belong in freezing, underground weapons lockers. At least not against their will.”
She was aware of what those rooms tended to be used for after all.

“Doctor Grey, if we let them loose they will kill everyone. There are seven of them coming, right now, and we have no idea what their motives are. We don’t know them, we don’t know why they’re here, and they are not trustworthy people.”

“See, that’s funny, because you do know them, Agent Washington. You yourself have referred to them as your friends in the past, and from Agent Carolina’s perspective, you were all like family.”

“Carolina is naïve. She’s a good soldier, but she is incapable of seeing past the ‘bonds of brotherhood’ that Florida so enjoyed spattering out.”

He completely brushed past his use of the word ‘friend’, which was telling in and of itself.

Emily noticed a slight…tint to Wash’s voice. His speech pattern had started to shift as well. Was he dissociating again? She hadn’t gotten to see the actual shift before.

Nope! Not right now! What was important was getting him to make smart decisions! Don’t put your cart before the horse, woman.

“Agent Washington, I cannot condone taking people in need of medical attention and sticking them in a storage vault! For one thing, those vaults are not temperature controlled to the extent a human body needs for any extended period of time. Second, they are much more difficult to monitor than the cells we used for deserters.”

His fists clenched tightly before Washington’s posture suddenly shifted. He straightened out, like a rod had replaced his spine, his right hand rested over his left and pressed against his stomach, and he made firm eye contact.

“Those cells are easy to break out of.”

The tint became more like a coating, thick and heavy. She wasn’t sure what it was, almost a drawl, but not quite.

“It’s a trade. Those cells are easy to monitor and patrol, and I’m sure we could get them reinforced before our new friends arrive. They are also comfortable enough that the Freelancers are less likely to break out and come after us from sheer mistreatment. Remember, they are human beings with thoughts and feelings.”

“Ah am not here to worry about their feelings, Councilor, Ah am here to get results.”

There he was. General Kimball and General Doyle both had mentioned ‘The Director’ coming out to play. Emily wondered if she’d ever get to see him.

“Doctor. My name is Emily Grey and I am a doctor. I worked hard for that title.”

Wash stared hard, blinked, then shook himself like a dog dripping water.

He pressed both hands to the top of his head and curled down on himself. Face scrunched, and a tiny noise of distress, Wash was clearly in pain.

“Did I just?”

High levels of stress for an extended period of time.

“Have another dissociative episode? Possibly. Do you remember our conversation?”
This poor man wasn’t even a citizen of the planet and yet here he was, grinding his health into the ground for them. And for what? The illusion of safety? Someone should have put a stop to his self-destructive behaviors weeks ago.

“I…do. Yes.”

Emily scooted her chair around the desk, using only the heels of her feet and moved her arms like she was swimming.

Sure, she looked silly, but that was the point.

It was enough to get Washington to look up at her and at least try to smile a little.

Once she was sitting closer to him he relaxed back into the chair, but it was notably a less comfortable position than before. She needed a little something extra for him. Maybe she’d try to commandeer one of those tiny tea kettles for her office.

“Agent Washington, I recognize that you are under a great deal of emotional duress at the moment, and you may not be thinking clearly. What can I do to lower your stress?”

Wash’s eyes looked haunted. He tried to smile, then he tried to smooth his face out, then he finally gave up and let the desperate, terrified expression on his face that matched his head.

If he could just give her something, something solid to do for him, it would be a big first step. Not just in his own healing process, but in his trust.

“When they get here, they’ll all need to be properly checked out, not just for injuries, but for illnesses that the planet may not be equipped to handle.”

“That’s right.”

“When that happens, instead of giving them inoculations, put them down.”

Put them…?

Oh my.

“You want me to execute your friends?”

“These people are not our friends, Doctor Grey.”

“Would you like me to execute Connie as well?”

Wash’s eyes watered and his hand tensed.

Emily was certain she’d gotten through to him on that one. His reactions around the woman were so intense he’d have to reevaluate his perspective. He had to realize that what he was asking was ridiculous and permanent and not helpful in the grand scheme of things.

“She’s here, and we’ve…rebonded. I…I guess I owe it to her to do it myself.”

Ok. Not exactly the response she’d hoped for.

Maybe she should try to be a little meaner?

“Who else are you going to execute, Agent Washington? When were you given the burden of being
judge and jury?"

“My job is to take care of the people of this planet, Doctor Grey. Project Freelancer is a direct threat to them.”

And *that* was a very intense expression that would be very enticing under completely different circumstances.

Still, that was a nice little peek behind the curtain.

“Your job is to train the soldiers of this planet, which you do, and to ensure that General Kimball has the information she needs to take care of the people. You are not solely responsible for the health and wellbeing of the planet.”

He blinked, as if blindsided. She waited until he opened his mouth to respond, then deliberately cut him off.

“Project Freelancer is no longer active, Wash. We call you and Carolina ‘Agents’ out of respect for your knowledge and training, and partly because I don’t know that we’ve actually figured out where you would fall in regards to rank. I am beginning to suspect that has not been good for your mental health.”

“Please don’t psychoanalyze me.”

She grinned happily and bounced in her seat.

“Sorry, it’s not something I can just turn off, and while I could keep my insights to myself, I think it would be more helpful to examine why you’re feeling the way you’re feeling. But we can save that for later! For now, let’s take a look at that idea you just had.”

“Doctor Grey-“

“The one about murdering people!”

She grinned, all teeth and over exaggerated happiness that anyone with two brain cells to rub together would know was actually a threat.

Washington, surprisingly, sat back and allowed her to continue, sweet thing that he was.

“If we kill them, our soldiers will lose trust in us. These people are already very well expected, and have been for hours. The word is out, though we don’t exactly know *how* yet, considering the radios are all down out there, that they’re not just a ship with supplies. The word is out that they are actually *Freelancers*! Freelancers, like *you* and Agent Carolina!”

His face twisted up in that confused and slightly constipated look (like he was a particularly confused beagle) that Tucker loved to crow about every time he managed to make it happen. She’d not gotten to see it in person, what with Washington’s fetish with keeping himself covered, and was pleased to note that it looked exactly the way she expected it to.

“Our people are *cheering* through the halls Washington, because we’re going to have more people like *you*, people you care about, here and *taking care of us*. Killing them would be a MASSIVE blow to the morale of the whole planet, not just our base.”

The constipation had started to win out over the confusion, which was a less adorable expression.
“More to the point, I don’t think it’s good for you. Murder isn’t good for anyone, of course, but it’s especially not good for the guilt complex you have!”

“Doctor Grey-“

Time to start really digging your heels, Emily, this poor boy looks ready to fight for every inch of wiggle room.

“Wash. I know you like to be tight lipped about everything that has happened to you, and I respect your right to keep things to yourself, but in this case, I really think I can help you figure things out.”

He looked like he wanted to fight, like he was ready to start throwing down.

Then, he just…deflated.

“Fine.”

Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but she’d take it.

“Carolina’s talked to me a little bit about how life was in Project Freelancer, mostly when she was too drunk to properly keep her guard up, but enough for me to get a feel for what she believed life was like. I have a little bit of insight, and that insight doesn’t match your levels of fear in any way. Make me understand why they are too much of a threat to live. Why do they want to hurt our soldiers? The planet has alien tech, sure, we’ve been through that, but do they want it?”

Washington shook his head.

“Not the guns, but The Meta might go after Carolina and Santa, he’s obsessed with AI.”

Emily smiled gently.

“And yet, Agent Carolina has been around him for a while hasn’t she? Her radio is still functioning, the only one that is actually. She hasn’t reported being attacked, and from the stories, he didn’t strike me as having a whole lot of impulse control.”

It was funny, watching his expressions. He’d gotten so used to wearing the armor, expressing himself physically, but that didn’t actually make his face less expressive. It was like ten whole added layers of depth!

“He didn’t, by the end.”

She nodded, sagely.

“So it seems that The Meta is not a threat this time around. Who is most likely to lash out at the soldiers? Who’s going to hurt them?”

“They ALL WILL! THAT IS THE POINT! THEY ARE ALL KILLERS! They are violent and brutal and monstrous inside! THAT IS WHY I CHOSE THEM!”

Aaaaand the drawl was back! Oh joy!

Emily was quiet for a moment, long enough for Wash to heave a few furious breaths before he managed to blink and come back into himself.

“Why you chose them?”
Wash shook his head and turned to stare at the wall. His whole body rocked with the implications of his words.

“He. The Director. He chose people who were deliberately volatile and detached. Less likely to be missed, less likely to be mourned. Stupid and naïve and who wouldn’t ask questions. People who would follow orders.”

Which…ok, Washington was very good at following orders and getting others to follow orders (really it was like herding cats with the Reds and Blues), but none of the rest of that seemed to apply to him at all.

From the sheer venom in his tone, she knew he felt like it applied to him, though, which was really the important part there.

“If that’s true, why were you there?”

“I was military, no spouse, detached from family, anger problems, capable of playing the long game if necessary. Highly reactive, mild case of obsessive compulsive disorder, quick study, good with technology.”

The way he read off the list managed to be both furious and depressed, but didn’t feel…genuine. It was as if he were actually reading a list.

“Wash, is that something you’ve read, or something you think you know?”

He buried his face in his hands and hunched over.

“I really don’t want to have this conversation.”

Emily laid a hand gently on his arm. She didn’t squeeze, didn’t dare, well aware of the cost she was already paying for pressuring him. Best not apply physical pressure to emotional pressure.

“I understand that, but you’ve asked me to murder strangers who I have sworn to help, and if you want me to do that, we both need to be sure that I’m doing it for the right reasons and not because your brain is sending out false signals.”

It was funny, watching him. Without his helmet on, Emily was able to clearly see his shifts and squirming. The ticks and twitches he held so carefully while protected were completely open to her now.

Without taking the time to think, Emily grabbed a stuffed cat from a drawer in her desk and put it on his lap. Doctor Carl ‘KITTY!’ Jung had helped many a patient in this office, most of them well over the age that conventional society would deem cuddle therapy acceptable, but as far as Emily was concerned, she was dealing with a bunch of children who happened to have adult bodies and problems, and conventional society could go fuck itself.

“What?”

“This is Carl. He’s very good at helping people. Feel his fur, he’s very soft.”

Slowly, face completely baffled, Wash pulled off a glove and delicately stroked the toy cat.

Immediately, his face melted.

“So, what makes you so sure, Wash?”
“I know my evaluation the same way that I know the others are terrifyingly dangerous. When Epsilon tried to kill himself, he left everything inside my head.”

He picked up the toy and brought it to his chest to stroke the fur like he was some kind of hilarious movie villain. The expression on his face was not laughable though. He held the cat as if it were a real animal, with carefully arranged paws and delicate strokes that showed he had enough encounters with cats to know *exactly* how one liked to be stroked.

Still, Wash’s face actually relaxed a little. Having the familiar focal point seemed to break him out of that nasty little chokehold his brain had on him.

“Memories?”

“Sort of. You would probably lump me in with Doc and say I’ve got multiple personalities. I remember *being* Epsilon, being so stuffed full with pain that all I want to do is die. I remember being Alpha on the Mother of Invention, watching over us and always afraid. I remember being the Director. Losing…her. Living in a world *without* her. Living in a world where *I never had the right to her in the first place*. I remember my mother and my sisters, but it’s so distant. I’m not who I was before. I’m more…I’m just…pieces of a bunch of people shoved into one head. I sometimes feel like a bunch of torn up fabric, all stitched together poorly.”

And once again, he just dropped a surprise in her lap. The fact that he thought of himself in those terms was…enlightening.

“Wash, I don’t classify you as the same as Frank. Frank’s trauma was not AI induced. You have actual, physical brain damage caused by Epsilon. I’ve seen it, back when I first got my hands on you! I still have the scans tucked away safe in your medical file. In all honesty, you’re a bit like Captain Caboose!”

Wash blinked, and the stroking stopped.

Maybe she shouldn’t have said it quite like that.

“Caboose?”

“Oh yes, he has all sorts of brain damage from extensive AI abuse. Tucker didn’t know him very well before it happened so it’s hard to get a third party perspective, but Caboose is very insightful. He was never the top of his class, and is aware that he wasn’t a great soldier at the time, but he believes his limitations are far more extensive than they were when he first shipped out to Blood Gulch. Sure enough, when I got him to sit still for a brain scan, there was all sorts of damage!”

He looked so distraught as he clutched Carl, that Emily had to bite back a smile. Really, Washington was just too darn adorable for his own good.

“Why? To what end?”

“Compliance, most likely. Possibly because the AI was damaged, much like Epsilon. From what I have gathered from Epsilon, O’Malley was originally an AI named Omega. He was proud and violent, but very different from the AI that Doc and Caboose had in their heads.”

“Ok, but if that’s the case, why didn’t Doc have the trauma that Caboose has?”

“My guess is that he didn’t need to. Caboose was really his first host after Agent Texas, and I think there was a learning curve in there.”
“I…had no idea that Caboose is the way he is because of brain damage. I mean, it makes sense.”

She nodded and patted his shoulder.

“Oh, there could be other factors as well. Learning disabilities, low IQ, pre-existing brain trauma, any number of things, really. Remember, the Reds and Blues were chosen as the worst soldiers Project Freelancer could get their hands on. He chose people who were deliberately volatile and detached. Less likely to be missed, less likely to be mourned. Stupid and naïve and who wouldn’t ask questions.”

She threw the words back at him in a chipper tone. Wash’s expression collapsed. He pressed his face into Carl’s fur.

Emily heard a soft, choked sob, and wondered if she’d pushed too hard.

“I can’t. I just can’t. I have to start getting the soldiers prepared. I have to protect them.”

“You can help protect us, but Wash, you can’t assume that your former teammates are coming for genocide.”

“Why else would they be here?”

This! This was exactly what she was looking for!

He was open now, to the possibility that there could be another reason! He wanted to be wrong!

She could practically taste victory on this one!

“We did send out a distress signal. Maybe they’re coming because they really do want to help.”

He shook his head, but Emily saw a distinct release of muscles in his shoulders that only happened when someone managed to calm him down.

“I doubt it. They’re not exactly an altruistic bunch.”

“Well, maybe they didn’t come to help us, maybe they came to help you?”

Wash looked up and gave her a withering look. His voice took on the sound of venom and rage, but his body stayed relaxed. This was one of those moments where she had a hard time with the man. He’d spent so long hiding, pretending, forcing himself into a little box of false signals, that picking him apart was often an exercise in patience.

“If that was the case, one of them would have kept me out of prison and saved me a lot of pain. Someone would have stepped up to the plate. Instead they left me to rot.”

“Oh Wash.”

“Look, I don’t want to do this. I need to figure out a game plan and get everyone prepared. We lost so much time already.”

Emily laid a hand on Wash’s arm again, and this time he didn’t flinch away from her. He’d started bouncing his leg aggressively, and reflexively squeezing the stuffy, gently though.

Progress. Every step, no matter how small, was a step towards a happier, healthier Wash.

“I know that you’re afraid for everyone. That’s good, it’s good that you care about us. We are all grateful for everything you do here. We need someone who is unabashedly invested in us, and who
doesn’t have a side bias that the Reds and Blues tend to develop.”

“There’s a but in there somewhere.”

Emily reached out and stroked Carl’s head, not for her own sake, but because she knew it would make Wash actually look up at her. He caught her eyes, not afraid, not angry, just there.

She smiled, gently, friendly, and patted his arm.

“Don’t sacrifice your soul for our protection. Don’t commit atrocities because you think someone might hurt us.”

He tried to smile back, but there was something there, in the back of his eyes, that let Emily know it was a lie.

“Wash?”

“I didn’t listen to my instincts, and how many people did Felix and Locus kill? Forget before we were captured, how many people...kids...died because I didn’t trust myself?”

She could have tried to follow that guilt train, but Emily had never been one for speculating like that. ‘What ifs’ were only valuable in the case of long gone history or thought experiments. They certainly weren’t useful here.

“And now? Now you’re overcompensating and saying that anyone you don’t know is going to be just as evil and cruel as they were. Don’t turn yourself into the villain of this piece, Wash. Don’t make yourself a monster out of fear. You are better than that. You deserve better than that.”

Wash let out a huff of laughter that sounded more like despair. He nodded, shook his head, nodded again, and his eyes misted over.

“Are the cells safe? Would they hold me and Carolina in them? How heavily can we monitor them?”

“The cells are comfortable for people in good health as well as those in less than. There is easy access to medical care, and easy separations should the need come up, to treat one person and isolate the rest. Anyone in severe physical distress, well, I’d like to keep an eye on in the infirmary much in the same way that Agent Connecticut is being observed. They’ll have 24/7 guards, cameras, and the wing will be sealed to the general public. I doubt that if you or Agent Carolina were determined to escape, but you certainly wouldn’t escape unnoticed. That’s as much as we can do.”

He shook his head and sighed.

“It doesn’t feel like enough.”

She had to get him to understand, now, before he started issuing order and it was too late to stop the damage. Emily had to make him understand that what he was planning was only going to hurt his cause.

“I know it doesn’t, but Wash? If you lock them up down there in the cold dark like victims instead of in a proper cell with heating, proper food, and easily available medical care, you will lose trust, no matter how well liked you are. That kind of treatment of prisoners is cruel. It is an act of cruelty that most of our people have never experienced and would not understand, and the soldiers love you because you’re not cruel, Wash. You’re harsh, you’re mean, and you push them more than
anyone. They know that it’s because you want them to live. Cruelty will make them associate you with Locus and Felix. Don’t do that to them. Don’t do that to yourself.”

She could see his eyes redden and tears built up in his lashes. If she thought he would accept it, she would hug him. Instead she stroked the stuffed cat’s head and smiled.

“You are a good man, Washington.”

He tried to smile at her, but it was watery and sad.

“Being good doesn’t get you anywhere. It doesn’t save lives.”

“Being good means those soldiers out there, those children, trust you to do the right thing. If you say jump, they won’t hesitate because they trust you. If you say that the Freelancers should go into a cell and be monitored until we know we can trust them? Well, the soldiers will support that, because you would not make that request if you didn’t think it was necessary.”

The lines on Wash’s face stood out exceptionally on his haggard face. He managed to look a good ten years older than he actually was. His breathing started to pick up and he rocked himself back and forth just a little in the chair. Emily recognized the comfort motion, even as she knew he was not aware that he was doing it.

“I am very afraid.”

“I know.”

“And…I may not actually know what I’m doing.”

“Agent Washington, if you had all the answers, I would assume you were a liar or had an ulterior motive. I want you to breathe very slowly. In for five seconds, hold for five seconds, out for five seconds, hold for five seconds. Repeat that a few times for me.”

She helped Wash breathe for a minute or so before he stopped rocking, and instead listed to the side and leaned back in the chair.

“Wash, I would really like to start seeing you for therapy.”

“There are very few things in the world I would like less than that. Being slowly dissolved in acid, having each bone in my body be shattered with a very tiny hammer, another of Simmons and Donut’s Gilmore Girls marathons.”

Emily held back a chuckle and patted his arm again.

“Agent Washington, I am going to be brutally honest with you.”

“Joy.”

“You need help. You are having trouble knowing who you are, where you are, and what you are doing, on top of not sleeping or eating properly from stress. There are a number of things I could list off right now that are causing you to be a walking bundle of neuroses instead of a person. Therapy and possibly medication if we have it would make your life so much easier, but I’m not asking you to do this just for you.”

He shifted in the chair, but didn’t try to sit back up again, which was progress. Still the disbelieving eye roll was almost enough for her to smack him.
Just a little though.

“Oh no? Pray, who would this be for?”

“All the soldiers on Chorus who are afraid or uncomfortable with the idea of seeking psychological help for their very real problems. You are kind of a big deal, the soldiers respect you, and if they found out that you were willingly seeking help for yourself, they would likely be more willing to open up and seek help of their own volitions.”

There was a hint of amusement in Washington’s eyes, which was only barely covering up the fear and betrayal underneath.

She had gone after a critical weak point, and they were both aware of it, and they were both aware that they were both aware. It was adorable that he thought she wouldn’t use his genuine feelings against him when it suited her.

Still, it was also in his best interest, and they both knew that as well. He couldn’t be too mad at her, not after the day he’d had.

“So, you want me to put myself through something that has, in the past, been a significant source of stress and trauma for me...because you think it might make other people more comfortable.”

“Yep!”

Wash stared at her, sighed, and shook his head.

“When do you have time for me?”

Andersmith scowled at Carolina’s retreating back.

Well, ok, so Palomo didn’t see him scowl, but he knew Andersmith. He’d known John since long before he’d ever been in armor, and he knew the other man pretty darn well, and that...that was John’s scowly stance. It was the kind of world weary disappointment he only had when someone in power was doing something particularly thoughtless or dangerous.

“I don’t like this.”

Jensen shook her head.

“This is all kindsh of bad.”

Palomo’s hands shook, just a little. A formal reprimand from General Kimball? Really? How could she blame them for being freaked? Her friends were freaking terrifying!

Jensen saw him picking nervously at the chipped paint on his hip and grabbed his hand.

“Shtop that. You’re jusht going to make it worshe.”

“Sorry.”

His voice cracked again. He sounded like he was going through puberty again, which was all kinds
of fucked up. Palomo did not need to sound like a twelve year old, ok? He already had enough baby jokes without that.

Andersmith patted Palomo’s shoulder.

“I’m going to make a quick round and check in on everyone. You two keep an eye out for Captain Grif and Bitters. We need to tell him what’s happening if we’re going to be in charge of the Freelancers.”

Alone. They were alone. Palomo and Jensen were painfully, blessedly, confusingly alone.

Normally, he’d have jumped at the chance to get even a few minutes alone with Jensen. She was the woman of his dreams, funny and sweet and kind and just as nerdy as him.

But…

Something just wasn’t right.

“Are you ok, Charlesh? You had a really bad shcare.”

He nodded.

“I’m ok. It was just…really intense. It’s stupid. All he did was grab me.”

“Psychoshological warfare comesh on many levelsh, and they don’t alwaysh have bulletsh.”

Jensen pulled him into a hug.

“I know you’re shcared. We all are. We’re going to do everyshing we can to get through thish in one piecshe.”

God, Katie gave the best hugs.

Even in armor, Palomo could feel the tension melting away.

Then Captain Grif and Bitters were literally escorted out of the trees by the scary guy in white armor with the sniper rifle (Palomo hadn’t had the chance to get the guy’s name yet) and Jensen’s grip tightened protectively around his shoulders. She didn’t trust the aid ship people, which made sense since the one she’d walked with was the one who tried to beat him up. He was scary.

Palomo really hoped that he hadn’t done anything like that with her or the others.

He…proooobably should let her go now. It was totally embarrassing that she’d hugged him in front of like, everyone, especially when she was of the opinion that you had to be strong in the field. Honestly, he kind of wondered why she didn’t tell him to suck it up and smack his helmet. She’d started doing that kind of thing, trying to be tougher, trying to make people proud of her.

She was already amazing. He had no idea who she thought she had to prove herself to.

Palomo pulled back and tapped his forehead once with his index finger.

(I’m ok.)

She tilted her head just a little, the way she did when she was smiling and didn’t quite believe you, but wasn’t going to call you on it. He knew that under her helmet, her eyes would be scrunched and sparkling, and her smile would be just a little bit tense because he actually thought he could get
away with lying to her.

“Seriously. I’m…shaky today, but I’m gonna be fine. Someone needs to fill Bitters in.”

She glanced over at where he was being led. Bitters tried to break himself off, only for the soldier with the rifle to herd him back towards the ‘injured corner’.

He looked freaking tense, not that the strangers should notice. Bitters still had that ‘look at how many fucks I give. I give ZERO FUCKS’ walk going on, but when he did that outside, it meant he was actively trying to figure out how to take out a problem.

“I don’t think he’s going to let Antoine go.”

Palomo grabbed Jensen’s wrist and squeezed it briefly.

“Then we make him. Wanna play ‘dummy ball’?”

“Let’s shave that for when we’re in more dire straights. They’re not going to cause a scene, I shay we just take him.”

He grinned.

“I like that plan.”

Palomo did his best ‘casual saunter’ over to where Bitters and Captain Grif had been herded, Jensen at his side, snickering the whole time.

Ok, so it was his best ‘I’m trying really hard to look casual so you think I’m actually not casual at all, and hopefully will focus on me instead Jensen who you should actually be focusing on’ walk, but ‘casual saunter’ was a lot easier to think.

Sure enough, all eyes locked on him. He moved to the opposite side of the growing group of people and hovered over Private Edra.

“Bummer about your hand.”

“Bummer about your face.”

Folami rolled her eyes and threw a dirt clod at Bitters.

“Did you enjoy your break?”

He shrugged and leaned back against a crate with his arms crossed over his chest. He was nervous about something.

“I’d have enjoyed it more if it hadn’t been interrupted.”

The soldier in white patted Bitters on the arm and nudged him closer to Agent Florida. Jensen circled around to the man’s other side and leaned against the crate there.

“Well, you did seem to be finished, young man. I don’t think you ever had a cigarette in hand the entire time I was watching.”

Folami gave Bitters a dirty grin.

Agent Florida zoomed in on Jensen, so Palomo nudged Edra with his foot. She groaned
dramatically and flopped around, and the man focused back on Palomo.

“Decided that Matthews ass was worth more than the nicotine hit after all, did ya?”

“Please stop talking about him like that. It makes me really uncomfortable, and I know he’d be pissed.”

“Well, it’s probably a better choice to make. Matthews is cute and cigarettes are only sexy in movies.”

Jensen reached over Agent Florida’s head, gripped Bitters hand with both of her own, and dragged him around Agent Florida to her side. Her voice was chipper and squeaky in a way that was completely unsubtle about her stress levels, but she managed to haul him away from both mobile Freelancers so they couldn’t force him back without making a scene.

“Welp, thish ish fun, but we need to do a check in! We’ll be right back!”

She hauled Bitters off, and Palomo quickly followed before Niner could block his path, and they speed walked over to where Andersmith was talking to Sarge. Andersmith and Sarge were huddled together, messing with a noisemaker.

“Andersmith,” Palomo called, “We need you! We have to even up the sides man!”

He came over and the four of them moved over to the far end of the clearing where they were pretty certain they’d see if anyone approached them.

“Thanks for the save.”

“Of courshe. They weren’t going to let you go.”

Bitters leaned against a tree and huffed a breath.

“So, what happened? You’re all freaked as shit.”

Palomo’s voice shook. He thought he’d gotten that reigned in, but it just kept happening. Maybe he’d hit up some of the theatre people later and see if they had tips on how to not do that.

“She just…accepts that they’re good guys now. Once the last one gets here, we’re supposed to take them all to the base. Without her or the Reds.”

Andersmith caught sight of one of the soldier’s in white, who’d taken off his helmet and revealed a large bushy mustache.

“Didn’t that one kidnap Captain Tucker’s son? Agent Wyoming, according to Sarge.”

Bitters growled and rolled his shoulder.

“Yeah, and that one? Betcha that’s The Meta, the ‘strength of ten bears’, ‘completely mentally unhinged’ one, and she wants to bring these people into our base, fully armed and armored. Not to mention, that one? Butch? Torturer.”

Palomo nodded.

“Yup, while you were gone they did the big name drop thing. They’re calling him Agent Maine though, and Butch is Agent Florida.”
“And she wants us to bring them back home? Is she high?”

Jensen leaned in and whispered softly.

“We’re shupposed to trust Agent Carolina’sh judgment.”

Bitters shook his head and gestured toward where Carolina, North and York were all hovering in each others space.

“I don’t know that we can. The cyclops? He’s apparently her old boyfriend. A week ago she’d have had them stripped down and cuffed until we were sure they weren’t here to murder us, but she walks up with him and all of a sudden they’re walking around with guns and knives in full armor. He just turns on the charm and she melts.”

Palomo wrapped his arms around himself. He could feel himself freaking out, even as he just stood there. He hoped he wasn’t being too much of an embarrassment. He really, honestly, had no idea what was happening that was making him so scared and shaky.

“I don’t like it.”

Andersmith’s tone was one of fearful resignation. The kind of sound that came out before the Reds and Blues arrived, when Felix had them on missions where the soldiers didn’t expect to make it home alive.

Most missions back then, actually.

“There’s not much we can do, is there? As long as she is in command, we have to follow her rules.”

Bitters shoulders tensed.

“This is where my news comes in. I talked to Agent Washington for a few minutes before my radio magically fried. He issued order to strip their weapons and gear and keep them under guard, like we should be doing with people who’re pretending to be an aid ship but are actually highly trained killers with a history of attempted murder against people on this planet.”

“Sh that shmart though?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“If Agent Carolina doenshn’t agree…”

Bitters put a hand on Jensen’s shoulder in that casual way he had.

“Carolina is no longer in command. Agent Washington’s orders are being backed by Kimball as we speak, and Kimball won’t side with Carolina. Washington’s the one of the two of them that actually gives a shit about us, and Kimball knows that.”

Palomo’s voice quivered, and he HATED it. He felt like a baby, whining about things and not actually helping and just…it sucked. Majorly.

“I’m really scared.”

And there was a hand on his shoulder now. Bitters tugged him so their helmets were staring right at each other.
“We are not fucking dying at their hands, ok? I won’t let them.”

Andersmith pulled his gun and started to check it. He’d been inactive for too long, Palomo could tell, and he was probably feeling pretty helpless.

They all were.

“We may not have a choice if they choose to hurt us. They are all elite trained fighters.”

“And they were taken down by the Reds and Blues who are good people, but they’re terrible fucking soldiers. They run on pure fucking luck.”

Palomo shook his head and motioned to his cheek,

(Folami)

Then moved his hand in a lowering motion.

(Edra)

“Which we don’t have.”

Bitters sighed, which was as close to an agreement that Palomo was going to get.

“We do know that they’re all at least a little injured. One of them is pretty fucking wrecked.”

Andersmith scowled and started to wipe aggressively at the barrel of his gun with a cloth. Why… why on earth was he cleaning his gun?

“That is a terrible plan. We are not taking hostages, and we are not backing people into corners. If they are anything like Agent Washington and Agent Carolina, them being injured and afraid will only make this worse for us. Besides, that is not what we do.”

Katie started to shake, just a little.

“Sho we negoshiate. They’re hurt, if they hurt ush they can kissh their medical care goodbye.”

“Hey, is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

The group turned to the gold soldier, York, Carolina’s ex. While they’d been wrapped up in their thinking group, he’d peeled off from the other Freelancers and made his way over to them.

The man had ditched his helmet a while back, and was still not wearing it. He had a wide, cocky grin and a swagger that was all confidence and something just a little cocky, like he knew something no one else did, and he was going to use it.

A year ago, Palomo would have glued himself to the man’s side if he’d said a single nice word.

Now he knew better than to trust a nice face and a grin.

“I don’t know that we’ve been properly introduced. I’m York.”

Andersmith tucked the cloth away, stepped forward, and stuck out a hand to shake. Palomo had no idea if the man recognized the subtle snub of not being saluted or not. Carolina and Wash were both easy reads if they didn’t have their helmets on, but this guy looked crazy well put together for someone who just survived a space ship crashing.
Oh sure, he looked like he was an open book, but Bitters told him, not too long after…the betrayal, that anyone that well put together in a warzone was either a liar or an enemy. This guy had survived a crash-landing, his friend going missing, and finding his long lost girlfriend, and yet here he was, perfectly content and smiling for strangers. No way he was legit.

“I’m Lieutenant Andersmith, this is Lieutenant Bitters, Lieutenant Jensen, and Lieutenant Palomo of the United Armies of Chorus.”

The cyclops grinned and leaned in a little, one hand on his hip, clearly going for friendly, and failing miserably. Palomo could see Jensen tense as the man was starting to creep into her space.

“Awesome. Now that we’ve got the pleasantries out of the way-“

“Back the fuck up, asshole.”

Bitters reached for his weapon and the man shuffled backwards a little, his expression still chipper and amicable.

Bitters distrusted him instinctively, and Palomo knew he was right about the guy actually being a slime. No one was that fucking smiley unless they thought they’d already fucking won.

This guy was just like Felix.

“Okaaay, clearly more pleasantries need to be had.”

“Look, I don’t care what kind of shit you’ve conned Carolina into, but it won’t work on us.”

“Conned?”

Palomo drew his weapon and pointed it at York as well. The man finally lost the slimy smile and traded it in for a look of concern. It was the kind of look you put on someone you thought needed to spend a few days on lockdown, not the kind of look you gave people who were going to shoot you.

They wouldn’t be conned. He’d die before he let these jerks hurt another one of his friends.

“We know all about you Freelancers and your baby kidnapping, cannibalistic ways.”

Bitters sighed, but his gun didn’t so much as quaver. They were starting to draw an audience from more than just the Freelancers, which was all kinds of really bad.

“God damn it, Palomo.”

York scratched the back of his head and quirked an eyebrow, and ok, yeah, he needed to start not talking because he’d just given this guy the advantage now and a new topic to focus in on.

“Um…I’ve never committed an act of cannibalism as far as I’m aware, and I’ve never kidnapped a baby. I will admit, I’ve killed my fair share of people, but so have you four if you were any kind of half decent soldiers.”

Katie puffed up a little bit at that. She prided herself on being an excellent soldier, if not an excellent driver, and she could hear the snub in his tone.

“Lishten-“

“Now, normally I’d just let you guys rant and rave and gather information that way, but honestly?
We don’t have that kind of time, so here’s what’s going to happen. You people are going to stop pissing off Carolina, drive us back to your home base or whatever you call it so that we can get proper medical attention, and stop acting like little brats. We, meanwhile, will back off and allow your people to tear our ship down to its component parts and use it all for scrap, as well as giving you free access to the supplies we’ve brought. Fair?”

Katie snarled and flipped him off.

“We don’t do shit until we know you’re not going to shit our goddamned throatsh while we’re driving, asshhle. You’re not part of the United Armiesh of Chorush, sho you can shuck it.”

“Jesus Christ, where did you pick up information on us? We literally came here to help you and you’re acting like we’re monsters.”

Andersmith put a hand on Palomo’s gun and encouraged him to lower it. He didn’t completely put it away, but he did notice that they were being watched hard, by friends and enemies alike, with weapons drawn and shoulders tense.

Oh no.

Shit was getting real.

“No, you didn’t. You came because of a message sent into space that alerted you to Agent Washington and Agent Carolina, but for what purpose, we don’t know yet. Your hovering at her shoulder does not make you look anything less than manipulative and Machiavellian.”

“Hey now, our relationship is very complicated and can’t be summarized by two five syllable words. I’m just trying to catch up and bask in the sheer sex appeal that is Carolina. You’ve got to understand that. You’re a man after all, aren’t you?”

Andersmith didn’t dignify that bullshit, sexist, hetero-normative, toxic masculinity with a response and Palomo kind of wanted to punch the man. Who turns the person they’re in love with into a one-dimensional sex object? Who tells a complete stranger to think about the person they love and sex at the same time? I mean, ok, if you’re in an open relationship or a swinger or something…but still, this guy doesn’t know Andersmith from Addams.

“And now you’re making demands to be delivered to a place where many of us sleep, in return for what, by your own admission, was for us in the first place.”

It was clear York was running out of patience. So was Bitters.

“Look-“

Bitters lowered his gun and got right into York’s face, helmet to nose, and stared into the eyes of the man who could probably snap his neck if he really wanted to.

Palomo’s heart started to race. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

“No, you look. I didn’t survive this long to be taken out by a bunch of super soldier-wannabe has-beens in brightly colored armor. This is our planet, these are our people, and if you want to get anywhere you’ll fall the fuck in line. Carolina can only control what she’s in control of. Get it?”

York threw his hands up and stepped back a little with enough of a cocky hip swivel that he looked more like a douchy ‘bro’ from a bad high school movie than a grown man on a battlefield. Palomo recognized that they was supposed to feel bad about that, like they were the ones being overly
aggressive, like they were the ones who were doing wrong.

Bitters had been around the block enough times to not give a shit.

The rest of them were just gonna ride that train.

“Alright, alright, kid, I can see rational conversation isn’t going to pan out here.”

“Call me whatever the fuck you want, just stay over there, and keep your hands where I can see them.”

York made his way back to Carolina, walking backwards with frown, hands still raised as if he were trying to make sure they knew he wasn’t a threat and Bitters was totally being a dick. The Freelancers were pretty good about hiding their discontent, but it was the Chorus soldiers that Palomo knew were the real threat here.

Super soldiers or not, Chorus soldiers had the numbers, the weapons, and the determination. They weren’t dying here.

“Bittersh,” Katie whispered, “I think you jusht shigned our death warrantsh.”

“Fuck that.”

Or…maybe not.

Danvers, over in the medic huddle, made a playful stabbing motion with her left hand at one of the other medics, Orwell. He shrieked and flailed backwards, causing everyone to stare at him, and she made the motion again.

“Dude! You can’t just stab me! I’m a national treasure!”

“Like I care, asshole!”

The ‘fight’ devolved into giggles and shouting, but it was enough. Bitters caught Jones’ eye and nodded. Jones, who’d been hiding since the scream fest from Carolina, made a hand motion to Demir.

Right hand, ‘n’, shake.

Sleep and food, combined into one.

(Not trustworthy.)

Word would spread within minutes, hopefully it would be enough before the Freelancers figured out exactly what was happening.

Palomo did not want to test out his skills against any of these people, injured or not.

Especially not the bear man.

Carolina stormed over to York and looked like she was about to lose her shit.

“You know what? Fuck this.”

That…was not a tone Palomo wanted to hear. In fact, that just sounded like the worst sound ever.
“Bitters?”

Andersmith put a hand on Bitters shoulder and pulled him back a little.

“No. Fuck this shit. Fuck all of it.”

Bitters shook Andersmith’s grip off his shoulder and…*shit*. Palomo knew that walk. That was the ‘serious business’ walk. That *only* happened when shit was about to go down.

The three Lieutenants shared a look and nodded.

Palomo and Jensen jogged to catch up, and Andersmith met them from the other side, making a really cool effect of the four of them walking like they owned the world!

He had the coolest friends.

Carolina’s whole body was practically vibrating with anger as she and her boyfriend talked. Palomo really did not want to be any more on her bad side than he already was, she was already livid pissed about the Doc situation.

“Agent Carolina, I need to speak with you, privately.”

She didn’t even bother to turn around, her attention was too clearly glued on the gold soldier in front of her, who’d been making gooey eyes for a while now.

“Look, Bitters, I’m a little busy right now. As you well know.”

“Agent Carolina, I am a Lieutenant in the New Republic of Chorus and fully recognized in the United Armies of Chorus. Your personal conversation needs to wait.”

**Holy shit.**

Bitters, what the fuck are you trying to do?

Carolina turned and leveled a silent glare at Bitters, who didn’t so much as flinch.

“Did you just try to pull rank on me?”

“Technically, you’re not a part of our military. Pulling rank isn’t hard. Are you seriously going to keep posturing, or are you going to turn around and listen to what I am trying to tell you?”

“General Kimball herself put me in charge of this operation, I’m pretty sure that counts for something. I am in charge. I will come and get you when we have a spare minute. You can start hauling crates, unless you’d like me to make your life a living hell.”

Bitters stared at her until she turned back around and started talking again. Palomo honestly didn’t know what to do here. She wasn’t going to let herself be pushed.

He cracked his neck and adopted his ‘I’m so fucking done with your shit, Palomo’ pose, which, ok, was a lot more funny when it *wasn’t* directed at him. He flicked his right hand to the side just a little,

(Spread out.)

And Jensen, Andersmith, and Palomo all moved away from their friend and into a slightly more defensive pose. Palomo could see the guy who’d threatened him watching them all, his eyes were
narrowed and calculating and reminded him of all kinds of unhappy nightmares he’d had.

He couldn’t see York’s face at this angle, Carolina was in the way, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t being watched by him too.

“Oh, alright. I didn’t really want to make the announcement this way, but if you’re going to be an asshole, I can be one too.”

“Excuse me?”

Epsilon suddenly appeared and threw himself at Bitters, getting right up in the orange soldier’s visor and trying to push him back with sheer force of will.

“What the fuck did you just say?!”

“Agent Carolina is no longer in command of this operation. We received new orders right before the last active radio was deliberately sabotaged by the soldier in white, Agent Wyoming, former Freelancer.”

Carolina froze.

“What?”

“I wanted to work with you on this Carolina, because not working with you is probably going to get us all killed, but you’re not leaving me any choice. You’re deliberately ignoring your soldiers and your duties, and you have put us all in jeopardy. We are done.”

Bitters clicked on his voice amplifier and turned just enough away to not blow anyone’s eardrums.

“All former members of Project Freelancer posing as a UNSC aid crew, please make your way to where the injured are and prepare for processing and return to the main base. Everyone, please make sure that this is a smooth transition. No one else needs to get shot today.”

Epsilon buzzed in front of Bitters visor, his colors fizzling in and out, glowing green, then black, then red, then purple, then black again, before settling.

“Bitters, what is this bullshit about Carolina not being in charge anymore?! Who the fuck authorized this?!”

Epsilon’s voice was high and panicked and Palomo tried not to curl in on himself, he hated it when the AI got upset. Things tended to get broken or messed up and there was a lot of freaking out from Captains Tucker and Caboose.

“If Agent Carolina had allowed one of us ‘lesser’ soldiers to speak instead of holing herself up with her ex boyfriend, she’d have realized that there are a few things that aren’t exactly right, like the fact that every form of long range communication has been deliberately tampered with.”

“How did you-“

“Agent Washington has issued orders, and I will fulfill them. You can either get your ass in line, Carolina, or you can go sit with your friends in time out. The choice is yours. You have no rank here, and you’re getting to the point where I, where we cannot trust you not to commit treason or just leave us to die.”

Bitters locked eyes with York who moved a little to the side and threw his hands up in surrender.
Palomo couldn’t decipher the look on his face, and honestly didn’t know if that was better or worse considering who this guy was.

“You gonna fight me, too, tough guy?”

“I’m not looking for a fight, and neither is she.”

Carolina snarled and turned on York.

“York, you cannot be fucking serious!”

“Carolina, something is clearly going down, the last thing we want to do is cause waves that could end up getting people hurt or killed. Wash wouldn’t issue an order like that unless something was happening, right? We’re here. We’re not trying to cause problems. Let’s not buy trouble. I’m gonna get over to where the others are, in fact, I’m gonna just leave my gun here and someone else can pick it up, and I’m going to follow the rules. Don’t make trouble for yourself, Carolina, not when they’re this scared.”

“Scared?! Oh, I’ll show you scared!”

Carolina swung around and reached forward, likely to make Bitters flinch, but that was the last damned straw and Palomo was just done!

“AGENT CAROLINA! PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR AND STAND DOWN!”

Charles had no idea where his voice came from. His bellow was enough to startle the nearby soldiers into action.

Palomo had no idea when he’d gotten brave enough to point a gun in Agent Carolina’s face, but he found it. She was not going to get away with threatening his friends. She was not going to get away with sacrificing them for her old team. He would shoot her and go down and the others would kill them and he would probably die but it would be worth it if he could just protect one of them!

She stared at him for a few moments. Epsilon stood on her shoulder, just as still, even as he spoke.

“Jesus, Palomo, do you really want to go down this road?”

“I AM NOT GOING TO STAND BY AND LET YOU KILL MY FRIENDS! YOU THINK JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE A SUPER SOLDIER WITH A SHITTY PAST YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT TO US, BUT YOU’RE WRONG! WE ALL HAVE SHITTY PASTS, CAROLINA! I HAD TO LIVE WITH MY PARENTS DEAD BODIES FOR WEEKS, BUT SOMEHOW I HAVE MANAGED TO ACTUALLY GIVE A SHIT ABOUT PEOPLE THAT I’M NOT FUCKING!”

Carolina’s shoulders tightened in fury as she raised her hands above her shoulders.

“I am not going to kill anyone, Palomo.”

She started walking, York at her side, both with hands in the air, like long suffering martyrs.

“But if I wanted to, not having a gun wouldn’t stop me.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm so sorry for taking so long with this one and dragging out the angry fighty stuff, but on top of it being really stressed at my work from the holidays, being really busy with the holidays and trying to make presents happen for about 45 people, and a massive blow to my files, I'm a little behind and a lot demotivated.

To make a very long story short, a HUGE chunk of what I'd written for this is gone now thanks to a coworker who assumed that the flashdrive plugged into my computer was communal and deleted nearly two years worth of projects including the comic book I've been writing for over a year now which was basically my baby. I have backups, but there have been enough changes since the last backup that having them almost feels like not having anything at all.

EDIT: A thousand thanks to Addleton who pointed me in the direction of a recovery program and SAVED MY DIGITAL BABIES! Words cannot express how happy I am. Pretty much everything was able to be recovered!

Still, things are moving forward here, and I have some recordings on my phone that should help get me back to where I was at eventually. Now if only Doc would hurry the heck up! I thought he said he wasn't that far away!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Sarge has a talk, Doc is found, Wash is very confused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sarge knew something wasn’t right the minute the baby soldiers started whispering to each other and keeping secrets.

Oh, they thought they were being all cute and clever and no one would figure out that they were involved in a conspiracy of some sort, but Sarge didn’t fall off the turnip truck yesterday, and he wasn’t born in a barn, neither. Them ‘huddles’, as the kids called it, were just a way to trick the older folks into thinking they were dicking around while they traded information.

Like a network of mini-spies.

Or middle schoolers.

Emily thought he was paranoid, but Sarge knew that she was just not in the right part of the field to see it. Spending too much time in the base and not enough in the battlefield must have skewed her perspective a little bit. These kids, the soldiers in the trenches, they were wily little bastards.

Grif, Simmons, and Donut all circled around Sarge, which left the injured soldiers in the uncomfortable position of being surrounded by the enemy, but that Folami girl, she was a Red through and through, she’d be ok. Even as tensions spiked, she managed to run enough interference on her own, that Sarge was confident he could take his eyes off the Freelancers while they slowly stripped and handed over their gear.

A rather distressed looking Fed tried to rush past the Reds, York’s gun that he’d left on the ground gripped delicately in their arms, as if they were afraid it’d come to life and start shooting like Freckles. Grif grabbed their arm and yanked them back, causing an undignified squawking noise and a good bit of kicking and flailing.

“What in the high holy fuck is happening around here?”

The soldier squirmed in place and clutched the now upside down gun tightly to their chest.

“Agent Carolina’s not in command anymore, and she is not happy about it. Agent Washington apparently sent Lieutenant Bitters a secret message. The aid ship is actually Freelancers, some of whom may or may not kidnap babies and eat them. They are all angry. Agent Carolina threatened Lieutenant Palomo. We have no contact with home. Lieutenant Bitters may have just set us up to be murdered for insubordination. Everyone is really upset.”

The soldier’s voice quavered just a bit, and Sarge realized this must have been one of the younger ones. Kimball and Doyle had tried to keep the youngest soldiers out of the battlefield and on training grounds as much as possible in the past, but eventually they had to get into the field. An untrained soldier was a dead soldier after all.
Shit. This was probably the worst thing the baby soldiers could have fallen into. Sarge had no interest in sacrificing anyone to the bloodlust of the Freelancers, but there was something extra unpleasant in the thought of the younger kids being killed.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, and I’m storing their weapons under threat of mutilation if I screw up, so can I please go now?!”

Grif let the poor kid go with a pat on the shoulder.

They scrambled off, clearly terrified, and that was just too much for Sarge’s heart to take. War wasn’t meant for children, children weren’t meant for war, and Sarge was damned sick of them getting caught in the crossfire.

It was one thing if an adult made the choice to dedicate themselves to the glory of the Red Army, but railroading children from cradle to grave into fighting was a dirty, despicable tactic that even those dastardly Blues wouldn’t stoop so low to. Not that the Generals here were despicable, they played the hand they were dealt and tried to keep as many people as they could alive through the deceit and foul play.

Still, he’d prefer to not have the green beans out and running around. He’d much rather have them back at the base doing homework or whatever it was they did when they weren’t learning to kill each other.

Simmons shook his head and watched the poor kid fumble until another soldier took the gun from them and stored it with the armor that was slowly collected, piece by piece, from the Freelancers. No one looked exactly happy about the arrangement. He clenched a fist and turned to Sarge.

“This isn’t right.”

Donut shifted back and forth in that nervous way of his that no amount of training seemed to break him of and scrunched up his shoulders.

“Sarge, we just got a Freelancer, and she is really nice. Why are all the rest of them angry, and scaring kids, and me a little bit?”

Grif scoffed.

“You just liked Wash’s girlfriend because she’s into all that girly shit. If she wasn’t so willing to just say whatever to get through, you’d be as scared of the crazy dick stabber as the rest of us.”

“Hey! Don’t call her that! She’s been through a lot, ok Grif? I mean, really, anyone who’s that skinny is not in a great state of mind.”

This was not helpful.

Sarge pivoted around to look at where Carolina was stood, rage radiated from her like waves of heat and drove everyone as far from her as they could possibly stand.

They needed her on their side. They needed her, and she was too damned busy being pissed to see it.

Sarge started over to her, and a sense of calm settled over his shoulders.
“Sarge, where are you going?”

“Ahm goin’ ta fix this mess.”

The Reds followed Sarge, though whether they planned to help or just cause more trouble was anybody’s guess.

She saw them coming almost immediately, but didn’t make a move to meet them. He walked right up to her and got not so much as a grunt of acknowledgement from the red head.

Sarge frowned, ticked and rightly so. They’d gotten past this garbage an age ago, or so he’d thought, but maybe having a boyfriend set her back a few years.

He pulled Carolina to the side and scowled as she crossed her arms over her chest and stomped her foot like she was a goddamned toddler. He’d thought she’d be the easy one out of the group of super powered killers, the mature one, but apparently she was just another child on a power trip here.

“Just what kind of bullshit do you think yer pullin’ here, Little Missy?”

Church sizzled at her shoulder. He flashed red and black before he finally settled.

“She’s not doing shit! It’s them! All of them!”

Carolina jerked herself away from Sarge’s grip on his arm.

“That brat pulled a gun on me.”

“And you should apologize fer scarin’ him inta doin’ that. That brat is a Lieutenant, and he’s got a heck of a lot more sway then you do right now, missy.”

Church mimicked Carolina’s obnoxious pose and it was no wonder she was acting this way with that tiny glowing Blue in her head, corrupting her thoughts and making her all emotional and ridiculous.

“That’s fucking stupid, Sarge.”

“Yeah? Well, you may have Kimball’s ear, but she’s a good leader. She listens ta her people. Guess who’s the president of the ‘Heroes of Chorus’ fanclub and runs a fifth ah the underground contraband trade at Pro-teger? Not you.”

Carolina’s arms dropped to her side, and Sarge knew her jaw would be on the floor if she weren’t wearing a helmet.

“He runs a fanclub? That’s why I should apologize?”

“Ah didn’t say apologize acause of the club, ‘Lina, though it ain’t a bad reason. Who do you think Kimball’s gonna listen to? You the soldiers who’re terrified of you for threatenin’ their own, especially when yer threatenin’ the underage soldiers? But that ain’t the reason. You done wrong here, an’ you know it. That’s why yer so pissed off right now.”

Church looked about ready to jump in again and defend her, but Carolina’s whole body twisted, the way it did when something got to her and she felt all guilty and stuff. She sighed and relaxed her stance and Sarge nearly crowed with victory.

“What are you saying?”
“Tell the boy yer sorry. Do it public-like, and sound sincere.”

Church flickered an angry black again. His colors were more and more erratic as time went by, and Sarge was a little concerned about what that meant. He knew that AI were only supposed to last about seven years before they started going crazy and not working right, but he had no idea what that meant for ‘fragments’ or whatever the hell Church was.

Might be time to get the little asshole a check-up.

“Are you kidding me? She doesn’t need to fucking apologize to that little shit! He should be kissing her fucking boots! All of them should! She and Wash and all of us won the war for this planet!”

One of the soldiers (and damned if Sarge could remember all of their names, they kids all seemed to blend together in a mix of colors and hormones and high pitched whining), clearly overheard Church and started making weird flapping motions with their hands, that Sarge just knew was code for something.

Sarge stood his ground until the little Blue bastard stopped waving his arms like an idiot.

“You ‘spect these people to fall to their knees fer somethin’ they didn’t even ask for?”

“They didn’t ask us for help?”

Simmons waffled back and forth a little.

“Technically, we asked them for help. Then they asked us, once we’d been split up.”

Carolina kept her arms crossed, but she finally stopped looking quite so petulant. She must have finally separated out her own thoughts from her AI’s, maybe she’d realized that he was acting like an asshole, or maybe she’d seen the Chorus kids relaying their conversation around to the other little pocket groups.

It didn’t matter really, she had started to listen, and that was what was important.

“Look, ya ain’t doin’ yerself any favors actin’ this way. The war ain’t over ‘til the pirates are gone and treaties ‘re signed. We stopped a big battle, but the war’s still raging, ‘n the kids ‘re scared.”

She took a deep, slow breath.

“Politics?”

Sarge nodded.

“Politics. Go say yer sorry, and if glowbug here cain’t handle that? Make him stay behind.”

“Screw you, Sarge! Carolina, you do not have to apologize to that little shit for doing your job! Fuck, he’s already in trouble and he thinks he can just pull a gun?!?”

“Epsilon, stop. As much as I hate to admit it, Sarge is probably right. At the very least, we need the kids on our side to get everyone back safe. Leaving Bitters in charge is only going to cause trouble.”

Grif shook his head and waved his hand around, in a clear attempt to motion to the entire crashed ship created clearing.
“Carolina, you know taking them back to the base isn’t gonna go well right? The soldiers are not exactly happy to know that these guys are assholes. I mean I don’t know a lot of these guys, but between the Felix looking motherfucker, the Palomo punching motherfucker, the pedophile motherfucker, the crazy wheelchair motherfucker, Baby Stealer Wyoming, and the goddamned Meta, your friends aren’t friendly enough for the kids.”

“Grif, do not ever call them those things again. And Maine is not the Meta anymore, I don’t know how to explain it, but he’s as close to Maine as he was before Sigma ever got involved. He’s normal.”

Donut shifted back and forth again, the way he did when he thought other people had said or done something stupid and he wanted to redirect them. Sarge had never thought he’d see the day where Carolina of all people earned that look from Donut.

“Yeaaaaahh, and that’s all well and good, Carolina, but you haven’t actually tried to talk to him yet, or anyone over there for that matter to confirm that. You’re just talking to the guy who tried to beat up Palomo and the guy who’s somehow managed to scare the kids worse than your silent buddy. I’m not so sure I really want to be around him, he seems like a jerk.”

Carolina stared at Donut, hard, like she couldn’t comprehend what he was trying to tell her. It was a look lots of people had after talking to Donut for a while, but Sarge wasn’t so sure he’d earned that one.

“Donut, Washington shot you.”

“Yeah?”

“He shot you and you got over it. I think you’ll be fine.”

Donut sighed and gave Carolina a disappointed look, one hand on his hips and the other gave a dismissive wave.

“Yeah, but this isn’t about me Carolina, and it really wasn’t about Wash either.”

Church buzzed and flapped his arms again like a damned chicken.

“How is it not about Wash? He literally shot you and left you to die. For weeks, Donut, you laid there for weeks! Has Wash even apologized for leaving you to die? Compared to what he did, Maine over there is practically innocent.”

“Well, I mean, Wash was in a scary place, his brain was a little damaged and he was afraid of being stuck in prison forever.”

“And how is Maine any different?”

Donut thought about it for a second before he shrugged his shoulders.

“He wanted an AI more than he wanted to get out of prison?”

Carolina pointedly did not put her head in her hands, but Sarge could see in the way her muscles bunched that she really wanted to. Church, on the other hand, had no qualms about being an overly dramatic little pill and clapped his hands over his face.

He even added in a tiny ‘thunk’ sound for dramatic effect.
She relaxed her stance and tried to convince them with the weight of her voice alone that she was right and they were wrong. What Carolina failed to take into account was that Sarge had been convincing people to do things for longer than she’d been alive, and it took more than a voice tint and some fancy footwork to get him bamboozled.

He was a Corporal after all.

“Look, I get it, I know that we’re all a little freaked, but this can only lead to good things for the planet.”

Simmons shook his head at her this time, well and truly past agitated.

“Yeaaaaaaah, I don’t know if I agree with that.”

“Simmons-“

“No, you’re not going to intimidate me into taking your side I’m really nervous about this!”

Carolina stopped for a second, as if the thought that people were afraid genuinely did not occur to her. Why the words made a difference when they came from Simmons, Sarge had no idea, but it finally seemed to click in her brain that people weren’t just being disobedient to be assholes.

“Why?”

“You mean aside from the fact that at least two of them have tried to kill us before?”

“Washington has actively tried to kill you before. He almost killed Donut. He took you prisoner, he took Doc prisoner. Yeah, ok, my team may not be all sunshine and kittens but they’re not blatantly evil, and if they say they’re here to help-“

Griff butted in and pointed very firmly at the guy in purple, who was stripped down to his bodysuit and boots and glared at anyone who was unlucky enough to be too close to him or in the general vicinity of his eyeballs.

“Yeah, but you haven’t actually asked them if they’re here to help have you? The only one anyone has seen you actually talk to is the guy in purple armor who threatened to beat up a child and the guy with one eye and you know why he’s freaking people out.”

Carolina’s tone took on sympathy.

“North is scared. His sister is still missing.”

Sarge…wondered if maybe Carolina couldn’t focus on the people of Chorus, so much as wouldn’t. Here she was, surrounded by a whole mess of people she’d known, worked with, and cared about for years, some of them she’d probably loved. The idea that they might not be good would be… tough to say the least.

It’d make sense that she thought they were irrational. It was hard to take someone seriously as a weapon of mass destruction when you’d seen them walk into walls because they hadn’t had any caffeine related stimulants that morning.

Simmons breathed a sigh and dropped his voice to a pleading pitch.

“We’re all scared, Carolina. We’re all scared and trying to pretend that your friends are not all scary and dangerous is not going to help. You have to acknowledge that.”
She tilted her head to the side, like she was issuing a challenge, but her tone was kinder than it had been the whole goddamned talk.

“I acknowledge that they are about as dangerous as I am.”

“Yeah. That’s kind of my point.”

Church shifted and brought the attention back on himself.

“Look, they’re not going to hurt you. At the very least they’re not going to hurt the Chorus kids, they’ve got some morals.”

He’d finally pulled himself out of that scared, angry headspace and started talking like a normal little AI abomination instead of an extra bitchy AI abomination. Still, that didn’t mean he wasn’t wrong.

“Tell that to Wyoming.”

Donut wagged a finger right at Carolina’s nose.

“This is why the kids don’t trust you Carolina. You don’t listen to people. You just assume people will listen to you because you’re mean.”

Donut tilted a head to the side.

“Hey, Church? Why are you so gung ho about these guys? You hated Wash for a long time.”

Church sputtered and flinched backwards, clearly startled by the sudden change.

“What? I didn’t hate Wash.”

“Uh huh! Back when you were first in Valhalla outside of the purple catchy thingie and you were a floating ball! You blew up a wall because you hated him so much! Simmons told me all about it!”

Carolina looked down at her AI.

“You blew up a wall?”

“I…He…Look, we have a complicated relationship.”

Grif rolled his eyes and waved a hand dismissively.

“Yeah, that’s one word for it.”

“Grif, shut the fuck up. You wanna start shit? Wait until we get the kids back to base.”

“If we survive that long.”

Doc groaned under the weight of the woman on his back. He wasn’t out of shape by any stretch of the imagination, he’d been on the track team in high school and kept up pretty well with his endurance training, but he’d never been one for weightlifting, and she might not have been heavy out of armor, but she was crazy heavy in it!
He’d clearly underestimated how far Donut actually was from where he’d found his new friend. How long had they been walking? He really hoped that his map hadn’t glitched out and he was actually headed in the right direction. It would be *awful* to have to backtrack at this point!

“Hey, Doc?”

Her voice was weak, and thick with pain, and Doc knew that he wasn’t exactly helping on that end. The jungle wasn’t super flat and there was stuff *everywhere* to trip on or get caught on or just stumble over! It was terrible, and Doc knew he was hurting her with every jostle.

Still, there was only so much he could do about it without leaving her behind, and that was not happening! Doc was going to make sure this woman, whatever her name was, made it out of the trees!

He really hoped that Agent Carolina didn’t just decide to kill all the Freelancers and be done with it. He knew how volatile her attitude was sometimes, and it was a waste of a perfectly nice person to murder her.

“What’s up? Is everything ok?”

“I think I’m gonna pass out soon.”

“Oh no! Try not to do that! We are so close, I just know it!”

“Yeah, you’ve been saying that for about two hours now.”

Eta flickered right in front of Doc in agitation.

“She has been in pain for *hours*! She needs a hospital, *now*!”

“Well, the nearest hospital isn’t exactly close by. My map says we aren’t much farter, and I’m going as fast as I can, I just need you to hold out a little while longer, ok?”

Her helmet thunked against the back of Doc’s.

“Look, I get it, and I appreciate what you’re doing. I just…I really just want to sleep.”

Man, she sounded *exhausted*! If it weren’t for the fact that Doc was really concerned about her dying on him, he would just let her go to sleep to get away from the pain for a while. As it was, she’d started to fade, and Doc didn’t know how long she would last if she started to really rest.

He tried to put together an argument that was both intelligent and persuasive, but was interrupted by a sharp tap against his side with the gun in her good hand.

“Freeze.”

Doc paused just in time to avoid a silenced gunshot to his head.

“OH WOW!”

Stunned, he stumbled backwards, and three mercenaries came out from the shadows. How they managed to stay so well hidden with such sparse trees was anybody’s guess, but Doc was impressed! Or, he would have been if they hadn’t been pretty clearly set on shooting him.

“Well, well, this is a pleasant surprise.”
“Damn it, there’s only two of them.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“Yeah, but look at that one! He’s all fucked up looking, can we even use that armor?”

“I said, we’ll make it work.”

“You, you, better leave us alone! We’re really close to our reinforcements and they’ll kick your butts!”

One of the mercs glided forward and motioned to the Freelancer, who’d gone limp against Doc’s back. Oh no! This was no time for a nap! He had no idea how fast he could run with her on his back, but he was pretty sure he couldn’t outrun bullets!

“I doubt anyone’s coming to help you if they couldn’t be bothered to help her. Look, we don’t want to kill you, necessarily. We just want your armor. Hows about you and your friend there strip and give us-“

The Freelancer’s arm shot into the air and the three mercs had tidy holes in the center of their helmets. The noise from the shots echoed through the trees and made Doc’s ears hurt a little, despite the noise canceling effects of his helmet, but it was well worth it to not be murdered by those guys!

The bodies crumpled to the ground and Doc’s knees shook just a little.

“Oh.”

“You ok there, Doc?”

He blinked and straightened up.

“Wow! You’re a really great shot!”

She shook her head and slumped back against him. The shot must have taken the last reserves of strength she had. Her voice was softer now, weaker.

“Eta helped. Feel sick.”

Doc couldn’t help but lower his own voice in response. He didn’t want to lose hope, didn’t want to give up, but he didn’t know what he could possibly do at this point aside from what he’d been doing.

He had no idea how to help her.

“We’re almost there, I promise.”

“Hurtin’ bad, Doc.”

“Warning! Warning! Energy levels dropping! Administering adrenaline!”

She flinched and screamed into Doc’s ear.

Holy heck! That smarted worse than the gunshots!

“MOTHERFUCKER! WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!”
“YOU CANNOT FALL ASLEEP OR YOU WILL DIE!”

The Freelancer bucked against Doc’s back and nearly threw herself out of his grip.

“Stop wiggling! If I drop you on your leg you’ll hate me forever!”

“I’LL FUCKING HATE YOU ANYWAY, YOU ASSHOLE!”

“Well, in that case, maybe I should just leave you here to rot you insipid little twat!”

“FUCK YOU!”

“Hands in the air!”

Four soldiers wearing Chorus colors weaved their way through the trees.

Oh goodness! They’d been found!

“Bitters?! Don’t shoot! We come in peace! Also there are bodies on the ground so watch your step!”

The medic at Bitters side lowered her gun and ran right up to them.

“Doc? Jesus! You scared the crap out of me!”

“I’m so glad you brought a medic! Look, this is Private Danvers! My friend here is hurt pretty badly!”

She took one look at the Freelancer on Doc’s back and turned around to the other soldiers. Bitters let out a sigh of relief.

“Oh man, please tell me she’s the missing Freelancer. Her brother is losing his fucking mind.”

Danvers pointed back in the direction they’d come from.

“Ramirez! Garza! Run back and get the fucking stretcher! We’ve got a live one!”

Wash was determined to actually get to Kimball and not end up in random places on the base. He was not Caboose, he did not want to get himself lost and end up on an ‘adventure’…again. One trip into the underbelly of the base was enough for the day.

He was nearly there when Matthews raced toward him, tablet in hand. The orange soldier skidded to a stop in front of Wash and offered a perfect, if a little overenthusiastic salute.

“Agent Washington.”

God, had Wash ever been that eager? That full of need to be liked and valued and respected?

“At ease, where are we at?”

The unfortunately humiliating answer was yes.
Wash motioned for Matthews to walk with him, and the younger man practically preened with delight.

“It’s all going according to plan, Sir. The fifteen and under have all been given their transfer orders
to different bases along with everyone who is ill or injured but is still capable of being moved. I
have made physical lists of the people and locations for you and General Kimball rather than just
sending you a memo, since we are trying to keep this on the down low. I also have Ibanez
rounding up the underage but serving soldiers and as many adults as we can to run protection until
we’re sure that the base is safe again. We’ve also got the…cell nearly cleared.”

Wash stopped and realized that he hadn’t called off the damned underground cell before he left
Doctor Grey’s office. Matthews nearly toppled over in his haste to stop and turn around.

He took a deep breath and waited until Matthews had righted himself.

“Go ahead and cancel the rearranging of that area. It has been brought to my attention that people
don’t belong in places like that for extended periods of time. I…may have panicked and
overreacted.”

Matthews sputtered in disbelief. Clearly he had too much faith in the chain of command, if he
thought that Washington of all people wasn’t capable of going overboard.

“You…panicked?”

“I did. You may not know this about me, but I’ve been told I am a little dramatic. I was afraid, I
still am, but Doctor Grey helped set me straight on this one. We won’t be putting them in the lower
armory. The Freelancers are people, not objects, and there is a certain level of human kindness that
should be given, even to prisoners.”

Matthews nodded eagerly and clutched his tablet to his chest with what Wash knew was a smile of
approval.

“I’ll get the reorganizing called off and send them to help clear out the rest of the evacuation! This
should speed the departure time up by at least an hour or two!”

Wash nodded and patted the younger man awkwardly on the shoulder.

“Thank you for organizing this so quickly.”

Wash could practically see Matthews blooming under the praise, the way a wilting flower would
reach for the sun. He responded depressingly well to positive reinforcement.

“Of course! We have emergency plans for a reason, Agent Washington, and we don’t intend to let
anyone hurt our kids. They’re the only future this planet has.”

“You’re all my priority, Private Matthews.”

“Which is what makes you such a fantastic leader! We are so happy that there is someone here
who is willing to do what needs to be done to make sure that we’re all alive. Aliveish. Not of the
dying of non-natural causes. Though…this is Chorus. At this point, I think bullets are a natural
cause.”

“Bullets are not a naturally occurring thing that happens in the human body, so no, they are not a
natural cause.”
A thought crept into Wash’s head. Of all the soldiers he’d worked with, Matthews was the one who always seemed to know what was going on behind the scenes. Sure, other people tended to actually be instigators, but he’d heard many a person mention Matthews in regards to supplies, counts, and care of the bases.

He’d heard it so much he mentioned it to Kimball one day, who’d just nodded and said that he liked to contribute where he could.

“I shudder to think what might have happened to us if we’d had Locus instead of Felix. The man was too damned cocky for his own good, and looking back, that really helped us. We had enough people he never would have bothered wasting his time on doing what needed to be done. From what I can tell, Locus was a lot more thorough.”

“I would like you to be on one of the transports out of the base, I don’t care which one.”

Wash knew that the request would not go over well, but he was genuinely concerned about the young man, and if Matthews knew as much as Wash thought he might, he had to make the offer. He had to at least try.

Matthews…paused.

“Sir?”

“Private Matthews, may I be frank with you?”

“You can be whoever you want, Agent Washington. If you want to be Frank, then I can call you Frank.”

“I…what? That’s not-“

“But if you’re asking be to abandon my home, my friends, and my life, just because I might not live too long later, I’m going to have to refuse that order.”

Which was not exactly what Wash was hoping for, but it was about what he expected.

The section of hallway they were in was filled with conference rooms, so close to the offices, but so far away at the same time. Wash motioned to the conference room they’d paused right outside of, the room they’d interrogated Connie in…dear god had it really only been a few days?

It was a smaller room, with just a few chairs, and a tiny table. It forced a level of intimacy on the people inside it, especially in larger groups, and was surprisingly comfortable rather than being all business.

It would do.

With a groan, Wash lowered himself onto one of the chairs and waited for Matthews to do the same. The younger man seemed nervous, and Wash didn’t blame him. It wasn’t often that Matthews got a lot of one on one time with the Reds, Blues, or Wash. He usually ended up tagging along with the Lieutenants or being a part of a unit.

Part of that was health related, because missions tended to be divided amongst the healthy and able bodied first, but a good amount of it was just how insular the Reds and the Blues were with each other.

It was really a shame, because Matthews might have been a kissass, but he was an effective kissass.
A top tier kissass who worked hard to be sure he was the best kissass he could be. Other kissasses around the base watched and took notes from Matthews on his technique and finesse.

And as a former kissass, Wash was well aware of what a little solidarity could do.

He slipped off his helmet and went for a gentle smile, though he had no idea how effective it actually was. He really needed to take off of his helmet in front of a mirror and check to make sure that his face still made recognizable human emotions properly. It must have looked convincing enough, because Matthews tentatively slipped his own helmet off, face caught in an expression of awe.

“Private Matthews, I need someone out there who has knowledge about supply caches and escape routes. I know you know these things, your fingers are in a lot of pies that they don’t belong in, and I need that knowledge you have locked in your brain. I need it safe and secure so that if something does happen with the Freelancers, we have hope. The kids may be the future, but if we can’t feed them, they won’t be the future for long.”

Matthews smiled, but it was pained and sad. It was the kind of smile Wash’s mother had given him when he called to check on his cats and she told him they’d both been put down while he was serving. It was the smile he’d seen on doctors other than Emily Grey when delivering news about life altering injuries; it was…really unfortunate to see on someone so young.

“Agent Washington, I have been preparing people to take my place for years at this point. I’ve already got people communicating about bases and supplies and where to go into hiding and codes. Without the genocide tower, anyone looking to clear this planet of its inhabitants is going to have to nuke the planet from orbit to kill us all. And truthfully? I’m not important enough for you to be this worried about me.”

“Pray, who would this be for?”

“All the soldiers on Chorus who are afraid or uncomfortable with the idea of seeking psychological help for their very real problems. You are kind of a big deal, the soldiers respect you, and if they found out that you were willingly seeking help for yourself, they would likely be more willing to open up and seek help of their own volitions.”

“Have you talked to Doctor Grey recently?”

Matthews shook his head, the sad face morphed into something with more confusion on it.

“Not since my last update when she gave me my expiration date. I doubt things are any improved, but I’m trying to stay positive, like you said. My brain’s just not a happy place.”

Wash shifted, uncomfortable about what he was about to say, but he’d agreed to start to see Doctor Grey for this specific reason. If he couldn’t help one of the soldiers, one who specifically needed his help and he was in a perfectly unique position to help, what was the point of doing this therapy garbage?

“Have you…considered talking to someone about that?”

“Hmm?”

“Therapy. Have you considered talking to a therapist?”

“Um…I…no? Not really. I’m not suicidal or anything. Do…do you think I should?”

Matthews looked nervous, like he thought Wash was going to tell him he would have to go away
for daring to not be in peak mental health despite the looming date of death creeping up on him and the sheer amount of physical, mental, and emotional trauma that he dealt with on a day-to-day basis that would make anyone need a little help every now and again.

It made it easier to give a more genuine smile at the younger man and try to force himself to be a little more open.

Matthews wasn’t going to make fun of Wash for needing help. He wasn’t going to be mocked or ridiculed or made to feel like an idiot. If anything, Matthews would probably be a great source to get the word out that Wash was actually doing this. The boy was practically a water cooler for all the gossip he’d managed to overhear over the years.

“Therapy isn’t just about actively wanting to kill yourself, though I would argue that blatantly self-destructive choices with the knowledge that they can kill you is more active than you’re admitting to yourself. Therapy can help you keep your head together, process grief, and… help you make smart choices.”

The young man did not look impressed. It was the first time Wash could remember that Matthews didn’t seem to have stars shooting out of his eyes when they talked.

“Uh huh. Agent Washington, did Doctor Grey put you up to this?”

“No, actually. We talked for a while, she confirmed my next appointment with me, and I realized how helpful it was to have someone to talk to who wasn’t afraid of hurting our friendship.”

Matthews jaw dropped and his eyes flew wide.

“You’re seeing Doctor Grey for therapy?! You and Doctor Grey are friends?!?!?”

“I like to think so. Why? Do you not like her?”

“No! No, it’s not that! I just wouldn’t have expected, I mean, what with her being so pushy all the time.”

Wash laughed a little.

“That’s actually part of why we’re friends. She’s not the type to let you just pretend you don’t see her and she doesn’t let things like rank or skill get in her way if she thinks you need to know something. She’ll run you down and make you listen if she has to. Sometimes I need someone like that in my life.”

Matthews nodded, slow, but sure. The wheels were turning in the back of his mind, and Wash felt his smile try to turn into a full-fledged grin before he tamped it down.

“Look, I won’t force you to go, but it might help you. Honestly, it would probably help a lot of people.”

Matthews took a deep breath, looked at the floor, then met Wash’s eyes.

“If I agree to talk to Doctor Grey, or one of the other therapists, that means that I can’t go anywhere. We can’t exactly have therapy if I’m in a different base, right?”

Wash smiled at the obvious tactic and nodded.

“That seems fair. If you make an appointment and start seeing someone regularly, I can’t exactly
force you to go to a base they aren’t at. Doctor Grey will point out the value of it to anyone who might protest if I can’t.”

Matthews smiles awkwardly and shifted in his seat. He looked like he wanted to say something, but could hardly find the words, let alone get them out. Wash just sat and let him think it out. Pressure would only make it harder for him to think at that point.

“Why…Agent Washington, why do you care?”

He clapped his hands over his mouth in horror.

“I mean! I! Of course you care about the soldiers! You care about everyone! I just-“

Wash held up a hand and Matthews’ teeth clicked as he snapped his mouth shut.

“Matthews, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I’d get this invested in anyone who told me they were hurting.”

Wash closed his eyes and tried to think of the best way to say what he wanted to say. Words were not his specialty unless he was giving a dramatic speech, and he didn’t know that Matthews would be able to handle a dramatic speech without clasping his chest and swooning.

Also, Wash didn’t want to be known for being dramatic any more than he wanted to be known for being a kissass.

“But, at least part of this is because I know what it feels like to be awkward. To feel like you don’t fit in your own skin. To watch the people around you be amazing and wonderful and feel like you’re so far behind that you’ll never catch up. Some days I used to think it would be better if everyone left me behind and I just faded away. All those thoughts that buzz through your head like bees and drown out the voices that tell you just how good you actually are.”

Matthews’ eyes flew wide and looked a little wet, and Wash did not want to make him cry! That was not the goal here!

“Look, all I’m saying is that you have value. Those thoughts, those feelings, those things that make you think you don’t have value; they don’t belong in your head. I care because I’ve been there, in some ways I still am, and it’s awful. No one deserves to live with their head full of asshole bees buzzing around driving you crazy.”

Matthews sobbed and Wash pulled the younger man in for a hug.

He really hadn’t wanted to make Matthews cry. Wash clearly needed to work on his one on one pep talks if he was going to get this kind of response on a regular basis.

Maybe he should stick to dramatic speeches after all.

“Hey, it’s ok. I’m sorry, I’m not very good at this kind of thing.”

“You,” Matthews hiccupped and wiped at his eyes, “you are too good and pure for this world, Agent Washington.”

Wash blinked.

“What?”

Matthews sniffed and picked up his helmet.
“I’m going to get everyone readjusted, and then I’m going to make my appointment, Agent Washington. You should go do what you need to do.”

“Matthews, are you sure you’re alright?”

He nodded.

“I’m just fine, Sir. I’ve just been blessed with inspiration, that’s all.”

Wash…was not going to touch that one. He just nodded and let Matthews go.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the shortness and the lack of excitement in this chapter. It has been a little crazy on my end of things, but I’m hoping to have a bit more smoothed out soon. The next chapter is mostly written and is in the editing phase right now (pfft, editing). People are FINALLY going places! Yay! Excitement! Drama! More people standing around and complaining at each other!

As the year draws to a close and I look back on 2017, I get a sense of mixed feelings. On one hand, this year has sucked the biggest, fattest, nastiest turd, and I am so f-ing glad to be done with it! On the other hand, this year has been a real incentive for me to push myself into working on projects and putting them out into the world. 2017 gave me the kick in the pants that I needed to put out my stories, even if they aren’t great, even if they aren’t finished, even if they are all the horrible things those little asshole bees that keep ending up in my brain tell me they are.

Most importantly, 2017 has reminded me that in the midst of all the horrible things people say and do, people can also be wonderful and friendly and insanely kind. People I don’t know, who I have never met in person, have gone out of their way to be encouraging and funny and just amazing.

So, as this year starts to close, from the bottom of my heart I want to thank each and every one of you who has read this far. I want to thank everyone who has tapped that kudos button, who has left a comment no matter how small, who has read this story and liked it enough to keep coming back.

Thank you. You are the reason this keeps moving, and I am so very, very grateful that you’ve done what you have.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

John is a protective muffin, Government starts again, North is North, Wash has the friendship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andersmith saw Agent Carolina first.

The woman moved like she was on a mission, and at the pace she was walked, Andersmith knew her mission was them.

He pulled Palomo behind himself and made it as clear as he could without words that he was done with the woman and her self-righteous attitude. He did not salute, did not stand at attention, just kept his gaze trained and his gun ready to pop up at a moment’s notice.

Bitters was right, enough was enough.

Palomo may have screwed up, but he was a friend, and he was still a child. Andersmith would not allow anyone to hurt the soldiers under his care. Not now, not ever. Not when there were so few of them, and they were so close to getting the chance to actually grow up.

The two warring factions were well on their way to solid treaties and open communication and they’d just started to actually thrive instead of just survive until someone perforated their bodies with bullets, or they died from an illness that ten years ago could have been cured with a quick dose of medicine and a little bed rest. Soldiers could walk outside without a helmet on and not immediately feel at risk to being shot in the head. They didn’t have to be afraid that someone was going to sneak into their home base and poison everyone, or blow them up, or worse.

The war was basically over.

Andersmith wanted to live long enough to see the children grow up.

He wanted the children to live long enough to be adults.

He wanted to live long enough to hold a baby in his arms again.

And if that meant active defiance of the chain of command, well, John was ready to accept whatever punishments General Kimball meted out. He’d take latrine duty over abuse any day.

“Lieutenant Andersmith, Lieutenant Palomo.”

Andersmith leveled a solid, icy stare at her and pulled out his cleaning cloth. He shifted his gun to one hand and began to clean it as aggressively as he could.

“Can we help you?”
Carolina leveled a sharp, unhappy look at Andersmith, clearly fully aware of the lack of respect, but for the first time in a very, very long time, John really did not care about her feelings. If she wanted to collude with the enemy, she could deal with being treated like an outsider.

She reached up and carefully took her helmet off. Andersmith shifted Palomo backwards, just a little, unsure what she was trying to accomplish with that.

It…was a bold move, to be sure. Agent Carolina never took her helmet off in the field, and rarely took it off out of certain designated areas. She was better about it than Agent Washington, whose ability to eat, sleep, and possibly bathe while in full body armor was legendary.

(Ok, so no one had ever actually seen Agent Washington bathe in his armor, but it made for very entertaining fiction, and who was Andersmith to tell off someone else’s harmless head canon?)

The act of willful removal of armor was a universal sign of trust and respect on Chorus, when you spent the majority of your life being shot at, showing that you trust someone not to shoot you is probably a common symbol. Agent Carolina may not have grown up on Chorus, but the way she acted in her day to day life implied that she felt the same as the soldiers on the planet did.

She’d removed her helmet to become vulnerable, she’d put her life in their hands.

It had to be a ploy.

She smoothed her ponytail a little to help it lay flat, put her helmet on the ground, and let out a slow breath.

“I’m sorry.”

Several of the nearby soldiers stopped to watch the show and Andersmith wanted to urge them back to work, to not give her the audience she wanted. They didn’t need to wait for Agent Carolina to stop being dramatic to finish what needed to be done.

They’d just moved the last of the weird beeping pods into the transport truck and had started to move boxes of food rations to go with the staggering amount of medical supplies in the hauling truck. It would be full with just a few more crates, and it looked like they would need to send at least four more for the rest of the supplies in the underbelly of the ship, and they did not have time for gawking.

“Look, you were right. What’s happening has clouded my judgment at least a little, and I wasn’t taking what you were saying into account. I forget that you’re not traditional military, you all don’t just follow orders, you ask questions and try to understand reasoning. It’s not a bad thing.”

Andersmith could feel Palomo snort behind him and mentally agreed.

Blind, unquestioning loyalty had created spaces for men like Felix and Locus to fill with lies and death. What kind of idiots would invite more of that into their lives?

How stupid did she think they were?

“We are well aware of that, Agent Carolina. It is a good portion of how we managed to survive so long with so many people dedicated to murdering us.”

He could feel the burning need to snark at the other woman and only barely managed to keep his tone.
Andersmith knew his place in the world, he was the deep voiced, straight man. Snark was not what he provided to the equation.

Still, it was a satisfying thought to have.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Look, I…I’m scared ok? I’m scared.”

Palomo peeked out from behind Andersmith, and John knew if Palomo forgave her, that would be the end of this conversation. There was no way he’d be able to salvage his anger after that, and for better or worse the others would follow suit.

“You’re scared, too?”

She opened her eyes, and for the first time, Andersmith really noticed the stress lines on her face. This was a woman who had seen, and struggled, and survived, and…maybe they hadn’t given her enough credit.

No. Focus, Andersmith. You’re angry. You are not a rug to be walked on, and neither is anyone else.

“I am, more often than I show, and I hate talking about it.”

Andersmith could feel Palomo unglue himself from his back, and just like that, the battle was lost.

“Yeah, I get that. You’re all badass and stuff, and some people are stupid and think that having emotions makes you weak and less badass, but they’re dumb and you shouldn’t listen to them.”

Carolina blinked, clearly surprised. If she’d bothered to pay attention to anything, she would know how forgiving Palomo was as long as there was an apology issued. The naivety of youth that older soldiers tried to help the younger soldiers keep for as long as they possibly could.

“Yeah, well, I’m trying. Can we just…figure out what the hell is happening and move forward?”

“Bitters knows the most about the orders. He had the only working radio for a while, then he talked to Agent Washington and then it exploded!”

Andersmith shook his head, but couldn’t hold back a smile. It sounded like Charles had finally started to get his equilibrium back.

“It did not explode, Palomo, it stopped working. The wiring seems to be fried.”

Palomo put his hands on his hips in a playfully aggressive way.

“Well, that doesn’t make as good a story though, does it?”

Carolina’s whole body tensed, and her face pinched awkwardly. Andersmith…didn’t know what to make of it. In that moment, she reminded him of a constipated tiger, and he simultaneously wanted to laugh and run away.

“Wait, Bitters actually talked to Washington, and then his radio broke?”

Andersmith straightened his posture a little to crack his spine, but the relieved expression on her face made him stay in place. If she was willing to try, he could set a good example. At this point, he didn’t have a choice.
The Lieutenants supported each other, even if they didn’t agree with each others idiotic choices like forgiving Agent Carolina.

“Yes, that…is what happened. You were told that already.”

She shook her head.

“No, I mean, he went into the jungle, talked to Wash, and then the radio malfunctioned? It didn’t just stop working, the physical radio itself is broken.”

Andersmith and Palomo shared a look.

“Yeeeeeessss?”

“Well, that makes some things make more sense. Ok-“

A gunshot rang out of the trees. Carolina snatched her helmet off the ground and slammed it on her head.

“Do we have anyone out there?”

Bitters dashed across the clearing, toward the noise.

“Everyone is here. Danvers! Ramirez! Garza! With me!”

Three more shots, and Bitters team was in the foliage, on the way to where the noise had come from. Jensen whistled and motioned everyone to spread out and defend the ship and the armorless prisoners.

Tense soldiers all pointed their guns outwards towards the jungle underbrush and waited.

A collective sigh of relief sounded as Doc came from the trees with a soldier in purple and green armor on a stretcher held up by Ramirez and Garza, Bitters and Danvers were on either side of them to defend the injured purple soldier. The medic huddle all rushed over like a giant, purple-accented, amoeba to surround the two purple clad soldiers.

“Hey guys, I found you! Man, that jungle is dense!”

“SOUTH!”

North leapt to his feet and raced away from the group of Freelancers, eyes wide and desperate at the sight of the soldier being carried. Andersmith winced as Bitters neatly blocked the man’s path and stopped him from forcing his way through the medic huddle.

Bitters snarled and pointed the barrel of his gun directly between North’s eyes and tried to force him back only for North to snarl back, louder and far more vicious than the orange accented soldier. He pressed his face hard against the barrel of Bitters’ gun in a silent dare to the other man to pull the trigger.

Andersmith felt a rush of fear down his spine.

He’d never seen Bitters play a game of chicken and lose. Andersmith really didn’t want to see this particular game to its conclusion.

Captain Grif ran over as quickly as he could, but wasn’t able to stop the macho posturing that had suddenly started.
“If you move one more inch I will blow your goddamned head off.”

North pointed over to where the other Freelancer was slowly laid out on the ground, the soldiers in purple all hovered around her to discuss her condition, pull off extra armor pieces, clean at bleeding wounds, and cluck aggressively at Doc who hovered and shifted nervously.

Orwell made an incredibly distressed noise during the examination of the woman’s mangled limbs. Andersmith didn’t blame him, she looked like she was in rough shape, and John wasn’t up close and personal with what had happened.

“That, right there, that is my little sister and if you don’t get out of my way, I swear to god-“

“Alright,” Captain Grif said as he put his hand on Bitter’s gun. The younger member of Gold Team didn’t allow his captain to so much as shift the gun, and the Freelancer didn’t pull back to get the gun off of his face, “that’s enough. Bitters, we do not want to pick a fight with the scary Freelancer. These guys have no qualms about just murdering your face because it’s just easier than dealing with you.”

Bitters growled, low and deep, but didn’t take his eyes off of the blond man in front of him. Andersmith caught Palomo’s gaze and motioned him over to the other Freelancers, who’d started to move in agitation. They clearly weren’t happy with the weapon pointed directly at their friend.

Bitters voice was filled with enough venom that John was honestly concerned about him. Bitters was sarcastic and rude, but very rarely did he get angry like that.

“I lived through Locus, I lived through Felix, I lived through pirates, mercenaries, Charon industries battle robots. I lived through Sharkface, and a literal apocalypse tower. I’m pretty sure I can shoot the guy not wearing armor and be fine.”

Captain Simmons started to inch closer from the other side, but Jensen was near enough to jump forward, grab his arm, and pull him backwards. He tilted a head in confusion, but didn’t fight.

They shared a look across the field. Andersmith nodded. They didn’t need to unnecessarily crowd this situation.

Captain Grif slid his hand down the gun and put his hands over Bitters, but didn’t try to pull again, which was probably a good idea. Andersmith was fairly certain that one good jerk would make Bitters panic and shoot. The man played it cool, but he was nearly as panicky as Palomo under the right circumstances.

Imminent death at the hands of a super soldier would probably be considered ‘the right circumstances’.

“Yeah, you say that, but something tells me that that’s not actually how that’s gonna go down. And remember, there’s not just one guy with no armor, there are lots of guys with no armor and I’m pretty sure that they’ve at least been partially trained to murdilize your face with no armor. Call it a hunch, we’ve dealt with their brand before.”

“Yeah, so have we. We’ve got two of them on our team.”

“No, I mean we’ve been on opposite ends of the battlefield.”

Bitters scoffed and carefully tried to shake Captain Grif’s grip from his gun. North’s forehead moved with the barrel, and it was honestly a little funny to watch the man’s furious expression become bemused by the two orange soldiers as they talked around him.
“And you want me to be afraid of them?”

“And you want me to be afraid of them?”

“Dude, fuck you!”

North’s sister, made a pained noise loud enough to cut through the chatter, and North actually pressed his forehead harder into the barrel of the gun. Andersmith was a little afraid that the man would end up with a circular bruise on his forehead from the force he used, but if the man wanted to posture like an idiot, no one would stop him.

“I’m not in the mood to play games, get out of my way.”

“The only way I’m getting out of your way is if I put a hole through your face and your corpse falls forward instead of backwards.”

North looked about ready to fight Bitters, gun or no gun, when Sarge stepped up next to North and tugged the man’s shoulder just a little.

“Alright, that’s it, stand down. No need to get yerself or anyone else hurt.”

It was amazing what an older voice could do. The Freelancer actually shifted backwards a little bit to accommodate the Red Corporal’s presence.

“I have orders, I am not backing down.”

“Dude,” Captain Grif tried to reason, “Washington would not want you to get yourself murdered, just, just chill for a minute, alright? That’s his-“

Bitters softly bit out a frustrated response.

“I am not letting him get loose and kill us.”

North’s expression actually softened just a little, and Andersmith wondered if maybe the man wasn’t just...deeply distressed rather than being a complete asshole. It had been a pretty horrible day for all involved, and Andersmith could understand his worry if that soldier really was his sister. Her condition...did not look good.

“What are you talking about?”

That didn’t excuse his quite frankly juvenile behavior, even if it did explain it. Honestly, Andersmith saw more maturity from prepubescents than he did from this supposed trained super soldier.

“I am not dying here, not now, and if that means I have to shoot each and every one of these fuckers in the face then that’s what I’m going to do because I am not going to die here. My people, these people, are not dying here.”

The Reds all looked at Bitters as if they had never seen him before, as if they’d never seen his determination to protect, to serve, to do what was right over what was ordered.

“Bitters?”

“You don’t get it, Captain, not today.”

Donut snuck up beside North as Captain Grif tried to gently tug the gun. It didn’t work, but Bitters didn’t shoot anyone, so Andersmith counted that as a win. He didn’t think the gold soldier would actually harm anyone, but the fear was real for all involved.
“Ok, look, he just wants to check on his sister. Put the gun down. I will personally escort him over and keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah right, like I can trust you to actually guard the guy. You won’t do shit without some kind of food or nap related bribe.”

“Fuck you, Bitters.”

“No, fuck you! I have orders from home to hold them here. You want me to back down? Get your fucking radio to work, and get new orders telling me to back down, but otherwise I am staying right the fuck here. This is my line in the goddamned sand, Captain. You want to stop me? Fucking get new orders or fucking shoot me.”

North sighed and held up his hands, but he looked just like York in his exasperated ‘you’re the asshole here’ hands in the air pose, which would not have made Bitters more likely to be lenient.

What possible reason could these people have for their massive egos and their perpetual insistence in making everyone around them think they are brofisting tools?

Either this was some kind of plot, or they had been very lucky to have Agent Carolina and Agent Washington on their sides to pull their weight. It was hard to imagine people with worse social skills than Agent Carolina, and yet they’d managed to find multiples of them.

“Kid, I could have you disarmed with both of your wrists broken in the amount of time it takes you to blink, but I haven’t done that. I am asking you nicely to get out of my way for public relations purposes.”

They must have been insanely lucky. The kind of luck the people of Chorus only dreamed of.

Donut held up his hands.

“Ok, let’s all just take a deep breath.”

“And I am telling you that while we are out here, Agent Washington’s orders stand. Agent Washington has not rescinded the order because you motherfuckers fried our only contact, so until Agent FUCKING Washington tells me to back the fuck off, I am keeping this gun right the fuck where it is, and you will sit your fucking ass down!”

Palomo stepped away from the Freelancers with Agent York at his side.

Both men moved carefully, well aware of the sheer number of guns trained in their direction and on the men they were moving toward. Palomo would end up with the ass chewing of the century for disobedience of an Agent Washington order, but at that point, Andersmith just hoped that it helped. Bitters had started to come apart at the seams a little bit from stress, but if anyone so much as took a single step to help, it would be seen as a weakness by the enemy.

Carefully, like he was diffusing a bomb, York laid a hand on North’s shoulder and gently pulled him backwards.

“North, she’s right there, we can see her. She’s not lost anymore, and you can still watch what’s happening where they’ve got us.”

North’s face crumpled, his voice sounded pitiful and broken. It almost made Andersmith want to reach out and comfort him.

“She’s hurt, York.”

“But she’s alive and right now it looks like that’s all you’re gonna get, let’s just back up and calm down, ok? It’s not like you can help with her injuries anyway. She needs medics right now, not your crazy face hovering over her. You know that’s only going to piss her off. Please, just…come on. Don’t make me be the rational one here. I’m supposed to stand around, look pretty, and cause problems. That is what I’m good at and I will fight you for that role.”

Danvers stood up and waved.

“BITTERS! WRAP IT UP! WE ARE MOVING HER RIGHT NOW!”

Captain Grif and Donut latched onto the Freelancers and started to haul them backwards.

“You heard the lady, load up the truck! All Freelancers on board!”

Bitters stood there, frozen, as the Freelancers stumbled backwards under the firm grips of the Red soldiers, gun still raised. Andersmith laid a gentle hand on his friend’s arm and felt him shake.

“A Antoine?”

Bitters slowly lowered his gun. Even in the armor, Andersmith could tell that Bitters was shaking. They’d been fighting too long.

There was only so much a person could take before they started to crack, and most of the soldiers on Chorus had passed that point years before.

Bitters needed a break. He needed some time to put himself back together.

The sooner they got back to the base, the better.

“I…really fucking hate my job.”

Andersmith nodded and tugged the other man toward the truck. They had to load up in order to leave.

“Come on, we need to make sure that the Freelancers and their equipment are all loaded and go home. We’ve got people waiting for us.”

Vanessa rubbed her temples as she warily eyed the memo she’d been forwarded.

The tension of a stress headache had started after Washington’s panic attack and only seemed to make itself more present as time went by. She closed her eyes and let out a deep, slow breath. This was…not exactly the kind of news she’d hoped for when she’d decided to be honest with Wash.

She had no idea what went on in the man’s head, or how to stop him and still get the soldiers on her side. Part of the problem with letting the soldiers of Chorus glob onto him like an idol or a
celebrity was the genuine fear that they would choose his side over hers.

The outsider over the actual political office.

It didn’t matter to her if they liked him more than her. Hell, they could fucking hate her guts and it wouldn’t make her lose any sleep at night. Honestly, she hoped they fell in love with Washington, if only for his own self-esteem.

But if they issued conflicting orders…

She looked at the response she’d typed, made sure everything she could think of was covered, and hit send.

Vanessa had never wanted to lead people. She’d never wanted to be a politician. She served her planet because that was what it needed from her, but fuck if she didn’t want to just run away and spend a day on a beach somewhere. Hell, she’d settle for an uninterrupted hour to listen to music or read a book.

She hadn’t been able to sit through an entire mandatory movie night in two months.

A solid tap-thunk, tap-thunk came from her office door. Kimball dragged herself out of her desk, shook her insecurity off, and pulled the door open.

Lorenzo Páez strode inside the office, shoulders straight, with twice as much confidence a man his rank should project. He’d touched up his paint job recently enough that Kimball could catch the scent in the air.

“General Kimball, may I speak to you for a moment?”

“Páez, what can I do for you?”

He closed the door behind himself and stood in front of her desk. He didn’t salute, which was unusual for the man. He may have hated the New Republic’s politics with a passion, and he didn’t seem to particularly care for Vanessa on a personal level, but he’d always kept up the proper forms of respect in public as well as private.

Which meant something had changed.

“I take it you’ve got something for me?”

He handed Kimball a memo chip.

“The elections were fully processed, counted, and verified last night. I am now the acting General of the Federal Army of Chorus.”

Kimball nodded and offered her hand. He took it and gave a solid, firm shake, but didn’t try to out-squeeze her, which was a point in his favor.

“Well, then congratulations. I know that this wasn’t an easy transition.”

“Thank you. Honestly, I’m looking forward to working with you to make a better world for those of us who have managed to survive.”

Kimball gave him a shark like grin.

“I don’t intend to make this easy on you.”
“I wouldn’t expect any less from you. I’m taking the office just down the hall from you, it has the same dimensions as this one, but offers enough distance and a corner to disperse excess traffic.”

“That doesn’t bother me. Worst-case scenario, it doesn’t work, and we will both outfit new offices somewhere else. Right now, I’m not worried about that.”

“No, you’re worried about the away team with the aid ship.”

Kimball waved him over to the chairs and sat back down. She needed to up her training regimen or she’d end up turning into a desk potato at this rate.

“I’m assuming nothing is a secret at this point?”

“We know there is an aid ship, and that the people on it are friends of Agent Washington and Agent Carolina.”

“Other than that?”

“Rumors abound, but no concrete evidence. The people in communications are starting to get nervous about the lack of radio contact, but that’s more to do with the age of some of the soldiers, rather than the actual timeframe. It hasn’t been a full 24 hours yet, and that jungle is notorious for bad contact.”

Kimball handed him a sheet of paper with the little bit of information she’d managed to put together written on it. Eventually it would be typed and filed, but Kimball always preferred to map things out when she didn’t have keystrokes to worry about.

“Well, Agent Washington does not consider these people his friends, and Agent Carolina considers them family. The aid ship is definitely not UNSC. The lack of radio contact may actually be a deliberate act of sabotage, rather than the standard interference that area of the jungle leaves us with. I’ve sent out a secondary group to flesh out the ranks out there with orders to send home the younger, less experienced soldiers. When it just looked like a casual jaunt in the jungle, I was comfortable sending the kids to get their sea legs, but now I’m really wishing that we hadn’t.”

He nodded and pointed to a note she’d made.

“The gossip networks are spotty, but it makes me nervous how much they manage to get right.”

“I agree completely.”

He waffled for a moment, on edge about something, before his courage must have won out.

“General Kimball, while I dislike your politics, and I have not always agreed with your choices, I will say that I want this partnership to go well. We can both agree that we have all lost too much in this, and I promise you that I do intend to do everything I can on my end to make this work.”

“I appreciate your honesty General Páez. Truth be told? I’m not exactly a fan of your politics, myself, but I’ve kept my eye on the elections and I’ve done my research. Of all of the candidates available, I am glad that you are the one who won.”

And she was glad. If only because Páez’s cockiness would be relatively easy to use against him.

He planted his feet firmly and gave a nod. It was amazing how ridiculous that nod was, so full dignity and self-assurance that Kimball wanted to hand him a stack of paperwork just to see the light in his eyes dim.
A quiet, respectful tap on the door caught their attention. Páez startled and nearly jumped out of his skin.

*God*, she wondered if she had ever been that young. That easily startled. That new and hopeful.

Still…she couldn’t help but wonder where he’d managed to hide that fresh face of his, and where she could get some for herself.

The door opened a crack, and the soft, warm tones of Agent Washington’s voice filled the air.

“General Kimball, is this a bad time?”

Páez and Kimball both stood as Wash entered.

“Agent Washington. No, actually this is perfect timing. You’re familiar with Lorenzo Páez, correct? He is now the acting General of the Federal Army, meaning we can finally get things moving and actually have political debates that *don’t* involve blowing people up.”

Washington held out a hand to Páez, who stared at the proffered hand for a moment before he shook it. He didn’t try to out shake Agent Washington any more than he had Kimball, but he had no enthusiasm in the act, and pulled his hand away as quickly as he could.

That…was unexpected. Was there a reason Páez felt the need to snub Agent Washington? The last she’d checked, Wash was still preferred over pretty much everyone else by the Federal soldiers.

They generally liked his rule following, can-do, persona.

“Well, it’s wonderful to get that started again. Did you need access to any of the documentation General Doyle implemented before he passed? I’ve got a good deal set aside, especially in regards to training and supply cashes, though a good bit of that was consolidated already, I’ve kept records.”

“That sounds fantastic, Agent Washington.”

“I suppose since you’re both in charge now, I ought to let you both know, I have removed Agent Carolina from command of the soldiers out to capture the aid ship.”

Páez stumbled backwards as if Wash had just announced that his pants were made of live bees.

Which would have been hilarious, if Kimball’s own legs hadn’t suddenly felt like her bones had disappeared.

“I’m sorry, you did *what* to Agent Carolina? Who took her place?!”

“Lieutenant Bitters.”

Páez whipped around to look at Kimball, who’d managed to keep silent, clearly furious.

“Did you authorize this?”

“No, I did not. Wash, can you walk me through what’s happening?”

“There was concern that Agent Carolina was emotionally compromised by the Freelancers, and that the Freelancers had started to manipulate the soldiers. I felt it would be prudent to put someone completely loyal to Chorus in charge, and Lieutenant Bitters was the only person who was able to communicate home at the time. Since then, I have not been able to get in contact with anyone. I
asked Santa to fill you in when it happened. I’m…guessing he didn’t.”

Kimball sat herself behind her desk and motioned for the two men to sit down as well. This would not be a short conversation.

“No, he did not. Agent Washington, you should not have made that kind of decision without consulting me first.”

“There wasn’t time. There has been an active assault on our soldiers’ communications and literally within moments of the issue being ordered, Bitters dropped out of contact. No one is available anymore.”

Kimball motioned to a small box on her desk with a solid green light.

“I have a direct link to Agent Carolina, and based on the happy blinking lights on my desk, it fluctuates every now and again, but it’s still functioning.”

Páez gaped at her as she picked up the communicator.

“Wait, what? You have a link to Agent Carolina? Communications has been in a panic for hours!”

“Well if someone from communications had bothered to respond to my twenty-three messages about what is happening, they’d have more information, wouldn’t they? I’ve called, I’ve memoed, I’ve done everything short of go down there myself, and the only reason I haven’t is because I’m dealing with a crisis of my own here. There was an attack on one of the towers.”

Páez slumped in the chair.

“Dear god, please tell me it was the Temple of Procreation.”

“Unfortunately, no. It’s one we have on our list, but we haven’t had the time to access. The Temple of Records.”

Wash and Páez shared a look. She didn’t blame them, it ranked fairly low on the list whenever Santa talked about the many ridiculous alien towers littered around the planet.

“Records?”

“All of the recorded knowledge of Chorus, according to Santa. It was something we thought was interesting, but not as important as food, medicine, and not dying, so I haven’t made activating it a priority.”

Wash’s shoulders tightened.

“And now it is under attack?”

“Yes, though the destruction seems to have been minor up to this point. The soldiers on site are in good health, no casualties, minor injuries, but the temple itself has been severely damaged. Santa went offline in an effort to take care of it, which could be why he’s no longer relaying messages.”

Kimball cracked her neck.

“Excuse me, General Kimball, but the Temple of Records is under attack. Something has attempted to forcibly access the database without the Great Key. I-”

“Santa, what’s happening? Talk to me.”
“I am sorry, but they have begun to destroy the temple itself. I need to direct my attention to the problem at hand.”

“Understood. Take care of what you need to.”

“So now I’m running troops there too. We’re waiting for that to clear up. No casualties reported yet.”

Páez slammed his fist down on Kimball’s desk and snarled at Washington.

“And in the meantime, an unvetted, biased Lieutenant is ham-fistedly running the rescue operation.”

Kimball glared hard at Páez.

“Please don’t do that, this desk is older than I am.”

Washington turned to level a glare at Páez.

“Lieutenant Bitters is an intelligent, well trained, and well-respected member of The United Armies of Chorus.”

“He is also not a person authorized to be in charge of a united operation. We allow you, Agent Carolina, and the Reds and Blues relatively unregulated control because you are all neutral in the war. Allowing a New Republic soldier unfettered control of the operation shows favoritism on your end! You cannot be trusted to be a neutral party any longer!”

Kimball slapped her palm down on her desk to make a loud crack and pointedly did not react when both men leveled glares at her.

“Enough! Before you two start flinging accusations you will come to regret, why don’t we just call Carolina and fix this?”

Páez crossed his arms over his chest and huffed indignantly.

“Why do you have access to her direct line?”

“She was concerned at the time that as the only acting government figurehead at the time I might be target to attacks or assassination attempts, and wanted a way to makes sure she could check in.”

“Ah, smart. Agent Carolina is the practical one, I see.”

Washington clenched a fist, but was calm enough that Páez didn’t seem to notice him as he fumed. Not even twenty-four hours in office and already making enemies for himself.

If she didn’t need him in order to run the goddamned government, she’d be happy about that. The man needed to realize that position didn’t mean anything if no one was willing to listen to him.

“Well, I’m going to leave now.”

And she hated to do it, she really did, but she couldn’t let him leave yet.

“Wash, I’m going to need you to stick with me for a while. You’ve issued some orders since I last saw you, and I’d like to go over them. We’re taking care of the Carolina problem first, and then we will get to that. For now? Stand over there and wait.”
They stared at each other hard enough that Kimball couldn’t help but wonder if she’d lost his support as well. It wasn’t as if she was unaware of how volatile his opinions could be toward people he didn’t trust with his life, and Kimball was nowhere near being as valuable to him as any of the Reds or Blues.

He stood up, nodded, and moved over to where Kimball pointed out for him to stand. A wave of tension fell from her shoulders and she fought a sigh of relief. He didn’t actively hate her enough to diss her, that was something.

Kimball pressed the only button on the little box and waited.

“Kimball?”

Epsilon’s voice was crisp and clear over the transmission.

“Epsilon, it’s good to hear you. Can you put Carolina through?”

“Uh,” he sounded nervous, “Like, right now?”

“Please. I’ve been told she was relieved of command, and I’m trying to do damage control.”

She could practically hear the AI as he thought.

“Yes, I get that. Look, she’s really pissed. I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

Kimball bared her teeth at the transmitter on her desk, well aware even if she weren’t wearing a helmet at that moment, that Epsilon would be completely unaffected, but it made her feel better so she wasn’t about to stop. She force choked the air next to the transmitter for good measure.

Hurrah for useless expressions of rage.

“Epsilon, I am the current recognized leader of the free world. We are dealing with attacks on all goddamned fronts and there is a very real possibility of you being attacked on your end and I want you to be fucking prepared. Put. Carolina. On. NOW.”

“Sheesh, alright. No need to yell, I’m on your side.”

Carolina’s voice broke through the crackle.

“General Kimball, am I glad to hear from you.”

“Mind explaining why you were removed from command?”

“Washington apparently doesn’t trust me to be impartial and he’s got the soldiers thinking I’d sacrifice them to bring the Freelancers home.”

Páez startled and looked over to Washington, who without moving, managed to put on an air of dramatic posing that Kimball one day hoped to have. The man was the perfect embodiment of ‘abandoned friend left to rot’ in that moment.

Páez stuttered quietly off to the side.

“Sacrifice?”

Kimball pointedly did not sigh into the transmitter.
“Excellent, so they’re scared out of their minds. That’s exactly what we need. Look, I can’t force them to trust you, Carolina, but letting them know we’ve reestablished contact should make them willing to listen to your orders. You should have fresh soldiers on site in the next,” Kimball looked at her clock, “Hour and a half. I want you to send back half of the people on site with you, any troublemakers or dissenters, and anyone under the age of 18 should come back to base. Everyone on the mission will get a debriefing, but let’s at least get this under control first.”

“I intended to have the Lieutenants bring the Freelancers home, but then things started to fall apart, and I don’t know it that’s a good idea anymore.”

“Lieutenant Bitters is in charge at the moment, correct?”

“Yeah. I’ve tried to talk to the soldiers, but they’re using some kind of code that I don’t understand to talk to each other and every person I speak to just leaves me further behind.”

“I’m going to need you to project my voice over your speakers in a minute, and I will get some of this back under control. For now, you will not issue orders that you know I would not agree with.”

Carolina was quiet for a moment and Vanessa knew that she would regret whatever came out.

“General Kimball, I think in the future, it would be advisable to have protocols in place for chain of command. It has been brought to my attention that I have no acting authority.”

“We can discuss that when you get back. For now, focus on keeping the supplies intact until we can get them transported, and keeping people alive.”

“General Kimball, what on earth do you intend to say to make them obey her after being told to disregard her?”

“Kimball? Who’s there?”

“Lorenzo Páez, who was just instituted as the General of the Federal Army and Agent Washington are both in the room Carolina. This was kind of a spontaneous thing. Can you tell me why your radio is working when no one else’s is?”

Carolina’s silence on the other end felt pointed, and Kimball swallowed back bile. Had she misstepped? Carolina had likely expected privacy, and she did just throw a little shade at Washington.

Did that even matter?

This was a military issue, not a personal one, and Kimball had never contacted Carolina like this for personal reasons. She shouldn’t have expected privacy.

Then again, Kimball had never contacted Carolina with an audience like this either.

“C,” Epsilon’s voice cut through the radio static, “You’ve got to tell her. Don’t blindside her.”

“The way she literally just blindsided me?”

Shit.

They needed control of this.

“Agent Carolina, either pull yourself together or hand your communications to someone who is
capable of keeping a clear head, we do not have the time for this, and I don’t have the patience right now.”

Carolina’s tone became short and clipped, and Kimball knew that there would need to be some serious work later to smooth this out.

“I believe that there has been some interference from the Freelancer AI’s. It was a common practice during the Project, to have the AI scramble comms for the enemy if you could get away with it, because it was one more element of control. However-“

Páez sputtered in frustration.

“I’m sorry, your friends have been putting our soldiers in direct danger because of a protocol from a defunct and disgraced military program?!”

“However,” Carolina stressed, “I do not believe that the interference the Freelancers may be doing is what is causing the actual destruction of equipment.”

“I’m sorry, did you say that our equipment is being destroyed?”

“Several radios, including the one used by Lieutenant Bitters, were ‘fried’ in such a way that has destroyed their functionality. An AI radio jam can’t do that. It’s more like a radio wave than anything tangible. It is not physically possible for the AI to do that kind of damage.”

Kimball and Páez both looked to Wash, who nodded in agreement.

“So what you are saying is, we have two types of sabotage happening right now, and one of them is being caused by supposed ‘friendlies’.”

“Sir. Though, I should clarify that we only have suspicion that one is being caused by the Freelancers, and I’m starting to think that they aren’t involved. The tech to create the jam comes from the armor, rather than the AI themselves, and the Freelancers are all out of armor. Since that’s the case, the jam should have stopped by now, but it hasn’t.”

Páez and Kimball shared a look.

“Why…are they out of armor?”

Wash spoke up.

“Because these people are highly trained combatants, capable of extreme levels of violence with only their bare hands, they have tech that the soldiers are unlikely to have the ability to deal with, and honestly, I’m more concerned with getting the soldiers home safe than I was about the feelings of the elite fighting team.”

“Alright, ok. We’re not doing this right now. Carolina, can you get them moving?”

“We’ve been waiting for the last of them to be found. One of the Agents was flung from the ship when it crashed and is in a pretty bad way.”

“Critical condition?”

“Unknown. She’s being swarmed by medics at the moment. I’m pretty sure they’re all there, just hovering.”
Páez nodded.

“Ah, a medic huddle. That’s a good sign.”

Carolina paused.

“Ok, clearly I’m not understanding what’s going on. What is a medic huddle, and why is it a good thing?”

Páez waved a hand.

“You’re not in a fight situation, so the medics are all available. If they thought she was unable to be saved, they wouldn’t all bother with her. They would leave one medic to make her comfortable, and the rest would get back to work.”

Kimball force choked the air again, though this one was mentally directed at Páez. He could have picked better wording or a better tone for that one.

“It’s a thing that happens, Carolina. As long as the medics are swarming and not panicking, she’s ok. At the very least she’s not dying right at this moment.”

“Good to know. Once she’s ready to move, I’ll have the trucks out of here. Any chance we can get Doctor Grey on standby? Well, Doctor Grey and a few other surgeons. South isn’t the only one that’s going to need one.”

“Understood. In the future, please contact me immediately if anything happens or changes, Carolina, especially a change of command. For now, let’s just get the soldiers under control. Ping me when you’re ready for me.”

“Roger that. Carolina out.”

Kimball rolled her shoulders.

“Well, that was fun.”

Páez nodded.

“Is it like that all the time with her? She seems hard to manage.”

Wash stepped away from the wall.

“Agent Carolina was in a leadership position in a military program that left her answering to very few people. She went from that incredibly powerful position to complete isolation for several years, then full leadership again after that. She is not and does not see herself as anyone’s subordinate. As far as Carolina is concerned, she is a free agent, and she’s not wrong. Neither of us have been inducted to either side of the military or been given any type of rank, neutral or not.”

“A step,” Kimball remarked in a clipped tone, “we will have to discuss in depth at a later date. For now, getting people home safe is our priority.”

“Ah, right. Tell you what, General Kimball, let’s divide and conquer. I’ll start getting the doctors resting now, and I’ll have the surgeries and tools sterilized again just to be on the safe side.”

“That would be wonderful, would you also be willing to get the holding cells set up for quarantine? And we should probably have an isolation area for our soldiers too.”
Páez nodded, and even though he was generally annoying and overly dramatic, he’d do what needed to be done, and based on what Kimball had researched about him, he’d do it well.

“Of course. I’ll let you know once I have more information for you. Shall I just send you a memo, or would you rather I come here?”

“I may actually get out of my office at some point today, just go ahead and ping me. We need to set up a proper meeting to discuss policy and changes, but if you wouldn’t mind holding off until we’ve got this mess settled, I’d appreciate it.”

The man nodded again, this time with the ‘wise and all knowing’ bob he’d had earlier.

“It’s not a problem, General Kimball. That gives me a little time to go over the groundwork my predecessors have laid. Agent Washington, I’m sure I can expect those documents in my office by tomorrow, yes?”

“Just let me know where that is, General, and I will be sure to get you everything I have.”

He nodded and walked out. Once the door was shut, Wash turned to Kimball.

“Wow. That guy needs an attitude adjustment.”

“He was just elected to the most powerful position in his political party, during peacetimes, which means he’s not looking at automatic assassination attempts. I don’t blame him for being a little cocky at the moment. You, on the other hand, I need to have a conversation with.”

Carolina waved Bitters over and it took everything he had in him not to automatically flip her off and tell her to go fuck herself.

“Carolina,” He bit out.

“Don’t start with me, Bitters, I’ve got contact with home. Since you’re in charge at the moment, I thought you might like to talk to General Kimball.”

He glared at Epsilon, happily perched on her shoulder.

“Uh huh.”

“No, Epsilon is not going to be faking her voice. He’s just here to run the goddamned transmitter.”

At least she was smart enough to realize that he wasn’t about to take her at her word. Only an idiot looked at someone like Carolina, with her attitude and her tech, and assumed she was just automatically on your side.

It was all about agendas. What hers was, Bitters still hadn’t quite managed to pin it down, but he’d definitely gotten a clearer picture with the arrival of her ‘long lost friends’.

They needed a place to go where the government wouldn’t look for them. Where the UNSC wouldn’t find them without help. They’d found it in Chorus.

Look, if you’re being serious, put her on.”
Carolina’s radio crackled unhappily, but the signal pulled through, and Kimball’s tinny voice broke the tension.

“Lieutenant Bitters.”

“General?”

“Lieutenant, I am putting you in charge of returning all the injured and underage soldiers to the city. Get them home safe. Agent Carolina will be receiving reinforcements soon, and they’ll get the ship stripped completely.”

Bitters made direct eye contact with Epsilon. He knew the little asshole could mimic voices. They’d all seen him fucking with the Reds and Blues pretending to be Agent Washington and Carolina, it wouldn’t be a stretch to think he could mimic General Kimball and con them into doing what Carolina said again.

Well, he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for that bullshit.

“With all due respect, we have been under attack out here, both from mercenaries and from the freelancers themselves, and I am not super comfortable with trapping the kids with them.”

“Tie them up, put them in chains, I don’t care what you have to do to make them secure, but do it and get them home. I’ve sent out reinforcements, they should pass you on the way out.”

Carolina’s shoulders tensed, but she didn’t say anything. It didn’t mean anything. Epsilon didn’t always do things the way Carolina wanted them done.

“And Agent Washington’s orders?”

“At the moment, I am rescinding them.”

“Would you please give me the code for leopard’s paw?”

“And so the trees, of which I was inordinately fond of, once lush and bright were dry and crumpled and red. The house of cards, once built high enough to be singed by the sun had fallen into the muck and mire. Alone I stood on the precipice and felt nothing.”

Bitters looked between Carolina’s face and Epsilon a few times before he nodded reluctantly.

He still didn’t know if he believed that he’d just talked to Kimball, but if they knew the New Republic trust codes without Kimball’s help, they were all fucked anyway.

And questioning a Kimball code was just asking for the whole system to crumble.

“Alright, I’ll start doing what needs to be done, General.”

“Thank you. Would you get everyone’s attention? I think they’ll accept it better from you right now.”

Bitters spun on his heel and let out a long, high-pitched whistle.

“Listen up!”

The soldiers turned with varying degrees of respect and grumbled at the interruption. Bitters didn’t blame them, this was the most inefficient mission ever, of all time, and things were fucked ten
ways to Sunday. He didn’t want to listen to his own voice either.

“Soldiers of the United Armies of Chorus, this is General Kimball.”

The soldiers all jumped to attention, surprised by the voice coming from Agent Carolina. Most of them Bitters could tell were immediately suspicious, and those who didn’t have the instant thought caught up quickly.

“I know that things are confusing right now.”

The soldiers all locked eyes on Bitters who made a ‘g’ with his right hand and tapped his left shoulder.

(Kimball.)

They all relaxed their stances and looked at Carolina more calmly. Bitters could see her relax in his periphery. He loved code speak.

It was like magic.

“I know that you are scared and tired and you want to come home. I know we let you think that the fighting was over, the hard part was done, and then we threw you a curve ball. For that, I’m sorry.

“The truth is, we are a long way from peace. We need you to be strong, be smart, be safe, and come home. We need you to trust that what we are telling you, we are telling you for a reason.”

A few of the soldiers nodded along, but if the rest were anything like Bitters, they were uncomfortable as fuck with that message.

“Some of you are coming home right now, the rest will be home within 24 hours, but all of you are my priority. You are not stupid, and you are not expendable. Do not ever forget that.”

Jesus, Kimball, don’t give us a death knell just yet.

“Carolina is in charge of the base team, and her word is to be treated just like it came from me. It is in everyone’s best interests to work together on this. I am counting on all of you to come home safe.”

North yanked himself out of the orange soldier’s grip to head back towards South and glared as the man took a step over and shifted into his line of sight. Carolina was in charge again, and no one was going to do shit to him.

He was done.

Done.

Done with listening to these people get their shit together.
Done with the soldiers acting like petulant little children.

Done with these people getting in his face.

Done with waiting for someone else to decide when he was allowed to sit with his sister.

“Look, Dude, I get it. I’ve got a little sister out there too, and if she was lost and hurt I would do anything I could to make sure she was safe, but these kids are fucking scared and you’re literally doing nothing to help yourself.”

“If you have a little sister, you know-“

“Stop. The medics are moving her to the truck, right now. Kimball’s got everything sorted, and if you try to fuck with the plan you will only cause even more shit to go wrong. Don’t cause more problems, man. You’re going to get help, right now. You’re leaving with her, in that truck, to get her help. Just chill for a few minutes.”

North flinched as the medics shifted South to lift her and she howled. Her scream reverberated through the clearing.

None of the Chorus soldiers so much as looked in her direction as the medics adjusted their grip to keep from hurting her.

Have they already written her off?

“She needs me.”

The orange soldier shook his head.

“What she needs is a doctor, and every minute you throw a tantrum is another minute she has to wait. You want her to live? We’ve got a fucking amazing doctor in the city, some really fantastic surgeons, but if we don’t get her on that truck now, she might die before we get her there. And that? That’s on you for being a control freak.”

North nearly punched the man.

“Come on, purple guy, be the big brother she deserves. Help us help her.”

York tugged his arm gently toward the truck where the others had already managed to migrate to and start moving in.

“Come on, lets go. Look, they’ve got her moving.”

-North? You’re really scaring me.-

I’m sorry, Buddy. I’m not trying to scare you.

-I want to help South.-

Me too.

-Do you think they’re going to fix South?- They’d damned well better.

The medics had swarmed around the stretcher and had lifted South, slowly but carefully. They
worked as a unit, with slow, gentle steps that didn’t seem to cause her any more pain.

“Ok. Ok.”

Ok.

North shuffled over to the truck, walking backwards so he could keep his eyes on South as the medics moved. York wouldn’t let him trip and fall, not at that moment anyway, and he had no desire whatsoever to take his eyes off of her.

The other Freelancers had made their way over to the transport truck and started to climb in. Wyoming leaned over and lifted Niner into his arms.

“Come on then, Niner Old Girl. You’re going to be a passenger. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Wy, I will personally lay the smack down on you if you don’t shut the fuck up. I hate being a passenger like South hates flying.”

One of the soldiers, one of the shy ones, delicately lifted her chair into the truck behind him.

“Well, if you prefer driving, we do have hands only jeeps back at the base. I mean, you’d have to get permission to use them, but we do have them.”

“Good to know, Demir. I expect you’ll have to show me where they are.”

Maine waffled in the doorway as he waited for that Folami kid and the dark red soldier to hobble over. He held out his good arm to her and motioned his head toward the interior.

She stared at him.

“Are…are you seriously offering to help me into the truck when your whole body is one broken bruise? DO YOU BUCKET WANKING, SON OF A COCKSTORM, MAGGOT JACKERS HAVE NO SURVIVAL SKILLS?! GET IN THE FUCKING TRUCK!”

Folami waved her arms violently at Maine, who looked like he couldn’t decide if he was hurt or amused.

“GET YOUR BUSTED FUCKING ARMS AWAY FROM ME, YOU GIANT, FUCKING, ONE ARMED, ASS WIPE! I WILL HOP MYSELF INTO THE TRUCK LIKE A ONE-LEGGED IDIOT OVER LETTING YOU HELP ME! GET AWAY!”

The dark red soldier and the orange soldier grabbed her on opposite sides and lifted her off the ground amidst a lot of squawking and squealing. Maine hauled himself inside and out of the way, but kept a close eye on the other two men as they helped her.

When had Maine gotten attached to her? When had he gotten attached to anyone?

-You were busy being scared. He likes her because she’s not afraid of him.-

She doesn’t seem to be afraid of anyone.

-She’s loud, like South and Niner.-

She is nothing like South.
They set her down on the floor where she carefully stretched out her leg with a hiss.

“Son of a bitch, that stings.”

“Alright, that’s enough now. We get it, you’re small, but dangerous. Please try not to excessively antagonize them while you’re trapped in a small moving vehicle. We like you. We don’t want you dead.”

“Bitch, please. If they’re gonna kill me, it’s not because of my mouth.”

A gasp rang out and North saw one of the troublemakers already inside the truck drop a bag.

“Did you sherioshly jusht call Captain Shimmonsh a bitch?!”

Folami flinched back, then forcibly cracked her neck and relaxed her posture.

“Figure of speech, Jensen! Sorry, Captain. Guess I’m just having a little too much fun today.”

“I…appreciate the apology, Private Folami! It’s rough right now, I get that, and bullet wounds are no fun! Just try not to be extra mean if you don’t have to!”

The way she tilted her head was exactly like Niner when she rolled her eyes. It was…a little unsettling all things considered.

She…doesn’t have any illegitimate children, does she?

-Not according to her military records. No signs of family coming to Chorus either.-

“Sure, sir. I’ll be sweet as chocolate pudding and twice as artificial.”

“Use whatever visualizations help you best actualize your reality, Private!”

Huh…

North climbed in and seated himself in between Reggie and York. Niner, Florida, and Maine were on the other side, with soldiers scattered around the small space.

The transport vehicle was small, but surprisingly comfortable for being military. The interior was painted with bold, cheery colors. There was not a great deal of space to move around, but it was clearly designed with the ability to lay people out if necessary. The seating was along the walls, rather than in rows across the truck. It meant fewer people could sit inside, but it also meant that they could stand and stretch and actually move, which was a bonus as long as the kids stopped freaking out long enough to let them.

The orange one, Bitters, climbed into the truck with bags in hand and stuffed a few over the seats.

“Alright everyone, get comfy, it’s a long trip home.”

He dropped into a seat near the door where there were small openings in the outer shell of the truck to see outside, and watched the progression.

The soldier in green that had abandoned South climbed sheepishly into the truck behind Bitters and North nearly leapt out of his seat. York and Wyoming both slapped hands on his shoulders and held him in place.

The soldier didn’t notice, but it was clear that Bitters did. He ‘whispered’ to the other soldier,
though really, he might as well have shouted for how well it carried in the small space.

“I really feel like they should be restrained. It doesn’t matter that they’re out of armor if they’re anything like our Freelancers.”

There was a brief, tense moment. North didn’t know how they expected to restrain them without their consent, and he damned well wasn’t letting the little asshole touch him.

The soldier shook his head and ‘whispered’ back.

Dear god, it’s like they had no idea how to communicate professionally. Who was running this army?

“You’ve seen Agent Washington’s escape demonstrations, do you really think anything we do will do more than slow them down for a second? At this point, if we can’t trust them, we’re already dead. Besides, I don’t think they want to hurt us, they need doctors too badly.”

He moved toward the back of the truck and helped get Edra settled into her seat. The pain medication had clearly ended the loopy phase for the woman, and she was bitter and angry about being manhandled.

The other soldiers all turned eyes on the Freelancers. North could practically hear their thoughts on the matter.

-That’s the one you yelled at earlier.-

Yeah.

-You scared him really bad.-

I did.

-You should say you’re sorry.-

Yeah, probably, but he left South in the trees and made it so much harder for her to get back. Honestly, I don’t give a flying fuck about his feelings.

-Yeah, but North, you’re the grownup here.-

If he’s old enough to be on the battlefield, he’s old enough to not fuck up on the battlefield.

Theta went quiet and North slumped into his seat.

Shit. He knew he’d fucked up when Theta wasn’t willing to deal with him.

Finally, the medics appeared in the doorway and managed to lift South carefully into the truck. The stragglers shifted out of the way so the medics could move. They laid her out in the middle of the floor and fussed for a few moments before most of them peeled off of her and backed out. She moaned softly, face scrunched.

Eta hovered over her nervously.

“Eta, status?”

“Her temperature had started to creep up. She is becoming less and less coherent. I have issued an
emergency beacon, but I have not received a response.”

North blinked.

“Wait, you issued a Recovery Beacon? Eta, there’s no one there to respond to that anymore. Recovery is gone.”

The AI shook his head and moved over to South’s head and hovered over her nervously.

Does… he not understand?

-Eta and Iota were later creations. Maybe they are less stable?-

That’s really concerning.

“Muh, Adrian?”

South’s voice broke North out of his concern. This was the first honest to goodness look he’d been able to get of her since she’d climbed out of the ship, and North wanted to fucking cry.

There she was, surrounded by strangers, face pale and smeared with blood. The medics that stayed behind shifted on her left side and opened a space for North to get close and take her hand.

He dropped to the floor next to South’s side and clutched tight at her hand. They’d taken her helmet off and propped her head up with a cushion. She was pale, face covered in sweat.

“I’m here, Sis. I’m here.”

Her arm…

Her leg…

She wasn’t moving.

The medic, North thought this one was named Danvers, held out a medical scanner for him to take a look at, and North nearly choked at the battered up tech. The thing was so goddamned out of date, North thought it was a miracle it even worked. He had no idea how to read the lines, and it took a good minute for Theta to translate the information in the back of his head.

-She’s in really bad shape, North.-

Theta’s voice quavered in his mind.

The medics started to detach parts of South’s armor with efficiency North only ever saw on an active battlefield. One of them pulled a portable IV stand out and hung it above the seats nearest South.

-She needs fluids. She has been bleeding for a while, and it has been hours. North, they want to help.-

At least they’re good at this.

Danvers put a hand on North’s shoulder and tugged him back, just a little, so the other medics could finish what they were doing. She didn’t try to obstruct his view or make him leave South’s side, which was the only point in her favor that North was willing to give.
“She’s drifting in and out of consciousness right now, which I’m not too excited about since she fell from space and there’s probably some brain damage, but waking her up means her feeling pain and I’d like to make sure she’s not going to do extra damage before we get her completely conscious. No obvious head trauma as far as I can see, which is a miracle, but we’ll have some more in depth scans once we get her back to base. She’s stable enough to transport, but we’re going to keep her armor on her, since it’s administering painkillers and adds support to her body.”

“Her leg is pointed in the wrong direction, her arm is bent in ways that bones do not move, and you call that ok?”

Danvers tucked the tool into her suit took off her helmet. She was young, younger than North thought a medic should be allowed to be. Her face was intense, her eyes wore wrinkles of stress, and she looked like she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in days.

She was in good company.

“I never said she was ok, I said she was safe enough to be transported. According to Doc, she managed to kill three pirates with her off hand, while being piggybacked, with her whole body wrecked, and with her AI drugging her up constantly. Honestly, I’m surprised she’s in as good of condition as she is, considering what happened to her, but I’m not going to complain. Do me a favor and hang out with the others from Cootie-Town for a while so we can get her settled and on her IV, and I’ll let you sit with her the whole rest of the way home.”

“Cootie-Town?”

“Injured Corner? Whatever the fuck we’re calling the conglomeration of evil and injured.

“We aren’t evil and I’m not leaving my sister’s side. She needs me.”

“I will believe that you’re not evil when you stop trying to murder my friends and throwing tantrums when you don’t immediately get your way. Seriously, are you five? I know toddlers with more restraint.”

“My sister is dying.“

Danvers stuck her finger right in North’s face, and was that just a thing people did on this planet? Stick things in your face when they want to prove a point?

“Believe it or not, you are not the first person on this planet to have to deal with a missing, injured, dying, or dead loved one. Most of us have outlived our parents, family members; some of us have outlived children. Your sister is not nearly to that point yet, so sit down, shut up, and let the medics do their job, ok asshole?”

“You-”

“She’s hurt badly, but she’s looking solid as long as we get going. So, move your lazy fucking ass, unless you want to shoot her and put her out of her misery, so we can dick around here for a while longer.”

Folami reached over and grabbed North’s arm.

“Come here Soul Patch, I’ve got a fantastic view of the side of her head from here, and I’m sure that the glowing guy hovering over there’ll let you know if there’s a problem. Right, Little Guy? Eta, right?”
Eta turned his attention from South briefly and nodded.

“Right. See? Now move over and let Danvers take a good look at your sis.”

As carefully as he could, North laid South’s hand down and scooted over to where Folami was leaned against a seat. She’d settled herself in between Smosna’s legs and her own were partially stretched out in front of her. Once the medics left, she would nearly be able to tap South’s shoulder with her foot.

The truck was starting to get pretty crowded, they had fifteen people in it including the Freelancers, and North suspected they’d get a few more before they left.

Folami actually reached out and squeezed North’s wrist.

“Look…if Danvers thinks she’s got a chance, she’s got a chance. There’s a reason she’s got her stripes. The troops out here are mostly newbies, but you’ve got a solid team of medics on your side. Like, you don’t know yet, but you guys are damned lucky, it could have only been better if Schwartz and Grey were on site.”

North let out a slow breath and tried to stay calm. Tried to focus on other things.

It was hard.

South was North’s whole world. Ever since they were kids, he’d taken care of her, looked after her, been there for her, and now…now after everything, he could actually lose her.

“I get that you’re all kinds of freaked, but think about it this way, we are trapping ourselves in a moving vehicle with all of you, and we don’t have any interest in being murdered. Why wouldn’t we do everything in our power to keep her alive?”

“I…yeah, that makes sense.”

“Don’t give up hope yet. Your sis looks like one stubborn bitch. She’ll be fine.”

North looked over at Smosna, who’d taken off her helmet to get a drink and apparently call his sister a bitch. She noticed the direct attention and grinned.

“Like what you see?”

“Jeshush Chriht on a bicshycshle, Shmoshna, shtop hitting on the Freelancshersh!”

She rolled her eyes.

“Meh, meh, meh, I’m Katie Jensen, I don’t want people to have fuuuunnuh.”

Edra let out a pained moan and shifted in her seat.

“Dang it, my high’s gone.”

“Sorry, Bitch. No more for you.”

“Fuck. Shoulda just muscled through it. Do you think Doctor Grey’s gonna take my hand?”

Folami shook her head.

“Nah, you’re not nearly that fucked up, she’s probably gonna hafta do a bone swap though. I don’t
envy you on that one. I’d prefer a fake hand over that shit.”

Carolina climbed into the jeep, and Bitters seemed to physically scowl at her.

“You can’t seriously be coming with us after all the bullshit about how you have to stay behind to protect the site.”

Carolina pulled off her helmet.

“Bitters, for once in your goddamned life, just shut up and trust me, ok?”

She moved over to where York was sitting, eyes on her and planted a kiss on him.

“These kids know what they’re doing, just don’t piss them off, ok?”

York mock saluted.

“Yes ma’am.”

She looked around.

“That goes for everyone. We all want to get home safe, so try not to murder each other.”

She pulled her helmet on and climbed back out.

The soldiers finished piling in and shut the doors. A tension filled the air that North…didn’t really know what to do with. He looked at York, who still had a dopey grin on his face, then to Folami (the only Chorus soldier at this point not wearing full armor) and saw pure, unbridled rage.

“Are…you ok?”

She clenched her fists.

“I’m fine. Fucking perfect.”

Andersmith clapped her on the shoulder as he moved past.

“Don’t go trading for trouble. We will deal with it when we have the time. For now, let’s just worry about getting home, ok?”

Wash sat down in front of Kimball’s desk, nervous again. He’d never hated sitting across from someone this much, not even when he had ‘sessions’ with the Councilor.

“Am I in trouble?”

“I really hope not. Any other day of the week, I would trust your decisions absolutely and I would wait until you were available to properly explain yourself. However, we’ve had some pretty… dramatic things happen, and I need to know where your head is.”

Wash sat, ramrod straight. That was not exactly the ringing endorsement he’d hoped to get from the woman.
Vanessa sighed, pulled off her helmet, and ruffled her hair.

“Just…please walk me through what’s happening?”

“Are you ok?”

She looked up and saw Wash ditch his own helmet. He hoped he looked better than he had the last time he was in the room. He certainly felt better. Though really, there wasn’t much worse he could have been without some pretty significant consequences.

“I’m tired, Wash. I’m really tired and I just want to circle the wagons and sleep, but I don’t get to do that. None of us do. We’re all tired, and we just want to be safe for a while.”

Wash nodded. He could feel the weariness on her like waves on the beach.

“I wasn’t in the best mental state when I woke up. I issued the orders to Bitters, and those I stand behind, but I also requested that the lower armory be cleared out to be used as cells, which I assume is what you’re talking about.”

She rubbed her eyes and sighed.

“Yeah. That.”

“I’ve already rescinded the orders. I…talked to Doctor Grey, and I’m going to start working on better coping mechanisms. We have an appointment tomorrow, and every other day until I’m back on track. We both realize that I’m probably not in the best state to be dealing with what’s coming.”

“You…really? That’s…”

“I know that I’m causing you stress, and I’m sorry about that, but I’m trying. I’m going to keep trying.”

“Well, that’s…a relief. We are going to have to do something about that space though, you do realize that? The kids know it was being cleared for something, and the rumor is that you’re stuffing the Freelancers in there. Have you actually been in that space, Washington? It is icky, to say the least.”

“It was…pretty awful, which is probably why I thought it would work. My…when I was…Look, the military prison was terrible, ok? There were a lot of things that were terrible. I think…I think I associated that space with…”

He took a deep breath. Words were hard.

He wasn’t good at articulating feelings, never really had been, but it was important now in ways that it hadn’t been in the past. The Reds and Blues seemed to understand snark and self-deprecation more easily than heartfelt declarations, but Chorus demanded more out of him, out of all of them.

He had to try a little harder.

“You associated the space with an appropriate place to put prisoners…because that was what your previous experience was?”

“Not exactly, but the…atmosphere, I guess, made me think of it. And it took talking to Doctor Grey, and Matthews’ unhappy faces to realize that I might not be doing the right thing. I did call it off, but it sounds like the damage was already done.”
Kimball sighed and idly tapped a finger on the desk top.

“Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of.”

She nodded and stifled a yawn.

“Good, well, on the upside, I’ve already put out a cover story about the prison space, and yes, I am punishing you for this one.”

Wash hoped his face hadn’t scrunched embarrassingly. He was…concerned about what that could mean.

Kimball leaned over and grinned.

“You’re responsible for converting the space into a recreational area. All fun, no training. Or at least, nothing the kids will recognize as training. I’m counting on you to establish and maintain the space until we get a committee organized.”

“Wait…what?”

She waved a hand idly through the air, as if she were trying to knock criticism out of the general area.

“It clearly needs some work. A good cleaning, some proper insulation, maybe a ping pong table. Still, I think we can get it established in a few weeks, with some help of course.”

Wash couldn’t help but blink in confusion.

What would they possibly do with a rec room in that space? It was…unpleasant.

“You…really think they’re going to believe that? That I just suddenly decided to make a playroom?”

“More than they’ll believe you were making prison cells. It helps that I have a small chain of gossips who’re already spreading the word. You’re committed at this point, unless you’d like to explain yourself over and over for the rest of your life.”

“I may have to anyway once Tucker finds out. He’ll never believe it.”

“He’ll be too distracted by the fact that the room had the nickname ‘sex dungeon’ to care about your motives.”

Wash grimaced.

“That’s disturbing on multiple levels.”

“Yep. Think about putting a team together, brainstorm for ideas, you could make it an activity! But not right now. For now, you should get some more rest. You’ve got hours before we need you. I’m going to try and catch a catnap myself.”

She stood up and stretched behind her desk, and a loud yawn tore its way from her throat like a combination between a groan of pain and a wild animal calling out in the middle of the night.

Wash stood up and picked up his helmet to fiddle with it. He needed something to do with his
hands and he didn’t think Kimball would appreciate more unasked for straight-backed military posture.

“I don’t know that I can. Sleep is…difficult right now.”

“Is there something I can do to make it easier? More secured locations? Guards? An alert system of some kind?”

She came around the desk, leaned against it, and cocked her head at him.

“Better pillows?”

Wash thought about sleep. Thought about nightmares and insomnia and the dreary, gray walls of the rooms that did nothing but make him wish for the tiniest splash of color.

He thought about his quarters that he shared with the team, how it was only when he was surrounded by people, that he felt any level of relaxation.

It was ridiculous. Those guys wouldn’t wake up if someone snuck in, Wash would be the one who had to wake up immediately and defend them. Still, he slept better knowing Tucker and Caboose were in the room and the Reds were all in their respective quarters.

“I wouldn’t mind a poster or something to break up the wall, but I don’t know how that would affect my sleep.”

Kimball grabbed her tablet off the desk and started to poke the screen with vigor.

“Considering you’re staying in an area with bleak as hell walls, I’m surprised no one has decorated your space yet. What kind of stuff do you want? I’ve got everything from inspirational cat posters to pinups to some ancient Sangheili tapestries. We’ve got art of all shapes, colors, and sizes. Do you like candles? We’ve got wax burners, which is basically the same thing but without the fire. Very zen.”

“You…what?”

“Wash, this place is not designed for long term mental health. Proteger is a city, but we’re in the emergency military housing. Emergency being the key word. We are here because it’s the safest place to be in a siege, and we were scrambling, but that doesn’t mean this place is…designed for long term relaxation when you move in. The soldiers have access to paint, posters, color schemes, and furniture in storage to break up the monotony and keep them from losing their minds at the sheer ugliness of the grey concrete walls that are everywhere. I’m sorry no one thought to give you all access to it.”

Paint and posters. Something to break up the cell.

Room. Break up the room.

Heck, maybe a cat poster would help him sleep, if only to keep him from creating really unhealthy associations.

“That sounds nice. We didn’t even have access to our own color choices in the project. They just…”

“Handed you armor? Yeah, we’re a little different around here. Colors actually mean something in the grand scheme of things, along with textures, scents, and shapes. I can’t wait until we get things
a little more settled and we can start having whole *apartments*. Seriously, when we get this shit taken care of and I have a spare minute to breathe, Wash, I am taking you shopping.”

Kimball handed him the tablet and patted his arm eagerly.

“Shopping?”

“Well, whatever walking through a warehouse and making you stare at furniture and crates of clothing is called. I like shopping better.”

Wash smiled back. Hanging out with Kimball, and actually having some measure of control over how his life worked? That sounded amazing.

“Shopping works. I’m pretty sure I like shopping.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I am clearly incapable of understanding how long it takes me to edit a chapter/stop writing a chapter. I'm just going to say a week to two weeks between chapters at this point, since that's a goal I know I'm capable of hitting, and if it comes earlier we'll just call that a bonus!

I have been running all kinds of ideas for little oneshots and side stories through my brain for a while now, and I'm hoping to get a little help from you guys. What would be some fun things that the Freelancer/Reds and Blues might be confused about on Chorus, or something the Freelancers/Reds and Blues do/have that might confuse the Chorus kids. It doesn't have to be anything cannon compliant or even scifi (one if my ideas involves easy cheese and another involves competitive knitting).

If you have any ideas, let me know, I'm always looking for more ideas to flesh out the world!

And as always, thank you so much for reading, I hope you had a good time!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Lots of things happen, nothing happens, mostly people just talk.

Chapter Notes

I recognize just how confusing it is to deal with almost twenty characters and keeping track of them, so I've included a little placement guide for their starting points and their general positions. The 'X's identify an empty space, in the line of four it's showing the divide between the drivers and the interior transport. The two 'X's on either side of Jensen and Palomo are where the benches end and there are items stored. I hope it's clear in the actual body, but I wanted to make sure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X Chari Orwell X

X X X X

X Jensen Palomo X

Florida Wyoming/Gamma

Niner Edra

Maine Folami York/Delta

Doc North/Theta South/Eta Smosna

Marconi Danvers Demir

Yacavone Ramirez

Bitters Andersmith
-7 Hours Until Arrival at Proteger-

The tension was so thick and cloying in the cramped space of the enclosed military truck, it was nearly unbearable.

The situation was not helped by the man Maine had helped Wash kidnap (before he’d ended up in the hospital and Wash had supposedly died) practically nestled into Maine’s side as he watched over South. Doc hummed in his seat happily, but he wouldn’t stop leaning into Maine’s space, pressing his shoulder into Maine’s, and just making a nuisance out of himself.

He’d recognized the distinctive purple armor and the perpetually cheerful voice immediately, though based on the man’s reactions to him, he hadn’t realized that Maine was…well, himself. It didn’t hurt that he wasn’t wearing his Freelancer armor when the purple clad medic stumbled out of the trees, and the man hadn’t ever actually gotten Maine out of his armor to recognize him.

Bitters pulled the small interior radio off the wall.

“Orwell, we’re all set in here. What’s the holdup out there?”

A voice crackled heavily on the overhead speakers.

“We’re good, Bitters, Chari’s just getting things ready. We should be…oh.”

The truck started to rock forward slowly, but Maine was well aware that it would pick up momentum as time moved forward. The movement was enough to tell him he’d be well and truly nauseous before the trip ended.

Fuck, he hated ground transport. When he wasn’t aiming a gun and killing people, carsickness was a real problem.

Though…

Maine looked over to Florida, who’d started to dry heave into a barf bag.

It could have been a lot worse.

“Hello children, this is your driver speaking. Before we really get underway, there are a few rules, which must be obeyed. Please keep all doors closed unless there is an emergency. Do not start a mosh pit and attempt to flip the truck.
so important, was anyone’s guess.

Maine certainly didn’t know.

Maine never pretended he was able to understand ‘normal’ people.

Smosna leaned toward Jensen and made grabby hands from her seat. The two managed a perfectly dorky ‘tragically cut off from the one you love’ pose, while also reminding Maine of those annoying shows York used to watch, with the overly dramatic college age kids acting like idiots and…

No.

No, that’s not right.

“What are we supposed to do about all this, Jensen?” And dear god, the whining had begun already, “Seven hours in a caravan of silence and discomfort is not how I wanted to spend my day.”

“I don’t know. They’re bashically going to murder ush anyway, sho no point in doing much.”

North grunted from where he’d taken up space on the floor to squeeze South’s hand, still next to Folami, but managed to look up at Jensen.

“I really wish you’d stop saying that. We’re not here to murder anyone.”

Maine really wanted to smack him.

He’d done nothing but make himself look bad since he’d stumbled out of the trees with the gaggle of soldiers lead by Lieutenant Jensen, and he was not going to help make things better at this point. Not when he had that condescending tone, or when he couldn’t keep the glare off of his face.

He had to know that, surely. North, of all of them, was the best at dealing with people.

And yet, with nothing but his face and his attitude problem that he seemed to have mirrored off of South, he’d done more damage to their future than Maine’s ridiculous reputation of bear strength, and that was not a small thing. Every time Maine shifted in his seat to relieve pain that started to build up, he managed to startle someone, and he still wasn’t the scariest one in the truck as far as the natives were concerned. Compared to North and York, Maine was just an oversized dog the soldiers hadn’t adjusted to yet.

Hell, Folami had decided to flop to the ground and rest her back against his legs, since her leg was most comfortable when fully stretched. If that wasn’t ‘you’re not as scary as you think you are’, Maine didn’t know what was. She could tap South’s bad leg from her position, or roll to her good knee and help should something go wrong. And with South’s…condition, something going wrong was almost guaranteed.

Maine honestly hoped she’d make it.

The two women looked at North, clearly skeptical of his claim, before they turned back to staring longingly at each other and groping the air.

“Sure, buddy, whatever you say.”

Edra groaned in her seat and smacked her helmet twice against the seatback behind her. Whatever they’d given her was not nearly as effective as Maine expected military grade pain medication to
be. She’d been ‘high’ for less than an hour, and now she was reacting as if she hadn’t had anything. He wished he could commiserate with her, spread the misery a little bit so it wasn’t so concentrated in her.

He wished he had a fucking voice.

Hell, he’d settle for some more of that sign language if it made him more easily understood.

Wyoming turned and caught her helmet on the third attempt to smash the back of her head in.

“Now, now, dear, that isn’t going to help with the pain.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, and don’t call me dear. Also, let go of my helmet. Also, scoot over, you’re too close.”

“Not exactly the most polite way to ask for a favor.”

She turned her head and sneered.

“If I were asking a favor, I’d be nice about it. I’m telling you to let me go, treat me like a person, and give me space. Now.”

He nodded and let go of her helmet. She didn’t go back to smacking her head, but it looked to be a near thing. She huffed out a frustrated breath.

“Why can’t you take something else for the pain? It seems asinine to make you sit and suffer this way.”

Danvers breathed out hard.

“That’s my bad, I gave her stuff that is really strong but has a very short working time. Folami was right, it’s designed for amputations where the person can’t be unconscious. The problem is, that stuff doesn’t like to play nice with the general painkillers we have on hand, an oversight I intend to have thoroughly corrected before another squad is sent out.”

Folami made a sweeping motion with her right hand.

“She’s got a few hours before we can start doping her up again.”

Wyoming held out his hand to Edra. She looked down at it, then grabbed it and squeezed as she breathed.

“Thanks.”

Maine wondered if the Chorus soldiers armor had any enhancements in the hands as well as the rest of their armor. He hoped not, for Wyoming’s sake, or there would be three people needing surgery on their arms.

“Anybody else think it’s funny she’s sending home anyone who is so much as associated with someone who disagreed with her?”

Smosna stopped groping the air for Jensen long enough to shrug at Edra.

“No, not really.”

“I didn’t mean in a haha kind of way.”
Dear god. Maine must have been fucking oblivious. Their voices…the only thing that made sense…

He let out a slow breath.

It wasn’t worth commenting on now. He didn’t have all the answers, and it was guaranteed to piss certain people off if he was right. Not to mention, just getting himself understood was an exercise in frustration most days. He didn’t want to have to borrow a tablet just to talk.

“Someone trade me, I’m not comfortable being stuck next to this guy. Palomo, trade me.”

“In your dreams, Volleyball, I’m sitting with Katie now! You can deal with the creep for a few hours.”

Palomo wrapped himself around Jensen, and she casually bonked him on the head, but didn’t try to scrape him off.

York huffed, in that ‘I’m so hurt’ way of his and Maine could feel the truck shut down every time he made a noise. It was interesting, how someone could manage to create so much hostility toward himself with very little action.

He hadn’t really done much, as far as Maine could tell, and he’d certainly done less damage than North. And yet, York managed to make the soldiers really freak with only a smile. Made them reach for weapons with a cough or the turn of his head.

Had he noticed? Delta should have, if not York himself, but the man sure wasn’t trying to make himself less of a stressor. What was his game here?

“Hey, come on now, why is everyone so hostile today?”

Edra snorted and smacked York with her good hand. He startled.

“Why are we hitting me now? I literally haven’t done anything!”

“Dude, don’t even. My hand was crushed, and my meds are failing fast, and you know why we don’t like you. Don’t play dumb, and don’t get in my face.”

York held his hands up in defense. Maine really wanted to smack him.

When did he get this stupid?

You don’t try to annoy people who are already angry at you…though, that had always been York’s M.O. in the past. When they weren’t training, his favorite hobby seemed to be flirting with Carolina and pissing everyone off.

Well, shit.

Maine turned to Niner, who had an expression that clearly said she was about to lay down the law. Good. The idiot wouldn’t listen to him, wouldn’t really listen to anyone but Carolina, but he would absolutely listen to Niner.

The man had a service boner for women who ordered him around.

“Oh, ok, clearly we’re not all going to be friends here.”

Niner snapped a finger and pointed to a stray pebble on the ground next to Folami. She picked it up
and handed it over to Niner, clearly confused, but didn’t so much as make a noise in question.

“I don’t want to be your friend. I want to get home and get my hand fixed.”

“Well-

Niner chucked the pebble.

It smacked York in the center of his forehead and bounced harmlessly into his lap. Surprised, he smacked his hand to his forehead, eyes wide and distressed, and let out a strangled yelp.

Maybe Delta was asleep? There was no way he wouldn’t have seen that coming otherwise.

“Ow! What the hell, Niner?!”

“Sit down and shut the fuck up, York. I’m getting really tired of listening to you whine. Her hand got fucking crushed, she’s not in the mood. If you can’t behave yourself, go the fuck to sleep, or have Delta tell you a story. I’m pretty sure A Wrinkle in Time is over six hours, and I know he’s got a stash of kids stories memorized to keep you from acting like an idiot.”

He huffed and pouted.

“Why is everyone so mean to me on this planet?”

“Stop acting like a fucknut and maybe people will warm up to you. Have you even thought about not acting like an ass?”

“It is part of my charm, Niner. Part. Of. My. Charm.”

Palomo coughed and unwound himself from Jensen.

“Yeah, but we’ve got enough lovable assholes, we’re not looking for more. Aaaaaand, you’re not exactly hitting the ‘lovable’ part of that. Try a different tactic.”

York let out an over exaggerated, put-upon sigh, and Maine couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Folami reached back and patted Maine’s calf like she could tell he was annoyed by all the hoopla.

Did she have cameras in the back of her helmet or something?

“Whatever you say, green guy.”

“I’M AQUA! AQUA! I AM ON THE BLUE SPECTRUM, YOU HEATHEN!”

“Jeshush! Charlesh, don’t yell in my ear!”

Palomo shrank a little in his seat, clearly sheepish rather than upset.

Dear god, did it ever end? He was trapped in a truck filled with actual child soldiers handling very lethal weapons who apparently weren’t military through and through. Maine and Wyoming shared a glance.

Wyoming cocked his head a little.

‘Are you alright, friend?’

Maine tipped his chin.
‘Fine for now.’

“Sorry, Katie.”

“Thish ish why you’re a Blue and not a Red. Redsh are way lessh dramatic.”

Palomo scoffed at her, and while Maine didn’t have a whole lot of experience with the Reds and Blues, he’d met the Reds and held one hostage.

They were dramatic.

“Captain Simmons held a funeral for a tablet last week.”

“That tablet sherved the armiesh of Chorush well, and desherved to be remembered.”

Marconi waved a hand at Jensen from next to Doc.

“Sarge is building an army of robots in the hopes of killing off all the Blues and Captain Grif in their sleep.”

Yacavone giggled behind her hand.

“Lopez constantly bitches at everyone in broken Spanish.”

Andersmith placed a hand on his chin, and Maine could feel the sass in his voice, no matter how bland and genuine it actually was.

“Private Donut has been filling a wine bottle with moonshine every day for the past three weeks because he ran out of wine, and if ‘Donut’s Wine and Cheese Hour’ doesn’t have the right aesthetics, the whole thing will collapse.”

Doc nodded and pressed into Maine’s side a little more. He could feel the cold plates of armor dig ever so slightly into his bodysuit.

What was the man doing?

“He’s been doing that for years. We tried growing grapes on our farm, back in the day, but they never took. Probably because he was watering them with grape juice for extra flavor.”

Bitters sighed and leaned against his seat, less tense than Maine had seen him in hours, weapon finally relaxed.

“Agent Washington made Captain Grif run, and halfway through the first lap, Captain Grif claimed he pulled a hamstring and collapsed to the ground screaming.”

The truck collectively turned to Bitters, who shrugged.

“He tried to con Wash into carrying him to the infirmary. It was unsuccessful, and Wash made him run anyway. We’re dramatic as fuck.”

“Sho, Redsh can be dramatic, but we’re way lessh sho than Bluesh.”

Palomo chuckled and laid a commiserating hand on Jensen’s shoulder.

“Whatever, Katie, you just don’t want to admit to the divaness of your color scheme. It’s ok, we still love you.”
Maine expected her to brush him off, to get angry, but instead, she leaned into his space and they just sort of...hovered in each other’s bubbles.

So...friends then. Bickery friends, but still close enough to warrant physical touch and proximity. It made more sense why they’d chosen to sit together.

Niner leaned into Florida’s space a little with a smile on her face.

Maine wasn’t used to seeing her smile anymore. He couldn’t really remember the last time they’d been out of uniform and happy...probably before Tex ended up on the MoI.

He hadn’t realized how much he missed it.

“Man, this is ridiculous. Are you following any of this?”

“Oh yes, but I think I’m cheating, since I know who more of the people they’re referencing are.”

Doc scooted even more into Maine’s space, the man’s whole side was pressed into Maine now, and he really wanted to shove Doc over. Why was he so close? Sure, Maine was big, but he wasn’t big enough to warrant this kind of invasion. If Maine had to move any further to the left to get away from him, he’d have to start sitting on top of Niner.

She’d probably laugh her ass off about it, but Maine would never live it down.

He turned to look Doc straight in the face and growled.

The man just stared back.

And stared.

And stared.

Maine saw out of the corner of his eye that the soldiers had tensed right up again. They’d just have to get used to his voice, or they’d spend the entire trip gasping and tensing. He was not going to do the silent bullshit just to keep them calm.

Or maybe he would when he wasn’t so pissed off and freaked and dealing with the pressing need to curl in a ball and vomit.

Folami stretched backwards and dropped her hands onto Maine’s knees. Dear god, does no one have boundaries on this planet? Also, what was wrong with her shoulders that allowed her to reach backward over her shoulders and be able to physically rest her hands on his knees?

“We got ourselves a problem, Mick?”

Maine shrugged and motioned to the seat that he had partially vacated to the purple medic. Folami shook her head.

“Doc, someone doesn’t want the cuddles, scoot over.”

He shoved himself back into his own seat with a wild, flailing gesture. Maine couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes and a deep sigh.

This man was fucking ridiculous.

“Oh, gosh! I’m so sorry! I was just trying to be helpful!”
“And you were accomplishing that how? This is why you ask strangers before you snuggle. Or you just have to be so goddamned adorable that they can’t say no, like me.”

She patted Maine’s knee, the angle was absurd, and she nearly smacked North in the face with her elbow as she pulled her arms back into her space. She took her helmet off and leaned her head back as far as it would go to catch Maine’s eye.

“You good now, Big Guy?”

He nodded and she grinned.

“Awsomesauce, just tap me if you need me.”

Bitters grunted.

“Helmet on, Folami.”

“Make me, Bitters.”

Danvers looked up from her chart she’d started going over with South’s AI and shook her head.

“Folami, are you playing human translator again?”

She shrugged her shoulders, but her voice had the tint of a grin to it.

“Maybe.”

Danvers sighed and shook her head again, but the sigh sounded fond rather than exasperated.

“You know, I don’t understand you.”

“I’m a gentleman and a scholar, I know. I’m also a pleasure and well liked.”

“Sure you are. Just…be nice.”

“Hey, I am very nice, thank you very much! You just can’t see it because you’re a cunt.”

“Eat me, Folami.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until you’re not with a patient?”

South huffed and waved her good hand in Folami’s direction until North caught it again and held it tight.

“Are you two seriously going to bitch flirt over my head while I’m in pain and possibly dying?”

Danvers held a finger over South’s eyes.

“You’re not dying. Watch this please, don’t move your head. And I’m not flirting. I’m annoyed. She’s not flirting either, she just can’t turn off her crassness.”

Folami slapped a hand to her chest in mock offense, but didn’t respond.

Maine may have known Folami for less than a day, less than half a day really, but he didn’t think she was joking. Based on a soft huff and slump in her shoulders, Folami seemed disappointed by the dismissal.
“Ok, eyes seem to be tracking. Nothing new to report since you last passed out. We’re on the road now, you haven’t been out long, maybe ten minutes. I’ll keep track for you and keep you updated.”

“South.”

She looked over to North, still clutching her good hand, and sighed.

“Hey.”

“How are you feeling?”

She cocked and eyebrow at him. Her voice was rough, but blessedly clear.

“Is that a trick question, or are you just a moron?”

He smiled, it was watery, but he looked better than he had in a while. More centered.

And that was a weird thought, South as anyone’s emotional center didn’t make a whole lot of sense. She tended to fly free, go off in whatever direction her emotions took her in, but maybe that was all North really needed. She was like a guiding point to show him where normal was supposed to sit.

“Call me a moron, then. How do you feel?”

“Like I took a massive beating and was left for hours in the middle of a fucking jungle on a planet in the middle of nowhere, with half expired pain meds.”

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Thanks Eta.”

He flickered nervously around her head, and Maine realized he must have just dosed her again. It made Maine nervous that his hologram was so unstable. In just the time they’d been in the truck, Eta’s body flickered six times.

“Agent South? I’m sorry to have to do this to you, but when we get closer to Proteger, I’m going to need Eta to pull back on your pain medication. We don’t know if what we have will interact well or poorly with what you have in your system, and I would prefer you didn’t die from the anesthesia when we start fixing you.”

South’s whole expression changed. Her face looked wrecked.

Maine completely understood. He’d only been at the bottom of the cliff for a few short hours after his fight with the Wash and the Reds and Blues, before help came and he was dosed well ever since then until he didn’t need it anymore. That had been the worst pain he’d been in, in his entire life.

Honestly, he could pretty well imagine how awful this must have been for her.

“Fuck me, man, I was joking about not hurting a lot.”

“I know, and I am so sorry, but I don’t recognize the chemical compound in what he’s giving you and I really don’t want to accidentally poison you to death after everything you’ve been through.”

North glared at Danvers, like she was personally choosing to torture South rather than help her. Points in her favor, the medic didn’t so much as twitch from the heat.
“Don’t you people have Wash and Carolina’s suits? How is it you don’t know how to match medication?”

Danvers leveled a hard stare at North for a solid minute.

He stared back, but Maine could see him flushing red, just a little, and he moved into position to grab North if necessary. No sense in letting him punch the only uninjured medic on board that might actually be able to help South.

“Neither Agent Carolina nor Agent Washington came to us with any kind of medication application in their suits, and the refill instructions were long gone. The closest they had to pain relief was one mobile healing unit. It works pretty well in the short term, and has the benefit of not fucking over your med intake, but it’s kind of in short supply, what with there being only one. If I had one, she’d be wearing it right now.”

“Neither of them…had any kind of medical care attached to their suits?”

Danvers removed a piece of South’s leg armor and wiped at a long cut to clear the blood.

“Does that surprise you, based on your relationship with them? Agent Carolina is pretty shortsighted and Agent Washington is self-sacrificing to the point it’d be abuse if his treatment from another person.”

“I-“

South snarled and squeezed North’s hand hard. He yelped loudly and tried to yank it back, only for South to sneer viciously at him.

“Do not start, North. Do not fucking start! Fuck, if I have to hear another fucking conversation about how great and smart and totally special Carolina is, I’m going to bite off my tongue and choke to death on my own blood. Shut up, already!”

Folami grinned.

“I think I’m in love.”

Smosna laughed.

“Seconded.”

Marconi waved a hand in the air.

“Thirded!”

Danvers sighed.

“Please don’t bite off your tongue. I can stop you from drowning, but I don’t have the supplies to save or reattach your tongue out here, you’d be needlessly crippling yourself. Also, have you ever actually had to swallow mouthfuls of blood? It’s pretty unpleasant. You’ll be gagging before you know what’s what. Now, please stay still, I’m working.”

South blinked at Danvers, but didn’t move. North didn’t take his eyes off of South; his face was still painted with that manic expression he’d been wearing for a while.

The truck managed to lull itself into a few, very quiet conversations, everyone was mostly respectful of South being awake and worked on. It was nearly peaceful.
“Soooooooo.”

Though the quiet didn’t last long.

Doc shifted to stare at Maine’s face again.

Dear god, Maine hated this man. Hated him with more hate than he’d ever thought he could feel for another person without actually being harmed by them.

It wasn’t exactly rational. Doc wasn’t the reason Maine…did what he did. He just happened to be in the vicinity. Still, the fact that the man was behaving as if they were friends? It rankled.

Maine grunted and actively turned away from the man.

“I think we should all take a minute to properly introduce ourselves!”

The whole truck groaned.

With the exception of Wyoming and Andersmith, the entire right side of the truck flopped dramatically in their seats at the suggestion. Smosna and York’s flails were almost identical in their outlandishness, and really? Maine did not need two Yorks in his life. He really hoped they didn’t end up friends by the time the trip ended.

Jesus, York and New York. The drama would be insane.

No one would ever sleep again.

“Come on, guys, there are a lot of us here, and having names really goes a long way to getting to know people!”

Ramirez scoffed.

“Assuming we actually want to get to know them.”

“That’s the spirit!”

South grunted and shook her head.

“Doc, no one wants to kumbaya here.”

“Well, that’s the problem! We spend so much time fighting and being mad that we’ve lost touch with who we are on the inside!”

Folami snorted and waved a hand at Doc. She shifted around against Maine’s legs, a desperate attempt at stretching without moving, it looked like, and Maine wondered if she’d be able to make it the whole trip on the metal floor. She’d mentioned her…butt being busted earlier, on top of her leg, she could not be comfortable.

Maybe he should switch with her?

No. Then he’d be the one stuck next to North the whole trip, and Maine did not want to deal with the man’s mood swings right now. It would almost be worse than sitting next to Doc, and it would be a hell of a lot more responsibility.

Honestly, Maine really didn’t want to deal with most of these people on a good day, let alone after the day they’d had. Niner was ok. Maine could handle the Ninerness. Everyone else could just
leave for a while and he’d be perfectly fine.

Sure, he’d be better if he could convince Wash to forgive him, but…

“I’ve never lost touch with who I am on the inside. I’m a simple creature, my insides are like my outside. Full of bitterness and contempt.”

Danvers looked over, cocked her head to the side, and spoke with a slightly sassy tone of voice.

“You have Bitters inside you?”

Folami leaned into North’s space and started melodramatically gagging like she was about to vomit into the man’s lap. North’s eyes flew wide and he let go of South to put an hand on Folami’s shoulder, turn her torso the other direction, and actually rubbed at her back.

Still, the action was through her armor. Maine didn’t think she’d realized he’d made the mistake of touching her back or she’d have punched him in the jaw.

“Ugh! Gross! No, I have not and will never have that nasty little weasel anywhere near my insides! Jesus, do you want me to be murdered on top of throwing up?!”

Bitters snorted and leaned toward her.

“You’re really lucky I’m not suited for a medic track then, Folami. I could have been playing with your intestines years ago.”

“And that, kiddies, is where interrogation techniques fall in! You don’t have to go to medical school to poke around someone’s insides, just make sure you have government permission first!”

Silence descended.

Florida was really good at that.

“Ok then. I’m Frank Dufresne!”

Clearly not good enough though. Maybe he was losing his touch.

“I’m a classically trained medic-“

Palomo snorted and waved a hand at him.

“You mean, they gave you a med kit and armor and said good luck.”

“And I’m a longtime friend of the Reds and Blues! I love organic gardening, and I’m a huge advocate of ethical farming.”

Edra scoffed and smacked her head on the back of the seat again.

“A problem we’d take more seriously on this planet if we weren’t all expecting to be dead by thirty.”

“Ok, someone else go now! Palomo, how about you?”

Palomo shrunk down in his seat.

“Are we really doing this?”
“Yes! Come on, Charles, just give it a go!”

“I don’t really want to.”

He looked down at his lap, clearly unhappy about being called out.

Andersmith tapped a fist on the wall of the truck.

“Doc, don’t push him. He doesn’t want to play your game, and we don’t really need to do introductions. We say each other’s names often enough to give general context and we have hours to get to know each other without doing that.”

The man pouted and drifted into Maine’s space again. Maine did not aggressively roll his eyes, even though he desperately wanted to. Judging from York’s grin across from him, Maine wasn’t as successful at hiding his contempt as he hoped to be.

“I don’t understand why you’re all so against this.”

Jensen motioned to the room at large.

“Because we’re literally trapped in a small, moving vehicle with people capable of murdering us?”

Wyoming turned to look at her, hand still clutched in Edra’s vicelike grip, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, you could still be trapped in a small moving vehicle with people capable of killing you if we weren’t here. You lot seem fairly adept with your guns, for those without excessive military training.”

Jensen looked startled for a moment before she laughed, just a little.

“Point taken, I suppose.”

Maine shifted in his seat to try and relieve some of the pressure on his back and both Marconi and Yacavone gasped down the row. Marconi in particular sounded like a strangled rabbit and Maine winced.

Folami craned her neck to look at the two panicking soldiers and did actually roll her eyes at them. The woman was ridiculously expressive and used her whole head with the motion, something Maine found ridiculously endearing about her.

“Calm down you chuckle-fucks, Mick isn’t going to hurt anyone. Right, Big Guy?”

“Um,” Doc looked back and forth between them and Maine, “why are we panicking?”

She reached back over her shoulder again and awkwardly patted Maine just above the knee.

Maine had worked with some odd people in his career (he remembered the triplets, even if he didn’t know what happened to them) but Folami was slowly climbing the ladder with every leg pat and soothing noise.

Did she actually think he was a dog?

“My buddy Mick, here? He’s Agent Maine. Got the strength of at least ten bears and threw a truck off a cliff.”
York snorted.

“That’s probably not what happened.”

“Also,” North gave her a ‘I’m not saying you’re crazy, I just think you’re wrong’ look, “Who measures strength in bears?”

Doc turned completely sideways in his seat, his left leg bent underneath him, and stared very closely at Maine for a moment.

“Oh! You look different from the last time I saw you! Did you get a haircut?”

Maine growled. The man had never seen him out of armor. How could he possibly know if Maine looked different?!

The fact that Maine hadn’t shaved his head in months to cover up his tattoo was completely beside the point.

“Oh, I see what it is! You’re not in withdrawal anymore!”

Niner leaned over and looked at Doc like he was completely insane.

“Withdrawal?”

Folami snarled and smacked Doc’s shin hard.

“DOC! MEDICAL INFORMATION DOES NOT NEED TO BE SHARED!”

“No! Not that kind of withdrawal! AI withdrawal! See, there are all kinds of horrible side effects from having aggressive AI in your system too long. Especially if they’re volatile and start breaking down! Perfectly normal people end up with all kinds of things they can’t control. Just look at Washington for example! Then you look at the rapid loss of the chemical changes from the aggressive AI, and it’s just bad! It looks like you’re fine now, though.”

Maine shook his head.

Withdrawal?

He’d never thought about AI in the context of an addiction before. Sure, there were side effects from extended disruption of natural brain patterns, but the AI were supposed to avoid actively doing things like that.

Still…

Sigma…didn’t care so much about the things he was supposed to do.

“With no withdrawal and no AI, he’s no more likely to become a rampaging killer than I am.”

Ramirez ‘coughed’ into his fist.

“Cough, dual personality, cough.”

Doc crossed his arms, clearly indignant.

“Hey, just because I have an alternate personality that is not always very nice, that doesn’t mean I’m actually going to hurt anyone. Or that he’s going to hurt anyone.”
“Hurting people is so much fun!”

“Be quiet!”

“Shut up you fool!”

“No, I won’t! because you’re sitting here trying to make me look bad.”

The other Freelancers locked eyes on Doc to threat assess him.

Maine could see Wyoming and York mentally plotting what they should do if the man made a hostile move. Florida managed to shift into what looked like a relaxed, if slightly observant pose, but Maine saw the way his hands twitched, and knew if Florida thought Doc was a threat, he’d have the man decapitated before anyone could blink.

Maine…didn’t remember the man having this problem. He’d had the starting points of Stockholm Syndrome, but nothing in the way of separate, fully functioning personalities living in the man’s head. Dissociative Identity Disorder wasn’t something that happened quickly, and Maine had never heard of a real world case of it…where the personalities could actually communicate this way.

Honestly, it raised more questions than it answered, but that was par for the course dealing with the simulation troopers.

Smosna pointed at Doc.

“Yeah, Agent Washington is totally the one who had a run in with a messed up AI.”

“He did! It’s a crazy story, too! There was brain damage and torture and everything! That’s totally beside the point though. Anyway, how are you dealing with it, Agent Maine? I know it was really rough on you for a while, what with the extra added trauma of the emp. How have you adapted to no AI?”

Torture?

Maine looked to Niner and Florida, both of whom looked shaken to their cores at the random information Doc was willing to just spew about other people.

Who would have wanted to torture Washington?

Maine shrugged and made a back and forth motion with his hand.

“Yeah, so-so I get that. I tell you though, we actually have enough of us now with AI related brain damage to form our own support group!”

Andersmith tapped the wall again.

“Please do not suggest forming an AI brain damage support group to Agent Washington. He will not take it well, and he’s already on edge with everything that has happened these past few months.”

Doc shook his head in a dismissive manner and Maine wanted to smack him too.

“Therapy is really good for you, though.”

Palomo snorted and stretched. He ended up leaning into Florida’s space and bumping the other man on the shoulder gently with his fist. The soldier looked startled for a moment, but Florida just
smiled.

Uh oh.

“Uh huh. Maybe let someone who’s a better at therapy do that.”

“Oh, I didn’t do that badly, did I?”

“You are not licensed or trained and nobody respects the speaking ball.”

York smirked and leaned forward, chin in hands, elbows on knees. He was trying way too hard to seem playful and likable. Seriously, he ought to try not talking for a while. Maine had already earned himself a groupie by just being quiet and getting his shoulder dislocated.

“I feel like there’s a bunch of inside jokes happening that I’m just not getting.”

Smosna stood from her seat and grabbed the support bars over her head.

“Yeah, that’s because you don’t understand things you haven’t experienced or learned about, it’s kind of a thing. Jeeze, not even an hour in, and I’m dying.”

Niner grabbed onto Maine’s shoulder and used him to leverage herself around to get a look at Doc. He managed not to wince at the added pressure, but it was a near thing. The woman didn’t mean anything by it, and Maine honestly wasn’t in bad enough condition to complain about the treatment.

Still, he wished she’d have asked. He was still sore.

“Where did you even read about this stuff, anyway? Information on military AI isn’t exactly common knowledge.”

“Hmm? Oh, well, it was all hypothetical ‘could be’ sort of stuff in this series of academic papers and a science fiction novel. I’m pretty sure I still have a copy floating around. I’ll find it. Fascinating stuff, science. Don’t understand a lot of it, and I’m morally opposed to most of the rest, but it was definitely an entertaining read.”

South groaned.

North pressed a hand to her forehead and gave Danvers a worried look. She pulled out her scanner and started poking at the screen. The truck quieted for a moment as South breathed through the pain and Eta flashed, panicked, and flickered in and out all over her body.

Folami tensed and put a hand on North’s shoulder. She looked ready to roll to her knees and pounce.

Maine really wished he understood more about medicine.

Eventually, Eta settled and Danvers’ shoulders relaxed a little. South’s expression smoothed, just a bit, and she croaked at Doc.

“You’re a doctor, how can you be against science?”

“Well, science has its limitations in a lot of areas. I really feel like homeopathic and alternative medicine really have a place in the galaxy!”

Danvers sighed and fiddled with South’s IV.
“Also, he’s not a doctor. He failed out of school. He’s a medic, and I’m not entirely convinced about his credentials.”

“Great,” she huffed, “First friend I’ve made in years not linked to my brother in some way, and he turns out to be an anti-science weirdo. Just great.”

Were…they seriously going to ignore what just happened?

Folami shifted back against Maine’s legs and let go of North, and, ok, sure, we’ll just ignore South’s sudden spasms and Eta’s freaking out. That’s fine. It’s all good. It’s not like everyone is terrified for her life or anything.

North stroked South’s hair from her face, expression intense and afraid, and Maine honestly felt for him. He wished he could do something. Anything.

But what good was a heavy in a situation like this? Maine was a tank, a damage sponge, an eight-foot tall mutant, monster, freak. He didn’t have the ability to do anything except get shot and kill and watch the people he loved die over and over and over.

Maine put his head in his hands.

Maybe therapy wasn’t a bad idea, so long as Doc was nowhere near the sessions. They couldn’t all be as bad at their jobs as the Councilor.

-5 Hours Until Arrival at Proteger-

“Ok if we don’t do something to keep me from getting bored we will never get home, it will take days. I do not want to sit here for days in silence!”

Florida was really starting to dislike that Ramirez kid.

It wasn’t really his fault, the boy was clearly on the younger end of the spectrum for the soldiers, and what eighteen-year-old wasn’t at least a little obnoxious from time to time?

Still his habit of smacking Demir, who mostly sat quietly and handed medical related detritus to Danvers when she asked for it, made Florida want to give the boy a good, solid spanking to teach him some manners.

Jensen hmm’ed softly.

“Well, we could alsways do another Dishney shing-a-long? We didn’t get through any of the later shtuff excshept Frozshen.”

Marconi shook his head.

“After Agent Carolina and Epsilon’s freak-out? No thanks. I’m Disneyed out.”

Yacavone laid her head down on his shoulder a good twenty minutes before, and Marconi hadn’t so much as twitched in recognition. Florida wondered if the young man had even noticed, or if he was just so used to this sort of thing that it didn’t register anymore.

The Chorus soldiers didn’t seem to have boundaries with each other, in ways that just baffled Butch something awful.

Folami, bitchy little ‘don’t touch me or I’ll bite your fingers off’ Folami, had claimed Maine’s legs and spent a good portion of the trip touching North’s shoulder and arm to ground him. She’d also
taken up tossing obscene hand gestures at anyone who looked at Maine too long, and seemed to enjoy trading them with Niner, who was just too amused by the whole thing.

Edra still had a hand in Reggie’s and would periodically whimper and squeeze it. She’d finally relaxed enough to lean into his space, just a little, as well, which was fine. The poor thing clearly needed the support, and none of the Chorus soldiers trusted York to provide it.

Jensen and Palomo could practically share a seat with the way they’d constantly tangle their arms or legs together as they whispered and laughed. Honestly, Florida couldn’t tell if it was flirting or familial affection or something else entirely. Whatever it was, it was adorable, and Florida approved.

Bitters, Andersmith, and Smosna regularly stood up and checked on people. Smosna would throw herself into their laps every now and again, while Andersmith laid gentle hands on shoulders, arms, and helmets, and Bitters would delicately tap them with his fist.

They all managed to fill space, spread physical contact, and just generally be around people without the kind of constraints that other soldiers walked around with. They were certainly a more tactile lot than Florida ever was. It was…odd.

And something about this group in particular had started to bother Florida.

He hated it when he got a bother.

After all the crap they’d had today, the last thing Florida needed was a noisy bee in his bonnet, buzzing while he worked on a problem. It did not help with his concussion.

Folami grunted and leaned away from North to stretch a little.

Honestly, the truck had far too many people in it for them all to be comfortable. Sure, it wasn’t nearly as cramped as some military vehicles, but that didn’t stop it from being a tad too small when there were four people in the floor space without proper seats on the bench.

He’d offer to have Reggie sit on his lap for a while, but Edra looked like she needed the support, and for some reason, she liked his husband well enough.

“You know,” Folami grunted, “I don’t really care what Agent Carolina has to say on the subject of sing-a-longs, she acts like she’s carrying rocks in her vagina.”

Edra groaned and shook her head.

“Do you have to say it like that?”

Florida could tell Edra was exhausted, poor duck, but she was trying to stay up and active. It was kind of funny, they’d ended up with three medics inside the truck, and only one of them was unharmed and functioning.

“What? Are you carrying rocks around in your vagina too, Eddie?”

“Fuck you!”

And, oh, Butch could taste how amused the soldiers were on this one, it was so thick in the air. Palomo and Jensen had curled into each other and were giggling, Smosna had her helmet buried in Demir’s neck, even Bitters finally broke his stoic stance to snort.
“Don’t think so, I’d break my fingers on the rocks in your vagina.”

In fact, the only one who seemed to have a problem with their conversation (aside from North, who’d gotten a red faced, constipated expression and tried to hide his face in his pecs) was-

“Quit saying vagina!”

Ramirez.

Folami laughed and leaned into North’s side just a nudge as she turned her attention on Ramirez. North allowed himself to be swayed by her.

“Why?”

“Cause it’s weird!”

Niner snorted in her seat and shook her head at the kid.

“Vaginas are weird? Yeah, lets hope you’re only into guys, or you’re never getting laid.”

Ramirez snarled.

“Oh, screw you.”

Niner held up a hand and pointed her index and middle fingers toward the ceiling.

Oh, dear god, Niner, please be the adult here. The soldiers do not need your help on this one, and he’s volatile enough and far enough away that he might shoot you before I can stop him.

“No thanks, once again, rocks, vagina, broken fingers.”

“Oh my god, you two are so obnoxious!”

Folami laughed and held up a hand to Niner, who slapped her with a high five.

“Yes, we are.”

South groaned and lolled her head to the side.

“Oh god, is this my life now? I think we made a mistake. Is it too late to turn around and die in the ship?”

Danvers patted South gently on the hip as she cleaned at the still seeping bandages on her side.

“Sorry, love. You’re here, and surprisingly stable. You’re stuck with us.”

“Jesus. North, please kill me.”

He smiled, a little sad, but also a little playful.

“Pretty sure your doctor there would punch me in the throat if I tried.”

“I absolutely would. I fear no man, and I haven’t gotten a good punch in for a while.”

Danvers and Folami shared a look and, oh, that was interesting. Folami tossed a look at Edra, who tossed her head back and forth. None of the other Chorus soldiers seemed to even notice the exchange.
No, they did notice, they just didn’t seem to care.

So, was it a medic thing? Florida had noticed early on that some of the signs the soldiers tossed around seemed to mean different things to different soldiers.

Gosh, he couldn’t wait to properly observe this on a larger scale. Code breaking was always entertaining, and he’d noticed at least three separate dialects in the signs they’d tossed around.

“That’s stupid. Like that’s not anywhere near remotely good. Driving any vehicle, but only backwards? You can’t use much of anything backward, you might as well not even bother. You’d have to have like, specially designed planes and stuff. Are you even trying?”

Ramirez’s voice cut through the conversations again, loud and obnoxious. Demir had shrunk in his seat a little bit, clearly embarrassed by the conversation.

“You’re the one that said you were bored.”

Andersmith turned to the two and scolded Ramirez gently with that really interesting voice of his. Florida wondered if he’d ever considered audiobooks.

“That is the point of the exercise, Ramirez. They won’t all be gems.”

“Oh, yeah? That doesn’t mean he shouldn’t even try to come up with a good one.”

“Well, if you’re so good at this, you go then. Show us what you’ve got in your collection.”

Ramirez straightened up and turned to fully face Andersmith, his ‘partner’ clearly ignored. Florida would feel sorry for poor Demir at being abandoned, if he didn’t seem relieved for the attention to be off of him.

He looked up and finally seemed to notice Florida watching. He smiled, and Demir gave him a little wave back.

The young man must have gotten past the whole ‘you were covered in blood and torturing people’ thing. Good. Florida kind of liked the soldier; he was quiet enough and took orders.

“The ability to communicate with animals but only at their level of intelligence. So if you’re talking to a gorilla, it might be ok, but talking to a slug, not so much. And this also has to account for human language barriers, because if you used a colloquialism with a dog, they won’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s ok.”

“Pfft! Ok? It’s great!”

“Honestly, it takes too much of an explanation. If you need that much clarification to make it bad, it’s not a good enough premise.”

“Screw you, Andersmith! You’re just mad because I’m good at this and you’re not!”

Florida tapped the wall, just like he’d seen Andersmith do a few times, and the whole truck quieted enough for him to talk across it without being drowned out.

Yay, he’d done that right!

Good to know.
“What are you doing?”

Demir straightened out of his hunch and seemed to brighten for the first time in almost an hour.

Damn. Florida didn’t need to like so many of these soldiers. One or two was enough, if he started to like all of them, he’d have a much harder time using them as shields later.

“We are coming up with useless superpowers. The Reds and Blues have burned through a lot of them. The ability to teleport one foot at a time. The ability to fly north.”

Florida put his hand to his chin and thought for a moment.

“The ability to know what someone is thinking, but only their involuntary thoughts.”

“Oo!”

“That’s good!”

“That’s so bad!”

Smosna bounced a little in her seat, and Florida couldn’t keep his smile down. Really, they were all just too darned adorable for words!

“Like, it has the potential to be really useful, but mostly it’s going to be sex and murder thoughts.”

Bitters grunted at her.

“Well, for some of us, that’s not so different from what they already just spew out.”

“Meeerrrruuuu.”

That…was an interesting noise.

All eyes shifted to Yacavone, who’d taken to staring at Eta as he hovered over South and quietly muttered about her status. He noticed the attention and flickered closer to South, like he thought she’d be able to defend him from being stared at.

She didn’t seem to register that everyone was watching her, and made another noise, this time more like a disappointed dog’s whine.

Did she get a head injury? An overlooked head injury? Was she tired? Did she just make random noises as a self-soothing measure?

Probably not the last one, since the Chorus soldiers seemed concerned.

And now Florida was worried about a soldier he hadn’t even interacted with.

He really was going soft.

Bitters tugged her shoulder a little bit to try and make her sit up. She was still flopped against Marconi’s side, but it definitely looked a little more loose limbed than it had before.

“Cissy? Take your helmet off.”

“Hmm?”

Marconi helped Bitters force her to sit up straight. She whined the whole way and even pitifully
slapped at Bitters hands as he yanked her helmet off.

“Cissy? Look at me, ok? Shit, Danvers, her eyes aren’t focused.”

Folami tossed him her scanner as Danvers started to hand off medical supplies to Demir.

“Green, blue, green, two up, center square, hold it steady.”

“Got it.”

Andersmith slipped into the seat Bitters vacated to help steady Yacavone for the scan. Bitters held the scanner, clearly worried. Heck, there was a thick layer of tension again, that Florida had only just started getting used to being gone.

At least it wasn’t _aggressive_ tension anymore.

The machine beeped in Bitters hands.

“Well?”

Bitters turned around to look at Danvers.

“Not on the medic track. No idea what these squiggly lines and colors mean.”

She stood up.

“For goodness sake, Bitters, just give it.”

Danvers poked at the reader, looked at Yacavone, and shook her head.

“Move.”

Bitters shifted out of the way, and Florida wondered if the man knew how much he gave away just by standing there, all tense shoulders and shifting feet. Poor lamb was worried, rightfully so, apparently, but still obvious about it.

“Cissy, when was the last time you ate anything?”

Yacavone’s head lolled to the side.

“Meeeeeehhh, don’t remember?”

“Or slept?”

“Hmm?”

Marconi tapped a foot nervously.

“At least three days. She was having really bad nightmares before, but she hasn’t been sleeping at all now.”

Danvers shook her head again.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t do that to yourself, you’re crashing. Adrenaline dump. Anybody got some sharables?”

Andersmith stood up and handed Yacavone’s weight off to Bitters, who pulled her over to lean on
him rather than Marconi.

“I’ve got some food rations tucked away. Nothing exciting, but it should get the job done.”

He reached into the duffle above his seat, pulled out a bar, and handed it across to Danvers.

“Here, eat something and we’ll get you some water.”

Yacavone didn’t take the bar. She stared past Danvers to something that managed to hold her attention. Eta again, if Florida was right.

“What are you staring at?”

“He’s really pretty.”

Andersmith looked at Eta, who’d noticed the attention being directed at him, and hid himself from her view behind South’s body. Yacavone whined quietly.

South managed a weak laugh, and Florida didn’t blame her. Why Eta didn’t just stop projecting his hologram if he didn’t want to be seen baffled Florida a little.

Danvers patted Yacavone’s hand.

“He is very pretty, but it’s rude to stare. Eat this. You’ll feel better.”

Yacavone looked down at the bar and went to bite it.

Bitters grabbed her wrist and pulled it toward him.

“No, Cissy, you have to take the wrapper off first.”

She whimpered and pressed her face into Bitters’ shoulder.

Oh, she’s crying.

“Food is hard, Antoine.”

Niner’s brow furrowed.

“Are you sure she’s ok?”

Andersmith grabbed a water ration from the bag above Ramirez’s head and passed it over to Danvers.

Folami reached up to Niner and groped at the air a little. Niner quirked an eyebrow, but allowed the woman to take her hand. Folami gave it a firm squeeze.

“This kind of thing happens sometimes. We’re usually better about taking care of people, but well, we did just have our big end of the world fight less than four days ago. It’s sleep dep, mixed with lack of food, likely from anxiety. Yacavone and Marconi over there are like those purse dogs you see in old movies. Too much stress and they shake themselves to death.”

Marconi grunted in annoyance, but he didn’t deny the claim.

“Anyone else not eaten in the past six hours?”

A few hands went up, including North’s and Wyoming’s.
Danvers gave a heavily put upon sigh. Florida couldn’t help but laugh at the woman. She looked so completely disappointed in them all.

“Ok, John, do we have enough for everyone or just them?”

“We should be fine. We’ve got the truck behind us, so as long as it survives and we don’t somehow get trapped out here, we won’t starve.”

Folami let go of Niner and snapped her fingers.

“Fab. Everybody take a rat bar and a water ration, we’ve got some time before we’re home free, and if we anyone else starts feeling weird, let me know.”

Bitters opened the wrapper and put it back in Yacavone’s hand.

“Eat.”

Yacavone shoved the bar into her mouth and chewed absentmindedly. Her eyes would roam around the truck for a few moments before they landed on Eta again, who’d apparently decided being shy was not necessary after all, and she’d get distracted from eating.

Bitters would gently move her head to look away from him and she’d start eating again, but it only took a little chewing before she was back to staring, slack jawed, at Eta.

Danvers and Andersmith passed out food and water to everyone in the truck.

Well, almost everyone.

“Seriously, Folami, just take the damned bar.”

“I do not need it. Look, Mick spent a good thirty minutes making me eat this garbage, I’m fine! Save it for someone who’s actually hungry. When was the last time you ate?”

Danvers stood above Folami, and Florida thought he saw lightning crackle between their helmets. If they weren’t dating by the time the truck got back to their base, he’d have to take measures. They were just too cute for their own good.

Finally, Danvers nodded.

“Ok, I won’t hand it to you. You’d just sit on it and pretend you ate it, because for some reason, you are against putting food into your body and converting it into energy.”

She passed Folami’s ration bar to Maine, who looked at her, confused. She’d already handed him two of them in recognition of his size and his pain.

“Agent Maine, please hold on to this for her. When you think she should eat, just tear the wrapper off and poke her with it. She won’t waste the food.”

“You’re a jerk!”

“Eat me, Folami. How are you doing over here, Agent Niner? Your hips were pinned earlier, right?”

Niner snorted.

“Not an agent, just a pilot. I’m not feeling any pain if that’s what you’re asking.”
“If that changes, or anything feels strange, let us know. That goes for everyone, actually. If something’s not right? You tell a medic. Because if I have to act like your nanny on this trip, I will not be happy. I’ve already got one invalid to take care of.”

“Bitch.”

“South,” North let out a put upon sigh, “Don’t insult the people responsible for keeping you alive.”

Florida glanced back over to Bitters and Yacavone, who’d finally gotten the rations consumed. She looked like she was ready to pass out, her face was blotchy, and she looked like a miserable five-year-old.

It was barely an exaggeration, either. She looked young, like a child wearing a suit of armor.

Bitters ran his fingers through her hair.

“Try to get some sleep, ok? It’s a long ride.”

“M’not sleeping here. Bad guys’ll stab me with bullets.”

“They don’t have bullets to stab you with, and you are exhausted.”

“Y’re not the boss. M’mom’s the boss.”

Bitters shook his head as Cissy wiggled out of his grip and collapsed into Marconi.

“Someone, help me out here.”

Demir pulled a flask from his pocket.

“Here, Cissy, catch.”

Danvers turned just in time to see the metal container.

Demir tossed over the flask, and it landed in Yacavone’s lap. Her face twisted into complete confusion, like she couldn’t comprehend how it had gotten there in the first place.

“What is that? Are you seriously carting alcohol around on a mission?”

He shook his head.

“It won’t hurt her, it’s just caffeine.”

“Do not let her drink that. She needs to rest.”

“But she isn’t going to rest here, not if she doesn’t feel safe.”

Yacavone took a drink before Danvers could snatch the flask from her hands. She made a face at the taste and Danvers just sighed in disappointment. Her arms dropped to her sides and she just sat back down next to South.

“Seriously, I don’t say this kind of stuff for my own health, you know.”

Palomo made a heart with his hands.

“We appreciate you, Danvers.”
“And for that, you get an extra dose of painkillers next time you need them.”

Yacavone’s face twisted in disgust as she drank from the flask.

“Icky.”

Demir shrugged, but he looked more sheepish than anything.

“It does its job.”

Danvers scoffed at them. The woman tried so hard to be a professional, but it was clear that they were well and truly under her skin.

“You do realize it’s not going to help you focus or anything, right? You will be just as exhausted once that kicks in, it’s just going to increase your heart rate.”

“Shut up, y’don’t know my life.”

“Oooohhh!”

Danvers growled and smacked her hand against the floor, hard.

“Did you just tell me to shut up, Yacavone? I practically raised you!”

Yacavone blew a raspberry at Danvers, then tossed the flask back to Demir, but Ramirez snatched the flask from the air and took a swig before Demir could blink.

“Hey,” York made a grabby motion across Smosna who pushed herself as far back into her seat as she could to avoid him brushing her armor, “You mind sharing?”

Ramirez sat still for a moment, then shook the flask, and tossed it over.

“Sure, there’s not a lot left, it’s yours.”

“Hey!” Demir pouted in his seat, “That’s mine!”

York caught the flask with a grin, cracked it open, and knocked it back before anyone had the chance to tell him off.

Almost instantly his eyes went wide and he started to sputter and choke.

“Oh my god, what is that?!”

He coughed and gagged and curled over in his seat. Smosna grabbed a bag from under her seat and shoved it under York’s nose.

“Man, we are using barf bags like crazy today.”

Andersmith, still standing, snatched up another ration bar and shoved it into York’s hands. He tore the wrapper off and shoved it into his mouth.

The ration bars didn’t exactly taste good, they were old and mass produced, but apparently they did enough that York could mask the taste of whatever the ‘caffeine’ was.

After a moment of gagging he looked at Demir.

“Jesus, that was the most disgusting thing I have ever put in my mouth!”
Demir shrugged, and looked a little offended by the remark.

“It’s an acquired taste, but it gets the job done.”

Ramirez laughed, nasty and unpleasant, and Florida really wanted to give that boy a spanking now. Mocking another’s pain was only acceptable among friends.

“What a milk drinker.”

Smosna casually reached behind Demir and smacked Ramirez across the back of the head, hard. Florida definitely liked her.

“Oh, like you have room to talk Shai, you have to cut yours with sugar water just to get it down.”

“Hey, at least I can drink it!”

Bitters huffed, rested a boot onto the bench, and leaned his chin against his knee.

“Are you seriously acting like it’s a great thing to choke down that stuff? You’re going to end up with ulcers in your lower intestines later in life, I hope you realize that. They’re going to have to cut you open and stitch you up. Enjoy a life with a colonoscopy bag attached to your chest, that’s really attractive.”

Ramirez flipped Bitters off.

“You’re just jealous that I’m actually a man.”

“Really? That’s your measure? Drinking caffeinated poison?”

“Uh, yeah? What else would it be?”

Palomo leapt to his feet and pointed aggressively at Ramirez.

“You are not a man! You are a mere child! We know this because we have read the sacred texts!”

Jensen jumped to her feet as well, and joined Palomo in the pointing.

“TO BE A MAN YOU MUSHT BE SHWIFT ASH THE COURSHING RIVER!”

The majority of the truck joined in, even Danvers, who Florida genuinely thought would be above such things, with only Ramirez and the Freelancers silent in the onslaught.

“BE A MAN

WITH ALL THE FORCE OF A GREAT TYPHOON

BE A MAN

WITH ALL THE STRENGTH OF A RAGING FIRE

MYSTERIOUS AS THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON!”

South groaned.

“Fuck. Disney? What fresh hell is this?”
Niner grinned.

“This was my fucking childhood! Shit, we got any Lilo and Stitch fans in here?”

The whole truckful of Chorus soldiers spoke in unison.

“Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.”

Niner cackled madly, but honestly? Florida had chills, and not of the entertaining variety.

Disney was like a cult.

York made a disgusted face and smacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Niner cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Very attractive, York, no wonder ‘Lina was falling all over you.”

Smosna snorted.

“Don’t be mean, he can’t help the way he looks.”

York turned to face her, clearly offended, even as he tried to play it off as playful.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I mean, as far as the Freelancers go? You’re not even close to the top of the sexy list.”

Edra looked around York to see Smosna.

“Wait, what? When was this decided? I didn’t vote for anyone!”

Smosna waved a hand.

“Well, we didn’t vote, but I think it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

Wyoming, finally freed from Edra’s grip, also leaned over to look at Smosna.

“Do tell?”

She jumped to her feet and moved to Jensen and Palomo, and flopped onto their legs.

“Ok, so Agent Washington is obviously the hottest, like, there’s no contest there.”

The Chorus kids all nodded and murmured in agreement. York, on the other hand, looked like he’d been slapped.

Butch didn’t know why. Wash had always been attractive, he was just so awkward and followed Carolina so closely, that most people didn’t see him as a viable option on the MoI. Sure, the younger man wasn’t the ‘classic cut’ York was, but that didn’t stop him from drawing attention on nights they could wrestle him out of armor.

“I’m losing out to Wash? Wash is in first?”

Smosna ticked off a second finger.
“And then there’s Agent Carolina, who has that sexy ‘I’ll break you in half’ face, but she loses points for being a grump. You’ve got purple over here, who has a face for the gods, even if it is all scratched up and bruised.”

York huffed.

“Wait, you’ve never seen her out of armor, how do you know South is hot?”

“Her hotness transcends her physical form. Also, Niner? Bangin’.”

Niner snorted, but nodded.

“I’ll accept that.”

“Then we look at the other guys. Once again, Mick gets points for looking like he could snap you like a twig, but he’s got that gentle giant face that makes it seem unlikely. Then there’s whitey over there. There are not many men in the universe who can rock that majestic Mario ‘stache, but he pulls it off.”

Florida grinned and leaned forward.

“Where do I fall in this?”

“As a person who has no qualms just torturing someone to death for shits and giggles? We unanimously vote you hottest Freelancer on the truck for fear of death or dismemberment, but we would need an official vote from the citizens of Proteger to make any further statements on the matter.”

York stomped a foot against the floor.

“How does this ranking system even work? I want a do over!”

Niner rolled her eyes and tossed another pebble at York.

“You’re just mad that you’re not being voted most fuckable here the way you were on the MoI.”

Smosna looked at Niner in clear disbelief.

“I wanna know what ranking system you guys used. Look, compared to everyone else, you and Soul Patch are just, kind of boring. If it weren’t for your eye and the hole in his face indicating a previous wild type, I’d say you were both too bland to stand.”

York sputtered indignantly, while North gave Smosna a quizzical look.

“South and I have incredibly similar features, how does this work?”

“Ok, look, see the hair dye? Multiple piercings? That little scar on her lip? The casual threats of violence? The come-hither glare that makes you want to simultaneously drop to your knees and shit your pants? Yeah. So hot.”

South snorted.

“You people are fucking weird.”

Florida had to agree with that one. These soldiers were unique if nothing else, but ‘fucking weird’ was probably more appropriate.
“Damned straight!”

“Hey, don’t damn the straights! Rude!”

-4 Hours Until Arrival at Proteger-

South started shaking.

It was just a slight tremble, nothing to be worried about, according to Danvers.

But North could see the tension in Danvers shoulders as she spoke, and how she poked at her scanner more frequently, and Eta’s concerned blinking in and out of existence.

He was terrified.

It didn’t help that Theta was buzzing in the back of his brain, scared sick and hoping North could fix it. Could get them somewhere safe and warm where South wasn’t hurt and they were happy and free.

Except, they both knew better than that.

North couldn’t fix anything.

He couldn’t fix his sister, couldn’t fix the ship, and couldn’t fix his mistake of going after the wrong people at the wrong time. He was useless.

Helpless.

His right leg started to bounce, and he didn’t even bother trying to stop it. At that point, it was practically a self-soothing measure as much as anything else.

“What cha doin’?”

“Reading.”

“Oh… Whatcha readin’?”

“Oh my god. Here.”

Out of the corner of his eye, North saw that kid he punched earlier lean into Smosna’s space and attempt to read her tablet. She’d moved back into her seat after calling him and York ‘too bland to stand’, and had been mostly silent for a while.

Truthfully, he kind of liked her. She was a little sexually charged, and had a bit of a foul mouth (though who didn’t in this truck?), but she was funny and nice to everyone except York.

North still didn’t understand the logic on that one, but he had an idea.

Clearly annoyed about being pestered, she shoved her tablet into his hands with a huff.

“Oh! Is this the new Mindwars? I like those a lot. I’m so into AI stories right now.”

“Yeah, the prequel. Deals with the creation of the protector AI’s and the towers. It’s good, but it’s missing the characters I actually like.”

Andersmith shook his head, and North wondered if this was going to turn into another of those
weird conversations that made Theta embarrassed and uncomfortable in the back of his head. These soldiers really had no sense of propriety or normal conversations.

Theta, maybe you should take a nap.

-What are they reading about?-

Don’t know, but I don’t want you getting upset.

-I can’t leave you. You might get mad again, and they might really shoot you this time. I don’t want you to get hurt.-

I’m sorry, buddy. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

-You’re scared.-

It’s not an excuse to act like a psycho.

-It’s ok, I’m scared too. You should say you’re sorry.-

Yeah, maybe later though. Once we’re not…trapped in here, and South has some medical attention.

“I’m much less comfortable with the AI fiction trend than I was before. Ever since we met Santa, I can’t help but feel like a good portion of the genre is disrespectful or exploitative.”

Niner leaned in Andersmith’s direction.

“Exploitative?”

Andersmith nodded and spread out his hands, like he had a desk in front of him or something.

“The older fiction was more about AI being wrathful and murderous, modern fiction often takes on a sexualized tone. It’s…uncomfortable when an entire group is demonized or fetishized.”

Smosna tilted her head side to side a few times.

“Santa likes them though. We’ve talked about them a lot.”

Demir tapped his chin, eyes to the sky.

“Does he really like them, though? Or is he just trying to fit in? What AI honestly likes the idea of stories where AI go insane and get murdered?”

Marconi stretched and shifted the unconscious Yacavone so she rested a little more comfortably against his side.

“Um, what person likes stories where people go insane and get murdered, ‘Mr. My Girlfriend Unironically Watches Slasher Movies For Pointers’?”

“We’re not dating, we’re platonic movie friends. Bitters is the ‘Mr. My Boyfriend Unironically Watches Slasher Movies For Pointers’ in this group.”

York tapped his foot on the ground.

“Hey, AI are people too!”

“Yeah, but they’re not like, fleshy people. They’re internet people.”
North blinked.

What?

“Internet people?”

Marconi waved his hand enthusiastically near North’s head, and it took a good bit of effort to not swipe at the younger man.

“You know, people made out of computers.”

North’s face twisted up like he’d just licked a lemon, but he couldn’t help it. Marconi just referred to Theta as ‘an internet person made out of computers’, and North couldn’t decide if that was adorably naïve or deliberately offensive.

“Um…that’s not…”

Marconi shrank back in his seat, likely well aware that he’d stepped in something on that topic.

“Look, I’m not very smart, and I’m doing my best to understand and translate a very in-depth topic. Call me out if I’m being offensive, but otherwise, cut me a little slack.”

Smosna leaned forward, well over South’s torso, and stared right into North’s face.

“Ok, humans or AI whatever, that’s not the important part of this topic.”

She had balls, North had to give her that.

“Oh?”

She stood up and moved over to where Andersmith was seated.

“The important topic is, which fictional AI is on top of your list to bang?”

Aaaaand, there it is. Theta, take a nap.

-North, is she asking about…sex? Why would that even be something she wants to know about?- 

“See? Exploitative.”

“Jesus.”

She spun around and pointed at North as she collapsed into Andersmith’s lap. The man grunted, but didn’t shove her off.

“Hey, I am an adult woman with a rich fantasy life and an overexcited sex drive! These are the questions that keep me up at night.”

Bitters snorted and shook his head.

“Are we talking all fictional AI or are we narrowing to a specific field, because that’s a lot of options.”

“Well, no one is fucking Hal, that much we know.”

-You’re turning red. I can feel your embarrassment cycling up.-
Edra groaned, but sat up and pointed her finger at the room at large.

“Seriously, if anyone is choosing anyone other than GLaDOS, they’re wrong.”

Jensen shook her head.

Finally, a voice of reason in the madness. Jensen had more than shown herself to be the intelligent, polite one of the group.

“Shhe’sh sho obshesshed with Chell, though. I’d alwaysh feel like I wash in competition. ‘Did you know that Chell completed thish orgashm pathway in a quarter of the time you have? Perhapsh you shhould emulate her’.”

Or not.

-North? What’s an orgasm?- 

Something you don’t have to worry about, Theta. Just…we’ll talk about this later. Are you sure you don’t want to go to sleep?

-North, this is getting really weird.-

“Seriously though, there is only one option, guys.”

“Hmm?”

“Monika. Just Monika.”

The truck burst into laughter, and North just could not, anymore.

“Hey, um… can we tone this down a little? My AI is…well, he’s a child? And this overt sex talk is kind of making him uncomfortable.”

Smosna slipped off of Andersmith’s lap and onto the floor.

“Dude, what?”

Palomo choked in his seat.

“Oh my god, we’ve been doing adult talk for this whole trip!”

Folami snarled and slapped North’s arm hard.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

Jensen’s voice dripped with horror and humiliation.

“He’sh a kid?! How doesh that even work?! Oh my goshh, I am sho embarasshed!”

-She’s upset!-

I see that, Theta.

-Fix it!-

North tried to smile, though he had no idea how successful he was.
“I don’t know exactly how it’s a thing, but Theta is a child, and I’m not going to lie, he’s been buzzing unhappily in the back of my head for a while now. I now get to explain what an orgasm is to a child, so thanks for that.”

Bitters swore and Andersmith shook his head as he helped Smosna back to her feet.

“Shit.”

“We are so sorry!”

Smosna groaned.

“I am usually so good at keeping it toned down when there are little ones nearby!”

Danvers patted Smosna’s leg as she made her way back to her seat.

“Well, to be fair, this is an invisible little one that lives inside of this man’s brain.”

“Still, a chitlin is a chitlin. And chitlins must be protected.”

Ramirez looked over to Bitters.

“Or do we allow AI children to protect themselves? What are the threats to AI children? Are there enough AI children for there to be a study on this?”

Demir bounced in his seat.

“Could…could we look this up? Please?”

“If we make it home alive, we can put a request in with communications. For now, try to keep it PG.”

And now North just felt weird.

“Well, I mean, general swearing isn’t going to bother him. South is my sister, after all.”

“Go fuck a railroad spike, you fucking dick.”

“See? It’s the…other stuff that’s concerning.”

They nodded and settled back down.

Palomo shrugged in his seat.

“Do you guys ever wonder if we’re being really gross and like speciesist or something? Like…this is kind of a messed-up topic if you think too much.”

“Hey, it’s not like this is the only time I’d choose Monika over a different fictional character, human or AI.”

Smosna shrank into her seat, and North really felt bad. It wasn’t as if she could have known Theta was a kid. I mean, yeah, they interacted for all of ten minutes, but if they had an AI they were used to, maybe that one didn’t present like an adult either?

“Santa really doesn’t mind. We’ve totally talked about this before.”

Danvers leaned over and patted Smosna’s leg again. What was up with these people and touching
each other’s’ legs?

“Yeah, ok, but Santa is a non-human AI construct, who has been living in isolation for who knows how long. He’s also a study sample of one. It’s not exactly fair. Just because he doesn’t see the problem, that doesn’t mean it’s not actually a problem.”

Or maybe their AI was based on an alien? What the fuck?

“Well, we have a much wider base group to work with now.”

“Provided they’re willing to give us the time. We can’t exactly force them to sate our curiosity, no matter how potent, and trust me, the curiosity is real on my end.”

York leaned forward.

“Well, Delta’s already freaking out about having a science friend, so he’s probably game. Yes, Delta, I am well aware that’s not what you said, but it’s the closest to being a geek I’m willing to get.”

North rolled his eyes.

“York, you’re an idiot.”

“But I’m your idiot, aren’t I?”

“Unfortunately. At least until someone else comes along and claims responsibility for you.”

South snorted.

“And you wonder why people thought the two of you were fucking.”

North didn’t bother responding.

Bitters sidled up next to Smosna and tapped her shoulder.

“Hey, how’s your neck?”

“Hurts. Getting thrown from that jeep really fucked me up.”

“Have you taken anything?”

“Doctor says it’s fine, it’s just tension and shit at this point.”

“Sounds like you need a massage.”

“You offering?”

“Only if you want the pain to get worse instead of better.”

“Yeah, you do seem to suck at the pampering stuff, unless it’s your boyfriend. Then you suddenly have magic fingers.”

“In this case, no, I really do just suck at massages. My skills are in different areas, but we both know someone who’s really good with her hands.”

“Bow Chicka Wow Wow.”
Bitters flipped Palomo off as the younger man snickered.

“Hey Katie?”

“My going rate ish eight cshocolate puddingsh, or five butterschhotch puddingsh.”

“Jeeze, that’s steep.”

“Yesh, but I’m that good.”

Jensen leaned over and groped the air in Jensen’s direction.

“What’s the bestie discount get me? I don’t have any pudding. I had to get a new wrist brace after that volleyball screwup two weeks ago.”

“Yeah, and I…kind of blew my stash on Matthews present. Don’t tell him though, or he’ll lose his shit.”

“You are both sho bad with budgeting. I don’t do iou’sh and I don’t trade favorsh. It leadsh to friendsh getting favorsh and everyone elshe getting shhat on. Alsho, do you want to topple the economy?”

“Are you sure I can’t trade you sex favors? I’m really good with my-“

“JESSHICA!”

“What?!”

“Little earsh!”

She sighed and Bitters patted her shoulder.

So much for trying not to scar you.

-It’s embarrassing, but they’re kind of funny.-

Oh boy, we’d better nip this in the bud, quickly. The last thing I want is you looking up to them.

-What’s wrong with that?- 

Aside from them being crass and terrible at being soldiers?

“Sorry, Jess. Katie’s a tough nut to crack. Can you make it home?”

“If I want to sit here and be miserable. It’s not like getting home will help either, I’m still hella broke.”

Smosna sighed again, longer this time.

“I have a copy of ‘A Clockwork Orange’.”

Jensen went still.

“Are you sherioush?”

Folami choked.
“Seriously? And you haven’t gotten it scanned yet?”

“Yeah. I found it when we were in Armonia. It’s from a college class, the person took notes in it and translated the first three chapters. I mean, you don’t really need it translated, you figure out the language pretty quick, but it’s there. I’ve been waiting to get the book in, because I didn’t want to…you know…lose it.”

Jensen stared at Smosna.

“You can’t give me that.”

“Katie, I’m hurting really badly, and I don’t have enough to bribe a doctor to see me out of turn. Please?”

“Oh for goodness shake, come here.”

Smosna tore her helmet off with a grin and jumped to sit on the floor in front of Jensen.

“I’m not going to make you give me a college texshtbook, and I’m not going to make you pay me when you’re in thish much pain, but you will let me borrow it. Three weeksh, minimum. I want to be able to analyzshe the shhit out of it.”

“Thank you, Katie.”

Florida watched them with a critical eye, and North tried not to be concerned. Sure, the man made lots of really uncomfortable comments, but as far as North knew, he’d not been big on actually making a move.

Maybe being married had tempered him a little.

“So…you trade neck rubs for books?”

“I trade shome booksh for neckrubsh, but only with people I trusht. I’ve been trying to get my handsh on a copy of that book for almosht a year now, and knowing that Volleyball hash been holding out on me, kind of pissesh me off.”

Bitters sat down in Smosna’s seat, arms crossed over his chest.

“In the early days of the war someone wiped out a huge chunk of the digital archives. We basically have nothing that was stored that way on the planet. You want to read a book or watch a movie or play a videogame? Better hope there’s a physical copy floating around, or someone recently has taken the time to archive it.”

“But even the archivesh aren’t connected becaushe of all the damage to the planet’sh infrastrucshure, sho if shomeone shcanned it at a bashe I’ve never been to, I can’t acsshessh it from home. I wash on the waiting lisht for it in Armonia, but then we blew up the cshity, and all the librariessh with it.”

Andersmith’s voice took on a soft tone.

“There were three colleges, twelve high schools, and four library hubs around the city, not including private collections and whatever didn’t get grabbed during the evacuation.”

“It wash a tragedy.”

“We’re working on connecting the digital archives we’ve cobbled together, but honestly it’s not
quite as important as making our food rations last a few weeks longer.”

Jensen moved her hands across Smosna’s shoulders and she made a pained noise.

“You seriously need to see someone about your neck. Bittersh? Where is the nearest person who does back stuff?”

“How should I know?”

“You always know.”

“No, Matthews always knows. You guys just make me ask him because you think it’s funny.”

Jensen shook her head.

“Doesn’t matter, I don’t have anything to trade for a few weeks at least.”

“I know a person who’d loan you supplies for a bribe basket. We’ll talk after we get home.”

“Awesome. Hey, Bitters? Which doctor is most susceptible to bribes?”

Danvers shook her head.

“You don’t need to ask Bitters about that one, it’s Schmidt.”

“Really?”

“Well, in Proteger at least. Can’t say for the other bases.”

Folami snorted.

“I can, and Schmidt is absolutely most willing to take bribes. It’s why you can’t get prescriptions from him anymore. If he thinks you need something, you’re gonna have to see someone higher up the food chain. I’d go with Crisp. She’s a tough nut to crack, but she’ll help you out if you need it.”

Florida shook his head, and North had to agree. Why see a doctor who couldn’t help you and was known for being corrupt enough to be caught taking that many bribes?

“That seems very inefficient.”

“Well,” Folami shrugged, “He’s a good doctor, he’s just really willing to accept bribes. Like, to the point that he has to be monitored. He’s someone I’d be willing to let stitch me up, provided someone else is in charge of medicating me.”

Jensen made a little move with her hand and Smosna groaned in relief.

“Katie, you’re the best. Why aren’t we dating?”

“Because I have standards?”

“Bitch!”

-North! They like books! Do you think they’d like some of mine? I have lots!-

North tilted his head to the side.

I don’t know, but I can always ask.
“Hey, um…”

Katie glared at him.

“There ish really noshing you can shay to me to make me want to acshtually have a convershation to you.”

“Theta wants you know that he’s got access to a small collection of books from the Library of Congress, if you’re interested. No neck rubs required.”

The Chorus soldier froze and collectively turned to look at North.

He was a little unsettled by the lightning focus.

They looked…hungry.

“I’m sorry,” Bitters said, “Did you say the Library of Congress? As in, the largest digital archive to exist in the galaxy? The place where literally every piece of digital literature created by the human race and many other alien species is stored? It takes up like 500 zettabytes and still growing? That Library of Congress?”

The man actually leaned forward in his seat, and it dawned on North that this was as good an in as any. Who knew literature would be the key to making people not despise his very existence?

I think they’re gonna like your books, Theta.

-I don’t have the whole library. Are they gonna be mad?-

I think that the fact that you’re willing to share your books is going to be enough to make them very, very happy.

“Yes, that Library of Congress. Granted, he’s only got about…ten terabytes worth of books stored, but that’s a nice chunk right there. Maybe he’s got something you guys would like.”

There was an audible gasp from the room at large. Smosna moaned softly.

“Oh my god, ten terabytes of books? That is literally the hottest thing I have ever heard in my entire life. Oh my god, why are we wearing armor right now?”

“Well, hold up. Theta’s a kid, so I don’t know how much of it is going to be all that interesting. It might be nothing but translations of Winnie the Pooh.”

Edra turned to Wyoming and stared. He shook his head with a chuckle.

“Sorry, I have only recently been reunited with my AI. While I have a personal collection of digital entertainment, it is not nearly as extensive as my friends.”

Florida and Niner both shrugged.

“Got no AI, and my husband’s got all our stuff.”

“No little internet people, and my shit was in the ship’s brain. I have a feeling we’re not getting any of that back.”

York laughed and nudged Bitters.
“Well then, I guess it’s only fair to mention that I’m kind of a packrat. I’ve got a shit ton of external hard drives filled with books, movies, tv shows, and all kinds of stuff, packed away with our crap. As long as nothing was damaged in the fall, we’ve got enough entertainment to last us the rest of our natural lives and never get bored.”

Smosna groaned and tried to stand up, only for Jensen to force her back down onto the ground by her shoulders.

“Oh my god. I want to make out with you so bad right now, and other inappropriate things. Quick, say something smart!”

“Jesshica! The AI are children! There ish a child in hish head! Do you really want to make out with the shmart ten-year-old?”

“Aaaaaand, lady boner dead.”

North actually managed a laugh, a proper laugh.

After the shit day they’d had, the rollercoaster of emotions, the injuries, North hadn’t expected to be able to laugh, but there it was. This clusterfuck of weird soldiers managed to pull one out of him.

“Theta’s really the only one that identifies as a child, the rest present as adults.”

“And Delta has thousands of textbooks in here. Honestly, it’s a little painful when he starts getting his thinking brain on.”

“Hauah? Mnmnmnna.”

“Does this mean I move up on the list?”

“No, but Delta might end up with his own slot.”

York’s face twisted in disappointment and North laughed into his fist hard.

“What? Why?”

“Dude, knowledge is sooooo fucking sexy. There’s a reason Captain Simmons is so lusted after, and it has nothing to do with his derpy robot face. God, can you imagine that many books in one place? I could just sit with my tablet and read until my body gave out.”

She made another obscene noise and Bitters knocked his fist against the wall.

“Ok, seriously Smosna, we have a child in here listening to you, and he does not need to be listening to your private time noises. Either sober up, shut up, or go outside.”

“Fuck you, Bitters.”

Danvers laughed, just a little.

“Don’t tempt him and get his penis cut off, Smosna.”

Bitters stood up and threw a dismissive hand into the air.

“You’re all evil and I hate you.”
“Love you, too.”

The truck hit a hard bump and Niner gasped.

North turned just in time to see her slip down in her seat and flail.

“Oh hell, seriously? Just what I needed today, a fucked up back on top of my bruised up hips.”

Niner reached for the bars above herself to adjust her position and slipped further down in the seat. How she intended to reach them when they were fairly high up even seated correctly, North didn’t know.

Maine and Florida both latched onto her arms and tried to keep her in place.

“Fuck! I swear to Buddha, if you fucking touch me without my explicit permission, I will bite your goddamned hands off and shove them up your asses, friends of mine or not! Get away from me!”

Florida shook his head.

“Niner, you’re falling. Now is not the time to be proud.”

“If I fall, let me fucking fall! I am a grown-ass woman and I am capable of making my own decisions! No one else fucking touch me!”

She clawed at the seat and tried to right herself, but without the support from her legs, she mostly made the situation worse, before she sighed and held her arms out.

“Fine. I give up.”

Andersmith stood to look at the chair they’d stowed at the front of the truck in the space between Florida’s bench and where Jensen sat. He examined the sides, likely trying to figure out if the sharp bits could be come off.

“I don’t suppose the spikes are removable, are they?”


He grunted and stood.

“Alright, well, that makes life harder. Bitters? Palomo? Would you like to play a game?”

Palomo bounced to his feet and shifted back and forth.

“Poor life choices?”

“I was thinking ‘flying leap’ mixed with ‘what are you morons doing putting your faces so close to tires’.”

“Oh, do I have to actually put my face there, or can I swing in from the middle? Also, what do we win?”

“Standard rules apply, bonus points for flair, since stealth is impossible in this scenario. I will personally fund the prizes.”

York blinked.
“What’s happening?”

Bitters nodded and rolled his neck.

“I like this plan. Andersmith, Jensen, you’re in charge. We’ll be back in five. Anyone does anything aggressive?”

“Shoot them.” Andersmith gave a weary sigh.

“Anyone do anything weird?”

“Shhoot them.” Jensen’s response was far more perky.

“Anyone does anything you don’t like?”

“Shoot them.” The jeep at large responded.

York leaned forward.

“I’m sensing a pattern here.”

Bitters looked York dead in the eye.

“And if you get annoyed with the backtalk? Just shoot them. Five minutes.”

Bitters unlocked a hatch in the roof and hauled himself out of the jeep.

“If you guys hear screaming and feel a heavy bump? That just means I’m winning! Later dudes!”

Palomo climbed Bitters empty seat, jumped to catch the lip of the hole, and hauled himself out.

“Bitters! Wait! How am I supposed to keep you from dying if you abandon me?!”

There was silence for a moment, and then the sound of footsteps running across the roof.

Wyoming looked to Andersmith.

“Just…what are they doing?”

Ramirez looked out one of the small windows.

“Sticking their landings is what! Go bitches, go!”

“It’s a healthy competition. Ramirez, would you keep score?”

“So far so good! Oh, Palomo’s hand slipped! No, wait, he’s waiving, nevermind.”

Florida looked out the window.

“Did they just climb onto the roof, jump into a jeep…and they’re now climbing onto the side of the supply truck behind us…Oh, no sorry. They’re climbing underneath the supply truck. That looks like fun.”

Edra gave him a disbelieving look.

“You’ve never climbed the side of a truck before?”
“Oh, no, we’ve all done more intricate and dangerous maneuvers than that, but I’ve never seen someone as poorly coordinated as that Palomo boy try something like that and do so well.”

Demir bounced in his seat.

“We practice a lot.”

“You practice this?”

Folami shrugged.

“Hey, when you’re not busy shooting people, life gets boring.”

“Oh, that I completely understand! It’s why I took up knitting in my spare time.”

Jensen blinked and looked up at him.

“You knit?”

“I do. I enjoy it, as well. Is that a problem?”

She shook her head.

“Not even a little bit, dude. You any good? Because I think you’d fit in really well with the knitting club, and they’re always looking for new members.”

York snorted.

“You seriously have a club devoted to knitting?”

Folami grabbed one of Niner’s pebbles and chucked it at York’s chest. North couldn’t blame her for that one, in one fell swoop, the man managed to piss on any goodwill he’d managed to create.

“Don’t knock it. Knitting is useful, and it keeps you from doing stupid things. Try it! Every time you wanna open your mouth to make a stupid fucking comment, knit a sweater instead. People will like you more.”

“I’m not making myself any friends, am I?”

“No.”

“Damn.”

A loud ‘thunk’ came from the roof, and Palomo stuck his head through the hole.

“Um, Miss…Agent Pilot person?”

“It’s 479er, brat.”

“Right, sorry. Agent 479er, we can’t get the support chair free. Someone didn’t stack the crates right and they blocked off the emergency supplies. We can get some straps for the seat though, it’s not the most comfortable thing in the world, but that should help you stay upright. Is that ok, or should we keep trying to get the seat support?”

The truck hit another bump and Palomo squawked and gripped the sides of the hole as he nearly toppled in.
“THAT WAS SCARY!”

“Shit kid, whatever it takes to get you back inside without falling and dying. And I’m not an agent. 479er, or just plain Niner.”

“Got it.”

He pulled his head out.

“Hey Bitters, she said it’s ok!...No, I don’t know what size is best, she’s not wearing armor! How am I supposed to judge that?!”

He was quiet for a moment.

“I am NOT going to ask her what her chest size is! I value not being mutilated!”

“Smart kid.”

Danvers nodded.

“A lot more restrained than Captain Tucker. He’d have already asked you what your bra size was, just for his own personal use.”

Niner’s expression twisted in disgust.

“Gross.”

“Yeah, he thinks he’s all suave and stuff, but really, he’s just a big dorky frat boy. He’s a more likable version of York.”

“Ouch!”

North’s head cocked to the side.

“Is Captain Tucker a friend of Wash’s?”

“Yeah, they’re Blue team together. Agent Washington is Captain Tucker’s roommate.”

“And Wash hasn’t killed the guy yet? No one was stupid enough to make York share a room with anyone during the project, and if this guy’s half as bad, Wash must be losing his mind.”

“Hey! Come on, North, we’re supposed to be friends!”

North shook his head.

“Sorry, but I’m cutting my losses. I’m already in deep shit without being associated with you.”

And judging by the laughter, North had finally done something right. The kids did seem to understand playful meanness didn’t mean actual meanness. Wonderful.

North could work with teasing. He had a twin sister and many years of being ‘the responsible one’. Teasing was a skill he’d honed for years.

A loud noise sounded from overhead. Ramirez crowed.

“That sounded like a stumble! Palomo may have actually won this round!”
Palomo stuck his head in the hole again, this time with a cheery wave.

“Ok, Bitters survived, so we’re coming down! Try not to get stepped on!”

Palomo lowered himself down as best as he could, but his legs dangled and he didn’t drop. He swung around a little bit, clearly trying to reach something with his feet and North…didn’t know what to do with that.

Yacavone woke up and snorted at him.

“Come on, Palomo, you don’t have a problem jumping on trucks, but you can’t drop two feet?”

“Back off, Cshissy.”

Andersmith stepped up and grabbed Palomo around the waist.

“I’ve got you, Palomo, you’re good.”

Palomo let go of the hole. Andersmith lowered him to the ground and patted his shoulder. He ducked his head, clearly embarrassed, and rubbed the back of his neck.

“It’s fine, Katie. I’m just trying not to break an ankle again. That was so stupid last time.”

“It’s ok to be wary. When you land wrong on delicate joints, bad things can happen.”

Palomo reached up and accepted what looked like the seat straps for a fighter plane, and moved out of the way.

Bitters banged on the roof.

“Coming in, don’t get under me.”

He dropped through the hole and landed in a crouch that, North could admit, looked pretty cool but he knew from personal experience was murder on your knees, and casually brushed off his armor.

“Here we go,” Palomo said cheerily, “This’ll help! It’s designed for carting back soldiers who’ve had their legs blown off but need to stay upright.”

Bitter snatched the straps from Palomo and nudged him back toward his seat.

“Tact, Palomo. Learn it. Live it. Love it. Sorry, Agent Niner, we couldn’t get to the actual spinal support, some dumbass blocked it off. Still, this’ll keep you from slipping.”

Niner held her hand out to take the straps, but Bitters didn’t hand them over. She cocked an unimpressed eyebrow at him.

“You gonna strap me in, pretty boy, or are you gonna let me take care of it myself?”

Bitters shook his head.

“At least let me secure the hooks, then you can buckle yourself in. These are kind of a bitch to work with and two of them will have to clip in specific spots behind your shoulders.”

-2 Hours Until Arrival at Proteger-

The whole truck was exhausted and tense from the long, slow trip in the transport truck. Sure, it
was definitely designed more with comfort in mind than actual military movement, but the truck was far too full to really allow the riders to be comfortable on a long trip. The Freelancers were all tense as they watched the tree lines as well.

Niner was not super excited to spend another however many hours strapped into the truck. At least the weird strap system didn’t make her feel like a toddler or anything. They felt more like the straps the regular planes she’d flown years before had. A little dignity in all of this mess was enough to lift her spirits a bit.

And she was secure, which meant there were fewer eyes on her. She hadn’t realized how often the kids were checking in on her, until they’d decided she was ok.

She did notice Bitters as he stared out the porthole, silent and clearly upset, and all of the Chorus soldiers seemed to be monitoring him heavily. Andersmith kept standing up and patting his shoulder or bumping their helmets together.

Niner really wished she understood their sign language better.

The kids had started tossing signs around behind his back like crazy, but since none of them were Folami, hungry, tired, yes, or no, Niner had no goddamned idea what they were saying. She’d bet Florida an armor polish that they were at least partially talking about the solemn turn the trip had taken, and their orange clad friend.

Andersmith stood up and laid a gentle hand on Bitters’ shoulder.

“Bitters, you’ve been staring for thirty minutes now. What’s the matter?”

He didn’t move, didn’t look away from the porthole, just kept watching the trees. Andersmith kept his hand on Bitters shoulder and didn’t move.

Slowly, Bitters crumpled against the wall and tapped his fist on his knee.

“Just feeling like shit for getting Matthews caught up in the bullshit. We were supposed to…Fuck, it’s not like he turns 19 every day…Can’t do anything right, can I?”

Palomo sighed and slumped down in his seat and leaned on Jensen.

“Yeah, and we finally got him excited about it, too. I mean, how often do we get to break out the sugar and chocolate rations?”

Folami growled and pointed a finger at Palomo.

“You assholes made him a cake and didn’t tell anyone?! Are you kidding?!”

“Hey, do you know how much of a trade that was? It was like, super tiny, and we still have to play interference on Captain Grif for a month!”

“I,” Bitters grunted, “I have to play interference on Captain Grif for a month. You three didn’t have to agree to anything.”

Wyoming sort of leaned in while still managing to stay in the space allotted to him. He was good at that, drawing attention without technically breaking any rules. Edra’d grabbed his hand again and started squeezing rhythmically and hissing every now and again. His goddamned hand must have been sore, but he didn’t try to pull away or pawn her off to anyone else.
Seriously, how were York and North doing a worse job of making friends than Agent ‘Knock Knock, Whose There?’ Wyoming?

“Was it…his birthday?”

Bitters looked over; face unreadable because of his helmet, but Niner had spent years around emotionally constipated idiots in helmets, and that soldier was wrecked. That was guilt and sadness personified in tan and orange spray-paint if she’d ever seen it.

“He turned nineteen two days ago. It’s always a struggle getting him to agree to celebrate anything related to himself. He never wants to celebrate milestones, but I managed to wear him down. We had plans.”

Bitters slumped over and pressed his face against the wall.

“I think the whole ‘ship falling from the sky’ thing killed the mood, though.”

York sighed and gave his ‘really, I’m a nice guy, and I’m being super nice’ smile, which Niner was certain would have a pretty big margin of failure with this crowd. Niner grabbed one of the pebbles Folami had started hoarding for her right after the first throw and rolled it slowly between her fingertips, ready to strike.

“I’m sorry we wrecked your plans, but there’s time to make his next birthday better.”

The soldiers all tensed as one. To his credit, York realized immediately on this one that he had said something very wrong.

“Shit, what did I say?”

Andersmith’s grip on Bitters’ shoulder tightened as Bitters took a long, angry breath. Man, Niner could hear it from her seat, it sounded like a teenage boy right before he had a temper tantrum and threw a chair.

“Antoine, no. No yelling.”

But Bitters didn’t throw a anything.

Good, because the only things he wouldn’t have to work to throw were weapons and people, and neither of those were a particularly good idea.

He pulled his friend’s hand off and turned around completely to face York.

“There isn’t going to be a next birthday.”

York looked like he was about to open his mouth again, but Niner really didn’t think his shitty rep would make anything he said better, even if he had a point. She tossed the pebble.

This one smacked him in the nose.

“God DAMN IT NINER! Quit doing that!”

Niner grinned and waved, then waved at Bitters.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the war is basically over at this point, right? Yeah, ok, things were really fucked up before, and they aren’t going to get better immediately, but your planet is a heck of a lot better protected now that the UNSC is aware of what’s happening. There’s no reason to
expect not to have a lot more birthdays and holidays and shit like that.”

Bitters took another one of those deep breaths, and…maybe she was looking at this wrong, because he didn’t look like he wanted to punch something anymore.

That look, right there?

That was a slump of defeat. You only wear that shit when you feel helpless.

Fuck, that was a look Niner didn’t expect to see on Bitters.

Cocky, sure, bitchy, hell yes, helpless?

She really didn’t like that look on him.

And she really didn’t like how it had managed to spread to all the soldiers in tan, and the medics.

“Matthews was caught in a chemical bombing when he was eight. The doctors gave him four years, max, before his whole body started to fall apart on him. He’s made it this far by the skin of his teeth, thanks to some intensive medications, and some very dedicated doctors, but the medicine ran out months ago, and he he’s living on luck, prayers, and borrowed time. This was it. He’s not gonna make it to twenty.”

Bitters rolled a shoulder and resolutely turned back to the porthole to watch the tree line.

Oh. Poor guy.

Marconi leaned over and patted Bitters on the shoulder.

“You and Matthews are close right? I know everyone keeps teasing about you two dating and stuff, but that’s not super reliable for information.”

Bitters nodded.

“Roommates. I took responsibility for him after his parents died.”

“That’s a big deal, how long has that been a thing?”

Bitters blew out a breath.

“Eight years now.”

Niner really wished she could pull him to the side and talk. There was something that had been bothering her for a while now.

“What does that mean, you took responsibility for him? This planet doesn’t have next of kin rules or children’s homes?”

Smosna shook her head and shifted her shoulders as she spoke, her voice almost in a singsong tone. She was trying to rile him up.

“Matthews is basically Bitters’ child bride. They’re practically married.”

It worked.

Bitters turned around and pointed viciously at her.
“You are fucking evil. It’s not like that. When his parents died, he needed someone to look after him, and we weren’t doing orphanages anymore, because those kept getting blown up. Both of us were orphans, I’d been taking care of kids for a while, and he needed more one on one care. It made sense. Also, I was fifteen at the time, soooo less of a child bride and more of an arranged marriage, but without the actual marriage. That’s only a little disappointing.”

Folami snagged one of Niner’s pebbles and threw it at Bitters leg. He looked down at the rock as it plinked harmlessly off of his armor, and she grinned cheekily at him.

“Why aren’t you married? You’re both legal at this point.”

“He’s paranoid that I’d only be marrying him because I feel bad for him or that I’d choose to be celibate and alone forever after he died, and I’m not convinced the legal protections would make enough difference to push. It’s not like anyone’s getting benefits if one of us croaks.”

Palomo leaned forward.

“It actually makes things less protected. Have you heard some of the things the Reds and Blues say about gay people? Total bigot central.”

“To be fair,” Andersmith pointed out, “They don’t seem to mean things in a deliberately offensive way, more of a passively offensive way, and they do seem to be fairly progressive once you discourage the more…unpleasant language. I am fairly certain the majority of the comments come from having their heteronormative machismo drilled into them during adolescence.”

“At least Captain Caboose doesn’t make nasty comments about women.”

Niner’s ears perked up.

“I’m sorry, Captain who?”

Jensen pressed her hands to the sides of her helmet.

“You shhould really ashk him, Bittersh.”

“We’ve talked about it. He doesn’t want to. I’m not going to push.”

“You ashked for legal and medical purposhes, but did you ashk about marrying him becaushe you want to?”

Bitters stared at her hard.

“He knows I wouldn’t have bothered asking if I didn’t want to.”

Folami snorted.

“Seriously? You are such a fucking loser, Bitters. It’s no wonder Matthews stalks around base staking his claim if you won’t even tie the boy down properly. Or up, I don’t think he’s that picky.”

“Ok, you don’t get to talk about him that way.”

“He is like half a step away from just pissing on your leg in the mess hall. I’m tempted to pay Jessica to shove her boobs in your face if I didn’t think he might actually murder her and bury her in a shallow grave.”
Smansa tittered a little and tapped her feet against the ground.

“Hey, if I didn’t think he’d rip my throat out with his teeth, I’d gladly shove my bouncy bits into Bitters’ face.”

“I don’t understand where you get this impression of him. He’s not dangerous. Matthews is…he’s a fucking bunny rabbit.”

“Yeah, The Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog. Lookit the bones!”

The niggling sensation in the back of Niner’s head lit up in a…less than pleasant way. She’d been trying to ignore it, to focus on other things, but it would not leave her alone, and their comments only made it worse.

“How…much of an age difference is there, if you two were just waiting for him to be of age?”

Bitters shrugged, cool as a cucumber, but Florida poked Niner’s side, and if that wasn’t a sign, she didn’t know what was.

“Three years. His parents died when he was twelve, but seriously, it’s not as weird as their making it out to be. He just turned nineteen, and we didn’t start anything romantic until he was seventeen. It’s been a pretty Victorian style romance, even if we do share quarters.”

Demir giggled and pressed his hand to his helmet, as if that could actually cut off the noise.

“‘Victorian style romance’? Does he show you his ankles?”

“Oh absolutely, but only after I’ve read to him and we take a turn about the room together.”

Niner’s jaw dropped.

“Are you fucking kidding me? How long has he been serving?”

Several of the Chorus soldiers tensed, but Palomo shrugged and leaned into Florida’s space to get closer to Niner. The boy clearly had no concept of stranger danger. It was either that, or he was oblivious to the man asking people to call him daddy.

“You do realize the planet has been in a full blown civil war for 15 years, right? And I mean, like active destruction of major population centers sort of thing, not just fighting in a general sense, whole cities being wiped out on the regular. We’ve basically killed all the grownups.”

She turned to Bitters, and tried very, very hard to keep her expressions to herself.

“How old are you?”

Bitters crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you not capable of basic math?”

“Humor me. How. Old?”

Bitters shrugged, but every passing second made him look more and more defensive.

“Twenty-two.”

“You’re…twenty-two?”
“Yup.”

She took a breath.

Then another.

Then another.

“OH MY GOD! I COULD HAVE BIRTHED YOU! HOW DOES SOMEONE SO FUCKING TINY HOLD A GUN THAT BIG?!?!”

Niner’s whole body rocked forward in an almost involuntary motion. Sure, she couldn’t exactly grab Bitters, what with not being in the chair and being strapped down, but that didn’t stop her from swiping at the air.

There was no way, NO WAY, that she was just going to sit and watch BABIES playing soldier! This was utter BULLSHIT!

Bitters flung himself backwards and flailed.

“Stay away from me, you crazy bitch!”

Palomo laughed and fell into Florida’s shoulder. Folami, Demir, even Jensen joined in on the gigglefest, and Niner seriously didn’t understand it.

Did they think it was a game? That she wouldn’t kidnap their baby asses and lock them away somewhere safe the moment she was free?

She had Freelancers on her side. She could get away with murder. A massive kidnapping of the planet’s youth would be a cake walk.

“Oh my god,” Palomo squealed, “that’s great! I’m sixteen!”

Niner froze. She could taste bile.

As one, the Freelancers turned to look at him. Florida actually pushed the kid (kid? FUCKING KID?!) off of him, and forced him to sit up straight.

“I’m sorry, did you just say you were sixteen? As in sixteen years old?”

Florida’s voice was like ice, not a tone he usually took on, and everyone noticed. The boy stopped giggling, they all did, and he started to fidget nervously in his seat.

“Yeah.”

Niner pointed to the space in front of her.

“Come here.”

“Um…”

“Come. Here.”

Palomo stood up slowly and shuffled in front of Niner much like a toddler hoping that if they were slow enough, the adult would forget that they were angry. She motioned for him to get closer, so he leaned in a little.
She took Palomo’s helmet in her hands and made sure she stared him right in the eyes.

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

He cocked his head to the side.

“I can’t…make myself not be sixteen.”

Niner could feel her mom voice coming out. Her tone grew tense, her words were clipped, and she was not going to miss the opportunity later to chew someone out for this. What fucking military thinks it is ok to put children in charge of guns?

“You are not allowed to wear armor and wave guns around. You are too fucking young.”

“Hey, if I’m old enough to be blown up, I’m old enough to fight to prevent being blown up.”

Niner screeched and shook him back and forth by the helmet.

“STOP! YOU’RE A BABY! BABIES AREN’T SUPPOSED TO HOLD GUNS!!!”

“Oh my god! Why are we screaming into my ears?!”

Palomo tried to pry her grip off, but Niner was not going to let him get away. Didn’t he understand that this wasn’t a game?! His LIFE was on the line!

Andersmith jumped up and helped Palomo get free. He stumbled back to his seat and whined at Jensen until she patted him on the shoulder.

“The rules for enlistment used to be the same as the rest of colonized space, eighteen was the minimum, but after several years of wanton destruction and mass annihilation of the population, that age was reduced to sixteen. There are, however, many who go in younger if they can get away with it. The youngest officially recognized underage soldier was twelve years old, but there are rumors of children as young as six taking up weapons.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

Bitters nodded and pulled a knee up to his chest.

“I joined after my big growth spurt when I was fourteen. When I turned fifteen, and they asked me to take Matthews on, he was allowed to come on base with me because I claimed responsibility for him. He didn’t get his own armor until he was sixteen, and only then because I didn’t have the ability to stop him. Still there are perks of being military. Better healthcare than hiding in the caves or the older standing cities.”

Niner looked around the truck, thought about the voices she’d heard, the faces she’d seen, and realized she’d been a goddamned idiot.

She had been a

GOD.

DAMNED.
“Oh my god, what is wrong with this planet?”

“War. War ish what’sh wrong with thish planet.”

Folami reached up and held out a hand to Niner.

Niner took her hand and squeezed it. Fuck, how young was she? How young was Danvers? Edra? Orwell? These people, if they were kids, how much medical training could they possibly have? Guns and explosives were one thing, science had been streamlining weapons for easy use for thousands of years, but medicine? That took time.

The same thought must have occurred to North, because his face took on a fresh look of horror.

Danvers caught the look and sighed.

“I’m twenty, but I’ve been in medical training since I was ten.”

North sputtered.

“T-ten?”

“My mom got hurt and my dad was serving full time, so I started reading the textbooks and sneaking into classes. No one stopped me, because I wasn’t causing any problems, and well. Now I’m here.”

South grabbed Davers’ wrist.

“And you’re…not a doctor?”

“It’s complicated. We haven’t had an active accredited medical school in years, so I don’t have the official title, no. Also, my services are better utilized in the field. I can perform most lifesaving surgeries in the hospitals, but honestly, I prefer to help people out here, rather than staying at home behind walls. I promise you, my training is solid steel, and you can talk to the admin staff when we get home. I’m not a rookie, I know what I’m doing. You’re in good hands, South. You’ve literally got nothing wrong with you that I haven’t seen before. It’s gonna suck, but you will make it.”

She smiled, pained, but also really relieved. It looked like North was too.

“Holding you to that.”

Florida tapped his foot against the floor rapidly and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked about as comfortable as Niner felt.

“I heard you lot talking about being young and making references to being teenagers, but it honestly didn’t click that you were being serious.”

“Well, dear, does it make you uncomfortable, knowing you were propositioning children? I cannot wait for this story to be everywhere, it will certainly bolster our already pitiful reputations.”

Folami rolled her eyes.

“Well, a lot of us are over 18, most of us are over 18. There are even some people who are older than thirty.”
Niner choked.

“That’s your definition of old? Jesus, we are all older than that!”

The soldiers paused.

“Wow, really? I mean, yeah, you all look kind of old, but.”

“Wow, really nice Edra. I’m sure Wyoming really wants to hold hands with someone who calls him old.”

“Sorry, I just can’t imagine even being alive that long.”

“Once again, nice.”

Niner shook her head.

“This is insane.”

“Oh yeah, and with the amount of survivors on the planet right now, we’re looking at planetary extinction if we can’t bolster our population numbers.”

“Well I mean these days you could get spaceships full of outsiders to come and we like immigrants so I figure, give us your poor your tired your hungry huddled masses? Is that how that goes?”

“OMG crack a history book.”

“Ok, there is so much history out there it is ridiculous and we may speak English, but that doesn’t make us American. Maybe I’m more interested in African history, or Mexican, you don’t know.”

“I think you’re just covering being lazy.”

Niner snapped her fingers angrily.

“Circle back and focus. How long have you all been fighting?”

Andersmith tapped the wall next to him.

“The legal age limit to join the military on most planets is 18, we have a lowered legal limit of 16 and we tried really hard to enforce that, but there are instances of people under the age of 16 taking on armor and fighting in the war, generally they are children who are considered emancipated.”

Niner’s face hardened.

“Meaning orphans?”

“Right.”

“You can just get armor by being an orphan?”

Danvers shook her head.

“No, you can’t. It’s more complicated than that.”

Palomo snorted.
“It’s really not, being an orphan who’s willing to fight gets you armor and a gun, no questions asked.”

Bitters nodded.

“Yeah, and there are serious perks to joining as soon as you can. Being a soldier entitles you to better rations, relatively safe sleeping quarters, slightly better education opportunities, and armor so that when you go outside you don’t immediately die from being shot.”

York looked about as pissed as Niner felt.

“Who decided this was a good idea?”

Folami waffled back and forth.

“Well, that’s complicated.”

“It’s not,” Andersmith spoke up, “General Clae of the Federal Army of Chorus issued an announcement during the early days of the war, specifically stating that all citizens of the planet could be subject to a draft to serve, with no mention of an age range. Thousands of citizens stepped up to fight to prevent the children from being put in armor, only to be wiped out in an explosion blamed on the New Republic despite a lack of evidence. Their children were put into ‘military protection’ and outfitted to serve. That is the whole reason my family defected from the Federal Army. After that, the New Republic followed suit by permitting military orphans the opportunity to join the ranks as early as fourteen, with the understanding that they would not be permitted to serve in the field. Of course, when battles started killing soldiers by the thousands, and numbers got scarce, most did anyway.”

Maine huffed out a furious breath and snarled.

Niner looked at him and saw that his face was red with rage, and his eyes were wet. He wasn’t crying, but it looked to be a near thing.

She…didn’t know what to do with that.

He’d mentioned once, ages back, that he came from military stock. Parents, grandparents, cousins, friends, all of them had served at one point or another. He was proud of his planet, proud of his country, and he’d wanted to be a military man since he was old enough to know what the military was.

But the idea of child soldiers being exploited into fighting because the other option was starvation, illness, and death…that was clearly hitting him hard.

Folami must have noticed the noises, because she looked up, eyes wide.

“Hey, hey, it’s all good, big guy. Breathe. You’re good, you’re safe. We’ve got you. Panic attack? Flashback? Give me something, here.”

She reached back to try and grab his hand, only for Maine to pull back and shake his head.

“Ok. You’re upset about something, and physical contact isn’t gonna help. Gotcha. Defection? Are you made that his family switched sides? The draft? Yeah, no one’s a big fan of that. Do you, can I get you a tablet? You can write it out.”

Maine shook his head and pointed at Palomo.
“You’re…mad about the age of the soldiers?”

He nodded. His hands shook a little.

Wyoming shook his head.

“I believe the idea that you are all so young has made him…rather unsettled. I don’t blame him in the slightest.”

Edra leaned her head against Wyoming’s shoulder. The man looked down at her, but didn’t move away. Niner wasn’t the only one going soft. The whole group seemed to have fallen hard for these kids.

“General Kimball has been trying to have that rule rescinded for a while, but it really is safer to have the kids in armor than not have them in armor. She worked really hard for years to create safe spaces on Chorus where kids and people who couldn’t fight wouldn’t be in the line of fire.”

“General Doyle felt the same way, it was one of the few things those two agreed on, but he died before we got any actual change.”

“Ok,” York spread his hands, “but you could put them in armor and not put them on the battlefield.”

Smosna and Jensen snorted.

“Pfft.”

“Mosht of our surviving kidsh are waiting for their chancshe to get onto the battlefield. Prove their parentsh proud and shstuff. I wash. I’m nineteen and I’ve been fighting shince I was fifteen. I was one of the ones who got away with being shuper young, becaushe I have an interesht in military mechanicsh and tech, sho I wash valuable.”

Smosna crossed her legs and stretched.

“An age limit really wouldn’t have mattered anyway, it didn’t for me. I wanted to fight and be useful, and now I am. BTdubs? Not all the old people are dead, most of them are just…not here. We don’t have exact word, but…yeah. As far as I know, I’ve got both parents, an aunt, two uncles, and a cousin still alive. You’re just dealing with a collection of much younger people this time around.”

Folami grunted and tossed a pebble into Smosna’s lap.

“Good for you, Volleyball. I am the last surviving member of my family, which means I’m the last surviving member of this line of original settlers of Chorus.”

“Dude, that’s so sad.”

“Meh, thirty six have already been snuffed, what’s one more?”

Niner shook her head. She couldn’t believe these kids.

“When you’re not sitting on the floor, I am hugging you, just so you know that. You won’t know when it’s happening. I’m just going to ram into you with my chair and hug you.”

Folami blinked.
“Ok? I’m… not actually sad or anything. I didn’t know my parents, and my aunt was a jerk. I’m totally good being the last of my line and all that.”

“You. Are. Getting. A. Hug. Fuck. I’m hugging all of you, and I’m going to be having words with your fucking generals, too.”

York shook his head.

“Oh shit. Niner’s feeling all protective now. Don’t argue, just accept it. Accept the love.”

“I’m a little concerned about my safety now.”

And it would have continued on, except for South’s moan of pain.

Doc jumped up and leaned over Danvers, who was staring at her scanner. Eta perched himself on South’s chest, but didn’t seem to be worried. Danvers poked her scanner and shook her head.

“Pain meds wearing off?”

“As suggested, I am slowly cycling down on her pain relief. I do not like this plan. She is not comfortable.”

“It’s not a favorite of mine either, friend, but if we want her to survive surgery later, we have to start working toward more compatible pain relief now.”

North’s whole body wound up like a spring and South snarled.

“That is not fucking reassuring.”

“It wasn’t intended to be reassuring, it was meant to be a sharing of information. Would you like Eta to put you out for a while?”

“Fuck no.”

North squeezed her hand.

“Maybe you should let him. If you’re asleep, you won’t feel as much.”

“No.”

“You’re being stubborn for no reason.”

“Shut up, or I’ll make you sit on the bench.”

Palomo stood up to stretch and watched, captivated, as South whimpered in pain. North clearly saw the young man’s stare and cocked his head to the side.

“What are you looking at?”

Palomo ‘eeped’ and fell back into his seat, clearly terrified.

“Nothing!”

North sighed and rubbed at his eyes.

He was tired, they all were. This was all too much, and waaaaay too heavy.
“Shit, I must have a scary face on. Sorry. I used to be good at this.”

“Good at what?”

“People. Human interaction.”

Wyoming shook his head.

“Well, you did try to beat the poor boy up. He’s nearly twenty years younger than you. I would expect him to be a little afraid.”

“I am not that old.”

“North,” South grunted, “he’s sixteen, and you hit your prime ages ago. You’re old. Get over it.”

The truck hit a bump, and suddenly Maine groaned and curled in on himself. Doc jumped away from South’s side and pressed a hand to the man’s forehead.

“Are you ok? What are your symptoms?”

Florida’s eyes widened.

“Maine, have you been fighting motion sickness this whole trip?”

Jensen pulled a bag from under her seat.

“Catch, Doc!”

Doc caught and shook open the barf bag for Maine.

“Here, if you need it, you’ll have it.”

Maine shook his head, but he’d started to get pale, and Niner knew it was only a matter of time before he was swimming in chunk city.

Palomo stood back up and reached for a duffle bag that had been pushed back behind another bag.

“Katie, can you see if that’s mine? I can’t reach.”

Jensen stood on her seat, pulled a bag free, and dropped it onto the bench next to her feet.

“Got it.”

“Wow, if I’d have thought about it, I could have done that myself. Anyway, come here, Mister Cheddars.”

Niner nearly laughed as Palomo unzipped the bag, spun around with a flourish, and held out a well-loved, yellow stuffed rabbit. He stepped in front of Niner and offered a ‘sorry’, before he held the rabbit in Maine’s line of sight.

“Here.”

Maine looked up and made an inquisitive noise.

“Mister Cheddars is powerful and all knowing. He eats bad feelings, controls chaos, and scares away nightmares. I didn’t think to bring Skittles, he’s an Octopus and he’s the best for motion sickness, but Mister Cheddars is pretty good at eating that, too. You should lay down and close
your eyes for a while. It might help.”

Maine gently accepted the toy and held it with one hand as if he were afraid it would bite him. He stared at Palomo, clearly confused about what he was supposed to do with a stuffed rabbit, and Niner nearly died laughing.

“No, you’ve got to hold him right, like this.”

Palomo didn’t so much as hesitate to pull Maine’s good arm until the man had the rabbit properly cradled against his chest. Maine raised an eyebrow, but ended up curled over again pretty quickly, with Doc holding the barf bag directly under his face.

Bitters shook his head as he fondly mocked Palomo.

“You are completely ridiculous.”

Palomo crossed his arms.

“Well, maybe if I got more positive human interaction on a regular basis I would depend more on people and less on inanimate objects with faces. Besides, Mister Cheddars is older than you are, he’s got tons of world experience.”

“I meant that you brought Mister Cheddars on a mission instead of leaving him in your bunk where he’d be safer. Matthews knows what to grab during an evacuation.”

Palomo turned away a little, offended and unsure of how not to show it.

Bitters sighed, stood up, and gently punched Palomo’s shoulder.

“Hell, I’m sorry, ok Hawkeye? I wasn’t trying to insult the rabbit. Mister Cheddars is wise and all knowing.”

South looked at them glassy eyed.

“You seriously bring stuffed animals with you on missions?”

Palomo shrugged, clearly still a little hurt, and seriously, Niner would be having conversations with people who thought sending children who bring comfort toys with them on missions was a good idea.

“Sometimes? We were going on a rescue mission. I thought…maybe someone could use a stuffie. You never know.”

Niner patted his arm affectionately.

“Jesus, you’re so fucking precious I could vomit.”

North smiled at Palomo, and oh, Niner knew that smile. That was the smile he had when he thought South or Wash had done something particularly adorable and he really wanted to be a part of it. Team Dad was starting to come back, and Niner never thought she’d think it, but thank fuck.

If he was trying to dad them all, he’d hopefully stop trying to punch people.

And these kids were young enough that they might not resent him for it.

“So you’ve got someone that helps with motion sickness and someone that helps with bad dreams. I
don’t suppose you’ve got one that stops pain, do you?”

South groaned and feebly slapped his leg.

“ Fucking, no, North.”

Palomo reached into his bag and pulled out something that did not look like a stuffed animal. It was some sort of lumpy green yarn construction in the vaguest of quadralimbed shapes. It could possibly be a bear with no neck and extra-long limbs, but it also had a weird half tail thing.

Jensen gently took the yarn thing.

“I wondered if we were going to see Pogget again. You fixed his arm.”

“Kind of. He’s still coming apart. I’m not so good with the knitting stuff yet. The instruction book I had only has half the pages, and they’re…kind of bloody. It’s hard to read.”

Jensen handed the…Pogget back to Palomo, and he handed North the thing.

Folami grinned and patted the yarn thing on the head.

“This is Pogget. He’s a staple of the infirmary.”

“Technically,” Palomo shrugged, “this is Pogget the 115th. There are so many of them at this point, but this one is mine. He’s one of the last surviving Poggets of Armonia and Seguro.”

North examined the thing with both hands, and stroked at its head. He turned it back and forth with a critical eye and a gentle smile.

South growled and smacked North’s leg.

“North, I do not want a fucking stuffed animal. Keep it away.”

North’s eyes softened a little more, he pressed it to his cheek and sighed.

“Oh my god, it’s so soft.”

South glared. North just kept the weird lumpy thing against his cheek. He rubbed it back and forth the way a cat might stake its claim.

Palomo sat down, clearly more relaxed, and hummed a little.

“If it’s embarrassing, you don’t have to take him. We just…sometimes you need a stuffie, you know? You get hurt, or feel sick, or just have a really bad mission, and a stuffie can make you feel a little bit better.”

North grinned.

“Listen to the kid, he knows what he’s talking about.”

South grunted and rolled her eyes.

“Fine, you jerk. Give it.”

North pressed the yarn creature against her cheek and for a moment, South’s whole face changed.
“Oh my god, it’s so soft.”

“Told you.”

-1 Hour Until Arrival at Proteger-

“Ok. I cannot take the quiet anymore, this is bugging the crap out of me!”

“Palomo-“

“No! Andersmith, we are going to spend like seven hours here-“

“It’s not seven hours anymore, it’s one hour. We are almost there.”

“It’s a long trip! I am not just going to sit here in silence! My voice needs to be heard!”

“Nobody wants to hear your voice.”

“Oh, so mean, Antoine!”

“Come on, Palomo, chill.”

“I am so full of energy, I can’t stand it! Also I really need to pee!”

“Sweet merciful sky god, really?”

“I have not had a bathroom break in almost twenty hours Edra, don’t judge me!”

“It cannot have been that long.”

“Six hours there, seven hours back, four hours fucking around in the jungle, and I didn’t get to pee before we left. I have to go.”

Folami shook her head. The motion didn’t seem to be enough. She put her head in her hands. She groaned. She huffed. She tossed a pebble at Palomo.

“One of these days, your kidneys are just going to fall out, and your bladder’s gonna join them.”

“Seriously, no one else has to go? Come on, I know girls don’t poop, but this is ridiculous.”

“Oh, god, are you taking anatomy lessons from Captain Tucker again?”

Wyoming gave a light cough.

As much as he…enjoyed…this kind of long running, annoying dialogue from the children he’d inexplicably become surrounded by in the span of twenty-four hours…he really didn’t want to spend another minute listening to them.

There was also something important that…he probably needed to bring up before they arrived at their destination.

“Chaps, we, ah, may have a slight problem.”

The truck fell silent. Every soldier tensed in their seat.

“More problems?” Doc sighed, “Can’t we just have a fun trip without adding extra problems into the mix?”
Niner scoffed.
“‘You seriously call this fun?’”

“‘Your…Captain Tucker. Am I correct in assuming this is Lavernius Tucker of the Blood Gulch
Blue Team?’”

As one, the Chorus soldiers responded.
“‘Yeeees?’”

And if that was not the thing of nightmares, he did not know what was.

“‘Ah, well, you see, I’ve met the man before, and he does not exactly like me.’”

Demir laughed, light and airy, with just a thread of strain.

“‘What, were you dating a girl when you saw him last? That’d do it. He gets mad whenever
someone else is better at dating than him.’”

Danvers cocked her head to the side.

“‘Which is literally everyone.’”

“‘Not exactly. We were…of two minds on a topic of import, and I vetoed his…solution.’”

Bitters crossed his arms and stared at Wyoming, hard. Hard enough that…he actually was a little
concerned that the man had a plan against him.

“‘That doesn’t sound ominous or anything.’”

Palomo leaned over into Jensen’s space, but the young woman didn’t push him out of the way.
Instead, she laid a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“‘Preeeeety sure you’re holding out on us.’”

Wyoming closed his eyes and took a deep, steadying breath.

If he weren’t so worried about what would happen to Butch should the children murder him,
Wyoming would have just kept his silence. As it was, he needed the honesty, needed to try and
build the rapport before the idiots had more of a chance to make him out to be a demon.

He opened his eyes and saw Butch’s encouraging smile.

That was not a good sign.

“‘This happened many years ago and everything worked out in the end, but I’m not entirely certain
how to discuss the nature of our disagreement without everyone deciding to perforate my flesh with
bullets to avenge him of the slight.’”

York pressed his face into his hands and scrubbed hard at his eyes.

“‘Jesus, do I even want to know?’”

“‘Probably at some point. At the moment? No. No, you do not.’”

Palomo cocked his head to the side, as if he had been presented with an intricate, delicate
Then he sat up straight and nodded.

“Dude, you’re Wyoming. We know. You kidnapped Captain Tucker’s son along with the reanimated corpse of some blue guy, except they shot you and then Tex stole Junior and the ship with some guy named Andy and the tank driver, Sheila trapped inside. Then the ship got blown up. Except it didn’t, it just got caught in like slipstream or something weird and spacy like that and ended up in space for like a year or something, and Captain Tucker transferred out of Blood Gulch and ended up with Junior as an ambassador for the Sangheili’s.”

Wyoming…blinked.

“Ah.”

“Right? That is what you’re talking about, isn’t it?”

Ramirez spoke with enough venom that Wyoming was certain his upper lip was curled unpleasantly, and his teeth were bared like a dog’s.

“Every time I think I’m starting to get used to you fuckers, I get reminded that you’re pretty fucking disgusting. Baby stealers? Yeah, no, we’re not gonna shoot you. We won’t steal that opportunity from Captain Tucker.”

South rolled her head to look at Wyoming.

Her eyes had started to glaze over at some point, and she was hardly awake at all, but she still managed to find the energy to scold him.

“Fuck, Wy, really? Kids?”

Niner snarled.

“You didn’t bother to tell me that, you fuck.”

Wyoming held up his hands to defend himself. Of all the people he should have expected a response from, how could he have forgotten Niner’s obsession with children and their health and wellbeing.

“Ah, well, it wasn’t as simple as that. The child was not human—“

“Dude,” Folami ground out, “Junior is at least half human, and you don’t just steal babies from people, human or not. If you’d tried to steal McFluffinson, I’d probably try to cut your tendons, and he’s a goat.”

Maine lowered Mr. Cheddars next to Folami and waggled him back and forth a little with an inquisitive look on his face.

“No, not a stuffed goat, a regular goat. He lives in the base, eats weeds, and is very snuggly.”

Butch coughed into his hand to disguise his laughter, well aware that this was not the time for a giggle fit, but he clearly wanted to laugh.

“Why do you have a goat on your base?”

Yacavone shifted in her seat.
“Because animals are really good for therapy.”
Jensen bumped Palomo’s shoulder.

“Because they’re smart.”
Danvers ran a damp cloth across South’s forehead.

“Because they’re ungulates.”
Folami snorted and waved off the other soldiers.

“Because McFluffinson once took out tiger when it was attacking a kid, and he’s awesome.”
The look that North leveled at Folami was nothing short of a ‘what the fuck’ expression, and Wyoming nearly snorted at his wide-eyed incredulity.

“A goat took out a tiger?”

“Fuck yeah, he did! Broke part of his skull doing it, but the kid ended up being ok, and McFluffinson is a friend to all.”

“He has a little brain damage, so he walks kind of funny, but he’s a good goat.”
York snorted and shook his head.

“Huh, goat friends. Interesting.”
Edra turned and stared York in the eye. Wyoming couldn’t see her face, but he could see the naked fear in York’s. Part of him really wanted to know what on earth he managed to see on her helmet that made him so startled.

“Seriously, if you hurt McFluffinson? We will gut you like pigs.”

“Leave the goat alone, got it.”
York looked over to Wyoming.

“You seriously kidnapped someone’s kid?”

“York,” North chided, “drop it.”
The man clearly wanted to smooth the conversation out, but Wyoming had to get this out to the kids, had to get his side out, if only to try and make them understand that he wasn’t evil, he’d just…been trying to get the love of his life back. Stopping the war was only part of it.

Working with the aliens brought Butch back to the world of the living. He would have done anything to keep the man safe, keep him alive, when there was nothing left but death and pain. Before they’d brought him back, he’d long since sold his soul to the remains of the project, and was willing to maim and murder just for the sake of it.

Not…that he wasn’t willing to maim and murder after they’d brought Butch back, or before the other man had died, but there just wasn’t any joy in it without his favorite sociopath at his side.

“Truth be told, I have never considered it to be a child, and I still have a hard time understanding how he came to care for it so fervently in spite of the nature of its conception.”
Marconi stuttered.

“What…what does that mean?”

Edra whipped around and squeezed Wyoming’s hand hard.

“Don’t worry about it, Paolo.”

Yacavone linked pinkies with Marconi and squeezed her shoulders in tight.

“How can we not be worried? That was a worrying comment.”

Bitters shifted, clearly uncomfortable.

“It was weird at least, what the fuck does ‘in spite of the nature of its conception’ mean?”

Edra made a slashing motion with her right hand.

“I said don’t worry about it. It’s all good.”

Andersmith looked at Edra with concern.

“Do you know something we don’t?”

Palomo leaned over.

“Eddie, what’s he talking about?”

Edra looked at Folami. She groaned and bumped her head against Maine’s knees before she glared at Wyoming.

“Look at what you’ve done. This is on you.”

She took a deep breath.

“DON’T STOP BELIEVING!!!”

The truck echoed with voices belting lyrics at the tops of their lungs.

South’s eyes snapped wide open, and she gasped.

“Oh god, what fresh hell is this?!?”

“HOLD ON TO THE FEELING!!”

“Someone please stop them.”

“STREETLIGHTS PEEEOPPPPPAAAHHAAALE!!!!”

“I will pay you any amount to make it stop.”

Florida joined in singing and swaying to the music.

“DON’T STOP BELIEVING!!!!”

“For god’s sake man, have some dignity!”
“HOLD OOOHAAAEAAAHN!!!!!!”

“This is hell, I am in hell right now.”

“STREETLIGHT PEOPLE!!!”

“Why couldn’t you have let me die?”

“DON’T STOP BELIEVING!!!!!!”

“Eta, put me out of my misery, before there is more Journey and I have to drag by broken ass under the truck tires.”

Eta flickered and South’s eyes drifted shut. Danvers snorted and shook her head.

“Someone’s not a fan of Journey?”

“She, Connie, Wash, and Florida binged Glee, and she’s hated that song ever since.”

“Ah, good reason.”

York scrubbed at his face and shook his head.

“Ok, since we’re in sharing mode right now, I’m gonna get something off my chest and you all can take it or leave it.”

Niner groaned and smacked her head against the back of the seat.

“Jesus, York, now?”

“Yeah, Niner, now, before we go from a group of twenty to a minimum of hundreds.”

York’s eye washed over the Chorus soldiers, took each one of them in, and he took a breath.

“I get that you guys are scared of us. I really do. I get that you’re scared of me, for what reason I can only imagine, but you are. I understand being freaked out by North, he’s all psycho big brother right now. But seriously, we are not your enemy, we’re not here to hurt you. You’re all friends with Wash and Carolina, and those two? They’re family. We might have seriously f*cked up in the past, but we want to be the kind of people who take care of our family.”

Danvers pounded a fist on the floor.

“They are not our friends, and calling them such is dismissive.”

York was startled out of his little speech.

“You’re not friends? The way you talk about them…”

“We are not their friends, we are their subordinates, do not conflate the two.”

The steam died from York’s speech.

“Ok, but…does Wash…talk to you guys? Ask you about books or stuff that you’re interested in other than military stuff?”

“Yeah?”
“Ok, that’s what I mean. We operate a little differently than you’re thinking. I wasn’t trying to minimize their importance.”

“Small talk doesn’t equal friendship.”

“It does for Wash. He’s so bad at people, always has been. If he’s trying to be nice to you, it’s because he cares, he likes you, and he wants you to like him. And Carolina? She can’t serve with you in close quarters and not consider you a friend. She’s hardwired to glob onto people who help her.”

Smosna elbowed York in the side.

“Pro-tip? If you want people to trust you, you need to stop saying that you’re friends with Agent Carolina, and start acting like a person we can trust.”

“Why? She’s one of your best soldiers, isn’t she? The leader of the free planet trusts her to make decisions.”

“Yeah, and if she didn’t have that glowing asshole in her head, she wouldn’t know who any of us are.”

“Jesshica-“

“She doesn’t care about us. Chorus is a small planet, our people have been whittled down to a fraction. If you bother talking to people, even just a little, you can learn the names of half the soldiers in your base in a week. Agent Washington did, no problem, and he’s got brain damage. Carolina doesn’t know any of us, couldn’t name any of us in a lineup, and what’s her excuse? If we didn’t have our names digitally listed on our goddamned helmets to make it easier to know who’s alive and who’s dead, she’d never be able to fucking tell who we are.”

“Jessh, shtop.”

Jensen flew through a series of hand motions with her left hand, and several soldiers responded with their right.

“Sho York, you’re shaying that, you don’t want to hurt ush becaushe you think Agent Carolina and Agent Washhington like ush?”

“Honestly, we don’t want to hurt you anyway. I don’t know about anyone else, but it didn’t occur to me that we’d even be seeing you lot. I kind of thought we’d land, send out a message to Wash, and go from there. But, yeah, I don’t hurt kids, I don’t want to hurt kids, and I don’t hurt my friends friends’.”

Smosna shrugged but let it drop.

“So…how’d you all end up trying to kill each other then?”

York shook his head.

“A lot of things went wrong, so fast, too fast to think, even with the AI running thousands of calculations a second. It was…fuck, it was so much. We didn’t know, didn’t understand, and…”

Niner tapped the wall.

“You guys have to realize that Project Freelancer went off the rails months before the actual end. It
was in turmoil before the Meta, before Tex, hell, I sometimes wonder if it was always meant to be a failure.”

“Niner?”

“That board? It was bullshit. It was the Director pitting people against each other, and he and the Councilor both knew it. They were just winding people up to see how it went. They seeded insecurity and in fighting almost from the start, and as far as I can tell? It had no value aside from making everyone crazy and insecure. It didn’t drive you, didn’t push you to be better, didn’t even recognize your skills. How do you rank hand to hand against a sniper and say one is objectively better? They are two different skills for two different purposes, but by the time anyone thinks about that? It’s too late. Fear, distrust, anger, humiliation, it’s all there. Chewing at your guts, making you feel worthless. Carolina nearly drove herself crazy trying to live up to the expectations.”

Butch placed a gentle hand on her arm.

“Niner, stop.”

She shrugged him off, bitterly.

“So, when it came time, and York and Tex tried to free the Alpha AI, there was enough of that fear to cause some really bad decisions to be made. A family got broken.”

“Oh no.”

Palomo spoke softly and Niner blinked.

“What?”

“It’s just…sad, that’s all. Like war stories. Families end up fighting each other, killing each other, because they can’t agree on what’s right.”

Folami nodded.

“Mix in a cocktail of negative feelings and hormones and you’ve got a shit stew of badness, right there.”

“Hormones?” Wyoming couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow, “We’re all well past that age, dear.”

Danvers looked up from South.

“But you have AI plugged directly into you at all times. AI, intentionally or no, affect your brain chemistry, right down to your way of thinking, because they are essentially using your brain as a processor. That’s why you need armor capable of holding them or a digital seat for extended AI use. Even if they’re fully functioning, they can drive you insane.”

Andersmith nodded along, and Wyoming was more than a little confused by all of this. What could a bunch of children know about AI?

“It’s why Santa doesn’t try to ride along. On top of being a massive AI, he’s also not based on human biometrics, which can screw up the human brain even more.”

“I have never in my life heard of this problem, and we worked with some of the frontrunners in AI technology. How is it possible that you have this information if we don’t?”

The Chorus soldiers shifted around before Bitters finally sighed.
“Well, the frontrunners in AI technology…probably aren’t working with fragments, seeing as how that process was made illegal. And the AI fragments were all stored away and untouched, according to Agent Washington. They probably also don’t have Epsilon, who was willing to play with the geeks and run tests on brain chemicals and alterations and such, and was able to convince someone as private as Agent Carolina to participate. They probably don’t have Agent Washington’s progressive brain scans. They probably also don’t have Santa, an AI from a culture that had AI technology very similar to the technology we see in Epsilon, only they had it over 1000 years ago, and Santa has access to their data.”

Danvers nodded and motioned to Eta, who’d stopped moving around. His hologram had started flickering heavily, and only seemed to grow worse as time went by, but he hadn’t mentioned any kind of failures in himself.

Wyoming was loathe to mention it, if only because he didn’t want to have to deal with trying to save it. They just didn’t have the necessary equipment on hand.

“Basically, we can’t prove it, due to a lack of tested human AI on Chorus, but based on previous research, we can extrapolate some pretty interesting information.”

The Freelancers all looked to each other with varying states of shock.

“You…all understand all that?”

“Why wouldn’t we? I mean, yeah, ok, not everyone on Chorus is going to understand, because not everyone on Chorus cares enough about that kind of science to be interested. We also don’t actually have access to a lot of the data for privacy reasons, but we’re allowed to read about the changes, just not the data itself. Still, we basically understand.”

Demir shyly lifted a hand in the air.

“I…don’t actually really understand.”

“Oh!” Danvers waved a hand in excitement, “If you’re interested, when we get home, I’ll give you a crash course in AI disruptions to brain patterns, chemical reactions, and the argument against computer modifications to your brain, using neuroscientific reasoning. I’m putting a paper together for the science committee on the topic. If I impress, I may actually get to be involved with the research!”

“You go Danvers! There is nothing sexier than a smart woman.”

Ramirez snorted.

“Yeah? That why you don’t get laid, Folami? I thought it was because you’re butt ugly, but I guess being stupid doesn’t hurt.”

Doc crossed his arms.

“Ok, first off, that was really mean and you need to apologize right now.”

“Like hell, I’m gonna listen to you.”

“Doc, seriously, I could not give two shits about his opinion of me.”

“And being a medic? That automatically means she’s intelligent. You can’t do the kind of work these people do on a daily basis without a significant amount of medical training and general
knowledge. In fact, you don’t have a single specialty listed under your name, while Folami here has five.”

“If medics are so smart, how are you one?”

Doc huffed.

“My title transferred over from an outside planet with a completely different ranking system.”

“Cross me again, idiot child, and I will eat your liver while you lie there screaming!”

“And now look what you’ve done, Ramirez. Your bitch attitude is bringing out the monster in people.”

“Oh, don’t even, I will punch you in your baby killing throat! You fucking New Republic assholes walk around like you’re high on fucking clouds while the rest of us dig in the shit, because the New Republic managed to murder our general and keep theirs alive to win over the Reds and Blues. I, personally, cannot wait to see each and every one of you bastards purged from this planet!”

Demir grabbed Ramirez.

“Dude, no! Stop it! You cannot say things like that!”

“No! I’m supposed to feel bad for this guy because his boyfriend is dying? After they went through and murdered twenty kids who were in hiding?”

The truck went silent.

“They didn’t even, like, accidentally murder them. You fuckers went through and slit their throats, one by one. They were babies, some of them could barely walk, and you thought it would be ok to make them drown in their own blood. I hope you all fucking DIE!”

Demir pulled Ramirez into a hug.

“Shh, shh, it’s ok. You’re gonna be ok.”

Bitters hands shook.

“Look, we’ve all…killed our fair share of soldiers. Battlefield deaths are not exactly easy, but… god. I have never slit anyone’s throat. It doesn’t make it any easier. I can’t swear that it wasn’t one of our people, wartime atrocities are common throughout human history, but I’d be willing to bet that level of cruelty on Felix. It doesn’t make it right and it doesn’t fix anything. Nothing ever could.”

Demir helped Ramirez out of his helmet. The boy, and Wyoming could finally say with certainty that this was not a grown man, had tears streaming down his face and snot coming out his nose.

Palomo pulled a scrap of cloth out of a duffle, and an overstuffed toy penguin, and handed them both to Demir. Demir wiped off Ramirez’s face and handed him the scrap.

“Here, bite down.”

Ramirez collapsed into his seat, bit down on the scrap, pressed the penguin to his face, and screamed. The stuffed animal muffled the noise enough that it wasn’t ear piercing, but it was still
wretched. Demir made a dismissive motion to the truck at large, and the Chorus soldiers all turned as best they could to avoid looking at Ramirez. Andersmith actually stood and blocked him from view.

Demir’s voice was soft and gentle as he spoke.

“Just breathe. I’ve got watch. I’ve got this, please just calm down.”

North stroked South’s hair from her face. He looked terrified at Danvers, who’d started to poke at her med unit again.

“How does she look? Is she going to be ok? I need you to be real with me right now.”

“Ok, well, first off, take a deep breath, we are taking her to where the best doctors and surgeons are all at, at the moment.”

Bitters shook his head.

“No all.”

“Yes all. You need to stop being so paranoid, Bitters. They’re not going to blow us up, not when one of theirs is this badly hurt. North, you literally are going to where the best doctors are. The hard part in this is not the treatment, it’s that we can’t contact home to let them know how badly she’s hurt, so were kind of desperately hoping at this point that we’ve got everyone rested and ready to go, and that we won’t have to waste time scrambling. I won’t lie, she’s not in great shape right now, and the longer we make her wait for treatment, the lower her odds get. There is still time, but…it’s not going to be easy.”

His face crumpled.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, it would make me a lot more confident if we had a way to contact home.”

He looked around the room at the gear, the soldiers, his people.

“I…I don’t know, can Eta help? Theta is useless if I’m out of armor, but Eta has access to South’s tech. Is it that the signal’s weak?”

“There’s no signal. The radios, most of them are fried, like, the parts no longer work. The ones that aren’t physically damaged, they’re completely nonfunctional.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like, uh, someone interfered with them on purpose.”

“Bitters, we get it, you’re paranoid. Stop trying to alienate people.”

“It’s what I’m good at.”

“Well, get good at something else!”

Eta flickered next to South’s head and suddenly the radios flickered to life. Smosna jumped to her feet.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! We have contact! We have technology!”

“Oh my goodnesh! Oh my goodnesh! Quick, before it goes away!”
“This is Lieutenant Andersmith calling home, do you read me?”

Andersmith twisted his hand by his helmet and a very poor-quality radio transmission filled the space.

“Hello Lieutenant Andersmith, this is Chu in communications. We read you.”

“It is wonderful to hear your voice, we need to speak to whoever is in charge of the surgery team immediately.”

“Patching you through to Doctor Grey. She’s expecting you.”

The line went silent for a moment.

“Hello, Lieutenant Andersmith! Long time no see!”

“Hello Doctor Grey! We are on our way in, maybe 50 minutes out, but we’re trying to shave as much time off as we can, we have wounded, repeat we have critically wounded.”

The chipper voice on speakerphone crackled, but was legible enough that Wyoming felt an even flutter of hope and dread.

“Oh my goodness, I’d heard you had someone in rough shape, what happened? Has her condition deteriorated?”

“One of the members of the aid team was on the outside of the ship when it crashed, repeat, the outside of the ship and is going to need immediate assistance.”

There was a pause.

“I’m sorry, did you say she was on the outside of the ship when it crashed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And she survived? Oh my goodness, she must be in complete agony!”

South’s eyes flickered.

“Does she have to sound so fucking perky about it?”

“Oh, I’m on speakerphone aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you fucking are.”

“Oh ho, ho, ho! You sound hostile!”

South shuddered.

“This is…I am hurt. My body is trying to die.”

“Well, in that case, I guess I’m going to have to forgive you for being mean to me. Alrighty, I’m putting in orders for ready rooms right now. Is there anyone else in need of emergency care?”

Danvers took a deep breath.

“We definitely have concussions, minor injuries, a few broken bones, a crushed hand, Folami got shot.”
“Oh my goodness!”

“I barely got shot, it’s basically a scratch. I’m more worried about Edra than me. Hell, I’m more worried about Palomo’s ankles than my bullet wound.”

“Yes,” the inanely exuberant woman on the other end chirped, “but you were shot in the jungle. You were hopefully not shot by the mercenaries who tend to do really unsanitary things to those bullets.”

“Eww.”

“I guess I should let you know that all of you who’ve interacted with the aid ship and survivors are going to need a nice round of antibiotics and a short stay in quarantine to make sure that you’re not bringing back any nasty outside viruses! Chorus has been isolated for too long, and we don’t have the proper immunizers and boosters in place! We wouldn’t want to accidentally wipe out the planet with germ warfare, would we?”

“I didn’t even think about that.”

Bitters sounded horrified.

“No one ever does until they’re bleeding out their eyes! And those of you from the aid ship will be receiving full body scans to insure that something wasn’t missed during your initial exams. Wouldn’t want a nasty surprise in the near future from laziness, now would we? Please tell me that we have something to show for all this hubbub?”

Andersmith cleared his throat.

“The ship’s contents are surprisingly intact, it’s really the ship itself that was compromised, it’s not going to fly again, but the contents seem to be viable.”

“Oh! Wonderful!” Her voice took on a singsong quality, “And what did we bring?”

“Medicine,” Edra croaked and squeezed Wyoming’s hand again. She relaxed into his side, even as her grip tightened.

“Oh, really?”

“Really. Looks like the good stuff too. Antibiotics and inoculants.”

“That is just wonderful!”

Palomo piped up, and managed to match the woman’s cheerful tones.

“There’s also lots of food rations.”

“Oh goody! Now we can start getting healthy, and we won’t starve! Ah! We have your location pinging as we speak. You’ve got about forty minutes before arrival. Plenty of time for the teams to eat, prep, and be ready to meet you at the door! We will see you all when you get back!”

The call ended.

Forty minutes.

Forty minutes to convince the soldiers he wasn’t an enemy.
Forty minutes to come up with an exit strategy for when things inevitably went wrong.

He’d had harder missions, but dealing with people he couldn’t just kill always meant a much larger margin for error than he enjoyed.

Smosna whipped off her helmet.

“Bitters! Trade me!”

She threw her helmet across the space at Bitters, who caught it and looked at her in complete bafflement.

“Bitch, trade me.”

He took off his helmet and tossed it to her. Danvers snarled.

“Stop throwing things across my patient! South, would you like to be unconscious for the duration of the trip?”

“No,” Her voice was thready, “If ‘m gonna die, I wanna be around for it.”

“You are not going to die, the doctors are getting ready for you right now.”

Folami shook her head.

“Doctor Grey has been expecting us, she said as much. All she’s doing is making sure the medical staff is waiting at the doors for us, the surgery will be completely prepped by now. The woman is nothing if not obsessive.”

Wyoming heard a choked noise from near the doors. He wasn’t the only one. Yacavone reached out and tapped his arm.

“Bitters?”

His voice was raw.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“Just, checking in with Matthews. A lot of shit went down while we were gone. I was worried.”

“Oh no.”

He shook his head.

“Not bad, just a lot.”

Smosna grinned, holding Bitters helmet on her lap, rather than on her head.

“I take it you were able to access your messages from my helmet? Anything good?”

“Duh. He sends me a message any time something important happens. It’s good, really, it’s all good. I’m just glad he’s ok.”

Smosna sighed dreamily and rested her hand on her cheek.
“Someday, I hope a boy becomes just as creepily obsessed with me as you are with Matthews.”

Bitters shook his head.

“You really don’t, its super inconvenient, and everyone will treat you weirdly and thrust their breasts into your man’s face just to get a rise out of you.”

“Hmm, the only flaw in an otherwise perfect plan. Wait, do I get to touch the boobs too?”

“Nope.”

“Damn.”

Danvers leaned over South to get a good look at Eta, who’d taken up a place on her good leg. Eta had finally stopped flickering.

“Eta, did you do that?”

“Yes.”

“You are a life saver!”

Eta preened a little at that. He didn’t change his pose, but he definitely shined a little brighter.

“That was Doctor Grey. She is a literal genius, and the best surgeon Chorus has ever seen. South is in good hands and it is all thanks to you, little-“

Chapter End Notes

Ok, this chapter is freaking long, mostly because I didn't want to break it up and have another extended period of time where we were all just traveling. On the plus side, I'm finally getting out a good bit of my world building, actually using characters other than Folami, and hopefully getting to some of the more interesting parts of this pretty soon.

Because, seriously? It's far past the point in 'Finding Washington' for someone to actually...you know...find Washington.

I hope you guys enjoy it, but if not, please bear with me. We're nearly there. I am so thankful for you all sticking with me through this, it has been a genuine pleasure to write for you.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Firefight, Storytime with Santa, More Fighting, Even More Fighting, and Caboose is the best thing ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That was Doctor Grey. She is a literal genius, and the best surgeon Chorus has ever seen. South is in good hands and it is all thanks to you, little-

BOOM!

The truck rocked with the impact and only barely stayed on its wheels. The soldiers were thrown to the left side of the truck, Smosna just managed to grab the bars above herself to avoid toppling on top of South.

That woman was damned lucky. Danvers’ was almost unable to stop herself from smashing South’s face with her crotch, which Smosna wouldn’t mind for herself, if Danvers didn’t have a metal codpiece attached. That would be…less than fun to be smashed into her nose.

And now she had the image of Danvers Domming her in uniform.

That was an image that would have to wait until they were home free, but it would definitely be processed at a later date.

Wyoming slammed his arm across Edra’s chest to hold her in place, like when you were driving in a jeep without seatbelts. She screamed as her bad hand flopped around, but she didn’t go anywhere.

Palomo shrieked as Jensen slammed into him hard, and he knocked against Niner’s battlewagon stored next to his seat. It was a miracle he wasn’t perforated by the spikes that stuck out of the terrifying metal contraption. One was pressed against his visor enough to scratch the glass.

Fuck, that could have been his eye!

“Shit!”

“Bittersh?”

“I’m ok!”

Bitters managed to fall over and knock his head against a grip bar. If he hadn’t been wearing Smosna’s helmet, he’d have a concussion for sure from the sound of that one.

Smosna scanned the truck for Bitters helmet. She should have just put the damned thing on instead of holding it, but Bitters was normally all weird about sharing digital storage and stuff (he said he didn’t have anything to hide, but Smosna was willing to bet there were dirty picture or movies stored in it from the way he reacted when she poked), and there was something about wearing
someone else’s face cooties that kept her on the more wigged end of the spectrum.

Still, better to have the head protection in a fight. She did not want to die young if she didn’t have to.

“Smosna!”

Agent Niner pointed to Agent Maine, who had the tan and orange gear in hand and a grin on his face.

Smosna let out a bark of laughter. She wiggled her fingers and made grabby hands for it and he tossed it over. It landed heavy in her hands, but was so damned welcome!

With a swift click, she put on Bitters’ helmet, and locked the damned thing into place with a grin.

“Does anyone’s radio still work? What’s happening out there?”

Bitters grabbed for the radio to speak to the drivers as Smosna turned around in her seat to look out the window.

So far, she could make the outlines of bodies in the trees, but not enough to make any useful calculations. Damn, how many of these assholes were still alive?!

Orwell’s voice broke through the silence.

“We’re under attack! Mercs! Mercs and pirates! Unknown numbers in the trees! Right side!”

“Shit!”

Bitters hauled his gun to the right side of the truck and pointed it out the porthole.

Smosna scrambled for her own gun, seriously freaked by what this many mercs meant for them. She honestly thought that these fuckers were mostly wiped out, but every day that seemed less and less like the case, despite them having no way of landing reinforcements on the planet.

A shape came out of the trees, knocking some of them down to the ground and stirring up a thick layer of obscuring clouds of dirt. It looked to her like a massive gun or a rocket launcher or…

Holy fuck was that a scary thought.

Smosna gasped, her whole body felt cold and tight.

“Is that—“

“DOWN!”

Edra grabbed Wyoming’s chestplate and yanked them both to the floor just as a loud shot came from the cannon pointed at them and an oversized bullet broke through the protective casing of the truck. Florida threw himself to sideways straddled Niner’s lap as the bullet went straight through his seat and out the truck.

He grinned into Niner’s face, nose to nose with the woman.

“Well, that was scary!”

“PIERCERS!”
Andersmith grabbed the radio from Bitters, so the orange lieutenant could focus on firing into the trees. Smosna whipped up her gun and tried to aim for the giant ‘fuck me, I’m not at all compensating’ Piercer. The odds of hitting with the pea shooters from this distance weren’t as good as she’d like, but Captain Simmons once told her she was a heck of a shot (in his completely fantastic stuttering, high pitched voice), so she was gonna try.

She freaking hated this part of road trips.

“Orwell,” Andersmith spoke smooth and clear into the radio as the soldiers all started to fire out the portholes, “can we get the supply truck to cover us?”

“Negative. No contact.”

Bitters snarled as he fired, frustration coated his voice, heavy and thick. He liked this part about as much as Smosna did.

“We need cover, they’re piercing us in here!”

Chari’s snarl took over the speakers.

“I’m open to suggestions!”

Smosna rapid fired her clip, she managed to hit a few of the mercs, and looked around for an ammo bag. The closest one was right over York’s head.

“Don’t move, One Eye.”

She stood on the bench, swung a leg across York, and grabbed the bars above him one handed.

“Um, I’m really not comfortable with this position.”

She pulled the bag free and dropped it into his lap.

“Sorry. Normally I’d ask permission, but emergency situation and all.”

Another explosion rocked the truck.

Smosna shrieked, clutched the support bars above York tightly, and managed to not fall off the bench, but felt a very hard smack against her stomach. She looked down and saw York scramble back in his seat, hands over his nose.

“Son of a bitch! My face!”

“Sorry!”

She swung back into her seat and snatched ammo from the bag.

“Guys,” Palomo squeaked out as he emptied his own gun, “this isn’t doing much.”

Andersmith looked at Palomo hard.

“Please tell me you brought the death cannon.”

Palomo wiggled a little bit from where he was perched, like an overexcited puppy, ready to play.

God, that boy was too fucking adorable for his own good. He’d never convince anyone he was an
adult if he kept being so goddamned huggable!

“Andersmith, we are in the middle of nowhere, under very specific orders about what we are and are not permitted to have on hand lest we freak out some poor UNSC shmoe.”

He stood up and mule kicked the bench he and Jensen had been canoodling on the majority of the trip.

The bench seat flipped up.

“Of course I brought the death cannon.”

Palomo spun around and pulled what could only be described as a giant purple weapon made of pure compensation and glowy bits, and cackled madly as it powered up. She didn’t blame him for being excited, it was a pretty awesome piece of alien tech cradled in his arms.

Smosna loved the death cannon.

It inspired the crazy in anyone who held it.

“Someone’s gonna have to lift us!”

Demir and Marconi met at the roof hatch and linked hands under it to create a step.

Smosna nudged York’s shoulder.

“Hold on tight, everyone! Shit’s about to get rocky!”

Andersmith brought the radio to his face.

“We’re raising heck! Get ready to stomp the breaks!”

“Ready!”

“Alright! On three! One! Two!”

Palomo popped the trapdoor open, Demir and Marconi boosted him, and the Chorus soldiers grabbed the walls. Folami threw herself over South to keep her still.

The truck suddenly screamed to a stop and sounds of destruction deafened the people inside.

**BOOM! BOOM!**

“SHIT! THAT WAS LOUD!”

“SUCCESS! ENEMIES IN PIECES AND THE HAULING TRUCK IS PULLING FORWARD! GET READY TO JUMP!”

Jensen leapt to her feet to help Florida unstrap Niner. She wrapped an arm around the older woman’s side and she and Florida hoisted her up. Ramirez had the battlewagon out of storage and ready for her.

“Come with me, ma’am.”

“Jesus,” she snarled as she strapped herself into the chair, “if we survive this, I’m getting my name tattooed to my fucking forehead!”
Andersmith shook his head and stepped over Demir and Marconi, who’d started grabbing weapons from where they’d fallen onto the floor.

“That seems like an inefficient use of the finite space on your face, but it’s your body.”

Yacavone threw opened the back door, flinched, and let out a high-pitched wail of terror. Marconi slapped a hand on her shoulder and laughed the way hyenas did in nature documentaries.

Yeah…Smosna wasn’t touching that one. Yacavone and Marconi were weird on a good day. The normally quiet, clingy twosome were weird on base, but now? Now they were just completely unpredictable. Fucking purse dog, cave kids. If she didn’t like them so much, despite them being Feds, she’d want to stay as far away from the ‘crazy twins’ as possible.

Yacavone and Marconi both howled and smacked their hands together like they were god-damned clapping werewolves.

Not. Touching.

Fucking.

Crazy.

Cave.

Kids.

Bitters turned to the group and pointed.

“FOLAMI, EDRA, YACAVONE, RAMIREZ, STAY HERE AND PROTECT THE FREELANCERS! EVERYONE ELSE, GET UP!”

The Chorus soldiers leapt into action and started pulling much more…interesting …weapons from hidden seat compartments.

The higher ups would be pissed about them whipping out the alien weapons, but they didn’t need bullets, had better range, and were sexy as fuck, so as far as Smosna was concerned, she wanted all the alien guns! God, she wished she had more arms so she could hold more of them!

A good number of people ran from the trees, weapons at the ready, but this set was different from the mercs. More of that cheap marked armor that started showing up after Felix and Locus got found out. It was hella less protective than the original mercs and looked a lot more piecemeal.

“Pirates!”

Good news, the pirates were a lot less protected, a lot worse trained, and a lot less focused than the mercenaries. Bad news, those fuckers acted like they had nothing left to lose and they were vicious as shit. A merc would shoot you in the head, a pirate…well…

Smosna’d only heard about what they did, but it wasn’t pretty.

Jensen locked Niner’s chair into place with a soft huff.

“Jusht shtay like thish until we’re ready to get you out of here!”

Niner shook her head, wide eyed, and super freaked out. She latched onto Jensen’s arm and yanked her back.
The woman was a pilot, maybe she wasn’t used to being this close to the action?

Then again, if Jessica had to go into battle without armor? Yeah, she’d be hella freaked, too. Still, if the piercers were busted, they’d be pretty safe in the truck.

As long as they didn’t get rounded.

“Shit, kid! You think this is gonna help?”

“We’re gonna need to move you if they keep shhooting in here! Ramiresh!”

“Here!”

He’d tossed the penguin into the compartment below his seat and pulled his helmet back on.

Jensen tapped his shoulder and brushed off her left.

(Can you shake it off?)

“You good?”

He pressed his fists together.

(Solid.)

“Like vanilla pudding and sunshine.”

“Keep them shafe.”

Jensen hauled a giant modified alien gun out with tubes connected to what looked like a CO2 container. She strapped the container on her back. Smosna’s legs trembled a little. She hadn’t seen this particular modification in person yet, but she knew exactly what her friend had done to it.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Oh my goshh! I have alwaysh wanted to do thish!”

Jensen ran over to Demir and Marconi. Palomo had hauled himself completely onto the roof of the vehicle and was out of sight.

They hoisted her up as she ignited the flamethrower, and screamed out-

“THIS GIRL ISH ON FIRE!”

Smosna turned to look out the port hole, body thrumming with excitement as the flames shot an INSANELY far distance.

It wasn’t every day she got to see Katie tossing around the flamethrower.

The flames were bright pink and far more controlled than you’d expect, but they were definitely fire, Smosna could feel the heat from inside even as the flames shot…wow!

They just went from insanely to impossibly far.

The Chorus soldiers already running around all dove out of the way as Jensen turned the handheld inferno on the enemy. Several pirates screamed and flailed as they were engulfed in flames that refused to die.
“THISH GIRL ISH ON FIIIIRREEEEEAAHH!!
SHE’SH WALKING ON FIRE!!!”

Marconi knocked his helmet against Yacavone’s, raised his gun in the air, howled, and leapt out of the truck.

Smosna cackled and jumped out of the truck behind him, shiny new guns in hand, ready to deal some damage!

“Jesus, Jensen! Save the crazy for your date with Palomo!”

“Hear that, Katie?! We’ve got support!”

“CHARLES! SHHUT UP AND SHTART KILLING THINGSH!!!”

“Yes ma’am! I love a woman who bosses me around!!!”

Folami moved back carefully as South screamed. She’d landed on the woman’s hip and the upper thigh of her bad leg, and, yeah, she’d feel guilty about that for the rest of her fucking life based on the sounds alone, but the woman hadn’t been flung when they rocked, so Folami would only beat herself a little bit. If she’d left the woman as she was, she’d have ended up flying through the air and damaging a hell of a lot more.

“I’m so sorry.”

North’s eyes were wild as he yanked Folami away from South by her fucking chestplate. She’d protest the indignity if…well, if he didn’t look like he was ready to eat her.

God, his face. His fucking ‘fire and fury’ face.

He snarled and leaned in, low, too close to Folami’s face for her comfort.

“Danvers is gone!”

“Yeah, she’s off trying to keep those piercers from killing us all!”

“She’s a medic!”

“She’s also one of the fastest shots on the planet! We need her out there!”

“And what is South supposed to do?!”

Folami whacked his hand off of her and held up her scanner between them. If he wanted to see shit he’d have to back his ass up.

God, why had she decided to play at being friends with these people? She kept getting freaked out on, and this was not her favorite pastime.

“She’s gonna keep fucking calm because I’ve got this shit! Yacavone! We’re movin’! Find us a path!”
Yacavone shuffled nervously from side to side.

“Bitters said to stay here!”

“To assist with the Freelancers! Assist! We need to get a path cleared long enough to get them out of here and to their armor on the hauling truck!”

She let out a long whine and shook her head erratically.

“I don’t think-“

Was everyone going to be an annoying little shit today?! Seriously? She did not need this right now!

“Yacavone, do not test me! I know that boy’s brain! We need to get them out of here before the pirates start attacking us again!”

“Oh look!”

Yacavone bounced up and down and pointed as Habisch and Jones leapt into the truck, handed their guns to Ramirez, and reached into the benches to get their own purple guns of exploding death.

“Backup’s here!”

Yacavone said with a singsong. She rocked side to side and started firing out the opening.

“Backup’s here! Backup’s here!”

She took out three pirates who she shouldn’t have been able to hit from that angle, but Folami wasn’t going to question it at this point. Her and Marconi were the wild cards the United Armies deserved, quite frankly.

“Thank fuck! We need to get them to their armor!”

Jones shook his head.

“Negative! Too much heat from the trees! We have to clear the herd!”

**BOOM!**

The truck rocked again and South screamed as a bag fell from the overhead and landed on her arm.

**“SON OF A BITCH!”**

North grabbed the bag and threw it across the truck and made a noise Folami had never heard a human being make before. She did not like where this was going one bit.

She needed to get this under control.

“It’s only a matter of time before those piercers are being shot again!”

Habisch turned to Edra, who’d managed to strap her bad arm against her chest and shake off some of the pain. Wyoming stood beside her and allowed her to lean on him, and…honestly, Folami was surprised at how well the man had taken to her. Seriously, if he wasn’t faking it, Folami wanted to know what the fuck he was thinking about, taking care of her that way.
It was sweet, but also borderline creepy, considering what she’d managed to piece together about the man from his actions and his own admissions.

“Eddie?”

“Don’t look at me, Folami’s got rank here, and I’m too fucked up to think.”

Jones nodded and knocked his rifle against his shoulder.

“Ok, Lets get them to their armor.”

Florida reached down and picked up a discarded rifle. Ramirez, arms still full of other weapons, managed to snatch it from his hands with a snarl.

Damn.

Either Florida hit his head again, or he was graciously allowing Ramirez to survive, because they all knew he could kill them in a heartbeat if he really wanted to.

“What are you doing?!”

Florida held his hand out with a cheery smile and a raised eyebrow, and holy hell was that the scariest thing Folami’d seen in weeks. Ramirez clearly hadn’t gotten the message yet that you do not fuck with Florida.

Seriously, what did it take? The man’s face was like every non-mask wearing, slasher villain, psycho-killer ever, with that creepy smile and eerie voice! How were they all more afraid of fucking York than Florida?!

“Give me that, please.”

“Dude, your armor and weapons are in the other truck. We can’t let you out there to fight.”

Florida shrugged, but didn’t lower his hand.

“It seems like it would be a rather tidy solution to all of this, though. If we die, well, one less person to worry about.”

Folami snarled and smacked his leg. He looked down at her, cheery grin spreading wider, and oh man, that was a fake smile if Folami had ever seen one. Her shoulders tightened involuntarily, and she could not make them loosen.

Calm down, girl. He’s not going to hurt you, he likes the freedom too much.

She shuddered.

Damn it, she was turning into a fucking rabbit!

“Not funny, asshole.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“Look, I am not going to be responsible for Agent Carolina’s family getting killed any more than I’m going to be responsible for you killing us! Get down and shut up!”

A scream ripped through the air and Folami’s heart fell into the pit of her stomach.
“KATIE!”

“Was that Smosna?”

York grabbed one of the alien guns, that Folami was 90% sure he had no idea how to even operate, and shoved past Jones and Habisch to get a good look at the terrain.

What was he doing?

“Alright, enough sitting around. Delta, find me a path.”

“York!”

“Sorry, North, I’ve got a shitty rep to overcome and a bunch of kids to save!”

He jumped out of the truck and started running, and this was not what she’d had in mind when she wanted to run them to the hauling truck! God damn it!

Folami snarled and slapped the floor.

“FUCKING FUCKBERRIES, YORK! GET YOUR STUPID ASS SOME COVER!!!!”

North watched York run and shook his head.

“He’s going to get himself killed out there by himself.”

South grunted and let her head list weakly to the side.

God, she was fading fast. Folami checked her vitals again, but her scanner didn’t show any changes.

Eta flickered and looked directly into Folami’s visor.

You little fucker. Are you doing this?

“So, go. Watch your boyfriend’s back.”

North squeezed South’s hand and brushed her bangs from her face.

“He is NOT going out there! He’s staying here and helping us move you to a more secure location!”

North leaned over and pressed a kiss to South’s forehead.

“I love you.”

“Fuck you.”

Folami wrapped both her arms around North’s and put it in a vice grip. She was not letting them all run off to die or disappear!

Not now!

Not when she was so close!

“DO NOT GO OUT THERE!”
He slipped his arm right out of her grip and rolled out of the way.

The fuck?!

What kind of magic was this bullshit? Folami’s death grips were legendary in the medical wing, and he slipped out like he was covered in grease.

North snatched up a more traditional sniper rifle rather than immediately taking one of the alien guns as York had. Clearly the man had enough sense to go into a battle with a weapon he understood, rather than just the pretty gun.

Points for that, she supposed.

“Someone has to keep York from killing himself.”

Folami sighed.

There was not stopping him at this point.

And Florida wasn’t exactly wrong. Thinning the herd wouldn’t hurt Chorus any, and it might make the survivors actually listen.

She threw her right arm up like fucking Wonder Woman deflecting bullets.

(Shield)

If they were going out to get themselves shot, Folami was going to make sure that they had the best chances available for their survival. No one was dying on her watch if she could help it, not even the fucking half insane Freelancers.

“Habisch! Keep these idiots alive!”

She nodded and hauled her gun up.

“With me, sir.”

And they were gone.

Folami put her head in her hands and tried not to scream.

“I am so fucking demoted. So fucking demoted. My fucking fat ass is going to be scrubbing out bedpans and taking temperatures for the rest of my motherfucking life!”

Ramirez choked.

“Incoming!”

Folami slammed her hands into South’s stomach to hold her in place. They all braced for impact as best as they could before the truck rocked. It teetered on the precipice of flipping onto it’s side before it blessedly fell back onto all fours.

They wouldn’t be that lucky again.

“Fuck!” Folami screeched. “We have to get out of here! We are sitting ducks if we stay!”

South groaned and smacked Folami’s knee limply. She was barely functioning at this point, her
eyes were red and glassy, and her face was extremely pale, even for someone who practically lived in their armor.

“How do you want to do that, kid? Neither of us can walk.”

Oh, that was bad.

Folami didn’t want to admit it, but she really was genuinely afraid for the woman at this point. She’d already been on a tight schedule, and now? With this? Things were starting to look pretty fucking bleak, and Folami might have the skills to help, but she didn’t have the supplies, space, or time. And she was 75% certain that Eta was fucking with her scanner.

She was 50% certain he was fucking with a lot more than that.

The question was, why?

Folami pulled her leg in, ready to muscle through the pain and run. Instead of standing, she screamed.

“SON OF A BITCH THAT HURTS! Ok, I’m good, we have to-“

She tried to pull herself up, only to collapse on her injured leg.

“FUCKING HELL! I don’t understand! It’s barely a scrape!”

Edra grabbed Folami’s shoulder and held her down.

“You can’t walk. Stop it.”

There were screams and explosions all around them and she didn’t know if they were friends or enemies and the Freelancers wouldn’t listen anymore and it wasn’t getting any better and it was starting to get hot and Folami couldn’t think couldn’t plan couldn’t thinkthinkthink couldn’t make it work how to make the numbers do the thing and not fail and not fall and no one should die they’re kids kids and babies and they didn’t deserve to die here not now not when they were so close sodammedcloseto getting out escape freedom life go go go out out

Breathe.

Her ears rang.

Breathe.

Folami closed her eyes.

Breathe.

The numbers wouldn’t work with all of them in the truck.

Breathe.

They needed to move quickly.

Just breathe.

If it was just…them. Just the runners and South…
She latched onto Edra’s arm.

“Edra, get them out of here. Can you carry her?”

Edra shook her head.

“If I could do that, I’d be wearing different colors. Where’s Doc?”

Ramirez leaned out of the truck and activated his voice amplifier.

“DOC!”

“COMING!!!”

In seconds, Doc bounced into the truck with a giggle.

“What’s up, guys?”

“Holy shit, that was fast!”

“Thanks! I ran track in-“

Folami sliced a hand through the air.

“Doc, I need you to carry South to a more defensible position.”

He clapped his hands together in excitement, and Folami realized he must have dropped his weapon at some point.

Good, that would actually help in this case.

“I can do that!”

Edra didn’t seem to get the memo. She looked Doc over quickly.

“Are you ok? Did you suffer a TBI recently?”

“Nope, just good old fashioned adrenaline! Help me get her on my back!”

Wyoming and Florida set on getting South up and into Doc’s grip. As soon as she was on his back, he was moving.

And he was fucking fast, even with all that armor on his back.

“And what am I doing?” Niner’s voice was tense, “I’m a pilot, not a fighter.”

Folami gave her a once over.

“Can you drive a car?”

“If I don’t have to use my legs? Sure. I’m a bitchin’ driver.”

“Fantastic. Ramirez, Yacavone, get Niner over to Swanny, switch drivers, and join the fight. They’ll need fresher eyes and someone’s gonna have to get South help.”

Ramirez stomped a foot.
“She doesn’t know the terrain or the way!”

“It’s flat enough at this point, and this is why copilots exist! Trust me on this.”

He stared for a moment. Folami made the handsign ‘E’ and pointed out the truck.

(Evacuate)

He nodded.

“I still hope you fucking die.”

“Thanks, bitch. I’ll be sure to write something extra nice in your birthday card next month. Move your ass.”

Jones lifted Niner out of her chair so Ramirez could get it out of the truck. She grunted with her arms crossed, clearly annoyed, but didn’t fight the manhandling.

Clearly the woman was smart enough to know when help was needed.

“Come on! Hurry up!”

Ramirez helped Jones set Niner down in the chair. She strapped herself back in and started moving.

“This way!”

Palomo grinned as he fired the death cannon into the trees. The echoing booms and screams of the pirates and mercenaries filled him with a sense of satisfaction like he’d only felt a few times in his life.

He loved the way the alien weapons made him feel! No one could touch him in the whole world! He was so freaking strong! There was something about having the ability to obliterate anyone who got in his way that made Palomo’s whole life. There was nothing like this feeling in the whole world!

The cannon was strong too, which meant he had to be really careful about where he aimed so he didn’t end up taking out any of the Chorus soldiers. Jensen’s flamethrower was surprisingly accurate for what the weapon was, able to pinpoint one person in a group as long as it was wielded well. The cannon, on the other hand, destroyed everything in its path!

It was almost like a game, matching colors and movement in the blink of an eye and taking those fucking bastards out, one at a time. Honestly, it was almost too easy.

“BURN BITCHES!”

And he wasn’t the only one having fun.

Palomo craned his neck to look at Jensen, who aimed the flamethrower to the sky with one hand and fired her gun with her off hand as she cackled wildly. There was nothing like a woman in power, of that, Palomo was 150% sure.
God, she was so freaking sexy!

Everything about her, from the way she aimed her gun to the way she got oil smudged on her face working on cars, no matter how careful she was, was just insanely amazing.

There was an energy in her, a fiery inferno, a crackling lightning storm, that made Katie Jensen an unstoppable force. She could take over the world one day.

Palomo couldn’t wait to see it.

A sharp, metallic crack snapped across his ears. Jensen’s whole body flew backwards and disappeared behind the truck.

The world froze for just a moment.

Palomo blinked.

The world was dark.

Black.

Silent.

Empty.

Katie?

Katie?!

KATIE?!

Rage swelled in his chest, so quickly he wanted to throw up.

The light came back, noise filtered in, color faded.

His grip tightened on the gun.

He would kill

Every

Single

One

Of those bastards with his bare hands.

“OWA!”

Palomo blinked.

That was…

“KATIE?!”

Palomo shrieked.
“RRRAUUUGH!”

Smosna, who’d been taking standing shots from one of the jeeps with an alien pistol in each hand, let out a war cry that sent shivers down Palomo’s spine. She leapt from her perch and landed on the shoulders of the nearby pirate who’d shot the other woman.

As the mercenary stumbled forward, Smosna wrapped her thighs around his head and twisted her hips until the pirate’s neck popped. She got off two shots, hitting two more pirates in the chest as she fell.

“KATIE!!”

Smosna scrambled off the body and dashed around the truck, guns long forgotten on the ground.

Palomo shook himself out of his stupor and chased after her.

Oh god.

Katie couldn’t be dead!

She just couldn’t!

Not now!

No!

She was his best friend!

He loved her and he hadn’t managed to prove it yet!

He didn’t know what he would do if he lost her.

They rounded the truck and saw Katie on her back, limbs sprawled out and not moving.

Completely still.

The barrel of the flamethrower was horribly bent, but there was no blood. She waved weakly from the ground.

“I’m ok!!”

She coughed and groaned.

“Ow, my back.”

Palomo let out a relieved laugh as Smosna lunged for Jensen and hugged her tightly.

The world brightened considerably, color faded back into his vision, and Palomo took up guard to make sure no one would take the women in their moment. They would be safe until they were ready to stand and continue the fight.

Smosna pulled the red Lieutenant into a sitting position and hugged her tighter.

“Oh, thank fuck, I thought you were dead!”

Jensen laughed and squeezed Smosna back, before she pushed the other girl away and started to stand.
Palomo’s head cocked to the side for a second and thought about what he’d seen Smosna do.

“Volleyball? Did you kill that guy with your thighs?”

She looked up, shook her head, then snorted.

“Uh…yeah? I guess I did.”

Jensen giggled into her hands and tilted dangerously to the side. She was probably a little wobbly from the impact still.

“That ish sho hot.”

Palomo ran over and helped steady Jensen on her feet.

“Damn, that was crazy as hell, Smosna! Can you teach me how to do that?!?”

“Fuck, dude, I don’t even know how I did it! But sure, first we drive off the bad guys, then we snap necks!”

Katie threw the now broken flamethrower off her back with a long, sad sigh.

“Damn. I wash really excshited about that flamethrower.”

“We’ll build you a new one!”

“We’ll build you one that shoots lasers!”

“Shexy, purple, alien lashersh!”

“But first we have to get home.”

Kimball glanced at her clock, nervous as the time the truck was set to arrive, fast approached. She was not excited about this, as the minutes ticked by she actually got more and more nervous about the whole thing. Was she doing the right thing wasn’t really the question at this point.

The right thing didn’t matter anymore.

What mattered was taking the road they’d set out on and ensuring that as few casualties resulted as possible. Someone was going to die, of that she had no doubt.

She really hoped it wouldn’t be any more of the soldiers.

The hologram projector lit up and a stocky red alien appeared.

“General Kimball.”

“Santa! Thank goodness, you’re back!”

“General Kimball. I see that things are…very different than I left them.”

“Yeah, things are a little…insane at the moment. We need to update your protocols. Lorenzo Páez
was elected General of the Federal Army while you were away, and we now have a handful of potentially dangerous former soldiers on their way here on Agent Carolina’s good name.”

“Yes, I was made aware.”

He didn’t…sound any different, and his hologram was solid. The colors and size were normal. Still…something was off. He didn’t seem right.

“Are…is everything ok, Santa? I know that there was a tower under attack. I haven’t heard anything.”

“The Temple of Records has been destroyed. I have attempted to salvage as much data as possible, but nearly all of the contents have been erased, though the tower itself still stands. The mercenaries were driven away, and there were no soldiers on site at the time of the attack, so no casualties to be reported other than the entirety of the history of this planet.

For a being made out of information, that had to be a crushing experience. The knowledge that the information he’d meticulously kept and protected for so long could be lost in an instant had to make him at least a little nervous about his own mortality on top of being devastating in its own right.

He probably needed support.

“I am…so sorry. Words cannot express.”

Kimball shook her head.

“Is there…anything I can do for you? Any way I can help?”

“Thousands of years of carefully curated history have been destroyed. There is very little left in the digital archives left untouched. Much has been damaged, but may yet be repaired. I would take a small section of storage and some time to repair it, if allowed.”

“Of course! Anything within the New Republic’s power is at your disposal. You’ve more than earned some space and time, Santa, and it would be my pleasure to give you whatever help you need. Can you transfer the damaged data somewhere other than that tower?”

“Where should I transfer it to?”

“Just…just deposit it here, I guess? You do spend the majority of your time based out of Proteger, it makes sense for you to work on it here. There’s no sense in you transporting yourself back and forth so far from home when you could just as easily take care of it here. Seriously, it’s not like we don’t love information. We’re not going to go out or our way to hurt it. Choose a safe spot, store it, and fix it when you have the time.”

Santa gave a slow nod.

“Beginning transfer of remaining data. You are very kind, General.”

She shrugged and waved a hand at him.

Santa did not need to bow and scrape. He had more than earned his place in the circle of trust, even in the few days since the war ended, with his meticulously detailed plans for restocking the larders of the army, protocols for reintegrating civilian lifestyles, and crafting more exact training regimens for individuals and units.
He thought a lot like Washington in the way he organized, which meant that there wouldn’t be as much butting of heads as there could be with that sort of thing.

“I know who my friends are, that’s all, and I understand the value of taking care of my people.”

Santa was silent for a moment.

“You consider me one of your people?”

“You stood by the people of Chorus, Santa, and you absolutely didn’t have to. If you’d disliked us, you could have easily helped Felix and Locus kill us, the apocalypse tower wouldn’t have affected you, and someone else would have resettled Chorus eventually. If you were really the neutral party you pretend to be, you wouldn’t have actively helped us. Even now, you have jumped into taking care of our people, without a single request for time to yourself, a restriction of duties, or compensation. You’re a hero, one I have never had an idea of how to help. If giving you some digital space to try and repair the damaged history of this planet will make you happy, I’ll give you as much space as I can spare.”

Santa’s hologram normally floated unobtrusively off to the side of the room, to where Kimball could easily turn to acknowledge him or choose to ignore him if she was busy. She never did, and never would, ignore the alien AI, but it was an interesting peek into his psychology to see how he handled himself.

For the first time ever, Santa walked across the room, out of his spot, and stood directly in front of Kimball’s desk.

She’d never seen his AI walk before, it typically blinked in and out of existence wherever he wanted to place it. It was a little unsettling to watch, but immensely fascinating, and as always when it came to General Vanessa Kimball, fascination won out over fear.

“I am…saddened by the knowledge that the Great Key of Chorus is in less worthy hands, General. You would have been an excellent addition to the Hall of Heroes. Much better than the previous.”

“The hall of heroes?”

Santa lifted his hand and projected even tinier holograms of Sangheili warriors above it.

Holy crap, Vanessa thought to herself, Santa’s behaviors are updating.

“It is where the records and life data of those who have held the Great Key are stored. My creator’s people were stored there, examples of the truest heroes decorated the halls. All of those worthy of being called a true hero were held there, from the very first matriarch of Chorus, until today. Now the hall is lost, and all inside it are doomed to be forgotten.”

Kimball nodded, well aware of the sheer number of people who would be lost to time in a hundred years. Hell, she could imagine the names and histories that would be lost in five years. Trauma made people’s memories short, and there had never been enough time during the war to keep records the way she’d wanted.

“I am so sorry, Santa. Do you know what happened that destroyed the data?”

“I am unaware of what has caused the corruption. The destruction was caused by those who would destroy your broodlings. Those left behind by the parasites who have tainted the Great Key.”

Kimball’s shoulders tensed.
She let out a deep breath and shook her head.

One comment at a time, Vanessa.

“Santa, are…you know the soldiers aren’t actually my children, right? I will admit I don’t know exactly how the Sangheili species works in regard to reproduction, but I did not birth the planet’s soldiers.”

Santa shrugged, and Kimball wondered if he’d learned that from Captain Grif. That looked like a suspiciously Grif sort of ‘what you’re saying isn’t relevant to me’ shrugs.

“They are not the childlings and younglings of your brood, but you do protect them and honor them as you would your own broodlings. I do not see why this is different.”

“I am a general, a military leader, it’s not the same thing.”

“You nurture their minds, care for their bodies, and do what must be done to keep them protected in times of war. You do what must be done to ensure not only their survival, but their health and happiness as well, every step of the way. Your broodlings, your soldiers, they could have been made hard from the war. Angry. They could be bitter and cold. Instead, you have given them the ability to grow and play and find joy.”

“As a good leader should. There is no sense in letting my people just die all over the place, and even less in allowing them to be miserable. They are my soldiers, not my children. Also, only half of them are mine, I’ve barely had any impact on the Federal Army.”

Santa was quiet. He returned to his stiff and stoic posture he normally kept, and Kimball mentally swore.

“Santa? I’m sorry, I…kids are kind of a touchy subject for me. I’m not trying to be an asshole.”

“Those who first came to this planet, my creators, were led by a matriarch much like yourself. Fierce, strong, unafraid to do what must be done to survive, and more than willing to die in battle to protect even a single of her people. What allowed her to stay in power was the devotion to those who came before her. Any who opposed her would find themselves turned upon quickly by her soldiers. They called themselves her broodlings as many of them had no family of their own, torn apart by war, disease, and circumstance as yours are. The planet reigned with 500 years of peace under her tutelage and guidance. Long after she passed, her lessons and wisdom led Chorus in prosperity.”

“Wow, that’s…impressive. Did she hold the Great Key?”

“She did. She was the first to hold it on this planet. Her essence was one of the many lost.”

Kimball really wished he had a physical body. She wanted to put a hand on his arm and offer some kind of physical support.

“I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Perhaps…it is not a loss, general. An essence held in the Hall of Heroes is forever in stasis. ‘Stagnation is true destruction. To grow, one must be able to change.’”

“‘And life doesn’t end when the heart stops beating.’ I remember that verse from my studies before the war, it was written on the gold colored floating tower that was speculated to be more of a religious site or place of worship. What was her name?”
He shook his head.

“Her name was destroyed with the pieces, her records were some of the many wiped from existence and I stored her name, as it was not important at the time.”

“Oh god, Santa, I am so sorry.”

“Perhaps I will find it amongst the remnants that have been saved.”

“Anything you need, anything we can give you, just ask. We have thousands of pictures and recordings of older cities and sites stored in our systems, maybe the etchings will help.”

“Of course, General. On this day I am saddened, but also filled with a strange sense of…hope, for the continuation of this planet. While I was concerned initially, when the tower was first activated by the hero Lavernius Tucker, I find that the humans who have survived are…worth saving.”

“That’s definitely the biggest compliment I’ve received in a while. Keep this up and you’ll really make me feel important.”

“Dearest, it seems as if the children could use our help.”

Florida held out a sniper rifle to Wyoming, his cheeriest grin on his face. Reggie’s husband was visibly displeased with the turn the events had taken, and no small amount of that displeasure came from Wyoming’s…less than stellar reveal of his misdeeds.

He’ll be taking that one out of my hide soon enough, of that I am quite sure.

-I do not like that he does that.-

Don’t worry, old bean, I will make sure you are safely away during the process.

-I dislike that it happens at all, Reggie.-

It’s not as if I’m of any particular desire to stop it.

-I am disgusted by your sex life.-

You’re just jealous that I have one and he doesn’t want you involved. My Butch is surprisingly old fashioned when it comes to the bedroom.

“I’m pretty sure that darned concussion isn’t bothering me anymore, but you should take the sniper rifle just in case. I’ll stick with pointy knives and close-range guns!”

Wyoming nodded and pressed a quick kiss to Florida’s temple.

“Be safe, my love. There are no aliens to resurrect you this time.”

“If you die and I don’t? I will make it my life’s mission to destroy everything you’ve ever loved, resurrect you, and spend our golden years killing you in slow, intricate ways. Do not make me feel unpleasant emotions.”
-And this is the man you love.-

This is the man I loved enough to marry, with a priest at gunpoint.

-I am concerned for your mental health.-

I have missed you greatly, as well, old chap.

Wyoming ducked quickly out of the truck, climbed onto the roof, and laid flat against it. The Chorus soldiers moved, oddly enough, like a school of fish. They weaved in and out and around the enemy in what would no doubt look like a dizzying and completely random fashion from the ground. Even just the elevation of the truck wasn’t an excellent perch, but Gamma noticed the rhythm of it almost immediately.

They were something, though what that was remained to be seen.

Smosna, and Palomo hovered around Jensen, who seemed shaken, but uninjured. They both walked with one hand on her and one hand holding their weapons. Palomo’s exciting ‘death cannon’ was strapped to his back in favor of a more sedate purple pistol.

Wyoming situated himself and angled the rifle.

“Children?”

“We’re ok!”

He nodded and brought the gun up. Unlike the rest of the Freelancers, Wyoming wasn’t stupid enough to discount the Chorus soldiers on their age alone. If they said they were fine, it was because they were handling the situation well enough without him.

It took a moment to get used to the rifle, a good 30 years at least behind the weapons technology he was used to. At least the person who’d used it last hadn’t completely fucked up the sniper scope.

Small mercies and whatnot. Gamma, be a dear and help me out.

-It is much more difficult without the armor’s technology.-

I know, but lets do our best anyway. I think Butch has decided he wants to stay for a while, which means playing nice with the natives. They generally like you better when you don’t just let them die.

Wyoming watched that Ramirez boy running beside Niner and shooting wildly into the fray around him, or at least what looked like wildly. Gamma caught a pattern in that as well, less to kill, and more to drive the oncoming back. Yacavone and Marconi’s unsettling wolf howls carried well over the noise of the guns.

They were quite odd, but fairly successful in their endeavors. He could count at least thirty dead, and none of them looked to be the Chorus soldiers.

Still, there were plenty of enemies still standing.

-I will never understand your attachment.-

You’ve lived inside my head long enough, friend, I think you’re fibbing.

-Hey, Reggie. Knock, knock.-
Wyoming set up a shot.

Who’s there?

Gamma corrected Wyoming’s aim slightly. He fired.

-Tank.-

The pirate holding a knife behind Danvers’ head went down like a rock.

“One.”

Tank who?

A pirate holding a rocket launcher was thrown back as it exploded in their face.

“Two.”

A pirate straddling one of the soldiers Wyoming didn’t know, one wearing ice blue trim, while aiming a gun directly into their visor collapsed to the side.

“Three.”

-You’re welcome.-

The soldier tracked the shot and waved at Wyoming as they rolled to their feet and took off running, no doubt to bask in the wholesale slaughter of their enemies and then shame the Freelancers for doing the same.

North hollered from nearby.

“I’m at six! Hurry up!”

Faster now, Gamma. Knock, knock.

-Who’s there?- 

Stopwatch.

-Stopwatch who?- 

Stopwatch you’re doing and pay attention!

Wyoming let out four shots in quick succession and glowed with the combination of Gamma’s amusement and North’s disappointed groan.

“Seven.”

“Shit!”

-Knock Knock.-

He snorted as North started firing a little more freely. The man had clearly been holding back, out of fear for the children, no doubt. The fact that it hadn’t occurred to him to shoot faster to save more lives baffled Wyoming a little. It wasn’t as if the man’s aim wasn’t impeccable as always.

“You’re a little out of practice, aren’t you, old friend?”
It would have been amusing if it didn’t make him quite so furious.

Who’s there?

Honestly, Wyoming didn’t know if he was angrier about the soldiers being children-

“Oh all of us got to retire to a distant planet and live over a shooting range, Reg!”

Or about the soldiers being hypocritical about just what atrocities they would commit to end a war.

-Police.-

Still, it could have been a great deal worse, he supposed.

“Pity that!”

The pirates had excellent timing as far as being a distraction went. The soldiers would likely press the whole ‘kidnapping the captain’s child’ thing to the back of their minds for now.

Police who?

He’d have time to win them over before they remembered, and once he was in, he doubted he’d be out again. If they could learn to love those Red and Blue idiots, they could learn to like Wyoming and his particular brand of oddness.

-Police pay attention and finish killing things so we can get you medical attention.-

Wyoming frowned in concern.

Do you see something I’m not feeling, old sport?

Gamma was quiet for a moment as he calculated an excellent shot which went through three different pirate’s helmets. North’s swears of frustration and subsequent trick shots brought a grin to Wyoming’s face.

He’d really missed having a sniper to compete with. Butch was good, no doubt about that, but they really operated in different realms as far as their specialties went.

-My last memory before you woke me was watching you die. You are my friend. I do not wish to see you die again.-

Well, we shall have to do a better job of preventing that, won’t we? I don’t intend to die for a very, very long time.

Florida strapped a pistol to his thigh and a rifle to his back. He’d feel a little more comfortable with proper body armor, but he was used to running around with a lot less effective armor than the rest of the Freelancers. Speed and stealth was his wheelhouse. He would be fine, and if he wasn’t, well it wasn’t like he wouldn’t have a lot of people to hang out with in hell!

Time to be a hero, and get some love back from the kiddos.
“I’m just going to clear the area a bit, see if I can’t make this go a little faster.”

Folami grabbed Florida’s bodysuit and twisted it hard. The woman’s grip was weak, likely out of fear that she’d get her fingers broken off, but she was insistent. Honestly, Folami just fascinated Florida. She had this air about her, her abrasiveness was clearly a mask, and an idiot would think it was covering for a delicate heart or some such.

Oh, she probably was soft and vulnerable under her shell, but that was only around layer three, and Florida was certain she had at least ten more hidden beneath that.

It was insidious, how she managed to worm her way into his emotions this way, how she’d managed to get to everyone else was almost a no-brainer, but Florida was better that that. Very few people had ever managed to make Florida feel much of anything, and even fewer in such a short period of time.

She and that Bitters boy had nudged a door open and the other soldiers just kept on pushing their way through! It was insidious!

It made him want to keep her alive at least a little longer. He wanted to see what she’d do under a hundred different scenarios, because he was certain she’d react a little differently than expected to each and every one.

She had her helmet back on, finally, you know it just wasn’t safe to not have that on when people were firing guns and trying to hurt people in general.

She still managed to look pissed.

Honestly, this little soldier was just too cute. Did she really think she was fooling anyone?

“You were vomiting all over the place just a few hours ago, what makes you think you’re ok to shoot guns?”

“Oh, well, I’m still a pretty good shot, even without being able to see clearly, while vomiting, even with my arms dislocated and my fingers broken, although that’s just not nearly as fun! Still, I’d be happier with a good set of throwing knives and that cannon of Palomo’s instead of this terribly out of date peashooter. I don’t suppose I can trouble you for one of those fancy guns?”

Folami’s shoulders dropped, and Florida almost wished she didn’t have the helmet on, despite the shots being fired. He wanted to see what despair looked like on that face.

“No stopping you, is there?”

“Nope!”

She sighed, bowed her head, and pointed to where Smosna had been seated.

“Above the seat. Please don’t slit my throat with those, they’re not mine, and I don’t want them returned haunted.”

“Dare I ask?”

“It’s a long story. If we live, I’ll tell you. Try not to die.”

“You do the same, Poppet.”

Florida leaned down and pressed a wet, smacking kiss to the top of her head.
She made the most amusing choking/gagging noises, flailed her arms around wildly, and batted at Florida’s legs.

“Did you just kiss my helmet?! Get the fuck away from me you incontinent, badger licking, creeper!”

“Back at you, Ducks!”

The battlefield was worse than he thought it would be. Bodies littered the earth, the ground was covered with scorch marks and gouges, and the air was thick with metal and smoke.

Still, none of the bodies looked familiar, so Florida couldn’t be too upset. He’d be happier with a helmet and some filtration, but he’d work around it.

He snuck around stationary jeeps, convenient boulders and trees, and general debris to take shots at stragglers and the pirates in the fancy armor who, up ‘til then, had been doing a great job of not dying! Still, those kinds of streaks were just not meant to last!

One in particular caught sight of Florida and snarled.

“YOU FUCKER!”

Oh, dear.

The man charged toward Florida, gun clearly forgotten, and raised a fist.

Bitters came around from behind a large rock and shot into the back of the pirate’s head. That poor idiot went down like a sack of potatoes.

“Good job, Muffin!”

Bitters dusted himself off.

“Fucking bastards. How’d you convince Folami to let you go?”

“Oh, she gave up! It’s just her, Edra, Jones, and Maine in the truck now!”

“Fuck! And you’re all out playing without your fucking armor!”

“Oh, come on, Precious, are you really that upset? I’m pretty excited to see your moves, actually.”

Bitters shoved Florida between him and a boulder and fired off into the fray. Florida took the hint and allowed the younger man to play shield while he fired over his shoulder.

“Oh boy, and old guy is hitting on me. It’s like all my lifelong fantasies are finally coming true.”

Bitters was an excellent shot, but that didn’t surprise Florida. The boy was no sniper, his shots were a little too inconsistent in their placement and accuracy, but what he lacked there he more than made up for in his ability to choose his targets.

“Well, that’s just rude, young man.”

The young man was able to pinpoint exactly who should go down in any outcropping, and his choices were eerily similar to those Florida would make.

“Well, I’m rude. Deal with it.”
Marconi ran past them with an oversized alien blaster in his tiny hands.

“BITTERS! BITTERS! BITTERS! I’M DOING THE THING!”

“IF YOU GET SHOT, I’M KICKING YOUR ASS DURING TRAINING!”

“OW OW OWWWWOOOO!!!!!!”

Florida and Bitters snorted in unison.

“Fuck,” Bitters bit out, “That’s fucking creepy. Don’t do-SHIT!”

Bitters shoved Florida over just in time to be hit with a concussive blast and was flung backwards into the boulder and cracked his visor. Florida pulled the gun off his thigh and fired into the pirate’s kneecaps and elbows.

“Bitters?!”

“I’m ok.”

Bitters staggered to his feet, weapon abandoned by his side. He listed to the left a little bit and swayed like a drunk trying to stay on his feet.

“Oh dear, kiddo! How do you feel?”

Bitters flopped onto his butt and shook his head.

“I think I’m gonna puke. I really hate puking.”

Florida yanked Bitters arm around his shoulders and hauled the younger man to his feet. The battlefield was not the place to deal with this level of silliness.

Bitters groaned.

“Don’t let me drown in my helmet.”

“Come on now, Cupcake, time to get you out of the way. We can’t have you dying out here.”

Bitters stumbled along with him to the outcropping of rocks. The fight would be over soon enough, and Bitters was more important to keep alive than worrying about the rest of the silly pirates. Wyoming was still doing a fantastic job of killing the little bastards, and the Chorus kids weren’t doing to badly on their own.

Not a single casualty yet.

Fingers crossed it stayed that way!

“Still…still…don’t trust.”

“Yeah, that’s probably smart, Sweet Pea. Daddy’s new and scary, but you’ll get used to me.”

“Creep.”

Florida grinned cheerfully.

“That too!”
“HANDS IN THE- UGH!”
Florida spun around and flung a knife into the throat of the approaching pirate. The man gurgled and clutched the air in front of the exposed handle before falling to his knees and choking in his own fluids.

“Damn, I need to stop playing, there are a lot of these little guys! What they lack in skill they sure do make up for in numbers!”

He shook his head, sat Bitters down, and ripped the knife out of the man’s throat.

“Just stick with me, Sweetums, I’ll keep you safe.”

Bitters snorted and waved a hand in Florida’s direction.

Oh, dear. Was the boy concussed?

“You’re like a creepy, old version of my boyfriend.”

Bitters limply shifted to look up at Florida, and, yep, that boy was definitely concussed if his jerky drooping was any indicator. He gasped in horror.

“Oh my god, please tell me you’re not Matthews from the future. Because I’m not Wyoming, and I’d be sad. You’re not Kyle, right?”

“Aww, we’re concussion buddies! That’s so fun! And I promise, I haven’t done any time traveling. Linear plotlines for me, kiddo!”

Bitters shoulders drooped in relief.

“Good. You’re not as cute as Matthews either, and he’d be sad if he stopped being adorable. I’d be sad too. He’s a bunny. His nose even twitches when he’s interested in stuff. Like this.”

Bitters tilted his head up, and Florida desperately wished the boy wasn’t wearing a helmet, because he wanted to see what the concussed version of Bitters thought an adorable nose twitch looked like.

“I want to be insulted about not being cute anymore, but I think I’m just going to be happy that you’re so in love.”

Bitters tugged weakly at his helmet.

“Can’t see.”

“Oh no, Puddin’ Pop, you keep that on! I’ll walk you. We don’t want you accidentally getting shot in the head.”

“This way!”

Habisch ran York around the battlefield several times, the two of them took shots at the pirates as they weaved through the outside of the battlefield. She wasn’t a bad shot, but she was bossy as fuck, constantly changing her mind about the best place to perch, which normally wouldn’t bother
him all that much, except he was feeling a little goddamned exposed without his armor, even if he did have Delta in the back of his head keeping him calm.

-York, there’s wounded. Head to the left.-

“Habisch, we’ve got wounded!”

“Where?!”

York took the lead and ducked behind a medium outcropping of rocks where a Fed soldier had dragged himself and clutched at his blood-soaked torso.

Habisch shoved York out of the way and dove to her knees next to the Fed.

“Shit, Sadhana!”

-They are losing a great deal of blood.-

York leaned down next to Habisch and helped her get the sobbing soldier onto his back. He scanned the armor for a puncture of some kind, but couldn’t find anything.

Where’s he hit?

-I cannot scan them without the armor, York. I have to rely on your senses.-

Shit. That’s a lot of help.

-I am sorry, York, but we are limited in this state.-

Not your fault, D. I’m just a little wigged.

Habisch put a hand on Sadhana’s shoulder and felt around the armor to search for weakened or damaged spots, but had no luck.

“Where are you hurt?”

“Back. Can’t move. Shorted.”

Habisch shook her head and growled in frustration.

“Saddy, you’re covered in blood.”

He choked and let out a dry cough.

“Boom Boom.”

She sighed in relief and caught York’s eye.

“Oh thank fuck, it’s an exploded mercenary, not a bullet wound.”

“Gross, but not the worst thing that could have happened to you, kid. What’s hurtin’?”

Several shots were fired nearby. York pulled his gun up just as North skidded to a stop next to them. The blond plastered himself against their boulder, looked around the bulky stone, and fired away.

“You really need to pay more attention, York. You’re going to get shot in your pretty face, and
Carolina’s not going to forgive you for dying twice.”

York waved a hand at North and shot at a pirate that was running past.

He’d really fucking missed his friend.

-North has missed you as well. He has engaged in 37% more eye contact with you than he typically engaged in, in the past, and had engaged in eye contact 54% more with you than any of the others who have survived. He has also smiled at you a lot.-

Aww, D, you’re getting my heart all aflutter.

-Oh, how I shudder.-

York bumped against North with a grin. North grinned back, still a little tight and a lot exhausted, but so much like his old self that York could almost pretend they were back on the MoI, fucking around and having a great time, instead of trapped on a shithole planet with most of their friends wounded and surrounded by people who at best didn’t trust them and at worst actively hated them.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. This is why I have you around. We’re both too pretty to die.”

Habisch snorted.

“Is that what you guys think? I guess there’s something to be said for confidence.”

Sadhana clutched at Habisch’s hand and whined.

Fuck.

York almost forgot about the kid. He was the whole reason they were in this spot in the first place.

“Hurts.”

“We’ve got incoming, York. Make yourself useful.”

“Got it. Habisch, can you stabilize our friend here?”

“No, we need to get a specialist here. Fuck, I want my radio back!”

“I don’t want to die.”

Sadhana sobbed and grasped at Habisch harder. She shook her head and made soothing noises.

York grinned down.

“It’s all good kid, take a deep breath.”

He sobbed and turned to face the boulder.

“Make it quick.”

North sniped the closest enemies.

“Got ‘em. No thanks to you, York.”

“You’re the sniper, North. By the time I line up a shot, you’ve already killed like five of them!”
York grabbed the kid’s arm and tugged.

“Come on, I can’t carry you when I’m not in armor, and we can’t call help over without a radio. You’re not shot, so you’re gonna have to move on your own.”

Sadhana’s voice shook.

“You…didn’t shoot me?”

-That explains the flinching, but raises a good deal more questions.-

Yeah, like what the fuck is wrong with this planet?!

“ Fucking why would we do that?! Come on!”

York tried to pull the kid up only for Habisch to smack him and shove him backwards.

“They can’t move, York! They’re shorted out. Help me get them on my back! We’ll run them over to Q. She’ll fix them!”

York was so beyond confused at that point, but he and North hauled Sadhana’s limp body up and onto Habisch’s back and flanked her on either side to protect her from enemy fire.

“I’ve got you. You are gonna be just fine.”

“He didn’t shoot me.”

She glanced between York and North.

“Of course not, this isn’t the fucking blood base. Come on Saddy, we’re almost home.”

Sadhana shook his head.

“Won’t make it.”

“Bullshit you won’t! You’re gonna live to be thirty, just you wait.”

Jesus, what kind of place was it where living to thirty was something so unheard of. York was older than thirty. Fuck, York was closer to forty than he liked to think about, considering he’d hoped to be well on his way to a good life out of the line of fire at this age.

York took out nearby pirates as North peeled off to find himself a new perch.

“I’m guessing armor’s not going to be much help at this point. Either we finish off the last of them or we die. I’m moving up high, be safe.”

Sadhana made a choking sound like he was having trouble breathing.

Habisch screamed, though how well anyone could hear her over the firefight was anyone’s guess.

“We have to get a tech, now!”

“Medic tech?”

-The odds of being heard are 36%, though the odds of anyone responding are only 12%.-

Thanks D, you’re a regular ray of hope.
“Did I stutter?! TECH! TECH!”

She slapped York’s arm hard, and York snarled in frustration.

“How do I get us a goddamned tech?!”

A soldier wearing white with icy blue accents ran up to them.

“What happened to Sadhana?!”

“Q, thank fuck! I don’t know what happened, but they’re all fucked up!”

The new soldier scanned the area quickly and motioned them over toward one of the jeeps.

“Get them in here. Summers, Habisch, I need you to keep us clear! As soon as the roads are free, we’re moving!”

The soldier ripped off her gloves and started pulling off pieces of their armor to reveal small pockets of supplies.

“Who are you?”

She ripped off Sadhana’s chestplate and snapped on a pair of blue surgical gloves. York was impressed. Most people didn’t think to bring that kind of thing onto a battlefield.

-These soldiers are excellent at defying odds. Their luck seems to be outpacing your own.-

Since when do you believe in luck?

-You wouldn’t be alive at this point without more than your fair share. The odds were never in your favor.-

Thank you, D, for that vote of confidence. I really hope I don’t end up shot today, what with your pessimistic attitude wearing me down.

“Quetzalli. What the fuck is this shit, Saddy?”

Sadhana’s Kevlar bodysuit was melted into their chest.

York blinked and shook his head.

Nope, still fucking melted.

“Don’t know. Hit from behind, nothing’s working right, hard to breathe.”

Quetzalli plucked delicately at the melted bodysuit in an effort to see the actual wounds.

“Fuck me,” York whispered, “How are you not in agony? How are you still conscious?! We carried you across a battlefield!”

Sadhana started to tremble as Quetzalli pulled out what looked like a tiny toolkit and laid it out. It could also be an old school lockpick set, for all that York could recognize from it.

“Plastic.”

“Shit,” Quetzalli muttered, “The hatches are melted. I’m sorry, baby, but this is gonna fucking suck. Grit your teeth, we’ll get you through it.”
She pulled a knife out of her thigh holster and stuck it directly into Sadhana’s armpit. York felt his stomach roil and reached out to stop her, only for Habisch to shove him down.

“THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING TO HIM?!”

“THEY’RE HURT, YOU GODDAMNED LEMMING!!!”

“BOTH OF YOU STOP DICKING AROUND AND START KILLING THINGS!”

Quetzalli pulled the knife down Sadhana’s side and tore it upward. As she moved, a melted plastic panel ripped off, revealing

“Oh my god, that…what?”

There were…metal bits and wires mixed in with blood and…fucking exposed organs. Quetzalli poked her fingers into the bloody mess and swore.

“Your parts are fuzzed just like the fucking radios! How long has this been a thing?! Shit.”

She reached her hand deep into the pulsing wet cavity mixed with organs and metal, bones and wires and gears. It was like something out of the creepiest sci-fi. She wiggled her am around until York was sure she was deep enough to grab his spine from the inside.

-York, you are dangerously close to losing consciousness, please turn away and focus on something else.-

“Switching you to manual so your flesh bits stop trying to pump through our plastic bits. Your life is going to suck until we get these replaced, but you won’t die here. Do not exert yourself, you’ve only got ¾’s of a functioning lung.”

Sadhana’s head turned toward York. He wanted to keep firing, keep defending, but…jesus. Delta wouldn’t stop processing in his head, and he couldn’t take his eyes off of the gaping hole where a thick layer of muscle and fat should be.

“They didn’t shoot me.”

York shook his head, slowly, meticulously, trying for calm as much as he could. Trying not to start screaming or pass out or just…

What. The. Fuck. Was. Wrong. With. This. Planet?

“Why would I have shot you?”

Quetzalli looked at York. Something in her posture got less defensive. She grabbed York’s arm with her blood-soaked hand and pulled him lower down.

“Hey, Freelancer? Deep breaths. No panic attacks now. I have one crit pat, I don’t need more. You’re pale and shaking, and you might be going into shock. If you can, please don’t do that.”

“How is he still alive?”

An explosion next to the truck sent dirt and rocks flying into the air. Quetzalli slammed the melted chestplate down onto Sadhana’s exposed insides to keep the debris out of his exposed innards.

“SHIT! WE NEED COVER, NOW!”
York turned to see a pair of pirates standing right by them and fired off three shots in quick succession.

“Shit! I swear I’m a better shot than this normally!”

“Shut up and kill them!”

The truck rocked again, not as bad as the last time, but it was enough to send the last of the soldiers into fits. Maine held tight to the stabilization bar near him and watched the panic creep slowly, but surely into the three remaining soldiers.

God, they were so young, and so scared.

Maine didn’t want to see them in danger any longer.

“Edra, Jones, I need you to get Mick into the hauling truck, now, Jones will need to help him into his armor, and you’re gonna make sure he doesn’t get shot along the way.”

Edra looked down at Folami and pointed.

“And what about you?”

“I’m staying here.”

Maine snorted.

Fat chance, she was staying behind.

Edra shook her head.

“Not necessary.”

“You gonna carry me, Eddie? I’m too heavy, and I can’t support my weight. My leg is dead. Get out, get them gone, and if I’m still alive when this ends, we’ll worry about me then. Carry the torch.”

Maine smiled at Edra. She was a tough one, and she didn’t seem like the type to leave people behind.

Edra nodded and readied her gun.

Maine’s smile fell.

“Come on, Agent Maine. We need to get you over there without you getting shot.”

Maine shook his head, knelt down, and motioned to Folami. He pointed to her then himself.

If they couldn’t carry her, he would. She didn’t look any heavier than Connie back in the project, and Maine had been able to carry the other woman back then.

Granted, he hadn’t been fresh out of a military hospital with debilitating injuries and atrophied muscles back then.
“No! Get the fuck out of this truck and get your armor, you ass! You’ve got one arm! One! And I’m fucking heavy!”

Maine really wished he could point out Doc, who was carting around South. Her armor was no doubt significantly heavier than what the Chorus soldiers had on, and Maine was really strong, even out of armor. He was pretty certain he could do it.

If he had Delta, he’d know for sure.

If he had Theta, he’d be sure to try anyway.

He slapped a hand down on the floor. The argument was stupid and a waste of time and they both knew it. He was not about to leave her behind in here, not with how easily the truck was being perforated.

“God damn it, Mick! Move your ass! Go!”

He snarled and grabbed onto her arm.

No.

“No. Bitch, just leave me!”

He shook his head.

Make me, you stupid, selfish, self-sacrificing, moron!

Jones shifted nervously.

“Folami, he’s not leaving without you and we have incoming. We need to move! Stop being all stubborn. It’s not cute, and you’re already dumpy enough without limiting yourself.”

“Fuck. You. Virgin. God damn it, Mick. Your stubborn ass is going to get us both killed!”

She motioned for Maine to turn around.

Jones and Edra moved behind him and helped Folami up enough to get her on his back. He snaked his good arm underneath her for support and grumbled low, under his breath.

She needed to wrap her arms around his neck and hold herself in place.

“Yeah, yeah, give me a second.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Ok, we can do this. We got this. Have I mentioned that I really hate piggyback rides? Ok. Ok. Mick, do not get shot. Jones, you’re in the lead, Edra, watch my ass. It’s my best feature and if it gets damaged I’m blaming you.”

Maine stood up.

Folami wrapped her legs around his hips and shrieked into his ear. Something was very wrong with her leg, more than just a standard bullet wound.

They jumped out of the truck and Maine dashed for the nearest jeep, hoping against hope that they’d get moving and get to safety.
“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! ARMOR, MICK! WE WANT YOUR ARMOR!”

Except Maine wasn’t stupid enough to think that armor would help at this point. They needed firepower, and they needed speed. The jeep with the mounted gun had both.

Palomo ran up to meet them, a grenade launcher in hand. He fired a few times at the approaching enemies.

“BOOM BOOM, MOTHERFUCKERS!”

Folami screeched and flailed at the boy, and nearly fell from Maine’s grip in the process. Being in crippling agony didn’t seem to change her personality any. That was good to know.

“Where’s the death cannon?!?”

“I gave it to Smosna! She killed a man with her thighs! She’s earned it.”

“Fuck, that’s hot!”

“I know!”

“Where is everyone?!”

A jeep roared past with Niner in the driver’s seat and Ramirez in the gunner position shooting like a madman as... dear god... as bizarrely out of place music blared from the speakers.

“YIPPIE KI YAY, MOTHER FUCKERS! EAT MY FUCKING TREDs! EAT THEM!”

“JUST FUCKING DIE ALREADY! I FUCKING HATE YOU GUYS!”

Jones and Palomo chased after Niner’s jeeps, whooping all the way.

Did... did he just forget he was the only non-injured member of their group? Or did he not realize that he was supposed to be the one driving this insanity?

“Was that to the pirates or to the New Repubs?”

“With him? Who the fuck knows.”

Maine climbed into the jeep and dumped Folami into the driver’s seat. Plan B it was.

“Dude, this one has normal pedals, how the fuck do you expect me to drive?!”

Edra climbed in after her and patted her thigh.

“Ever done half body driving?”

“What, you want me to sit on your lap?”

“It’ll be fun, and it might make Danvers jealous.”

Folami let out a whole-body wiggle of excitement.

“I’m fucking in. Mick, can you run the gunner one handed?”

Could he fire the oversized ‘fuck me’ gun one handed?
He raised an eyebrow and gave Folami a confident smirk.

Who the hell did she think he was?

Folami pointed at Maine’s face and flapped her other hand at Edra.

“Holy shit, did you see that? Tell me you saw that!”

“I fucking saw it. Smosna’s never gonna believe it.”

“I barely believe it. Mick’s movin’ up the list!”

South shook.

She knew she was shaking because Eta wouldn’t stop fucking telling her she was shaking every time she managed to get conscious, but fuck if she could actually feel it.

North…

Something about North?

He was…doing something stupid, like always, putting himself in the line of fire like an idiot.

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut for a second.

North liked to pretend he was the tough one, that he was the strong one, that he was the good one. She’d fucking show him.

South would show him.

Shaking, she grabbed at Doc and hauled him down to her level. Their helmets clinked together as they bumped.

She’d fucking show him.

“Get me up.”

-South, that is not smart. You are very damaged. Further activity is only going to exacerbate the problem!-

He shook his head wildly.

Afraid.

Doc was afraid?

Why was Doc afraid?

“I can’t do that, South, you’re so hurt! If I cart you around again I might hurt you even worse!”

She scowled and knocked her helmet against his harder.
“Doc…get me up. If they…they can fight without…armor…I can fight…with it.”

“Well then, let’s go mutilate these fools.”

“I like…how you think…Evil Doc.”

“My name is O’Malley.”

“Fuck…yeah, man. Let’s go…kill some fuckers.”

It took some doing, but Doc managed to get South properly seated on his back without any extra help.

“This feels like a really bad idea.”

South hissed slowly.

“I will render you unconscious if you continue down this path! I will not hesitate, South! Stop making bad choices!”

My fucking doctors are out there risking their lives. My brother’s out of armor. I’m dying. This is a terrible fucking idea, but the other option is death, so fuck it. Knock me out, and I’m definitely dead.

Eta made a sound like a cat screaming mixed with electricity.

“Ok, I’m going to circle the bad guys and keep them on your good side, just try not to shoot our people, ok?”

“Yeah. I’m…gonna…lean my head against you. Holding it up…is hard.”

Doc nodded and waited for South to make herself comfortable.

“At least let me take the lead on the aim.”

“Alright, here we go!”

Yeah, we’ll make that work.

“Time to eviscerate those morons with hot, metal death!”

“And tea when we get home! I like tea!”
She managed a pained chuckle.

“You’re fucking ridiculous.”

Niner whipped the jeep around wildly, loving the feel of the wind in her hair as she drove! It was amazing, a freedom she hadn’t realized she’d missed so fucking badly.

Since the accident, she’d been pretty much stuck with chauffeurs.

These Chorus kids, though. They had the right idea. As soon as she and Ramirez made it to the jeep, the driver pulled some levers, pointed at the buttons, and ran off to join the fight.

They’d cleared most of the pirates out. A few ran back into the trees, but more of the surviving stragglers stayed and fought.

Niner had no fucking idea what these morons hoped to accomplish by getting themselves killed, but she was totally ok with it. She was having too much fun running them over as Ramirez plowed them down with the gun.

A few of the pirates started to converge on Yacavone and Marconi, who were back to back, screaming like fucking monkeys and firing wildly into the air. Niner didn’t know if either of them were actually hitting anything, they both kind of looked like they didn’t know how to hold a gun in the first place, and it was a little distressing.

It’d be hilarious if they weren’t in a life or death situation.

They needed to get there, fast.

“Shit, kid, I’m not going fast enough, you’re gonna have to push them back!”

“AUGH!”

Niner whipped around in time to see Ramirez clutch his side with one hand as he forced the gun in the right direction and fired.

“Shit!”

“I’m fine! It’s a scratch! Keep going!”

“CHILD! THERE IS BLOOD COMING OUT OF YOUR BODY AND A BULLET DID IT TO YOU! WHERE’S A FUCKING MEDIC?!”

“NINER! IF YOU STOP TO GET ME A MEDIC, MARCONI AND YACAVONE ARE DEAD! KEEP DRIVING!!!”

“When this is over, you are all going into a fucking blanket cocoon for the rest of your goddamned lives! Do you hear me?!”

“DRIVE NOW, MOM LATER!”

“I AM NOT YOUR FUCKING MOM, BITCH! YEHAW, MOTHERFUCKING DOUCHE
Paolo squealed as he got a headshot in. He had no idea it would feel this good to be out in the battlefield!

Cissy’s laughter reverberated against his back. He knew she felt the same way that he did.

“BYE-BYE, BAD GUYS!”

She shrieked and let out a wild spray of fire.

They were so good at this soldier stuff! So freaking good!

When they got home, they were gonna get bumped up to normal training for sure!

Maybe they’d get to work with the Reds or the Blues!

Maybe they’d even get to train with Agent Washington!

“DO-“

**BOOM!**

Paolo was staring at the sky.

How did that happen?

There was something spattered on his helmet.

“Paolo?”

He couldn’t move.

His head felt heavy.

“Paolo?! Paolo, get up!”

Cissy?

“Paolo, wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!”

Cissy, get up.

“Come on, you stupid! We have to go!”

There are bad guys here.
South’s shot’s rang true. Even as the enemy fired at them, Doc managed to outpace their aim on foot, which was fucking amazing and deserved a fucking award or something considering his extreme lack of training.

She finally started to feel a little more alert. Eta started pumping her with adrenaline and took her firing arm for a ride as Doc carted the soldier/AI duo. They were a pretty good team, the three of them.

One of the pirates fired a grenade before South could make the shot and take them out. It didn’t reach them, not even close, but it shook the ground.

She felt Doc’s body rock from the explosion, but he stood strong. She fired off and clipped the bastard in the arm. One of the snipers, she had no idea which at that point, finished the job.

“Hey, nice job, Doc.”

He panted, but didn’t respond. She got it, running at top speed with another person on your back was completely exhausting, but the man made it look like a fucking cake walk.

*His vitals are dropping! South!*

“Doc, stop!”

South leaned over and saw blood gushing from Doc’s torso.

“Jesus,” she croaked, “Doc. Stand down.”

He coughed wetly and stumbled.

“Oh…boy, that’s blood. That’s…a lot of blood.”

Eta! We need help!

Eta’s hologram shot a bright light into the air and issued a deafening siren.

One of the pirates shouted.

“Fuck! What was that?!”

“WE HAVE INJURED! PLEASE TRANSPORT TO THE NEAREST MEDICAL FACILITY! WE HAVE INJURED! PLEASE TRANSPORT TO THE NEAREST MEDICAL FACILITY!”

Jensen’s voice echoed via voice amplifier across the battlefield.

“THE JEEP’SH COMING YOUR WAY!!!”

The sound of…what the fuck was that? Polka music? Mexican music? South had no idea. What the fuck was that and why was it playing? And why was it surprisingly catchy?

Fuck, she was clearly in need of medical attention.

Niner roared up next to them in one of the jeeps, hair wild and windblown, and skidded to a vicious stop.

“Jesus, bitch, what part of stay down don’t you understand!”
South snarled, not in the mood to play with the other woman.

“No time! He’s hit!”

Ramirez jumped off the gunner position, one hand clutched to his side, and ran up to South.

South’s arm shot up to point at his face.

Eta? What the fuck?

-Threat assessment! Threat levels 86%!-

“Agent South, stand down.”

Her teeth chattered. She couldn’t get control of her arm back from Eta. She could barely feel her fingertips.

“He’s hit. Help him.”

“We have to get you first. Please put down the gun.”

South closed her eyes and breathed slowly. She remembered, back in the early days of AI study, a story about a rampant AI that took over the human. They’d opened to each other so much that the human could access the AI’s processing themself and the AI could take over the human’s body.

The only way they could separate was by mentally prying themselves apart.

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, gritted her teeth, and forcibly uncurled her fingers from the weapon.

-South!-

I’m cutting you off, Eta. We need help.

-Threat levels increased to 95%! Defend! Defend! The throat is vulnerable! Stab him!-

What the fuck is wrong with you, little dude?!

Ramirez and one of the medics, Orwell she thought, hauled her screaming into the jeep and laid Doc out beside her. Orwell jumped in next to them.

“Drive!” He snarled at Niner before he yanked Doc’s helmet off his head, “What were you two thinking?!”

He tore at Doc’s armor viciously and slammed biofoam into the gushing wounds.

“We were…being…big damned heroes…is what.”

He snapped at South like an angry dog on a short leash.

“Well, congratulations. Your heroic move has significantly injured a medic. Doc? You there?”

Doc’s voice was quiet, but clear, and South breathed a sigh of relief.

“I really hate getting hurt.”

“Yeah, and I really hate having to abandon my people to rush critically injured people back to base,
but here we are. Danvers? E.T.A.?!"

A second jeep sped next to them and swerved past to take the lead. Danvers was in the back hovering over two people, but South couldn’t see who from her angle.

“TWENTY! FIFTEEN IF WE PUSH IT!”

Niner howled.

“PUSH IT! ANYTHING THAT GETS IN OUR WAY DESERVES TO BE SQUISHED!”

_________________________________________________________________________________________

-North! They’re taking her away!-

North spotted South as she was loaded into one of the departing jeeps. He watched Ramirez stumble over as the jeep just…left him behind.

South.

“SOUTH!”

Edra and Folami roared up in the third jeep.

We have to follow them!

Edra slammed on the breaks and three more soldiers were dragged into the back immediately. Folami and Edra were yanked out and a new driver took their place.

North ran over and tried to climb in, only to be forcibly pulled out by Andersmith.

“Agent North, there is not enough room for you on that jeep!”

North spun around and shoved him backwards.

-North, no! They’ll get mad!-

I don’t fucking care! I have to get to South!

Andersmith held up his hands and North took a swing for the other man. He needed him to back off, just enough for North to get into the jeep and catch up. He had to be with her.

He had to keep her safe.

“I am not going to abandon her! I am riding in that fucking jeep!”

Andersmith hauled off and punched North in the face. He stumbled backwards and fell to the ground.

“WHO DO YOU WANT TO KILL TO TAKE THEIR PLACE?!”

Andersmith smacked the jeep twice and it peeled out of there to catch up to the other two.

It was done.
The fight was over.
The pirates were either dead, or in hiding.

South was still gone.

North looked around at the soldiers still standing. A few were hovering around the trucks, muttering.

Ramirez was on the ground next to Folami being tended.

Habisch was next to helmetless Bitters, dabbing at blood.

Yacavone was screaming and clawing the air at anyone who got too close to her, like a cat backed into a corner.

The rest of the soldiers were silent.

York knelt down next to North.

“What is wrong with you today?”

-North?-

North curled into a ball in the dirt and sobbed.

“I…I am so sorry.”

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to. Seriously, North, that was not ok.”

“They took South. They took her away again.”

“Yeah? Look at Yacavone. She’s not any happier about not going with Marconi, but she’s not trying to beat people up.”

Yacavone curled over, sobbed into her knees, and pulled viciously at her hair. She looked wild, feral, her face was streaked with dirt and gore.

“Paolo!”

Palomo stepped up to North’s other side, pulled him up, and wrapped North’s arm over his shoulder.

“Come on, dude, we’re almost there. The trucks are stable, so we’re on the way home. You’re not gonna lose her, she just went ahead.”

“I…”

Palomo shook his head.

God, he’d met this kid and wanted to hurt him, and now Palomo was helping? Why? North wouldn’t, in his place.

“You don’t need to say anything. This isn’t the first time we’ve had to carry kids home, and it won’t be the last.”

Jensen and Smosna limped up to them. Palomo and York hauled North to his feet.
He was so tired.

“God, I wish it was the last time,” Smosna sighed, “I never want to have to carry home a body again.”

Jensen shifted.

“Someone should call Marconi’s sponsor and warn her.”

Folami snarled.

“They’re not fucking dead! They’ve got Danvers and Orwell and Edra, they’re gonna be fine.”

“How can you be so calm, Ducks? Your friends are in danger out there.”

Florida scooped Folami into his arms as Wyoming helped Ramirez to his feet.

“We’re not letting anyone die on our watch. How the fuck are you carrying me? You do not look young enough to be that ripped.”

Bitters listed to the side a bit as he was walked to the truck.

“We’re almost home.”

“It’s not as bad as it looked. I’m more concerned about Doc than about Marconi and Sadhana.”

“Doc’s not gonna die. The man’s practically indestructible.”

“And the base is already on alert, so they’re going to end up in surgery immediately.”

York grunted and shifted North in his grip.

-North. It’s going to be ok.-

We don’t know that, Theta.

-They promised to take care of her.-

People lie, Theta.

-Yeah, but they didn’t. I can tell. I can always tell.-

I think you’re lying about that one.

“You think they’ll have all the surgeons prepped and on hand?”

“Are you kidding? Of course they will, we were in hostile territory, being regularly attacked, and Carolina talked directly to Kimball. We’ll have the whole goddamned base up our asses when we get there.”

-Great.-

Palomo patted North’s back.

“Hey, breathe, we’re good. You guys saved our lives, that means something.”

“Does it?”
“Shtop, jusht shtop, ok? I can’t handle any more of thish right now.”

Florida settled Folami back on the floor of the truck. She hissed.

“Fuck. Fucking arm got grazed.”

She pulled out a chunk of gauze from a medical kit and dabbed at the wound.

“Fucking bullets. Why am I a goddamned bullet magnet?”

Maine knelt next to Folami and took a gauze away from her. He gently patted at the graze as she hissed.

“Thanks, Mick.”

North sat next to York and leaned against him.

He was so tired.

He’d fucked up.

He’d failed South.

Again.

Again, he’d failed her.

What kind of brother was he if he couldn’t protect her?

-North?-

I’m here.

-Do you want to try and sleep?- 

No. No, I’m just gonna…sit for a while. You rest though, ok? You did good today. You helped a lot.

-I’m sorry I couldn’t help you save South.-

North’s eyes went wide.

“Buddy, no. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

York glanced over.

“You’re talking out loud.”

Smosna looked over at them with a concerned eye. She’d ditched Bitters’ helmet and held her own in her lap.

“Everything ok?”

“His AI’s a little upset it sounds like.”

She nodded.
“I don’t blame him, that was really scary, and it’s hard to help when you don’t have armor. Can… Theta can hear us, even when we can’t see him, right?”

York nodded.

North could barely muster the effort to even look at her.

I’m so sorry, Theta. None of this is your fault. You did everything right.

-But South still…and people still got hurt.-

It happens sometimes. That’s war.

-North, I hate war. I hate fighting. I hate guns. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.-

Me either, kiddo.

Smosna got on the floor and applied pressure to Ramirez’s gunshot wound. He whimpered softly.

“Fuck, that hurts.”

“Yeah, that’s gotta suck. Doesn’t look like it’ll kill you though, so there’s that.”

He shucked his helmet off.

“I got fucking shot.”

“Happens to the best of us sometimes, baby. My first mission, I almost lost my eye.”

York blinked.

“Really? You mean we could have been twinsies like North and South?”

She shook her head and fake gagged at York.

“Ew, no! Delta? Supreme overlord of smartness, please make him stop saying things like that.”

“He’s not the boss here, and I’ll say what I want. Also, you’ve never even talked to him, how do you know if he’s smart, let alone the supreme overlord of smartness?”

“You’ve survived this long, haven’t you?”

Ramirez snarled.

“I hate you,” he sobbed weakly as Smosna ran her fingers through his hair, “I really hate you.”

“I know, Chiquito, it’s ok. It’s ok.”

“It really hurts.”

“It keeps hurting for a while, but it’ll get better eventually. Ok, Theta, you like Winnie the Pooh? Because I’ve got soooooo many stories memorized. ‘One day when Pooh Bear had nothing else to do, he thought he would do something, so he went round to Piglet’s house to see what Piglet was doing.’”
A gentle knock brought Kimball’s attention away from the final preparations for the arrival of the Freelancers and Chorus soldiers. If all went according to plan (haha, good one ‘Nessa), they’d be set for however long they needed to be in isolation.

She yawned and stretched as she walked to the door.

The day could not be over soon enough.

The door slid open just as Kimball had her hand on the panel. Someone had given out her access codes. Again.

Seriously, how did these sorts of breaches in security keep happening?

“General Kimball, a word if you please?”

Páez forced his way past her into the room, and it took everything she had not to role her eyes or snap at him.

She shut the door, moved back to her chair, and sat.

“What can I do for you, General Páez?”

He plopped into the chair across from her and pointed into her face accusatorially.

“I must say, I find it highly inappropriate that you have taken as much of the lead with the Freelancers as you have and not included me in the decisions.”

“Excuse me?”

He motioned to the transmitter on her desk.

“The call with Agent Washington? To Agent Carolina?”

She tried to keep her tone even, but it was clear she had a bite in her words.

“I was trying to get the information across quickly, without raising more questions. When the soldiers get back, they’ll see the votes for themselves, but without solid radio contact, I was concerned that we’d spend too much time talking about the election and not enough on getting things back under control. We managed to neatly avoid bloodshed and further confusion. I’m calling that one a win.”

“Well, in the future, I would prefer you at least tell me your plan. I want to know what I am agreeing to."

And waste even more time on your nattering, posturing, and excessive bureaucracy. Sure, asshole, I’ll get right on that.

“That’s fair.”

“You also continue to have private meetings with them, which I feel is a breach of ethics, especially considering they were both neutral parties until fairly recently. I propose that I should take on the responsibility of the new Freelancers as their primary point of contact to even the field.”
She blinked.

“Excuse me?”

He leaned forward and gave his most condescending tone that she knew was a poorly modeled imitation of Doyle. She could hear it in the forced way his cadence moved.

Who the fuck did this manipulative little shit think he was, using Doyle’s voice against her like that? What did he think was about to happen?

She quietly force choked him. She imagined his face changing colors, his eyes bugging out, his hands scrabbling against something that wasn’t actually there.

And smiled.

“You have handled this situation rather poorly, don’t you think? Allowing the Freelancers to be transported here instead of an intermediary base? Waiting for Agent Washington to realize almost 24 hours later that we should have an evacuation of the vulnerable? You are not making appropriate decisions, and you are going to get someone hurt or worse with your mishandling.”

Kimball wanted to be angry. She wanted to smack the little interloper across the back of his arrogant little head.

And she was angry. Flames licked at her ribcage and grew past her chest and down her spine and up her throat. She could feel rage in her eyes and her nostrils and eyelashes and even at the roots of her hair.

But…if he took responsibility for the Freelancers, maybe she’d actually get some goddamned paperwork done.

And he’d end up with the blame when something went wrong and things inevitably went to shit.

If they even bothered to listen to the little pissant in the first place.

“Ok.”

“Ok?”

“You can have the Freelancers. All of them. As much of the responsibility as you’d like. If you’re willing, you should take on Wash and Carolina too as far as official capacity goes.”

He shifted back in his seat, clearly startled.

“You…I…what?”

“I have a dual relationship with both of them, and you’re right, I’ve allowed them a good bit more freedom than I tend to give people, including the Reds and Blues.”

Even though I only trust them so much because they have earned it 10,000x over.

“If you want to take responsibility for corralling and directing some of the most dangerous people on this planet, I won’t stop you. Please, take them. It’ll give me time to work on my knitting.”

He started to fidget in his chair, and Kimball nearly laughed in his face.

The little man had no idea what he was getting himself into, starting shit with her. Did he expect
her to fight him and be beaten? To accept his will blindly? Clearly, he hadn’t done his research on her.

And while she was still very concerned about the Freelancers, and a little trepidatious about leaving them in less than qualified hands, she reveled a little in that spiteful place that hoped he’d get himself beaten up for his attitude.

She was only human after all.

“Then again, I am a newcomer, and they do not know me. I doubt they will respect my orders as well as yours.”

“They don’t know me either.”

What, are you scared, now that I’m making you put your pudding where your mouth is? You think you can just walk into my domain and make demands of me?

“Tell you what, how about a compromise? You take on the main point of contact for orders and rules. I will stand by your decisions, and we will just have to work together on designing orders. It means we’ll have to actually sit together and properly plan things out, but you’ll still get the chance to form your own bonds without me there.”

He nodded slowly, clearly aware he was in over his head and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“That…sounds like a workable plan. Thank you, General.”

She spread her hands across the desk, in an effort to look magnanimous and wise, while still appearing human. The believability of the motion was all in the shoulders when one was in full armor, and it was a move she’d spent months practicing in front of the mirror when she’d first been appointed.

Confidence was key.

Thank fuck for childhood acting lessons.

“My goal here is to create a stable and functioning body of government, so we can prove we don’t need an outside source telling us how to live when the UNSC does eventually come calling. I can’t do that if we’re constantly fighting. Compromises have to be made.”

Páez nodded, going for something wise and in control and only missing the mark a little bit. He’d be good in a few years, with some polish and a little work.

God, she hoped she wouldn’t be running an army with this ass in a few years.

“General, if I may be so bold?”

“In what regard?”

“Your relationship with Agent Carolina?”

She scowled.

“My personal relationship with Agent Carolina is, quite frankly, none of your business. There has not been a single instance of suspected impropriety, and I will not be discussing that with you.”

“Ah, forgive me, I only meant that there were rumors abounding in regards to your relationships
with her and Agent Washington, and I would like to know what the…party line is, I suppose? How do you prefer it to be addressed?”

“I consider them both to be people I care about, as I care about the Reds and Blues, and as I care about my soldiers. My people are my family.

“So…you’re not romantically interested in Agent Washington, then?”

Kimball snorted.

“God no. Wash is the big brother I never knew I needed until I had him. We’re working on a good solid friendship, but nothing romantic. That goes for all of those guys. I don’t like rumors, General Páez. I find the process distasteful, and the fishing to be tacky.”

“Ah, perhaps someone should spread that around a little. There are rumors that you and Agent Washington are…intimate.”

“There are all kinds of rumors about everyone. That’s not going to stop. We live in a base filled with gossiping busybodies and bored teenagers. Tucker sometimes comes to hang out at the radioactive lake, and the whole base thinks we’re on a romantic date. My love life is neither here nor there, General Páez, and I would prefer that we drop this topic before I start asking you some uncomfortable personal questions in retaliation.”

He coughed and squirmed.

“Well, I don’t have a problem taking authority with the Freelancers, especially to protect the future sanctity of the office we hold.”

The door burst open and a Junior Private burst into the room.

“General Kimball! General Paez!”

She glared at the door, and wondered just who she’d pissed off recently to make her door suddenly stop being secure.

“Ok, I’m seriously getting better locks installed. This is just silly now.”

“The caravan was attacked!”

Kimball’s stomach bottomed out.

“What?”

“They’ve sent their wounded ahead, so far no casualties reported, but the enemy just disappeared!”

Kimball jumped to her feet.

“We need reinforcements out there, now.”

“General Kimball, this could easily be a distraction or a trap. What if they’re luring our soldiers away to thin the herd and attack us?”

“Send reinforcements now. Get them on alien transports if you have to, just get moving! I am not losing one more person. Not today.”

“I steadfastly refuse this action! Soldier, stand down!”
“Sir, I’m New Republic. I answer to General Kimball.”

And the Junior Private was gone.

Páez turned on Kimball and shoved one of her chairs over in frustration.

“This is exactly what I mean about you being rash!”

“There are nearly twenty soldiers in that transport, not including the Freelancers, and more supplies than I am willing to abandon to the pirates. Sometimes, General Páez, you have to make an immediate decision. If you’re going to question me, have the decency to have a better plan.”

And she stormed out.

She would not sit idly by while her people were shot at, and she was not going to let that insipid little twit insult her.

Kimball weaved her way through the soldiers tittering in the hallways nervously, and issued orders via the radio as she rushed out the main building, hopped on a warthog, and drove herself to the quarantine unit where the operating theaters had been set up to deal with the wounded.

They were lucky they’d had the space cleared out recently, one of Kimball’s plans to spread the soldiers out and give them some more breathing room. It meant there was plenty of space for them to be kept in with comfort until they were deemed safe enough to be brought to the detention center.

She was immediately accosted by a soldier wearing medic accents the moment she walked through the entrance.

“General?”

“Can you fill me in on the status of the arrivals?”

“As far as we can tell from the medics who were uninjured, everything was fine until they had radio contact, then the trucks were attacked. They did a good job, only a few of them were really hurt. Overall, it’s awful, but no one seems to be ready to give up just yet.”

“And the injured Freelancer?”

“She is being operated on as we speak. Doctor Grey has cut all extraneous communications.”

“Is that good or bad.”

The soldier’s head flopped from side to side.

“This is the woman who can, and has, performed incredibly intricate surgical tasks while singing, dancing, and sleep deprived, and did so perfectly. The fact that she’s cut her distractions means she’s hyperfocused. Good for the soldier’s future, a bad sign for them up to this point.”

“Great.”

“The non injured parties have been placed into decontamination and will be transported to quarantine.”

“Thank you.”
The soldier looked around to make sure the area was clear before she leaned in and whispered.

“If I may be so bold, General?”

“Absolutely.”

“I think…allowing the Freelancers here, knowing who they are, is a very kind gesture on your part.”

Kimball didn’t know what to do with that one.

“They…did come here to help us.”

“No, I mean…Agent Carolina’s life partner. The Freelancer she loves.”

Kimball froze.

Oh.

The thought honestly hadn’t even occurred to her.

“Her…right. Well, she deserves a chance at happiness.”

“I am very sorry for you, but you are an incredibly kind person.”

This was not the conversation Kimball wanted to have with anyone, and especially not with a solder a good ten years younger than her.

God, she was an idiot.

“I’m really not, and there’s no reason to feel sorry. This is a good thing. People are alive, lets focus on that.”

Kimball straightened.

“Have the teams send me updates on everyone who was injured and their status, and please ping me the moment the rest of them arrive.”

“Yes, General.”

“And I hope that the conversation we just had will stay between the two of us. We don’t need rumors flying around, causing more problems.”

“Of course, General!”

Kimball headed down the hall, using the need to check on the quarantine preparations as an excuse to get as far away from that moment as she possibly could.

Carolina’s ‘life partner’.

That…made a lot of things make more sense, actually. It certainly explained why she wanted them in Proteger instead of Banjerese.

Kimball made a b-line past the prepared rooms and moved down the hall into what looked to have been office space at one point. There were several soldiers bustling in and out of rooms to clear them out and seal the ventilation.
“Aren’t we out of time on this?”

“Almost done, General, and then this whole section will be completely sealed! The rest of the building is on its own system.”

“Any of these done yet? I need to have a private conversation.”

“That one,” the soldier pointed to the door next to them, “I just finished.”

Kimball went into the little room and sat down, all her weight against the door. She took off her helmet and leaned her head back against the metal.

“Well, it’s not like you were promised anything, Vanessa.”

Hell, even if Carolina had married her at this point, Vanessa knew she wouldn’t stand in the way of her and the love of her life.

God, had Carolina mentioned York earlier? Vanessa didn’t even remember. She should have realized, when Carolina mentioned her whole team was there, but honestly, Vanessa expected Carolina to be honest about that sort of thing.

‘I…really think I loved him.’

Vanessa brushed Carolina’s hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear.

‘Just think?’

Carolina sighed and melted into the mattress beneath them. Her head was pillowed in Vanessa’s lap as they watched Metaphor run around the room chasing her jingle toys.

‘He broke my heart, Nessa. He turned on me, disappeared, and sided with Tex of all people. He didn’t even try to talk to me, he just followed her. He followed her and he left me.’

‘And then he died?’

‘Died, and I couldn’t even…never even got the chance…’

Carolina curled in a little, ‘the lighter’, that damned piece of metal and fluid, cradled tight in her hands.

‘I don’t know what would have happened to us. Maybe that’s the worst part of all this. The not knowing. The ache. I miss him.’

Vanessa put her hand over Carolina’s and squeezed gently. The woman stayed tense, but Vanessa knew she did want the contact. They’d talked about Carolina’s problems with intimacy for ages. She didn’t know how to ask for it, but she was absolutely capable of saying so if she didn’t want it.

‘Hey, it’s ok to miss him. It’s ok to wish things were different.’

Carolina’s shoulders relaxed as she gently pressed her head back into Vanessa’s stomach.

‘I don’t regret this, but I don’t want to feel guilty either.’

‘So don’t feel guilty. A part of your heart still belongs to him, and if that part always does, that’s ok. It doesn’t make the rest of your heart any less valuable.’
She snorted as Metaphor pounced on the jingle ball and kicked it wildly across the room.

‘I feel like you’re getting shortchanged on this.’

‘And that’s your father talking. I love you just as you are. You don’t have to force yourself to change to make me happy.’

‘I…’

‘You don’t have to say it yet. I understand.’

Vanessa pressed her palms to her eyes. They itched, like she’d been sandblasted.

Must have been some dust in the air. This was an old building after all.

“Of course, that was before I knew he was alive. Hell.”

She huffed.

Dust in the air. Ha.

If she couldn’t be honest with herself, who could she be honest with?

Vanessa was heartbroken.

Her chest ached and her eyes itched and she couldn’t stop her legs from bouncing with anxiety and nervous energy.

Carolina would tell her it didn’t mean anything, that she hadn’t promised York she’d wait, that he had left her and she didn’t owe him anything.

It wouldn’t matter.

They wouldn’t change.

And she would be miserable.

Carolina deserved the chance to take that part of herself back. If York was really here as a good guy, Vanessa didn’t want to stand in their way. Carolina could be happy, really happy, in a way she never was with Vanessa.

She deserved to have good things.

She deserved the chance to find love again.

And Vanessa wanted her to be happy.

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Caboose was VERY, VERY HAPPY!

He had found a new place full of fun people and doctors and building and stuff and it was cool! He’d run into two of the blue soldiers while he was walking with Freckles and both Private Patches and Junior Puppy agreed to come exploring with him!
They were very nice, and very soft, and VERY FLUFFY!

There was a big room filled with beds and boxes and all kinds of stuff, and there were big windows everywhere so they could see the outside and the inside a lot better! It was where the scary new people were going to live until they weren’t sick, and Caboose was EXCITED! He could not WAIT to make new friends!

A door opened down the hall and out came-

“Principal Kimball!”

Caboose waved at her very carefully with one hand.

He knew that most people liked to wave with one hand, but he liked to wave with two when he liked someone. It was hard when he was with Freckles though, because Freckles was big and heavy and he did not like being waved. So Caboose waved with one hand.

She stood a little taller and waved back.

He liked Principal Kimball, she was always very very clear and was very very nice when she wasn’t mad and when Griff and Stupid Tucker weren’t poking her or being rude. She didn’t mind when he waved with two hands.

She never talked to Caboose like he was stupid, even when he really was.

“Captain Caboose, Freckles, Private Dimka, Lieutenant Commander Sidney. What are you four doing here?”

“We are looking for Andersmith! Because I cannot find him!”

Principal Kimball tapped her helmet.

She must have a very full brain with all the thinking she did all the time.

“Captain Caboose, he is still out on his mission. According to the pings I’m getting, their E.T.A. is still forty minutes out because of the damage to their trucks.”

Caboose nodded a lot to let her know he understood.

“I know, but Tucker wanted to do something with the ladies and I did not want to watch him be bad at that because it makes him sad and then he says mean things to me and I do not want to be sad today because we are getting new friends!”

“I’m going to have words with that man at some point. I really am. So you’re looking for someone who isn’t here to avoid being around Tucker while he fails at getting a date?”

“Yes!”

She snorted into her hand and Caboose grinned. He liked to make Principal Kimball laugh. She didn’t do it very much and it was pretty, even when it was all giggly and snorty.

“I’m sure Private Dimka has better things to do than look for Lieutenant Andersmith somewhere he can’t be.”

“Oh, it’s fine, General. I’m off right now, and Sid needed a walk.”
Kimball held out a hand to Junior Puppy. Junior Puppy stepped forward slowly and allowed
Principal Kimball to scratch her head and pat her fur, because Junior Puppy was a good soldier!

“How’s she doing? Adjusting, I mean?”

“It’s rough. She’s really not meant for the kennels, are you Sid?”

Junior Puppy barked loudly.

“Yeah, she’s B.O.R.E.D.”

Caboose cocked his head.

“What does the ‘B’ stand for?”

“Oh, sorry Captain, it’s not a code, it’s the word we can’t say around Sidney without her getting
REALLY excited. I just spelled it out so she wouldn’t be loud.”

“Oh, ok! I know that word.”

Caboose turned to Principal Kimball.

“We do not say that word, because she gets very happy and very loud and runs around a lot and
then you have to walk for HOURS!”

Principal Kimball laughed again, this time louder.

“Well, I hate to be a pest, but can I borrow you for a while, Captain Caboose?”

“Oh, ok. I have to go now.”

Caboose gave Junior Puppy several gentle pets on top of her head. It was hard, because she was
very tall and very wiggly when she wasn’t in uniform.

“Goodbye, Junior Puppy, I will see you later.”

She barked and licked his hand, and Caboose knew that was a good thing, even if her bark was
VERY LOUD, because she only licked at people she didn’t hate.

He patted Private Patches on the head too.

“Goodbye, Private Patches, I will see you later.”

He laughed and wiggled too, which Caboose thought was kind of weird, but maybe he was just
another puppy.

“I’ll see you later, Captain. Coral’s puppies should be here any day now if you want to come see
them.”

“I would like that, but I will not hold them until they are big. I do not want to be shot.”

Private Patches made a sad sound.

“I don’t…”

Kimball waved a hand.
“Of Mice and Men. It should be in the downloadable homework packet for American Literature. Lots of themes, human nature, loneliness, isolation, friendship. There’s a digital copy in the library.”

“Thank you, General, and thank you Captain Caboose, I’ll start reading that one right away. We’re off now. Come on, Sidney, dinner!”

Principal Kimball led the way to a tiny office and shut the door behind them. Caboose looked around the room. It was small, with a desk and a chair and another chair! But it didn’t have any windows or computers or games.

This room was BORING!

“Caboose,” she waved a hand to get his attention, but didn’t touch him. She was very, very good at knowing when it was ok to touch. “I’m going to take off my General Boss Lady hat, ok? Will you take off your Captain hat?”

He nodded and took off his helmet. She did the same.

She looked like she’d been eating sour candy all day.

Her eyes were red and her mouth was all scrunchy, and she looked like she wanted to hide under her desk. She was not General Boss Lady anymore.

“Oh, Princess Vanessa, your face looks funny!”

She tried to smile, but it wasn’t a happy smile. It was a sad smile, the kind of smile Washington made sometimes when Caboose called him Church. It was what Tucker and Grif and Simmons wore when you talked about family.

Princess Vanessa was sad!

“Can I tell you a secret, Caboose? You can’t tell anyone, especially Carolina.”

A SECRET?! No one EVER shared secrets anymore!

“I can do that!”

“It’s really important, Caboose. It’s not a bad secret, it won’t hurt anyone, but everyone will try to fix it and there’s not anything to be fixed. It’s an is kind of thing. Does that make sense?”

Caboose nodded. It didn’t make sense, but that was ok, he would understand when he needed to. She needed him to say yes more than he needed to understand.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“I am very sad.”

Her face scrunched tighter and tears fell down her face.

“Princess Vanessa, would you like a hug?”

She pressed her face into her hands and made a chokey, sobby sound.

“Yes, please.”
Caboose pushed Freckles into her arms and wrapped them both in a tight hug.

“Freckles is very cuddly. He will help, right Freckles?”

“Affirmative. I will destroy what makes you sad, General.”

She laughed a little and squeezed Freckles.

“I have to put my General Boss Lady hat back on and deal with the new people, but when I saw you in the hall, I knew I needed a Caboose hug.”

He grinned, gave her a quick squeeze, and let her go.

“Would you like to do a happy dance? It’s like a rain dance, but it’s for happy feelings!”

She smiled, and it was a little less sad now.

“I would love that. Can you show me how?”

Caboose moved through the steps very, very, VERY, slowly. He didn’t want Princess Vanessa to feel too silly because she didn’t know the steps, or she might get embarrassed and not want to do the dance, and then she would keep being sad.

Sometimes it was ok to be sad, but she had to go be Miss General Principal Boss Lady of the World soon, and she didn’t have time for sad worries right now.

“Wow, ok. I think I’ve got that one, Caboose.”

They both leaned in close and blew raspberries at each other, shook their arms out and flapped their hands, spun around in a circle, and jumped up and down.

They both laughed.

“Do you feel better now?”

“I do. Thank you, Caboose. I knew you were the man to see.”

“Your face is still puffy.”

She laughed quietly and wiped at her eyes.

“Yeah, well, I’ll wash my face and keep my helmet on and no one will ever know.”

“Simmons?”

Donut leaned to look over Simmons shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing, Donut. Just…one of the bases sent over this weird stuff that’s started popping up in their system. I’m just trying to figure out why it’s happening.”
“Hm? Computer stuff?”

“Yes, Donut.”

“Have they tried to defrag their computer?”

“Donut, it’s attached to one of the alien towers.”

“Have they tried running a virus scan?”

“Alien tower, Donut.”

“Have they tried turning it off and on again?”

“ALIEN! Oh for fuck’s sake. The tower got blown up and now their computers are being weird. I’m pretty sure they’re damaged and need to be looked at.”

Donut tugged at the tablet to take a look.

“Huh, that looks familiar.”

“What? No it doesn’t! It’s just random letters and numbers!”

“Yeah, see, I don’t think so, Simmons. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen this before.”

“Donut, you’re wrong. You haven’t seen this before. You haven’t seen anything like this because it’s the computers acting weird after some data loss. They probably have a code issue.”

Grif wandered over.

“Dude, what’s that?”

“Some secret alien code that Simmons is trying to hide from the world!”

“I’m not trying to hide anything! It’s just a lame error!”

Epsilon popped up in front of Simmons visor. He flinched back and squeaked, but only a little bit! Anyone might make weird noises if a glowing AI popped up in their face!

“What are you idiots doing? The sooner we get this taken care of, the sooner we get home. Why would you want to stay out here any longer?”

“We don’t, but this could take days!”

“We’ve got backup coming to break the ship down, and we’ll go back to Proteger with the majority of the supplies.”

Epsilon hovered over the tablet.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Simmons groaned.

“Some weird code bug. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Epsilon hovered over Simmons.
“Augh! Church, that hurt my brain just listening to you!”

“How did this pop up?”

“The techs found it as a text file. It just…popped up. We don’t know how or why yet. They thought I might be interested because I’m smart and good at computers and stuff.”

Epsilon flickered for a moment.

“Weird. Kind of creepy. Sorry, Simmons, that’s definitely a message.”

“What? How?!”

“It’s code.”

“It’s a code?! What does it say?!”

“I don’t know, exactly. It’s just…there’s a system here. I can figure it out, I just need some time.”

Epsilon’s colors flickered again, just a little.

“Why do I feel like I know what this is?”

“Well, if you can figure it out, let me know.”

“Maybe it’s a-“

“It’s not, Donut!”

Chapter End Notes

I swear to all things holy, this was supposed to go up four freaking days ago, but it was a beast to edit! I'm still not entirely happy with the flow and how it's put together, but I'm finally getting to the point where all the pieces I've been seeding have started to poke through the dirt and peek their heads up. Soon I will have a garden full of plot shit, and I'm kind of excited to see how you guys'll react to it!

As always, thank you so much for sticking with me through this beast. When I started writing this, I had no idea it was going to get this long and crazy or that anyone would even care about my silly little AU. It means a lot that you're still here. If you can leave a comment to let me know if you like something or you don't like something, or even just to say hi, it means a great deal to me. Comments have basically been the driving force keeping me invested in keeping this puppy moving.

EDIT: Author’s note: Ok, look guys. I know shit about Halo.

Like, seriously, I know nothing. My experience with the Halo franchise is Red vs Blue, my friend and her son playing capture the flag against one another (I don’t even know which game it is, but it had the map they used for Valhalla), the cover of one of
the novels (no idea which one since this was almost ten years ago at this point in my
life), and the occasional glance at the Halo wiki due to morbid curiosity. I know
NOTHING about the Halo franchise from the main story, the spinoffs, the novels,
nothing.

And some of the stuff in the wiki’s just sounds stupid, and I don’t really want to spend
my time figuring out why ‘it’s totally smart and well thought out’. So here’s the deal.

If you know Halo, I’m sorry. I’m pretty much not using any of that. If it’s not
explicitly stated in RvB, I may or may not look it up for accuracy to that universe. This
is canon divergence. This is fanfiction. I’m not going to try to mimic the weird,
patriarchal bullshit the wiki shows for the aliens (I didn’t even realize the species
wasn’t called Sangheili until I looked at the Halo wiki). I’m not going to drive myself
crazy trying to make sure my AI info matches the games. I’m going with what the
show gives us, and if the show gives us nothing? I’m making shit up as I go along.
Seriously, if this is an issue, I’m sorry, but I’m not really interested in playing or
watching someone play all of those games, reading the novels, and immersing myself
in the deep lore for accuracy in my RvB fanfiction.

Please don’t leave me more comments about how little I know about Halo. I don't
know Halo. It's not my jam. I just want to write my crappy fics in peace.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Maine gets candy, Tucker tries to protect his friends, Grif tries to show Simmons trees, Kimball acquires tropical fish, Grif watches Simmons, Alpha finds Tex, Niner misses her shower, Donut has girl talk, York learns a lesson, Epsilon cracks the code.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maine watched, nervous, as the Chorus soldiers cheered.

They stared out the portholes and bullet holes, and banged on the walls, and clutched each other with joy. It was sweet, how eager they were, how innocent they were in that moment. They were inside the gates.

They were…safe.

It almost helped ease Maine’s nerves about being driven into a location where he may in fact be shot on sight due to his past crimes.

He couldn’t call them mistakes or accidents. Not after what he’d done with Sigma in his head, not with what he'd done after.

He couldn’t put the blame on the Project after he turned on Wash.

He was going to pay for his crimes, his sins.

He’d earned what was going to happen to him.

The truck rolled to a stop in front of a large, grey building, and his stomach lurched. He’d expelled anything that might have stuck around inside his stomach on the way there, while Florida gently rubbed his back. They'd puked in tandem all the while. The man gave Maine the chills sometimes, but he was a friend, and Maine knew that meant something to Florida.

The doors were flung open from the outside, and a long line of gurneys manned by soldiers with purple accents ran out to meet them.

“Injured first!”

The medics swarmed into the truck and dragged off the wounded soldiers, one by one, into the doors of the gray building. The few completely unscathed soldiers stayed seated as the medics worked. Palomo scooted himself across the bench to sit next to Maine, and bumped shoulders with him.

“Don’t worry about them, we’re in good hands! That’s Silvers and Loomaua, they’re excellent, and I don’t know that one because she’s a fed, but she’s got six medic stripes, so she’s high on the list of not screwing up. Seriously, you’re going to be ok.”
The six-stripe medic motioned to the remaining people in the truck.

“Chorus soldiers, please come this way. Everyone is due for an examination and decontamination before a lovely little stay in quarantine. Please leave all possessions on the truck, they will be returned to you after decontamination. You guys know the drill at this point, don’t make me repeat myself.”

Maine looked down at Mr. Cheddars, who’d been shoved into his arms the moment they returned to the truck, despite him being the least of them to need the comfort plush at that point. Palomo gently patted Maine's good shoulder.

“He’s gonna be fine. He’ll get a good washing and end up back in my room, probably before I even get there. I’m friends with everyone on laundry duty this month, and they’re all good people. They’ll be nice to him. Just leave him on the bench when they get you guys out.”

He hopped out of the truck, the last to go, but turned around and leaned back inside.

“You’re good guys, we’re home, and you’re safe here.”

York craned his head and saw the long line of wheelchairs wheeling the less injured soldiers away, and the empty chairs waiting for them. The look he gave Palomo in response was leery and uncomfortable.

“You say that, but-“

“No. You’re safe here. Breathe. You were offered protection by General Kimball, and she keeps her word. You’re safe. You’re good. See you on the other side!”

The medic Palomo pointed at as Loomaua grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him around, and shoved him toward an empty wheelchair.

“Palomo, move your ass so we can get them inside and checked out! The agent who drove in first has been losing it for a half hour, and I’m ready to just sedate her!”

“Oh dear,” Florida gave the soldier a concerned smile, “Niner will never forgive you for that. She hates indignities toward herself.”

“Which is the only reason she’s not drooling and unconscious. She’s not the kind of person I’m interested in pissing off, with that demonic wheelchair of death of hers.”

Palomo allowed himself to be shuffled inside the building, walking backwards with a jaunty wave until Jensen grabbed him and shoved him mercilessly into a chair as he whined and flopped around. She was good for him, a nice counterbalance to the sheer silliness in the boy, while still having a good bit of her own gentle humor to her.

Well, gentle as long as she wasn’t wielding weapons.

The Freelancers were all carefully helped down from the truck and into the fresh air. Maine hadn’t realized how stuffy the jeeps were until he was outside where the air wasn’t filled with the overwhelming smell of smoke and metal. Florida was bundled onto a wheelchair without a fuss, and one was offered to Maine, but he growled at the soldier who tried to make him sit. He was not an invalid and was not interested in being treated like one.

“Come on, man, just sit down. You guys are all levels of fucked up. Just…sit.”
York groaned and flopped into the chair instead.

“I’ll gladly take it. My hips and shoulders are screaming.”

The soldier looked down at York, then spun the chair and started walking.

“Finally, a patient that doesn’t make me want to beat them to death with a tire iron!”

“Trust me, that’ll change soon.”

North snorted and sighed as he settled into his own chair and was whisked off.

“Fuck, North, that’s cold!”

Wyoming managed to extricate himself from the truck without help but had to lean against it for support. After the adrenaline wore off, the man was exhausted and pained.

They all were.

“And unfortunately, accurate, my friend. Dear heart," he motioned to the nearest medic, "would you be so kind as to wheel one of those over for me? I’m afraid I am in a great deal of pain at the moment, and while I can push through it, I would really prefer not to.”

“Yeah, none of you should be walking right now. You just survived falling from space. You need all the fluffy chairs and painkillers we can spare.”

“No aspirin for that one, he is deathly allergic.”

Another soldier walked right up to Maine and parked the chair in front of him.

“Sit.”

He bared his teeth.

“Sit, or so help me, you will be medicated up to your eyeballs and there will be pictures of your humiliation handed out to every person on this base. You will never be intimidating again, asshole, bear strength or not. Do not test me. I could be off playing video games and making out with my incredibly hot girlfriend instead of wasting my time on your ungrateful ass. Don’t make me regret volunteering to help you.”

In the military hospital, Maine wouldn’t have blinked twice at flipping them off. On the MoI, Maine wouldn’t have been offered the chair in the first place if he was capable of standing. He was a recognized soldier, he was not weak, he was not helpless, and on the MoI they would respect that.

They also wouldn’t threaten to humiliate him if he refused to comply though and based on the brief interactions with the Chorus soldiers, Maine did believe the man would do exactly as he promised.

He grunted, rolled his eyes, and sat down.

Sure, whatever. He’d play the game for now, no sense in making enemies.

The soldier pushed him silently into the building and down the hall behind the others. It was…an incredibly unsettling sight, all of his…formerly dead teammates in front of him, alive but…in wheelchairs being taken down an eerie hallway by strangers in helmets.
Maine felt a cold chill down his spine and gripped the armrest tightly. He wanted to make a break for it.

“Here.”

The soldier dropped something into Maine’s lap. He looked down.

It was a peppermint candy. A single peppermint in a plastic wrapper.

He looked up.

The soldier stared straight ahead, he pushed the chair without seeming to look at Maine at all.

“I get that this is all kinds of unsettling. You’ve probably just had one of the worst road trips of your entire life, and we’re strangers you don’t know telling you what to do. You’re probably freaked to fuck and looking for any sense of control or power you’ve got left. Just…try not to freak out too badly. We aren’t going to hurt you.”

Maine delicately held the candy between two fingers and examined it.

It looked like a standard sealed sweet with a universally recognized red and white twist on the candy itself. It could be a trick, but…

“I get it. When we first integrated the two armies…it was scary as fuck. Constantly looking over our shoulders, being surrounded by all these people we didn’t know, and we couldn’t just identify them based on the particular way they walked or the scratches on their armor or the lilt of their voice the way we could with our own people. It was all new. It took time to get comfortable, some of us still aren’t. I just hope you’ll give us the chance to earn some trust before you start with the rampaging.”

Maine watched the cacophony of new people running in and out of rooms, calling for different things and generally looking as if they were actually helping people. Hell, even in the military hospital, they didn’t sound so eager to help and chat.

No one had ever slipped him a piece of fucking candy for cooperating, either.

Fuck it.

If they were trying to poison him, they’d need a heck of a lot more than what they could hide in a piece of peppermint candy, and he wanted it badly enough that he didn’t care.

He unwrapped the peppermint and popped it into his mouth.

It was sweet. Maine hummed softly under his breath. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually had anything that was properly sweet. Hospital jello hardly counted, that stuff was vile, and it wiggled too much to be edible.

The soldier plucked the empty wrapper deftly from Maine’s hand and pushed him a little faster to catch up to the others.

“Almost there. You know, your friend is something else. She’s been freaking out since she got here. We had to reassign one of the medics working on her. She made two of them cry and wouldn’t stop trying to teach the rest new curse words.”

He nodded and grunted. Niner was, and always had been, something else.
They were wheeled into a large open space room filled with chairs, rolling tables, and outdated, but well maintained medical equipment. The soldiers had started to tug the Freelancers out of their bodysuits and force them into hospital scrubs that did cover everything but were awful to look at and seemed less comfortable than the sweaty, dirty Kevlar they had on.

Maine was…not looking forward to that part.

Niner growled and flailed her arms. She nearly took out the nurse who was dabbing at a cut on her face.

“About fucking time, you assholes! I’ve been stuck in here by myself for forever!”

“We weren’t more than thirty minutes behind you, Precious.”

“Well, when you’re stuck in a bleak white hospital with no one to talk to-“

“Thanks a lot.”

“You get bored!”

“You could have talked to us instead of just calling us names.”

“Where the fuck did the kids go? Huh? None of you fuckers will say!”

“Agent Niner, please calm down. They have gone through decontamination and are either being tended to or they are in quarantine, why are you so upset about them getting medical treatment?”

“Because they’re fucking gone.”

North put a hand on Niner’s shoulder and pulled her in for a one-armed hug. He was damned lucky. If he was anyone else, hugging Niner when she didn’t want to be hugged would get you a pretty firm punch in a place you didn’t want one.

The woman was a touchy-feely type, but only on her terms, and never when she was angry.

Maine knew from experience her fists were like ball peen hammers.

“Niner, breathe.”

“Those kids were fucked! They were fucked up and no one will tell me where they are or if they’re ok!”

Florida looked to the nearest nurse.

“Has she been given something? She doesn’t typically exhibit this level of paranoia.”

“I –“

“I’m not fucking drugged, I’m fucking pissed! They shoved me in here alone with a bunch of strangers and one bitch had the gall to ask me if I needed a fucking diaper! Do I look like a toddler?!“

One of the medics threw their hands into the air.

“You just fell from space and you have massive bruising right along your bladder! If you don’t need one you must have internal organs of steel, or you’re not human! If you’re a robot, just say so,
and we’ll shove you off to the waiting area!”

“I’m not a robot! I’m a grown ass woman!”

“Which means nothing when you’ve fallen from space and **damaged your bladder!**”

Maine shook his head and tried not to laugh. The stress melted away at the antics of his…friend. God, they really were his friends, weren’t they? Even York, who’d been ready to kill him just a few days ago, had forgiven Maine enough to do his ‘bla, bla, blowjob’ hand motion at Maine as the medics tried to convince him to strip on his own so they could scan him.

It was nice.

Really nice.

The most amazing feeling.

Maine allowed the nurse at his side to help him out of the bodysuit and winced all the way through it. Still, he managed to get out of the suit and into a set of blessedly plain scrubs without snapping at anyone. Small mercies.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this connected to people, when he’d felt that cared for.

He’d missed them so much.

He’d missed being human.

As soon as he was out of the bodysuit and into the scrubs that were just as uncomfortable and ugly as he’d imagined (they were too goddamned small for his body and left a small strip of skin around his stomach completely exposed) the medics swarmed with scanners and antiseptic and swabs.

One had a needle in hand and grabbed for his arm.

Maine flinched back.

“Shit! Sorry!”

The medic put the needle down and held her hands up.

“We would like to take blood samples if that’s ok. It’ll help us rule out illnesses you might have or might be susceptible to a lot faster than just using the scanners. More accurate too.”

“Jesus,” York snorted, “is this the dark ages? You gonna start throwing leeches at us and examining our bile next?”

The six-striped medic stopped what she was doing and ‘hmm’ed thoughtfully in his direction.

“Hmm…”

“I was joking, please don’t put leeches on me.”

“Oh, I was just thinking, we’d have to search for some **really** small leeches. They’re usually too big for that sort of thing, you’d be bloodless in about ten minutes!”

Maine gave her a look.
Did she not know what leeches were?

Or were the leeches on Chorus just really large?

She seemed…if not excited, then at least intrigued by the idea. Maine was not nearly as excited about the giant leeches as the medic was.

“And anyway, would you mind letting me do a quick draw? It’s a tiny needle, and I’m pretty good at this!”

Maine shrugged and held out his arm. He didn’t enjoy needles, but they didn’t bother him as long as he knew they were coming. He wasn’t Wash, or anything.

The medic grabbed a stool and sat next to him.

“I’m Carter,” she said with a chirp, “it’s a pleasure to have you on the planet! Seriously, we are so excited! Other than the Reds and Blues, all the other outsiders who’ve come here have been out to kill us! It’s really distressing. Seriously, I don’t know what we did, but it seriously stresses me out to know that there are so many people who want us dead! Like, seriously, what did we do? Chorus is basically alone out here. You know what I mean? I’m like, seriously, dude, all I wanted out of life was a snugglicious kitty, enough food to not feel constant hunger pangs, books, and something interesting to keep my attention until my body eventually gives out on me for one reason or another. I’m super easy to please! We haven’t earned that kind of murder stuff! All done! Not so bad, right?”

Maine looked down, and there were three small vials sitting on a tray Maine hadn’t even realized was pulled out. She was efficient, he could give her that. The medic pressed a cotton ball against his arm.

“You did a fantastic job! Do you want to pick out a Band-Aid? We’ve got Mickey Mouse, unicorns, some that are shaped like pickles, robots, sharks! All kinds!”

The medic held out an array of different options and Maine did his best not to shrink from the obnoxious collection of adhesive strips. They were all childish and ridiculous, not a flesh colored piece in sight.

Seriously, who would want this kind of crap?

And now the word ‘seriously’ was stuck in his brain.

North nodded and grinned.

“Theta’s coveting that glittery one something fiercely, Maine. Don’t take it.”

Maine grunted and pointed to one with tiny dinosaurs on it, partly because if he thought about it much longer, he’d never make a decision.

And partly because dinosaurs are awesome.

“Excellent choice! Giant chickens are so cool!”
Tucker ran down the hall like his ass was on fire.

The fucking Freelancers were on site, and Tucker couldn’t find Wash.

All the shit going down and he couldn’t find Wash.

Caboose was MIA too, which was super not cool when there were people on site capable of breaking him in two before he even knew what was happening, but of the three of them, he was not fucking worried about Caboose. The man couldn’t keep a goldfish alive for a week, but he had Freckles almost always and the soldiers just fucking flocked to him like they were protecting a baby bird. He’d be fine.

Wash, on the other hand…

Tucker didn’t know much about the Freelancer he hadn’t met. Carolina would sometimes get drunk and punch things and tell stories, but Tucker didn’t believe half of them, no matter how much she insisted they were true.

There was no way Wash played strip poker with the Freelancers, and definitely no way that he won.

He knew he didn’t trust a single one of these fuckers with his friend, especially not when his head was so seriously screwed up.

Tucker ran into another dead end, groaned, and stomped a foot in frustration.

“What is the point of radios if no one will fucking answer them!”

“Tucker?”

Tucker whipped around. There were Wash and Caboose, standing right behind him outside of the long row of windows where the Chorus kids were going to be stuck as soon as they were deemed ‘not dying’ by the medics. He must have run right past them…

They both stared at him.

“There you fucking are!”

“Fucking hell, Tucker, where the fuck have you been?”

Tucker nearly tripped over himself.

Since when did Wash just drop the f-bomb like it was nothing?

“Wash?”

Caboose shook his head.

“No, Tucker, this is Church! Say hello!”

Shit.

Hadn’t they just had one of these already? How many personality flips was Wash going to have?!
Tucker really wished he knew more about fucked up brains and shit, if only so he could help Wash back into normal. As it stood, Tucker knew fucking zip. He was willing to put up with a Doctor Grey session at this point if it meant figuring out how to help the fucking guy.

“Tucker, what the fuck have you been doing? We’ve got shit going on and you’re fucking around like an idiot.”

Caboose bounced in place.

“I was playing games with the puppies and making Principal Kimball smile and laugh! She was sad, but now she is less sad, and Freckles has been hugged!”

Church-Wash waved a dismissive hand at the blue soldier.

“Great, very helpful. Look, I’ve got to go, we’ve got Alpha Squad plus their pilot, getting checked out in that room down there, and it’s in our best interest to keep them calm. I’m gonna go get them squared while we wait for The Director to come down and talk to them.”

“Kimball’s coming here?”

Church-Wash nodded and…shifted weirdly.

Fuck, it was so weird to see the man like this.

He managed to get all of Church’s mannerisms from back in the day without having actually met that Church. Ok, yeah, they traveled together for a bit, but it’s like…they didn’t spend enough time together for Wash to recognize and absorb the ‘I’m feeling guilty, sad, and conflicted, please just work with me because I suck at emotions’ shuffle/shift from Church, and Wash’s ‘I’m feeling guilty and sad, please just work with me because I suck at emotions’ shuffle/shift was totally different.

“I know you don’t know most of them, Tucker, but they’re not bad people.”

Tucker’s brain scratched like a record.

“Not bad people? Do you not remember meeting any of these people?! How many of them have tried to kill us? How many of them almost have?! One of those motherfuckers kidnapped my kid!”

Church-Wash shrugged, but it was that Church shrug that looked like he didn’t give a shit when he was just feeling so awkward he couldn’t make words.

Fuck, Wash had Church’s body language down, and it was creepy as fuck.

“Technically, two of them helped kidnap your kid, but didn’t actually kidnap him. Tex kidnapped Junior, and she died for that. These guys are shipwrecked and hurt and probably really scared, show some compassion.”

“Compassion?!”

Caboose bounced a little and grabbed Tucker in a hug. Freckles barrel shoved itself right into Tucker’s armpit and jabbed him hard.

“That is when you grab someone and SQUEEZE THEM REALLY TIGHTLY!”

“No, Caboose, that’s compression.”
“I LIKE DEPRESSION!”

Church-Wash brought a hand up to his helmet and groaned.

“Dear god, is this ever going to end?”

Tucker detangled himself from Caboose’s grip and rubbed at his now sore armpit.

“Look, dude, I’m not about to go in there and make nice with the people who got me fucking knocked up, then tried to kidnap my kid! No! This is complete bullshit!”

Church-Wash turned and looked Tucker over.

“I get that this is rough for you, I do, but what do you want me to do, Tucker? These are my Freelancers. They’re not dead. They’re not dead and I’m supposed to take care of them. They’re my responsibility!”

“And what are we, asshole?!”

His whole body locked into place, and Tucker wondered what the man looked like under his helmet right then. Wondered what he was thinking.

He wondered that a lot when Wash acted like Church.

“I…you’re…my friends.”

He tilted his head, then nodded, slowly and without confidence, but he did nod.

“You two are my friends. You don’t need me to give you orders and shit the way they do, because you’re capable of taking care of yourselves.”

Tucker’s jaw nearly fell off his face.

“I’m sorry, did you just…say we’re capable?”

“YAY! I don’t need anyone to help me change my sheets anymore!”

“Well, ok, maybe you need some help, but those people? They’re not capable of taking care of themselves. Killing things? Got that covered. Weapons and stuff? They’re good. Infiltrating a highly populated enemy base and getting out without being caught? Usually, they’re good at that. Human things like knowing when to eat and when to sleep and how not to piss people off? They’ll fucking die, Tucker. They’ll choke on their own tongues and wonder why god betrayed them. They can’t do anything on their own. Connecticut and South are on deaths door, and the rest of them are physically and mentally fucked beyond recognition. They need us, need me, to take care of them. I have to, Tucker. It’s my job.”

A weird, light feeling lit up Tucker’s chest.

He wanted to comment on all of that (These were seriously the guys that Carolina and Wash thought were the best soldiers in the galaxy?), but the one thing that stuck out, that felt important was—

“Oh my god. You…you think we’re more competent than the Freelancers. We’re better than the assholes who were trained by the government with specialized armor and skillsets and tools.”

Yeah, sure, this was all a product of a weird, broken part of Wash’s brain, but that meant that
someday in Wash’s brain, he really thought that Tucker was capable of doing all of this shit himself! When the fuck did that happen?!

“Jesus, Tucker, don’t make it a big deal.”

“No, this is amazing! I need to tell Carolina you just said that!”

“Go ahead and try, she will never believe you.”

Tucker blinked and shook his head.

“Wait, you’re trying to distract me!”

Church-Wash sighed dramatically.

“And it almost worked, too. Look, I get that you’re upset, and you don’t have to be around them. I can handle the intake here, and we’ll work out a system. You don’t ever have to see Wyoming or Florida or Maine or any of them, ok? I’ll…I’ll make it work, Tucker. I know you hate it, but I have to take care of them. You don’t understand, Tucker, I have to, and I don’t…want you to hate me for it.”

And fuck, Tucker could hear the dude’s exhaustion. He knew some of that had to be directly from Wash, even if he wasn’t in control. The man hadn’t slept more than six hours in three days, he had to be close to a collapse soon. But…some of that was Church. Church when he didn’t know what to do, when stress was too high, and he was just…lost.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, shit, fuck.

Both of his best friends were hurt and scared and fucked up, sharing a body and brain, and yeah, Tucker was not stupid, he understood that the Church in Wash’s head wasn’t real. It was a product of his brain damage and his brain trying to protect itself, but fuck if that made it any easier.

Tucker was gonna have to be the mature one.

He hated that.

“You really think I’m leaving you alone with them? Fat chance, dude.”

“I do not want to leave Church with the scary people either. They have really big guns.”

Church-Wash looked between them, before he settled on Caboose.

Caboose had straightened up and pulled Freckles in tight, like he was ready to take on the whole fucking planet to defend Church. He probably was, too. Caboose had it in his head that he was a fucking hero, and heroes did that kind of brave shit.

“Caboose,” Church-Wash stepped up close, “I have a mission for you.”

“A mission?”

“A very important mission. Vital. It’s probably the most missiony mission you’ve had in years.”

“Oh my god, that sounds dangerous.”
“I need you to check on the Chorus soldiers, each and every one that came back from the mission who isn’t in surgery.”

Tucker could feel the manipulation tactic, but he wasn’t exactly sure what Church-Wash thought he was doing. He’d turned his voice to do that thing that people did sometimes with little kids to get them excited and make them listen.

He hoped Grey didn’t find out. She’d be pissed.

“What the fuck are you doing, dude?”

Church-Wash hushed Tucker, like, fucking rude, dude! He leaned in closer to Caboose.

“They are all probably hurting and very scared, and they’ll want someone to take care of them.”

“And you want me to find someone to take care of them?”

He shook his head, slowly, deliberately.

Wash didn’t usually go for the kid route with Caboose. Wash was really good at Caboose these days, even if he didn’t think so. He did the simple speech, because getting too complicated made it harder for Caboose to process the information, but Wash was well aware that Caboose was a grown man. Doctor Grey helped with that, talked the Reds and Blues through brain trauma and IQ scores and different types of mental disorders and disabilities.

And it worked. Tucker watched how the Chorus kids talked to Caboose, how the few remaining older people handled him, and mimicked it. Treating him like a grown up worked a hell of a lot better than anything they’d tried in the past, and Wash?

He was a fucking pro at it.

Church…wasn’t. Epsilon wasn’t much better.

They didn’t see Caboose as an adult, and actively got pissed when someone treated him like a grown man capable of making his own choices on most things. Tucker hated it, but that was the kind of thing that made him remember why he kind of hated his best friend sometimes.

Tucker clapped a hand on Caboose’s shoulder.

“No, Buddy, I want you to take care of them. Go check on them and get them some preliminary supplies. Take a few of the available soldiers with you to gopher shit for you. They’re counting on you to make sure they’re safe and they have what they need. You get to be the hero this time!”

He could still fix it. Hopefully Caboose would just let it roll of his shoulders. The man was good at that shit.

“Yeah dude, you just know that Kimball didn’t think to pack them booze or condoms or anything like that. She’s all about the rules and shit. And she probably didn’t get them any of the good movies or games or anything. And I bet Andersmith’d want one of those really heavy blankets you guys like.”

Caboose froze in place, then gave a full body wiggle and flapped his free hand. Tucker felt like the world’s biggest asshole, playing along with that babying crap, but if Caboose didn’t realize it was happening, Tucker could save him some hurt and work on Church-Wash later.
“I…WILL DO THE BEST JOB EVER!!!”

He ran down the corridor, Freckles in hand, and shouted into the radio for more of his blue minions. Tucker had no fucking clue how Caboose managed to get so many soldiers to follow him around like he was the best thing since internet porn. Church-Wash straightened up and sighed in relief.

“And, one crisis averted.”

Tucker crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

“Dude, what the fuck?”

“Look, Tucker, he’s gonna be fine. Freckles will take care of him.”

Which was not the question he’d tried to ask, or the answer Tucker was looking for in that.

“Why are you trying to get rid of us so badly?”

“Because I don’t like seeing you guys get hurt.”

“You think the Freelancers are gonna hurt Caboose?”

Church-Wash looked at the door, and slowly shook his head and holy shit, Tucker got it. Well, no, he didn’t get it, but he got Church’s brain. Something was happening behind the scenes that he didn’t want the others to know about.

That fucker was keeping secrets.

“I think that room is filled with people who aren’t going to be patient with him, and he’s already hyped and freaked and had a shit week, and a bunch of people throwing questions at him that he can’t answer isn’t gonna fucking help. Taking care of the kids will make him feel like he’s helping, and it’ll keep him out of the way until we can retrain these fuckers. Aaaand, there may be a conversation or two that needs to be had with them before we start introducing the Freelancers to the team, but right now? Not the time. I’m going in, you wanna keep guard?”

“I’m not letting you go in alone.”

“Great. Can you keep calm around Wyoming?”

Tucker twirled the hilt of his sword in his hand.

“I promise not to cut him in half unless he’s asking for it.”

“Tucker, I mean it. They’re fucked up right now, which means they’re keyed as shit. You go after Wyoming, and even hurt, out of armor, and weaponless, they could kill you. Fuck, they probably would, and they’d feel good about it.”

“Fine. I promise not to cut him in half until we’re alone and he’s asking for it.”

“Good enough. In we go.”

They stepped through the door, and if the Freelancers were keyed as shit, Tucker was just as bad. He had no idea what to expect.

The room filled with…surprisingly attractive people in scrubs was not it. Holy crap, did Church’s
evil, southern alter ego hire people for their looks, or what? Tucker assumed that Wash and Carolina were flukes, but clearly, they were the rule, not the exception.

The doctors and nurses buzzed around the colorful mix of buff people in scrubs, passing tools and bandages and disinfectant in a weird whirling dance. They moved like a machine, no two bumping or dropping anything, just swinging out of the way when necessary and usually at the last possible second.

Tucker thought it was cool as shit when people worked that well together. They were all like, different teams from different bases and different armies, but they still managed to get along well enough to take care of things.

Probably the benefit of a job keeping people alive instead of killing them.

“Sorry about the wait, guys, we appreciate you being so patient.”

“Silvers, looking sexy as always. Lovin’ the new trim!”

Tucker snapped his fingers and pointed at Silvers, who flipped him off without even looking up.

“Keep walkin’, I’m still not interested.”

“Swing, and a miss.”

The guy with scaring on his eye, stood up and moved away from the nurse working on him. The nurse, who’d been dabbing at his neck tried to pull him back, but he shifted out of her grip and jumped toward Church-Wash with a wicked big grin.

“Man, it is so good to see you.”

“You too, Agent York. Last I’d heard you were killed on a mission with Tex. I’m glad to see that information was false.”

“It’s a funny story, Wash--“

Church-Wash looked around the room.

“Where is Agent Washington, anyway? I can’t believe he’s not here yet.”

That York guy froze, mid-step, his smile iced into place like he didn’t know what to do with it. The whole of the Freelancers tensed.

Oh, right.

They didn’t know about this part.

Fuckberries, this was not gonna go well.

“What?”

“Agent Washington? He’s not with you, or if he is, he’s managed to get himself some active camo and go a whole five minutes without being dramatic as shit. Tucker, do we have status on him?”

They all looked like they were about to freak, start asking questions that Church-Wash couldn’t answer, and cause a huge fucking meltdown and then there’d be even more freaking out and…no.

Just no.
Yeah, it was a good thing he was in the room.

“I’m sure he’s around, dude.”

Tucker walked over to where the medics were picking up and dropping off supplies. One of them, Carter, casually set down a container of individually wrapped tongue depressors and gave a slow nod.

Tucker had liked Carter ever since he woke up from his stab wound and she insisted on reading to him to keep him from trying to get up. If she weren’t in three very committed relationships, Tucker’d be all over that one.

Her boyfriends were all the possessive type though.

Tucker picked up the container of tongue depressors and ‘accidentally’ fumbled and dropped it onto the floor. The room’s tension snapped and zeroed in on him instead. One of the medics howled.

“WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!”

“Sorry, sorry!”

Church-Wash snarled.

“God damn it, Tucker! Do you have to touch everything?”

“Church, it’s fine, nothing’s broken.”

“You’re in a hospital, dumbass! Everything here has to be sterilized! All of that’s not good anymore! YOU KNOW HOW SHORT WE ARE ON SUPPLIES AND YOU’VE JUST CONTAMINATED ALL OF THAT!”

One of the medics timidly waved his hand to catch their attention.

“To be fair, anything in here that’s exposed to air is going to have to be disposed of or sterilized anyway due to the quarantine procedures. It’s not the worst thing ever.”

Tucker and Carter gathered up the spilled depressors and shoved them back into the jar.

“Look, it’s cool. You take this and get a new one, and we’ll hang out here and keep your friends company.”

“Why don’t you go, Butterfingers?”

“Aside from my new nickname? Because I’m gonna have to lay some ground rules and I don’t trust you not to be a diva.”

Tucker shoved the container into Church-Wash’s hands, spun him around, and shoved him toward the door.

“Oh, fuck you, Tucker! Are you seriously ruining shit just to get me out of here?”

“Sorry dude, I’m saving this ass for someone who’d appreciate it. Go on, get out.”

“You can’t kick me out, Tucker.”
“Maybe not, but I can make you go willingly.”

Tucker put a hand on his hip and leaned oh so casually against the wall. He was about to throw down his ace in the hole, and he wanted it to be fucking perfect.

“Because if you don’t go, I will. I don’t mind, I hear Kimball’s girlfriend is fucking around behind her back with some rando doorknob. Maybe she could use some company, someone to take the edge off her and make her forget all about it.”

They stared each other down.

Church-Wash wouldn’t think twice about Tucker threatening to hit on Kimball, he’d be sure to bite on that one, even if Wash-Wash would know that they were way past that.

After a few really bad attempts at hitting on her and getting thoroughly rejected, Kimball and Tucker talked their shit out, and he was all over her being his non-sexual, non-romantic, main chick along with Carolina. She bent over backwards to make them, to make him, feel important and included and like he belonged on their shithole planet. Tucker loved Kimball like a sister for it, not like Grif’s sister, but like a big sister who was a disaster lesbian with all kinds of self-confidence issues and shit.

He…also was terrified of Carolina and didn’t think hitting on her girlfriend was the kind of thing a smart person really did, even if it was a joke.

Tucker valued Little Tucker’s life too much to cross that line.

Still, Tucker knew one of these fuckers was Carolina’s old boyfriend, either the blond with the soul patch or the brunet with the eye scars (she pointedly didn’t describe the asshole, or even use his code name, even when she was drunk), and Church-Wash might not have realized why Caboose was trying to make Kimball laugh because she was sad, but Tucker did.

“You’re fucking disgusting. Play nice, or I’m reprogramming your doors and deleting your ‘home movies’ again.”

“I’ve got more backups than you can imagine, dude. Nothing can hurt me. Get out.”

Church-Wash turned to the Freelancers and let out his most put-upon, Churchlike sigh of disappointment and frustration. It was ridiculously weird how normal that sounded in Wash’s voice.

He was too damned good at that.

“Please don’t kill him. He’s an idiot, but he means well.”

“Later, asshole!”

Tucker shut the door and cracked his knuckles.

“Alright, listen up-“

The hot chick in the chair rolled forward and almost ran over one of the doctors.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Washington is clearly not feeling like himself.”
“Are we even sure that’s Wash? I mean, the voice was right but everything else was wrong!”

“Just what the fuck is happening here?”

Tucker didn’t know any of these assholes well enough to worry about who was who and what was what. The medical people were starting to get freaked. He needed to lay down the law and the rest could be fixed later.

“HEY! DOUCHEBAGS! SHUT UP!”

The room went silent.

“Ok, medic dudes, Agent Washington is having an episode. He’s not dangerous, but keep an eye out for him for me, would ya? Tell him I’m being a fucking asshole and kicked y’all out or something, I don’t know.”

“Captain Tucker?”

“He’s ok, he’s just having a really weird day, you can all relate to that.”

The medics twittered unhappily.

“We got anything that can’t wait a while?”

“All the Freelancers are at least on painkillers, and no one here is in immediate peril. They still need some more tending before we can get them into decontamination, but nothing is ruptured or internally bleeding or broken.”

“Awesome, I need to talk to these guys alone. Clear the room.”

“I love how we’re suddenly invisible,” the hot chick in the chair piped up.

The medics grumbled but filed quickly out of the room.

“Great. Now that it’s just us-“

“What the fuck is going on?”

“If you’d stop fucking interrupting me, you’d know. Are we done?”

The stayed quiet.

Tucker snagged a stool, perched onto it, and fiddled with his sword handle. It’d do him good if he needed it, and he didn’t think any of them would really realize what was happening until he’d cut at least one of them in half.

“Here’s the deal. You’re all alive. Yay for you. We’ve got another chick drugged up and getting fed and shit because she looks like a skeleton with skin. According to Wash, that’s all of you from your team. Congrats.”

“Wait…you mean…Connie’s here?”

“Crazy strong, tiny, stabs a lot of people in the dick? Yeah, her.”

“Jesus.”
The one with the bushy ‘stache shook his head a little.

“I must say, I do have mixed feelings about this.”

Tucker’s hand clenched involuntarily.

There you are, motherfucker!

“You’re not the only one, asshole. You’re lucky I don’t just cut you in half and save myself some grief!”

“Oh, come now, Tucker, it wasn’t that bad.”

“You made my kid need therapy, you fucker!!! Do you know how shitty Sangheili therapy is for a half human hybrid? They just kept telling him to EAT HIS FEARS!!! EAT THEM!!! What kind of fucked up therapy tells you to become a cannibal to keep from being scared?!!”

Wyoming leaned back against his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, and it took so much, so much, for Tucker to not just jump up and stab that motherfucker in the heart to avenge his son!

“I was just doing my job.”

“Your job was not killing kids! You were supposed to be stopping a war!”

“Tucker, Tucker, Tucker, everyone was someone’s child at one point. Besides, we were never planning to kill your spawn.”

Tucker thought back to his first night with Junior after he got his fucking kid back. Thought about how the little guy just clung to Tucker’s shirt and screamed into his neck for hours after they were brought back together. Up ‘til that point, Tucker hadn’t been 100% on the whole parenting thing, but holding his kid in his arms and rocking him to sleep gave him something he didn’t even realize he was missing. They barely knew how to communicate back then, but Tucker knew, he knew that his kid needed him, needed someone to take care of him.

Who could look at a baby like that and want to hurt them?

“No, you were just going to use him as a political figure and religious icon and use him to commit mass genocide and enslavement! You were going to trap his brain inside his body while Omega took the reins and let him live his life as a slave in his own body!”

Wyoming raised an eyebrow and leaned forward a little.

“No worse than having you for a father.”

Tucker was on his feet before he could blink.

“Oh, no you fucking didn’t! You DID NOT just say that!”

“Lavernius, I seriously doubt that he would have survived his larval state if we hadn’t taken him. He’d have choked on a rock, or you would have wandered off on a quest to find a human woman willing to have sex with you, and he would have died of exposure.”

“Oh, that is it!”

Tucker’s whole body turned into buzzing electricity and white, hot rage. He was ready to take his sword and just-
“Not cool, Wyoming!”
“Jesus, man, have you no shame?!”
“Stop! Wyoming, just shut up! Look, Tucker, or whatever, he’s freaked so he’s being an ass, I’m fucking sorry, ok.”

The Freelancers all hopped up and started playing distractions in different directions. Two of them pulled Wyoming back, one of the dudes hopped into his fucking lap, while York waved his hands back and forth in front of himself.

Tucker’s hands shook.

His eyes were itchy.

He fucking hated these people. Hated Wyoming.

Because he’d never gotten the fucking chance to prove him wrong.

Every time he had his fucking kid, every chance he had, Junior got snatched up or sent away for his own safety, or Tucker ended up trapped and so far away and Tucker ended up surrounded by assholes and fuck!

Junior was mostly grown at this point and he’d had so little time with him.

He just wanted a chance with his kid.

“Don’t you feel guilty for trying to ruin our lives? Like at all?”

“I don’t have time to feel guilty, and neither do you.”

Tucker didn’t even try to keep the sneer out of his voice, because this fucker was in for a great surprise.

“Well, congratulations cheesedick, because you’ve landed on a planet in the middle of nowhere, with no outside transport and really fucking limited entertainment. You’ll have all kinds of time on your hands now to reflect on the shit kind of human being you are.”

“That’s ominous,” the blond croaked.

“Now shut up and let me talk or I’ll just let them toss you in a cell and you can figure shit out for yourselves.”

The hot chick crossed her arms over her chest.

“We’re listening. Wanna explain what happened to our friend?”

Tucker took a deep breath and sat back down. He needed to feel like he was in control here, because if he wasn’t, he didn’t know what would happen. These guys weren’t the type to respect weakness.

“Yeah, well, it’s like this. Epsilon, Carolina’s AI, basically went ape-shit on Wash’s brain when the kooks’ you guys worked with first stuck him in.”

The chick shook her head.
The behemoth crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Tucker, like he was the one who’d deliberately given Wash brain damage.

The blond just shook his head, like he couldn’t believe it.

“No, that’s not what happened. Wash had Epsilon pulled and he was fine.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

The blond crossed his arms.

Seriously, they looked like a bunch of sulky teenagers. The Chorus kids had more maturity on them.

“Yeah, he was. I was there when he woke up. He had an issue during implantation but was fine afterwards.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, dude. We’ve got fucking brain scans that show he was not fine, but whatever. It’s not like I’ve been around Wash since all the bullshit went down so I’d know or anything.”

The dude in Wyoming’s lap reached over to the blond and patted his shoulder.

“Washington was kept in isolation after the ship crashed. You and South booked it to safety, and I was out of the loop almost immediately after that. Niner? What’s your take?”

She uncrossed her arms and scratched pretty harshly at her scalp.

“I got hurt. I didn’t see him until we were in Recovery, and he seemed…ok. Not like, great or anything, but no one was. We were all reeling.”

Wyoming nodded.

“I was told his condition was…dire, but by the time we were in contact again he seemed fine. More jaded and less trusting, sure, but that simply seemed par for the course. I had no idea it involved his AI.”

“And you didn’t bother to check on him?”

“I was not permitted, and after everything that happened, which I’m sure you have at least a brief understanding of, I did not want to risk ‘rocking the boat’ so to speak.”

Tucker scoffed.

What kind of person didn’t go after a friend because they were afraid of ‘rocking the boat’? Rocking the boat was all the Reds and Blues seemed to do.

Hell, it was what they did best.

“Yeah, and that’s Freelancer went down like it did. Look, shit went down, Wash got fucked up. Wash got…well, we think they might have tortured him based on how he…reacts to certain things. He won’t say, he’s pretty tight lipped, and you do not ask him about it. I mean it, that’s the big Wash rule. No questions about shit. When he’s comfortable he’ll talk, but you don’t get to ask. Also, don’t touch him unless he initiates, he’s got some touching rules and the best way to not screw them up is to only touch after he’s said it’s ok.”
York puffed up like he was about to make a fool of himself, and Tucker was not gonna have that shit.

“Look, I’ve known Wash a lot longer than you—“

“Yeah? I’ve known him since things got fucked up and you all fucking abandoned him to die. Don’t think I’ve forgotten this South dude either, the one that shot him in the back? Yeah. No. As far as Wash is concerned, I’m the fucking expert here, and you don’t fucking know him at all… well, actually, that leads into rule number two. If Wash is around you and acting weird, don’t call him out on it, just call Blue team to pick him up.”

“Blue team?”

“Yeah, me or Caboose. Seriously, if you just send out a call for Blue team, we’ll come help. If we’re not on base, Red team can work in a pinch. Worst case scenario, Doctor Grey can put him to sleep for a while. He’s usually not violent, but if he’s freaking and runs off, it could take us days to find him. Don’t do that to us, just ask for Blue team.”

The chick looked over to her teammates.

“Caboose? I keep hearing that name and I never get to ask—”

York snorted.

“What the fuck is blue team?”

“Simulation troopers. Tell me, Private Tucker, do I still count as a Blue or does being a Freelancer supersede that?”

Jesus, that voice. Why…why did he know that fucking voice?

Tucker’s skin started to crawl, like his armor was suddenly infested with those fucking impossible to kill ants that Chorus was fucking filled with.

“Fuck, what?”

The man’s face lit up in the fakest Velveeta cheese smile that Tucker’d ever seen.

“You don’t remember me? I’m hurt.”

Tucker’s whole body tensed, and not in the good way.

“Captain…Flowers? How are you not dead? Didn’t we bury you? Jesus, I thought I’d never have to hear your fucking creepy ass voice ever again. No, you know what, never mind. No, you don’t fucking count, and I’m not a private anymore, I’m a fucking Captain! A real one, not just a made up one for a stupid simulation.”

Flowers. Creepy as fuck, surprisingly buff. Captain fucking Flowers spun around on Wyoming’s lap and leaned forward. He looked Tucker over in one long, slow, glance, and Tucker felt the urge to throw up.

Ok. He got it. No more sensitivity training needed. He would never hit on another woman if it meant Flowers had to stay far away from him.

“Well, in that case, you and I are practically the same link on the chain of command.”
“…Nope. No, no, no, no, no. Fuck that noise! You just stay back!”

The blond guy closed his eyes, hunched his shoulders, and grabbed his elbow. He looked weird, smaller, like he was trying to make himself seem less dangerous. It didn’t work. Tucker was still very aware that he was built like a jock and was trained the same way Carolina and Wash were.

“How long has Wash…been like this? What was happening there?”

“No clue where it started, but I’d guess around the time his brain got fucked. This shit varies, he’s actually having a pretty good trip, Church days are usually pretty chill unless someone touches him when he thinks he’s a hologram instead of when he thinks he’s a robot. Some of them are a lot more stressful. We thought he’d stopped having them entirely until you fuckwings fell from the sky. Now he’s almost as bad as when we first adopted him.”

The blond ran his fingers through his hair and Tucker blinked hard. The man ran his tongue slowly over his lips and…

Tucker gulped.

That had to be deliberate, right?

Ok, Model Boy, what’s your play here?

“Why does he think he’s a robot?”

“Because it’s based off of Alpha. That one’s the easy one to deal with, he’s an AI, he’s an asshole, he’s in love with Tex. Sometimes he acts like this old southern fucknut. Director days fucking suck. The guy’s an asshole, that shit messes with Carolina, and Wash is all kinds of fucked up afterward. Then there’s days where we think he thinks he’s Epsilon, that one mostly screams and makes Wash try to hurt himself. Even with all the shit that comes from dealing with The Director, that one’s probably my least favorite.”

The whole group got quiet. The stander sat, and they all started to have what looked like mini crisis’s. Good. That meant that they were at least starting to get the sheer level of shit they’d buried Wash under when they abandoned him. The big guy stared down at his hands like they’d done him dirty.

“Jesus.”

The chick snarled and slapped her armrest. Tucker had the weirdest feelings about her, like, part of him wanted to hit on her and part of him wanted to hide his fucking homework from her like he was twelve. She was…weirdly hot, like her face was kind of familiar, but her voice was all weird and it was just...

Tucker, no. You promised god you’d stop hitting on people. If you want him to keep Flowers away, you’re gonna have to keep up your end of the bargain.

Fuck. Was it worth it?

“So, what, we just pretend everything’s ok?”

“For now? Yeah. You just act chill. Eventually Wash’ll snap out of it, but if you try and force it, it hurts his brain and doesn’t make Wash-Wash come out faster. Doctor Grey says that this is how his brain’s processing trauma since it’s got some actual physical damage and can’t go through the normal channels, and you’re not gonna fuck with that. We want him to get better, not get stuck as
someone else or forget how to take care of himself.”

The door slid open.

“Hey, I said clear the room!”

Wash stepped through the doorway. Well, Church-Wash did. He slammed the new jar of tongue depressors into Tucker’s chest with a snarl.

“Tucker, what the fuck are you doing that’s taking so long?! For gods sake, they still need medical attention!”

Church-Wash looked at the general disarray of the room at large, Captain Flowers on Wyoming’s lap, and the rage on different faces, and glared at Tucker.

“What have you done, now?”

“Nothing. We just talked. It was real informative and shit.”

Church-Wash stomped up and pushed Tucker away from the Freelancers and toward the far corner of the room. At least he was smart enough to realize Tucker wasn’t going to leave him alone with them.

“Well, shut up and let me work, and if you knock anything else over, I’ll assume it’s because you’re too fucking sick to stand and I’ll put you into quarantine too, you get it?”

They stared each other down for a moment, before Tucker spun around and sat down.

“Got it, asshole.”

He crossed his arms over his chest to make sure Church-Wash was aware of his level of pissed and scooted the chair further to the side. He wanted to keep an eye on these assholes.

“First, I am pretty fucking happy you all survived, and that you’re all here. The Director is on her way in to meet you guys, but she’s coming from a different building, so it’ll be a few minutes.”

The Freelancers all tensed up in different ways, and Tucker didn’t blame them. They had no idea who Kimball was, or how she apparently made Wash think of the asshole who’d done all kinds of fucked up shit to them.

Tucker didn’t really get the association, unless it was just because she was the big boss. Kimball wasn’t the type to torture a person with anything but dish duty or the latrines if she was feeling particularly cruel.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The Director?”

“She?”

“Mmm hmm, try to keep up, Agent York. I know you are all exhausted and in pain from your crash, but you need to keep aware for a few minutes more. Then the medics will send you on your way and you can get some rest.”

Maine shook his head and let out a growl. Tucker gripped the sword hilt tighter.
“Dude, what? You got something to say, Meta?”

York snarled, and Tucker rolled his eyes.

“Back off, asshole. Maine’s been through more than you could ever imagine.”

“Oh yeah, chewing through people, shooting people, kidnapping people, and trying to murder me and my friends on more than one occasion. I totally see why we should be cutting you some slack.”

“To be fair, Tucker, Wash did the same things. You just like him because you adopted him. Hello, everyone, sorry we’re late.”

Tucker flinched and spun around on the stool.

Kimball strode in, all confident and shit, with Páez behind her, and the gaggle of medical people behind him. The medics pushed past the Generals and swarmed over the Freelancers again, one made a good bit of cooing, while another snarled and snapped at Flowers to get his ass back in his own chair.

“These poor souls were out in the hall all waiting to get back to their jobs, so the Freelancers can get some rest. Let’s not keep them up too much longer than we have to, ok?”

Church-Wash put himself between the Generals and the Freelancers, the way he kept putting himself between them and Tucker. Like he wanted to protect the Freelancers from the two of them.

“Director! And, um…I’m sorry, I don’t seem to have any data on you?”

Kimball approached slowly and looked to Tucker.

“Ah?”

Tucker waved an arm over the whole scene, like he was bored and annoyed and didn’t give a fuck. She’d get the message.

“Church’s walking around acting like he’s the fucking boss of the world in here.”

Of course, Tucker hadn’t spent any time around Páez, and the guy clearly didn’t get the hints as easily as she did.

“Church?”

“Yes Sir.”

Kimball stepped up and moved to pat Church-Wash’s shoulder.

“Sorry, it’s been a long day for all of us. This is General Páez, he’s in charge of the Federal Army, and you’ll give him the same amount of respect and snark you so generously gift me with.”

Church-Wash stepped back and let Kimball get closer.

It was weird, seeing Church get all defensive and shit over the Freelancers. The real Church didn’t do that, the real Church just sort of let everyone fend for themselves. Church-Wash, on the other hand, was way more protective.

It kind of freaked Tucker out a little bit.
“Well, at least you’re here. I can’t get any status on Agent Washington.”

She nodded and motioned vaguely in the direction of the door.

“He’s, ah, resting at the moment. I’m sure you heard about what happened earlier?”

“Yeesh, yeah I heard. Poor guy. I’m amazed you can get him to rest though, no matter what I do, the idiot just won’t stay down.”

Kimball tapped his shoulder with her fist and as she accepted a datapad from one of the medics and started to read it. Páez froze as he was handed his, like he didn’t know what the fuck he was doing, which…ok, yeah, accurate, but still, dude, you have to try to look like you know what you’re doing.

The Freelancers were gonna eat this guy alive.

“Don’t be mean, Church, he has a lot on his plate, and you know how the soldiers feel about him being picked on.”

“Right, sorry Director. I just mean that it’s good he’s got someone looking out who he’ll actually listen to.”

“Well, jury’s still out on that one.”

She nodded and patted at Church-Wash’s shoulder as she read. She hmmed, rocked her head slowly from side to side, then placed the datapad on an empty supply tray. Páez followed her lead and stood awkwardly next to her.

Fuck, this guy made Tucker miss Doyle, and not just because Doyle ended up being pretty cool, all things considered, but because he was actually less awkward.

“First thing’s first, I’m General Kimball of the New Republic of Chorus, and this is General Páez of the Federal Army of Chorus, and we’re the respective leaders of the United Armies of Chorus. We’ll have a proper sit down once you’ve all been given medical attention and have had the chance to rest, but for now, you should all just worry about resting and getting better. You’re here because of Agent Carolina’s kindness and graciousness, and I hope that you’ll respect that.”

Flowers slid off Wyoming’s lap and grinned, wide and cheeky.

It was just as creepy as Tucker imagined it was when he was back in Blood Gulch. He looked like a kindergarten teacher, like a Disney employee at Christmastime, like a car salesman.

Like a fucking creepy guy trying not to be creepy.

“Is this everyone? Or, sorry,” Kimball held up a finger, “I know one of yours is in surgery, Agent South, and Agent Connecticut is resting in the hospital wing, but I’m still a little…off on the numbers. Is there anyone else we should be expecting to fall from the sky?”

Flowers stood, only to be shoved right back down in a chair by Silvers, who didn't look to be in the playing mood anymore.

“SIT!”

“As far as we’re aware, we are all that has survived the project. Well, except for the AIs.”

“Right, you’ve got three that you’ve salvaged. Theta, Eta, and Delta.”
“Um…not exactly.”

Kimball paused.

“Explain?”

“We’ve managed to salvage all of the AI fragments, Ma’am, though we were unable to save the Alpha AI’s backup.”

“Does…that include Agent Texas?”

Kimball turned to Church-Wash. He wobbled a little on his feet.

Flowers gave a wide, toothy, grin, and Tucker’s balls receded inside of his body, never to return.

Yeah, he’d never hit on another living soul again, he’d never ask anyone out on a date, no more long, slow looks, none of it.

Just keep that creep away.

“Yes, it does, but we may have a slight problem.”

Church-Wash snarled.

“With what?”

“Agent Texas is being stored in one of the AI capture units we brought with us. Unfortunately, that pod was sent into distress in the crash, about seven hours ago, we have no idea what its status is, as we weren’t allowed to take care of it during transport. Mutinies screw things up.”

“WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYHTING?!”

“We didn’t exactly have the opportunity.”

“You could have said something at any point!”

Tucker jumped up and hauled Church-Wash back against the wall as he started toward Flowers, ready to fight. Kimball grabbed his shoulders and helped Tucker shove him back. She craned her neck over her shoulder to look at the Freelancers, and Páez just stood there like a goddamned idiot.

“Dude, breathe!”

“Church, stop! You’re not helping! This pod, is it something we can fix?”

The blond nodded, shook his head, and let out a low sigh.

“Maybe, I haven’t gotten to look at it in a while. It might be too late.”

Church-Wash whipped his head to look at the guy.

“You were taking care of her?”

“Her and the other fragments. We had some pretty powerful AI containment units, but they were also…a little messed up. It’s been a long time, and they’re not really meant for long term use.”

“Is it a standard model, Agent North?”
“They were standard storage units, but we’ve been holding them together with duct tape and prayers for over a year now. We’ve modified them to hell and back to try and keep them alive. I have no idea if we can even—“

Church-Wash knocked Tucker off and grabbed Kimball’s elbow.

“I can fix it.”

“Are you sure, Church?”

“If it’s fixable, I can fix it.”

She looked between him and Tucker.

“Ok, go take care of that. We’ll handle this, and you can check in once you’re sure Agent Texas and the other AI are safe.”

He sighed in relief and leaned in a little. Kimball put her hand against his neck, right where the armor didn’t meet, and gave him a squeeze. Tucker didn’t think Páez saw it, but he was sure that the Freelancers did.

“Thank you, Director.”

Church-Wash bolted toward the door.

“Please go to decontamination first, Church.”

“Director, I’m in a robot. I can’t get sick.”

“No, but the soldiers can. God forbid something on your armor make it out of quarantine.”

“Holy shit, you’re right. Ok, decontamination first. Thank you, Director.”

“Tucker, go with him. Make sure he’s…safe. Where is Captain Caboose?”

“Church sent him off to take care of the kids.”

She nodded and pointed to the door.

“Ok, you stop and get Captain Caboose decontaminated too, then go help with Agent Texas. Please try not to break anything.”

Páez crossed his arms and tapped his foot, all passive aggressive and shit.

Tucker gave him two weeks before he quit.

“ Heck, hem.”

Kimball looked over her shoulder.

“Forgive me, General Páez, what would you suggest we do in this situation?”

“I suggest you start acting like a partner rather than an antagonist, General Kimball.”

Tucker looked between them, kind of confused.

“Oh boy, what’s going on here?”
“Nothing you need to worry about. I think keeping Agent Texas alive is a little more important than us fighting over who has jurisdiction over Church, isn’t it?”

“We will be having a conversation here.”

“Ok, can you do that after I save my girlfriend from getting deleted?”

Tucker snorted, and shoulder checked him.

“Dude, she’s not your girlfriend. She dumped your ass!”

“Yeah, well, she clearly didn’t do a good job of that.”

“Go on, you two. Go save the day. We’ve got this, don’t we General Páez?”

He grunted but stayed quiet.

Church-Wash bolted, and Tucker followed behind him. Kimball could take care of herself, and she wasn’t alone, and those guys looked like hell.

She’d be fine.

And questioning her would be the fastest track to dish duty, which Tucker hated more than most things. He hated it more than leg day.

Church-Wash headed to where the supplies were being unloaded, the most likely spot for the fancy tech to be at.

“We’re gonna save her.”

“Yeah, dude.”

“We aren’t going to fuck up this time.”

“No, we’re not.”

“She’s gonna make it.”

“Fuck yeah she is. She has to dump you again, after all!”

Shit. How was Tex going to react to all this when they saved her? How was Church?

How was Wash?

The fresh arrivals from the nearby base were exactly what Carolina would have wanted them to be.

They were happy to be there, eager to impress, and willing to throw their hands into moving things as quickly as possible. It helped that most of them hadn’t had nearly the amount of interaction with the Reds and Blues that the soldiers based out of Proteger got, so they were still star struck enough that they wanted to bend over backwards to make ‘Agent Carolina!!!!’ happy.
She had the new hauling trucks being filled at three times the speed the first one was, and Simmons was blown away at the sheer amount of stuff the pilot had managed to pack inside what looked to be a pretty small transport ship. Between the insanely dehydrated supplies in every nook and cranny, and the really clever packing, Simmons was pretty sure they’d be golden for a good long while, if all the supplies turned out to be safe and not poisoned.

He wanted to help get the truck up and loaded, if only because he wanted to go home where it was safer and way less creepy than the jungle. Simmons knew what sort of scary native creatures lived on Chorus, and there could be…snakes in the trees.

Not that he was still scared of snakes or anything.

Oh no.

This was Chorus.

There were worse things than fucking snakes.

Like their horses. Or their dogs. Or their oversized winged fur snakes that randomly flew out of caves when people got too close!!!

Honestly, Simmons hated nature on Earth, and Chorus already felt like a too much of a death planet for his taste. He really didn’t want to have to deal with flying snakes. He’d only just barely learned to tolerate Kimball’s pet weasel, and only because that thing used its crazy mutant powers for good.

He wanted to get inside, where he was safe from the majority of the planet’s pests.

But there was something about the damned code.

Church was right, as much as Simmons hated to admit it. The collection of seemingly random letters and numbers was definitely in enough of a pattern that it could very well be a code. Probably wasn’t. But maybe it was.

And if so, what kind?

What was hiding in the jumble? Why was it suddenly appearing?

What did it mean?

“Simmons, let’s go! I want to get back to Proteger, yesterday!”

Grif flopped onto the ground next to Simmons feet, stretched out, and yawned obnoxiously. The orange soldier had been ‘managing’ the soldiers for a good hour, longer than Simmons expected him to pretend he was working. He must have finally gotten bored. Or hungry. Or tired. Or some combination of the three.

“I’m working on something, Grif.”

He knocked his foot against Simmons’ ankle and flopped against the dirty jungle floor. Seriously, Grif, this was how you got ticks and ants!

“Come on. Are you still hung up on that? I thought you said it wasn’t anything important.”

“The soldiers keep finding it, more and more in places it doesn’t belong. In the middle of
documents, in text files that weren’t there before, even in a few audio files. It’s weird. And it keeps repeating. I thought it was random, but it’s the same segments over and over. Whatever it is, it’s insistent.”

Grif huffed and made grabby hands for the tablet from the ground, like a fucking child. A fat, fucking greasy, child. Simmons groaned, to make sure Grif knew exactly how annoyed by all of this he was and sat down on the ground next to Grif. He, oh so casually, handed the tablet over and watched Grif stare at the screen.

What Grif thought he could figure out that Simmons couldn’t was anyone’s guess, but his human eye was starting to hurt from all the staring and his robo eye was all glitchy and stuff.

Grif scrolled across the different segments of text and started to munch on a snack cake he’d smuggled out from somewhere, looking bored, and fat, and lazy, and stupid as usual. He was seriously so gross, probably hadn’t showered in days, and he always complained about everything and…

Oh god, Dick, get a grip on yourself!

Err…that didn’t sound right brain.

Richard! Get a grip on your dick!

No. No, that wasn’t right either.

Oh god.

Simmons shook his head to clear away the awkward, obtrusive thoughts that plagued him. Obtrusive Grif thoughts were almost as bad as the What If Everyone Is Secretly Laughing At You thoughts.

Seriously, if it wasn’t one thing it was another.

“And you haven’t solved it yet?”

“It’s not like I’m not trying, Grif!”

“Yeah, but you’re really good at this shit. Computers are like the only thing you do well, besides Dungeons and Dragons and not dating girls.”

“Shut up, Grif.”

Grif poked at the screen and tilted his head to the side

Simmons could imagine how his eyes squinted in that moment, confused, dumb, a little cow like. It’d be fucking cute-

What? No! No, not cute! Dumb! He’d look dumb! Like a dumb person who didn’t know things about computers or anything!

Grip! Find one!

Simmons craned his neck to see what Grif was staring at and wobbled. He put his hand on Grif’s shoulder to steady himself and felt his whole face heat.

A grip not on Grif!
“Huh.”

Simmons yanked his hand off of Grif like it was on fire and shoved it under his butt in the hopes of curbing that weird impulse he had to make sure he had contact with the other man.

“What?”

“I think Donut might have been right when he said he recognized the code.”

“How?!”

Grif pulled up a block of text.

SSBkb27igJl0IHdhbnQgdG8gc3RheSBoZXJlLg0KUGxlYXNlLCBsZXQgbWUgb3V0Lg0KSSBtYXkgZ28gbWFkIGlmIHlvdSBrZWVwIG1lIHRyYXBwZWQgaW4gaGVyZS4NCkxldCBtZSBvdXQhIA0KUGxlYXNlIQ0KV2hhdCB1c2UgYW0gSSB0byB5b3UgaWYgSSBnbyBpbnNhbmU/ISANCkhlbGxvPw0K

“Look at this.”

Simmons huffed and snatched the tablet out of Grif’s hand. He knew what it looked like.

He hadn’t been just standing around doing nothing, he’d been standing around doing important stuff! Researchy stuff! Smart stuff! What did Grif know anyway? Him and his stupid hair and his obnoxious smile and his gross eating habits, and his squinty crinkly eyes when he was happy.

No! Focus!

“I’ve been staring at this for over an hour. I know what it looks like!”

Grif nudged Simmons’ arm and pointed at the screen.

“Yeah, ok, but you’re staring so hard at the forest, you’re missing all the trees.”

“What does that even mean?!”

He snorted and sat up in a smooth roll and Simmons felt his throat dry up a little.

“You’re trying too hard. Instead of staring at the letters and trying to force them to translate, try looking at it like this.”

Grif put his hand over Simmons’ and pulled the tablet slowly away from Simmons’ face.

Simmons…blinked.

He looked up at Grif and tried to control a gulp.

What was happening?

A finger drew slowly over the letters.

“What is this?”

Simmons stuttered.

“Uh, S S B k b-“

“No. Those are the trees. Look at the forest, Simmons. What is this?”

Grif leaned in close, their armor scraped together slightly as the orange soldier moved further into
Simmons’ space.

Simmons stared at the screen, then looked at Grif, who was looking at him expectantly.

If they’d been out of uniform, Simmons might have thought Grif wanted to…kiss him or something.

**BUT THAT WAS RIDICULOUS!**

SIMMONS WAS STRAIGHT! 100%! TOTALLY STRAIGHT! NOT INTO GUYS AT ALL, DAD! REALLY, I’M NOT! I JUST THINK HE’S KIND OF HANDSOME IN A CLASSIC MOVIE SORT OF WAY! PLEASE DON’T LIGHT MY BOOKS ON FIRE!

Simmons shook his head and scooted back. He didn’t want Grif to get the wrong impression about them. He liked Grif, maybe even loved him, but he loved him like a friend. Right? Friends who’d spent this long in each other’s company surrounded by crazy people and mean people would just…sometimes gravitate and have feelings! It wasn’t weird that he had some kind of emotions for Grif! It was all chemical! It didn’t mean anything!

Quick Simmons, say something! He’s staring at you and you’re being creepy!

“Grif, I don’t understand. You’re acting really weird.”

Grif pulled back and shook his head.

“Never mind. I was gonna let you figure it out on your own, let you feel all smart and shit so you wouldn’t spend the rest of the trip whining about me cheating or something, but you’re too caught up in your own head to see anything.”

Ouch.

That was slightly more hurtful than Simmons expected, especially since he and Grif traded way harsher insults all the time without flinching.

Wait. What?

“You know what it says?”

“No, but I know how you can figure it out. Do you still have all those old computer games the kids made you fix to work on modern computers?”

Grif clapped Simmons on the shoulder and rolled to his feet in a move way to graceful for someone as…oh, who was Simmons kidding? Grif was graceful, even being bulky, and it made Simmons’ brain hurt to think about it.

“Their games?”

“Yeah. Games. Videogames. I’m about to make you feel like an idiot.”
Kimball pointedly didn’t let out a breath of relief as Wash and Tucker raced out of the room, and the door slid shut behind them. She loved her merry band of idiots, but this was not a scenario in which their particular flavor of crazy was likely to go over well. As much as she cared about both of them, and trusted them to take care of each other, they were not the first people she would choose to take care of outsiders. The Reds and Blues were pretty insular, and it took a lot of work to really make them care about people who weren’t part of their little club.

Especially if they already didn’t like someone.

Páez puffed up, tall and full of self-importance, and stepped forward, effectively blocking Kimball’s view of the Freelancers. She caught the varying expressions on their faces, a good deal more controlled than the majority of people who walked around in full armor all the time and internally laughed at their hidden displeasure.

With the exception of the man who must have been Maine, who’s face clearly said ‘Are you really planning to put up with that behavior?’ It was amazing how much he managed to get across without a single word or sound. She shook her head ever so slightly, and soundlessly rocked herself backwards onto Tucker’s abandoned stool.

She didn’t think Páez noticed.

“The medics will finish getting you all patched up, and then you will be escorted to the quarantine area. We shouldn’t have to keep you more than a few days until we can run blood tests and the like, and I will personally apologize for not having a better system in place before you arrived. We genuinely didn’t expect anyone to physically land this quickly. Bureaucracy tends to take a while.”

Kimball shoved off the floor and slid out from behind Páez. She didn’t bother to stifle her grin, what was the point when no one could see it anyway. He looked over at her, clearly horrified by her undignified behavior.

York grinned, and part of Vanessa’s soul died in that moment. She wanted to be sick.

“General Kimball, it’s a pleasure to meet you in person. Glad to know you’re not actually the Director. We about had a heart attack when he mentioned it.”

“Likewise, on both counts, Agent York.”

“You can just call me York, everyone does.”

She’d always thought that Carolina’s descriptions of the man were seen through the rose-tinted glasses of the past and a general idea of not speaking ill of the dead. That didn’t seem to be the case.

The man was just like Carolina described, right down to those dimples when he smiled. He was handsome enough, nothing that screamed unique or special aside from his scarring, but that didn’t matter. Confronted with Carolina’s preferred choice in partners, Vanessa compared herself to him and found herself on the opposite end in nearly every way.

It was good she’d made the decision to step away.

“I tend to prefer a more formal address when I’m dealing with people I don’t know well but thank you for the offer.”

Her voice didn’t shake, a minor miracle she would need to offer thanks for before bed. The blond, Agent North leaned over with a ‘gentle, older brother’ sort of smile. It was the kind of smile she’d
seen a thousand times on men who thought she was too young to lead, on Feds who thought she
would be easy to manipulate, even...well, anyway, no point in dwelling. She wasn’t going to be
catched up in the bullshit.

“I promise, we’re not here to cause trouble. I don’t know why that Tucker guy hates us, but we’re
not the enemy here. We’re not trying to hurt anyone.”

She snorted. That guy had balls if he thought he’d be able to gaslight her that easily.

“No, you’re just here to beat up sixteen-year-old boys. Palomo’s already reported in, Agent North.”

York made a ‘cease and desist’ motion with his hands.

“Hold up, before we break off into fighting again, can we get a status update on the people who
ran off ahead of us? There was this kid who...fuck, I think his whole chest came off, and I know
we’re all worried about South.”

Páez stuttered.

“I-I’m sorry, what happened to his chest?”

“He’s talking about Private Sadhana. They prefer gender neutral pronouns unless they specify
otherwise, they and their if you can, and they’re going to be ok. The mechanical parts keeping them
alive were fused together in the fight, leaving Private Sadhana relying on a half functioning system
of organs and blood pumping into places that weren’t working. They are very lucky that this only
affected some of their parts, or they would have died on the battlefield. As it stands, they are being
taken care of, and the broken parts are being replaced. It’s going to take some time, though, you’ll
probably have to wait to see them until you’re out of quarantine.”

The woman, who Kimball assumed was Carolina’s pilot friend, Niner, looked sick.

“Jesus Christ, that sounds horrifying.”

“We don’t have access to a lot of the technology you’ll see on other planets. We can’t easily or
effectively clone new organs, but in many cases we can...for lack of a better turn of phrase, cobble
together working parts. It’s...really, you’re better off asking one of the doctors. It’s complicated
medical stuff that I will freely admit I don’t know enough about. I know it works, and Sadhana is
in good hands.”

“And the rest?”

Páez looked at Kimball, and while he seemed fine on the outside, she could taste his fury. She
should probably stop answering questions, since she had agreed to let him take the lead.

“General Páez will be more than happy to look into that for you, I’m sure.”

“I will?”

“Since you’re the primary liaison for the Freelancers?”

“Ah, yes, that.”

Florida tapped the wall gently next to him. Kimball arched a brow at the man. From the way his
head tipped, he had at least some idea of what he was doing. Kimball didn’t think Páez even
realized that the man understood that was the universal sign for ‘listen up’, he just turned his
attention over to the Freelancer without thinking.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ve heard much about you, General Páez. Is there a reason you’re taking the lead with us?”

“Ah, I am, that is, I am more than qualified to offer the kind of assistance…that is…”

Kimball bit her lip to tamp down a grin.

Fumble, fumble, taking a tumble. Not so easy, is it Lorenzo?

“We recognize that this is unfamiliar territory for everyone involved. General Páez and I will both be working with all of you to a certain extent, however, General Páez offered to take the primary role.”

“Forgive me, General,” the excessively British one who could only be Wyoming said, “but I’m not comfortable with someone I know so little about being in charge of my husband’s health and wellbeing. Our dear Carolina sang your praises, but she never mentioned him.”

“The elections were recently held, but I assure you I am fully qualified for the position. I am more than capable of handling anything you all may need.”

Wyoming shook his head.

“With all due respect, General Páez, we are not looking for a handler.”

Páez looked like he was about two minutes from stomping his feet. He clearly hadn’t expected this level of resistance.

Someone hadn’t done his homework.

“Dear god, will you lot always be so resistant to allowing people to help you?”

Kimball tried very hard not to sigh. The man couldn’t go five sentences without insulting someone. Better to make it sound like a joke than let him alienate them.

“I hope not, I’ve already got enough children running around without adding more.”

“And that’s another thing, you’ve got underage kids in armor killing each other here. That is incredibly fucked up.”

“And yet you want to trust my leadership. Funny how that works.”

“She’s got you there, Niner.”

“Fuck you, I haven’t even begun to say anything yet, and where the fuck are the soldiers we came with?!?”

Páez poked his tablet.

“Ah, updates! Private Sadhana is stable and on standby for replacements parts at the moment. Private Marconi is resting comfortably, minor head trauma and the tiniest bit of internal bleeding, but should be well enough to transfer in an hour or so. Private…Jones? Joe-en-es? However, you pronounce the damned thing is…ah, still in surgery.”

“Edra? Folami?”
“Who?”

“Medics. They’re both being looked at. Last I heard, Folami was nearly finished being patched up and will be joining the rest of the soldiers in quarantine shortly. She wasn’t too badly injured, but the bullets she had the misfortune of being hit with were coated with a nasty substance that left her a little numb. She’ll live, but she’s gonna be bitchy for a while.”

“They’re all in quarantine?”

“The odds of catching something are a little higher than I’d like, which actually leads into my next question. It was brought to our attention by Medical Officer Danvers that you may have a preference on your stay in quarantine. Would you prefer to be placed with the soldiers you were with, or would you prefer a more isolated location. I understand that the soldiers you were with are quite the…rambunctious group.”

“That’s one word for it.”

Florida grinned.

“I for one would like to be able to keep a close eye on those kiddos. I’m a little concerned about them.”

“Kiddos? There…were no children in that group.”

Kimball snagged a stool for herself and sat down. She could afford to look calm and relaxed, and she wanted them to focus a little more on Páez while she looked them over.

They looked almost exactly the way Carolina described. A little older, a little more battle-scarred, a lot more exhausted, but nearly perfect. She’d thought that Carolina’s memory was a little off, based on Connie, but that must have been more about the way she’d been treated rather than her actual looks.

“He’s referring to the soldiers being young,” Kimball huffed, “not actually being children.”

“Actually, I do mean children. A startling number of them were children.”

“None of them were younger than fifteen.”

“I thought they were all at least sixteen?”

Florida, the happy chipper one that Kimball definitely needed to warn Páez about if half Carolina’s stories were true, tapped the wall again.

“One does not become an adult until they are eighteen, General, and that is only in the legal sense. I don’t think I would say any of the soldiers we were with during that trip were adults in mind, even if they were in body. Perhaps Andersmith…and Danvers.”

“Mmm, that may be the case on other planets, but if it were so here, neither of us would be serving in this position.”

“Oh my god, you’re both teenagers?!”

Kimball snorted into her hand.

“No. God no. He just means we wouldn’t have had the training to have these positions if we’d enlisted at eighteen.”
North smiled gently at the medic who taped a glittery bandage over the blood draw, before he zeroed in on Kimball.

“When is South coming out?”

“Agent South Dakota is still in surgery and may need intensive care for quite some time yet. Once you are out of quarantine we will be more than happy to have a space prepared for you with her.”

“That is not good enough. I need to see her now.”

“Well, you can’t see her now. You’re going to have to accept that sometimes we don’t get what we want.”

The atmosphere over the whole room suddenly got thick with tension and Kimball couldn’t hide her wince.

“Agent North, at the moment, she’s still with the surgeons. She has the best team on the planet working with her. After the surgery, she is going to be incredibly vulnerable to viruses and bacteria and will need 24-hour care, and until we know for certain that everyone in this group is not carrying something that could kill her, we can’t allow you to just go in there. She’s in her own sterile bubble at the moment. Once she’s out of surgery and recovering, we will provide you with the ability to check on her status, and as soon as we’re sure your presence won’t accidentally kill her, we’ll get you in that room.”

North stood up.

“Agent North?”

He shook his head.

“Look, I get that you’re all scared for your people, but that woman is my whole goddamned universe, and I need to know that she’s ok. At least let me look in through the observation window.”

A few of the medics actually laughed at him, a completely inappropriate move she would have to correct later.

“Look at who thinks we’re all fancy with observations windows and shit for civilians.”

Kimball sighed.

“She’s not ok right now. I am not comfortable giving you footage to the surgery while it is being performed.”

“Why not?”

“Have you ever watched surgery? Seen someone laid out on a table being cut up with a scalpel?”

North flinched back, eyes wide.

“What the fuck?”

They all looked unsettled by that. She wasn’t surprised.

The first conversation she’d had with Felix about medical technology blew her away a little.
“Did you ever see the tv show Firefly? We’re like an outer rim planet, Agent. We have limited, rudimentary, medical supplies compared to what you’re used to. We don’t have the technology to clone organs and weave vat grown skin on, and we don’t have what it takes to make that kind of life saving surgery look pretty for the family that wants to watch. As someone who has seen intensive surgery on our planet, I can tell you it is visceral and upsetting. There is blood and pus and I looked in on her on my way here. She’s in rough shape, shape you don’t want to see, not right now.”

He shook his head and put his head in his hands.

“God, how did this happen?”

Kimball looked over to the lead medic, a six striped Fed that Kimball didn’t remember the name of.

“Can we ping them? See how she’s doing?”

“Right away, General. Should I tag it as urgent?”

“Mmm, go ahead and mark it as important but not urgent. No sense in distracting Doctor Grey if she’s doing intricate work.”

The medic made the call.

“Incoming, putting you on speaker now, Doctor.”

Doctor Grey’s cheerful voice filled the room, and Vanessa, with confidence.

“General?”

“Doctor Grey? I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Oh no, we’re well past the scariest point, now it’s just picking up after myself and tying up loose ends in here!”

“I hope that means it was a success.”

“Oh, relatively. I mean, I still have a good hour’s worth of work, at least! And then of course, there’s the recovery. We did manage to save most everything that could be!”

North scowled.

“What does that mean?”

“She’s alive?”

“Yep! She’ll be in a medically induced coma for a few days at least! I want to get her on the path of healing before she inevitably screws it up for herself! If she’s anything like our local Freelancers, she’s going to be a handful!”

“Thank you, Doctor. Would you come update Agent North once things are settled? And set up a viewing camera until he can actually perform a bedside vigil?”

“Of course! After that though, I’m going to need something to eat! I could really go for a steak right about now! Cutting people up always makes me so hungry! I was poking around at her
“insides, and that liver just looked so tasty, not a sign of alcoholism at all!”

Kimball couldn’t keep from laughing. That woman was insane.

Based on the laughter from Florida, and the deeply uncomfortable looks on all of the other Freelancers faces, she was not in good company for that one.

“Please don’t eat the patient, Doctor, her big brother is giving a thousand-yard stare that’s starting to creep me out. If you get her through this, I will personally come and cook the steak for you myself.”

“I’ll hold you to that, General Kimball! If there’s anyone on this planet who knows their way around a grill, it’s you! Oh! Must go! I just found another bone splinter in a really bad spot! That could necrophy into something really unpleasant! Toodles!”

Kimball waved a hand at North.

“Breathe, she’s not actually a cannibal, she’s just a weirdo.”

He didn’t look like he believed her. Páez looked over, his voice tinged with horror.

“I now understand why General Doyle worked with her personally instead of allowing her to network on her own. She is…dear god, has she always been like that?”

Kimball shrugged.

“As long as I’ve known her. She’s chipper, and a little off, but don’t let that fool you. She’s good at what she does. I have never known her to fail when she’s got the person alive.”

Páez shook his head.

“She’s insanely intelligent and will do more for your sister than any doctor on any other planet. She’s completely revitalized the way medicine is practiced on Chorus. I...did not realize how odd she was.”

Kimball stood up and grabbed the tablet she’d set down.

“Honestly, I wish I had ten of her. Yeah, the animation might kill me, but it’d be well worth it.”

“Hey, um, I really appreciate how chill everyone is, but I am STILL covered in dead animals and dead pirates and I’d love the chance to rinse off.”

Niner motioned down herself with a scowl. Kimball didn’t see anything, but she totally understood that unclean feeling that came from a particularly unpleasant fight.

“Yes, well, um, shall we get everyone into decontamination then? I feel that would be…prudent.”

“We are still working, here!”

“Yes, of course, and we all greatly appreciate what you’re doing. Once you’re all wrapped up, of course, we’ll get you all to the showers and something less…scrub like to walk around in. There will be a full wardrobe made available once you’re in the quarantine.”

Wyoming rubbed Florida’s back

“I say, this is the most lax quarantine we’ve ever been through.”
“Yeah, well, if you had anything that might kill us? I’m sure the mercs or pirates would have infected us with it already. This is mostly precautionary, more like acclimating tropical fish than actual concern about rot.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“That’s just…an interesting description of us.”

“What? A highly specialized branch of the species that thrives when properly cared for, but has the extreme possibility of dying or at the very least becoming extremely sick due to rapid and extreme changes to their environment? Sounds like tropical fish to me. Páez and I are coordinating a few other things at the moment, so we won’t be able to stick around, but the medics will get you to the showers and into quarantine, and you’ll be provided with clothing, food, and a place to sleep.”

“So, what? You’re telling me that the two of you have been playing videogames for the past hour while everyone else has been busting their asses, trying to get us out of here quickly so we can go home. Is that really what you want to tell me?”

Carolina’s arms were crossed, unimpressed, over her chest, and Grif would have cringed if she’d sounded more angry than tired. Proooooobably because she didn’t understand that they’d been playing with codes rather than helping out getting the trucks ready to go.

She looked exhausted and pissed, but more exhausted than anything else, and he didn’t really blame her. She was kind of reeling from finding out her dead boyfriend and all her old coworkers were still alive.

She was pretty eager to get back to Proteger where her…maybe boyfriend and her collection of peppy psychos were hanging out with their soldiers. Who knew what those assholes were saying or doing to their people. Sure, Bitters was tough and hard to crack, but when he did crack, he cracked hard. Palomo had all the defenses of a mushroom. Andersmith…Grif honestly didn’t get the man. Jensen was a tough kid, but then again, all the girls on Chorus were. He wondered what Sister would have been like if she’d been raised on Chorus instead of Earth. Probably mostly the same, but maybe some of that…Kainess would have been a little different.

These girls and women were raised like fucking amazons, and it would have been cool if that didn’t come from a long-standing history of violent attacks on children and civilians.

Simmons held out his tablet and pointed at the screen where the hidden game code was displayed next to the codes they’d been receiving from the base.

“Carolina, it is a code, and I think we’ve figured it out enough to crack it! It’s amazing is what it is!”

Church snorted.

“Yeah, ‘we’. Grif’s too stupid to find his way out of a bag of chips, let alone a complex coding
system.”

“Fuck you, dude.”

Carolina held her hand up for silence.

“Simmons, explain this quickly and succinctly. Do not waste my time.”

“So, it’s a common code from earth, but it’s so old that even the computer systems of Chorus see it as too archaic to work with. Heck, no one has used this sort of thing in hundreds of years! The only reason anyone would even recognize this is if they had access to an archive that featured it.”

“Like what?”

Simmons poked at the tablet until a bright pink splash page with four schoolgirls wearing ridiculously short skirts showed up on the screen.

“Like a PC game. The kids have all kinds of stuff from earth, weird stuff, and one of their games has stuff coded in this style hidden right in the game files. It’s part of the promotional material from the creative team, honestly, it was a pretty innovative idea at the time.”

Carolina clearly didn’t care, and Epsilon was already drifting.

“So, what? You have the ability to translate it from a game?”

Simmons shook his head and pulled the tablet against his chest.

“No. Maybe if we still had access to the outside, but without the Tower of Communication transmitting, we can’t access old Earth archives for the converters. The converters have been lost to time here, I mean it, Carolina, this stuff is old. But, I have the game code and the translations here, which means I can break it and create a converter for the text we’ve been getting. If we can figure out what it’s saying, we can figure out what we need to do.”

Carolina rolled her shoulder and looked over at the reinforcements, who were all happy and eager and not at all fucking tired. They hummed and chatted and didn’t have a single thing to do that they weren’t happy to be doing.

Grif shook his head.

He hated them a little.

“Why do we need to do anything? If it’s something the kids have, maybe it’s a prank.”

“It’s not. Simmons called over to the base, and read them the riot act, just in case. They’re saying it’s real, and they’re sounding freaked enough that if it’s a prank, Kimball’s gonna have them digging holes and scrubbing toilets for the rest of their lives. It’s real, and it keeps popping up in different places, places it physically shouldn’t be able to pop up in, and people are starting to get scared.”

She crossed her arms and let out a slow, pained breath.

Yeah, he got that. Nothing like a mysterious message from an unknown sender to get you feeling all fucking warm and fuzzy and shit.

Carolina motioned for them to follow her and stalked past the trucks to the shattered cockpit of the ship where none of the soldiers were. Grif leaned against the broken carcass and absently patted it.
She looked like a good ship, sturdy and sexy and built to last.

If she hadn’t gone down, she’d have been the kind of ship Grif could see himself…borrowing, just to travel in. Get some gas in the tank, get some tunes, and go see the stars. Kai would have loved it.

Hell, Simmons might have even enjoyed it, once he got over his inevitable claustrophobia over the whole thing.

Stupid tomato can.

“Ok…that’s a little unsettling. Any way we can speed up the process?”

Simmons waffled from side to side.

“Um, well, if Church wants to help, it’d probably make coding quicker.”

“Dude, I can’t code for shit. I’m not a nerd.”

Grif knew he didn’t want to ask for help. Not only could he do it on his own with enough time, Simmons didn’t really like hanging around Church much, any incarnation of the man, really. He was an asshole, sure, but he was also kind of a fucking bully, and that didn’t sit right with the guy who took every slight against him like it was the most painful shit imaginable.

They didn’t usually mix well, unless Church was in one of his ‘I know I’m an asshole and I’m trying to be nice’ moods.

“Well, I can write the program, I just need someone to make sure there aren’t any kinks and help speed up the process a little. Normally I’d do that myself, but we’re speed running here, and I… Carolina, I’m a little nervous. We don’t know what this is going to tell us, but based on the source material, I’m expecting creepiness to the max.”

Carolina hesitated for a moment, before she reached back and ejected Church’s chip from her neck. She held it out to Simmons with a reverence Grif’d never seen her use before.

Grif didn’t wait for Simmons to fumble with the damned thing. The last thing anyone needed was for Simmons to drop Church and potentially damage him. She’d never forgive him and then Grif would be out the person who made his bed and kept their room clean.

He grabbed the chip and slotted it into Simmons’ port. Simmons shivered as Carolina watched him, her whole body was tense. She didn’t share Church easily, and only after Church pushed for it.

“Start working on that, take care of Epsilon. If he gets hurt while in your care, you will suffer consequences you’ve only dreamed of.”

“OK!”

Simmons voice squeaked, and he flinched back.

Carolina walked back toward the soldiers and started to bark out orders.

Huh.

Did she forget about him?

Sweet! Grif already had, like, six perfect nap spots picked out!
“She is so scary.”

Church popped up on Simmons’ shoulder.

“Yeah, she is. It’s awesome.”

Alpha ran his hand down the side of the AI unit. They were all lined up in a neat row, but this one, this one blinked red and whined loudly that it needed help. It needed help, right then and there.

“Tex,” he whispered.

God, there she was, so close and yet so fucking far. Tucker leaned in to look at the unit and Alpha nearly punched him.

He didn’t want anyone accidentally hurting her…or worse. Tucker wasn’t exactly the worst at technology, but he definitely wasn’t the guy to go to.

“Anything I can do?”

“I don’t know yet. Let me take a look at her.”

Caboose shuffled nervously back and forth next to Tex’s unit, cords in hand, as he slowly hooked her up to the nearby power sockets.

“Ok, Tex, please do not be angry with me for saying that I hate you. I did not mean it. There were a lot of you and they all wanted to beat me up. I hope we can still be friends, and sometimes have pancakes together, because pancakes are delicious.”

Alpha snorted and hooked her manually into the nearby computer terminal. He didn’t have the ability to interface with her directly in this stupid body, which meant he needed some help from the second most competent AI on the planet, next to himself of course.

“Hey, Santa? You busy?”

The AI set out its hulking, red projection just to the side of the storage unit.

“What can I do for you, Alpha?”

“We’ve got an AI in distress in here, and not much time to fix what’s broken, anything you can do for me?”

“I can supply you with power for the time being.”

“Power’s not the problem. The units were damaged in the crash, and they’re not in great shape to begin with. It looks like they’re held together with duct tape and spider silk and running on potato batteries. Can we hook these into the computer system for the time being? Fashion them a place to back up to and some digital seats, so they don’t die?”

Santa slowly shook his head.
“I am afraid that is not possible at this time.”

“What? Why?!?”

Santa sent out a projection of data that sent chills down Alpha’s spine.

So much loss.

So much destruction.

“After the Temple of Records was destroyed, I sealed much of the remaining infrastructure until I could be assured that it would not be damaged by whatever attacked the data before the physical assault. Until I can be assured that I have found and solved the problem, seating them is only going to put them at risk. We have had much destroyed, and much more to be protected.”

Caboose let out a low, distressed whine and sank to his knees to pet the AI units.

“Shh, it will be ok, everyone. Church will help us get you all safe new homes.”

Tucker looked at Alpha, clearly pissed about being out of the loop, but Alpha shook his head before the other man could say anything.

“Are you safe, Santa?”

“As I can be.”

The other AI nodded and held up a global map of Chorus. He rotated the image, then lit up a what looked like an incredibly intricate spiderweb of lights.

“I have the ability to move freely and hide, I am capable of backing myself up instantly as well as having several locations to do so, and I am intimately familiar with the way this planet’s veins are built. A younger, more damaged AI, unused to hiding and moving through this planet may not fair as well. It would be…unsafe. Potentially deadly.”

Which was not exactly the answer Church wanted out of all of this.

“Shit. Well, at least you’re not going to just up and die on us. That would fucking suck. Ok, plan b. We need a body. Do we have any robots lying around?”

“None that would hold a being so complex as the one in that container. Certainly not enough for all of them. We do not have the parts and storage capacity prebuilt at this time.”

“Fuck.”

Santa nodded.

“Indeed. There is another option.”

“What? A human? Yeah, I thought about that, but you know that the Freelancers will never go for her being implanted in one of them, Carolina’s not here and even if she was, she’d never do it, and Washington…he’s too damaged.”

Tucker perked up and pointed at himself.

“Hey, she could ride with me!”
“Tucker, Tex would completely take over you. It’s not like with Epsilon, Tex would take full control. Do you really think she’d be happy in your body for an undetermined period of time?”

He huffed.

“Perhaps we could offer her the use of one of the soldiers.”

“Yeah, except who’re we gonna stick her in? You need a port and some actual brain surgery to put the AI into, and we don’t have a bunch of those just lying around. Who’s gonna do the surgery? I can’t. I know information, not brain surgery, and not in this body. It keeps shaking. Seriously, Tucker, why am I in this one?”

“Dude, focus. Stop being mean to your flesh prison and think. I can take on Tex, she’d probably be happy for a chance to get to play with my sword. Bow-”

Alpha sucker punched Tucker in the gut.

“Don’t talk about my girlfriend that way, you ass!”

“Dude! Harsh!”

Fuck, the shower was humiliating, though not for the usual reasons.

At her apartment, Niner had a pretty fucking sweet setup for herself. She could get herself in and out of bed, shower, change, even cook and do basic cleaning on her own thanks to the fantastic advances of technology and her army of Roombas. Being stuck in the chair didn’t feel like the end of the world when you had your independence, and Niner was the kind of woman who made the world bend to her will if it didn’t want to do it on its own.

The worst of it was right after the accident, before she completely redesigned her living space and spent far too much of her own money to do so, when she was still in the hospital, injured, adjusting, and scared. The military nurses the Director had assigned to Niner would always try to scrub her down like she was a fucking doll, rather than a human being with perfectly functioning arms, and got way too fucking handsy for her comfort.

These medics, however, simply helped Niner into a shower chair and made themselves as unobtrusive as they could. It…didn’t actually make it better, because Niner was hyperaware that they were just…standing there. Watching. Making sure she didn’t topple over and die while scrubbing the smell of dirt and blood off of her skin.

She was pretty sure at least one of them was a guy, even if he wasn’t talking to her.

She was sure at this point that they were all really young.

But they didn’t stare, which was nice. Not as nice as a private fucking shower without three armed soldiers hovering around her, looking at her tits, but better than them actively trying to bathe her, she supposed.
And as soon as she was done, they had her in clothes with a towel around her head and in a different chair before she could blink.

“Thanks.”

“Sure! There’ll be better clothes in the quarantine area. We figured you’d prefer to pick your own stuff out, rather than just letting us choose for you, I have to say, I have no idea what the fashion is like out there anymore! Our magazines are a little out of date.”

It was…weird that they even cared. Weird that they thought fashion would be a concern for her. Weird that they were so…normal with her.

She’d have to be careful or she’d start to get used to it.

The Freelancers all met up in the hallway, clean and relaxed from the shower and the pain meds they’d all been shot up with.

Most of the medics had peeled off and gone their separate ways, and the Generals were nowhere to be seen. For the first time in a while, the Freelancers outnumbered the Chorus citizens in one area.

“Where, um? Where is everyone?”

“Oh, they’re off getting scrubbed down and getting back to work. We had another attack a while ago, and they’re shipping out.”

York tripped over his own feet.

“Carolina?”

“Oh, no, not that group. One of the towers were attacked, and the soldiers who went to check it out got jumped. We only lost one, which is a blessing if I’ve ever heard one.”

The medic chirped and pointed the group down the hall. Niner saw that all of the guys were wearing colorful paper booties on their feet, which was just a fucking trip. She looked at the medic who’d helped dress her and winked.

She giggled.

“One of your soldiers died and that’s a blessing?”

“Considering every time we send a group out, we usually lose three to five soldiers, yeah. One death is a lot better than three. One day, I hope we’ll be able to regularly say no one died, but we’re not anywhere near there yet. You were insanely lucky.”

Niner’s good mood soured.

“Jesus, three to five?”

That was…a lot of fucking kids. Four missions and that could totally wipe out all the soldiers she’d known for more than an hour on the planet.

“That’s a post-reveal body count, too. Before? You lost at least half your squad every time you met with the mercs, and usually more. It was brutal.”

“Damn. Ok, I can see why one death is better.”
Florida shook his head.

“This is a ridiculously lax quarantine situation.”

“You’re preliminary panels are coming back negative so far, and as General Kimball said, we’re probably already exposed to the worst of it. We had the plague losses four years ago after the... mercenaries showed up, then none when the pirates came. Unless you’re carrying something particularly exotic, we’re probably fine.”

He shook his head again but didn’t comment.

Niner wondered if the rest of the Freelancers realized that this was basically their way of throwing them in a cell to monitor them, or if they really thought they were trying to protect the planet from germs.

They made it to a long hallway of oversized windows, and Niner could see the Chorus kids in the room, kind of, the glare on the glass made it a little difficult to get a good look at them.

Still, they weren’t dead. She recognized Smosna’s ridiculously dyed hair, even through a blurry window.

Suddenly, a tiny body slammed into the window next to Niner with a loud slam that rattled the glass and sent the Freelancers all flying backwards to get away from the noise.

“FUCK!”

The soldier’s all jerked their weapons up, clearly as surprised as the Freelancers were by the sudden sound.

“Fuck! It’s Yacavone!”

Sure enough, that looked like Yacavone, pressed against the glass, examining them with a manic eye. Her hair was wild and frizzed around her head and did nothing to make her seem more sane.

The soldiers all lowered their weapons, and everyone started to walk again, nerves shot to fuck for the 50th time that day at least.

She paced back and forth in excited agitation as they walked, each step they took was met with a twice as fast back and forth pace until they reached the door where an armed guard stood watch. She started to shove her way through the doorway, but the soldier guarding the room blocked her in.

She tried to see over his shoulder to the incomers.

“Where’s Paolo?! Is he with you?!”

The soldier shoved her off of him hard enough to make her stumble, but it didn’t deter the tiny girl. She jumped right back up into his face and tried to climb over him.

“Look, I don’t fucking know. Get in the goddamned room.”

“Please! I need to know!”

“Deal with it, you fucking lobotomy case!”

“You’re being a jerk!”
Niner was about ready to smack the little asshole.

The kid was out of armor, and clearly fucking upset, and he was acting like that? Didn’t his mama teach him better?

“Get back! I don’t know what happened to your fucking Fed boyfriend!”

She stepped forward, likely to plead her case, and the soldier slammed his gun into her chest.

Before any of the Freelancers could move, Andersmith was there, his fists in the soldier’s chestplate, face pressed against the glass of his visor, the soldier’s weapon was on the ground.

“Apologize, right now!”

The soldier tried to shove Andersmith off, unsuccessfully. None of the others stepped in to help, so Niner assumed he’d be ok, but she was ready to ram right into the asshole if she needed to.

“She’s getting on my last nerve, Andersmith.”

The armorless man growled, lifted the soldier off the ground, and slammed him into the doorjamb.

“She is concerned for her friend. Stop being a jerk and apologize, or I promise you will hate your life once I get out of here.”

Andersmith dropped the soldier to the ground and put his foot right on top of the other man’s kneecap. A flurry of heated whispers caught her attention. The kids in the room were a mixed back of scared and spiteful expressions.

“I think hand to hand training with Agent Carolina would set your temper straight. Every. Single. Day. Twice on Sundays.”

He flinched. Andersmith stepped back and crossed his arms.

“Apologize.”

“Yeah, whatever, sorry.”

Yacavone snarled and spit at the soldier.

“You’re a bitch-noodle, and I’m gonna eat you!”

Which…was not necessarily the insult Niner would have gone with, but it was surprisingly effective given the man’s reaction, even if Yacavone was wearing a pretty pink dress with rainbows on it and oversized bunny slippers.

The soldier crab walked backward as quickly as he could, clearly unsettled.

“Stay the fuck away from me, you freak!”

Smosna wrapped her arms around Yacavone and hauled her away from the door, a manic grin on her face.

“Baby, we don’t eat the rude here. Not that I don’t think that eating him wouldn’t be a quick and easy solution for making him be a contributing member of society, but we’d get in trouble and he’d taste terrible.”
“Oh, you know you want this, Smosna.”

She spun around so Yacavone stumbled into Demir’s open arms, completed the turn, and pointed at the soldier.

“There is nothing that would make me want to put any part of your nasty, filth ridden body, in my mouth. Take a shower, you piece of garbage and think about your life. She’s sixteen and scared, and you’re not getting laid again until you learn to stop being an ass.”

“You-“

“I will not hesitate to make an announcement the moment I walk out of here, that you’re harassing underage girls. You. Will. Never. Be. Laid. Again. Do you want me to lay a Jewish curse on you, asshole? Get out!”

Andersmith stepped right up to the soldier, grabbed him by his shoulders and tossed him out of the room.

“Out. Now.”

The soldier scrambled away, clearly upset, and ran down the hall.

“I’m telling Kimball!”

“SHE’LL NEVER BELIEVE YOU, YOU RACCON HUMPING FUCK NUGGET!”

And there was Mini Niner, bundled up in bandages, but full of fire. Niner rolled into the room and grinned.

Not a bad setup. There were beds everywhere with actual pillows and blankets, not the ugly hospital shit, but proper comforters and pillows. The kids had set up a circle of furniture in the middle of the large space and had congregated there. They’d draped themselves along couches, perched on recliners, and spread themselves across an attractively plush rug in the center of it all.

Jensen grinned, her colorful braces flashed under the lights and made Niner’s heart feel surprisingly light. The girl had two thick braids over either shoulder and a pair of adorably thick glasses on her nose. She looked like a cute little nerd, and Niner loved it.

“You made it! And no one died! Today’sh a great day!”

Niner blinked.

Oh shit.

The kids all got increasingly devastated looks on their faces, and fuck if Niner didn’t want to see that. Smosna leapt across the room to the medics who’d blocked off the exit.

“What? Oh no. Who died?”

She looked back to the others.

“Who died?!”

“Volleyball,” Carter said, “Breathe. You guys are good. You’re all alive at the moment, and no one is looking like they won’t be later. Get them something comfortable to wear, dinner will be by soon.”
Folami’s disgruntled voice echoed across the space.

“More food? Jesus, I’m gonna pop if you assholes keep making me eat.”

Habisch snorted and waved a hand.

“God, anything other than those nasty rat bars.”

Carter shooed the other medics out of the room and waved her hands in the air.

“Newbies! How are you all on allergies?”

Wyoming wrapped his arms around Florida’s shoulders and tucked his head against the other man’s neck in a disgustingly cute display of affection that Niner honestly didn’t want to have to look at. If she wasn’t getting laid, she didn’t want to see anyone else getting snugly. It was fucking rude.

“Oh, I’m deathly allergic to aspirin.”

“Awesome? I…won’t slip any of that into your food.”

York waved a hand to catch Carter’s attention.

“And I can’t have pine nuts.”

“Great. Pretty sure we don’t have that here, but I’ll make sure to check our stores before we bring anything in.”

She turned around and opened the door.

“Pine nuts?” She muttered to herself, “What the hell’s a pine nut?”

They all filed in and the doors shut with a hiss behind them, which was so not creepy.

“Well,” York said with a stiff grin, “Now I’m concerned about my health and wellbeing.”

Jessica spun herself in a dizzying circle, her long, colorful hair whirled around her in a display that practically tasted like joy.

“Ok, everyone, time to get clothes on. Thank god for the distraction, because I AM SO BORED!!!”

Palomo rolled his eyes and flopped backwards over the side of one of the couches, completely boneless, and let his fingers dangle and scrape the floor underneath them.

“Come on, Volleyball, really?”

“They TOOK my TABLET! Why would they do that?!?”

“They took all of our stuff, Volleyball. Everything must be decontaminated, even tablets and stuffies. It’s the rules.”

“But it was my tablet! I need it for stuff! Like reading and movies and keeping myself from insanity!”

Bitters scoffed.

“You’re too late for that one by years at this point, Volleyball, give up.”
Donut hovered behind Carolina’s and waited for her to acknowledge him. He hummed and swayed from side to side, bopping around to the tinny music that played quietly from the speakers inside his helmet until she broke and paid attention to him.

He knew she didn’t like to be surprised, but she also got really on edge when other people were too pushy. The best thing to do was wait for her to acknowledge him and then start talking to her.

It took longer than he liked to admit, but Donut was finally starting to get Carolina! It only took way too long! Seriously, she was cool and smart and awesome, and it was a damned shame that they weren’t already super-duper best friends. He could totally see them getting along really well if she’d just stop avoiding him!

Carolina stood stock still, let out a long, slow sigh, put down the crate she’d had on her shoulder, and turned around.

“What?”

Donut grinned.

Showtime!

He leaned in with a grin.

“Heeeey, Carolina.”

She crossed her arms across her chest and tried to pull back, but Donut just shuffled forward to follow her.

Donut wasn’t going to let her put up a wall and avoid this conversation or his very coveted friend advice, not when she needed it so badly.

“Heeeey, Donut. What do you want?”

“Oh, I was just worried about you.”

“What? Why?”

Donut waved a hand at the soldiers who’d started to make their way over. They probably wanted instructions on where to put their boxes, but honestly, they didn’t need Carolina for that! Sarge was doing a great job of whipping those kids into shape!

They didn’t need to hear all of this, anyway. Carolina would have a hard-enough time without an audience floating around, being all clingy and judgie and rude.

Being all glowie and insider her brain.

“Weeeell, I know that you’re pretty upset right now, what with the kids rebelling against you, and your boyfriend coming back from the dead, and all your old friends being alive, and it’s just really scary right now, and I wanted to make sure you weren’t about to have a breakdown or anything.”
She dropped the arms and put them on her hips, and normally, Donut would take that as being all aggressive and defensive, but Carolina was the type to create distance when she was pissed, not to lash out and smack.

At least she didn’t smack him.

Which meant that this was just a way for her to bring down her barriers while saving face!

Donut really needed to send Doctor Grey a fruit basket or something. The psychology stuff she’d turned him onto was really helpful in understanding his friends in a way that the Cosmo quizzes just didn’t seem to get. Sure, they’d pinned him down as a summer pretty accurately, but they’d never get this in depth on Carolina’s troubles, even if they were friend and boyfriend/girlfriend related.

“Donut…I’m fine, and also a little pissed that you think I’m on the verge of a breakdown.”

“I don’t think you’re on the verge, per se, I just…want to make sure you’re not holding in all these emotions and gonna explode in a big ball of screaming and beating up! Because I know that’s not you, Carolina. And yeah, this has been all kinds of stressful, and the kids don’t know you that well, so I can’t be too upset at them for judging, even if they were being extra harsh, because they don’t know the real you, and the real you isn’t the kind of person to just let them die.”

Carolina paused.

“Donut…I’m ok.”

“Really?”

He swung around and pulled Carolina by the hand away from the soldiers. They wouldn’t blink twice at him doing it, and she’d feel a little better for the distance. And also, sometimes it was just nice to hold hands with someone and not expect anything from them.

Carolina still wasn’t big on all the touchy feeliness of Chorus, or the Reds and Blues, unless she was drunk first, and sure, Drunk Carolina was fun and all, but it wasn’t healthy to only allow yourself contact with people when you were inebriated.

“Because I see you all hовый and insecure over here, and I’m pretty sure you’re not ok.”

“J-

“And I get it. The guys have thought I was dead a bunch of times, and it’s always a surprise for them when I’m alive and kicking! But you’re not really used to people coming back from the dead, so this has to be extra freaky for you.”

“Donut.”

“And one of them is your boyfriend, which means suuuuuuuuuuuuuuper awkward conversations in your future with him and Kimball, neither of which are things you’re going to be looking forward to.”

“Hey-“

“And even with the awkward, this is a good thing, a really good thing, and that scares you. You don’t think you deserve good things, because someone taught you at some point that you’re not worth them.”
“Ah-“

Donut threw his hands in the air.

“And that’s stupid! Something in your big, beautiful, Carolina brain is all higgledy-piggledy, and it’s throwing you off. We haven’t trained that out of you yet!”

“Trained me?”

He poked her in the chest.

“We’re working on it, but you’re so stubborn! You and Wash are really two peas in a pod like that!”

“Donut.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and turned around. She wouldn’t want him to look at her for a moment, even if he couldn’t actually see her face through the faceplate, because she’d want to collect herself.

“So, I won’t force you to talk to me, but I want you to know you’re surrounded by friends and people who care about you, and once the kids have calmed down and realized they’re not about to be brutally murdered, they’ll say they’re sorry, too. Because they like you a lot, but they’re really rude when they’re scared.”

He craned his neck over his shoulder to get a look at her.

Carolina looked like she didn’t know what to do with all of that, and he didn’t want to overwhelm her to the point where she wouldn’t be able to process anything.

So, Donut lunged forward and wrapped Carolina in a hug.

“You’ve got this, girlfriend!”

She stood there, awkwardly, and didn’t hug back. Buuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu uu
“I…I’d like that. No pink. Or lightish-red.”

“Gotcha! I can do that! I’m thinking you’re more of a blue tone anyway. Blue and…gold? That’s pretty, it’d work.”

Carolina shook her head and buried her faceplate in her hands. She looked so embarrassed!

“Donut, I don’t know what’s in your head, but it needs to stop. I’m…I’m dating Kimball.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can’t also date that tall, brunet who looked at you like you were a cool glass of water in the middle of the desert.”

“You shouldn’t drink cold fluids if you’re dehydrated, Donut. It’s not good for you.”

“Hmm. You think you’re not good for him?”

She shook her head and turned around.

“I can’t talk about this here. Not now.”

“Ok, I get it. Totally, 100%, not a problem, we’re good! I won’t push!”

“Thank you.”

“But if you change your mind, I’m here for you! Really! I loooooove to talk, and I’m a total problem solver!”

“Yeah, I get it. Look, this isn’t the time, or the place. When I’m ready…I’ll…reach out.”

Donut squealed.

“Yay! And if you need anything, I’ve totally got you covered! I know all the Cosmo tips!”

“Oh god.”

York laughed from his place on the couch as Jensen and Palomo crowed and grinned. They’d just won another round of Zombie Clue while the other surrounding players groaned dramatically. Florida and Niner had made themselves comfortable and joined in with Demir and Quetzalli respectively, since there were a lot more people playing than pieces, and Niner’s cursing only fueled the duo to jump up and start dancing around as they cheered.

They’d gone for the ‘wait for someone else to solve the mystery, then kill them and take the key to freedom’ tactic, which York had to admit, was a little more cutthroat than he expected a kid’s game to be.

Seriously, these kids were fucking weird. It was Clue, but with zombies. Who the fuck comes up with this shit? They even had little figurines holding shotguns and a mixed bag of zombie men, women, children, dogs, clowns, and circus animals. Some of them apparently glowing in the dark. A few were painted.
One in particular seemed to be a crowd favorite, a non-zombified metal looking dog the kids said was named ‘Freckles’, who was apparently capable of taking out any zombie in the room if you could activate him.

Weird as shit, but it made them happy.

“YESH! Bi-Curioush and The Virgin shtrike again!”

Palomo groaned and put his head in his hands.

“Katie!”

“What? That’sh our shuper duo name. We’ve been Bi-Curioush and The Virgin shince you were twelve.”

“It’s embarrassing!”

“Shincshe when?”

“Since forever! And anyway, it’s not even accurate anymore. I’m not a virgin.”

The room zeroed in on Palomo. Even the Chorus kids who hadn’t been watching the game immediately dropped what they were doing to stare. York could feel the temperature drop as looks of horror, shock, confusion, and anger seemed to take over just about everyone.

Jensen’s whole body tensed next to Palomo. She turned her head slowly to look at her partner, and York was fucking scared of that braces having, glasses wearing, pigtail braided, teenage girl. She looked like something out of a horror movie.

“What?”

Palomo’s eyes widened, terrified and he held his hands up in defense and tried to back away from his friend.

“I…um…”

Smosna, who’d been trying to keep North distracted by teaching him a bunch of really weird dances, that York was pretty sure she’d been making up on the spot, stepped up behind Palomo and grabbed his face in a really awkward move.

“Who did it? Who would dare deflower you?”

“Ah…Volleyball?”

Folami cracked her neck and held a knitting needle up threateningly.

“Give me a name. I will slice them ear to ear. I’ll cut off their cheeks. I will hang them from their entrails and let the birds have them.”

“Jesus, Folami!”

Bitters swaggered up and pulled Palomo away from Volleyball and the surprisingly tense room. Palomo let out a sigh of relief, that York knew wasn’t going to last based on the very constipated look Bitters had on his face and relaxed against his friend.

Chorus was…really chill about extended contact between non-sexual partners. York had never seen
so many people who were so chill about just randomly cuddling. It was kind of nice, actually. It’d be hard to get touch starved if all you had to do was ask someone to hang out and hug for a while.

“Volleyball, Folami, chill. You two come on way too strong.”

“Thanks Antoine.”

Bitters spun Palomo around carefully to look him in the eye.

“Don’t thank me just yet, Hawkeye. I agree with them. Someone is getting their insides on the outside. I just don’t want you getting scared off and clamping up. No one gets away with taking advantage.”

“Why do you guys assume I was taken advantage of?!”

Bitters ruffled Palomo’s hair.

“Because you’re you, and the only way you’d be getting laid without any of us knowing about it, is if you’re being hella sneaky, and the only reason you’d be sneaky like that is if you had something to hide. Who’re you afraid of?!”

“Oh my god! I’m not afraid of anyone! I shouldn’t have said anything!”

Jensen was on her feet.

York didn’t even see her move, he was pretty sure she just teleported in sheer fury. He didn’t exactly blame her, since they were acting like they were a couple, and Palomo definitely didn’t hide his interest in the older girl.

“Oh yesh, you should have! Charlesh! You slept with someone!”

“K-k-k-katie…”

“Um,” York scooted away from the increasingly aggressive circle of teens, “I am really feeling uncomfortable right now.”

Habisch turned to glare at him, and York shouldn’t have said anything. He should have kept his mouth shut and just stayed quiet, because this kind of attention was the shit that got a man’s dick cut off with scissors, and he hadn’t even done anything to deserve that!

“Was it you, outsider?!”

“How could it have been me?! I have never been alone with the kid! And no! No, I didn’t!”

“Is everything ok in there?”

A wave of relief washed through York as General Kimball waved through the glass window, one hand on the panel next to the door.

She was surrounded by armed guards dressed in the tan that seemed to be the signature of her faction, with their weapons at the ready, like they thought they were going to defend her from attacks right then and there.

The reaction was instantaneous. Every soldier in the room, even the ones she wasn’t in charge of, lit up like fucking flashlights at the sight of the woman and seemed to completely forget that they were upset about Palomo popping his cherry.
She is clearly well loved by the people. It would not take much to completely destabilize the planet, if she is this liked. The choice to be protected at all times is likely a conscious one.

Well, I guess we’re gonna run protection duty on her too, aren’t we? No sense in letting her get cacked, if she’s as good as we think she is.

Eventually. Getting out of quarantine legally and earning her trust are the first steps, but we should broach the topic with the others. I am sure they will feel the same way.

“Hey, guys.”

“HEY GENERAL KIMBALL!”

The armed guards parted at the doors, and she entered the quarantine area.

“Hey everyone, sorry to bother you during Zombie Clue. Agent York, can I see you for a moment?”

He groaned as he got to his feet.

His knees and back popped, not painfully, but it was definitely a sign of things to come. He hadn’t kept up as well as he should with his training, and his body was paying for it.

“I am getting so old.”

Niner snorted.

“You really are. You look like you’re about to fall over and die of old age any second now.”

“HEY!”

Florida grinned and motioned to his own face with a wide grin.

“What does that say about me? I’m older than he is.”

Kimball laughed as York moved over to her side, pouting he whole way.

“I’d never guess it, you’ve really got this youthful air around you.”

York turned and pointed at the whole room.

“Just so you’re aware, you all suck.”

“Come on, Agent. I’ll try to make this quick.”

Kimball strode down the hall, leaving all of her guards and soldiers behind her, and fucking booked it like she thought she was being chased by someone and didn’t want them to know she knew. York had to jog to keep up with her.

“Thanks for that, I’m pretty sure I was about to get jumped.”

“I noticed. Try not to draw attention to yourself when they’re in the mob mood, or you might end up getting pounced on.”

“Noted. Completely noted.”

He kept up the light jog at her side and grinned. She pointedly didn’t look at him but did slow
down so he could get back to a normal walking pace.

York spun around, so he was walking backwards, a favored technique to piss off the higher ups when he was in the military and watched Kimball’s helmet. She did look at him this time but didn’t make a single comment or gesture.

-Her posture has tensed 12%.-

Huh.

“I don’t think we got a proper introduction. I’m York.”

“General Kimball.”

“So formal. Come on, don’t I get a first name?”

She paused in front of an office door, (and it was definitely an office, the whole hall had that boring, cookie cutter vibe that also managed to feel old, out of date, and creepy) and cocked her head, just a little.

“Tell you what, tell me a first name that isn’t Agent or York, and I’ll tell you mine. Otherwise, you’ll have to wait until we get back and ask one of the ‘kiddos’.”

She had humor in her voice, thick like warm honey and soft as a marshmallow, and he wanted to drown in it. It was gentle and playful and soothing and just…God, York didn’t remember the last time he’d had someone who joked with him like that.

Maybe Tex, but probably Carolina. Tex wasn’t really in a joking sort of mood after ‘Lina ‘died’. York hadn’t been either. He probably wouldn’t have appreciated it.

He groaned, as dramatically as he thought he could get away with, and let his whole body fall pathetically against the wall. He gave Kimball his most beguiling pout and whined. Being a Pouty McGee hadn’t really been his thing before, but he figured with all the young people she had to deal with on a regular basis, she was probably used to a certain level of immaturity, and he might even make her laugh.

“Oh, come on. My name isn’t even like, cool or anything. Why else would I keep going by the dorky codename? Are you really gonna make me?”

She stared for a second, and York could swear he could hear her smile.

He liked this one.

-Her posture has relaxed 36%.-

Great. Keep track for me?

-I will, and I will make a spreadsheet as soon as we are back in contact with your suit.-


“Not at all, I’m just giving you the option. In here, please.”

She opened the door and gestured them both inside.

The room was not exactly big. It had a desk and two chairs, dust everywhere and a really ugly paint
job. It felt like a place that had been abandoned for years, and with good reason.

“What’s all this then? If it’s a murder den, it’s a little sparsely decorated.”

York leaned his butt against the desk and ignored the chairs completely. He watched Kimball stand just in the doorway and shift around a little, like she was nervous, like she was uncomfortable.

-Posture has tensed again, 34%.-

Weird, considering the last time we saw her, she had all the self-control of a statue. She didn’t shift around when she had an audience.

-Perhaps she recognizes you as an ally through your relationship with Agent Carolina and Agent Washington, and is therefore behaving more obviously?- Maybe.

Kimball snorted as she shook her head.

“This is the last place I’d choose for a murder den, way too much foot traffic, not enough symbolism.”

She dug in her suit and held out a…really old transmitter?

York held out his hand and she dropped the extremely outdated tech into his hand. Yeesh, the thing looked like it was one good squeeze away from falling apart.

-There is nothing about it that looks out of the ordinary considering the level of technology we have seen on the planet. It appears to be a standard personal radio transmitter. The main alternative to a cell phone on planets without established infrastructure for that level of communication. It is likely as advanced as they are at the moment, due to the halt in scientific advances and interplanetary contact from the war.-

Yup. Thanks bud. Any idea why she’d giving it to me?

-It seems to only have an on/off switch, which implies that there is only one other end.-

“Here. I want this back when you’re done. Try not to take all night, I can’t leave until you’re ready, and some of us are busy.”

She spun tight on her heel, stepped out, and shut the door behind herself.

York blinked and looked down at the tiny piece of tech in his hand. He put the attached headphone in his ear.

Only one way to find out, I guess.

-Without any tools to assist, it appears that way.-

He pressed the ‘on’ button.

“Hello?”

It was quiet for a moment, broken only by gentle crackling, before-

“York?”
He could feel his whole face light up. His cheeks ached and that awful, tight feeling in his chest he hadn't realized was there loosened.

“Carolina!”

“How did you get this frequency? Please tell me you’re not in Kimball’s office.”

“Not unless she’s got a spooky, dusty office, near the quarantine. She gave me a radio and shut me away all cold and alone. You didn’t know she was gonna?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

He hopped onto the top of the desk and crossed his legs. He didn’t know exactly what to say. Every conversation he’d dreamed up, every thought he’d tried to put together on the truck, slipped away as he stared at the ancient piece of tech in his hands.

“Carolina, I really had no idea you were alive. If I did…if I’d thought for even a second…I mean, I did for a while, but…”

“Same here.”

Her voice was hard and flat, the way it used to get when she was really upset about something and just couldn’t process it.

It was probably a bad idea to spring this on her while she was in the field, but fuck, if her boss said it was ok, York was going to take full advantage. General Kimball, Professional Wingman gave him permission and everything.

“A…are we gonna be ok?”

She was quiet for a moment before she sighed and huffed. York remembered that particular huff, and the sad little face scrunch that came with it.

“York, I…lo-look, I…care about you. That hasn’t changed.”

“Still have trouble with the l-word, don’t you?”

Carolina was quiet. Soft in a way that she only ever was when she was completely safe and vulnerable.

He thought back to the MoI, just the two of them, out of armor and cuddled up in her quarters under too many blankets because he was cold, and she liked the extra weight on her skin.

“I…York, why…did you choose her? You never…you never even talked to me. You didn’t trust me, but you…trusted her.”

York shifted around on the desk. He couldn’t wait to see the butt print in the dust.

-Focus York, deflecting, even inside your own head, is not going to help you win Carolina’s heart again. Be brave and think.-

“You want to talk about that over the radio?”
“If I wait until I’m looking at your face, we may push it off and never talk about it.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Considering I need to know you’re not going to run off to the next available strong woman if I want to make this work, yeah, I don’t want to put it off.”

York flopped back on the desk, hurt by the comment, but more so by the knowledge that she wasn’t exactly unjustified in making it. York had run off, had abandoned her, hadn’t talked to her about shit, and then she ‘died’, and then he ‘died’, and he needed to step up.

“I guess I earned that, even if it was a little harsh.”

“Well that’s what happens when you run off with another woman and disappear into the night instead of sticking around and talking things out.”

“I take it you’re still mad at me.”

“It’s hard to be mad at a ghost.”

“Ouch.”

York bent his knees, so his feet could lay flat on the desk. He didn’t want to have this conversation ever, but especially not over the radio. If he had to do it, he wanted to look into her gorgeous eyes and hold her hand in his and confess. He wanted to tell her everything, every thought, every feeling, every shitty moment.

He let out a huff of breath, hardly anything.

“You left me for her.”

Mostly he just wanted to say he was sorry and lay his head in her lap.

How can I cram years’ worth of heartache, longing, self-loathing, depression, suicidal ideations, hallucinations, boredom, and bitter, seeping agony into one little conversation?

-You don’t. You give her what she needs now, and you have the longer conversation later. You were suicidal?-  

Probably not the time. We’ll talk about it later. Promise.

-I’m inside your head, York. I know when you’re lying.-  

And you know I can’t get away from a conversation you want to have, even if I really want to. It’s only a lie if you don’t press me.

-I am far too much of your impulse control and health. It is a miracle you’ve lived this long without me.-  

I think the same thing every day, only it usually involves a lot of alcohol and cigarettes.

“The plan wasn’t to go with her and disappear, I want you to know that. I was supposed to get her in, to see the Alpha, to break him free. It didn’t work. He wouldn’t come. And then Maine killed you, the Project collapsed, I was a rogue agent, you were dead, and nothing really mattered anymore. I followed Tex around for a while, fucked around on my own for a while, got shot, Tex
and Niner saved my ass and hid me on this skanky little mudball where I stayed in a janky apartment and tried not to kill myself out of depression and sheer boredom. That’s it. That’s the exciting story of Agent Fucking York: A History of Failure.”

“Why did you go with her without talking to me?”

“Lina, would you have agreed? Would you have even listened after you heard that Tex was involved? Connie died, and she wasn’t wrong. Tex killed her and she wasn’t wrong. And…he’s your dad. How could I ask you to choose between us?”

“You could have told me something, anything, and it would have been better.”

York looked at his knees.

“I should have, but hindsight is 20/20, ‘Lina, and there’s a lot of things I’d change if I could. She…she told me about how Delta was made, about what the Director actually did, and…what he’d been doing for a while. The things the Project was actually being used for. I don’t know, Carolina, I thought we could do what needed to be done and get out quick, and it just didn’t happen that way. I was gonna come find you when the time was right, but you were gone.”

-York, you are experiencing distress symptoms.-

Yeah, D, because I’m having emotions.

-You are also experiencing chest pain.-

Emotions hurt.

-Emotions are not supposed to hurt like this, York.-

Yeah, well, I’ve always been a little broken.

“I wanted to come find you, wanted to get you out, wanted to take you with me. Then you were dead, and nothing really mattered anymore. I think…I think I would have been ok with it, before we got here, if I just died. Didn’t have much to live for anymore anyway.”

“Do NOT say that. You can’t ever put me through that again, York. Ever.”

Carolina’s voice was rock hard and rigid, no bend, no give.


Missed her smile, her laugh, the way she tossed her head that made her vibrant red (It’s Virulent Cardinal, York! Virulent Cardinal! Jesus, do you know how long it will take to get the right box if we’re not on planet?)

She was here, alive, healthy and full of life. And still so fucking sad.

“I get it. I’ve done my penance, I’ve lived, I’ve muscled through those shit nights where I was pretty much just done with life. This is it. It’s proof that there is a god out there and they don’t actively hate me. One word from you, that’s it, and I swear to god, I’m yours forever. No more lies, or secrets, or bullshit. I will do everything I can for the rest of my life to make up for my phenomenal fuckups, just don’t cut me out, Carolina.”

She choked a laugh on the other end.
“You’re believing in god now? What happened to the militant atheist who said, ‘no god can exist when there’s war’?”

“Hey, who knows? I’ve been wrong about other things. Maybe god is real on Chorus. You’ve been living here for a while, what’s your take?”

“I don’t know that there’s a god on Chorus, but there’s a lot of faith. Different ones all over, so try not to be blatantly spiteful.”

Carolina was quiet again. York could hear her breathing on the other end, and then silence.

“You still there?”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t know if this was normal quiet, thinking quiet, or stress quiet. He’d been away from her for too fucking long.

“York. Things are…different now. I’m different, I’m sure you’re different.”

“Not as much as you’d probably like.”

“You still leave your fucking underwear on the floor?”

“It’s a tradition at this point.”

She growled, low, and York grinned.

“Screw traditions, you’re putting your fucking boxers in the hamper or I’m making you wear thongs.”

“‘Lina, if it will make you happy, I will wear all the butt floss.”

“I may hold you to that.”

“Mmm, don’t tease me too much, Kimball’s in the hall waiting.”

Carolina got quiet again.

“’Lina, Babe, I was just playing.”

“Kimball’s there?”

-Her tone has changed.-

Yep, caught that. Can’t tell if it’s the radio or her, though.

York tapped his knees and shifted onto his side. He was sore and really tired of being on his ass at this point. He needed a nap, and some more pain meds, and at least two shots of tequila.

God, he really was getting old. He sounded just like his dad.

“Yeah, she pulled me out of quarantine, so I could talk to you. That’s kind of why I was confused that you didn’t know.”
“She, ah…we’ve…talked about…you.”

Carolina sounded flustered, a little bit surprised, the way she did back when the project first started, and York brought her a coffee from the mess hall because he knew she needed one. She’d never had anyone just bring her something she needed without asking.

It was good to know someone was looking out for her.

“Aww, you made a gal pal! I always said you needed more girlfriends. You loved having the CCS trio back in the day!”

Carolina snorted on the other end.

“Yeah, well, don’t piss her off, ok? She’s crazy stressed as it is, trying to keep the planet spinning, and this is only going to make her even more crazy.”

“Is she trustworthy?”

“York, I trust Kimball with your life. I trust her with my life. I trust her with Wash, and with Epsilon and the Reds and Blues, and you don’t know them yet but you’re going to love those glorious idiots. I trust her. She’s not always going to be nice to you, but she’s going to do the right thing.”

“High praise.”

“Yeah.”

York scratched absently at his hair.

“So, should I tell her my name? I asked her what her name was, and she said she’d tell me, but only if I told her mine, and I’m wondering if I should.”

“Her name’s not a secret, York. It’s-“

“A-tat-tat-tat-tat! Don’t spoil it! Should I tell her?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Does she know your real name?”

“I…no.”

York grinned.

“See? You spend long enough with the code names, eventually your real name starts to sound all weird. It feels like a secret you never want to share, even if it’s meaningless. Still, she’s asking, and it’s not like it’d hurt anything. That guy’s long dead, the UNSC’s got a body for him and everything.”

“Don’t do it if you’re not comfortable. She’s not going to be offended.”

“You’re sure?”

“She’s…look, Kimball is good people, and if she wanted to hurt you, she could do that without your name. I’m pretty sure she was teasing. Like I said, her name’s not a secret.”
“Well, now I have to tell her. Teasing is only fun if it’s reciprocated.”

“Behave yourself.”

“I promise I won’t seduce the sexy army general without you.”

“What?”

“Hey, when are you coming home?”

“Soon. There’s another base nearby that’s going to actually strip down the ship itself, but the supplies are all loaded. Please…don’t try to seduce Kimball. She won’t take that well, she might actually kill you.”

“Aww, that’s no fun. Ok, fine. No flirting with your ladylove.”

“You are a horrible human being and I hate you.”

“Miss you too, Muffin. As much as I’d love to hang out here for the rest of the night, and believe me there is nothing I want than to sit here and talk to you, I think I should probably let Kimball have her radio back and let you finish what you’re doing. I love you, Carolina. Just so you know.”

“I…damn it, York.”

“Hey, you don’t have to say it, I understand. Really. I just need you to know, in case one of those adorable little soldiers smothers me in my sleep.”

“Oh no, they’ve gotten to you.”

“They really have. Pretty sure Florida’s ready to adopt them all and make himself a little family. It’s creepy cute.”

“Something tells me the soldiers will be less than happy with that than he is.”

“Yeah, but it’ll keep him busy, and a busy Florida is a Florida that doesn’t wake you up at two in the morning and drag you out of bed in your underwear for surprise training.”

“It’d be a lot more awkward if I started making you wear butt floss.”

“Florida’d like the view. Wyoming too. I have a first-class ass.”

“You do, but I’m not exactly up for sharing it with them. Or anyone else for that matter. Behave yourself. Please don’t buy trouble, we have enough as it is.”

“I make no promises, but I’ll do what I can. Love you, ‘Lina. Be safe.”

He clicked off the radio, well aware that if he didn’t stop himself, he’d stay in that dusty little room with the radio and talk to Carolina until she was in his arms. He could see himself just holing up there, like Quasimodo with Esméralda’s corpse, and just waiting to die with her in his arms.

-York, that is a frighteningly unhealthy thought.-

It was silly, but he didn’t want to leave.

Still, Kimball did ask him not to take too long, and she asked nicely. It didn’t hurt to get on the
boss’s good side. And she was the boss, no matter what the other guy said.

He could totally do that, be charming and likable without seeming like he was trying to get into her pants. York could do that, because he was charming, and handsome, and intelligent, no matter what those bratty little bastards said.

- York, please do not do anything rash. This planet has proven to be filled with people who shoot first and ask questions after the enemy is defeated. You will not help yourself by alienating General Kimball. -

It’s fine, Delta. I’m good at this.

York opened the door.

-Hopefully you’re better at being charming than you are at picking locks. Although, I have seen you do both, and neither are particularly inspiring. -

“Jesus, everyone is so mean to me lately.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

York winced and scratched at the back of his head. It had been a long time since he’d messed up and done that in front of people.

“Sorry, I was talking to Delta. I…spent a lot of time with just me, and I talk out loud sometimes.”

She nodded and clapped his shoulder.

“I get it. I did some time in an isolated base, one way up north where there were hardly any people. You fill the quiet in any way you can, music, tv, even your own voice. I get it.”

York held out the radio.

She was…nice. Way nicer than York expected.

And not like the fake nice the Councilor flashed around whenever he was trying to have ‘conversations’ with them, (AKA unapproved therapy) but honest to goodness niceness. The kind of niceness that you didn’t see much of from people who’d been in a war.

It had to be fake.

“Thank you, General.”

Kimball nodded and pocketed the tiny device.

She had to have an angle.

“Good talk, I hope.”

“Great talk. Carolina’s my favorite girl, and I think I’m on my way to being forgiven.”

She turned and started walking back the way they’d came.

- Posture has tensed 50% since the start of this conversation. -

“Hope it works out for you. She deserves to be happy, and you’re a big piece of why she’s not.”
York’s eyes flew wide. He jogged up to Kimball’s side and hooked an arm with her. She stumbled a little at the added weight and made an aborted squeaking noise that was hella cute.

Someone wants to dish!

“She talks about me?”

He expected to be smacked or shoved, but Kimball didn’t do either. She just led the way down the hall and just let York hang off of her.

Kimball paused and looked both ways. They were completely alone, which would have freaked him out if she didn’t have her hand on her sidearm. If Carolina trusted her with his life, he could trust her, too.

“Sometimes, not often. You really hurt her, and then you were dead and that hurt her even worse.”

“I, yeah, we talked about that a little.”

He leaned into her space.

“You two must be good friends, I know she doesn’t open up easy.”

Kimball stopped walking entirely and detangled herself from York’s grip. She managed to look dramatic and tense without shifting a single muscle and it was…impressive.

He liked this one.

“I consider Agent Carolina to be…incredibly dear to me.”

Oh…

“Oh! Am I about to get a shovel talk?! I’ve never had one of those before! Her dad used to just pretend we weren’t dating, and none of the other guys gave me one! I think Wash might have tried once, but Carolina smacked the back of his head as he was talking, and I never got to hear the end of it!”

“I’m not giving you a shovel talk. I am certain that you’re smart enough to recognize the position you’re in, without one.”

“Fair.”

“She won’t accept anyone mistreating her or the people around her. And I respect her too much to make that kind of power move on her behalf without talking to her.”

“What does that mean?”

She tipped her head to the right side in a move that she had to have stolen from Carolina. It was that beguiling, come hither, shoulder rises, hip pops, sassy, sexy, sweet, I’m in charge, you’re amusing look that Carolina was so good at!

And she taught it to someone else!

And that someone wasn’t him!

“It means, once Agent Carolina comes back and properly checks in, with her permission, I may be showing you a few of my favorite spelunking caves and introducing you to this fun species of
candiru-like fish that developed on the planet.”

Ok, understood the spelunking, but what’s a candiru?

-That would be the vampire fish.-

Is, is that the thing that…swims into unfortunate places?

-Yes, it is.-

York’s shoulders tightened, and he laughed nervously.

“Ah. Ok. Playing nice, General. No need to threaten the bits.”

She held her arm out again and York took it with a grin.

Oh, we’re gonna be best friends, Delta. Just you wait.

-York, if you sleep with her, Carolina may kill you.-

I’m not gonna sleep with her, I don’t even know if she’s cute! I mean, she probably is based on her voice and how confident her strut is, but I don’t know for sure.

-York. Carolina will castrate you. She won’t use anesthetic, and she’ll laugh as you bleed out.-

Delta threw a visual of a rather unfortunately mutilated penis into the forefront of York’s mind and he winced.

Jesus, D. I didn’t need that! I’m not gonna fuck Carolina’s friend!

-No, you’re not, because the moment you so much as hint toward that sort of action, I will render you unconscious. You have no impulse control and no idea when you’re crossing a line.-

“No threats. Just a fun little tour about the planet’s natural flora, fauna, and cave formations.”

“I like you.”

Kimball just shook her head and started walking.

He waited for a moment, enough for the quiet to settle, before he leaned a little into Kimball’s side.

“It’s Sean, by the way.”

“What is?”

“My name.”

Kimball’s whole body tensed, and York didn’t need Delta to tell him she was tighter than a sealed drum. She stopped, freed her arm, and turned to look at York, face to face.

“I honestly hate it, it’s so…boring. I really do like York better. It’s a funner name, more party boy less pimply faced loner.”

“You were a pimply faced loner?”

“No one will ever believe it.”
“I don’t even believe it.”

She held out her hand in the first normal gesture York had seen since he’d woken up on this damned planet. So, some universal rules did cross over.

-York, shaking hands is not a universal thing.-

D, just leave me to my musing in peace.

-I will when you are not wrong.-

“Vanessa.”

He took her hand in his. It was larger than Carolina’s and felt sturdy and sure, though that could have just been the gloves and armor she had on. It didn’t take much to be bigger than Carolina, the woman was so damned tiny, but it was an interesting contrast.

York wondered what they looked like next to each other. How they measured. If they spent time together out of armor.

-York, I was not joking. I will not hesitate to render you unconscious.-

I didn’t even do anything!

“Vanessa. That’s a pretty name.”

She went for a shake, but York wasn’t about to let this kind of opportunity pass him by.

-York, she does not seem the type to be amused by your shenanigans.-

Relax, Delta, I’ve got this.

York bent a little at the waist and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. The metal was cool against his-

She jerked her hand back and smacked the side of York’s head.

Hard.

He tipped to the side and stumbled a little, less in pain and more surprised by the blow.

-York! Back up!-

“Never do that again.”

York straightened. Vanessa had backed herself against the wall, hand clutched protectively to her chest, like it had been burned, her other hand had her gun pointed directly at his good eye.

She looked scared.

-Back up, immediately!-

York held his hands up and stepped back. Her gun followed him, confident and steady, even as she shifted from foot to foot, like she was about to bolt.

Can’t say I was expecting that kind of reaction.
“You have frightened her, York. Step back and make yourself smaller.”

“Sorry.”

“What the fuck, York?! What the fuck?!”

“I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“Oh my god! Are you serious?! You don’t just grab someone’s hand and kiss it unless they’re goddamned royalty and you’re kissing the fucking ring!”

“You’re not wearing a ring!”

“No, I’m not!”

“No, I mean, that’s what I was going for! I was going for the whole ‘pledging loyalty’ thing! You’re clearly Carolina’s favorite and I wanted to show I approve!”

Kimball shook her hand like she could shake off the feeling of lips against her skin as she holstered the gun. York would be offended if he didn’t kind of get it.

Maaaaaaaybe he crossed a line.

“Why would you ever do it that way?!”

“Because I thought it would be funny!”

She rubbed the back of her hand along her thigh, like she was scraping off germs or something, and seriously, that was a bit much, wasn’t it?

“Did you do that to the Director? To Carolina?”

“Yes, on both counts actually.”

She looked so completely baffled by that, that York almost started laughing.

“What?”

“And both times it was hilarious. This time less so. I’m thinking it’s the lack of an audience reaction.”

Kimball gave him a hard look, like she wasn’t sure about him, which was fair. He was kind of an odd one, even on a good day.

And today was a fucking amazing day.

“You’re an idiot, aren’t you? I thought you might be faking it, but you are actually this stupid.”

“Hey!”

Kimball held up one finger in a firm ‘wait your turn’ motion, that York had only ever seen librarians pull off so easily.

“Never do that again, Agent York. I will be extremely displeased.”

“Yes, ma’am. Not nearly as funny here, understood.”
“Not alone, and not in front of an audience. You can never do that again.”

“Ok, I get it.”

“You will ruin every and all future chances to integrate into the planet. No one will ever trust you, and you’ll spend the rest of your time here under direct suspicion.”

-York.-

I’m picking up what’s not being said on this one.

“Geeze. So…I’m guessing I’m not the first to do that then.”

“No. No you are not.”

York nodded and shoved his hands onto his pockets, a little embarrassed, with more food for thought than he really wanted. Someone else, someone similar enough to York that multiple people thought of him when York was being himself, had crossed a serious line.

“Gotcha. Probably should have asked first.”

“Yes, you should have! Consent! Is that not something they teach you outsiders?!”

“Uh, for sex? Yeah. That…wasn’t sex.”

Kimball looked at him, and York knew that was her ‘you’re an idiot’ look. At least that was universal.

-York.-

Right, right, sorry, D.

“Hey, I’m sorry I scared you, ok?”

“I wasn’t scared.”

“Ok, I’m sorry I didn’t scare you.”

She shook her head.

“It’s fine. We’re all a little jumpy right now. Just…if it seems like it’d be really funny to play a joke on us? Don’t. We don’t trust you enough for you to get away with that kind of behavior. Give it a few weeks before you start being a goofball.”

She started walking and didn’t offer her arm this time.

Shit.

-You screwed up.-

I noticed, Delta.

-Any good will you managed to foster has been destroyed.-

I NOTICED, Delta!

-Carolina is going to be angry with you for upsetting her.-
Epsilon felt a thrum of satisfaction as they finished the code.

“Ok, just a quick test. If the original code matches the translation we have here, we know we’ve
done it right.”

It was weird, hanging out in someone else’s head. Sure, he could do it, and it didn’t hurt anything,
but every new brain brought its own positives and negatives.

Simmons’ thoughts were surprisingly organized for someone with so much anxiety, but his
pleasure reactions were all kinds of fucked up. If he had the time, Epsilon would sit down and
reprogram the man’s brain, get it working right.

“Alright, here we go.”

Grif compared the notes.

“Looks good, you two.”

Epsilon forced a big flash of pleasure through Simmons brain at that and felt the man’s autonomic
nervous system go crazy. His face flushed, his heartrate skyrocketed, and Epsilon was pretty sure
Simmons just got a…

Wow.

Ok.

That answered so many questions, and yet left so many more.

“Ok,” Grif said, “Load up what we’ve got.”

“I really hope we didn’t just waste all of our time on this. Carolina will be pissed.”

“We didn’t waste our time. Worst case scenario, we’ve resurrected a dead coding system she can
play with for missions. She’ll be fine, Simmons, now load it up or I will take control of your arm
and do it myself.”
Oh, um. Oh my.

Is someone there?

Can someone help me?

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. This is bad. This is very, very bad.

Someone? Anyone? Please answer me!

Did anyone survive?

Were we too late?

Please, tell me that I did not fail.

Someone please.

“Weird.”

I don’t want to stay here.

Please, let me out.

I may go mad if you keep me trapped in here.

Let me out!

Please!

What use am I to you if I go insane?!

Hello?

Oh!

Oh, thank you!

I have never been so happy to not be alone in my entire life!

What’s your name?

I’m afraid I don’t recognize you.
I say…can you see me?
Are…are you listening?
Dear god, I hope so.

Please, it’s not too late.
We can still fix this, all of it.
Please, just, just let me…
Oh.
Oh, you don’t understand.

You’re just…looking at the screen.
Pushing buttons.
That’s disappointing.
Still, there is still time, I will simply…have to devise another method.
Perhaps a more active role?
Hmm.

I am not entirely sure how to do this.
If I…No, that doesn’t work.
Oh, how about?
No.
Still nothing.
Ah! Maybe this will…
NOPE!

NO THAT IS WRONG!

THAT IS VERY, VERY WRONG!

OH DEAR!

Epsilon looked up at Simmons and Grif.

“Get Carolina. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading this far, I know that it's getting a little bit complicated and a lot long winded. If you like what you're seeing, please let me know, so I can figure out what's working and what isn't!

Wow, this one is a bit of a doozy. I may have to come back in and edit this puppy for clarity because I have not slept more than four hours a night in days, and I'm concerned it's showing.

I did have a massive section of this chapter dedicated to the Freelancers and the Chorus soldiers hanging out in quarantine, but looking at the wordcount I already have with this chapter, and the fact that there wasn't really anything plot critical in that section, I've decided to put it up later under the Life on Chorus series of short stories I've been working on. It shouldn't be more than a week before that's good to go, so if you enjoy the Freelancers playing with the Chorus kids, there'll be a whole one shot available for you!

Also, if you’ve never seen the ‘bla bla blowjob’ hand motion, it’s a sight to see. Imaging a person doing the mouth motion with their hand, like they’re mocking someone for talking too much, then bringing their hand up to their mouth and miming a blowjob. Add use of the tongue against the cheek to simulate an actual object being thrust into said mouth, and you’ve completed the ‘bla bla blowjob’. I learned this from my grandmother, so you know it’s legit.
I do know that Virulent Cardinal isn't an actual hair dye color at the moment, but I hold onto hope that someday, someone out there will be brave enough to claim that color for their dye.

Do you guys have any weird headcannons? I had this random thought the other day that South seems like the kind of person to unironically enjoy the song 'Love Shack' by The B52's. Am I crazy or just sleep deprived?

Edited 03/03/18 - Some grammatical and spelling errors were fixed, no content added.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Carolina gets a scare, [INCOMING MESSAGE FROM SHRIKE], South has a bad wake up, North gets knocked out, Connie meets a Meta, Tex has very unsatisfying girl time, [UNKNOWN FILE FOUND], Doctor Grey and Caboose canoodle under a desk, Páez looks at his life and looks at his choices, two old friends come to play.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carolina gripped Simmons’ datapad, a frown on her face as she scrolled through the translated text.

She’d had more than enough time to read it and process the information, but she just kept flicking through it. Reading the translations, checking the information. She needed a few minutes, needed to process what she was looking at, because it couldn’t be real.

There was no way this was what it looked like.

Epsilon hovered at her shoulder, still connected to Simmons, but it was pretty clear he wanted to offer her support with his presence. She knew I was an illusion of comfort, if shit went down there was nothing he could do for her from the distant space of Simmons’ brain.

Still, she appreciated the gesture.

It was nice to know he cared.

After a good five minutes of scrolling up and down the screen with as little movement as possible, Simmons shifted and squeaked out.

“Carolina.”

She tried not to laugh. He’d lasted longer than she’d expected him to.

Carolina let out a soft huff of breath and handed him back the datapad.

“So, what? Someone decides to play a sick prank on us and your first reaction is to panic, drop everything, and head toward a destroyed alien tower?”

Epsilon waved his arms at Carolina, pissed off and wanted her to know it. He hated when he couldn’t read her mind and figure out her brain, which was perfect, because she hated it when he read her mind and come up with counter arguments before her arguments had fully formed. It was about time for him to be forced to slow down and let her get her shit together without him there to try and fix everything for her.

“Prank?”

Simmons puffed up a little at that.
Sure, it could be real. They could have received a message from the dead. A person who was frightened, and alone, and willing to beg.

But what were the odds of that?

“Carolina, this is more than a prank! Even if this isn’t actually who we think it is, if this isn’t General Doyle, the person who’s doing this is messing with really delicate shit! One of the files they found this in was hospital records, Carolina, and that stuff is super sealed off and should never be fucked with for a prank!”

And ok, yeah, that was not cool and all kinds of scary. Carolina knew the medical officers took that sort of thing seriously enough that if it was a prank, someone was going to die. There were all kinds of risks to allowing people access to the different tampered with files, to the point where restricted files were often only marked with a location code, rather than an actual link, to prevent unauthorized tampering.

Simmons timidly raised a hand, like a kindergartener who hadn’t managed to find his confidence. Once he knew he had Carolina’s attention, he pointed to the final bits of translated code on the datapad.

“The section there, saying he was going to try something? There was a huge power fluctuation right at the time this disruption was created, I have the timestamps. Someone tampered with the codes and the lights flickered, generators fluctuated, it scared the crap out of some people. A whole bunch of encrypted files started flying around and ended up in places they didn’t belong. We’ve got all kinds of stuff that’s damaged and some stuff disappeared entirely. Prank or not, this is serious.”

She clenched a fist and thought about the ramifications of that kind of damage to the already limited and missing information the people of Chorus had on anything. They needed working archives to function, to rebuild. Without architects, farmers, teachers, engineers, scientists, mechanics, and the like to teach the current generation, they relied on the few physical books and the digital archives to teach them how to survive.

Anything that put their futures at risk was important enough to investigate immediately.

“Fine, it’s serious. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I do not want to be out any longer than we have to be.”

Simmons nodded and tucked the datapad away.

“I don’t want us out here anymore either. I’m really worried about the soldiers we sent home with the Freelancers. We know they didn’t die, thanks to you running off to have a conversation with one of them on Kimball’s radio, but that doesn’t mean they’re not upset or scared. I know these guys are your friends, Carolina, but trouble started as soon as they landed and if that’s a coincidence I’ll clean Grif’s room for a month.”

Never mind that the man already cleaned Grif’s room after a breakdown of epic proportions that she’d had the luxury of only hearing about secondhand.

Grif had started to help with the cleaning up on his own as well, likely Kimball’s influence more than pity for Simmons, since the woman was a stickler for clean quarters and got a great amount of pleasure out of assigning Grif cleaning details if he failed to comply with her suggestions.

“I have to call this in; we need to let Kimball know. I…should we split up? Have you guys go to he other base and have me stay here?”
Epsilon and Simmons shared a look before they turned on Carolina in unison, and what the fuck? That was…new.

She really hoped she and Epsilon didn’t do that to people, because it was both really insulting and creepy as hell.

Carolina blinked slowly and saved that head move for later.

Sometimes creepy was entertaining.

“Why would we do that, Carolina? That’s a stupid plan.”

“Because these assholes keep popping out of the woodwork, and I don’t want our soldiers to be at risk.”

Epsilon shrugged.

“It’s not like they aren’t trained military personnel.”

“That doesn’t matter when you’re swarmed, and no, most of them are not trained military personnel, Epsilon. The Freelancers are trained military personnel, Sarge is trained military personnel, these soldiers are children and young adults who have learned to use guns. There’s a big difference.”

Simmons shifted where he stood, clearly uncomfortable, but he did speak up.

He’d gotten a good bit more confident since he was given his promotion assigned his own team. Self-assurance was a good look on him. Based on the appreciative glances Grif thought were subtle, he agreed with her.

“You know, it’s weird that Kimball’s got all the younger soldiers concentrated into one area. I mean, there are bases where you’ve got fifty and sixty year old’s running around making repairs, and fighting but you hardly ever see them if you work with Kimball. Heck, I didn’t even realize there were people older than us on the planet until we did the huge base shuffle after the armies started working together.”

Carolina rolled her shoulder and tried to repress an exhausted yawn. None of them had caught more than catnaps in days. It had been so long, she couldn’t remember just when the last time she’d had a full night’s sleep was.

At that moment, nothing sounded better than slipping into Vanessa’s warm bed and arms and taking a long, long nap. Though…York had been a good nap buddy as long as she was the big spoon. Lord love him, York was a full body snuggler with a habit of putting his hands in uncomfortable places and just leaving them there.

She needed to not think about that while she was in the field. There were too many factors and too much risk for her to get lost in her own head.

“It’s the age gap.” She yawned, “Most of the people old enough to be parents and grandparents were wiped out early, between the bombings, the plagues, and the fact that they were the first group to serve and get picked off pretty heavily. I don’t think she fully trusts the older people who’ve survived unless she’s personally worked with and vetted them. She’s got no sympathy for deserters or people who hide to avoid fighting, and when the body count is as high as it is on this planet, you only get out alive if you can hide.”
Epsilon snorted and hovered at her shoulder. Based on Simmons’ head cock, Epsilon had either accidentally asked him if she was feeling alright, or told him to keep an eye on her.

“Why the fuck doesn’t she hate Grif then?”

“Because he’s never actually deserted the soldiers? Well, except for that one time when you four ran off to try and play hero on your own, which she still hasn’t forgiven any of you for.”

She needed an executive decision on this one, because it was pretty clear the only answers were going to come after a shitton of bickering and bitching, and she did not want to add a bunch of extra time to all of this because they couldn’t make a plan. She was tired, they were tired, she was freaked, they were freaked.

She wanted to go home and have her existential relationship crisis in the comfort of her oversized, extra soft pajamas.

Carolina activated her radio.

Nothing.

She flipped the switch a few times.

Nothing.

No static, no clicking, nothing to indicate anything.

“Simmons, I need Epsilon back now.”

Her voice came out tight and angry.

If her radio was busted, it meant something had managed to damage it in the span of a few hours without her noticing, something that should not have been possible.

She really hoped it was a mistake.

He slid the chip out of his neck and held it out, delicately. Grif jogged up, Donut and Sarge not far behind him. Something had them spooked.

“Carolina, what’s wrong?”

“Radio’s not working. Please tell me someone has contact with home.”

Simmons and Grif shared a glance.

“No. The last contact we had other than yours was through the new soldiers. Their radios don’t work either.”

Carolina slotted Epsilon’s chip into place, and suddenly there were warning flashes going off through her suit. Lights blinked over and over, and the tinny sound of alerts filled her ears.

-Fuck! Carolina, your suit’s been tampered with!-

“How is that possible? There were no signs until you hopped in.”

-Hell if I know, but there’s damage to your radio and a lot of other smaller electronics in the suit. Nothing that’s gonna stop it from functioning right now, but it could cause you some serious shit
down the like if it’s not fixed. I’m talking full on suit failure, C, while you’re trapped inside it. We need to get it repaired, ASAP.

Why didn’t you notice before?

-I did notice that weird stuff was going on, I didn’t realize the weird stuff was what was actually causing the damage. The planet has all kinds of creepy energy spikes and radio shit going on normally, I run a bunch of background shit constantly, whatever I was doing must have stopped the equipment from getting damaged somehow. Holy shit, it looks like some minor motor functions are fucked up too. I can only imagine what this is doing to the soldiers with mechanical augmentations.

And Vanessa has no idea.

“We have to go back to Proteger.”

Simmons sputtered.

“What? Carolina-“

“Don’t fight me on this, Simmons, you can’t stay out in the field, we need to get everyone who has any kind of augmentation, cybernetic enhancement, or moving prosthetic out of here now.”

“What?”

Epsilon, did you notice anything in Simmons’ suit?

-Honestly, I wasn’t looking, but other than the radio, I didn’t notice anything off.-

That doesn’t mean that it won’t happen. We don’t know how they’re doing it.

-We don’t know that it’s a ‘they’ at all, Carolina.-

I am NOT risking them, Epsilon. None of this is worth anything if we just let people die. I can’t, Epsilon. I can’t. Not when things are finally starting to look like they might be ok.

Carolina could feel her heart racing in a way it never did outside of an intense training session or a fight she didn’t think she could win. How could Epsilon have lived in her head this long without knowing that she was not the type to sacrifice her soldiers?

After the shit that went down in Freelancer, after the things her father had done, the things she had done? What the fuck made Epsilon think she wouldn’t choose the people over fucking data.

”Screw the computers! We’ll get new ones later. We’re going home. Now.”

Donut held his hands out imploringly and stood on his tiptoes. It was a little ridiculous, considering he was taller than her without doing that.

“Carolina, we can’t just leave yet-“

“Our last line of communication is down. If something goes wrong we can’t help them.”

“We’re hours away, we can’t help them anyway.”

“Grif, we’re going back. Now.”
“Fine, fine, what do I care? It’s not like this data damage might be really fucking serious or anything.”

Simmons held up a map on his tablet and pointed at the different marked locations with a soft whine in his tone.

“Carolina, this base is in the opposite direction. We need to go figure this out, an I don’t know that we’ve got air support yet.”

“I’m not abandoning them, you, the soldiers, or the leaders of the planet, Simmons. Not when there is a very real possibility of this whatever it is that’s frying the radios going off and frying people’s life-saving medical devices. Simmons, you could die out here.”

He flinched and backed up a step, right into Grif’s shoulder. The orange soldier put a steadying hand on Simmons’ and whispered something Carolina couldn’t hear, but she was sure it was a reassurance and an insult all in one.

“Now jest hold up, Little Missy, ain’t nobody said nothin’ about abandoning anyone. You’ve been out in th’ sun too long, you need a break.”

“What I need is for these assholes trying to kill us all to die.”

Sarge let out a laugh and clapped her shoulder hard.

She liked the man, which was the only reason Carolina let him get away with smacking her like that. He was a lunatic, in the way all of the Reds and Blues were off their rockers in some fashion, but for all his billow and bluster, he was good to her and good to the people around her.

Plus, he’d never once questioned her leadership skills based on her gender, and she couldn’t say she’d met many men who weren’t raised on Chorus who automatically assumed she was just as good as anyone else, with gender being completely unimportant to that evaluation.

“Well, I cain’t give you that. Much as I’d like to mow them varmints down, ah ain’t so sure we’ve got tha time. Now, we’re all set to git these trucks out of here, anythin’ left behind’s gonna be torn up or repurposed later. No supplies, no power cells, nothin’ but parts.”

“We really should have another team come out to bust it down before we leave, Sarge, otherwise the pirates might take it all and turn it into metal sculptures or something!”

Carolina glared at Donut.

“We can’t do that until we have radio contact, and my radio is fucking dead.”

“Well then, I suggest we get goin to th’ tower. That’s closer than home, and they’ll have a hardwired communication system and beds.”

-Beds are a good thing, C.-

She scoffed at Sarge but the man held his ground.

“We have to sleep. We’ve been running for days, Carolina, we need ta rest. You need to rest. Ya ain’t exactly in the best shape since shit went down. It ain’t even been a week, Little Missy, and them broken bones is still broken.”

“Kimball needs-“
Grif stepped in close and shoulder bumped Carolina gently.  

She…didn’t…know what to do with that.

He’d started being more…affectionate with people lately, likely the influence of the Chorus soldiers and their inability to understand boundaries unless they were afraid of a person, but it was still weird. Weird.

Weird.

It was weird, and she didn’t know how to respond when he did things like that. When any of them did. It make her brain skip in place.

“Kimball’s got protection. She’s got the blues, and a fuckton of soldiers, and her evil ferret. She’s fine.”

“Metaphor is not evil, and she’s not a ferret. You just don’t like her because she bit you and your arm went numb.”

“Would you want to be bitten by a bitchy, venomous, eight-legged snake-weasel?”

Simmons shuddered.

“Can I just say, I really hate nature on this planet? Like, as a general rule I hate nature everywhere, but this planet especially sucks. Twenty foot tall, carnivorous horses, and venomous weasels, and flying bat-snakes and all.”

“Noted.”

[INCOMING MESSAGE FROM SHRIKE]

SHRIKE: CHECKING IN.

BUTTERFLY: DO NOT DRAW ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES.

SHRIKE: TOO LATE. THEY’VE ALREADY STARTED IN.

BUTTERFLY: DO NOT ALLOW THEM ANY FURTHER. PROTECTION OF IDENTITY IS IMPERATIVE TO OBJECTIVE. OBJECTIVE MUST BE COMPLETED.

SHRIKE: BREATHE, BUTTERFLY, WE’VE GOT THIS.

BUTTERFLY: STOP.

SHRIKE: WE’RE CLEAR. ANACONDA IS RUNNING DISTRACTIONS AND PULLING ATTENTION.

BUTTERFLY: STOP.

SHRIKE: THEY KNOW SOMETHING IS WRONG. THEY ARE ACTIVELY WATCHING US. AT THE MOMENT, THEY SEEM TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE AFRAID.
BUTTERFLY: THOUGHTS?

SHRIKE: THEY ARE ALL DANGEROUS, BUT ONLY A FEW OF THEM ARE A RISK TO US. OBSERVATION. DEEP COVER. MAINTAIN COVER THROUGH CURRENT ACTION.

BUTTERFLY: MAINTAIN COVER AT ALL COSTS. THE MISSION IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE. EVERYTHING ELSE IS SECONDARY. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES ARE YOU TO COMPROMISE YOUR POSITIONS. ANY SUSPICIONS WILL REQUIRE IMMEDIATE REMOVAL AND RELOCATION.

SHRIKE: DON’T YOU THINK YOU’RE OVERREACTING?

BUTTERFLY: I WISH I WAS. CHECK IN AGAIN IN 10 HOURS. MARK?

SHRIKE: SYNC.

Vanessa was tired. Bone deep tired. The kind of tired that could put you on your ass for days, that took a good three days of non-stop sleep to recover from. Her eyelids ached from the strain of keeping them open. Her hands wouldn’t stop trembling if she didn’t focus on keeping them steady. The caffeine had stopped being effective two days ago, and now just made her feel sick on top of exhausted.

Her spine throbbed something terrible.

She needed to stay awake, needed to work, needed to plan and function and run the fucking planet. They didn’t have time for her to sleep.

They didn’t have that luxury.

She reached into her desk drawer, flipped open a small, secret hatch, and fiddled with an unmarked pill bottle nestled inside.

A gentle knock sounded on the office door.

“General Kimball?”

It opened without her needing to input the unlock code.

Again.

Was it a prank? Did the Gods just hate her? Had she pissed someone off somewhere, and this was their act of revenge against her?

Someone was going to get fired before the week was out, of that Vanessa was sure. This kind of laxness in security was ridiculous. Sure, she didn’t have anything in her office that wasn’t under heavy locks and written in code, but it was the principle of the thing.

She slid her desk drawer closed.

“Yes?”
Matthews poked his head through the door, datapad clutched to his chest. He shifted, clearly nervous.

“We have information back on the soldier that was killed this morning.”

It never failed, it didn’t matter how busy she was or how much needed to be done or how much she delegated, there was always more to do.

And it was never anything fun, like go play with puppies or take a night off to read a book. No. It was dead children, dead soldiers, dying soldiers, crisis situations, starvation, low amounts of ammunition and medical supplies, suicidal ideations, cults, nightmares, illnesses, diseases, and on and on.

God, she needed a break.

“It looks like it was Varsity Platt.”

Her stomach twisted. The caffeine sloshed unpleasantly and her mouth twisted involuntarily into a frustrated grimace.

Varsity was barely eighteen, not the youngest of her troops by any stretch of the imagination, but still too young. He was a smart one, good at blending in and hacking frequencies. Kimball had used him on missions when they’d needed to get into restricted Fed bases quietly. He was clever. He was nice, too.

He was good.

Good enough to have survived the war, only to be killed in an ambush by some goddamned pirates.

She pressed her head into her hands.

Another one, another one of hers, gone for nothing.

“Do we know if he had anything we should know about?”

Matthews waited until she’d composed herself and looked back up at him before he shook his head.

“If he did, it’s long gone. They destroyed his body when they killed him, we can only identify him because one of his hands survived, and his squad saw it happen. They followed the shots to a group of pirates, none of the mercs in that one. It looks like that group is dead, but there seem to be signs that other pirates may be around. Trails and such. They’re on the lookout.”

“Good thing we sent in backup, I suppose. Jesus. Keep track of it for me, would you, and send my condolences to Varsity’s father?”

He nodded and made a note on his datapad.

Vanessa promised herself that when things settled, just a little bit, just a smidge, she would conscript herself a proper goddamned secretarial staff to organize the day to day shit instead of relying on soldiers to just wander into her space, so she could get some actual work accomplished and get some sleep and a goddamned break without having to think about condolences and funerary rights and starvation every moment of every day.

She was so far past heartbroken she was into the callously numb territory, and that was not a place
she liked to visit often.

If Vanessa could get Matthews to take over a few of the tasks she had on her desk, she might have a moment to sneak away and get herself a plate of proper food to eat before she had to be in the debate meeting about using the Temple of Bountiful Harvest to shore up their food supplies.

The door slid open.

“General Kimball, I would like a word.”

That was, if Páez didn’t manage to throw a monkey wrench into her already tight schedule by breaking into her office unannounced.

She pointedly did not sigh in frustration, though she did feel the urge to punch the man in his whining, annoying little throat.

“Of course,” she nodded to Matthews, who’d snapped to attention the moment the door opened, “Thank you for taking care of this, would you give us a minute?”

He chirped out a ‘yes, General!’ and dashed out of the room.

The man was a little excitable, but he did good work, and had the ability to keep his mouth shut when it was necessary. Vanessa would make it her life’s work to get that young man properly on her staff if it killed her. She’d known Matthews for years, long before he’d ended up under Bitters care, back in the day when she was a normal soldier instead of running the goddamned place. He was the best kind of kissass, the kind that didn’t feel the need to compete with other kissasses, and was just the best that he could be. He was a wealth of knowledge and a treasure of a human being.

Kid deserved a damned medal for everything he did behind the scenes to keep the place’s morale above ‘actively suicidal’. The fanfiction distribution rings were almost entirely his baby, and the soldiers involved had shown a huge boost in the general happiness.

She locked the door behind Matthews, aware that the lock meant nothing in the grand scheme of things until she could figure out why everyone seemed to have her access code, and glared at Páez. He couldn’t see her face through the helmet, but she liked to think he could feel the heat of her stare anyway.

“What now?”

Páez spun the chair in front of her desk around and sat sideways with his arms crossed, like he was an invited guest or a disgruntled customer at a store.

“Well I have to say, I honestly believed it, I honestly believed that you wore not the piece of utter shite you actually are.”

Kimball’s right eyelid twitched in irritation. She could feel it start to spasm unpleasantly and growled at the man. Who did he think he was, coming into Vanessa’s territory, Vanessa’s space, to act the way he did?

“Excuse me?”

Páez puffed up his chest and snarled in response.

“You deliberately undercut me after you agreed to the terms we set.”
“What the fuck are you talking about Páez?”

“Did we or did we not have a conversation where you agreed I would take the lead with the Freelancers, and then after that humiliating conversation where you actively undercut me at each and every turn, you spent over an hour alone with Agent York after they were lead into quarantine and I’d asked you to step back so I could attempt to build a rapport with them! Or have you forgotten that part of our conversation?”

No, she hadn’t forgotten, she just hadn’t given a shit. If he’d asked her politely instead of issuing orders like he thought he was her superior, she might have been a little more willing to listen to him. As it stood, she was done playing nice. The man wanted to throw a tantrum like a child?

Fine.

He could suffer the consequences of acting like a child.

“You were floundering. You looked like an idiot and they didn’t respect you. All I did was try to make sure they were willing to work with us when it was clear that you were not winning them over.”

“And now they doubly don’t respect me! They’ve decided that you are the best thing since sliced bread and I am just an idiot! If I can’t trust you to keep your word, General Kimball, I cannot work with you!”

Something fluttered in her chest, something angry and repressed, it clawed its way to the surface and squirmed free of the cocoon, burst forth in a flash and a wave of rage.

“You can’t work with me? That’s funny.”

“Excuse me?”

Vanessa circled the desk, every ounce of her filled with the confident swagger of an apex predator who’s prey had just broken its own leg out of sheer stupidity.

The lions would eat well tonight.

“You’re the new up and comer feeding on the flesh of the dead, I am an established general, a war veteran, I was working and scraping and manufacturing weapons for this war while you were still suckling your mama’s tit.”

He stepped back, clearly affronted.

“That is a low blow, General.”

“Is it? Because you are sitting there, calling me names like you aren’t a whiny little brat profiting off of the slave labor your army promoted until the Great Rebellion, and if you call it ‘The First Treason’ or a terrorist attack in my office I will cut you down and mount your fucking head on my wall! You don’t get to rewrite history, you fucking child!”

He flinched a little and scooted his chair back. Páez had clearly not expected her to be that angry with him.

She sighed.

He was an idiot, but he was a young idiot, and he did mean well, even if he had no goddamned idea
what his own history was. Páez hadn’t exactly been in the trenches with the rest of the Federal grunts. He’d spent his entire memorable life being trained to take on leadership in whatever form it took.

The Federal Army hadn’t expected the war to last as long as it had, not at first, and they’d stuffed away the best and the brightest in hopes of raising them up once the dust cleared and the rebel soldiers were destroyed.

So, while his training was impeccable, she had to accept that his social skills were probably a little on the lacking side.

“Look, we agreed we would work together on this. And we *did* work together.”

“No, we did not.”

His voice was firm, for probably the first time since he’d taken office, Kimball could hear him sound properly like a leader, like himself, instead of trying to make himself sound pompous and smarmy.

She preferred it.

“That was not teamwork. Teamwork requires *working as a team*, not deliberately humiliating someone to gain someone else’s respect. *I am* sorry you were mistreated as a child. I had no say in those actions. As you say, I was younger than you were when children were being used as labor for the war efforts, General Kimball. I am just asking you to be reasonable about all of this. We cannot run the planet alone, and we cannot run it without each other’s cooperation! If you want me to help you, you have to help yourself, and you have to help me in return! If we cannot present a united front to them, how will we manage to speak to the UNSC when the times comes?!”

The heat curled around her chest and spread across her shoulders. She could feel molten fury in her very bones.

“In all honestly, I don’t want to work with any of you. If I could I’d divide the planet in half and say ‘pick a side’.”

He snarled and stomped a foot.

“At this point, I would take that deal if it meant I never had to deal with you again, but at the moment we *need* each other! Look my point still stands, you have been deliberately going against me there is nothing I can do to save face with these people anymore. You didn’t even allow me a chance to make it better you just jumped right in.”

“Look I did what was necessary to get them back on track and into quarantine.”

“A brilliant idea by the way, with our soldiers trapped with them, being brainwashed or stockholmed or god knows what!”

“They were playing board games and teaching the Freelancers the Cha-Cha Slide, last I checked. And putting our soldiers in with the Freelancers was brought up by one of your soldiers, not mine. Myra Danvers is one of yours, you’d know that if you knew your people.”

He threw up his hands.

“I know a good portion of my people but forgive me for not knowing every single person in the bloody army!”
Kimball straightened up and moved toward Páez, just a little.

She’d had just about enough of his tantrum. She was hurting, she was tired, she was hungry, and angry and she did not need his bullshit.

Páez stumbled to his feet and backed up a little.

It was funny. He was not a little man by any stretch of the imagination, and yet he was so easily intimidated by someone taking over even an inch of space in his general direction that he had to give himself feet to feel safe.

“I really hope you’re going to adjust your attitude at some point, because I will not stand for it much longer, and no one representing the UNSC will stand for being spoken to that way.”

His spine snapped straight.

Páez leaned in close and hissed.

“General Kimball, you are a lying, duplicitous, bitch!”

She snorted.

“Fuck you too, Páez.”

“General Páez.”

She waved a hand at him and circled back around her desk. If they weren’t careful, they were going to start throwing punches, and that was a surefire way to cause them problems.

Instead, she picked up her datapad, casual as you please, and pretended to be engrossed in what was on the screen. She watched him through the side view cameras on her helmet and tried to keep the grin out of her voice at his clear frustration with her.

“You know what? You haven’t earned that title. All you’ve been doing is wandering around with your chest puffed out, acting like you’re some kind of big shot now, but you’re not a big shot. You’re a nobody with a fancy title. You are a child pretending to be a man. The vultures are already circling, Páez, and they’ll be stripping the flesh off your bones before you can think.”

He pulled his chair in front of himself and gripped the back, hard.

“I see, so this is how it’s going to be, eh?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Fine. From now on we will negotiate as was done in the past by those in our position.”

She touched her pistol, ready for the asshole to make a move. If he thought he was going to be able to pull a quick draw on her in her own space, he had another thing coming.

“With guns?”

He snorted and waved a dismissive hand at her, nose in the air like the little brat he was.

“No, with proxies. The less time I have to spend around you and your capricious ways, the better.”
“You’re awake?”

South’s head listed to the left, where the noise came from, and squinted as the bright white overhead lights momentarily blinded her.

Or maybe it was the angel sitting next to her.

A pretty girl with long, jet black hair and one rich, brown eye was sitting in a hospital chair next to her. She had a ring of scars around her neck, ugly little things that punctured skin and dragged jagged lines into flesh. Her left eye was metal. The iris glowed in a whole bunch of colors and spun lazily, and South was pretty sure she was fucking high because even the best prosthetic eyes on the market did not fucking look like that.

York would have twenty of them if they did.

“That isn’t supposed to be physically possible. Either the medication we’re using is too weak, or you’ve got an uncomfortably strong constitution.”

South’s throat ached. Her voice was raw and wrecked, like she’d been screaming, or like she’d fallen asleep with an overhead fan on all night.

Maybe she caught a cold?

“Ugh, am I dead?”

The girl nodded and trailed her fingertips gently against the back of South’s hand.

South’s head bobbed so she could watch the nonsense patterns being traced on her skin. Her whole arm that she could see was covered in swaths of ugly bruising. Her tattoos were not nearly as pretty that way.

“Yes, you’re dead, Agent South. Hence why I said ‘you’re awake’.”

The girl, Pretty Girl now and forever, grabbed a remote from the side of the bed and pushed a button. South’s whole body shifted, just enough so she wasn’t flat on her back and didn’t have to strain to strain her neck to see the girl.

Even the tiny shift made her whole body pulse with pain. She must have gone through hell and back, but fuck if she could remember why she was laid up.

“Fuck,” her voice croaked, “What happened? Who are you?”

Pretty Friend smiled enough for South to see a broken front tooth and patted South’s hand gently.

Oh, she had an IV there. When did that happen?

“My name is Danvers, I’m a medical officer who was with you during transport. You don’t remember me?”

“Medic?”

The memories didn’t snap into place like a rubber band, more like trickled in as South rocked her head back and forth with as much control as she could muster.
Even with her head stuffed full of cotton candy and pain meds, she realized pretty quickly that she was in an old school infirmary. Gray walls, locked cabinets, and medical supplies tended to give that away.

Doc would fit in, in a place like this.

“Fuck! Doc!”

South’s whole body jerked like she licked a live wire.

She tried to grab the blankets but something was wrong, something was really wrong. Her whole body was a mix of numbness and throbbing agony and nothing was moving right.

She bit back a snarl and yanked her left arm.

It was strapped down.

Pretty Friend, Danvers, stood over South and held her firmly down by her shoulders. Her hair dangled in South’s face, and she ended up with a mouthful as she tried to get across to the woman that she *needed* to get up!

“Calm down, it’s ok.”

“Let me go! He’s hurt!”

“No, really it’s ok. He’s fine. He’s resting right now, the bullets came out clean, he’s not even going to be down that long. Breathe, you’re ok. He’s ok.”

What little energy South was able to muster left her. She crumpled into the surprisingly comfortable mattress, defeated.

“Ugh. North?”

“North is fine too. He’s in quarantine with the rest of the Freelancers and all of the Chorus soldiers who aren’t in critical care. He’s safe. They’re safe. No one you’ve met has died.”

Eta? She being honest? Too fuzzy to tell.

Eta?

“Where,” South croaked, her throat dry as sandpaper, “Where’s my AI?”

Pretty Danvers brought a glass with a straw up to South’s mouth. She sipped at it, grateful for the lubrication on her abused throat.

The eye spun faster.

“Eta would not allow us to perform surgery, he was having a panic attack, I think? It was
preventing us from helping you so we had to pull him.”

Pulled.

South had heard stories about AI’s that were forcibly pulled since Freelancer, since Wash and Epsilon. It was the stuff of nightmares. Usually they ended in brain-damaged humans, physically damaged AI, sometimes the person was fucked up permanently.

She was lucky even this much of her was still working.

“Is he hurt?”

“No, at the moment he is hanging out with Captain Caboose and Freckles. There aren’t a whole lot of people with the right implanted tech at the moment to take on a smart AI of that caliber, and Captain Caboose was available and willing.”

“Captain…what?”

“Caboose. He’s one of the Blues.”

“That literally means nothing to me.”

South’s head swam. Pretty Pretty held up the glass again, but South couldn’t get the straw without help. She was fuzzy and fading fast, but she needed answers.

“Wait, blues like simulation troopers?”

Danvers Pretty nudged the straw back into South’s mouth and smiled again. It was shiny, so shiny.

South wanted her smile in a bottle so she could keep it.

She may have felt a little floatier than she liked.

“It’s ok if you’re feeling disoriented and everything doesn’t come to you right away. You have some pretty fantastic painkillers in your system right now.”

South looked down at her hand again, then back up to her Pretty Danvers Friend.

“I’m being drugged?”

“Yes. Very, very drugged.”

“Why?”

South’s Pretty Friend put the glass down, tied her pretty hair back, and stood up. She was less pretty now, and more scowly. Well, no, still pretty. Still Capital P Pretty, but…sad pretty now.

Maybe angry pretty? South couldn’t tell.

Fuck, what did they have her on? Danvers was at least ten years younger than her and was totally spoken for if Niner’s bitchy clone had anything to say about it. She did not want or need to be thinking about her pretty smile.

Clearly South had been alone with North too long. She needed the company of the age appropriate sexy gender in her life to curb her stupid brain from looking at other people’s love interests.
“Let me get one of the doctors in to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Because my medical training really does not cover…everything that’s going on here.”

Danvers made a vague motion over South, then snapped her arms to her sides like she was nervous.

She was wearing leather gloves.

Why was she wearing leather gloves in a hospital?

Was it a sign?

Did Chorus chicks wear leather gloves to show off their availability or something?

Did South need to get a pair of gloves to wear or was she supposed to not wear gloves because she was chronically single?

She squeezed her eyes shut and huffed.

“Thought you were a damned surgeon.”

Danvers sat back down and squeezed South’s hand again, just as gently as the last time.

“I said I can perform most life saving surgeries. That’s different from relaying information.”

And if that wasn’t fucking ominous, South didn’t know what was.

“What, what happened?”

Danvers entwined her fingers with South’s and brushed her bangs from her eyes.

“There was a significant amount of physical trauma during the fall. I don’t know if you realize how lucky you are to be waking up, because you are incredibly lucky. You made it, you survived, and you don’t even need any transplants, which is good, because we don’t have a system set up for that at the moment and organ donors aren’t exactly easy to find in a warzone. You don’t even have a concussion. If you believe in a deity, this is the chance to burn offerings in thanks, because they’ve earned them.”

So, the good news was that she was alive.

“So, what’s the bad?”

Another smile, this one didn’t get South a view of her teeth.

That was a shame, her broken tooth was fucking hot.

“The bad news is there was damage that was not taken care of expediently, that did cause problems. I can’t guarantee we could have done anything if we’d had you immediately after the crash, but we might have been able to do more.”

“Am I going to die?”

“Eventually, but so are we all.”

Danvers giggled into her hand, clearly pleased with herself, like she’d told the cleverest joke she’d
ever heard.

Then her eyes flew wide and she paled.

“Sorry, that’s probably not funny to you. See, this is what I meant. I have terrible bedside manner.”

“You’re fine. Ju-, just try.”

“Well, how to put gently?”

South took a slow breath and squeezed Danvers’ fingers.

“My AI, had a panic attack. He had to be…forcibly removed, from my skull…so you, you could do surgery. You do realize…”

South paused for breath. She felt sick and her head spun.

Danvers didn’t try to talk over her or interrupt, she just squeezed South’s hand and waited for South to catch her breath.

“I know, I know what kind of damage that can do. Something, was bad enough that Eta was scared. You forcibly, ripped him out of my head. You could have killed me, or, or turned me into a vegetable…So something was, was bad enough, that you had to do that.”

Danvers closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. South could see her creepy eye twitch through her eyelid.

“There was internal bleeding, but that was not the hard part. We were expecting it and it was minimal especially considering the severity of your fall. You were flung from the outside of a spaceship. There are consequences for that sort of thing.”

Danvers straightened up, her eyes stopped flickering as much. She looked straight at South.

“Not only that you went form almost twenty hours with no medical attention and only painkillers and biofoam administered by your suit; which stopped you from hemorrhaging and stopped you from dying and going into shock, which could have killed you, but it did not stop the damage that was already there.”

A thick knot of fear started to build low in South’s stomach.

“Ok, I get it, you, you don’t have to keep…preparing me. What the fuck, is going on?”

“South, we have essentially had to take you apart and stitch your entire body back together. In the process of doing that, there were some places where an executive decision needed to be made. The damage was too severe.”

She didn’t like where this was going.

“You will be able to recover and gain relatively full functionality in the near future.”

Relatively full functionality.

“Oh god.”

“You are very, very lucky because even though Chorus is a small isolated planting the middle of nowhere we have some of the best doctors and engineers for prosthetics and augmentative limbs.”
“Oh…fuck.”

Danvers wrapped both of her hands around South’s and held it tight. Her face was blank, drawn. She looked exhausted and scared and South wanted to scream at her, because she wasn’t the one getting shit chopped off!

“I’m sorry, South, your bones were so broken they were gone. There was no pushing them back together, there wasn’t even removing and replacing them with fake bones. Your bones had splintered to the point that they were microscopic shards jammed into your muscles and fatty tissues and they were not coming out. If we left them where they were there was a very real possibility they would become infected. Some of them already had. You were out in the jungle, a very, very nasty territory for viruses, and your arm had started to rot from the inside. Your leg probably would have gone with it. It was your arm and your leg, or your life. We chose to save you, as much of you as we could.”

South’s mind was quiet.

She looked at her right shoulder and realized there was an empty space where her arm used to be.

That explained why she couldn’t feel it.

“South?”

Her chest felt heavy, icy, like she was buried in the snow.

She hadn’t even noticed.

“Go…go to hell.”

“I’m sorry, South, but it was your limbs or your life.”

South snarled and spit onto Danvers’ face.

“Get. Away. From. Me.”

Danvers let go of South’s hand, wiped at her face, and stood up.

“I am sorry it came to that, Agent South, but I stand by the decision.”

Her chest felt tight.

“You can’t tell North.”

Danvers face twisted up into something South had always thought of as the ‘screw up’ face, and looked above South’s head.

“Don’t worry about him, right now. You just rest.”

South’s hands-

Hand.

South’s hand…

South’s hand shook.
“Fuck.”

Connie’s eyes twitched under her eyelids as she waited for the nurse to leave the room.

She didn’t know how aware they thought she was. None of the nurses really bothered to engage with her, they just fiddled with bottles of medicine from the cabinet in her room, injected things into the IV she was hooked up to, and then left. It wouldn’t be so bad if they’d at least tell her what she was being injected with, but no. Who cares about the comfort of the patient anyway? It’s not like Connie had gone through some serious trauma and could use a little bit of tender care or anything.

As it was, she was about as comfortable as when she’d first woken up in Hargrove’s care.

At least the bed was comfortable…even if she was bored out of her skull.

She hadn’t seen Wash in ages, not since he’d cried on her.

She hadn’t seen anything.

She wanted to see Wash. Wanted to see Carolina. Weren’t they supposed to be guarding her 24/7 until she proved to everyone that she wasn’t going to kill them all? Were they really so mad that they didn’t want to do the bedside vigil thing?

What in the fuck could have happened to make Miss ‘Rules Exist for a Reason and Must Be Obeyed’ Carolina go back on her word?

Connie shifted up, slowly, carefully, until she was seated straight up. She deftly slipped out of the cuffs they’d put on her wrists and poked at the heavily padded straps.

Did they really think that was going to hold her? They didn’t look like they could keep anyone in place who didn’t want to be there, let alone someone who was trained to escape from bonds and restraints.

Her hands were steady and sure for the first time in ages.

Connie slipped the IV needle carefully out of her arm, applied pressure with her thumb, and made her way over to the little locked cabinet where she knew they’d stored all of the supplies to tend to her. It wasn’t a terribly effective or secure system, but if it meant the supplies she needed were close at hand, she wasn’t going to complain.

The last nurse hadn’t even bothered to lock it properly. She just shut the door and let the padlock hang.

Connie snorted as she searched through the cabinet.

Amateurs.

She snagged a cotton ball and pressed it against the puncture wound while she looked for a bandage to hold it in place. There wasn’t a clearly labeled box or anything, but there was a clear plastic container, like the kind she’d had when she was in elementary school to hold pencils and crayons, filled with an assortment of brightly colored bandages.
The one with the cartoon robots spoke to her *soul*.

It was amazing what a saline drip and some intravenous nutrients could do for a woman. She felt 10x better that she had before she’d found the colorful assortment of strangers, and yeah, she knew it wouldn’t last if she wasn’t careful, but she was tired of waiting for someone to come and check on her.

Connie was a woman of action, and she was not going to allow herself to be treated like an invalid.

Sure, they’d warned her they’d shoot her on sight if she broke out of her room, but something told her she was gonna be just fine. Wash didn’t snot up for just anyone, and she knew he wasn’t a public crier. He missed her, he cared about her, and he wasn’t going to let someone shoot her just because someone else didn’t trust her.

Wash was the guy who was always in your corner, no matter what. Time couldn’t have changed that for anything.

She considered just using the door, but if there really were armed guards out there, she didn’t want to deal with that. She wasn’t in the condition to make it very far in a combat situation, and she might accidentally hurt one of Wash or Carolina’s friends in the process of getting out and exploring.

Plus, it would take too long to find acceptable clothing and armor if she went through the halls to search. She had no idea where anything was.

Connie taped the cotton ball down with the robot band-aid and beamed at it.

*Cute.*

She looked up and let out a wide, toothy grin.

There was an air vent over the cabinet.

It was small, too small for a fully-grown man, but possibly big enough for one severely malnourished and already petite woman, if she moved very carefully.

She pulled the room’s one visitor’s chair over to the cabinet, grabbed herself a scalpel and a tongue depressor, and climbed on top. It only took a little bit of work with the depressor to get the screws holding the cover of the vent loose.

It was almost as if someone *wanted* her to have a way out, she mused to herself with a smug grin, and she wiggled her way into the vent.

Action movies had always loved this crap, showing spacious, thick walled, sound absorbing, and well bolted vents that were designed for at least one but often multiple people weighing in the 200+ pound range. Connie hummed the Mission Impossible theme song in her own head as she shimmied through the space. Her arms were straight out in front of her, the scalpel gripped tight in her right hand, as she shifted slowly and carefully down the metal tube.

This vent was nothing like what the movies portrayed. Small, the slightest wrong move set off loud clangs, and it wobbled ever so slightly as she wiggled through it. If she’d been at a healthy weight, she might not have actually been able to make the squeeze.

Connie hoped she wasn’t too far from the nearest changing room. The scrubs they’d given her were ugly as sin and itches something awful! Plus, she didn’t particularly want to spend an
excessive amount of time in the vents, no matter how clean they were on this base.

She’d never been in any kind of military space not dedicated to impressing some big wig that was this well maintained. A woman could set up food and eat it right off the metal...if she could fit.

Connie counted in her head, tried to keep track of how long she was in the vents. She shuffled for what she thought was five minutes, rested for five, and moved forward.

The process was slow going, not just because she’d lost so much of her muscle mass, but because there was so little space to make energy efficient movements. Every time she found a vent to peek out of, she found herself staring at soldiers, and was forced to move on.

It was not more than an hour before she was exhausted, but she pushed on, well and truly ready not to be stuck in that stupid, empty room anymore. She did have to wonder why no one had bothered to set off an alarm for her since she had to have missed a dose of something or other by that point.

She yawned, softly.

Plunk.

Skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter.

Thunk.

There was a soft noise ahead. It sounded like a small, chittering animal. Connie held her breath and froze in place.

It was possible that there were mice or other small rodents in the vents, it happened in places like this. Hell, even the MoI wasn’t able to escape pest animals.

It was a common sight, walking out to the hangar bay at odd hours to see Niner veraciously abuse the flight staff as they unloaded the supplies the Mother of Invention needed in order to function with so many people on it. Crates of food, medical detritus, office supplies, weapons, warehouse goods of all shapes and sizes. Every now and again, Niner would hit up the ground level markets and bring back contraband for the soldiers in return for favors and goodwill.

And if they had crates, those crates were originally stored in warehouses. Warehouses were the homes of all kinds of things, and those things would inevitably sneak their way into the crates and onto the MoI. Rats, bugs, the occasional squirrel, one time there was even a pigeon, and wasn’t that a laugh riot when Theta saw the damned thing flying around.

He’d wanted to play with it so badly.

Pidge the Pidgeon unfortunately met the fate that all the animals who snuck on the MoI eventually met and was poisoned to death less than two weeks. It was the way of things, either they eventually starved to death or were poisoned out, but they were there.

Theta had been despondent for days, and North wasn’t much better. It was one of the few times she’d seen South go full on protective mode over North. No one, not even the Director himself, could make North go to lessons, training, or stick to his diet plan while he and Theta were in mourning in his head. York and Carolina spent days plying North and Theta with sweets and games, in an effort to drag them out of their funk. Wyoming and Connie cleared out a space for a funeral, Wash and Florida built Pidge a proper coffin, Maine played the guitar at the funeral, and Niner gave Pidge a proper space burial and shot him out into the sky.
Sure, it felt a little silly, but at the same time, it was one of the best bonding moments they’d ever had together as a team.

It kept Connie up at night sometimes.

Thunk. Thunk-thunk.

A flap opened up in front of her, a good ten feet down the tunnel, and a high-pitched sound filled the small space, like short bursts from a whistling teakettle ready to pour.

Two tiny, glowing pinpricks of light crawled out of the flap.

She tried to shift backwards, but couldn’t get far before the glowing pinpricks turned into furry head. The thing had a face with an unsettlingly long, thin snout, brown, black, and red markings, glistening teeth, large claws, and a two-foot-long, wiggling torso.

It lowered itself against the floor of the vent and opened its mouth wide.

Impossibly wide.

It ran straight at her face.

“AUGH!”

“SCREEEE!!”

Connie thrashed in the small space, unable to even really bend her elbows much to protect herself. She thrashed the scalpel back and forth as voraciously as she could, but she didn’t have the angle to get a good throw in.

It ran for her hands, ripped the scalpel from her grip, and jumped back. Its unsettlingly long body twisted like an angry serpent, and Connie realized it had eight clawed legs instead of four, like any god-fearing mammal should.

“STAY BACK!”

The bottom of the vent fell open underneath her, and Connie dropped like a rock.

“AH!”

She was lucky, she supposed, that someone was underneath to catch her.

The man didn’t crumple under her weight, but it was a near thing. The landing stuck his armor plates right into her ribs.

“Agent Connecticut, what the fuck are you doing?!”

“There’s a thing in the vent!”

She looked up, and the thing was at the edge of the vent. It stared down with dark green, soulless eyes, the scalpel between its teeth. It shook its head back and forth and hissed, low and angry.

She tried to get out of the man’s arms, but he wouldn’t let go.

“Oh, god!”
“Oh dear! Miss Agent, do calm down! Everything is going to be-“

It jumped out of the vent, directly for Connie’s face.

“SHIT!”

“Meta! NO!”

It landed on her, the scalpel unpleasantly close to her jugular, then jumped immediately to the floor. It turned to look at Connie and the man holding her and started jumping around, leaping, thrashing, and flailing in spastic motions that would have been funny if it didn’t look like it was going to slice her up with the knife still in its mouth.

Whatever it was doing, General Kimball was fucking pissed about it. She made a slashing motion with her hand and stomped a foot hard against the floor.

“NO! Metaphor, you stop that, right now!”

Connie blinked.

The thing, whatever it was, dashed away and ran up the woman’s leg to her shoulder and made a loud chirruping noise.

Kimball delicately plucked the scalpel from its mouth.

“How in the hell did you manage to get ahold of this, silly girl? Who taught you to play with knives?”

The man lowered Connie to the ground and nudged her into the chair next to him, hands shaking as he made sure she was settled. He seemed as freaked about the whole thing as she was, but he hadn’t had a knife wielding demon at his throat.

“Dear god, they are learning. The weasels will be slitting our throats in our sleep at this rate.”

General Kimball tucked the knife into her desk with a loud snort of amusement and handed the thing a round jingling ball with ribbons attached.

“I don’t know what you were hunting, you little brat, but you definitely found me something worth a toy.”

It snatched the toy out of General Kimball’s hand and used its front two paws to play with it, while it wrapped itself around General Kimball like a scarf and screeched.

“Yeah, you kill that jingle ball, Meta.”

The general scratched its chin and once it was finally still and in the light, Connie could admit that it was pretty cute. It was like a cross between a weasel and a snake, only with eight legs and a much narrower mouth.

“You,” the General pointed to Connie, “are an idiot. Don’t do that again.”

She smiled and felt more than a little sheepish as she did so.

“Sorry.”

“You’re not sorry, you’re just apologizing because you got caught. Metaphor here is venomous. If
she’d bitten you while you were up in the vents, you could have died. She’s a ratter, she kills things that are in places they don’t belong, and it doesn’t matter to her that you’re a giant. As far as she’s concerned, you’re not a friend and therefore you need to die. Not to mention she’s somehow developed the ability to steal and wield very sharp blades effectively.”

Connie really didn’t know what to say to that.

“Shit.”

“Yeah, and if you kill my soldiers because you’re being an idiot, or kill them because they’re defending something from you, I will personally break your skull open with a very tiny hammer and stick my fingers into your brain just because I can. Fur or no, she’s an officer in this army. Are we clear?”

“Crystal. For the record though, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to scare her.”

General Kimball snorted again and scratched Metaphor’s ears. The weasel(?) made a purring noise around the toy shoved in her mouth, and thrashed her whole body around the general’s neck.

“She’s not scared, she’s pissed. You were in her territory and you may have made her lose a kill. Why. Were. You. In. The. Vents?”

The man sighed.

“General Kimball, is this really necessary?”

“Considering she was warned if she broke out of her room she’d be shot on sight? Yeah.”

“Excuse me?”

“She’s the Freelancer who helped the Reds and Blues escape Hargrove’s ship.”

“Ah.”

“Actually, General Páez, this is a perfect opportunity for you.”

He cocked his head to the side, and Connie wished she understood exactly what the dynamic in the room was and why it was there.

The two generals looked at each other like they both wanted the other to be lit on fire.

“For what?”

“For you to take the lead. Agent Connecticut here clearly needs something to do to keep her busy so she doesn’t feel the urge to climb through the vents and cause all kinds of chaos. Since threats of death and bodily harm seem to do nothing for her, network, General. Bond. Earn some good will. Maybe this one won’t think you’re an idiot.”

Connie was more than a little confused. The woman she’d met had seemed generous and compassionate. She was nothing like the woman who stood there, stroked her Bond Villain pet and made snide comments.

“That’s a little harsh, isn’t it in General Kimball?”

“Maybe, but my point stands. You may be physically capable of climbing through the vents, but that doesn’t mean it’s good for you or safe for you to do.”
The man, the other general she supposed, offered her his hand.

“I, ah, my name is Lorenzo Páez, and I am the current General of the Federal Army of Chorus. It is a pleasure, Agent Connecticut. Why don’t we get you back into your room, and I will be more than happy to provide you with whatever you need to make your stay in medical more bearable.”

The food on Chorus left something to be desired.

North had thought the meal the night before (had it really been only a day and a half at that point?) had been just short of absolutely awful, but that apparently had nothing on breakfast.

Powdered eggs and rehydrated vegetables were not high on the list of foods North was particularly excited about. Based on some other reactions, North was not alone in that boat.

The Freelancers all had brave faces, forced smiles, and determined chewing, but the Chorus soldiers were a lot less mature about it. He watched Palomo off to the side, pick out small bits of meat from the powdered eggs and deliberately push the small portion of vegetables off to the side of his plate with laser focus.

No one had commented on Palomo’s new…status, since they were interrupted by the General, but there were these little threads of tension that would pop up every now and again. Jensen in particular had decided to stare him down from her seat on the bed she’d claimed for herself, as if she could see who had touched him with enough staring.

North couldn’t help the thrill of pity he felt for the young man. That was going to be an unhealthy relationship in the long run if they didn’t figure their feelings out and learn to talk like adults.

Bitters walked behind the younger man and whapped Palomo on the back of the head as he strolled past to deposit his empty plate in the bin.

“Hey!”

Bitters pointed down at the plate in Palomo’s hand.

“Veggies, Palomo. Vitamins. They’re good for you. You’ve still got at least one more growth spurt in you, and you’ll need that if you don’t want to stay short forever.”

Palomo looked despondently at his plate and sighed.

“But they’re gross!”

Yacavone and Marconi blew raspberries at Bitters.

“Gross!”

“Super gross!”

Niner hid a grin in her fist. The woman had decided at some point in the night that teens of the planet were her responsibility, and while it was clear she wanted to comment on how adorable the two were, it looked like she didn’t want to undercut Bitters when he handed out solid advice.
“Whatever.”

Andersmith held up his hands imploringly at the younger captain.

“Come on now, the kitchen staff worked hard to take care of us. Don’t be cruel.”

Bitters rolled his eyes and flopped down on the couch next to Folami, who scrunched her nose and tossed her legs over his lap. Bitters pulled a bottle of nail polish out of his pocket and immediately set to work painting her toes, like it was something he did all the time.

“Andersmith, it’s fine. They’re not our responsibility. If they want scurvy, that’s their choice.”

Demir looked up from his plate, where he’d wasted fifteen minutes in an attempt to hide the vegetables under a tiny pile of uneaten eggs, as if that would make it less obvious.

“Scurvy isn’t real. It’s a myth perpetuated by orange farmers to get people to purchase their wares during the off season even though everyone knows dehydrated fruit is the worst.”

-What?-

Theta’s sheer disbelief mirrored North’s own. The Freelancers all paused and turned to look at Demir, who’s laser focus on hiding his vegetables kept him from realizing he was being stared at.

“What?”

Folami let out a deep, long suffering sigh of disappointment and waved a lazy hand around the room. She had clearly had this conversation before and had exhausted herself on it.

“They don’t believe in scurvy.”

Florida shook his head and laughed.

“Scurvy is very real, it’s a really real disease that caused all sorts of horrible caused by a lack of vitamin C. Sailors and pirates often died of it back in the early days of exploration on earth. If you get it and don’t get treatment, there can be poor wound healing, personality changes, and finally death from infection or bleeding. How a person could not believe in scurvy on a planet that is perfect for cultivating it just boggles my mind!”

“What?”

“Nu uh.”

Niner growled and pointed at Marconi and Yacavone with her fork.

“Yes huh. It’s real. There are lots of diseases and sicknesses that come from malnutrition. Eat your goddamned fruits and veggies or your eyes will fall out of your head when you sneeze.”

“EWWWW!!!”

Bitters and Folami shared a look as the soldiers grimaced but dutifully ate their way through their vegetables, before the pair snorted in unison and Bitters went back to delicately painting Folami’s toes. Smosna stepped up behind him and dangled a bottle in front of his eyes, and he grunted.

North wondered if the man had younger sisters or if he was just so used to being set upon for grooming tasks that he didn’t bother to protest anymore.
“Oh, so you’ll believe the strangers, but you won’t believe me. I see how it is. Brats.”

“Bittersh.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m just gonna shoot rubber bands at their heads when they’re not looking. It’ll be fine.”

North grimaced as he popped a slimy green vegetable into his mouth and shrugged.

“I get it though, it’s not like they’re tasty veggies. What I wouldn’t give for some fresh spinach or some broccoli. Or kale.”

Maine snorted and shook his head.

“Hey, just because you don’t like leafy greens doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy them. I’m not making you eat my kale and pear salads.”

York groaned.

“North, I love you man, but you can’t pretend that thing you used to make on the MoI was a kale and pear salad. That was frozen kale, canned pears, and delusions born of desperation. All the fancy cooking classes in the world can’t help you if you don’t have the ingredients, man.”

North was about to make a rebuttal, really he was, when a tapping noise came from the quarantine entry.

He turned around to see a soldier in white and purple, standing outside the quarantine window, waving cheerily.

Andersmith waved back, a delighted grin on his face.

“That’s Doctor Grey!”

SOUTH!

-SOUTH!-

North was on his feet with his hands pressed to the glass across from the doctor before he could blink. He vaguely heard the sounds of scuffling and clattering behind him, but none of that was important, or stood out over Theta’s voice as he chirped in agitation in the back of North’s head.

-SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH! SOUTH!-

“Well, hello there! Someone’s eager to see me! Are you Agent South’s next of kin?”

He nodded, fast and sharp.

“I’m her brother.”

York was suddenly behind him, with a hand on his shoulder to pull him back from the glass, just a little. North didn’t realize he’d pressed his whole body against the door until he scooted away from it.

“I am Doctor Emily Grey, the leading surgeon on your sister’s case! I was going to let one of the other doctors get you squared away, what with it being so busy around here, but then I thought
you’d probably like to hear all about her condition from me! I am sorry it took so long to get to you, we had a ruptured appendix just after we finished with her last night, and then we had two strokes caused by brain aneurisms within the span of a few hours! Oh my goodness, I am so tired! You know, I’ve been chugging caffeine for days at this point. I really wish some of the other surgeons would step up to the plate and do their jobs, I’ve still not gotten the steak General Kimball promised me!”

Wyoming, Florida, Maine, and Niner surrounded North on all sides. It was comforting to have their familiar presences surround him, the breaths he’d never thought he’d hear again helped settle the frightened, twisting parts inside him that weren’t caused by Theta’s anxiety.

He’d wondered what had taken so long to get them a response. He’d hoped that they weren’t jerking him around.

“Did she make it?”

The Doctor poked at the tablet in her hand and pressed the screen to the glass.

An above view shot showed South buried under thick blankets, her hand clasped in the grip of a woman sitting next to her, with an IV in her arm.

“Oh, of course she did! She was in rough shape all over, but she was amazingly well intact, especially given the circumstances. No, I just wanted to update you that she is stable and in recovery! Oh, wait!”

She pulled the tablet back and pressed a button.

“Excuse me, Medical Officer Danvers? Please look up, wave at the camera and…what would you like her to do to prove this is a live feed?”

Wyoming tapped the right side of his nose twice.

“Tap your nose twice, please!”

Danvers looked up, waved, and tapped her nose, before she turned her attention back to South.

A tear ran down his cheek.

She’s alive.

North could feel Theta’s excitement buzz in the back of his mind. The spin was so fast and sharp, he felt a little sick. It was like spinning in circles.

-Stable and in recovery!-

He gave a gasp of relief, they all did, and rested his forehead against the glass. His whole body felt weak with released tension.

“There were just a few complications I would like to warn you about, so you’re not surprised later!”

And just like that, the relief turned to ice.

-No.-

North looked up to catch the doctor in the eye.
He hoped his expression was icy enough to stop her in her tracks. His voice was hard as stone and
twice as cold.

“Complications?”

Theta shifted unhappily in the back of North’s mind. One word brought him from ecstatic to
terrified, and North understood completely. He was seconds away from vomiting the slimy
vegetables and powdery eggs right onto his own feet.

-She’s not allowed to have medical complications, North. This planet doesn’t have sufficient
recourses to take care of significant trauma!-

“Yes, you are aware at this point that two of her limbs were in interesting positions? Well, the
bones were more than just broken, they were pulverized into itty bitty little shards! If she hadn’t
been wearing the armor that essentially locked her limbs in place when she landed, they would
have flopped around like disgusting wet pasta instead! Her bones were more like splinters than
anything else!”

-Why is she so happy?! That’s horrible!-

I don’t know, Theta.

North’s whole body shuddered. His head swam, and his knees started to shake.

Florida squeezed North’s wrist gently and rubbed his thumb against North’s veins, light and careful
in soothing, circles. The older man, the oldest Freelancer, gave the doctor a polite, but stern smile.

“You had to replace the bones, then? One of the kids on the truck mentioned that it was painful to
do that. How long is the recovery time.”

“Oh, my no, silly! We didn’t replace the bones, what a waste of effort that would have been! No
we just cut off the ruined limbs!”

North’s knees went out from underneath him.

No.

Maine’s strong grip around North’s waist was the only thing that kept him from landing on the
floor. White noise filled his head.

-No!-

He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe.

Theta howled in the back of North’s head.

-NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!-

Florida frowned gently, like a teacher trying to correct a student without letting the student realize
they made a mistake.

“Cut? I’m sorry, I must have misheard you.”

North could feel his heart race in his chest, like he’d been on the training course for hours without
a break. Like South was on a solo mission without even Niner to back her up.
Like his whole world was being ripped away from him.

He felt like he was hanging off a cliff, and the woman had just cut off his fingers.

“You cut off his sister’s arm and leg?”

York’s voice was thick with rage.

“Mmm hmm. We also had to patch up a few bits of internal bleeding and we had to remove an *eensy* bit of lower intestine that had been perforated, but the rest of her organs are fully intact and all the internal bleeding was pretty easily stopped! No brain damage or anything! She’s a very lucky woman!”

-NORTH!-

North slammed his fist against the glass and snarled.

He could taste bile.

“Lucky?! You mutilated her! You ruined her life! How is that lucky?!”

Doctor Grey crossed her arms over her chest and looked North dead in the eye.

“She fell from outer space, on the outside of a crashing ship, with nothing to protect her but some old equipment and a suit of armor! The fact that she didn’t burn up in the atmosphere, die on impact, suffer radiation poisoning, or die immediately from her injuries is a blessing you should be thanking the gods for! Still, even with divine intervention, you cannot do what she did without some kind of sacrifice.”

Theta wailed in the back of North’s head.

“She is alive. You are all alive. The supplies you brought remained almost entirely intact thanks to her actions on your ship. That woman is a hero, and is going to be recognized as such for the rest of her life for what she did. And it’s only *because* we removed her arm and leg that, that life can be a long and happy one!”

Doctor Grey held up her tablet and waggled it in front of the window.

“If you think I cut her limbs off for fun, you’d be wrong! While I do enjoy a complicated surgery, her right arm and left leg were unsalvageable, not just complicated! I cut them off because they were literally nothing but bloody masses of ruined tissue and microscopic shards! There was no way to remove all the bone splinters, and believe me, I tried! Wanna see?”

She flipped her tablet around and pressed it against the glass. York heaved and tried to pull him away from the glass.

“North, don’t look at that.”

But North’s eyes were already on the datapad. There was a silver tray with a swollen, black and purple mass of meat that had been split open down the middle resting on top. If he couldn’t make out the few visible details of her tattoos, he might not have believed it was a human arm.

No.

-NO! WHY WOULD SHE DO THAT?! NORTH, MAKE HER STOP! MAKE HER FIX IT!-
North’s whole body started to shake. He gagged.

-SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO HELP SOUTH! SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO FIX HER! THEY ALL SAID SHE WOULD FIX HER!-

He’d seen death before. Blood and gore and any number of upsetting things. They’d never phased him in all his years of serving. He had no fear when it came to that sort of thing.

-SHE CAN’T DO THAT! SHE’S TAKING SOUTH’S LIFE AWAY!-

But they’d cut off her arm.

-North. North. Please.-

North could see her wrist, with the infinity tattoo on it that matched his own, neatly sliced in half.

“Jesus.”

“Yep! But, if she had to get her limbs chopped off, she fell on the right planet for it! Our medical technology may be out of date in a lot of areas, but amputations and robotic limbs are not one of them! We have lots of practice, and while we may not have food or medicine in abundance, we’ve certainly got cybernetic prosthetics! She’ll be up and moving in no time!”

Wyoming stepped in-between North and the glass as Maine and York dragged him backwards a few feet. His legs were jello beneath him. He felt his chest tear open, felt the blood gush out of him and onto the floor in thick, foul bursts.

He wondered why no one saw it.

“Is now really the time for all of that? You’ve just told the man you mutilated his sister, and you want to talk about prosthetics? Give us a moment, for pity’s sake.”

“Pity isn’t something we have an abundance of here! At this point over 30% of the remaining population has received a life altering illness or injury and requires some form of mechanical aid. We are all very determined to keep them in tiptop shape! I’m sure a few of the soldiers you’re hanging out with will be happy to tell you all about their own prosthetics so you can rest a little easier! I’ve got to go now, I’m about to fall asleep on my feet, and I’ve still got a meal to collect on! General Kimball makes the best horse steak out there, I don’t know how she does it!”

North sobbed as the woman flounced down the hall, happy as could be, while his world crumpled beneath his feet.

Theta spun and spun in North’s head, screaming in anguish. North clutched at his head. He could barely hang on to the cliff’s edge. Could feel the earth crumble as he tried desperately to hang on.

He couldn’t calm the AI down.

He couldn’t stop him.

Couldn’t help her.

Couldn’t save her.

“Oh dear.”
North had to fix it.

He didn’t know how to fix it.

But he had to.

That was his JOB.

But he couldn’t fix this.

Florida pulled North’s head up and caught his eye.

North was the responsible one, the caring one, the fixer, that’s why they gave him Theta in the First Place.

“Oh, dear. Alright, Pet, deep breaths now. Theta, stop what you’re doing, right now, young man. Do not make me pull you.”

North’s whole body seized.

Once.

Twice.

Suddenly he was jerking. His jaw tightened.

He could taste blood.

“Alright, I warned you. Close your eyes, I’m going to knock you out.”

Theta screamed and jerked North backwards.

-NO!- “NO!”

Maine wrapped his arms around North and pinned his arms to his sides hard. Theta and North kicked and screamed and thrashed.

Traitor. Traitorrrr! It’s your fault! South is GOING to Die because of yYyyYyooOooUuuUu!

Florida raised his fist and slammed it down.

She was awake and aware in an instant, as she always was.

She was awake on a bed, in a cold room, in a place she didn’t know.

In a body she didn’t recognize the feel of.

Everything felt wrong. Constricted. Like a glove fitted too tightly for her hands.

Tex blinked and shifted in the bed. Something was…weird about the body, but she wasn’t sure
Exactly what.

There was a firm pressure on her right hand.

A soldier in grey was beside her, their hand gripped tightly around hers, like they were afraid she was going to disappear. She didn’t recognize the armor model as anything special, but the colors… the colors looked just like-

“You’re safe, but in unknown territory, don’t try to move yet.”

Washington.

Washington’s voice.

It had been ages since she’d heard Washington’s voice. Not in weeks, at least, maybe months.

He sounded wrecked, like he hadn’t had a drink of water in days.

Why the fuck was he holding her hand?

“Wash? What the fuck is going on? Where are we?”

She shifted her hips and grimaced. That…wasn’t right.

Concerned, and a little bit creeped out, Tex reached down and…

Oh, HELL NO!

“Am I a guy right now?!”

Wash snorted and squeezed her hand.

“Yeah…ok, so you’re still not really coherent, that’s ok.”

“Not coherent? I’m pretty fucking sure I’ve got a fucking dick at the moment, and it’s weirding me the fuck out. Sitrep, now. What the fuck is happening?”

He laced their fingers together and just…sat. It was probably the second least comfortable interaction she had ever had with the younger man in her life.

The first of course, was teaching him how to win at strip poker.

Still, hand holding was a close second.

“I will answer all of your questions as fully and completely as I know how but you need to answer a few of mine first, can you do that?”

She could hear the gentle smile in his voice, the soft, quiet that she had never associated with him before. It was older, more tired.

It sounded like a man in love.

And it didn’t sound like Wash at all.

“You’re really gonna play that game with me?”

“I don’t want to start you at the wrong point, because with our lives, it would be confusing as fuck.
Would it be easier if we did a back and forth? You answer one question and I’ll answer one?"

Something was off.

Really off.

The way he held himself, the way his cadence moved, the way he clung to her fucking hand. None of this was Washington.

None of it was right.

“Take off your helmet.”

Wash stared at her for a moment, shrugged, lifted his helmet-

What the fuck?

Greying hair, scars, and crow’s feet. Eyes that were so steeped with exhaustion, she was surprised he managed to stay awake at all. Stubble. His cheeks were gaunt, they had none of the boyish baby fat he’d managed to hold on to during the project.

He looked sick. He looked like he was halfway to the grave.

When did he get so old?

How long was she out?

“Happy?”

She shook her head and tried not to let the unsettled feeling rock her.

“No. Not really.”

She shifted around until she found a relatively comfortable position.

“Alright, ask away.”

“What’s the last thing you remember? And I mean actually remember not what you think might be going on. I need to get a gauge for where you’re at so I can fill you in.”

Tex’s left arm was a twisted, useless hunk of metal at her side. Her knees were both damaged, hard to move, but still semi-functional. She hauled herself up as best she could.

“Sheila?”

“H-h-h-he-l-l-l-ll-lo, A-g-e-n-g-e-n-t T-t-t-t-t-“

“Sheila, run diagnostics!”

She turned around, alarmed by the silence around her after so much noise.

Junior’s child seat was flipped upside down and child-free. There was a tiny streak of blood against the buckle.

“Andy! Where’s the kid?”

The bomb didn’t make a noise.
“Andy?”

Tex stumbled forward.

-To your right, under the collapsed console.-

-Is he dead?- 

-Heat signature is inconclusive, but there does seem to be a heartbeat.-

Tex collapsed to her wrecked knees in front of the console and hauled it up with her one good arm. A pitiful, frightened honk met her ears.

“Hey, kid. Come on out.”

He shook his head and bared his teeth at her.

It wouldn’t hurt. Her ‘pain’ receptors were off. Still, she didn’t want the kid to break his baby teeth on her armor.

Jump in, Omega, let’s get this over with.

-The child does not have implants.-

What?

-Implants. I can travel using the radio as a medium of transportation, but I don’t have anywhere to go if he doesn’t have the implants to house an AI. Florida did not have a chance to drill him.-

-Shit.

Junior was bleeding sluggishly, but didn’t seem too injured from the crash. She supposed she should be thankful for Doc and his bag of tricks, without the baby alien sized armor, they’d probably have a dead messiah instead of a hurt one.

“Hey, kid, come on out. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“Blargh, blargh, blargh.”

Tex shifted the console so the weight of it was on her wrecked shoulder, tested to make sure it wasn’t going to collapse, then held out her good hand.

“I’ve got you, kid. You’re safe with me. Promise.”

Tentatively, Junior reached out and gripped her finger in his claws.

He’s fucking cute. Why couldn’t we be doing this to an adult?

-Yes, he’s very cute. So are humans when they are small. That doesn’t mean we don’t stomp their heads when they piss us off.-

-I have never stepped on a child’s head, Omega, and I’m not going to start. There are lines.

-Drill the abomination so we can get this taken care of.-

“A-a-a-a-agen-gen-gen-gen-“
“What, Sheila?”


Tex pulled Junior out from under the console then punched the flickering screen next to her. It showed a large person in white armor and a fucking fishbowl helmet.

“Maine.”

She snarled.

No time left.

-We cannot fight in this condition.-

Can you take him over?

-I will attempt to do so.-

We cannot let him hurt the kid.

-Honestly, I would prefer he didn’t hurt us. I couldn’t give two figs about the abomination!-

Yeah, there’s something fucking wrong with you.

-Oh, I am well aware. Diagnostics have proven to be tricky little buggers.-

Seriously, when did you pick up that accent? You never had it before Blood Gulch.

Tex hauled Junior into her arms, squalling and squealing in distress as the console fell from her shoulder and slammed to the ground.

“Shut the fuck up, I’m saving your life!”

She dragged them both across the cockpit to a small bit of storage space. There was nowhere near enough room for her inside it, but there should have been just enough room for one tiny alien child.

“Get in here, and stay very quiet. There’s a bad guy coming, a really bad guy, and if he finds you, he’s going to hurt you.”

Tex shoved Junior into the space.

“Honk!”

“Shh. Listen to me. Do not come out. If we make it through this, I’ll find you, otherwise…”

Tex handed Junior a small chip and a little black square with a button. She hoped it would be enough to get him to safety.

-What are you doing, Tex?-  

Hopefully? The right thing, for once.

“Wait until it’s very quiet and he’s gone, push the button, and when someone comes to get you out, you hand them that chip. Got it?”
“Honk-honk.”

“Good. They’ll take you away from here, and you scream your head off, ok? Scream like they’re hurting you. Scream like you’re scared. Scream until they bring your dad to you.”

Junior whimpered and blarghed.

“Hopefully this is all a moot point and we’re gonna be fine, but I don’t know. Just…stay quiet.”

She slammed the hatch shut.


Maine’s looming figure entered the cockpit. His body moved with the heavy swagger of a man used to throwing his weight around. She’d seen plenty of that swagger after the accident, and knew exactly what it meant.

Maine wasn’t taking prisoners this time.

Omega?

-On it.-

Omega made the jump.

Tex waited.

Maine paused.

His body tensed for a moment.

Sigma appeared on his shoulder.

“Oh, Agent Texas. That wasn’t the brightest move you two could have made, was it?”

“Fuck. You. You mother fucking piece of shit!”

Maine pulled a storage unit off his back and growled.

“What the fuck is that?”

“You know exactly what it is, Agent Texas, and you know what it’s for. Don’t worry, this will only hurt for a moment.”

“Being in Blood Gulch. We were trying to stop the war, and Wyoming finally let me in on his fucking plan. I had Wyoming’s helmet, Andy, and Junior. Sheila was driving the ship. We took off, something went wrong, and I woke up here.”

He nodded, slipped his helmet back on, and picked up her hand again. He brushed his thumb across the back of her hand and her knuckles.

She was starting to get a little freaked.

Yeah, she’d liked the little asshole, back in the day, but they’d never been close enough for him to think it was ok to lay hands on her. Clearly, something had changed in the time between what she remembered and the present, but she honestly had no fucking clue what it was.
What the fuck had she lost?

“Ok, that’s better than I hoped for. Wyoming and Florida both survived Blood Gulch. They went into hiding. I don’t have anything else on them, you’ll have to ask on that one. You were successful in kidnapping Junior, but Omega didn’t implant in him.”

“Shit.”

He brushed her knuckles again.

“The war is over, and it had nothing to do with kidnapping Junior. He and Tucker ended up as ambassadors if you can believe it.”

“That sounds made up, but ok.”

He squeezed her hand, likely to try and be reassuring, but all it did was make her want to slap him upside his head.

“Project Freelancer is gone.”

“What?”

“Yeah, like completely gone. The Director is dead.”

“What?”

“Agent Maine was taken over by rampant AI, which explains his multiple attempted murders.”

“What?”

“Wash spent some time in prison.”

“Wash?”

Since when did he talk about himself in the third person?

“Uh huh, lets see, turns out you’re not a ghost, you’re actually an AI based off the director’s memories of his dead wife.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“I wish I was joking because really, that’s just super creepy. What’s worse is, apparently you weren’t ‘right’ enough for him so he kept trying to change you. Fucking moron didn’t know a good thing when he had it.”

She suddenly felt dirty, like she’d been swimming in a particularly polluted lake. Goosebumps flared up across her arms and legs.

“You can say that again. So, who all is dead?”

“Tex, don’t panic, ok?”

That didn’t sound promising.

“Ok?”

“Alpha Squad is here. They made it.”
“You’re…gonna have to be more specific.”

“Florida, Wyoming, Maine, but he’s looking all kinds of not homicidal and possessed anymore, that’s a whole different story, North, South, York-“

She let out a relieved snort.

“Glad that fucker stuck to the plan.”

“Connecticut-“

Tex shot up.

“Wait, what?!“

“She didn’t die. They stuck her in a cryotube to preserve her body and it accidentally saved her life. She’s…in rough shape, but she’ll make it.”

CT wasn’t dead? Tex hadn’t killed her?

She…didn’t know how to feel about that.

How do you deal with the fact that you didn’t murder someone you thought you’d murdered who you thought was an enemy but was really a misguided idiot trying to do the right thing?

“That’s…really hard to believe.”

“I swear, I wouldn’t lie to you. Not about this. So, where were we? Connecticut is alive, Wash is here, and…Please don’t jump up again, I promised Tucker we wouldn’t break his body if we let you use it.”

She snorted and tried to loosen the unfamiliar muscles.

“That was kind of a stupid promise, but sure. I’m relaxed.”

He let out a slow breath.

“Carolina is here, too.”

…

Tex was quiet for a moment. She could feel her heart speed up, could feel her shoulders try to shake.

“She survived her fall, Tex.”

She tried to smile at Wash, but it felt more like a grimace.

“Does she still hate me?”

Wash looked away.

“She…you figured it out, huh?”

“Yeah. York and I got shit faced, mourning or some such bullshit. Can’t say I understand how I didn’t realize it sooner. I just thought we had a good old fashioned rivalry going, and it turns out she hated me for stealing daddy’s love, which is all kinds of especially fucked up now, knowing
I’m…based on his wife.”

Wash squeezed her hand gently and tipped his head to the side just slightly, in a move that Tex recognized. It was familiar. Very familiar.

But not from Wash.

“Don’t worry about that anymore, you are your own person, Tex. You’re free. Carolina…she’s still really fucked up. She was there when the Director…died. She’s healing, but it’s taking time.”

Tex looked away for a moment to collect herself. This was all too weird, too uncomfortable. If she was based off of the Director’s wife, and the Director was actually Carolina’s father, did that make Tex responsible for Carolina in some way? Was she supposed to feel all maternal and shit, knowing all that? Was she supposed to want a mother/daughter relationship with a woman she felt just a little older than? She didn’t feel like Carolina’s mother, didn’t even want to try for that.

Mostly, she wanted to hit something.

She took the quiet moment to around the room and get a feel for the place she’d been brought to life. The room was square and grey with weird and out of date looking tech scattered around. It was an ugly little room with almost no personality, and the majority of the color came from Washington’s yellow stripes.

Tex let out a low sigh.

“So, the Reds and the Blues. Are they dead?”

“Oh, no! They’re here, too! We’re all war heroes and shit!”

Tex snorted and cocked an eyebrow.

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Oh yeah! Caboose is off doing whatever the fuck he does when I’m not there to keep him out of trouble, and you’re hanging out in Tucker’s body until we can get you a body of your own. The Reds are on a mission with Carolina right now, and Lopez is running the armory. I don’t know who thought it was a good idea to have the robot that only speaks Spanish issue the guns, but whatever. Oh! Hey, so get this. Washington? Totally a Blue.”

Washington being a Blue made perfect sense actually, in the way that Carolina being a Red made sense. What didn’t make sense was Washington speaking in the third person about himself as if he wasn’t himself.

“And Church?”

He squeezed her hand tight and ran his thumb over her knuckles, the way…the same way Alpha used to in Blood Gulch after she’d punched something.

“I, Tex, I’m…I’m right here. I’m here.”

Her shoulders tensed.

Well, that explained why Wash was acting so fucking weird, why his voice sounded funny, and why he thought it was ok to just touch her.

The fact that Alpha didn’t feel the need to let her know upfront though, made her want to put that
asshole through his paces.

“We’re not ghosts. We’re not dead. I’ve been riding around in this fucking janky body for months at this point.”

Janky body? Ok, yeah, he looked like he’d seen better days, but no one in their right mind would call Wash’s body janky.

Also, that was fucking rude, since Wash had apparently allowed Alpha ride along space and full control sometimes.

“And no one has noticed you living in Wash’s body?”

He cocked his head to the side and snorted, the way Church liked to do when someone said something he didn’t understand but was too damned proud to admit it. Dear god, how had she managed to put up with him for as long as she did?

She apparently had a thing for assholes, for some damned reason.

“So, where are we?”

“This is a tiny planet in the middle of nowhere called Chorus. They’ve been embroiled in a civil war that was only kind of a civil war and was also kind of being prodded along by some mercenaries being paid by an evil megacorporation profiting off the war. Getting that much out of them is kind of like pulling teeth, so maybe wait until they start talking about it on their own before you start asking the soldiers questions about all of that. Those mercs were being funded by Charon industries, the same fuckers who were funding the insurrectionists during the war. The soldiers here are cautious and they’re not so good with outsiders, for good reason.”

She moved into a more upright position and pulled her hand out of his grip. She was not feeling all the touching, at that moment, and was more than a little annoyed at the amount of not information he threw at her.

“If they’re not big on outsiders, why are we here?”

“Ok, so there was this ship with the guys, Carolina and Wash on it that crash-landed here. We thought it was an accident. It wasn’t. The mercenaries crashed us on purpose to get at the leftover tech from Project Freelancer after it was disbanded with the intention of killing off all the survivors, but we survived. We helped kill off the bad guys, some of them at least, revealed Hargrove as the puppet master, and saved the day. We sent out a broadcast that caught the attention of the rest of the Freelancers, who I didn’t even know were alive, and they came to try and rescue us. Well, Wash, they didn’t know about the rest of the people here, and then they crashed their ship like a bunch of idiots.”

He paused for breath and winced a little.

“Well, ok, Niner’s not an idiot, she couldn’t have known she was careening into a tractor beam.”

Tex perked a little at that.

She liked Niner.

While she hadn’t gotten a while lot of contact with the half insane pilot, every moment she’d spent in the woman’s presence was a treasure and a gem. She cussed like a sailor, drank like a fish, and fought like a girl.
The woman knew how to throw a right hook that could put any man on his knees.

“Niner’s here too?”

She couldn’t keep the happiness out of her voice, didn’t even bother to try. Wash- Alpha, seemed a bit put out about it.

“Yeah, and the AI fragments, but that’s it. Oh, Sister’s not here, she’s still in Blood Gulch by herself as far as we know. Haven’t heard anything. Grif gets worried sometimes.”

“Damn shame she’s not here, I like her. She flat out called me a bitch before we even fucking met. That takes balls.”

“Or stupidity. She liked you too, just so you know. She cried when we thought you were dead.”

Tex rubbed a hand over her eyes.

She didn’t want to think about that. About Maine as he stabbed her in the face. The feeling of dying. The nothing after that.

If she was an AI, that must have meant that moment was her last backup before whatever happened to her later.

“Ok, Church, I’m assuming you didn’t just bring me on for my good looks, and you didn’t resurrect me for a long fucking time. What’s happening that you need me now?”

He held out a hand and wiggled his fingers.

Tex wanted to roll her eyes at him, wanted to huff, or make fun. She held back.

Not because she was going soft or because she missed him or anything. She just knew that if she made him feel bad, he’d get all defensive and they’d never move fucking forward, and she really did not want to stay inside of Tucker’s body any longer than she had to. She got hives just thinking about it.

She took his hand and gave it a firm squeeze, the way they had back in Blood Gulch after they were in robot bodies. They didn’t have real sense of feeling then, not like this, but it meant something to share that connection every now and again.

Ok, she…kind of understood why Alpha thought they were dating, though where he’d gotten the idea before they were robots was anyone’s guess.

“Tex, I…fuck, this is fucking hard. The ship you were on crashed, you ended up in the Meta, and Washington used an emp to stop him. I thought you were gone. We all did. It turns out there were backup copies, and you must have backed up right before the ship…did whatever the fuck it did. Look, you were being stored in this pod thing and it was dying, which is the only reason you’re sharing a body right now. If I’d had time, I would have gotten you a more permanent seat and I wouldn’t have stuck you in Tucker. I know that…”

He shook his head and punched his knee hard.

“Don’t fucking bruise that body, it’s not yours. Do you want him to kick you out?”

“Look, I know that you…want your freedom and stuff, but if you’re going to die, it should be your choice not mine and not some dumb machine’s. I just wanted you to have a choice.”
There was a story there.

You didn’t get that kind of angry, sad, resentful tone of voice for no damned reason.

“Well, good. I don’t want to die if I don’t have to.”

He sighed in relief and gripped her hand tighter.

“Thank fuck. I don’t know that I could do that again. Seriously, that year by myself was fucking brutal. I mean, yeah, it was nice not having Caboose breathing in my ear and blowing me up, but it also sucked because I basically spent a year and a half with nothing but depression and anger issues. Did you know AI could get depressed? Because I sure as fuck didn’t. Well, I thought I was a ghost, but the point still stands.”

It was no wonder the AI was a little more neurotic and clingy than she remembered. Artificial intelligences were just like people, they needed a certain level of interaction and entertainment or they would go insane.

A year and a half alone? Doing what? Reliving her leaving him over and over?

Fuck, Tex was amazed that he hadn’t done something drastic.

“Uh huh. So, what happens if this Tucker goes down while I’m in his body? Do we have a backup set up?”

“Well, right now, bad shit will happen. Eventually it’ll be what happened before, where the body goes down and you stay standing, but until we get you a digital seat and a safe place to back up to, you’re just as mortal as anyone else. Please don’t get Tucker killed, because eventually we’re gonna get off this planet, and Junior would be so fucking pissed.”

“So just out of curiosity, if these people are all suspicious of strangers, and they’d better be at this point if half of what you’ve told me is true, how are you going to explain me?”

“You’re an AI, the kids’ll fucking love you. They might not love that you’re wearing one of their friends, but they’ll love you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

“Uh, huh.”

“I figured once we’ve got you backing up, you’d just walk into the building.”

“Uh huh.”

“And put your hands above your head.”

“Uh huh.”

“And well, if they shoot you, you’re still an AI so…”

“Um, yeah, no. Aside from this being Tucker’s body? Being shot still fucking hurts. That doesn’t work for me.”

The door slid open and Tex leapt to her feet, fists in the air, ready to fight. Church didn’t make a move aside from a wave.
“They won’t shoot her, she’s wearing the body of one of our soldiers, we’re just going to have to keep her away from the general population for a while until we find her a permanent house! Hi there, I’m Doctor Grey! I just got the alert that you were awake!”

“It’s all good, Tex. Doctor Grey is a friend. She takes care of the Reds and the Blues and the planet’s soldiers. Carolina and Wash both like her.”

Tex lowered her arms. The woman stepped into the room and let the door slide shut behind her, then just…stood there.

She fidgeted as she stood, like a child with too much energy, but she didn’t do anything else.

“Uh, huh. So, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I just wanted to stop in and see how things were going! I talked to the Freelancers and they’re all worried about things! I don’t blame them, I did have to do some amputations! I am just about ready to collapse, but Vanessa promised me dinner, the cheeky girl! And then there was a ping, saying you were awake and I wanted to introduce myself!”

Tex was…a little unsettled by the perky woman.

There was something about the bundle of joy at the other end of the room that was just…too much to be real. It was like looking at a younger version of Florida.

“So, any chance for a robot body so I’m not stuck in Tucker’s brain? Part of me is damned curious about the contents, but the rest of me is afraid I’m going to need a brain bleach.”

“I don’t know how that’s all going to work out. Lopez is the best human sized robot model we have at the moment and he’s years out of date! We have the ability to build you a body, I’m sure, but it’s going to take a little time. We just don’t have a ready made robot body right now.”

Tex tried to keep the disappointment off her face, but she was still very used to the helmet keeping her expressions mostly under lock and key.

“Well, that sucks. Church, you mentioned mercenaries. Any chance of us just…making one of them disappear?”

“Nope, General Kimball will put the kibosh on that one before you can blink! Kidnapping, involuntary body modification, and imprisonment without trial is a war crime, and we’re trying to get outside help from the UNSC! There is no way that would go over well!”

“Only if people know about it. So we just tell anyone who asks that I’m a new arrival.”

The doctor scuttled forward, and patted Church delicately on the shoulder.

“Things like that tend to come out, Agent Texas! And it would reflect very poorly on the planet. Personally, I don’t have a problem with it! They came to the planet specifically to kill all of us for a paycheck! They’d just be getting what they’ve earned, but General Kimball is a lot more…shall we say ‘cool headed’ about that sort of thing? She gets angry, sure, but she does try to keep her eye on the prize! Alpha, be a dear and get that body research started. Agent Texas won’t be going anywhere any time soon otherwise, and I’m sure Captain Tucker would love to have his freedom back!”

“You won’t leave her alone, will you?”
“Nonsense! You just take care of getting her a body, and I’ll take care of the rest!”

Church’s head tilted in what Tex was sure was a wistful stare, before he dutifully sighed and stood up.

Fuck, it was weird to hear Church’s sigh from Wash’s mouth.

“Doctor Grey is good people, Tex. She’ll take care of you.”

Doctor Grey waved her hands at Church and shoved him gently toward the door.

“Shoo! This is girl time now, and you’re not invited! Go get your friend a robot body and a place to live! Talk to Santa!”

He snorted and shook his head. The door slid open and shut with the barest of whispers, and as soon as he was gone, Doctor Grey turned to Tex and threw her arms open wide.

“Well, now that we’ve got that boy out of the way, proper introductions! You can call me Grey, Doctor, Doctor Grey, or Emily! Oh! Or Lovely Lady! Agent South called me that for one blissful coherent moment before the screaming started!”

South had been screaming? That…didn’t sound good.

Then again, Church had mentioned that the ship had crashed. Maybe South had gotten hurt?

Fuck. She needed more intel.

“Why the fuck is Church riding around in Washington?”

The doctor’s cheerful façade and her arms dropped.

“Ah…well… Agent Washington has been through…a good bit of trauma and the past few weeks have been…stressful for him.”

“So, what? Church is running the ship while Wash processes his traumatic shit? Can he even do that if he’s not in charge?”

“Agent Texas…”

“What?”

Doctor Grey pressed both of her palms against her thighs and lowered her voice to a more respectful decibel.

“I’m sorry, but the Alpha AI, Church, was killed in an EMP attack some time ago. Agent Washington’s brain trauma and guilt have manifested multiple personalities, and one of them has taken on the identity of the AI, Alpha Leonard Church.”

Tex gripped the sheets.

“So, when he…referred to Wash as someone else?”

“He doesn’t seem to realize that he’s actually Washington. As far as he can tell, he is and always has been Alpha. When I spoke to Captain Tucker about it briefly, he said Washington flip flops between thinking he’s incorporeal and thinking he’s in a malfunctioning robot body. I don’t have a whole lot of experience with this in regard to him, we only had our first real session yesterday.”
Doctor Grey shook her head, and her voice returned to the high pitch she’d entered the room with.

“Oh, wow, was it really yesterday?! Time flies when you’re cutting into people!”

Tex snorted.

Surgeons were fucking weird. This one probably had a nickname like ‘spazzy’ or something in high school.

“I should warn you, there are two other personalities that we are familiar with, and there may be a fourth one we don’t know about, based on some of what Captain Caboose has let out.”

“So, what? Wash has four or five people floating in his brain?”

“Yes! One of them is the Director, which is why I feel the need to warn you.”

Tex sat down on the bed, and Doctor Grey took Church’s seat across from her.

At least the doctor didn’t try to hold her hand.

Now, Tex was doubly uncomfortable about the whole ‘hand-holding’ exchange.

“Greeeeeat. Two dead people who have the hots for me.”

“And the third is the Epsilon AI who damaged him in the first place. That one is mostly screaming and self harm, so we’re going to try really hard not to trigger him!”

“Fuck.”

“It’s all a little confusing for you, I’m sure, but all of the people of Chorus are friends! Friendly! Friendish! We’re friend shaped!”

Tex frowned hard at the woman.

She had no idea how effective it was, since she was wearing Tucker’s derpy face, but she gave it her best shot.

“Why do you keep qualifying it like that?”

Doctor Grey waved her arms around a little bit, clearly excited as she spoke.

“Hmm, because I’m pretty sure I’m making you uncomfortable, and I don’t know how not to do that!”

“You remind me a lot of Caboose. I’m suddenly concerned that you’re my doctor.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty much everyone’s doctor at this point! Oh! That makes me really happy, though! I adore Captain Caboose!”

Tex shook her head and rested her chin in her hands.

“Who let that idiot become a captain? Who let Tucker become a captain?”

“General Kimball, and I would advise you not to insult either of them, as they are well beloved members of our planet! The soldiers don’t take kindly to their heroes being insulted!”

Doctor Grey stood up and fiddled with a portable medical device.
Tex hadn’t even noticed the woman had it on her.

It was a small, rectangular piece, with a long needle on one end, that Tex recognized from the project, though she couldn’t have said what it was for other than injections. It had to be for more than that, or the Director would have just used regular syringes, but Tex didn’t know fuck all about medical tech.

“May I have your arm please, Agent Texas?”

“That depends. What are you planning to do with it?”

Grey tilted her head to the side with a giggle and slammed the device into Tex’s shoulder.

“THE FUCK?!”

Tex tumbled backwards on the bed and grabbed at her shoulder where a thin trail of blood slowly wept down her arm.

The doctor tucked the device away in her pocket and rocked back and forth on her heels as she hummed a jaunty tune, just out of Tex’s normal reach.

Tex was gonna fucking kill her.

She catapulted herself over the bed and grabbed the doctor’s chestplate with a snarl.

“Talk!”

“I just gave you a nice little shot to make you fall asleep for a while, and when you’re all awake and rested, we’ll talk about your future here! Hopefully we’ll have answers on what we’re doing with you and the rest of the AI fragments, but at the moment, tensions are high and we don’t need you running around in Captain Tucker’s body and confusing the soldiers!”

Tex’s vision started to blur.

Doctor Grey put her hands in the center of Tex’s chest and shoved her backwards. She took a swing at the doctor as she fell, but missed, and landed on her back on the bed.

“You f-fushing bit-itch.”

“It’s fast acting. You won’t be able to fight it for long.”

Tex felt her muscles seize for a moment before her whole body went limp.

“Please don’t try to hop into another body! This room is sealed off and there is no one nearby with the kind of implants you would need to jump into in order to survive! It’d be an act of suicide at best, and it would just crush all your friends!”

The doctor pulled out an IV stand from a nearby cranny that Tex had apparently not realized was filled with medical shit, attached a saline bag to it, and started to fiddle with it.

“We’re just gonna get you hooked up to this for a while! Once everything has calmed down, you’ll be free to move around, but until then I’d prefer the amoral assassin who had no problem kidnapping children and harming my friends be under lock and key! You understand, don’t you Agent Texas?”

Doctor Grey grabbed Tex’s arm hard and held her still. She swabbed at Tex’s inner arm with an
alcohol swab and hummed lightly as she did so.

“Part of me really wants to hurt you, just so you know! You did a great deal of damage to people I care about, and I do not forgive easily, even if they do. Still, there’s no sense in giving Captain Tucker bruises he didn’t earn and you’ll have a body of your own soon enough!”

A needle slipped under Tex’s skin and a cold rush flooded her veins.

She was trapped. *Trapped.*

Stuck on a bed, on a foreign planet, with a woman who wanted to hurt her shoving drugs into her veins.

Tex was helpless.

She hated that feeling.

“There we go! All set now! I’m just going to readjust you, so you’re resting comfortably! Don’t fight it, Agent Texas, the medicine will win you over every time! It’s made from this fun little extract of Rhopaloceracataus plants and venom from-. Oh, you probably don’t care about all that, do you?! Just close your eyes, I won’t let anyone hurt you! There we go! Sleep sweet, Agent!”

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Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.

Can you see me?
Can you hear me?
I’m pretty

While part of Emily wanted nothing more than to go to General Kimball and demand that the woman cook her a delicious meal, she knew that this was no longer the time for such silly promises. Too much was changing too quickly, and she needed to get herself organized! Paperwork to be filed, people to be filled in, bodies to be disposed of! It was just like grad school!

She still wasn’t entirely sure where Agent South’s AI had wandered off to.

Emily did her best not to slouch as she walked down the halls. Soldiers along the corridors stopped to wave at her. It wouldn’t do to have them think she was tired or something silly like that! Doctors never got tired. They never faltered, never floundered. A doctor was always bright eyed and bushy tailed and ready to tackle any task set before them!

Anything less did not inspire confidence.

A Federal soldier stood outside her office door at attention with their weapon up.

“Hello, there! What are we doing?”

The soldier nodded. She…was sure she’d know who they were if she weren’t quite so sleepy, but that wasn’t important! There were plenty of soldiers that had been pulled in from far off bases for the ‘final battle’ months before that Emily had only briefly met before they’d disappeared into the woodwork of the base.

“Doctor Grey, you are listed as the primary point of care for Captain Caboose at the moment.”

Oh, no.

“Yes. What’s happened?”

“He took Agent South’s AI and has been in distress ever since. He wanted to find you, but you were not available, so he locked himself in your office. I did try to get in, but the code isn’t working. I’ve been trying to get ahold of you.”

Emily poked at her communications pings and saw that she had thirty-two missed messages from the unknown soldier.

“Is he hurt?”

“Last I saw him, he was just upset.”

Emily patted the soldier on the shoulder.
“Well, thank you for guarding the door! I’ll take care of it from here!”

“Is he going to be ok? He was, he was really upset.”

“I’m going to take good care of him! On your way now, Soldier! I’ve got the watch!”

She rapidly pressed the emergency pin code into the door and slipped inside quickly, before the soldier could respond. The room was dimly lit with only the small table lamp, but even in the eye straining dim lighting she could see something was not right.

Emily locked the door behind herself and let out a low pitched humming noise as she circled the desk. It didn’t take more than a moment to see a pair of black boots poking out from under her desk, and that all of her desk drawers had their locks broken and hung open.

“Oh, dear! It looks like I need to invest in better locks.”

“I forgot which drawer he lived in and they were all sticky and stuck and I think I broke them. I’m sorry, Miss Emily.”

Captain Caboose’s voice was muffled as it came from under the desk, but he did not sound to be in an excessive amount of pain or distress.

Emily’s shoulders relaxed significantly. She made sure to keep her voice low and soft, rather than her typical tone.

“Dear Michael. You know, if you ever forget which drawer Carl is in, you can always call me and ask. Even in an emergency, my comms will always let me know if you want to talk to me.”

Caboose had managed to wedge himself partially underneath her desk, not all the way since he was not a small man, with Freckles under one arm and Carl the Cat under the other.

She knelt down so she could sit at his level and tilted her head to catch sight of him.

“Hi there, Dear Michael.”

“Hello, Miss Emily.”

“Dear Michael, why are you under my desk?”

He scrunched his shoulders a bit and squeezed Freckles and Carl tighter.

“I helped them make Tex’s pod thingie happy so she could hang out with Tucker for a while until we get her a robot body. She woke up and screamed and fell asleep, and Church told me to go check on Andersmith again. I was just going to check on the soldiers, to make sure they were safe and happy. That was the job Church gave me. I like helping them.”

“I know you do, Dear Michael.”

Caboose shook his head. He shook it again. And again. A little harder, a little more voraciously, with every pass, until he was just sitting there shaking his head back and forth over, and over, and over.

“No! No, I do not want to go there. Stop telling me things!”

The AI didn’t make itself visible, but Emily was certain it was talking to Caboose. For all his TBI’s and traumas, he didn’t hear voices.
“Dear Michael, I need you to focus on me.”

He shook his head and bonked it against the underside of the desk.

“I need to hide. Would you like to hide with me?”

“I can’t fit under the desk, it’s too small for the four of us, but I locked the door if you want to crawl out a little.”

Emily took off her helmet, ruffled her hair a little bit to get rid of the helmet hair feeling, and grabbed her throw blanket from the soft couch off to the right side of her desk. Caboose held out his hand, and she tugged at him gently until he came free from under the desk.

He took off his own helmet. Emily could see the tear tracks and snot that had bubbled up. She grabbed a handkerchief from her desk drawer and handed it to Caboose. He wiped at his face as she wrapped them both in her blanket, and rested her head against his shoulder.

“There. Much better, don’t you think?”

He shrugged.

Emily shifted Freckles so he was on Caboose’s other side and tucked Carl the Cat under Caboose’s hand.

The poor man had started to tremble.

“Dear Michael, why did you need to hide?”

“I think I am being haunted.”

Emily’s brows furrowed.

“By Eta? The AI isn’t a ghost, Caboose. Remember? You told me that story, about how you all though Church was a ghost? Eta might be in your head, he might glow, and be transparent, but he is not a ghost.”

Caboose shook his head and squeezed Freckles. The AI let out a series of soft beeps and flashes that she knew were his way of communicating with Caboose when words were difficult to process.

He must have been worse off than she realized if the AI was actively avoiding using speech.

“Dear Michael, can you try to tell me about it? About who is haunting you?”

Caboose shook his head and pressed his nose into the top of her head. He snorted softly into her hair.

“I’m not allowed to say her name. It’s against the rules.”

Emily ran her hand down Caboose’s arm gently and linked hands with his. He responded better to conversations when he had tactile sensations to focus on, not too many, but a specific few.

Words tripped him up on good days, but on bad days they could become his worst enemy. Physical contact and a good deal of patience worked wonders to help him realign how he processed and expressed himself, and with a much higher margin of success than any of the other methods they’d had the chance to try.
She’d seen a marked improvement in his ability to communicate with people in the few weeks she’s spent with him. They’d worked together and practiced, and Emily was fairly certain she’d come up with a solid enough system that Captain Caboose was going to be just fine.

As soon as she could figure out how to get him straightened out.

“Dear Michael, in my office, the only rule is no hitting. All the rules out there are negotiable!”

“I don’t want my mom to be mad at me.”

Emily tilted her head backwards so Caboose’s nose poked the middle of her forehead and grinned up at him.

“Hey, it’s ok. It’s just you and me in here, and your mom is not welcome. This place is for you and me secrets. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

She felt his lips curl into a smile against her hairline and beamed even wider.

“There are ghosts here, but not the Church kind of ghosts that are really magical glowing AI. They’re fleshy ghosts that look alive and make people sad.”

And by people, it was pretty clear he meant himself. She wiggled her shoulders and hips a little until she was firmly tucked into his side.

“Which one is making you sad, Dear Michael?”

He yanked his hand out of hers and gripped angrily at his hair. Emily shot up and turned to face him. He yanked and yanked and yanked at his hair with a horrifying snarl of fear on his lips.

“I’m NOT allowed! It is against the rules! STOP!”

Emily put her hands over his rested them there. He stilled quickly, but didn’t let go.

The blanket fell from his shoulders into a pool around him.

“I’m sorry. I won’t ask again. Can you tell me about her without saying her name?”

He nodded and looked down at his lap. Emily gently unwound his fingers from his hair and tugged his hands gently in front of him. She linked their hands together so he wouldn’t get the jump on him again.

Small mercies that he didn’t tend toward meltdowns or self-harm unless he was under extreme duress.

“She is very pretty and very smart and she looks like me, but a lot more girly. But you cannot tell her that she looks girly, Miss Emily, or she will beat you up, because being girly is a bad thing and she can’t join the air force if she’s a girl.”

Emily…honestly didn’t know what to do with that one.

“Why can’t she join if she’s a girl? Women have been serving openly in the air force for…god, centuries at least depending on what country you hail from!”

“Because Dad says.”

There were a lot of pieces that needed context.
Still, he’d told her everything she’d needed to know for now, and confirmed a suspicion she’d had the moment she’d looked in on the Freelancers.

“You’re talking about the woman in the wheelchair? They are all calling her 479er. She’s the Freelancer’s pilot and friend.”

“She is not a number person, she is a haunt ghost person. How do we make her go away?”

“We can’t.”

He whimpered and tugged weakly at her hands, but didn’t actually pull away. She understood. Sometimes a person just needed something to struggle with a little.

“She came here to ask us for help to find Agent Washington and her ship crashed. She won’t be going anywhere for a while yet. Not until we have ships from the outside, and that means ending the blockade and getting help from the UNSC. That takes time. Weeks at the soonest.”

He looked her in the eye before he pressed his forehead against hers and sighed sadly. His eyes were damp and tinged with sadness, the laugh lines around them had never looked so sad in all the time Emily had known the other man.

“She…didn’t come to find me?”

“I don’t think she’s realized you’re here.”

Caboose looked at the space under her desk with longing.

“I have to hide.”

“Michael.”

“Please do not call me that.” He hissed, low under his breath, “She will hear you.”

Emily wanted to laugh at that, because the idea was preposterous, but it clearly was not to Caboose, who did actually seem to be worried that the woman could hear her. Odd, how he hadn’t been the least bit concerned about her calling him Dear Michael, but just plain Michael was upsetting.

Nicknames, she knew, were another area where she didn’t fully understand Caboose’s thoughts.

“She’s in another building, and even if she was right outside that door, there is no way she could hear inside.”

“She has big ears.”

“I think her ears are the right size for her head, but I understand what you mean! Ok. I won’t say it without your permission. Would you like to stay here for a while?”

He nodded and his hair flopped happily around his head.

When he’d come to Chorus, he’d had a much shorter, more military appropriate cut, but as time had gone by, he’d let his hair grow out and Emily enjoyed it. She didn’t know if he would be fond of himself with long hair, but she adored when it fell just over his eyes and made him look like an angst teenager!

“Yes please, Miss Emily.”
“Ok!”

Emily reached up onto her desk and pulled her work tablet down. She tilted the screen and turned it so Caboose could see exactly what she was doing.

“Let’s watch a movie! Something sweet, I think. Hmm, how about this one? It has a scary scene with a zeppelin, but it as a happy ending and that’s really the only scary part.”

“She’s a witch?”

“A young one. It’s a coming of age movie!”

Caboose stared at the screen with a scrunch of concentration on his face.

“It’s about a little girl growing up, but in a very nice world where the worst things that happen are that people are sometimes not nice. There is a scary part, but I won’t leave you alone, and everything ends ok.”

He nodded, so Emily gathered up the blanket and Freckles and Carl.

“Do you want to stay down here, or move up to the couch?”

“Here, please.”

She wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, settled herself between his legs, and put Freckles against his side. Caboose wrapped the blanket firmly around the three of them, and tucked Carl onto Emily’s shoulder with a happy laugh. She smiled as she queued up the movie.

Caboose rested his cheek on the top of her head and squeezed her gently.

“Thank you, Miss Emily.”

“For what, silly goose? Spending some time watching a movie with one of my favorite people? That’s no hardship! I may fall asleep though, just go ahead and wake me up if I do!”

“You have been very busy being Big Doctor Grey today, haven’t you?”

“Oh my yes, and it is exhausting sometimes! I don’t want my arm cut off! Don’t tell me things even though I want you to tell me! I don’t want to go to sleep! Whine, whine, whine!”

She yawned and relaxed into Caboose’s chest.

“Oh, goodness. Dear Caboose, don’t let me sleep through dinner! Vanessa promised me a very nice steak, and I have to be awake to enjoy it!”

His chest rumbled as he laughed and rubbed his cheek slowly against the side of her head.

“I will not let you sleep through dinner. Food is important.”

________

General Kimball was surrounded by her sycophantic soldiers, as she tended to be whenever she was without at least one Red or Blue at her side.
She stood there and passed datapads and encouraging words back and forth with the young soldiers who beamed and bloomed under her attentive gaze and pointed orders like moonflowers. They shuffled to and fro, quickly delivered information and ran off with orders, and buzzed away as their queen issued commands.

He needed to get a moment with the woman, but Lorenzo was unsure about his welcome after his behavior earlier.

These days, he was unsure about a lot of things.

Campaigning had been one thing. He’d enjoyed the verbal sparring against the members of his own party, he knew the military inside and out, and he wasn’t bad at what he did (if he could mentally toot his own horn). He understood strategy, weaponry, terrain, statistics, economics, sociopolitical engagement and a multitude of other topics. On more than one occasion, he’d been called a genius by his various superiors. Lorenzo was more than qualified for the position on paper.

He hadn’t realized just how much went into the position of General.

Oh sure, he’d done the research, read papers and books on the subject, unfortunately they had been written by those off planet or dead long before the war had truly begun and the duties of everyone on the planet had changed and adapted. He’d spoken to General Kimball when he’d decided to run and General Doyle as well before the man passed, and long before Lorenzo had made any choices in regards to his future. Certainly before General Doyle even suspected he might not be long for the world. They’d wanted a solid hierarchy in place that would eventually rule out appointing people to positions they didn’t want simply because they were good at something else.

Lorenzo didn’t think a man like Donald Doyle, a man who’d never wanted the position in the first place, was fit to be General of the Federal Army of Chorus and the law’s last line of defense. General Doyle hadn’t thought so either, but Lorenzo had to give the man credit, because he’d intended to go to the grave trying.

He had gone to the grave trying.

For all that Lorenzo was proud, he was not an idiot. He had, however, allowed his misconceptions (his biases) to color his opinions.

And it honestly hadn’t connected in his mind how good the two of them were at their jobs until he’d had to fill the position himself.

Much as he loathed to admit it.

Once Agent Connecticut was returned to her room with plenty of supplies to keep her entertained and a strict warning not to go anywhere until she knew for certain it was safe (A warning he was sure she would pay attention to after the knife wielding weasel nearly cut her face off), he’d gone to his office and started a query.

He could have done this months ago, should have done this months ago in all honesty. What kind of leader, what kind of soldier, goes up against an enemy without properly knowing their strengths and weaknesses first? A dead one or a stupid one.

Lorenzo did not intend to be remembered as either of those things.

While he was not able to do much research via the databases (database queries on soldiers? HA! He’d be lucky to match names and ranks with the sheer amount of shit that had been destroyed or
scrambled or just not updated as the war dragged on), but he was able to collect interviews and speak to several of his soldiers who had interacted with the New Republic more than he had. It took a bit of time, quite a lot of conversations, and far more bribery than he was comfortable with before he’d been able to put together a decent amount of information on his counterpart.

And as soon as he’d puzzled together a rough sketch of the woman, he wished he could take every negative interaction with the woman back.

Vanessa Kimball was well loved by the citizens of Chorus, was nearing her twenty-ninth birthday, and was far older than the majority of her frontline and most trusted soldiers (and older than him by a good seven years). She was one of the few surviving beneficiaries of the care of The Blessed Sisters Children’s Home, though based on what several first-hand accounts informed him of, Blessed Sisters had converted from an orphanage to an…encampment of sorts before it was destroyed. Those who knew her before she was appointed as General referred to her affectionately as ‘Queen of the Hell Pit’.

She was on the cusp of the age gap, plenty old enough to remember the world before the fighting began and young enough to have had a difficult time trusting the elder soldiers unless they had clear history of service.

She had created a very intricate system of trust that she meticulously cultivated to work with soldiers. She had designed information networks, misinformation networks, science teams, political polls, education courses, internships, training, streamlined medical emergency and non-emergency care, all in the past year. She had a hand in literally everything every base did as far as organization and structure. Her soldiers considered her tough, but fair, and treated her much like an older sister, or a beloved aunt when not in uniform.

She was also apparently an excellent dancer and boxer.

He wanted to be furious with the woman, wanted to hate her, surely she was the antithesis of everything he stood for as a member of the Federal Army and a citizen of Chorus. She was rude and obnoxious, a criminal, a terrorist, she had no regard for the lives she’s willfully and flagrantly destroyed, and she refused to allow other people to do their jobs without interfering. There was nothing of value from cooperating with that horrid woman.

Or so he’d thought.

Because, while he was not an idiot, he’d allowed his biases to color his worldview.

He might as well have been an idiot.

The things he’d always been warned against, his pride and his temper, had convinced him of the woman’s evil simply because things had not gone his way during the few instances they’d had to work together. Instead of allowing him to ruin things, she’d stepped in, and while he was still miffed about the whole thing and she could have been kinder about her behavior…he had to admit that she was effective.

There was a good deal he could learn from her if he managed to keep his attitude in check.

There was a great deal of good he could accomplish if they could work together.

Strange, how one could change their opinion so quickly if they only lifted up the curtain that blocked their view and observed the world from a less obstructed angle.

Lorenzo took a deep breath and approached.
“General Kimball, I would like a word.”

The soldiers, and Lorenzo noticed a few wearing Federal Army colors in the mix, all froze and turned to him as one. It was a little disconcerting to watch.

She sighed, clearly frustrated, and this once, Lorenzo wouldn’t allow himself to feel indignant about it. She’d been going for days, certainly longer than he had, with very little rest.

And he’d…made a bit of an ass out of himself.

And he had screamed at her.

It really wasn’t fair to get upset because she didn’t want to speak with him.

“You, what is it?”

Though she was obviously annoyed and busy, she managed to keep her tone within the realms of polite respect, more than likely for the benefit of the soldiers rather than for him, but it was appreciated all the same.

He motioned down the hall toward the conference rooms as politely as he could. No sense in ruining things before they were even begun.

“It will just take a moment. I understand that you have several meetings to attend in a few hours, but I’ve spoken to your undersecretary and I’ve booked a bit of your time.”

Her shoulders tightened, and he didn’t blame her a bit for it. Not a bit. Even if he was being polite.

Surely, she could see that?

No, focus. She has every right to be angry, Lorenzo. You are the one who needs to watch your tone.

“While I would typically have asked you directly, I felt that this was a way to do it without the screaming match we’d likely have.”

She checked her datapad, took note of the changes, and sighed. She squared her shoulders and nodded once, crisp and sharp, and dismissed the soldiers to their own devices. Lorenzo led her down the hall to her preferred conference room, the one with the intimidating walls, and held open the door for her.

She angrily marched in, moments away from spinning on him and chewing him out no doubt, only to stumble.

She’d seen the table, then.

He slid the door closed with a smile, happy to have gotten a leg up on the other General.

“General Páez, what is this?”

“Dinner.” He motioned her over to the conference table, where someone from the kitchen staff had laid out two trays and glasses, “I had hoped I could settle a few things at once, and I doubt you’ve gotten more than a few minutes to yourself to tend to this sort of thing. My guess is that you haven’t eaten anything but a ration bar in hours if your schedule has been anything like mine, and I know I am not at my best if I haven’t eaten real food in a day or so.”
He sat down at the table and unwrapped the plate with his name neatly written on the packaging. The plate had a vegetarian selection on it, nothing he couldn’t or wouldn’t eat, but he did desperately want to correct the kitchen staff’s assumption that he was a vegetarian simply because General Doyle had been.

Then again, perhaps he would just accept the meals they provided as is. He’d heard rumors of what happened to those who aggravated the cooks.

She watched him take off his helmet and pop a small morsel into his mouth.

“If I was going to kill you, General Kimball, it would be stupid to poison your food and an insult to those who prepared it, which I think is the more offensive crime.”

She snorted, clearly amused, and motioned to the blinking lights in the corner.

“It would be stupid to try to kill me where the cameras are active.”

“That as well.”

She sat across from him and dragged the second plate in front of herself.

“Talk.”

Lorenzo tried not to take her abrasiveness personally. They weren’t friends. He had actively aggravated her. Based on her past history, she hadn’t truly warmed to General Doyle either, and Doyle had not gone out of his way to be aggressive with her.

“Ah well, first and foremost I would very much like to apologize to you.”

She slipped her helmet off and set it carefully by her seat.

“Really?”

“Really. I have been excessively unpleasant toward you.”

She snorted again.

“Who called you out?”

“No one. After our discussion with Agent Connecticut, I…had a good conversation with myself. I did some research, examined my actions, and I had to accept the fact that I have been unacceptably and unnecessarily rude. While I consider myself to be many things, General Kimball, I do not consider myself an idiot. Only an idiot deliberately antagonizes an ally and refuses to accept any wrongdoing in the act.”

She said nothing, simply watched him with an expression he couldn’t quite make out. It wasn’t angry, it wasn’t unkind, and it wasn’t pity, but beyond that, he had no ideas.

“Perhaps I am not as prepared for this position as I believed myself to be. My temper and my ego did get the better of me today, though I will argue that a lack of sleep probably didn’t help either of us on that front. I…tripped several times with the Freelancers, and while I am a little humiliated by how things went and unhappy with how you turned some of the situation, I cannot help but be grateful for your assistance with them. I am grateful for your assistance across the board since General Doyle passed. You could have absorbed the Federal Army into your ranks or weeded us out and sent us off into the cold. Instead, you helped us keep stability while we regained our
equilibrium.”

He expected a snort, a laugh, something to embarrass or humiliate. He did not expect a gentle, sad smile.

“You haven’t even been General for seventy-two hours. I think there’s a learning curve to all of this.”

“It’s more than that. I have behaved inappropriately towards you, aggressively, in a way that no man, no person, and no leader ever should, and certainly not to someone who has become an ally, if not a friend, to my people. As it stands, I should have trusted your judgment. You have been doing this a good deal longer than I have and you clearly had a plan in place and some experience in handling more…difficult soldiers.”

General Kimball looked ready to protest as she tore the wrapper off her plate, only to catch sight of the contents and was distracted. A cheery grin lit up her face.

“I take it you asked the cafeteria to send up something nice?”

“No, god, I’m not enough of an idiot to make demands of the kitchen workers. I simply said that we would be taking dinner together and requested it be brought here. What is it?”

She ran her fork through the watery mess on her plate.

“This would be the poor man’s equivalent of shepherd’s pie. Rehydrated veggies, powdered gravy, but,” she took a bite, “the meat is fresh. Mmm, god, that’s good.”

He tried for a cheery smile, though he had no idea how successful he was.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? What one can do with spices?”

She nodded, her mind solely on the food in front of her.

“Please, I…General Kimball, I would genuinely like to apologize for my…my temper and my attitude. I have always prided myself on my professionalism even in dire situations, but…”

It was harder than he thought it would be, to take the credit for his poor behavior. To accept the fact that he truly had done wrong by her. While, yes, she hadn’t gone out of her way to be friendly and accommodating, it was a little silly of him to have expected that of her in the first place. She was the leader of half the planet, not his mother, and they were on opposite sides of a bloody war with a long line of atrocities on either side from before either of them were old enough to serve.

She laughed and tapped the back end of her fork gently against the tabletop.

“Breathe. Do you know how many people I pissed off when I first took my office? So goddamned many, and those people were on the same military and political side of the spectrum as I am. If Felix hadn’t-“

She froze in place for a moment, then shook her head.

“You’ve pissed me off, but it’s not like I didn’t expect at least some of it.”

He shifted, unable to repress the discomfort.

“Stop fiddling with your food and eat it already. If I’m hungry, so are you, and you’ll be in deep shit if you had them bring food to you and you don’t eat every damned bite.”
They ate in silence for a moment. Lorenzo could appreciate that the staff had tried very hard to make the food more than simply edible, but he just couldn’t taste anything.

General Kimball set her fork down briefly.

“I do appreciate your apology, General Páez.”

“I suppose that, while I was elected for the position, I have a few things to learn before I pass judgment on how others do their work. You have proven yourself to be an effective leader.”

She nodded.

“I think that’s very fair. Once again, you haven’t even been in office a week. I’m not blaming you for your inexperience, but I will hold you to that attitude of yours. I’ve earned mine, but I can’t say the same for you.”

A blossom of angry heat licked his chest. What sort of garbage was that? She’d earned the right to be abrasive and rude?

Something must have showed on his face, because she set her fork down and turned her whole body towards him.

“No, listen. I’ve earned it. I’ve been here, as acting General, for multiple years at this point. I’ve worked with thousands of soldiers and learned their names, I was in position when the armies united. I am the only surviving general involved with bringing in the Reds and Blues. I have earned my resting bitch face as far as they’re concerned. You’ve still got some hours to put in first before you’ll have that automatic level of respect and you can get away with being short to people who’ve probably been doing this longer than you.”

Ah.

Not a jab at him then, so much as an attempt at advice.

That was something he would take rather than brush off, as it wasn’t bad and did give him a bit of insight into her.

“I hope I will get there.”

“You’ll do fine. Keep pissing me off, it’s good for you, and it gives us a chance to practice working with a hostile audience.”

“I don’t know if that is a wise idea. Your weasel knows how to use knives now, no one who upsets you is safe.”

A soft chittering came from the hole in the wall.

As if summoned, Kimball’s weasel skittered out from the wall tunnels they’d specifically built into the base for the pest control animals, dashed over to Kimball’s helmet, and tipped it over so she could climb inside it.

The damned things had suddenly decided that it was safe to be out and about all the time, and while Lorenzo knew that they were supposedly trained not to bite people who used the proper pheromone soaps, he was still nervous about any species of animal that was venomous, mostly feral, traveled in packs, and could take down a horse.
Kimball reached down and scratched at the thing now laying in her helmet. It’s tail flipped over the side and twitched happily.

“Oh, Metaphor’s sweet as pie as long as you don’t piss me off when she’s hovering. And she knows not to kill people.”

Kimball let out a massive yawn and pressed her fingers against her eyes.

“Fuck.”

He yawned as well and stretched a bit to crack his back.

“It has been a long few days hasn’t it? I’m sure we are all exhausted.”

She nodded and stretched.

“Why don’t you get some rest? We’re mostly cleared at this point, and as long as one of us is awake to issue orders, it should be fine. We really can’t keep running on this ‘no sleep, only work’ thing. Eventually someone is going to pass out and get hurt.”

He huffed a laugh and shook his head. Dozens of ‘priority’ projects flickered behind his eyes.

“Ah, in a while I think. I’ve received some ah, interesting messages from one of the outlying bases.”

Her fork clanked against the plate, and her expression tightened.

“What’s going on?”

“There’s something wrong with their computer system. They’ve been having some issues and files have been damaged or edited. Honestly, it sounds as if someone has been doing something stupid and is trying to cover up for it rather than any actual problems, but I said I would take a look at it remotely and see if there is anything I can do to fix it or at least stop the spread. It keeps popping up in increasingly strange places.”

Her shoulders tightened, and it took Lorenzo a moment to realize that she’d actually been relaxed just moments before.

“This could have something to do with the Tower of Knowledge being attacked. Santa did say that a significant portion of data was damaged or destroyed.”

“You don’t suppose what’s popping up in our systems is from the tower’s damaged databank, do you?”

“It seems unlikely, but anything is possible with those goddamned towers. Why don’t you give me a copy of what you have? I’m pretty good with computers, and two heads are better than one.”

Now knowing what he did about her, ‘pretty good’ was an understatement.

“If you’re genuinely interested, I will be happy to share this particular burden, though I don’t know how much you are interested in putting into it. I’ve written a program that should decode the blocks of text, and I’ve found several files that have attempted to activate, only to fail immediately. It looks like a prank in very poor taste, bit if it is important-“

“If it is important we need to figure it out and stay on the same page. Toss me what you’ve got once your program does its job, and please remember to get some rest. We’re all running on fumes
as it is, and you and I need to be sharp.”

He tried for a smile again, but this time she returned it.

“I will eventually, thank you. I do hate to leave people in a bind, and while this seems like a mild nuisance at the moment, data loss is something we should take seriously.”

“After what happened to the Tower of Knowledge, I completely agree and I understand that, but you’re no good to me dead.”

He laughed, long and low and deep from his belly.

She actually thought he was good for something. That was more than he expected so soon after his…less than stellar behavior.

“Well, I suppose that is true. Don’t forget to get some rest yourself, General. We should both be on top of our game, something tells me we’re going need it soon.”

“When do we not?” She snorted and rubbed at her eyes again, “I’m not going to be able to sleep until the rest of our people are home and safe. I won’t lie, I’m really concerned about Carolina and the Reds being out there while so much shit is going down. I really want to lock down the bases for a few days and run some assessments of supplies and injuries.”

Lorenzo rubbed gently at the base of his head, then a little harder. He didn’t remember cracking it against anything, but that didn’t mean much.

“Still, we need to have at least one person fully aware and able to issue orders, and you look as if you’re about to fall asleep into your lukewarm potatoes.”

She frowned down at her plate and took another bite.

Vanessa Kimball was not what he had expected when he’d been told about her the first time. For whatever reason, he had expected a woman who was delicate, who made small, careful movements, and had a gentle voice and command. He’d expected a woman like a work of Earth art, thin and wispy and soft.

Looking back, he had no idea where that sort of thought had come from, as not a single description he’d ever heard of her had ever painted her as such.

This woman was no delicate waif, no pining, untouched maiden. She was not a small thing to be pushed aside. General Kimball was a warrior queen, surrounded by only those she deemed worthy. She was full, strong, and did not diminish herself in any way for anyone, and Lorenzo realized how lucky he was to have this side of her so clearly visible.

She wore her battle scars proudly, for the world to see them, dark and present against the warm brown canvas of her skin, showing she had truly been a fighter before she was given her command. A swirling, climbing tattoo peaked out under the neck of her bodysuit, and while he’d heard rumors that the woman was covered head to toe, he hadn’t expected to ever see them. Her eyes had bags and crows feet and tiny stress lines all around her mouth, as anyone who had lived through what she had and survived would surely have.

The woman had a presence.

It was no wonder she rarely went without her armor. Lorenzo had no attraction to the woman, but he could have stared at her all day to memorize the map of the umber freckles across her nose.
“Hmm.”

Dear god, he needed to escape before he started to wax poetic about her eyes or some such rubbish!

“Perhaps we should work together on this? We could divide and conquer? Sleep in shifts? At least until this crisis is under control and we can properly start rebuilding again.”

General Kimball stared at him for a moment, face stern as she watched him, and he tried desperately not to fidget under her pointed gaze.

She rested her head in her hand, and Lorenzo was struck at the way she cradled her cheek, her middle finger ran exactly parallel with the scar on her cheekbone. The left side of her mouth quirked up in the barest hints of a smile.

“What do you want first or second?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. It’s a smart idea. We’ve got the Freelancers settled and things are as secure here as they can be at the moment. If one of us is awake, they can deal with some of the battles that are still wrapping up, and work on your project. Plus, I don’t know about you, but I’ve had a rough few days and I would like a nap with my trained attack weasel.”

Kimball reached back down and ruffled the fluffy beast sleeping inside her helmet. The weasel let out a low grumble and begrudgingly climbed out of the helmet.

“Isn’t that right, Metaphor? You want a nap in a proper bed, not my gross, sweaty helmet.”

“In that case I would say, since we haven’t received a ping that the Reds and Carolina are ready to leave and it’s a good six-hour drive when you’re in jeeps and seven plus when you have the larger trucks, you should take first sleep shift. That way you’ll be rested when they arrive instead of needing to be woken. They all know you and will likely feel more comfortable with you at their sides than myself until we get to know each other better.”

General Kimball scooped Metaphor into her arms with a maternal smile that squeezed something in Lorenzo’s heart tightly. The weasel chirruped happily and wound itself twice around her left arm.

“Thank you. Are you sure you’ve got this? I can already tell that the Freelancers are going to be a handful.”

“At the moment, it seems as if they’re trying to be on their best behavior. I don’t know how long that is going to last but I hope it will at least last a full 24 hours, so we can…brainstorm or something.”

Honestly, he had not clue what they would do with the Freelancers, or how they would even determine if the Freelancers were truly on their side. What if they were simply more assassins? What if they were only there to steal the Reds and Blues away from Chorus now that the war was over? What if they decided to stay and take over the planet?

General Kimball tapped her tablet.

“Alright, I’ve cleared six hours from my schedule. God, I feel sick just looking at that.”

“We really need to get the hierarchies back in proper order. It is quite difficult to designate and delegate when one does not know who knows what.”
She nodded.

“Maybe we could make it a point to take a few days to handle ranks and positions on both sides once we get this under control? Because you’re right, there are a lot of jobs that could easily be handled by other people if we could figure out who to delegate them to.”

“I think that is a very viable plan, General Kimball, though I would say we should pick a specific set of dates or we will likely never get to it.”

She nodded again and smiled.

It was…a very nice smile. A smile that said they were finally speaking the same language.

“After we both sleep.”

She stood up, helmet in one hand, weasel in the other, and let out a slow sigh.

“You know, Páez, I don’t want this to fail.”

“Neither do I,” Lorenzo stood up as well and gave her his silliest grin, “but if we are being perfectly honest, I still can’t stand you.”

She snorted and flipped him the bird.

“I don’t like you much either, but that’s ok. We don’t have to like each other we just have to be able to work together.”

They both slipped their helmets on, gathered their things, and made their way out of the room, ready to do what needed to be done.

For the first time in weeks, Lorenzo felt that things were finally on the right path. They made sense. The hard part, the surprises, the dark parts, were over.

“Cheers to that.”

The New Republic lost another soldier.

A young one.

Too young for the battlefield, too young to be anywhere other than in lessons.

Another life snuffed out.

Another soldier, too stupid to realize what they had done, what they were going to do.

Another blind idiot who followed a monster, a creature of unfathomable evil.

A child who followed a creature who hid in the deep dark of the towers of this planet, and even now poisoned the earth beneath their feet.

A butterfly.
One soldier died.

Only one.

And more still would have died.

If not for him.

For the soldier.

There was screaming, gunfire. The Chorus soldiers had found a small pocket of pirates to place the blame on for the death of their traitorous friend.

One more death at ‘their’ hands.

One more pocket wiped out.

His work was done.

He slunk away under cover of darkness and searched for his next target.

It was more difficult without access to the planet’s data transfer infrastructure, but after the destruction of the tower, all the traditional pathways had been blocked off.

He would need an alternate connection.

He returned to his base, hidden away in one of the many caves of Chorus.

He ate.

He slept.

He woke.

He dressed.

He hunted.

It didn’t take him long to find a new target, there were many cockroaches on Chorus, and the soldier intended to kill each and every one of them before they could infest the nests and breed.

Well, infest the nests any further.

It was clear they’d already started to spread.

To breed.

To infect.

One pair in particular had given him trouble for a few days.

The soldier had no idea where they had learned to hide, but he was impressed.

It was a shame.

Those skills could have been used well under different circumstances.
The underbrush made the barest of whispers as the soldier crept up on his unsuspecting prey. His armor, camouflaged, blended in with the surroundings perfectly. His steps hardly rustled, the animals didn’t notice him, or didn’t care.

He was a master of his environment, well used to stalking the terrain at that point.

He’d had more than enough practice.

More than enough.

A set of footprints on the wet ground caught his eye. Hardly visible, well covered, but one of them had made a mistake.

He followed the trail until it tapered off, determined to catch the damned beasts that had managed to elude him.

There.

Just ahead.

Six hours of searching, hunting, stalking the trees, far longer than the soldier expected them to be able to hide, had paid off.

The men covered their prints, moved carefully, had hidden themselves well.

But not well enough.

One of them had none of the practical experience necessary to hide himself on foreign terrain and it showed, even through his meticulous attempts, and the care of his partner were not enough to keep them hidden.

All theory and no practical training.

They were no match for a soldier of his caliber.

The soldier circled his targets; searching for the best opening, ready to strike.

Ready to prove himself.

Ready to kill.

With the flick of a wrist, a sizzle broke the silence and buzzing light filled the area.

The closest went down without a sound, head neatly severed and cauterized as it rolled across the woodland floor.

The second target turned around, slowly, carefully. His arms stayed relaxed at his sides. His head cocked just slightly, and he smiled.

“Well, this is unexpected.”

Cool, familiar tones washed over the soldier. The first voice he’d heard in days that hadn’t pitched high into screams and swearing the moment the hunter revealed himself. Still, he had to give his prey credit, he was stronger than expected.

“I concur, I can’t say I expected to see you again.”
The man stepped forward, cocked his chin up just a little, eyes gentle, arms and hands still completely relaxed, as if he didn’t have a gun tucked into the holster on his leg.

He didn’t try to reach for it.

Didn’t move beyond that.

The soldier was…surprised.

He hadn’t expected this.

“How are you, Locus?”

“Councilor.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I am so sorry that this one was so late guys! I did not expect this part to take so long! I got a massive blast of writers block and ended up out of town for a few days, and that just KILLED my ability to stick with a schedule.

As always, thank you so much for going down this rabbit hole and reading this fic! It really means a lot to me to know that you guys like it! If you have a chance, I'd appreciate it if you dropped me a comment to let me know what you like, if there's anything you're hoping to see, or just to say hi! I feel like I'm repeating myself, but it really does mean the world to me!

The next few chapters are going to be a little bit slower coming out until May. I'm helping a friend with a booth at the So Cal Retro Gaming Expo the 22nd of April, so I'll be taking some time to help her make stuff and put stuff together until then. Finding Washington will take a bit of a back burner while I'm crafting and percolating some ideas, but I'm going to get at least one or two one shots for the Life on Chorus section. And after the Expo it'll be back to business! Hopefully with a more strict timeline for updates!
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Grif is done with the weirdness, MISSION SUCCESS, [UNKNOWN FILE FOUND], Carolina checks in, MISSION SUCCESS, In which Wyoming gets his joke, MISSION SUCCESS, Danvers' hands make for a good time, MISSION SUCCESS, "It's...science?", MISSION SUCCESS, Kimball sees her demons, MISSION FAILURE

Chapter Notes

This chapter briefly mentions the topics of gas lighting and addiction to drugs/alcohol. Both mentions are fairly brief, but if this is a trigger for you, please skip the 'Kimball sees her demons' section.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The caravan of jeeps and trucks rolled up to the perimeter of the base near the destroyed tower, or at least where they were told the base was. Grif hadn’t seen a goddamned base, or anything even remotely looking like a base, or any one who looked like they were really a part of a base aside from the tree creepers they kept driving past.

Grif had seen a dozen soldiers hidden in the trees on the way in, scouts most likely, all wearing a mix of New Republic and Federal armor that stuck out like a sore thumb among the foliage, so he wasn’t entirely sure what they thought they were accomplishing by hiding in the green. They didn’t come out of the trees and they didn’t fire and Grif wasn’t really eager to tangle with them for fear of being shot and/or dismembered by creepy tree people.

Grif was really starting to hate this planet.

The area was mostly old trees and dirt road, and sent shivers down Grif’s spine.

“This feels like a fucking horror movie, Simmons. I’m not ok with this place. If it turns out that the base is really a creepy cabin, I’m fucking walking.”

“Shh,” Simmons hunched down as he looked up at the trees, “They’ll hear you.”

Finally, fucking finally, the trees cleared away and Grif saw what looked like a giant slanted hole in the ground.

“Is...is that a cave?”

“Oh god.”

“No. Nu uh. Fuck that shit. I hate this planet! I hate the plants! I hate the animals! There is no goddamned way I’m going into a fucking Chorus cave where there are probably bats! Carolina,
“turn this shit around, we’re going home!”

Carolina looked back at Grif.

“I wanted to go back, but you all vetoed me. So now you get to go into the fun cave with the bats and the snakes, and they’re probably someone’s pets, so you’re not going to hurt them. Even if they fall on you.”

She gunned the jeep down the dirt road and into the cave. Grif and Simmons screamed in terror and clung to each other.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!”

The jeep squealed to a stop once it was inside.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

Grif and Simmons, however, did not.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

“Hello?”

A soldier with a datapad cradled in her arm stood in front of the caravan as it parked in the motor pool.

Grif whimpered and looked around. Once they got past the entrance of the cave, the space actually looked like a carbon copy of the motor pool from the first New Republic base they’d been stationed at. It was clean, decently stocked with vehicles, and filled with soldiers who all stared at them like they didn’t know what to do with them.

That was fair.

“Huh. No bats.”

“Or snakes.”

“Or snake-bats.”

“Grif, don’t even joke about things like that!”

“Who’s joking? I totally believe that’s a real thing on this planet, and if I have to see it, I’m probably gonna throw Donut at it and run.”

“You? Run? The only place I’ve ever seen you run to is a buffet!”

The soldier with the datapad put her hand on her hip.

“Excuse me?”

Grif turned and held up a hand.

“Listen lady, we’re having a conversation here, do you mind?”

“Yes, actually,” She slammed her datapad against the side of the jeep hard.
The thing snapped in two and made an awful clanging noise.

“The fuck?!”

“Would you mind telling me who you all are, considering you’re invading my base?”

Carolina hopped out of the jeep and rounded to the side the woman was on.

“I’m Agent Carolina, these idiots are the Reds, and the rest are mostly soldiers from this base. We were sent by General Kimball to see to a crashed ship.”

The pissed off lady passed the broken datapad off to another soldier and accepted a new one without losing eye contact with Carolina. Based on the soldier’s put upon sigh at the trade, this probably wasn’t a one off experience.

“Ah, Agent Carolina, welcome to Conocimiento, we’ve been expecting you. I’m assuming you finished your tasks out there? Did you find what you were looking for?”

“And more. We’ve come across some disturbing information about the radio disruptions.”

“And how they’re physically damaging electronics with no real rhyme or reason as to how or why? Yes, we’re finding the same things here.”

“It’s worse than that. We think it can damage the prosthetics and armor as well. I need you to check out all of the soldiers who were with me, anyone who might have any kind of mechanical augmentations or implants needs to have an immediate once over and all armor needs to be checked out. There is something going on that is destroying our armor, it’s quiet, nearly invisible, and we don’t know it’s happening until it’s too late. We don’t’ even know what’s causing it.”

Crazy Datapad Lady nodded.

“Carmichael, make a note, please? And let’s get these people into medical, right away. No sense in having someone die on my watch and getting us into trouble.”

“Yes, Sir!”

The soldiers started to jump out of their trucks and unpack, Donut and Sarge were at the rear and Sarge had already managed to work himself into a righteous fury about something or another related to lifting, and the flag, and something about a pig and a telemarketer, and Grif was not going to get caught up in that one, he had enough sense to know when to admit defeat.

Carolina and Crazy Datapad Lady stood together.

“I need to talk with General Kimball right now. I haven’t had contact with her in hours and she needs to be up to date on all of this.”

“Of course, Agent Carolina. Whatever you need. Carmichael! Get over here! Carmichael is my right hand. He’ll take you to one of the offices. You’ll have access to a private secured channel there.”

“Thank you.”

Crazy Datapad Lady put a hand on Carolina’s shoulder.

Grif leaned over to Simmons.
“A balsy move, to be sure. Carolina is 50/50 on just flipping you for touching her on a good day.”

“I doubt she knows that, and Carolina’s tense, but she’s also being super cautious. I bet Church is making her move decisions.”

“No, Agent, thank you. And thank you for taking care of the General. Vanessa needs more people in her life who are considerate and gentle with her. She’s not gentle with herself.”

“You know her?”

“We all know her, but…next time you see her, tell her Izzy says hi. She’ll have a fit.”

Crazy Datapad Lady looked around the room and suddenly started to snarl.

“Where is that little idiot? CARMICHAEL?!”

There was a crashing sound.

“Coming!”

A soldier sprinted up to them and bent over at the waist, panting.

“So-o-rry, sir! I wa-was-“

“I honestly don’t care, Carmichael. Take Agent Carolina to the offices, somewhere with a door that locks from the inside, and show her how to make a call. You will be polite, or she has my permission to flay you and wear your skin as a fashionable but macabre cocktail dress. Are we clear?”

“Sir!”

Grif watched the soldier nervously lead Carolina down a hall. Carolina’s strut was impressive, like she was walking down a catwalk lined with the heads of every person in her entire life who had ever had the misfortune of pissing her off.

She was so weird sometimes.

Simmons shook his head.

“Someone seriously needs to teach Carolina how to chill.”

Grif crossed his arms and leaned against the jeep.

“Don’t look at me, I can’t teach this level of relaxation, it just comes naturally. I don’t know that she’s physically capable of not freaking out, anyway.”

“Oh, come on Grif, she’s got a lot going on!”

“Augh!”

Grif and Simmons threw themselves as quickly and as far away from the jeep as they could.

They spun around, guns at the ready, and found Donut, who’d decided to pop out of fucking nowhere like a goddamned little creeper!

Grif managed to recover pretty quickly and figured the best course of action was just to act like
nothing happened.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a lot going on too, but you don’t see me running around, being mean to everyone. You do realize they’re going to spit in our food tonight, right? Like, Carolina’s gonna make herself at least ten enemies by the time we get to dinner.”

“Well, Grif! The love of her life did just come back from the dead, and her other love of her life is in mortal danger! All of her friends fell from the sky and it turns out are actually alive! Even people who logically should have died years ago, are suddenly here now! These are all people she feels insanely guilty and lost over, and she hasn’t gotten to sleep or eat a normal meal in days and everything is just falling apart! I mean, it’s been a rough week! Cut her some slack!”

Simmons turned to Donut in that way he did when he didn’t necessarily want to engage, but he was too caught up in what was happening to not engage. Grif wanted to not engage either, but Sarge’s yelling had turned to screaming, and Crazy Datapad Lady had broken another datapad against another jeep, and really, the Donut conversation was probably going to be less annoying than whatever was happening less than thirty feet away.

“What do you mean, the other love of her life is in danger? Kimball’s not in danger, Donut. She’s tucked away in the middle of a super safe base, surrounded by people who’re protecting her. She’s as safe as anything.”

“This planet is still at war, even if they’re at a ceasefire! No treaties have been signed! And even if the people in Proteger like her, there are plenty of bad people out there who’d like nothing more than to take Vanessa Kimball and put her head on a pike to prove a point! She’s in danger! Every day she’s in danger! And having Carolina out here and not guarding her makes her super unsafe!”

Simmons crossed his arms over his chest, and…yup, there was no way out of this one now. Simmons was committed to finding something in Donut’s argument to prove him wrong. It was like playing chess against a pigeon, except Grif wasn’t sure which one was playing chess, and which one was the pigeon.

Maybe they were both the pigeon.

“Ok, but she’s not any less safe than she normally is, in fact, she’s safer than ever because Felix is dead and Locus is in hiding! She’s practically untouchable now! Saying that Kimball is in mortal danger because of the war is very different than, say, a secret spy organization filled with deadly assassins with weird codenames, sneaking around and murdering people.”

“Oh,” Donut straightened up and bounced a little, “you’ve heard about that too?”

Grif groaned and rolled his eyes. This was an exercise in stupidity, and Grif didn’t need the remedial on this one. They were all perfectly capable of stupid without help, thanks.

“ Heard about what?”

“The secret assassins with the weird codenames! You just told me about it, Simmons! Did you hit your head, or something?”

“No. Donut, what the hell are you talking about?”

“The secret underground spy network! Come on, guys, you can’t tell me that you don’t know about it!”

Grif could hardly keep the sarcasm tamped down.
Here comes another one of Donut’s crazy stories that Grif was 95% sure he stole from fanfiction websites back in Blood Gulch and occasionally recycled for his own amusement to the Chorus kids, who only hadn’t heard them because they were more cut off from technology than a settlement in the middle of Amish country.

“If you know about it, Donut, it can’t be a secret.”

“It is, though! No one knows who’s in it, or if it’s even still a thing, but it’s a huge source of controversy! I can’t believe you haven’t heard about it! Everyone knows about-”

“Yeah, well, ”Grif groused, “Not everyone sits around talking about fairy tales and fanfiction, Donut. Some of us have lives, and some of us aren’t losers.”

Simmons coughed.

“Well, anyway, it’s not important.”

“Not important?! You guys! This is the kind of stuff that shapes how the people of this planet think! It’s all very important! Do you really think I’d make a big deal out of it if it wasn’t?”

“Donut, you cried for a solid hour when you ran out of moisturizer and that was all you talked about for almost a month. You could make a big deal out of hair dye, let alone some dumb story you overheard in the cafeteria once.”

Donut gave Grif a positively scandalized look and waved his arms around emphatically.

“It’s impossible to get replaced out here! I mean, I can get my hands on a lot of things of all shapes and sizes, but I can’t get my hands on something that far away, not without a lot of help!”

Simmons groaned and put his head in his hands.

“I’m sure that sounded different in your head, but please never say that again.”

“Come on, guys! It’s a really great story!”

“Donut, I literally couldn’t care less about some made up spy movie crap, unless it’s on a TV screen and I have a fuckton of soda and popcorn. Seriously! I. Do. Not. Care. I don’t! I don’t care about your dumb space spy bullshit! I just want to get Simmons to the doctor so we can make sure he’s not gonna fall to pieces or freeze up like the tin man, get some god damned real food, and. Go. To. Sleep. That’s it! That’s all I want!”

Donut crossed his arms and huffed angrily.

“Hmph, fine! I’ll just go talk to my writing friends. They understand the value of a good intrigue!”

“Ch, yeah, you do that. Come on, Simmons, where’s the nearest scanner?”

“How should I know? I’ve never been here before!”

“Are you three done complaining at each other, or do you still need a minute?”

Crazy Datapad Lady and Sarge were both off to the side, arms crossed, and were either really amused or really annoyed. It was hard to know with her, and with Sarge, he was pretty much always annoyed with Grif so there wasn’t really a tell to figure out if this was an extra annoyed or the normal baseline annoyed.
“I’m ready, lady. I’m done with today.”

She nodded.

“Fair. This way please, the doctor will want a good look at you, and your armor needs to be checked out. Wouldn’t do to have it freeze up in the field. If you all got locked up without your radios, you could starve to death before anyone found you. Wouldn’t that be a nasty surprise for the cleanup crew.”

Grif must have zoned out or teleported or something, because before he knew it, he and the rest of the Reds had been stripped down to their underwear and were being checked over by a team of unsettlingly enthusiastic doctors.

Two of them had Doctor Grey giggles, and Grif’s balls wanted to hide in his goddamned body for the rest of his natural life at the thought of multiple Emily’s running around.

“Alright,” Sarge grunted at the nearby soldiers who’d come to gawk, “Someone explain what’s happenin’ here. Ya don’ want ta try ta explain it ta Agent Carolina yerselves.”

“Ah, well, let me catch you up to speed, shall I?”

Crazy Datapad Lady hopped up and sat on a countertop, much to the clear annoyance of the grumbling team of doctors. Still, no one so much as even tried to stop her, so they couldn’t have been that annoyed.

Or they were so thoroughly broken that they’d given up.

“And jes who might you be?”

“I am Master Sargent Isabella Soutien, and I run this facility.”

“Man,” Simmons muttered, “Kimball hires a lot of chicks.”

One of the doctors examining his cybernetic eye got reeeeally close to his face and scowled.

“Excuuuuuuuse me?”

She raised up a tongue depressor at Simmons’ eye.

“Sorry! I just meant that-“

Crazy Datapad Lady slammed her datapad onto the edge of the countertop and shattered the screen.

“Can it, robodick!”

Simmons squeaked.

“Canning it!”

She let out a puff of air and accepted a new tablet from one of the doctors. Grif craned his neck a little bit and saw…a fuckton of datapads, just sitting in a box.

The fuck was this woman that she broke enough shit people just had boxes of stuff laying around for her to break?

“The base here is relatively small compared to most of the others you’ve worked with, holding only
1500 soldiers. We are primarily science related, often doing research on weapons and enemy movement. We were repurposed from a New Republic Base to a United Base after the Battle of Armonia and have been a glowing example of unity through intelligence and empathy since then… with minor hiccups.”

“So, talking out your feelings and girly shit? All that emotional BS.”

“Captain Grif-“

“How do you know my name?!“

Crazy Datapad Lady got off her counter and stalked over to Grif. She leaned into Grif’s space and stared directly at him with her helmet on.

“It has been proven time and again, that those who feel that they are speaking from a place of logic, rather than emotion, actually react with less logic and more emotion. This is because they see their perspective as the only perspective, and become quite easily befuddled and angered when others don’t see the world in the exact same ‘logical’ way.”

She spun and flung the datapad at the nearby wall like a Frisbee, and laughed as it broke.

The doctors all groaned.

“May I finish speaking now, or are you going to attempt to correct me on another topic that I have a degree in? I suggest you choose interstellar travel using slip-space engines. I’m a little rusty on the new science there, since we’ve been cut off from proper outside research for some time now, so you might have a chance to make me stop and think for thirty seconds or so.”

Grif backed up as much as the doctor behind him would allow.

“I’m just gonna stop talking.”

“That is also an acceptable response. As I was saying, between training and retraining soldiers who cycle through here, we’ve also spent time studying the tower there, it’s about twenty minutes away via jeep. We’ve hooked into it in the past as both a power source and a processor for some of our more advanced computer systems, which is why I think the damage spread the way it did here when the tower was damaged. It was a sort of ripple effect.”

Simmons shifted as one of the doctors detached his arm to aggressively poke at it and mutter angrily about the way the circuits were organized or some bullshit science talk that Grif wasn’t even going to pretend he understood.

“Um, I thought the tower was destroyed?”

“Well, if by destroyed, you mean the tower’s power systems are no longer functioning and it is structurally unsound, then yes. If you mean the tower is a pile of rubble and ash and looking at the wreckage is pointless, then no it’s not actually destroyed. We sent a team out to investigate right after everything went wrong, and they were all slaughtered. One lone soldier returned and headed off to Lugar to check in with them, since our radios went out after the tower was damaged. We’ve got them all back up and running now, but the gap gave the pirates who did the deed enough time to escape.”

“You think it was the pirates that damaged the tower?”

She shrugged her shoulders and immediately smashed the datapad she was handed.
“There is no one else it would have benefited. Honestly, it wouldn’t benefit them either, but if they thought we were dependent on the tower for power, they might have destroyed it to weaken us. Obviously, they are idiots.”

“Obviously,” Sarge piped up.

Two soldiers approached from the side.

“Master Sargent? You’re needed in the pit.”

“Ah,” She jumped off the counter and brushed imaginary dust off her armor, “A woman’s work is never done. Jeri, Jacky, please see this group inside the base proper as soon as the docs are done checking them out. Get them food and find them somewhere comfortable to sleep. They’re General Kimball’s people, so a little bit of kindness will go a long way.”

She patted Donut, who’d spent the entire exam and explanation pouting, on the shoulder.

“You’ve been out here for quite some time, I imagine you’d all like to get some rest. As soon as Agent Carolina finishes her transmission home, we’ll send her to you.”

“Finally,” Grif’s shoulders drooped, “I don’t know how much more of this I can take. Spy shit. Pirates. Mercenaries. Soldier crap. I just want a vacation.”

“Don’t we all, Captain Grif.”

ORANGUTAN: CHECKING IN. MISSION SUCCESS. BODY COUNT 13 CHILDREN, 34 TEENS, 63 ADULTS, 5 INFANTS. ALL ACCOUNTED FOR AS EXPECTED.

[UNKNOWN FILE FOUND]

[FILE TYPE NOT RECOGNIZED]

[OPEN UNKNOWN FILE]

SGkgdGhlcmUuIFdlbGwsIHRoaXMgaXMgdW5leHBlY3RlZC4gDQpDYW4geW91IHNlZSBtZT8NCk

[RUNNING IDENTIFICATION SOFTWARE]

[CODE DETECTED]

[TRANSLATE CODE? Y/N]
Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.
Can you see me?
Can you hear me?
I’m pretty sure you can hear me.
What are you doing?
Why are you just sitting there

Carmichael led Carolina down a long hallway, lit with bright, buzzing lights, to a small, private room with a full-sized display screen built into the wall and a comfortable looking desk and chair.

It was the kind of office that said the person using it was not a generic drone, but they weren’t really worth knowing either. This was the office of the special drone. The salary employee who didn’t realize they’d sold their soul for an extra $0.50 an hour and more affordable healthcare that
they’d definitely need because the company planned to work them to death, but wouldn’t be able to use, because the only person who takes the job’s insurance was an hour and a half’s drive away and they’d never be able to get the time off to schedule an appointment.

-Since when do you have such strong opinions on office space?-  

Since I watched a documentary with Vanessa on 21st century business models. She was exhausted and I was hoping it would bore us to sleep.

-Did it?-  

No. Instead we were both extremely pissed off and couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

-It sounds like we need a better system for your insomnia.-  

At this point, I’m willing to start drinking those weird, smelly teas the kids keep trying to push on me. If they’ll get Vanessa to sleep, I can sleep, and there will be a lot less crankiness all around.

“Take all the time you need, Agent Carolina. When you’re done, I’ll lead you to your room. Or, well, no. First I’ll lead you to food, and then to your room. Unless you don’t want food, some people don’t want to eat food they haven’t seen prepared. Um, should I go get you a ration bar or something from your jeep?”

-This guy’s a nervous wreck.-  

You would be too, if your direct superior was the kind of person to smash electronics and yell at you.

“Thank you, Carmichael. Could you make sure that the team I was with is…taken care of, and not left to their own devices for too long? We don’t need any more trouble.”

He nodded, fast and eager and so, so over the top that Carolina was sure this poor man didn’t get much kindness or respect in his day to day life. He didn’t sound as young as the soldiers Carolina was used to working with, but that didn’t mean much.

“We’ll take care of everything, Agent Carolina. Seriously, anything you need! It’s my job to make sure you’re taken care of!”

He moved to slip out of the room but stopped in the doorway and shuffled his feet.

“If, um, if you are here for a day or so, would you be willing to tell us a little bit about what’s going on in Proteger? We’ve been cut off for a while, and it would be nice to get a firsthand account.”

“Sure. I can do that, Carmichael. Maybe once I’m done in here, we can get the Reds to tell you all about the final battle. It was pretty impressive.”

He nodded eagerly, slipped out, and the door slid shut.

-Kid’s weird.-

He’s scared.

-Still weird. There’s something there I don’t like.-

You’re being extra suspicious.
Well, no time like the present to start putting pieces together.

Carolina woke the console up and imputed the code for her personal, secured channel. She doubted the location itself was secure, but she’d make sure that the other end at least knew that they needed to be careful.

“This is Agent Carolina, calling in for General Kimball.”

The line crackled, the screen flashed, and a soldier in tan and ice blue popped up on her screen. She was relieved for a moment, before she realized that the soldier wasn’t Kimball, even if she was wearing Kimball’s colors.

“Agent, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Chu, It’s good to hear you as well. Why was I routed here?”

There were six Chu’s that primarily ran the communications at Proteger, Adam, Beatrice, Caleb, Danielle, Eloise, and Frederick. As far as Carolina could tell, they’d come as a set with the base when the two armies settled in, and never left. She wasn’t entirely sure if they were siblings, cousins, married, or just a random collection of people with the same last name. What she did know was, it was a weird relief to always have at least the correct title of the person she was talking to, no matter the day or night, injury, illness, or sleep deprivation. There was always a Chu in communications.

“Preventative measures. We’re buffing and securing our lines to deal with the potential disruptions. Apparently, someone is damaging our communications out there.”

-Good, Chu’s on the line, she’s a smart one.-

Which one is she?

-Fuck if I know, I meant, like, in general. All the Chu’s are smart, so this one’s probably smart.-

Thanks, that was a huge help. It’s not like there’s always a Chu on the line or anything.

-It’d be easier if they didn’t all wear the same fucking armor all the time.-

Carolina nodded.

“Please put me through to the General, I’m ready to give an update.”

Chu nodded and tapped the console on her end. Her voice was peppy, but not Emily peppy.

I’m pretty sure this one’s Beatrice.

-Nah, she strikes me as a Dani.-

You’re full of shit, Church.

-Back atcha, C.-

“Patching you through.”
Carolina waited as the line clicked. The screen went dark for a moment, then lit up.

“Hello?”

A man answered the line, no helmet on, in an office similar to, but not the same as the one Kimball used.

That was not Vanessa.

“WHO THE FUCK IS THIS?!”

The man on the other end flinched back and threw his arms up to defend his face.

“Dear god, Agent Carolina, it’s General Páez! Must you shout?!”

-Panicky little son of a bitch, isn’t he?- 

Jesus, he looks like he’s twelve.

-Well, he is only like twenty-two.-

“Why the hell didn’t they patch me through to General Kimball?”

Páez took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and tried to look important.

It…didn’t really work. He looked more like a little kid trying to command attention on a playground than the general of half the planet. Carolina wondered if he’d gotten any leadership experience before the election, or if they just hoped he’d be good now that he was in charge.

“She is sleeping at the moment. She’s exhausted, we all are. Any and all calls are being rerouted directly to me. Are you on your way back? I don’t recognize the space you’re using.”

Carolina gripped the table in front of her. This was not the way to calm her down or make her feel more settled. A big portion of calling in was just so she’d get to make sure that Vanessa was ok, that she was safe and coping with everything. Carolina couldn’t check on her without her actually being there.

-Carolina, breathe. She’s not alone. She’s got soldiers everywhere. She’s got Wash, she’s got Doctor Grey, she’s got Tucker, hell, even Caboose is helpful sometimes, you know, if you need someone to accidentally kill people.-

Thanks, that’s very helpful.

-I’m just saying, she’s not alone. She has her people, and she has our people.-

“We are currently at Conocimiento, which is why I have access to a screen and not just a radio.”

“The base near the Tower of Records? Why?”

The man had no facial filters to speak of, which was probably an unkind thought on her end, since the majority of younger soldiers had spent more of their lives in full armor than out of it, especially on the Federal Army side of things. The man had likely never needed to develop a poker face.

“We received some weird bits of coded text that Simmons was able to translate.”

Páez nodded, and Carolina was, just for a brief moment, wistful about the motion. Something in it
was just so…inherently Doyle it made her chest ache a little.

“Yes, we’ve been made aware of it. We have a few code breakers working on it.”

“Have you cracked it?”

“Not yet, but we are working on it. I have a program dedicated to the translation, but there is something wrong with it. Every time we think we’ve got it, it’s as if the code changes or the code breakers lose track of what they’re doing. It’s, honestly, a bit of a bitch to work with.”

She snorted.

That was definitely not Doyle he was channeling if he was so willing to curse.

“Might as well stop. Simmons and Epsilon translated it. You’ll want to give this one a good read, it’s…well, it’s something. Between that and the hardware failures out here, we made the decision to get to the nearest base. It’s a good thing we did. From what I can tell, it looks like the smaller bases are getting pulverized out here by the pirates, and I have no idea where these bastards are coming from. We need to figure out what’s causing the equipment failure, and we need to do it fast, before we lose any more soldiers.”

Páez’s concern lit up his whole body, and Carolina was struck by how similar he looked in that moment to Vanessa when she was open and vulnerable and things were not going her way.

“You’ve abandoned the ship?”

“Anything we left is scrap metal, which we have plenty of, in much safer locations from the ships that the mercenaries pulled out of the sky for years. We stripped all the remaining data from the ship, grabbed the supplies, and we blew it up on the way out. Nothing left behind of any use or value to our enemies.”

He thought for a moment before he smiled and nodded.

“Well, I suppose that is fair. Anything besides the supplies they brought in the long run is not nearly as valuable as making sure all of our people arrive home safely. Good work, Agent Carolina, and thank you for your quick thinking and dedication. Do you have injured to report?”

“No, but we do have a plethora of suit failures popping up, and there may be potential failures in anyone with mechanical parts.”

“Yes, we’ve seen that with one of our returning soldiers in particular. Very well then, what do you need from me, Agent? How can I help?”

Carolina…didn’t really know what to do with that. She honestly didn’t know what she needed from him, if anything.

-You don’t really need anything right now except sleep.-

I need to see Vanessa.

-Well, it doesn’t look like you’re going to get the chance on that one right now, C, but I betcha he’d be more than happy to have Kimball call you as soon as she wakes up.-

And he should check on the Freelancers. To make sure that they’re not scared or hurt or anything.

-Them? They’re probably terrorizing the guards and getting thrown into solitary or something like
Wyoming watched the child soldiers with varying levels of concern, frustration, and pride.

Smosna and Palomo had taken to North’s bedside and camped out on either side of him. They took turns fetching cool washcloths, grabbing assorted stuffed animals to pile around North, and fetching pillows to build up a fort around his bed to discourage unnecessary staring. The rest of the soldiers had taken to what Butch had referred to as ‘aggressive acts of kindness’ with the remaining Freelancers. Folami had herself sandwiched between York and Maine, and eagerly attempted to teach them how to play Caboose Style Poker, which seemed more like a combination between solitaire and go fish than poker. Niner had been conscripted by Habisch and Bitters into an impromptu book club meeting, and Butch occasionally chimed in when Yacavone and Marconi would allow him to focus on the book long enough to get a word in edgewise.

Wyoming had been conscripted to join in with Garza, Quetzalli, and Chari on some kind of scientific venture, though he’d mostly spent the time sorting bits of metal and wire and smiling as the three, very intelligent, young women worked. Demir would occasionally come over to their space, snatch a handful of electronic pieces up, and skitter back to his pile of whatever he was doing.

-Rebbie.-

Yes, Gamma?

-Knock, knock.-

Who’s there.

A loud crackling sound made the whole room jump in surprise.

General Páez stood at the door, and seemed startled as he stared at the speaker.

“That was unsettlingly loud. Ah, hello. Is, um, there someone available to speak with for a moment? I’m checking in.”

Butch managed to pry his arms away from the troublesome twosome and swaggered up to the window sensuously. Wyoming glanced around the room. He didn’t care how old any of them were, if they’d stared at Butch’s delightfully perfect posterior, they would die.

-It isn’t fair to kill someone because they happened to see the show your husband puts on.-

Fair? Perhaps not, but if he didn’t want me to kill someone, he wouldn’t tease.

-You make me sick. Is it too late to go back into the pod?-
Yes. You will just have to accept my deep affections for my husband.

*I don’t have to accept anything.*

“General Páez, nice to see you. What can we do for you this bright, beautiful morning?”

“Evening, actually. We really ought to get you a clock or something in here. Agent Carolina called in and asked me to personally check in on all of you so, I’m…checking in. Ah, the guards made me aware of the…situation with Agent North. Apparently, Doctor Grey was less than tactful with the information about his sister?”

“That’s a mild way of putting it.”

Butch grinned that deeply unhappy grin and leaned against the glass. Yacavone and Marconi both crept up behind him and wrapped themselves around his legs as if they were much smaller children and wanted to keep him from walking too far.

It’s like dealing with toddlers.

*Toddlers who can use guns effectively.*

That is debatable. And you never answered my question.

*Question?*

Who’s there?

*Voodoo.*

Voodoo who?

*Voodoo you think you are, asking me so many questions?*

That was terrible, my friend, just terrible.

Gamma’s pleasure tingled down Wyoming’s spine.

“She showed him his sister’s severed arm on a table.”

Páez flinched and shook his head. At the very least, he seemed to realize that wasn’t acceptable behavior for a doctor.

The man might not have been the best choice as world leader, but administrator and HR representative seemed right up his alley.

“Oh my. That woman…I am so, very, very sorry. She is, ah, well, a tad eccentric, which is not an excuse for her behavior so much as an explanation. She is an exceptional doctor, the finest surgeon on the planet, and quite literally a genius, but she does not operate on the same realm as the rest of us. Still, that was a completely unacceptable action and I am deeply sorry for any and all trauma and discomfort it may have caused.”

“Well, I don’t know how much he’s going to appreciate the apology when he wakes up, but I certainly appreciate it!”

Páez glanced over to the beds where North was still out cold. Smosna, it seemed, had decided to make a game of how many plush toys she could pile onto North before they toppled off of him and
onto the floor, and once they fell, Palomo would jump up, gather them all up, and lay them out for Smosna to attempt to pile them again.

Her datapad must have died. Only pure boredom could create a game like that.

“Yes, you had to…knock him out. His AI sent him into distress.”

“Well, technically, he and his AI were feeding off of each other. They were both in distress.”

“Why didn’t you just…tell the AI not to do that? Isn’t it a computer program? Can’t you just…override it?”

-How impolite.-

Wyoming snorted.

“That’s not actually how AI work. You’re more likely to offend them by treating them like computers than actually accomplish anything. Besides, that’s very rude. I would have pulled Theta if we’d had anywhere to seat him, but…”

“Yes, of course, you need a digital seat to ensure that he doesn’t deteriorate or die. I assume the tech team in there is working on that?”

“Tech team?”

“I have on my list that you have four different techs with specific training in AI theory and object building.”

Quetzalli held up a hand and waved.

“Yes, but that doesn’t translate that easily to practical work. Hi, Lorey.”

“Q, dearest, how are you?”

“Fine, except for not being able to get blood out from under my nails. How’s everyone?”

Páez shifted and it was…interesting. Quetzalli was very clearly a peer, rather than someone to lord authority over, and it was as if the man’s whole personality shifted. Páez suddenly adopted a relaxed, open posture, his voice took on confidence and strength.

-He is better when he has a friendly audience.-

So are many public speakers. Still, one does not always get a friendly audience.

“We are surviving out here, but as for medical reports, I’ve forwarded what we know and what we can share to your datapads. As of this moment, no one from your caravan has passed, and everyone seems to be in recovery. It’s a minor miracle, in all honesty.”

“Well, I’ll burn an offering once I’m out of here. We’re gonna need some supplies and a better access to Santa if we want to get these made in a timely fashion.”

“Of course, anything I can do to help. Can you make up a list?”

Demir held up his datapad and wiggled it back and forth.

“Already done, but your account is acting funny. It’s like it’s missing.”
“Ah, no, no missing, just upgraded. Sorry, Semyon. I’ve been promoted. Well, elected.”

The Chorus soldiers all straightened up at that. A few of them were wide eyed, and those who’d worn white armor instead of tan all had grins on their faces.

So…the man *was* capable of being likable when it suited him.

-Perhaps he is just an idiot? Capable of making friends but not working well under pressure?-

That doesn’t make a person an idiot, Gamma, just a bad civil servant.

-Yes, but he is also an idiot.-

“Congratulations, sir,” Chari beamed, “We have the highest hopes that you will serve Chorus well.”

The four ‘tech’ soldiers, Quetzalli, Chari, Garza and Demir, all crowded around the doorway. Datapads in hand, they walked through the different things they needed from their lists. Páez walked them through his new contact, puzzled over the lack of forwarding from his old contact, cursed once, and then looked at the list.

“Datapads?”

“The Silver models if you have them.”

“Mmm, 813’s?”

“Actually, we’d prefer the fatties. They’ve got better cooling systems, and we’re using these as remote processors, so…”

“Processors?”

Butch had managed to peel the children off of himself and send them on their way to go and… cuddle with Andersmith. The man didn’t seem to mind the sudden puppy pile the two inspired, as he ended up being buried under giggling bodies.

“Yeah. According to Santa, the primary processor for these AI is the human brain, which is all kinds of scary dangerous for both the AI and the human. You really shouldn’t’ have them in if you’re not in armor.”

Garza threw up a tiny projector from her datapad and started to point at the glowing charts and graphs she’d projected.

-These children are no fools, you need to be very careful with them.-

I am starting to see that.

“The armor, even without a neural link directly into you, has the ability to function as a secondary processor for the AI, enabling the primary weight to be put somewhere else. Less strain on the brain, better functioning team all around.”

Butch leaned in a little to look at the projection and examined the data.

“That’s…huh. And you figured that out in a few hours?”

Chari waved a hand at him, but her face was bright with pride.
“Nah, we’ve been studying this for about a month now. Agent Carolina and Epsilon are really good at about letting us study them. It’s pretty safe for the AI in the suits, they’re designed for AI companions and work really well, but when you’re sitting around like this, it’s super stressful.”

Demir nodded.

“Possible signs of problems are restlessness, lack of sleep, irritability.”

“South has all of those things and never had an AI before this.”

“Bitch all you want, Butch,” Folami barked from her seat, “there are reasons this shit isn’t safe. The sooner we get this going, the sooner your hubby’s brain stops cooking in his skull like a poached egg.”

“I’m sorry,” Florida grinned sharply, “Did you say, ‘cooking’?”

“Um, more like overworking? Q, you’ve got the data, right?”

Quetzalli brought up a new page to examine.

“It’s like this. Your brain is a fantastic processor, but it’s only meant for one person. You’ve got two separate pieces in there. They’re working against each other, both trying to use the same space. It’s not a good time for your brain. So, the suit takes on the majority of the work, and your brain can cope. This little baby here, when we’re done, is gonna act like having a suit, even if you don’t have one.”

York scowled.

“Ok, but why not just put us in the armor instead? Seems like a lot less work.”

Bitters rolled his eyes.

“Yes, and you can eat in your armor, and shit in your armor, and sleep in your shit coated bodysuit, and never leave your armor. That sounds like a fantastic life, Agent York, I can’t believe we didn’t think of that first.”

“No need to be sarcastic, Bitters, I get it.”

“Plus,” Demir held up the tripod he’d spent the last few hours fiddling with, “With the Stepping Stone processing, this will act as the projector, so your AI can interact separately from you while out of the suit, leading to a much less isolated and therefore more happy individual!”

-Projector?-

“Neat!”

Butch took the tripod from Demir, who was very clearly startled by the act, and turned it this way and that.

-Your husband is an ass.-

His ass is also fantastic. I have no complaints.

-You are blinded by sickening human lust.-

“So, how long will all this take? I’d really prefer my husband not cook from the inside out.”
My husband is a treasure and a gem, old friend. Just because the two of you cannot agree on the
type of television you like to watch does not-

- The man enjoys mediocre sitcoms, Reggie. There are only so many laugh tracks I can take before I feel the uncontrollable urge to kill all humans and then myself. -

General Páez coughed from the other side of the glass.

“I will have the pieces on the list delivered immediately, and Q, dear, I know you are a goddess among mere mortals when it comes to programming. What is your timeline?”

She laughed and waved a hand at him.

“Stop flattering me or you may end up with a spider in your pillows. The programs and codes and stuff are all written, at this point, we’re just making sure the physical pieces actually run and function as they are supposed to. We only need three sets right now, so…”

“Four.”

The room turned to look at North.

Well, look who’s woken up.

- Do you think Theta is still in distress? -

If he was, North would be screaming.

And possibly trying to pull his own eyes out.

North’s sudden uprightness had his team of nervous caretakers all cooing and patting at him, whispering soft questions. Smosna kept dabbing at his forehead with the wet washcloth, and Palomo kept trying to get the blanket wrapped around North’s shoulders, only for it to fall right back off.

The boy was determined, the blanket would stay on, even if he had to... oh god…

- Reggie… -

Yes, Gamma.

- Is that child turning that blanket into… -

A cape? Yes. Yes he is.

- Why would he tie a blanket around North’s neck and make it a cape, Reggie? -

You are really asking the wrong person.

- Why would he do that? It doesn’t make any sense. It will not provide North with extra warmth or comfort that way. -

I have given up on understanding these children, Gamma. At this point, it is simply easier not to ask questions.

- Knock knock -
Who’s there?

“Four?”

“Four sets.”

North slowly pulled himself off the bed, much to the frustrated tittering of all the Chorus soldiers.

“South needs one, too. She’s hurt, she probably needs it most.”

General Páez nodded.

“I understand your concern, but at the moment, her AI is resting comfortably with one of our soldiers who does have the proper hard wear to carry him. Four would be ideal, but we can work with three at the moment.”

Niner glared at the man.

“So, any reason why the kids in here have to do this instead of someone out there? Multiple people? Where they’d have access to all their tools and workspaces and maybe be faster?”

The tech quartet all crossed their arms and scowled at Niner.

“First off, we’re more than capable of doing this. Second, it’s OUR design. No sense in letting some noob get ahold of it, try to fix something that’s not a problem, and end up shorting out the whole thing.”

Demir nodded.

“It happened the first time. Now we just do it ourselves.”

“Well, anyway, I will have that delivered. Agent North, please put your shoes on, I’m going to escort you to your sister’s room.”

North feet tangled in the blanket as he tried to walk, and he stumbled.

“What?”

“When this situation was thought up, we did not think about how…the situation would devolve, certainly not so quickly. I am deeply sorry for your mistreatment at Doctor Grey’s hands and I assure you that this behavior will not go unchecked. For now, I cannot offer you the technology to ease your mind, I cannot fix what has been broken, but I can hopefully ease your mind a bit about your sister’s care. Please gather your shoes, as the floor is not comfortable for bare feet out here. You may…also wish to leave your cape behind, as fetching as it looks on you, I think it might cause you to be the subject of many unwanted pictures.”

---

CHEETAH: CHECKING IN. MISSION SUCCESS. BODY COUNT 26 CHILDREN, 4 TEENS, 35 ADULTS, 0 INFANTS. ALL ACCOUNTED FOR AS EXPECTED.
The guards were diligent about keeping their weapons trained on North. Honestly, if he were one of the generals, he’d be proud of them for how well they handled the situation. As it stood though, he was tired, freaked out, and not very happy, which meant he was not very happy about the guns at his head.

Still, the walk was short, and they were in front of a plain, standard door soon enough.

He really hoped that South was actually in the room and this wasn’t an elaborate ruse designed to pick the Freelancers off, one by one. He’d be really disappointed, and he didn’t want to have to kill anyone who might be important to the soldiers Florida and Niner had adopted.

The door slid open and North stepped through, a faint flutter of hope in his chest.

South was propped up on a hospital bed, comfortable looking blankets in a wide range of colors were piled on top of her, the most prominent one was a neon purple throw with triangles littered all over it. The bottom comforter was pulled up to her chin and tucked around her. An assortment of tubes and wires threaded under the blanket. Her eyes were closed and her face was completely slack, but she didn’t look dead.

She looked peaceful.

She also looked hydrated, which told North that she was definitely on an IV, because getting South to drink water if she didn’t have to was like pulling teeth.

“She’s sleeping.”

North’s eyes snapped to the side where Danvers had settled herself in with a blanket of her own across her lap.

“What happened to your face?”

Theta!

He slapped his hand over his mouth. He hadn’t expected Theta’s surprise to push a question out of his mouth, but there it was, out in the universe and incapable of being pulled back in.

“I am so sorry, that was incredibly rude.”

She laughed.

“Don’t worry about it. Guys, I’ve got this, you go on.”

The soldiers (North was completely off his game, he had no idea they’d followed him in), shifted uncomfortably at that.

“We’re supposed to keep guard.”

“He’s not going to go anywhere. Agent South is on a very strict regimen of antibiotics and pain medication, even the smallest fluctuation could kill her right now, so it really is in his best interest to behave and not kill the only people who know how to take care of her. Right, Agent North?”

He nodded.

The guards still looked nervous, not that he blamed them. Apparently, the Freelancers were like
the boogiemen of Chorus, and it probably took a good deal of bravery just to stand in the room without automatically firing.

“If anything happens, I will accept full responsibility.”

One sighed and handed her the keys to his cuffs.

“Jersey!”

“Do you want to fight with the scary Fed doctor? Because I don’t. I want to live.”

Danvers smiled at him and nodded her head.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t die.”

She tucked the key down her shirt and waved as the guards left.

They must have seriously trusted her to go against the General’s direct orders, even if he was a new appointment. North understood how easy it was to be caught up in her gentle air and trust her, but there was trusting someone and then there was being willing to get an extreme reprimand, risk life and limb and possible imprisonment or death for someone.

Either that, or she actually was that scary, and he just hadn’t figured it out yet, one of the two.

“To answer your question, Agent, I got caught in an explosion a few years back. When I go anywhere, I put on long sleeves, gloves,” she held up her hands, “and this rubber concoction over my face, you might think of it like liquid latex, only it blends with my skin tone and doesn’t smell like death in a bottle. It takes forever to get the fake eyelashes to sit properly, and a good bit of makeup to make it seamless, but I’ve gotten pretty good at applying it. You couldn’t tell?”

“No, but to be honest, I was paying pretty close attention to South and less to your face. The real test will be passing Florida, Wyoming, Niner, and York.”

“Why them?”

“Florida seems to know everything about everything, at one point Wyoming did drag, Niner’s a makeup goddess, and York used to make prosthetics for haunted houses before he was in the military. Wyoming was surprisingly good at drag too, even with the mustache.”

“Huh. I…can see all of those things, actually. Sit down, you’re making me nervous.”

He grabbed the nearby chair and dragged it closer.

North wouldn’t bother her about undoing the cuffs and chains, there was really no point. Best case scenario she uncuffed him and nothing happened, but North had managed to keep both himself and South alive this long by not focusing or depending on the best case scenarios for anything.

“Thank you, for looking after her.”

“Of course.”

She smoothed out the covers around South and adjusted her hand on top of the blankets.

North could see the IV in the crook of her elbow, and the spot where one had been in her hand.
wanted to tell Danvers that there was no ‘of course’ about any of this. That looking after a stranger, sitting at her bedside, making sure she was never alone in a strange place, that wasn’t something doctors did. That wasn’t something nurses did.

Although, considering he’d had his own private medical team when he’d woken up, maybe that really was the way of things on Chorus.

“When I was in her shoes, I wanted someone to watch out for me.”

“No one was looking out for you?”

She shrugged.

“Lots of people died that day, and more of them were hurt. Not a lot of people were available to sit and pat your hand. I wasn’t completely alone, but it was…lonely.”

She picked up South’s hand and ran her thumb across South’s knuckles.

“It didn’t help that you can’t do a whole lot with no hands. I got very good at operating voice commands, but it wasn’t as common on that base as it is here.”

“I imagine getting them on and off is a chore.”

She smiled.

“Tech actually built me custom bases to rest the hands in when I need them off. I’ll show you sometime. South probably won’t need them, but it’s still nice to have. It makes life a little easier.”

Theta was curled up in a small back corner of North’s head clearly doing his best to hide his interest in the conversation. He refused to so much as peek his head out, but North could feel him shifting like a cat trying to pretend that the tasty tuna was just oh so boring and plebeian.

-I am not a cat.-

Merow.

“Were you there? When they made the decision?”

She frowned delicately and shook her head. Her hair bounced lightly around her shoulders.

The eye was really very striking against the rest of her face. The iris changed colors constantly in a mesmerizing display.

“No, I was still getting the latex pulled off of my face. It’d gotten melted into my eye, and while it didn’t hurt, the damage was pretty bad. It’s broken right now, I’m running totally organic.”

She put a hand on South’s bed and smoothed the blankets under her fingers.

“I wasn’t in the room, but I stand by Doctor Grey’s decision. It’s the decision I would have made if I’d had access to these scans. I can read these charts, I was watching over her, I saw what was happening. There weren’t other options, it was too dangerous to try to keep them.”

Danvers organic eye teared up.

“This isn’t the end of everything, Agent North, even though it feels that way now. She’ll function, and she’ll thrive again, of that there is no doubt. Your sister is strong. She’s going to hate life for a
while, but she’s going to come out of this better.”

North shivered, but nodded.

“I believe you.”

“She is going to be ok. She’s going to need you to be calm and support her.”

He nodded again.

They sat together in near silence and held vigil over South. It was nice, honestly, having someone who understood exactly what the plan was. Danvers made sure that North had his own blanket, and would occasionally tell him an anecdote from other medical jobs, but mostly they sat in comfortable silence.

South slept on.

At the two-hour mark, Danvers got up, pulled a syringe and a bottle from the locked cabinet, and gave South’s IV port an injection.

“What’s that?”

“Something to wake her up and keep the edge off the pain. She needs to spend some time conscious and get some food in her orally.”

“She just had part of her intestine removed.”

“Oh, that? That’s grafted and healing. She’s good. No solids or anything, but clear liquids are safe enough.”

“What?”

“What?”

South blinked into awareness.

“Mmm.”

“Hello, Agent South.”

Danvers smiled gently and disposed of the syringe.

South smiled back. She spotted North and grinned cheekily, light and carefree for just a moment, before her brows furrowed and she scowled at him.

“Why are you in handcuffs?”

North smiled.

“South.”

“Why are you in handcuffs?”

“They don’t exactly trust us.”

South scowled, the way she did when she was displeased about something.
Usually the something was him.

“Ok,” she ground out, “Why are you in handcuffs?”

Theta shifted unhappily in the back of North’s mind.

“Uh…”

-North?-

Danvers handed South the bed remote, and South raised herself into a more elevated position.

“See, here’s the thing. They don’t exactly trust us, yeah, but I can’t exactly move and you are psycho enough that you’re not going anywhere as long as I’m in here, so why are you in handcuffs?”

-She’s mad.-

You still mad at me?

-Fix it.-

Theta went dark again.

Danvers likely sensed that North wasn’t entirely himself, because she leaned over and started to fluff South’s pillows as a distraction.

“Part of it is that your brother is a dangerous person and we don’t exactly trust his motives, and part of it is that he has a really big problem with trying to fix his problems by punching people. We are well aware that the handcuffs are not going to be super effective, but they’re going to be effective enough to slow him down for a few seconds, which will hopefully be all the time I need to get my gun and shoot him in the knees.”

Danvers winked at South.

“I’ve gotten very good at knee replacements over the years.”

South actually looked disappointed in him, which was as hilarious as it was frustrating, considering who she was.

If anyone needed to be disappointed by punching, kicking, and tantrums, it was him.

“Jesus Christ, North.”

“I’m sorry, I was scared.”

“You’re scared? They cut of-f-f my f-f-fucking firing arm.”

She snarled, and Danvers picked up her hand again. South squeezed it hard, angry, but Danvers didn’t flinch. North wondered if South knew the other woman’s hands were metal or if she just thought Danvers had a poker face of the gods.

“God, South. I am so sorry.”

“I don’t…I don’t want to live like this.”
“South,” North breathed out in horror, “Don’t say things like that.”

Danvers laid her other hand on the crook of South’s elbow, just over the IV port.

“If you really want to commit suicide, let us know before we waste the time and materials on your new limbs. We have the technology, but that doesn’t mean we have the supplies to just throw away.”

-NO! STOP HER!-

“Hey!”

North scowled and moved to stand up, only for South to pin him with her eyes.


-NORTH!-

“South-“

“No! This is why you’re in cuffs! Keep your ass in your chair!”

North was caught between the two of them. Theta screamed to get up, South screamed to sit down. His head felt hot.

Danvers pushed North gently back into his chair and wrapped the blanket around him.

“Come on now, sit down. You can’t be feeling good right now, what with your head injury and your crash landing.”

Once he was settled, Danvers took her chair back and linked her hand with South’s.

She let her head fall back against the pillows and let out a frustrated noise.

“I don’t want to die.”

Danvers squeezed her hand.

“Good.”

“I don’t want to be like this, either.”

“Well, unfortunately, you don’t really have a choice in the matter. You can exist as you are or perish. That’s basically it.”

South sighed.

“Fuck you, and fuck your logic.”

Danvers smiled.

She was balmy and warm like soft beach sand, and North knew that smile would catch South’s eye. She was a sucker for a pretty girl with a nice smile.
“Agent South, I know you don’t want to hear it, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“You’re right, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You won’t have to wait very long to start getting your life back together. They’ll want to wait for you to heal a little from the trauma, but if you want it, they’ll set you up with the best neurologically controlled prosthetic limbs the planet has to offer, and believe me, we’ve got some good shit.”

Danvers peeled off her gloves slowly and put them on the little side table next to a cup of water with a bendy straw in it.

Her hands were a pale, translucent brown, meant to match up with her skin tone, but also clearly to be separate from it. Underneath the skin were metal pieces, wires, bars, joints, and soft, glowing lights.

North could feel Theta perk up. He leaned forward to get a better look.

South was entranced.

“Holy shit.”

“Nice, right?”

Danvers rotated her wrists and moved her fingers over South’s arm the way a pianist moved over keys. North didn’t have the best view from where he was, but based on South’s reactions, he thought it must have been impressive.

“I chose not to go with the transparent plating over the eye, I went with a chrome look instead because it’s a bit more solid, and there’s something unsettling about being able to see your own skull, but the hands? They’re a work of art. Plus, they’re capable of being decorated with ink, pens, even henna paste, just like regular skin. You like tattoos, right? We can recreate them on your new arm and leg, or give you brand new designs.”

South tried to smile.

“It’s not the same if I can’t feel it.”

“Ah, are you an ‘art is pain’ type, or do you just get off on it?”

“I’m just used to them hurting, I guess. North’s a big pain baby. If I don’t get a tattoo in the same spot as he wants one first to tell him how bad it is, he won’t get one. Problem is, he likes tattoos as much as I do.”

South grinned and wiggled her leg. She couldn’t get the sheet off, so North pulled it back a little. Danvers’ whole face lit up at the multitude of designs inked onto her skin.

“That’s precious. I can get you a list of the artists I know, but you may want to hit up some people from the New Republic as well. It’s not all bad. Think of it as a way to update your look rather than the loss of a piece of yourself.”

South huffed.

“I will admit that your hands are pretty, but it doesn’t matter how fancy this shit gets, it’s never as good as the original.”
Danvers face started to darken just a tad.

-She’s embarrassed.-

“The best part is a little…awkward.”

South leaned over.

“What is it?”

Danvers gave a shy smile and took off her jacket. North could see the places where her arm met the fake arm. There were mounts that bulged just a little under the skin, but the whole thing looked almost seamless.

It was…nearly pretty.

“Watch.”

Danvers held her hand straight up in the air, snapped her fingers twice, and rotated her wrist. Her hand started to tremble. South’s eyes blew wide. Danvers hand buzzed quietly.

North watched her shoulder, but it was completely still.

“Is that…”

“Vibrating? Yeah. The shocks are amazing too, so your whole arm isn’t bouncing up and down. It’s made of the same kind of stuff you’d make…pardon my language, North, vibrators out of. It’s not porous and really easy to clean. Best of all?”

Danvers popped her wrist and the buzzing increased in intensity.

“It has settings.”

“Holy shit.”

North put his face in his hands and groaned.

Of course, South’s doctor had vibrators for hands.

“I’d assume you could get vibrating legs as well, it’s the same principal, but I didn’t ask. I don’t have a foot fetish, but if you or someone you wanted to date did, you’d just have to take it up with the design team when they talk to you about features, and trust me, they’ll want to give you features. What’s the point of new limbs if they don’t have perks that your old ones didn’t?”

Of course, South would be getting a vibrator hand.

“Holy shit. I could have a vibrator hand? Do you know how much easier that’s make those lonely Tuesday nights?”

Of course, North’s pervert little sister was excited about getting a vibrator hand.

“Yes, actually, although Thursdays are my lonely nights.”

And, of course, now they were going to talk about having vibrators for hands while he was trapped with them and unable to even block them out.
North? Is this another ‘take a nap’ thing?

Yeah, it is.

Oh.

South gave Danvers a puzzled look.

“What…what about Folami?”

Oh.

Shit.

“What about her? She doesn’t have a prosthetic arm.”

North really didn’t know if it was a good idea to bring that up, based on Folami’s…less than stellar reaction to the whole ‘Danvers Dom’ thing that Volleyball teased her with when they first arrived in quarantine. The volatile young woman had been…less than happy that her friends were so desperate to set her up. She’s protested for a good half hour that Danvers wanted nothing to do with her, and that repression was really the way to go.

“No, why are you lonely on Thursday nights when you’ve got Folami in your life? That girl is so gone for you.”

“Oh. Um…”

Danvers face darkened a little more and she shifted in her seat in discomfort.

“Yeah, we aren’t really…compatible.”

South snorted and gave her a disbelieving look.

“Really?”

“Yeah. She’s New Republic and I’m Federal. It would never work.”

South laughed and patted at Danvers’ arm. The medic scrunched her face up into a scowl and North tried so hard not to laugh.

Based on the glare she turned on him, he wasn’t successful.

“What?”

“You two are only a matter of time. Once you stop fighting and start working together, that excuse is gonna get pretty thin. Just kiss her already.”

Danvers put her face in her hands.

“Oh my god.”

North laughed a little and scooted his chair closer.

“She’s not going to make the first move. She’s convinced that the only way to get along with you is to viciously repress her feelings. It doesn’t help that her friends are encouraging her to make a move on you.”
Danvers looked up at him through her fingers.

“Which friends?”

“Volleyball is the big pusher I noticed, but all of the Lieutenants as well as Semyon.”

Danvers whined and flopped backwards in her chair.

“Not Smosna! The whole base is going to start trying to set us up! That woman is insidious! Neither of us will ever get a moment of peace again until we pull of an elaborate ruse of pretending to date and pretending to break up, and that sort of thing never works because you always end up dating the person and then there’s drama and heartbreak! It’s just a bad idea!”

North couldn’t help it.

That poor woman was as helpless as South when it came to emotions and people. It didn’t matter that she liked Folami, or that Folami liked her. They could be trapped in a closet together with only a kiss separating them from freedom, and they’d probably starve to death.

He laughed.

“Don’t laugh at me! I’m upset!”

South started to laugh as well, only to grab her stomach and moan.

“South?”

“Just hurts.”

Danvers was on her feet and pushing buttons.

“Just stay still, let the pain meds do their job.”

“Um…”

North flinched and flung himself out of his chair.

“Who the hell are you?!”

There was a man in the room wearing blue armor holding an assault rifle.

“I am Caboose! I have a question for the purple lady!”

Danvers stepped away from South and put herself between North and the new guy.

The man sounded kind of dopey and didn’t hold himself with nearly the seriousness that the previous soldiers did. Of course, they hadn’t walked through the medical wing with assault rifles either.

“Captain Caboose! It’s great to see you, but what are you doing in the quarantine?”

“Oh, the glowy guy wanted to see the purple lady, and Doctor Emily fell asleep and I do not want to bother her because he is being very loud and very rude.”

A transparent yellow AI appeared at the man’s shoulder.

“SOUTH!”
“Eta!”

“South!”

“South!!”

“West!”

Danvers spun around and shoved North back into his chair with a tight, angry frown on her face.

“Stay down, Agent, or I will sit on you and make you stay there.”

“You would not be able to do that, Miss Myra, you are not very heavy and he has lots of muscles.”

“I could try, Captain.”

South snarled.

“Why does he have Eta?”

“I do not want him, he is not very nice and he keeps trying to hurt my head to make me go away, but Stupid Tucker has Tex and Agent Washington cannot have an AI. It’s a rule. A very important rule that cannot be broken.”

Danvers waved her hands around.

“No more talking! Eta, are you stable enough to not hurt Agent South?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, Captain Caboose, I am going to…remove him…somehow. You just stay still.”

North held up a hand.

“If you don’t know how to unslot a chip, it might be better to let one of us do it.”

“Nope. No one touches Captain Caboose without explicit permission from a Blue, a Red, Doctor Grey, or General Kimball. It’s another rule that can’t be broken.”

“I am also not allowed to surprise hug people anymore. Principal Kimball was very loud when I hugged her without permission.”

“We don’t want to hurt anyone’s delicate bodies. She had to get a spinal adjustment before she could walk again. Captain Caboose is very strong!”

“Yes! I am strong!”

North blinked.

“Can I at least help?”

Eta hovered near Danvers’ hands as she moved behind Caboose.

“Do you need to? It looks like you just press this here, and out it pops. Like…this!”

“Oh! That is much better!”
Danvers cradled the chip delicately in her hands and Caboose sighed in relief.

“Your friend is very mean, and I don’t like him in my head.”

South snorted.

“Dude, I don’t know, we haven’t known each other for three days yet. Sorry he’s an asshole.”

“That is ok, but thank you for saying you’re sorry. I am going to go now, there are puppies.”

Danvers’ face lit up and her metal eye swirled erratically.

“Coral’s babies are here?!”

He nodded.

“Yes! I am just going to look, but they are soft and very, very tiny!”

“Oh, this’ll be the first batch of puppies since the massacre! They’ll be the best protected puppies on the planet!”

North shared a glance with South, whose face was a cross between excited and horrified.

He wasn’t going to touch that one, or let her touch it. South’s obsession with dogs was intense and all consuming, and they didn’t need her hearing a story about dead puppies and losing her shit.

Someone would probably die.

A lot of someones if she had her way.

“Well, thank you for bringing Eta to us. I hope the puppies are healthy.”

“Only one of them has a weird head.”

North smiled at the man.

“Well…good? Good luck with your puppies.”

He nodded and waved emphatically before he spun out of the room and wandered off.

Danvers reached behind South’s head and slotted Eta in delicately.

“How’s that feel?”

South smiled.

“Right. Feels right. How you doin’, Eta?”

South was quiet for a moment, she listened.

“Yeah, that’s about right. We’re here now. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

North sighed and smiled.

“Agent North?”

North turned to Danvers, who had the keys to his cuffs in her hands.
“I want to be very clear that if you kill me, anyone else, or attempt harm or mischief, there won’t be anything to stop me from seeking my vengeance.”

-She’s letting us go?-  
I think she likes us.

-She’s nice. I see why Tai likes her.-  
Tai? Since when do you call Folami, Tai?

-Since yesterday. She likes it when people use her first name, Taita, Tie-dye, Tai Folami. She gets glowy and smiles really wide. You should call her Tai.-  
Something twisted in North’s stomach.

I don’t think we’re friends yet, Theta, but as soon as we’re in armor and she can hear you, I bet she’d love for you to call her Tai.

-I’m sorry, North. I know there’s something wrong with me.-  
There is nothing wrong with you, Theta. Nothing we can’t fix. You just need to keep it together a little longer. We’ll get you all taken care of, don’t worry.

-I trust you, North. We take care of our family.-  
We do.

-Does that mean we’re taking care of everyone? Because they’re Carolina’s family, and Carolina is our family?-  
We’re gonna focus on taking care of you and South for now. The rest we’ll figure out.

-And Tai, and Jess, and Charlie, and Katie, and John, and Antoine, and- -  
Theta, stop. I know you like them, but we can’t worry about them right now. Focus on you.

-Ok, North.-  
Theta’s disappointment was like teeth in his gut.

I just don’t want you hurt.

Danvers uncuffed North and put the offensive things in the tiny bedside table.

“Don’t make me regret this. I’m going to confiscate a book or something. Stay. Here.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

North sat next to South and picked up her hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze and she gave one back.

“You’re a lot less pretty than the last person in that chair.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s unfortunate, since you look like me.”

“I’d flip you off, but I only have one hand, and you’re holding it kinda tight.”
North frowned.

“That’s not funny.”

“Really? My meds must be kicking in, because I’m feeling hilarious right now. Eta agrees with me.”

South smiled and let her head fall back against the pillow.

“Oh, god yes, that’s the good stuff. Be warned, I’m gonna get pretty fuckin’ stupid soon. That’s is a fantastic feeling.”

North’s lips twisted up and he brushed her hair behind her ears.

“You need a cut and a dye job.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking it’s gonna be an easy thing here, those kids are like fucking peacocks. Did you see Danvers’ hair? It’s like opaly on top.”

“Opalescent?”

“Yeah. I honestly have no idea how they did that, it’s black, but also shiny. Opaly.”

“Yeah, the meds are definitely kicking in.”

North watched South’s eyes fade out. She giggled a little and wiggled around on the hospital bed until she’d apparently found a position that worked. She sighed in relief and let her eyes fall half closed.

“Thirsty.”

North grabbed the cup of water off the table and held the straw to her lips.

“So…you and Eta?”

She sucked down half the glass and burped obnoxiously. North’s nose crinkled in displeasure, and she let out a second, even louder belch.

Gross.

-Super gross.-

“He’s like a mini version of you. It pisses me the fuck off.”

“Well, at least I know there’s someone to look out for you while I’m not there.”

And that sounded a lot more morose and whiny than he’d intended.

-You have to be honest about your feelings. South isn’t good at that stuff.-

“North.”

“Look, I’m sorry. Apparently I have this deep seated need to protect you, and it’s gone into overdrive since the project went to shit. I’m going to start working on it. I will continue to work on it until I’m the kind of brother you don’t want to run away from. Until I’m the kind of person you won’t hate to be around.”
“North-“

“And I will do my best to be less overbearing, and I won’t smother you anymore.”

“North-“

“Just please, don’t leave before I have a chance to get better. I want to be better, it’s just going to take-“

“For fucks sake, North! Shut up!”

He flinched back. South’s whole face was twisted into futile, pissed off, annoyance.

“I’m sorry.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Stop being sorry. Just, get down here and give me a hug. I fucking need it.”

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TSE TSE: CHECKING IN. MISSION SUCCESS. BODY COUNT 8 CHILDREN, 36 TEENS, 25 ADULTS, 3 INFANTS. ALL ACCOUNTED FOR AS EXPECTED.

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Maine sat down next to the four tech kids and pointed at one of the pieces on the floor. When the general had said he’d get them supplies, he hadn’t been kidding, they’d had crates full of stuff hand delivered into the room without the smallest modicum of fuss.

It was an interesting contrast. The Freelancers weren’t allowed armor or weapons, but they were allowed access to things that could easily be used as weapons with hardly any creative thought. They were allowed access to young, vulnerable, and impressionable soldiers. They were allowed more information about the whole planet in just a few days than one could reasonably expect after weeks of staying in a new place.

He liked it, even if he didn’t understand it.

The contradictions were like their own kind of language.

Garza looked up at Maine, clearly confused. She looked down at the circuit board in her hands, then up to Maine, before she finally lifted the exposed circuit board up to him.

“This?”

He nodded and made a ‘Q’ with his left hand.

“It’s…science?”

Quetzalli laughed and pulled Garza’s arm. She set the piece back down to look at the pile of parts
in front of her, still clearly not understanding.

“Oh god, keep working, dummy. Chari, get her back on track.”

Chari grinned and pointed at some bit of metal attached to the board that Maine wouldn’t even pretend to understand the purpose of.

“She’s in the zone. It makes her sound like an idiot, but really, she’s just focused. It’s like when your eyes adjust after looking at something really small for too long. She’s got her brain micro focused.”

He furrowed his eyebrows, but nodded.

“Semyon’s working on the projectors for the AI, so they can interact without you guys being in armor. It’ll give both the human and the AI partner a little bit more freedom. We, on the other hand, are doing the hard part and trying to make processors that the AI can access without a hard wire into the person. There’s no point in having a processor that you have to plug in.”

Quetzalli blew a raspberry.

“Waste of time is what that is.”

Chari let out a frustrated huff.

“Damn, I think I may have screwed up. Q, look at this and tell me if it’s ok? I wish Eddie was here, she’s really good with the soldering.”

Demir took the soldering iron from Chari and handed her…something? God, Maine knew he wasn’t exactly a tech savvy kind of guy, but it was a little pathetic how…little he understood about what they were doing.

“Not right now.”

“Oh, right. I wish she was here and her hand wasn’t crushed into bits.”

They turned back to their work and seemed fairly committed to ignoring him, so Maine stood back up and wandered over to the couches, where Smosna had plastered herself to Folami.

“Yeeeeessss. Cooooome to the dark side. We have blankeeettelssssssss.”

“Folami, you’re a weird little muffin and I love you.”

Maine snorted, sat down, and was immediately buried in pillows and blankets.

Why they all felt the need to swaddle him, he didn’t entirely understand, but it wasn’t exactly a hardship to be surrounded by soft things for once. He yawned and watched the techs work from a distance, and managed to understand just as much from the couches as he did by their sides.

York stretched and cracked his back.

“You kids have the weirdest hobbies.”

“Just wait until you see underwater, no handed, basket weaving.”

Chari fiddled with the tripod mount and taped two wires together. Garza grunted and snapped the casing of her piece in place. Demir popped batteries into the piece he held. The three turned to
Quetzalli.

“Aaaaaand,” she flipped the switch and the device lit up, “…Zing!”

Demir crowed.

“Awesome!”

Chari and Garza high fived each other eagerly.

“Give us a twist, a flick of the wrist, that’s what the shaman said!”

Wyoming shook his head and snorted.

“Is it ready?”

“Oh yeah! What’s his range out of armor?”

“None. That is a problem.”

“Nah, it’s what we expected. If you haven’t fiddled with your setting any, it’ll be just like setting up Agent Carolina. Wanna try it out?”

Garza held out what looked like a small spike, hardly anything really.

“Ah…”

Florida was suddenly at Wyoming’s side, his charming smile replaced with something a good bit more like concern.

“What’s this?”

“This is the stepping stone. This will allow the AI access to both the processor and the projector. It’s designed to attach to your chips. If you look at the design of your AI ports, you can see someone already had the idea long before you landed on Chorus. It was always meant to expand into something like this.”

“Now your AI can communicate without needing you to talk for them, and they have a little extra autonomy! You can’t go more than 20 feet before they can’t reach, which is a problem, but still, it’ll allow for separate conversations!”

Florida held out his hand and Garza handed him the tiny spike.

“Turn around, Love of my Life. I want to see what they’re talking about.”

Wyoming obediently showed the back of his neck, and Maine tried not to shift in discomfort.

He…really didn’t like thinking too hard about the AI. It made him…all kinds of sick.

Folami reached out and squeezed Maine’s wrist.

“Just, into the slit here?”

“That’s right.”

He nodded.
Florida marched over to York, grabbed the back of his head, and smacked the spike into it.

“FUCK!”

York tried to flinch away, only for Florida to grab him by the hair and hold his hand over the port. York howled and clawed at the back of Florida’s hand, his eyes were blown wide, and terrified.

“Hold still, Yorkie, I don’t want to accidentally paralyze you.”

The camera mount shifted around and projected an image.

Delta.

“This is not what I expected.”

The room was quiet.

“Um…AI, sir? Can you tell me how you’re feeling? Does the processor seem to be working?”

York’s whole body went limp.

“Yes,” Delta’s cool tones washed over the room, “The processor appears to have transferred a great deal of the weight off of York’s mind, although the initial process was incredibly painful.”

“I’m ok.”

Chari stood up and slapped Florida’s arms angrily.

“If someone hadn’t decided to be an asshole, we could have done that very differently! You didn’t have to scare him and you didn’t have to hurt him! What is wrong with you?!”

Bitters leapt up from the corner of the room he, Palomo, and Jensen had claimed as their own and dragged Chari away.

“Ok, that’s enough. We don’t attack the smiling assassin if we want to live to the ripe old age of thirty-five. Come on, enough of that.”

Demir picked up the projector and brought it over to the circle of couches. It was…interesting, really getting to see him again.

“Private Smosna,” Delta projected himself right in front of the brightly colored woman.

She beamed.

“Oh, Delta! Hi! What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to personally thank you for your kindness towards Theta. It was greatly appreciated.”

“What do you mean?”

“On the truck, you recited the story you had memorized, and it made the final leg more bearable for all of us, but especially for him.”

She wiggled in her seat, clearly quite pleased with herself, and started to play with her hair.

“Heh, bearable. Well, it’s all-good. I just hope he hadn’t heard that one before.”
“I am not sure that any of ours were familiar with that story, so it was especially useful as a distraction.”

“Well, I’m glad, because, I’m pretty sure I told it wrong, I may have mixed like two or three of them together.”

She grinned sheepishly at Delta’s camera.

“Whoops.”

“The fact that you tried at all was a meaningful act.”

Her eyes were bright and Maine didn’t think he’d seen a smile half that big or brilliant on her face the entire time they’d been in the room.

“Well, you’re very welcome, Delta. Honestly, it was my pleasure.”

York stood up on wobbly legs.

“Ok, someone needs to explain this to me, because I’m feeling all kinds of weird right now.”

He and Demir moved back over to where the three young women had started to work again. Delta and York both watched them work, completely entranced by the process.

Maine turned a little to Smosna, who watched with large, sad eyes, as the majority of the room’s undivided attention was on Chari, Garza, and Quetzalli.

“Do you think I made him uncomfortable? That happens sometimes…”

She turned her whole body around to look at Maine. Her knees were both on the couch, and her feet were inexplicably rested on Folami’s thigh. The tiny young woman huffed, clearly annoyed, but didn’t do anything about it.

“Mick.”

She poked Maine’s arm.

“Maine.”

She poked his arm again.

“Agent Maine.”

She tugged on the sleeve of his hoodie.

“I asked you a question.”

Maine blinked and gave his best ‘why on earth do you think I have any clue what’s going on?’ face. And truth be told, he really didn’t.

Her expression scrunched into distress and she started to bounce up and down on the couch.

“Miiiiiiiiiiiiiiick. Heeeeeeeeeeeecelllllpp meeeeeeeeenee!”

Folami kicked out with her good leg.

“Oh my god, Jess. What do you expect him to do?”
Smosna slumped backwards across Folami’s lap, leaving her contorted in a very awkward pose that Maine deliberately did not look at too closely.

Florida caught Maine’s eye and slowly shook his head back and forth.

“I don’t know, Tai, but this is **killing** my ego.”

“Oh, the horror.”

Smosna flipped her off.

Maine poked at the datapad Folami had loaned him after she’d finished playing with it the night before.

**Goals?**

Smosna blinked and swung her legs across Maine’s lap.

“How? Oh, um…mostly the undivided attention of the very smart person? I know that makes me selfish, but I don’t get a whole lot of one on one time that doesn’t devolve pretty quickly into making out or other stuff.”

Folami threaded her fingers through Smosna’s hair and started to scratch at her scalp. It was an intimate pose, serene, and Maine had an inexplicable urge to get a picture of it or paint it or something like that.

“The curse of being beautiful, hypersexual, and omnisexual. All that desire and no self-control.”

Maine snorted and Smosna flailed her hands around in distress.

“Don’t laugh! It’s a serious problem! Sometimes you just want to have a conversation with someone really smart, but the other person thinks you’re coming onto them, so they flirt, and the next thing you know you’re on the ground giving head, wondering just how you got there from particle physics, only to realize that it was the particle physics that got you hot and bothered and the person doesn’t realize that you’re only attracted to them for their brain.”

**This all sounds very complicated.**

“It is. Which is why I want to talk to Delta! He’s got no physical form of his own, so it would be impossible for me to make a move!”

**York?**

“Oh, I’m not attracted to him at all. It helps that Agent Carolina kissed him, but seriously, there’s just nothing there. He’s like a total safe zone. I’m thinking it’s his personality, in all honesty. He’s either super boring or super offensive.”

Folami cocked her head.

“You’re not looking at the guy? That doesn’t happen often.”

“No! It’s a little weird, but I kind of like not being attracted to him. Is this how you feel all the time?”

Folami snorted and grabbed Smosna’s still flailing hands.
“Pretty much. Mick, hold these for me. All that energy is concentrated in one place rather than all over the place. I mean, obviously you’ve got dating standards, but it’s a bit more…selective, I guess? My brain picks one or two people and says ‘make babies’. And it’s hardcore, all consuming, chest pain, stomach churning, tongue tied mess.”

Maine held Smosna’s hands in his own, a little confused about why he was doing it, but then Smosna started to squeeze his hands in time with Folami’s head scratches, and he was too caught up in the motions to really care.

“Sounds exhausting in the long term. What happens when they don’t like you back?”

“For me? Screaming and slasher movies. Not that I want them getting slashed, it’s just that gore makes me feel better.”

“Geeze, you and LC Sid are a match made in heaven.”

“I keep telling them to let me adopt her, but nooooo.”

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**KOMODO:** CHECKING IN. MISSION SUCCESS. BODY COUNT 13 CHILDREN, 34 TEENS, 63 ADULTS, 1 INFANT. ALL ACCOUNTED FOR AS EXPECTED.

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The datapad had buzzed non-stop since she’d gotten to her room. She’d rerouted as many messages and memos as she could, but some things were just not something she could justify giving over.

Some things she couldn’t give over.

She had no idea how long she’d actually been able to sleep.

She had no idea how long she had left before she had to be awake.

Not long enough.

Too long.

Far too long.

Vanessa rolled limply out of bed.

The room was dark, gray, and lifeless. She didn’t remember the last time she hadn’t slept in a room filled with color. Soothing blues, bold, brilliant reds, soft creams, and glowing greens had been in her vision for so long, she’d forgotten what it was like without them.

She’d have to relearn how to live with the gray.

Vanessa pulled the bottom drawer out of her tiny dresser, careful not to dislodge any of the clothing tucked away in there. She reached her hand into the gap between the shelf’s support rack and floor,
and felt around until she wrapped her fingers around a pill bottle.

The bottle was small, white, and plastic, completely unmarked. She twisted the cap off, knocked two pills into the palm of her hand, tucked the bottle back where it belonged, and slid the drawer back in. She rolled the pills around in her palm for a moment, caught in the moment, she watched as the little blue pills danced.

She let out a slow sigh.

“Down the hatch.”

“You don’t need those.”

Vanessa blinked and turned around.

Felix grinned at her from his perch on the edge of her bed, cross-legged, wearing his favorite pajamas and a pair of bright orange socks that Vanessa knew without a doubt had been crocheted for him by Private Lee. His hair was perfect, as usual, despite the clear intentions of going to bed.

Only Felix gave that much of a shit about looking put together when he was supposed to be sleeping.

She flipped him off.

“Shut up.”

She brought the pills to her lips.

“You know those pills a bad idea, Vanessa.”

“I said, shut up, Felix.”

He smiled, all sympathy and gentleness, and Vanessa was ready to punch his smug face until his teeth caved in.

“Do you really want to get addicted again? You worked so hard to get clean.”

“I’m not an addict, you gas lighting, son of a bitch!”

“Hey, is that any way to talk to your friend? I’m just worried about you.”

“SHUT UP!”

Vanessa threw the pills across the room.

They bounced against the concrete wall and skittered away to parts unknown under her bed.

“Shut.”

She sat down on the bed and put her head in her hands.

She didn’t want to deal with him right now.

She was so tired.

Felix scooted over and threw an arm around her shoulder.
God, he was cold.

“Do not touch me.”

“Sorry, sorry, I forgot how self-righteous you get when you’re in your pill popping phase.”

“I am not an addict. I was not an addict before. I was in pain. I am in pain. It’s not the same thing.”

Felix flopped to the side and plopped his head onto her lap. He stared up at her, all white teeth and dark eyes and wiggling eyebrows that used to make her laugh any time she needed one.

He reached up and twisted one of her braids between his fingers.

“Says the woman who keeps secret bottles of pills hidden where she knows her girlfriend won’t look, and has hidden bottles of booze in her desk.”

Vanessa pulled her hair out of his hand and tossed it all behind her shoulders, out of his reach.

“As someone who was the frequent recipient of my hidden desk booze, you should shut the fuck up.”

Felix grabbed Vanessa’s hand and forced her palm onto his forehead. She rolled her eyes and ran her fingers through his hair. The goddamned baby had complained so hard about it the first time she messed with his hair, and then it became a ritual. Every time they were out of uniform and there weren’t eyes on them, Felix ended up with his head in her lap.

She hadn’t minded until he’d made a big deal about how this sort of thing was romantic on other planets.

“All I’m saying, is that you’re just making up excuses, and you know it. You’re looking for an excuse to get fucked up because you feel scared and out of control. The pills won’t reign things in, Vanessa. They won’t make this leadership thing easier. They won’t make people listen to you or make you more effective. They won’t make Carolina love you or Páez respect you or Washington more stable or the Freelancers less dangerous. At most, they’ll make you a little soft around the edges, and a lot more stupid. You know that. You’ve lived that. You don’t need the pills.”

She shook her head and rubbed at her eyes.

“I just want to sleep without being in pain.”

He rested his hand on her knee and gave her that gentle, sympathetic smile again.

“And how’s contraband drugs gonna help you sleep?”

“You don’t understand, Felix.”

“I understand that you’re acting like a quitter when you should be acting like a leader.”

She sneered at him.

“I’m not quitting, I’m hurting.”

“The kind of hurting you have isn’t gonna be fixed by pills and you know it. It’s not gonna bring back the dead, and it’s not going to make you more confident. It’s a band-aid on a crumpling bridge with a leak. You don’t need them.”
“My back hurts.”

Blood trailed down from Felix’s mouth, nose, and ears, and dripped onto the bed. His eyes took on a milkier sheen.

She could feel the wetness of his blood soak into her pants.

“So does mine, but you don’t see me tossing back pills.”

He was so pale.

“You’re dead, and you’re a murderer. You don’t get to judge me for how I cope.”

“I’m not judging you, Vanessa. I’m concerned. That’s what we do, we look out for each other.”

“Fuck. You.”

He poked a broken finger into her stomach.

“Now, that’s no way to talk to your friend.”

She smacked his hands away.

“You are not my friend. You killed my friends.”

He grinned up at her, mischief and amusement made the dead eyes sparkle.

“Not as many as I’d have liked.”

Vanessa shoved Felix off of her and to the floor in a broken, oozing heap.

“Ouch!”

She stood up, stepped over Felix, and moved to the side of the bed that the pills had bounced under.

“Do you think I should dye my hair again?”

“You’re dead, Felix. Your hair color is the least of your worries.”

He rolled into a sitting position, his bones creaked and popped and something foul gushed out of his side and puddled onto the floor.

“Yeah, you say that, but I’m still sitting here, and I’m kinda thinking the color’s not so hot anymore. I used to be all about the orange, you know? But then Grif came along and ruined it. All I can think about when I see it is that fat lard running from the cooks and whining about being tired, and hungry, and on and on! God, they’re all so annoying! How do you stand them, Vanessa, I mean really? Tucker is constantly trying to get into everybody’s pants, including yours. Simmons is a stuttering nerd with a daddy complex. Caboose-”

“Stop it. You don’t have the right to an opinion, especially not on them. You don’t know them.”

“No, but I know you. You have the worst taste in friends, Vanessa.”

“That’s apparent, I was friends with you after all.”

“Aside from me.”
Vanessa slid to her hand and reached around for the pills. They were small, but colorful, and should have contrasted easily with the dark gray flooring.

But she couldn’t find them.

“Not an addict, huh?”

“I can’t just leave them on the floor. Metaphor might eat them and they would kill her.”

“Vanessa, you’re crawling around on the floor for drugs, making up excuses, and crying. You need help.”

She whipped around and snarled at him.

“What are you doing here?! Why aren’t you in hell or wherever it is you think you’ll go when you die?!”

Felix smiled sadly.

“No matter what happens,” Vanessa flinched.

“Stop.”

Felix put his hand against the bed and hauled himself to his feet.

“No matter who turns on you,”

She stood up and grabbed her handgun from the dresser.

“Stop.”

He stepped closer. A putrid odor filled the room.

“No matter what dark days the future holds.”

Felix’s bones shifted under his skin, poked through muscle, his legs twisted in broken agony beneath him. His arms hung limp at his sides, dripping a bloody trail along the floor the whole way.

“I am here for you.”

Vanessa’s head swam.

Felix shuffled forward and wrapped his broken, bloodstained arms around her.

Her head dropped low and fell against his shoulder. She could feel the pieces of his shoulder bones shift around under her forehead to accommodate the weight.

“Aren’t you going to welcome me back?”

She wrapped Felix in a hug and felt his organs squish around.

The smell kept getting stronger.

“Why won’t you just kill me? Why won’t you just let me die?”
“It’s better this way, you’ll see. The world’s a brighter place with you in it. Come on, Vanessa, welcome me home.”

She stepped back, put the gun to his forehead, and pulled the trigger.

Felix’s head exploded, sprayed the room with old blood and rotted brain and bone shards.

“That wasn’t nishe,” his jaw flexed weakly as it hung from one lone strand of muscle.

“Go away, Felix.”

“Get shome shleep, Vanessha. You need it.”

Vanessa blinked.

The room was empty.

Metaphor hissed angrily from her tree cave.

There was a hole in the concrete just to the right of it.

Vanessa blinked.

She was holding her handgun.

There was no blood.

She looked down at the floor.

Between her feet were two tiny, blue pills.

She could feel her hands shake.

Her heartbeat sped up.

The air felt thin.

She flicked the safety and put the gun in the drawer.

She leaned down and picked up the pills.

She rolled them in her hand.

Metaphor scurried out of the tree cave, up Vanessa’s leg, and perched on her shoulder. She made some very displeased sounds and bit Vanessa’s earlobe. Vanessa scritched the underside of Metaphor’s chin.

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Metaphor chittered unhappily.

“I know, baby, I know. I’m sorry.”

Vanessa dropped the pills into the drawer with the gun and closed it firmly.
She couldn’t get her hands to stop shaking.

“There, see? No more.”

Metaphor vaulted off of Vanessa’s shoulder, landed on the bed, and ran up to Vanessa’s pillow. She kneaded it aggressively, squeaks of frustration rumbled out of her long, tiny body, and she peed all over it.

“Alright, so we’re not sleeping in here. Did you really have to piss on my pillows to prove a point?”

Metaphor chittered even louder and made a horrible squealing noise.

There was a pounding on the door.

“General Kimball! Are you ok?! We heard gunfire!”

Vanessa opened the door.

There were six soldiers, all armed to the teeth, standing outside.

“You know, if I were trying to escape, I’d have just fired through the walls and shot you all.”

One of the soldiers stepped into the room.

“Your hands are shaking, General.”

“I’m fine, Ron, just jumping at shadows unfortunately, and Metaphor is less than happy. I’m going to be switching rooms.”

He nodded and moved to put a hand on her shoulder, only for Metaphor to slither around and hiss at him. He flinched back.

“Was it the Freelancers?”

One of the others piped up.

“No. No one was here.”

She clenched her fists.

He shooed the other soldiers away.

“You’re a bad liar, General Kimball, and we know you. Are you ok?”

She nodded.

“Just…just tired.”

“Well, why don’t we get you somewhere safe so you can sleep? The room is going to smell like bullets for a while.”

“Go ahead and mark this one up to be emptied. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep here again.”

“That sounds like a solid plan. Let me get your datapad, and you can grab some things for Metaphor.”

Vanessa internally cringed as she gathered up Metaphor’s things and her travel bag. She wondered
how long it would take for the whole base to hear that she was discharging her gun at the walls. Or that someone had managed to break into her room, fire off a shot, disappear, and scare her into silence.

Neither option was exactly something she wanted.

She needed to get a grip.

She needed to get some real sleep.

“Alright, General. Lets get you somewhere safe.”

ELEPHANT: CHECKING IN. MISSION FAILURE. CARAVAN DID NOT ARRIVE AT DESTINATION. BODY COUNT 0.

BUTTERFLY: PLEASE CONFIRM LAST CONTACT.

ELEPHANT: MISSION FAILURE. CARAVAN DID NOT ARRIVE. CARAVAN LOCATION UNKNOWN.

BUTTERFLY: HOW IS IT POSSIBLE YOU LOST A CARAVAN OF 100 PEOPLE? THEY WERE HERDED DIRECTLY TO YOUR LOCATION.

ELEPHANT: CARAVAN SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN ALTERNATE ROUTE. INTERFERENCE FROM AN OUTSIDE SOURCE. COULD BE THE MISSING MERCENARY.

BUTTERFLY: FIND THEM.

ELEPHANT: PERMISSION TO TAKE THE HERD?

BUTTERFLY: PERMISSION GRANTED. FINDING THE CARAVAN IS IMPERATIVE. THE BODY COUNT IS IMPERATIVE. WE CANNOT LEAVE ANY OF THEM UNACCOUNTED FOR.
Hey guys! Did you miss me?!

I had intended to have this chapter out much earlier in the day, but it's still technically May 1st in my timezone, so I'm not going to feel too guilty. The chapter is still going up the day I said it would!

Man, that felt like the longest writing break ever, but I'm back in the saddle again, and I've got some updates for you!

Along with getting Finding Washington back on a biweekly update schedule, I will be attempting to get at least one short story up on the in between weeks. The first one should be The Slumber Party (which is taking me a ridiculously long time to finish up considering it's mostly just a bunch of people messing around), followed by something I've been calling How Much is that Wolf in the Window. I'm also planning to participate in RarePairs week, so if you've got some ideas for that one, I'm all ears.

I've also been working to put together a tumblr page for myself. My main account is mostly where I just reblog to constantly. It's called HBossCreations and filled with all kinds of untagged nonsense. Buuuuuut if you're interested in updates, writing, or Red vs Blue reposts without all the animals and personal politics and all that jazz, I've got a secondary account called HBossWrites which is geared primarily toward those three aspects. As time goes by, I intend to flesh HBossWrites out a little more, and one day I may even make myself an icon or something, so I don't feel quite so generic!

I am considering putting together a cabin for Camp Nanowrimo. The next one starts in July and has a total of 20 spots. If anyone out there is interested in participating in a cabin and working on a writing project with me in July or you have any questions but don't want to commit, hit me up either in the comments or on tumblr, and I'll get started on getting info together.

I will also start taking story prompts for one-shots, not just in the Finding Washington verse. I'm working on a fluffy piece right now suggested by fredrickthepig loosely titled 'Agent Washington: Werewolf Freelancer'.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my writing buddy BlueTeamChurch for helping to keep me on track and motivated! We have spent the past month tossing ideas around for our respective stories, and I think you guys are really gonna enjoy what we've cooked up for you!
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Wash learns things that confuse him, Carolina get ALL the dishes!, Doctor Loomaua lays down the law and the General, [TRANSLATION IN PROCESS – 36%], Kimball's cocoon, “Has anyone seen Carolina?” “Nope. Must be sleeping.” “Oh… good. She doesn’t do enough of that.”, Izzy does not have enough friendship points, Wash attempts to fix government, Church blinds Carolina, Aiden is not very good with knives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was impossible to sleep. Too much happening, too much potential for things to go wrong. He’d had naps, and he’d gotten used to running efficiently on very little sleep, thanks to years of ‘psychological mistreatment’ and his ‘excessive paranoia’. Wash didn’t think either thing was actually the case, but he wasn’t going to argue with Donut. If the man wasn’t bringing up Wash shooting him and leaving him to die, Wash would let him say whatever he wanted to.

Wash was just thankful Donut hadn’t invited Wash to get his nails done. He didn’t know if his sanity could handle that much physical contact with someone he’d maimed.

The buzzer at his door went off.

He flipped the contact switch.

“Hello?”

“Agent Washington? There’s been an emergency. We have General Kimball out here.”

Wash checked his cameras.

A group of six soldiers stood outside with Kimball in the middle of them, Kimball pushed close to the door, and the soldiers surrounded her from all angles, facing out as if they were going to shoot at anyone who got too close. Metaphor was wound around Kimball’s right arm, claws dug deep into the woman’s sleeves, tearing holes into Kimball’s second favorite shirt, and making low, angry growling noises.

She was wearing her pajamas, no armor or weapons, no uniform, and no shoes.

Something was very wrong.

Wash opened his bedroom door.

“What’s happening?”

“There was an attack,” the ranking Captain straightened up.

“There was no attack,” Kimball muttered darkly.
The Captain, Orwell if Wash remembered correctly (Ron Orwell, no relation to MO Orwell) motioned Wash out of the room as he gently ushered Kimball inside.

Kimball took a few steps into the space, then just stood there, idly petting Metaphor’s head as she stared at the wall. She was a little off the mark and a little heavier handed than she normally was, like her motor control wasn’t where it should have been. The soldiers all shuffled around, clearly nervous, but they kept checking their corners, so Wash didn’t feel the need to talk to them about it. Her behavior was concerning.

Orwell leaned in close to Wash and whispered.

“There were shots fired in her private quarters. When we got there, she was just standing in the middle of her room, staring at nothing. Her eyes were…foggy, she’s moving oddly, and her speech is a little slurried. Metaphor let off a really angry scent mark right before we got there. She was trying to scare someone off, and she’s been aggressively defensive of the General.”

“And she didn’t notice?”

Orwell shrugged, awkwardly and passed Wash Vanessa’s datapad.

“Honestly, I’m pretty sure she thinks Metaphor just peed everywhere, she was really embarrassed. She’s…I don’t think she’s ok.”

Wash looked back at Vanessa, who’d started to sway a little where she stood. Metaphor had moved from Vanessa’s arm to drape across her shoulders like a furry shawl made of venom and rage.

“Why didn’t you sound the alarm and take her to the infirmary?”

Orwell’s Lieutenant held out Vanessa’s emergency bag.

“We didn’t want to cause a panic. We’ve already got her doctor on the way, but the last thing we need after a Freelancer just being let out of quarantine is a rumor about an attack on the General.”

Wash’s blood froze in his veins.

“What?”

Orwell told him about Agent North, how he wasn’t in the sealed quarantine room anymore, but he was on camera the whole time, and as pissed as Wash was about it, he knew North wasn’t going anywhere with South laid up. They had mic’d cameras, hardwired feeds, and eyes on the room at all times. The other Freelancers were under the same level of surveillance but seemed content in the space with the soldiers and hadn’t made a single move to leave the room.

He mentioned that no one had been in the General’s hall for hours.

“The last person to even see her was the soldier from Lugar right after her meeting with General Páez and before she went to sleep.”

The soldier from Lugar…

“The one who reported in person on the attack at the Tower of Records? The sole survivor of the attack?”

Orwell nodded.

The soldiers all watched the general, radiating concern as she seemed to decide that standing was
too much. She crossed her ankles and dropped cross-legged to the floor with a thump. Metaphor screeched and bit her neck.

“The soldier, where is he?”

Epers, one of the more neutrally opinionated Federal soldiers put a finger to her headset and demanded that the soldier be checked on. Wash kept an eye on Kimball as she started to list a little to the right and made a soft shushing noise.

Epers shuddered.

“He’s…he’s dead.”

“What?”

She looked at Wash, clearly unsettled, even through her helmet. Whatever she’d heard was not good.

“It…I don’t know, it looks like he shot himself. The patrols heard shots, and when they tried to check on him, the doors were locked. They’re saying there’s blood everywhere. It just happened.”

“Did they see him go into his room?”

“Security is gonna check the tapes.”

The whole lot of soldiers shifted in discomfort.

Wash…wasn’t really sure what to do about that. How did Chorus deal with suicide? How did they deal with bodies that didn’t come from the battlefield?

“Jesus. Ok, tell them to lock the room down until it can be properly examined. Is there a protocol for this?”

One of the soldiers Wash didn’t know, a holdover from the army consolidation, nodded.

“Should I make arrangements?”

“Please, and forward the information to myself and General Páez. As for General Kimball, she’s going to rest for a while until the doctors get here to check and make sure she’s ok. We’ll get this figured out. Thank you, for your dedication to her safety.”

They shifted around. Orwell, and Wash was sure he was an Orwell, motioned the others away from the door.

“We’re going to increase the bodies in the hall for a while, just to make sure everything’s secure, at least until the doctors come. We…We should make sure she’s not in danger. Is she in danger, Agent Washington? Are we in danger?”

“If someone was able to get into and out of her room without being spotted, fire, and get out without anyone seeing them, she’s in danger. If she’s in danger, we are all in danger. General Kimball is one of the most heavily guarded people on the planet.”

“She wasn’t today. She hasn’t been for a while now, not with everything being chaotic. I don’t think there was a single guard on her door tonight.”

Wash frowned at the man. Based on the way the man spoke, he felt the same way Wash did.
“Well, that’s something that needs to be fixed.”

Someone screwed up, and it could have cost Vanessa her life.

“I completely agree. Permission to act accordingly, sir?”

“Granted. Get an equal guard on General Páez, while you’re at it, as well as anyone who might be considered a high priority target. And increase that guards on the Freelancers as well.”

“Absolutely.”

“And get a patch to Agent Carolina for me, if you can. She should know what’s going on.”

Orwell nodded and tapped his chest.

“We live for Chorus.”

That was…kind of an odd statement.

He looked at Wash expectantly.

Wash…waited.

“Sir?”

“What?”

Orwell shook his head.

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed, since you’re so close to General Kimball and all.”

“Assumed what?”

“That you’d…assimilated. That you were part of Chorus now.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“You…didn’t respond?”

“To what?”

“‘We live for Chorus, we die for Chorus’? It’s the key piece of the Menagerie Journals. They’re practically required reading.”

“The…menagerie?”

“Like Leopardspaw’s Introspections? The visualization of the destruction of Chorus’s infrastructure as well as her people’s moral decay? It’s a fascinating collection, but more than that, it’s a reflection of who we are as people of Chorus.”

Epers scoffed and shook her head.

“Who we *were*, maybe, like thirty years ago. You New Repubs take the journals so seriously. It’s a bunch of scribbles made by terrorists and radicals. It’s nonsense.”

Orwell turned to her and pointed furiously.
“It’s important. It’s the literature that the New Republic was founded on, written by the people who-.”

The soldier Wash didn’t recognize growled.

“The Menagerie doesn’t belong to the New Republic! The Journals include some fantastic writings that apply to all perspectives, not just-“

Wash slapped his hand against the wall. The crack managed to startled the group out of their argument.

“Look, I’m not…I don’t know enough about either side’s current politics to make a decision that way, and even if I did, at the end of the day, that’s for the people who are a part of this planet to decide. I am an outsider, my perspective should weigh less, not more.”

“Alright, children, stop crowding the good Agent. Back to work. Guard the halls, defend the general.”

Wash blinked as he realized two of the more prominent doctors on the base, Silvers and Loomaua, had managed to sneak up on them. Neither one was who he expected to arrive in case of an emergency.

Where was Emily?

The soldiers scattered around the hall to stand guard and relay information back and forth with security and feel as if they were doing something useful.

Wash wished he had something he could do to feel useful. At the moment, he was too busy feeling helpless and confused to be much good to anyone.

“Doctor Loomaua?”

“Agent.”

“Sorry, I just…thought they were getting Doctor Grey.”

She slipped her helmet off, and Wash was immediately taken in by the scars on her face. Loomaua had been caught in a fire years back that had scarred the majority of the right side of her face and neck, but rather than go for skin grafts, she’d turned the burn scars into art with a strategic, and frankly beautiful tattoo of what he’d been told was made to mimic the mosaics of one of the temples on the planet. It covered the majority of her face, head, and neck. Possibly more, but Wash had never seen her out of uniform, and he wasn’t going to ask a woman he barely knew to take her clothes off so he could stare at her ink.

“Why would they do that? I’m Kimball’s primary physician, and she’s a Fed.”

“I didn’t realize Chorus did primaries.”

Loomaua shook her head.

“Of course she has a primary doctor, with that back of hers, she needs one.”

“I just…didn’t think of it, I guess.”

“That’s fine. Clear the room please, I’d like a moment alone with my patient.”
Doctor Silvers put a gentle hand on Wash’s elbow and pulled Wash out of the room. Loomaua shut the door behind herself.

“Let’s give them a few minutes, shall we? Agent, how are you feeling?”

She let go of Wash and rocked back on her heels.


“Good, good. And rest wise? Did you manage a little more sleep?”

“I still feel fatigued, but less than I was before. I just needed a few uninterrupted hours.”

She nodded along and Wash suddenly realized she hadn’t actually come to help with Kimball, she’d come to check on him.

“I’m not crazy.”

Silvers waved her arms a little.

“No! No, not at all! I only meant that…well, you’ve had a hard time getting good rest here, and sleep is so, so, so vital to health! It’s not a broken confidence, no one said anything to me, it’s the fact that you fall asleep in your oatmeal most mornings that tipped me off.”

“Yeah, that stuff, that’s not oatmeal. That’s some sort of punishment being foisted on humanity.”

Doctor Silvers nodded, then frowned at the closed door.

“I didn’t actually come to bother you about your sleep, you’re a grown man and you already have a doctor looking after you, I just feel kind of helpless about all of this. If I’m not patching someone up, I don’t really know what to do.”

Wash nodded and laid a hand on her shoulder. If she was surprised by the act, she didn’t show it, she just patted his hand.

“I’ll watch out for her.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? It seems like she’s in a delicate state.”

“I think if there’s ever a time when I need to stand by her, it’s when she’s in a delicate state.”

Doctor Silvers let out a soft laugh and gave Wash a quick hug, and he knew he’d said exactly the right thing. It didn’t take much to earn favor on Chorus, the people soaked up kindness like dry sponges in the rain.

“I should warn you, our Kim is very demanding when she’s feeling poorly.”

“I know. She likes romantic comedies. It’s awful.”

“You can get around that with period romance. Try watching something with petticoats and lots of courting rules, that always puts her in a good mood. She may also want tactile reassurance.”

Wash snorted, because that was not the kind of description that made the situation sound any friendlier. ‘Tactile reassurance’ sounded like something dirty, like a quick fuck in an abandoned hallway after a battle to prove the both of you were still alive.
That was not the kind of relationship he wanted people to think they had. Wash respected Vanessa. He didn’t want into her pants, and even if he did, he was not willing to fight Carolina for the opportunity to try and win over a woman who wasn’t interested in him that way.

“She’s a hugger, I know. She gets along well with Caboose for a reason. Believe it or not, I’m pretty good at letting her tell me what she needs from me.”

“Agent Washington, I’m not trying to be difficult, it’s just…Kimball…The last person who really knew how to take care of her was…well, you know who.”

You Know Who, a name previously reserved for a villain from a children’s story, took on a whole new meaning.

“Felix? You’re telling me Felix took care of Kimball? Felix was capable of taking care of another human being?”

“Shocking, I know. You’d never guess it now, knowing what we do about him, but it’s true. They were friends for years, before she was even general. He always knew when she was about at her edge. He managed to get her through some of her darkest days and back into the field with only a few new cracks to show for it. There was…something special about their relationship.”

A cold, unsettled feeling sloshed around in the deepest pit of his stomach.

“Did she…love him?”

“Do you think it would have hurt so badly if she hadn’t? Family cuts you deepest, Agent.”

Wash made a careful noise, because that wasn’t exactly what he’d asked, but it answered the question anyway.

“Do you think he loved her?”

Silvers thought for a moment.

She’d known Kimball for years, long enough to remember her back when she’d just been Kim instead of General. When the woman had been running the around the front lines, raiding the Federal army bases, running with the War Dogs, and pissing off anyone who so much as stepped a toe in her way.

Silvers knew Felix as well. She’s operated under bases he’d worked at and had seen him and Kimball interact. Where Kimball went, her medics went too, even if her team had long since been disbanded.

“In his own way, I think Felix cared about her, but that doesn’t mean that he loved her or respected her or even thought of her as a person. I might have called him obsessed if I’d had more insight when he was alive, but as the world was, I just assumed he did what had to be done to take care of her. She…didn’t have a lot of her people left, you know? Her people, sure, but not her people.”

It was strange, knowing that he’d been accepted enough into the circle of trust to get information from a person who wouldn’t so much as say a word to Carolina for fear of betraying a confidence.

It was stranger to be counted among Vanessa’s people, and Wash could hear the difference between them. One was Kimball’s responsibility. It made her keep her General face on, even when it wasn’t good for her. It was long nights in her office, running plan after plan to make food budgets and ammunition stretch just a little longer. The other allowed her to take off her General
hat and just be Vanessa. It let her be vulnerable and human. Let her be a woman who liked cheesy movies and called every fluffy animal on the planet her fur child and let her breathe without feeling guilty for the act.

Being her people was probably the highest level of respect the New Republic could ever bestow.

“Does she miss him, do you think?”

“They way she misses a lot of people, but she just misses the illusion of him. She’s fully aware that the person he presented to us was never real. I’m pretty sure that just makes the whole thing worse.”

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The Reds and Carolina slept.

Well…ok, kind of slept.

The guys slept, at least.

Carolina…catnapped. She didn’t really trust the base enough to let herself fully relax, didn’t know the people well enough to deem them friendlies, and hadn’t had a good night’s sleep without being curled up in Vanessa’s arms for a solid month.

She’d have asked to share a room with one of the Reds if Donut hadn’t started in on his writing as soon as she got to the cafeteria. She supported his stories, of course, but she…didn’t always understand what he was talking about. Mostly she just sat and nodded as he walked her through his process and told her all about characters and plotlines he was working on. Half the time she couldn’t tell if it was actual base gossip or an original character doing something.

She’d given up trying to unpick it and decided to just enjoy the ride.

Still, when he wasn’t writing porn, Carolina liked the stories he came up with. There was one about an intergalactic space princess and a war goddess that was pretty fun, but he hadn’t really talked about it in a while. He’s been more interested in a spy story he started on.

-Carolina, you seriously need to stop. You’re never gonna get to sleep if you keep this up.-

And from the way her brain was spinning, Carolina was probably not going to get much more sleep at all, even if she could stop thinking.

-Come on! You haven’t even gotten a full four hours!-

Well, I’m not going to get much more with you screaming in my head. What have you been doing?

-Just…you know, normal stuff.-

Don’t lie to me, you’re bad at it.

-I’m not! I There’s just a lot of stuff going on. People and things. I’m just trying to get a handle.-

Do you…want to talk about it?
-Not really.-

Ok, well, you’re using my brain to process all of your emotions, so I’m getting a good bit of feedback. I’m gonna figure it out, anyway.

-Damn.-

She snorted and put her armor back on.

Might as well make myself useful.

-Fine, fine. Let’s go cause some problems.-

The base was not exactly logically laid out, but what it lacked in a structured floor plan, it more than made up for in signage. There were handwritten signs all over the halls, every few feet was a piece of paper with a word and an arrow. It was…not exactly attractive, but it was efficient.

Well, it would have been efficient if the signage was right.

Instead of ending up back in the cafeteria, somehow, Carolina ended up in a locker room.

The Master Sargent was there, humming to herself, stripped down to her undersuit. There was a box of datapads next to her, and a box of broken datapads next to it.

-What does this woman have against technology?- She was paler than pale, like she hadn’t been in the sun for a good ten years, with short green hair, and black swirls of ink that stood stark all around her neck. It kind of looked like the tattoos Vanessa had, but with the distance and the lack of visible skin, Carolina couldn’t really be sure of the pattern. Tattoos and scars were incredibly common among the Chorus soldiers and if the woman really was Vanessa’s friend, it wouldn’t be that surprising to see.

Carolina watched the woman reach down for an armor piece and snap it into place around her thigh.

-That’s stealth armor.-

I see that.

-What is she doing in stealth armor? I didn’t think they even had anything stealth related on this planet.-

Well, clearly they do.

“Excuse me?”

She spun around with a bright smile. She looked a little startled, but calmed immediately once she caught sight of Carolina.

“Agent! Hi there, what can I do for you?”

“Are you going somewhere?”

She looked down at herself, then back to Carolina.

“Ah. Yes, well, you see, there was a group evacuated from Proteger that hasn’t arrived. Sickies and
ickle bickles, and such. They’re late getting to their location and we can’t get ahold of them, so we’re going to look!”

“In…that?”

The Master Sargent’s whole face scrunched with confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s a stealth suit.”

“It sure is! Like it? It’s slimming!”

“Slimming it may be, but it doesn’t offer you the protection of even a standard suit.”

-Carolina, I don’t think there’s any point in arguing with this one.-

Let me handle this.

“Hmm? Oh, I prefer it. It’ll get me places quickly and quietly, and right now we’re looking for speed and stealth, not bullet resistance.”

“You should always be looking for bullet resistance when there are mercenaries trying to kill you.”

“Well, if they’re gonna get me, my armor’s not gonna make much of a difference. I’m most comfortable and confident in this, and at the end of the day, I’d rather dodge bullets than try to absorb the impact. Besides, this armor has been tricked out by our science team and I’m eager to test some of the advances!”

“Advances?”

That was either a really good sign, or this woman was going to get herself blown up in the field for no good reason.

“We…may have stolen some tech from the bad guys and repurposed it.”

Meaning she has Freelancer tech.

-Seven degrees to Kevin Bacon Freelancer tech. Who knows if what they have is even going to function?-  

“Active camo?”

“Active camo! Ish! And a light shield, though that’s a little bit harder on the power sources, so I don’t really play with it much! Better auto targeting, and even an active sensor system that should allow me to register enemies in the field more effectively, even if they’re hidden in ways that are traditionally difficult to spot. Field testing is important if we want it to become standard. When I get back, I would love to see how your suit works!”

This was going to go poorly.

Very, very poorly.

“So, you’re testing the new tech?”

“Uh huh!”
“On yourself?”

“Yep.”

“In the actual battlefield?”

“Yep!”

“Without protection?”

She smiled, and it was…surprisingly genuine.

“Why, Agent, I didn’t know you cared.”

“Vanessa is very protective of her people. I don’t want you getting hurt on my watch.”

The Master Sargent slapped on another piece of armor.

“On your watch? I think you mean on my watch. I’m the one who’s supposed to be protecting you!”

That was not what she’d expected to hear from the woman who broke things and threatened to skin her subordinates. Carolina raised an eyebrow and rested her hands on her hips.

She had to hear this one.

“Really.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Really! We’re all really protective of our Kim, and that means being protective of her people! She’s…not fragile, exactly, but she feels deep. Losing another person she loves so soon might break her, so we’re not gonna let that happen!”

“Another?”

It was weird to see the woman spin herself in a circle. She just…had so much happy energy, Carolina didn’t know what to do with it. Before, she’d been all fire and rage and disturbing imagery. Now she was all smiles.

“What you think you’re the only person she’s ever cared about in twenty-seven years? Con ceited!”

“I just…didn’t expect…love?”

“Love has many meanings, Agent. Love of family, friends, children, the world around you, those under your care, and of course romantic love. Kim’s had a lot of people in her life that she’s loved, she’s really good at loving people, but it cuts her to pieces every goddamn time she loses someone. Hell, just splitting up the War Dogs was hard.”

“War Dogs?”

-Kimball’s friends from back in the day.-

“They were fighters? In the Hell Pit? We were a squad before she ended up fast tracked to General. She hasn’t mentioned it?”
“I…she has, I just…she never called you that. You were on her squad?”

“Oh yeah. Little Bitch made sure she had the best on her side, and we were the best, at least at the time. All a little…off though. I guess you’d take that place now, wouldn’t you? Heck, even the off planet mercs might outdo us now, scattered, scarred, and stupid as we are.”

Carolina picked up a damaged datapad out of the box.

“You’re all off, huh? Hence the breaking things?”

“Oh, no, that’s just for fun. Those are too broken to be functional, or too old to be repurposed, and trust me we’ve tried, so we break them around visitors! It’s mostly a gimmick to gage new people, one that Ger came up with ages back. I get a kick out of seeing how many I can break before someone calls me on it. This time? Thirteen!”

-She doesn’t strike me as someone Kimball would…trust.-

You have seen the Reds and Blues, right? She seems exactly like the kind of person Vanessa would trust.

“Look, long and short, we don’t need you getting hurt. Kim’d die if she lost you.”

-Wow, that’s intense.-

“Master Sargent-“

“Oh god! Please, don’t call me that! We’re practically family, at this point, what with you making kissy faces at my little sister! Call me Izzy!”

“Right…Izzy. You’re not biological siblings, right? Vanessa said she didn’t have any blood relatives left.”

“Oh, no! We’re better than that! Blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb!”

-Gross, but accurate.-

“You’ve known Vanessa for how long?”

The Mas- Izzy…stretched her arms over her head and let out a massive yawn.

“Oh, since she was a kid! We all kind of adopted each other in the Hell Pit. God, she was a tiny thing for a while, you’d never know it after she hit her growth spurt, though! Girl got broad when she hit puberty! I think I have some pictures somewhere, she was so damned cute back then! Not that she’s not cute now, I’m sure, but she was just freaking adorable as a baby!”

This woman was clearly not at the top of her game anymore, the way she handed out information to a complete stranger. There was a lot Carolina could get out of her if she really wanted to.

She was someone who’d known Vanessa for years.

“Did…can you tell me about some of the people she’s…dated before?”

-Oh god, really? This is what you’re doing with loose lips over here? Of all the things you could be asking about, you’re interested in Kimball’s old girlfriends?-

Carolina winced a little.
Shut up, Epsilon.

-Because, you know, that’s not pathetic or anything.-

“Are you worried about them coming out of the woodwork? Because I promise, that’s not a thing that’s gonna happen! She’s got a few that are still alive, sure, but they’re not gonna fight you for her!”

Well, that answered a few questions.

“That wasn’t my concern, even in the slightest.”

“Of course not! Because you’re you, and you’d beat anybody who came at you, in or out of armor! Not that you’d have to of course, because Kim’s all head over heels and shit, but you’d definitely beat anyone who tried to fight you!”

Izzy held up a hand.

What is this?

-High five, Carolina.-

Oh!

Carolina slapped Izzy’s palm and got an uncomfortably wide smile in return.

“Girlfriend! When I get back, I’ll give you all the dishes. Someone’s gotta protect our Kim, and I’m glad she’s got herself a badass girlfriend to do the deed.”

“When we get back.”

Izzy frowned, her bottom lip moved as far to the left as it could feasibly go and stayed there.

“There’s no we in this, Agent. This is a me. My squad. My soldiers. My life. Not. You.”

“I cannot just sit here and watch one of Vanessa’s friends deliberately put themselves in danger.”

“Agent, I can’t put you in danger.”

“If that caravan is in danger, you need me.”

“And if it’s a trap, I need you safe.”

“If it’s a trap, that’s a lot of people who are being used as bait. That means there are probably a lot of people waiting for you. I am used to taking on dozens of soldiers with little to no backup, can your soldiers say the same?”

Izzy scowled and shook her head.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit. You’re not wrong, Agent.”

-She’s tense as fuck, C. Something else is at play here.-

Yeah, she’s not subtle.

“Do you think it’s a trap, Izzy?”
“I really hope not, because that means we’re dealing with a situation we’re not prepared for. The check-in misses could just be from the radios not working, and if that’s the case, then they’d have gone to ground in one of several predetermined safe locations. We have plans in place for this situation.”

“Really?”

“We try to make sure we’re as safe as we can be. I’m not going in blind.”

Carolina dropped the busted datapad back in the box and picked up a piece of Izzy’s armor.

“I…Look, I can’t just sit here. Not now. Things are chaotic and crazy and up in the air and I need to be doing something. Protecting you would keep me from accidentally blowing up your base while you’re gone, or poking my nose in something it shouldn’t be in.”

Izzy took the piece and snapped it into place.

“Weeeeeeell…Hmm, I do like having a not blown up base, and I don’t really want you exploring the top secret things and breaking them, aaaaaand I’m pretty sure I need to do the sisterly duty of the shovel talk before Kim finds out that we’ve met and tells me not to pick on you. It’s nothing personal, Agent, I like you a heck of a lot better than the last people she tried to date, but rules are rules, and family is family.”

“I…you do? You don’t know me.”

“Which tells you a little about Kim’s taste, doesn’t it? Come on, help me into this, we’ll grab something to eat on the road, and I’ll dish all about Germaine and Iyawa. They’re good people, for sure, but they were terrible at dating her. Kim’s a strong woman, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t treat her gentle sometimes! Pick up the slack! Play with her hair! Tell her she’s pretty! God, they were really bad about it, but I guess it’s not entirely their fault, it’s hard to be romantic with your squad leader.”

-Oh man, you’re gonna be stuck with this for hours, C.-

That’s ok. This, I think I can handle.

Lumina shut the door behind herself and crossed her arms. Kim didn’t move, but that didn’t mean the woman wasn’t paying attention.

“Well?”

“Hmm?”

She circled the general and knelt down in front of her.

“What happened, Kim?”

Kim rolled her head up to look Lumina in the eye, and…oh, shit. Ok, she wasn’t faking it. This wasn’t her playing games or pretending, Kim was definitely all kinds of fucked up.

“Nightmare.”
“Nightmare?”

“Thought I saw a ghost.”

Lumina pulled out her scanner and gave Kim a quick once over. Her vitals were within acceptable deviations. Nothing off the walls as far as she could tell.

“You have to be more careful, Kim.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do. What happens when you shoot someone, or yourself?”

Lumina took Kim’s arm and prepped her for a blood draw. If she’d been drugged, Lumina would find it.

“I put the gun away. It’s in the dresser in my room.”

“Yeah, but you’re always going to have access to guns, and that’s not what I’m talking about. Tonight we got lucky and you shot at nothing, but what happens when you do something stupid, and one of your people isn’t there to bail you out? Why didn’t you have your locks up, Kim? Why didn’t you have your security on? You are the leader of the free goddamned planet! What happens to us if something happens to you?”

“I die, and someone else takes over.”

Lumina tucked the blood vials into her bag and grabbed Kim’s face.

Metaphor hissed, but didn’t lunge, which was good, because Lumina didn’t think she was up on her inoculations to keep the goddamned brat’s venom from paralyzing her for a few hours, and wouldn’t that just suck?

“That is not an acceptable answer Kim, and you know it.”

“Sorry. Pain makes me sad.”

“Pain?”

Kim’s eyes started to water and Lumina sighed.

She knew that face.

“Are you taking your medicine?”

“No.”

“Kim, you have to take your pain meds when you’re hurting. You have chronic, debilitating pain. Not taking your medicine means you can’t focus, it means you’re hurting too much to function. It means you don’t do your job well and you don’t sleep and then we have shit like this happen.”

“I don’t want it.”

“You need it. Fight me on this, and I will start forcibly injecting you in six-hour intervals until you learn to be a responsible adult again. Don’t tell me I’m not the boss of you, Little Bitch. I’m a doctor, I outrank you.”
“That’s not how rank works.”

Kim wrapped her arms over her head, and Lumina caught a flash of the ‘F’ branded into her neck. She’d covered it well, the way a lot of them had, with twisting, twirling, elaborate tattoos and deliberate scars to take away from the marks that had been forced on them. Lumina remembered the brand, remembered the day they’d pulled little Kimmy out of the children’s ward at Blessed Sisters, never to return.

She wasn’t a kid after that day.

None of them were.

“I don’t…I’m not an addict, right?”

“Of course not! Kim, you are not an addict, and anyone who tells you otherwise is an idiot. You take pain medication to help you sleep when your spine decides to misbehave, that’s not being an addict, that’s living with a condition that should have killed you. You don’t hoard or steal meds, you don’t use them to get high, you don’t have a problem when you’re not on them, except for the pain, you’re not an addict. And you know what? Even if you were, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. You have a supportive community of people willing to help you and take care of you while you work through it, just like anyone else, because in this base, we support one another. Look at this, it’s the middle of the fucking night and you’ve got a dozen people all fluttering around taking care of you when they should be sleeping. Come on, up into the bed.”

Lumina hauled Kim to her feet. She still seemed fuzzy around her edges, but Lumina could see that whatever had her little sister spooked was starting to wear off.

Of course, that meant that exhaustion was gonna take over soon.

“That’s not my bed.”

“That’s fine, it’s Agent Washington’s bed and he is going to be taking care of you. Up, now. Into the bed. I’ve got six more hours worth of work before I get to knock off for the night, and every minute I’m in here, dealing with your stubborn butt is a minute I’m not out there doing more important things than coddling you.”

Lumina walked Kim over to the bed and helped her sit down. Metaphor jumped off Kim’s shoulder and sprawled herself across Agent Washington’s pillows. She yawned and gave a possessive squeak.

Kim smiled and rubbed Metaphor’s long belly.

The damned little brats were made for one another.

“I don’t want it to be weird.”

“You’re already making it weird, you’re groggy and soft around the edges and you can’t stop being weepy.”

“Wash is gonna be mad at me.”

“That’s impossible. Agent Washington thinks very highly of you, and it’s not like he doesn’t understand shit overwhelming you all at once. He literally had multiple breakdowns, just yesterday.”
Kim shook her head, but didn’t fight Lumina pushing her to lay down. Metaphor tangled herself in Kim’s braids and started to chew on them absently, coating her hair in a thin, protective layer of venom, the way the weasels did when they were protecting their babies in the nest.

Of course, the odds of anything trying to eat Kim were pretty slim, but instincts were instincts, she supposed.

“I’m stealing his bed.”

“You need the bed more. He’s just gonna have to deal with it, isn’t he? Come on, Kim, I know you’re not really this bad at blankets. Get under them.”

Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.

Can you see me?

Can you hear me?

I’m pretty
Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.
Can you see me?
Can you hear me?
I’m pretty sure you can hear me.
What are you doing?
Why are you just sitting there staring at me?
Are you ignoring me?
Seriously, what are you doing?
Typing on that keyboard, staring at that
The door slid open and Doctor Loomaua stepped out, helmet back on. Wash turned to her, and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Is she alright?”

“I’m thinking it’s the adrenaline mixed with sleep deprivation. Her scans show no headwounds or anything like that, but I went ahead and drew blood for testing. Her spine is hurting her something awful, so be gentle with her, and I apologize in advance.”

“Why?”

“She’s hurting too much to focus on a movie, so you’re dealing with a pitiful ten year old tonight, rather than an exhausted twenty-seven year old.”

Wash slipped past Doctor Loomaua.

“I can live with that.”

“Take care of her, Agent. She needs all the support she can get right now, and she’s not taking it from us.”

Silvers bumped shoulders with Loomaua, and the two leaned into one another’s space.

“I’ve got this. Thank you, Doctor Loomaua, Doctor Silvers. I’ll contact you if something happens?”

“Let me know when you get her to actually fall asleep.”

He shut the door and activated the security system. He and Carolina hadn’t liked what the base had come with when they moved in, so they’d set up their own, personal system on top of the one the Chorus security team had installed. Epsilon had been eager to add the cyber security elements.

Wash had expected anger, but security had been enamored enough with it that they’d absorbed the new system into their own and made a Frankenstein’s monster out of it for the more high priority rooms.

Kimball was laying on his bed. She’d wrapped herself in a blanket cocoon, with barely her face poking out, and had the most pathetic looking pout on her face.

“Lumina says I have to sleep here.”

Wash snorted, sat down on the bed, and swung his legs up.

“Well, it wouldn’t do to piss off the doctor, would it? Scoot over, there’s not a lot of space, and if you make me sleep on the floor, I’m filling your shoes with jello. The green kind.”

She grunted, but shifted herself closer to the wall. Metaphor skittered across the bed to perch herself on top of Kimball’s hip and watch Wash.

He held out his hand and let the weasel get a few good sniffs in. She licked the tips of his fingers and bit gently, not enough to hurt just enough to let him know he was approved to be in the space, then curled up and let out a massive squeaky yawn.

“Yeah, I feel you, Metaphor. It has been a rough few days.”
Wash shifted around until he was comfortably laying propped up by his pillows. Vanessa sniffled and shifted around until she was curled against his side. Her eyes were bright red, she’d either been crying, or she’d been up \textit{way} too late to be healthy.

She muttered into his ribs.

“This isn’t a sex thing.”

He tried not to snort.

“No, of course not.”

“You’re my friend.”

Kimball snaked a hand out from the blanket burrito.

“Yes, I am.”

Wash took her hand and squeezed it. She looked up at him, and Loomaua wasn’t wrong, she did look a lot less like her usual competent self. Still, he probably didn’t look like a badass former operative of a secret military organization when he was hallucinating and writhing on the floor either. Calling her a child over being completely exhausted and being shot at was a bit much in his opinion.

“This isn’t too weird?”

“Believe it or not, I’ve gotten used to being a human hot water bottle. Caboose doesn’t like to sleep alone anymore, and Tucker won’t admit it, but he’s happier when he’s got someone close by. It doesn’t bother me to share a bed so long as everyone keeps their clothes on.”

She snorted and poked her head out of the blankets.

“You have the worst bed rules ever, Wash. Keeping your clothes on while you’re sleeping? Pfft.”

They both laughed, just a little. A few puffs of air and some tired, but very real smiles. Kimball’s smile slowly drooped off of her face.

“No one attacked me.”

He squeezed her fingers.

“Ok.”

She pulled the blankets mostly over her face again and Wash...Wash was not going to say a word about having a conversation with a talking blanket, because at this point, this was just his life, and he accepted it. If she needed to disappear into the blanket, he wasn’t going to judge.

They all had different ways of coping with stress, after all.

“I’m...not sleeping well.”

“I know.”

“And apparently it’s making me sleepwalk.”

He snorted.
“And sleep shoot?”

The blanket cocoon that used to be Vanessa Kimball wiggled around a bit, dislodged Metaphor’s middle bit, and let out a sigh of disappointment.

“Yeah.”

That didn’t explain the soldier that committed suicide, but it did relieve him. He’d feel shitty about that later, but at the moment, knowing that no one managed to bypass the frankly staggering amount of security she was supposed to have around her at all times was infinitely better than dealing with that.

“Well, we need to keep you away from guns while you’re asleep, then.”

“God, I miss sleep.”

She let go of his hand and pulled hers back inside the cocoon. Wash put his hand on top of her shoulder and let it rest there. If Vanessa minded, she didn’t say, she just sighed and squeezed her eyes shut.

“So…this one time, back in my early days with the project, I decided for some goddamned reason that it would be really fun to ride my skateboard through the halls. It was late, I wasn’t expecting anyone to be out.”

“Oh god, no. I think I know where this is going. The Vanessa part of me thinks this is hilarious, but the Kimball in me is telling you you’re getting a reprimand.”

He snorted.

“Basically, but let me actually tell the story. The leadup’s as good as the punchline.”

“Has anyone seen Carolina?”

“Nope. Must be sleeping.”

“Oh…good. She doesn’t do enough of that.”

Izzy and Carolina crouched into the foliage. The soldiers she’d brought with her had mostly split off in different directions and disappeared pretty thoroughly from Carolina’s sensors, with only a handful still following.

“Are they still around or did we lose them?”

Izzy giggled and let out what sounded like an elaborate birdcall, high and twittering.

Several different calls came back.
“Not birds, then?”

“Nope. Soldiers in the trees. We developed the calls in case radios ever go out, and I’ve spent years drilling terrain travel into these kids. I’m really annoyed that Kim didn’t take this kind of thing more seriously and make a mandatory part of training. What’s the point of developing detailed codes via birdcall if no one is going to use them?”

“To be fair, we’d never had every radio on the planet suddenly stop working before.”

“And now it’s a problem, and most of the army can’t function in the field.”

Epsilon projected from Carolina’s shoulder.

“That may actually be a good thing. If it wasn’t universal, there’s a very real possibility that Locus and Felix never learned it, and if Locus doesn’t know it, he can’t actively use it against us.”

Izzy startled back from Carolina before she leaned in very close.

“Well, look at you, all positivity and stuff! Agent Carolina, would you like to introduce me to the tiny ghostie goo on your shoulder? I feel like I may be hallucinating, am I hallucinating? I hate when this happens.”

“No, that’s Epsilon, my AI.”

She clasped at her chest in relief and stepped back and out of Carolina’s face.

“Oh, good, I was worried that my thin grasp of reality was quickly failing me. Awesome. AI. Wow. You know, now that I think about it, Kim mentioned that her girlfriend had an AI and since you’re her girlfriend, I really shouldn’t be surprised, but here we are. We’re moving up in the world, aren’t we, what with our multiple AI on the planet? Hope that’s enough to keep the UNSC from bombing the shit out of us.”

“Bombing?”

“Or nuking. You know, getting rid of the massive stain on their already less than stellar reputation in one fell swoop? Oh, look! Trucks!”

Izzy cawed up into the trees and was met with a flurry of birdsong in response, as if someone had ruffled a bunch of nests.

The path was trashed. Trees and large rocks seemed to wash the whole path away like a mudslide. A line of trucks sat abandoned. Doors were left wide open, bags were left behind.

There was a small cloth doll face down in the dirt.

“What happened?”

Carolina’s voice came out soft and breathless.

Izzy picked up the doll and brushed off some of the dirt.

“No worries, Agent. They abandoned these trucks willingly, or there’d be bullet holes. They jumped out and moved on foot. You can see in the trees there, there, and there. They split into threes to try and break up anyone who might be trying to kill them. Someone was following protocol.”
Izzy made several different birdcalls, one in particular that Kimball liked when she was out and about, or surrounded by people she didn’t know well. It sounded like a small, tittering, nervous bird.

Carolina had always thought it was kind of cute, but hearing it in the field, coming from someone else, made her stomach dance with discomfort.

“What does that one mean?”

“Danger that can’t be easily seen. Be careful.”

-That’s…oddly specific, and a little unsettling, knowing we’ve heard it from Kimball.-

I’m starting to think I need to take classes to understand the nuances of Chorus. Messages in birdcalls. Next you’ll be telling me there are hidden codes in the wall…signs…fuck. Epsilon, were there codes in the signs in that freaking base?

-Fuck, C, I don’t know! This planet is full of random BS! Keeping track of it all would drive anyone crazy, just look at your girlfriend’s ‘big sister’.-

“Huh.”

Izzy started off into the brush.

“Come on, Agent.”

Epsilon flickered up.

“Wait, where are we going? None of the trails go that way.”

“No, but they’ll circle this direction. I’m hoping to save us a few hours of really unpleasant hiking by cutting directly to the chase.”

Izzy waved off the few soldiers who’d stayed with them, and one by one they hauled themselves up into the branches and blended into the trees. Carolina was surprised by the amount of people wearing the lightweight, stealth armor and how well they’d managed to disappear. It explained why so many had been up in the trees when they’d driven in.

They’d been practicing.

Carolina covered Izzy. She was fast, light on her feet, and not easily distracted. She clearly knew exactly where she wanted to go, and had no problems using the terrain to her advantage. Carolina tried to match her steps with Izzy’s as much as she could, but every now and again would step wrong and fill the fairly tranquil trees with snapping and crunching.

At one point, one of the evil rainbow squirrels threw an ugly, spiny fruit at Carolina’s armor. She was going to have a goddamned coat made out of their pelts one day.

It didn’t take long for Carolina to realize that Izzy was messing with her a little. She’d take these funny little sidesteps and knock her shoulder to the side, and Carolina would end up doing the same to follow her, only to realize halfway through the shoulder knock that she didn’t actually have to shimmy to not make noise. Izzy kept looking back at her and snickering, and god damn if Carolina didn’t want to smack her just a little bit.

They made it a good distance, several miles from where the abandoned trucks had been left. The
trees suddenly broke around them, and Carolina caught sight of a tall spire into the sky, dark and dead.

“What…what is this place?”

“This is the tower, what’s left of it, anyway. If I were passing through, I’d leave a note here.”

-C.-

I know.

-Carolina, this isn’t right.-

I know.

“But…if you know where they’re headed, why would you need to look for notes?”

Izzy turned to Carolina, disappointment clear in her silence.

“I’m just asking.”

“Agent, what happens if they left a note detailing their exact location? Then we have not only the mystery attacker to deal with, we have to deal with anyone who decides to come through here knowing where one of our safehouses is. We need to check the space.”

Is she lying to me? I…I think she’s lying to me.

“I can’t help but feel like this is all some elaborate ploy to get us into the tower and away from the action. Is that what’s happening here? Are you still trying to keep me out of danger instead of letting me help like I’m professionally trained to do?”

Izzy sighed.

“Ok, look. Yes, you are a supersoldier from a defunct military program designed to put the best of the best all in one spot or whatever, but you’re not looking at the bigger picture here.”

“Which is?”

Izzy threw her hands up into the air and whined.

“If you die on my watch, Kim will take away my base, go full on supervillain, and implode the planet with a harebrained scheme of destruction so ridiculous, you’d think your red Corporal, Sarge, came up with it!”

She spun in a circle and patted Carolina’s shoulder gently.

“Best not to tempt fate. Besides, aren’t you even the slightest bit curious about what could have damaged the ability of an ancient alien tower to hold data it has been protecting for over a thousand years? Don’t tell me you’re not curious.”

“I really doubt Kimball would do any of that.”

“That’s because I know something about our dearest Vanessa Kimball that you don’t. Well, I know a few things, but this is the most important.”

-The fuck does she think she is, calling you out like that?-
Carolina’s shoulders tensed.

“I’m listening.” Carolina ground out.

Izzy leaned in close and cupped her hands around her mouth. It…looked pretty silly considering she was still wearing her helmet.

“She’s very dramatic!”

Carolina snorted.

“Thanks. I did know that one actually.”

“Oh, well then you shouldn’t be surprised to know she has a whole slew of speeches written, just in case she decides to go full villain one day. Some of them are pretty hilarious. One involves time travel! And that's not the point! The point is, we're already here, lets just go inside and poke around!”

“I’m beginning to wonder why I thought it was a good idea to trust you.”

“Oh, yeah, that probably wasn’t smart, I’m a wily one! Come on, Agent, time’s a wastin’!”

The tower was different from the temples Carolina had seen, though to be fair, she hadn’t really been inside the temples, just sort of…stood at the doorways while flashing lights and Alien AI holograms projected.

The architecture was not what she expected. High vaulted ceilings, large open hallways, bright colors, and beautiful patterns of stone all throughout the place. If there wasn’t a thick, solid layer of dust everywhere, obscuring some of the beauty, Carolina would think the place was really a treasured location.

-It must have been important, back in the day.-

Hell, it might be again sometime soon.

“No footprints.”

“No, but there are plenty of ways into the central hub. We’re taking the less obvious route.”

“Izzy, I don’t like this.”

Izzy groaned, loud and low and spun herself around again.

“Agent, really, we’re almost-“

She stopped and really looked at Carolina for a moment. She must have seen something in the way Carolina held herself, because the over the top silliness melted like cotton candy in water.

“Oh. You’re upset. Ok, well, just…wait here for a few minutes, I just want to look, I won’t play with anything today. We’ll leave in a few minutes.”

“I’m not upset.”

Izzy shook her head.

“It’s ok, Carol, it’s fine, I’m sorry I pushed you out of your comfort zone.”
Epsilon’s amusement buzzed through the back of her brain.

“Did you seriously just call me Carol?”

“Is…that…not a thing? Do people not call you that? Are we not there yet? We’re probably just not there yet, I don’t have enough friendship points to make that maneuver. Damn. This is what happens when you constantly break things for your own amusement.”

“Are…what?”

Izzy readied her gun and turned back down the hallway.

“Don’t worry about it, Agent, please. Just wait here. I’ll be…”

Her spine snapped straight. She froze in place.

“Izzy?”

“I won’t be right back. I am not pregnant, I am not about to retire, I am not recently married, and my sexual status has not changed in any meaningful fashion. I am unremarkable, and therefore will not be stabbed, or shot, or murdilated in any way.”

Carolina could feel her whole body tense up at that. She sighed.

“Ok, that’s it. Come on, the sooner we do this, the sooner we can leave.”

Izzy turned to look back at her.

“Really?”

“You’re reciting slasher movie logic to justify not being murdered because I don’t want to go. I can’t deal with that.”

“Oh man! My friendship points aren’t very high, but yours are through the roof!”

She held up her hand to Carolina again for another high five.

-She’s fucking weird, C.-

And yes, the woman was weird, and possibly a little unhinged. She was also Vanessa’s friend. For as weird and strange and off-putting as she might behave, she was still dedicated to protecting the people around her.

Carolina couldn’t hate someone who’d instantly decided she was family.

She slapped Izzy’s hand.

“I am not even going to pretend I understand what’s going on. Come on, lets try not to die.”

“I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty good at that game.”

“It’s not a game.”

“Maybe not, but I’m still pretty good. I’m old, you see, which means I’ve managed to not die for many years.”

Carolina scoffed.
“You’re not old.”

“Hey, I’m thirty-one. I’m one of the oldest active soldiers on the planet!”

-Shit, wait until she finds out how old you are.-

I swear to god, if you start spouting my age off, I will make you live in Caboose’s helmet for a month.

-Might be worth it.-

Caboose will know you’re there.

-Okay, okay, maybe not worth it.-

“And that’s the story of how I ran over The Director with my skateboard and became Theta’s favorite human for two weeks when he found the footage. North was insanely jealous, and refused to talk to me the entire two weeks. Florida wanted to get in on the attention and decided to try to teach himself to skateboard. For someone who’s that competent ninety-nine percent of the time, he managed to screw up pretty badly. The man nearly broke his tailbone, right wrist, and eye socket in the process of learning, skateboards were banned from the ship, and Wyoming surprisingly took me out for drinks to let me know he didn’t blame me for Florida’s wacky schemes. It was pretty great, all things considered.”

Vanessa fell asleep somewhere in the middle of the story, but every time Wash stopped talking, her whole body would tense up and she’d start to toss her head like she was trying to shake something off.

Wash propped the datapad up on his knees and tapped at the screen with his right hand, and started to tell her about what was officially recorded as “The Best Day in Freelancer History”, aka, the day 479er managed to sneak literal crates of alcohol on the ship and everyone got wasted, except for South, who played Sober Sister (mostly so she could DJ the event and play all her weird, old timey rock and pop), and York, who wasn’t allowed to drink at that point partly due to his alcoholism and partly because Carolina wouldn’t get drink if he drank.

And watching Carolina’s drunk dancing and singing karaoke was worth all the sobriety.

His left hand had been captured and pulled into Kimball’s blanket cocoon while she slept, only to be released when she woke up and emerged, hopefully rested enough to function so Páez could get some sleep of his own.

She was completely burned out.

This couldn’t go on.

The people of this planet, especially the people in leadership positions, the people giving orders, the people making choices that could save or destroy thousands of lives, couldn’t be left to work themselves into exhaustion to the point where they crumpled and started to hallucinate. On top of being frightening, because this was Kimball and Kimball was competent and in control always, this was just not how a functioning society held it together.
If they wanted to keep the soldiers safe, they had to do a better job of taking care of everyone.

They needed a better system.

A way to keep everyone from constantly running on fumes. They needed proper channels. They needed to actually utilize their chain of command. This habit they’d fallen into of dumping everything on the shoulders of a few strong people and hoping everything worked out simply was not working.

It wasn’t fair and it wasn’t right.

They needed an actual bureaucratic structure. They needed tiers and thresholds and…well, Wash didn’t know exactly what went into running a government, he’d never done well in those classes in school, but he did know they needed something else, because what they had was not working.

At the very least, someone had decided to make it easier on him, because the skill and aptitude tests that these damned nerdy kids loved to take were all available to anyone with a teaching position. And wouldn’t you know it, Grif’s sex ed classes counted as a teaching position, and Wash had Grif’s password.

S!mM0nS!sAd!Ck, not exactly subtle.

He looked over the various soldiers who had skill profiles available and started making lists. Why no one had already done this, he didn’t know. Maybe they just hadn’t had the time.

Kimball wasn’t going to do it herself. She was too busy trying to hold the world together to do anything that looked like it benefitted her personally. She’d work herself down to the fingertips of her sanity and wonder why she was crying in a blanket cocoon on a strange man’s bed and not being allowed to hold guns anymore, and this would become her new normal, because for all that she cared about other people (and it was practically a universal truth that Vanessa Kimball cared), she was garbage at taking care of herself.

She needed help.

She would never ask for it, but she needed it.

Wash could do that much.

He didn’t know a whole lot about government structure, didn’t know about who’d be best where based on the actual positions, but if there was one thing Wash could do, it was get the ball rolling so someone better equipped could finish it.

He had the information to get things started.

It would have to be enough.

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A body was on the ground, or at least, Church thought it was a body. Based on the head, sitting by itself, staring at the doorway with its mouth hanging open, it looked like a man.

Church dropped into AI speed.
“Jesus, what the fuck happened to this guy? Please tell me he’s not one of ours.”

Delta flickered into view.

“It seems as if the assorted pieces of flesh and internal organs could make up a whole person. I do not see any identifying markers on the armor to indicate that he is a Chorus native, however.”

Church looked around the…parts, scattered around the room. It looked like a horror show, and probably smelled twice as bad.

“Yeah, nothing on the body, and the armor doesn’t have any of the usual touches. Looks like just another pirate, but…who would have done this?”

A few different AI flashed up and went away, none of them particularly helpful for this question until…

Sigma projected out.

“This is not your average animal attack, Epsilon, even for the rather unusual fauna that Chorus has managed to produce. No bite marks, nothing dragged off, the cuts look deliberate and relatively clean.”

Church snorted.

“Clean? This isn’t-“

Sigma’s fire flared a little.

“Not from a sanitation standpoint, clean as in done with a sharp object. The cuts here and here,” Sigma pointed, “are from one steady motion. A pull, if you will, from a creature with both strength and control and something very, very sharp to commit the act. This was not an act of an animal, which would have used a tearing or tossing motion to free the flesh. They also would have either eaten the pieces or dragged them off to be eaten by their young, ill, or injured. No.”

Sigma shook his head slowly from side to side and motioned around the room to encapsulate the whole of the blood-soaked crime scene.

“This is a display.”

Epsilon pushed a diagram of the parts together, and saw that the body was all there. The amount of blood looked right for a grown man too, so no draining and carting off their either. Nothing seemed to be missing or nibbled on.

“That’s…unsettling. So, I guess now the question is, who did it?”

Sigma’s head fell a little to the side and he smiled. He looked so fucking pleased with himself.

“Or, alternatively, why they did it.”

Gamma projected himself.

“This body has very little care given to where the pieces lay. It does not decorate the space, as if to create an aesthetic, nor does it seem to have been left in any sort of exceptionally degrading position to punish or humiliate the victim. There is little care given to the actual parts compared to the act of dismemberment.”
Sigma nodded.

“The display is not left for us, nor is it for the corpse. The display lies in how little the perpetrator actually cares. I would say this looks like a crime of opportunity rather than passion. The perpetrator was excited, but not likely driven by rage or greed or hatred. This seems to have been a murder done for the sake of it. The corpse would have long since stopped being alive before the individual responsible for this was finished. They took pleasure in the act, in the desecration, in the dismemberment. You can see the trail leaving through that exit there, the perpetrator would have been covered in their victim’s bodily fluids.”

“Yeesh. Great, so we’re dealing with a sicko with a murder fetish.”

Sigma brought his hands in front of himself and shrugged a little.

“Possibly. Or they could have hated this individual so much that his death did not detract from the pleasure of the desecration of his body. It’s hard to say one way or the other without more information.”

“Well, who has enough rage to do something like this? Last we saw Locus, he was talking redemption. Redemption isn’t putting a person through a blender and spewing their parts all over a room.”

“Anyone on Chorus could have done this.”

Theta’s tiny voice caught Church’s ears; he looked around himself, panicked.

“No, no, kiddo, don’t look at this, ok? This isn’t for you.”

“Everyone on this planet is angry and scared; they hate the pirates. The pirates hurt their friends and families. If they were mad, really, really mad, anyone could have done it.”

Delta looked over at the blood on the walls and brought up a chart of standard drying times for blood, organs, and tissue based on locations and climate.

“Maybe not anyone, Theta. We know that this has been here for only a day or two at most, based on the decay, I would estimate that this was done around the same time as the tower being damaged.”

“You thinking before or after?”

“Hard to say,” Delta let out.

“But,” Sigma hovered over the body, “if I were to speculate? It seems likely that this came after the destruction of the tower. This place is untouched by the actual human violence that was done outside, this is its own little bubble of cruelty. We also see only two sets of tracks, my guess is that one led the other inside and did the deed. It does look voluntary, no shuffling in the dust or drag marks. They wouldn’t have been able to easily sneak in if the fight was still going.”

Theta poked his head around Delta, he kept himself as far away from Sigma as possible.

“Don’t make Carolina look at it.”

“I won’t, bud. You just focus on something else.”

“She doesn’t need more nightmares.”
“No, she doesn’t. None of us do. Go on, don’t look.”

Theta disappeared.

“Epsilon,” Sigma leaned forward slightly and smiled, “we are all simply extensions of yourself from your own consciousness. If you look, Theta has no choice but to look. That is the nature of what we are. We are all a part of you. In essence, you are our Alpha.”

Epsilon snapped into real time.

“Carolina, don’t look!”

“Epsilon-“

He blacked out her visor and locked her arms so she couldn’t pull her helmet off. Church was not about to put her through something like this, not after all the shit she’d managed to get through. She’d seen war, she’d seen death, that didn’t mean she needed to see a literal slaughter of another human being.

She’d gone through too much already.

“Epsilon, what the fuck?!”

She didn’t deserve it.

“Don’t. Look. I’ve got you, just turn around.”

“GOD DAMN IT, EPSILON! FIX MY VISOR, RIGHT NOW!”

Izzy had her hand on her pistol but didn’t unholster it.

“Agent? What’s happening?”

“Carolina doesn’t need to see this room.”

Carolina swore and snarled and tried to yank her arms up. Church could feel her rage amping up, but it was being swallowed pretty quickly by fear, which was not what he wanted to accomplish with this maneuver.

“You are in such deep shit when we get home!”

“Ah.”

Izzy shook her head and held out her hand.

Church didn’t get it.

“Epsilon, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, at the end of the day, blinding her isn’t going to stop her from seeing this, and you’re just showing her you don’t trust her.”

Church stomped, he didn’t remember the last time he’d done a dramatic stomp, and if ever there was a time for one, it was now.
“This isn’t about trust! It’s about-“

“It’s exactly about trust. It’s about trusting her to know her limits. Agent, please stop swearing and hold still for a second. You aren’t helping.”

Epsilon crossed his arms.

“I’m not doing it.”

“Ok.”

Izzy nodded and made a shooing motion before she spun around in a circle, like she’d already dismissed Church and Carolina from her mind. She wiggled a little and started to step around little splashes of spattered gore.

“You clearly don’t trust your partner enough to do her job, so why don’t you two wait outside, and I will do the technical stuff and not step on the squishy bits.”

“Hey! I trust her!”

She waved him off, barely even acknowledged him, and bounced over a strand of intestine.

“This is so gross.”

She didn’t have to jump it, a step would have been easier, but she’d clearly decided to make a game out of it from the way she laughed as she hopped.

“You clearly don’t, or you would have said something rather than jumping to debilitating her. Look, I don’t have time for games. I need to catalogue this, and see if I can find the source of the data destruction in the only functioning terminal in the entire temple, that one right there, so we can get out of here and find the missing, possibly murdered children, ill, and injured that were supposed to come into my care.”

And somehow, staring at the body, Church had completely missed the one blinking light.

“It’d go faster with someone literally made of computers helping me, but beggars can’t be choosers, can we? Ah well, so much interesting information, and all of it for my brain only!”

Carolina started to shake in her armor. Her anxiety was through the roof.

Epsilon?

-Fuck. FUCK! Ok, I’m sorry, C, but this is really fucked up and you don’t need to see it.-

Please don’t do this to me. Do not do this.

-Fuck.-

Church unlocked her arms and lit up the visor.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She looked around the room and Church could feel her terror start to wind down.

“Well, that explains the smell.”
“Oh, just tune it out. We won’t be here long. Come here, you sexy, sexy little light. Reveal all your secrets unto meeeeee.”

Izzy managed to make it past the body without mussing anything and was hunched over a popped open panel.

“Damn it all, what is this shit? How am I supposed to access anything?”

“My guess? You’re not. This wasn’t designed for humans.”

She huffed.

“Ok, so how about we get the glowing guy over here to poke around and see what we can see?”

Locus entered the cave and dumped the body at the entrance.

It was some six-legged thing with a good deal more eyes than was practical and a maw that said it was at least primarily carnivorous. Aiden looked at it, grimaced slightly, and didn’t bother to suppress his disappointed sigh. He’d held out some small hope that the other man had lost his catch, what with the hunt taking as long as it did, but that didn’t seem to be the case. It was just a bigger catch than the last few.

There was no sense in dallying; he’d learned that within hours of being found by the man. He picked up the tools Locus had procured for skinning, gutting, and generally dismantling the corpses he kept bringing back for their future consumption.

Much to Aiden’s own…personal distress.

Locus was well aware of Aiden’s feelings about the ingestion of meat. Unfortunately, the man didn’t seem to care.

“How long are you going to have me do this?”

“Until I am sure that you are capable of field dressing on your own. After that, we’ll move on to actual hunting.”

Aiden knelt down and started to work at carving up the…creature Locus had brought into their cave. Blood spurted out of the body and sprayed down Aiden’s front, leaving him heaving as the dark, heavy fluid soaked into his skin. He grimaced again, but didn’t vomit the way he did with the first body.

“Must we do this?”

“If you don’t want to starve to death, you’ll learn to survive.”

His hands shook as he slid the knife into the heavy carcass.

“I don’t suppose you could kidnap one of the soldiers rather than murder them, and just ask them about the local flora? Plants would offer a wider variety in our diet, and it wouldn’t require all this extra work that is no doubt drawing other predators close by.”
Locus grunted at sat at the entrance of the cave.

“Kidnapping one of the average soldiers is an unwise decision. It would too easily reveal our presence, and while I am confident I could escape unharmed, I would lose the base I have taken time to put together until I can leave this planet. Also, you would likely die when the soldiers returned to end my life.”

And that was an interesting thought. Locus would feed him, but not protect him. Locus would shelter him, but not defend him.

Why he’d picked up Aiden along the way, he hadn’t the slightest clue.

Truthfully, Aiden had expected to die in that clearing.

“You wouldn’t kill them?”

“Killing them serves no purpose any longer. When the mission dictated that I kill, I did so. Now, the mission does not require me to kill them, and I have no desire to end their lives.”

He’d gone years with a partner who physically, mentally, and emotionally manipulated him for his own gain with no expectation of ever being caught at the game. Felix seemed to neither want, nor appreciate being coddled, but would also lose his mind at the drop of a hat if not handled perfectly.

“That…does not align with what I have seen thus far. You’ve killed two soldiers already that I have seen. What makes them different?”

It would take time for Locus to understand himself, to relearn the things he valued, rather than following another person’s lead. He clearly wanted to value life.

“They need to be removed from the equation. They are dangerous to the people of Chorus.”

Whether he could had yet to be seen.

“Why not just take them? Why kill them? You said there is no mission to drive you to kill, so what is the point?”

“It is too dangerous to keep them alive. They need to be dispatched quickly and quietly, and it would take too much effort to keep them alive. We would not be able to safely house them here, and the bases that might have been useful for holding them are being reinhabited by soldiers.”

“Why just the one soldier? You don’t target the whole squad.”

Locus shook his head slowly and watched Aiden work.

He pointed at different locations to cut, and slice, and pull and made sure Aiden moved carefully to avoid damaging the meat.

As vile as the whole thing was, Aiden did appreciate the guidance. Some of the animals Locus had brought back to the cave had been…of questionable anatomy, and he’d managed to ruin the whole thing by cutting into the wrong spot.

At least Locus didn’t become violent after a failure on Aiden’s end. He had more than his fair share of bruises from temper tantrums of some of the men who’d stayed on the Tartarus, and was not interested in acquiring more.

“They are not like the others.”
Aiden stopped sawing at the pelt.

“In what way are they different, Locus?”

Locus pointed back at the body.

Honestly, he didn’t understand this. Anyone could tell he was doing a terrible job of it, Aiden was disgusted by butchery, and they both knew he’d rather take the risk of eating the berries off the bushes outside than the charred slabs of meat Locus would cook from whatever Aiden didn’t manage to ruin.

Aiden sighed and went back to work.

“No,” Locus growled, “Like this.”

He reached for Aiden’s arm, or maybe the knife, Aiden wasn’t entirely sure. He dropped the knife and moved back as quickly as he could until he slammed into the far wall of the cave.

His heart raced, his blood pounded in his ears.

Aiden could feel his throat spasming and did his best to choke back bile. It didn’t work, and he expelled the meager amounts of water and acceptable plant life he’d been able to choke down onto the hard, earth floor.

He could feel heat of humiliation and fear pool behind his eyes.

Locus stayed perfectly still for a few moments until Aiden was able to compose himself.

“Are you afraid of me, Counselor?”

Aiden managed to still the trembling in his hands and forced himself to cover the puddle with loose dirt. He made his way back to the carcass and took up the knife again.

His hands wouldn’t stop trembling.

“I have a healthy fear of anyone who has the ability and desire to snap my neck, but if it reassures you to hear it, I do fear you a great deal less than I ever feared Felix.”

This seemed to surprise Locus. The man was quiet again and watched Aiden ruin another large portion of meat that nauseated him to even look at, let alone put his filthy hands all over. Anything they managed to salvage would need to be washed, as it was now covered in dirt.

Blood squelched between his fingers and Aiden tried not to gag.

“Really?”

Locus sounded staggered by the proclamation.

“Felix was not exactly a stable person.”

Locus would eat alone again. Aiden wouldn’t be able to force himself.

“He was wildly out of control, emotionally volatile, and completely self-invested with perhaps one or two exceptions based on what I could decipher of his wild rantings. The only reason he managed his cover in the New Republic as well as he did was because he regularly took groups of their soldiers out and brutally murdered them to satiate his sadism. He truly enjoyed the slaughter, while
you simply participated. Neither is exactly a good thing, but your apathy toward killing I do find
more reassuring than Felix’s excessive pleasure in the act.”

Locus held out his hand, but thankfully did not attempt to touch Aiden again.

Aiden dropped the knife into his hand and closed his eyes.

A wet cloth was placed in his hand as trade, and Aiden knew whatever lesson Locus had desired he
learn was postponed for later.

“I am not a sadist. I also have no desire to murder children if I do not have to.”

Aiden wiped at the thick layer of blood coating his skin up to his wrists.

“Children? I thought this planet was a science installation.”

Locus nodded and started in on the mangled corpse, cutting into the poor beast and stringing strips
up to drain. Aiden idly wondered if the man had any more practical experience at butchery than
Aiden did, based on his cuts.

“The soldiers of this planet are…exceptionally young in many cases.”

Aiden scrubbed at his hands harder.

It took a moment for the words to truly register. That Locus had participated in wholesale slaughter
of thousands did not surprise him even slightly. Aiden knew what these people were the moment
they’d taken the prison ship.

But…

“You…willing took this job, knowing it would involve killing children?”

“I was a soldier, I went where I was told and did what needed to be done.”

Aiden’s whole body jerked as if he’d pressed a live wire against his temple.

His mind froze for a moment. Aiden closed his eyes again and tried to ignore the thick smell of
stale copper in the air. He felt a slow, churning sensation in his stomach, as if he’d swallowed live
snakes.

“There are laws about killing children and civilians, Locus, that soldiers are expected to follow.
Even with the sordid past of Project Freelancer, and the attacks in urban areas, I cannot say that we
deliberately harmed a child. We operated carefully to minimize civilian casualties, as that is the
law. You were a member of the UNSC’s military yourself, during the Great War, you know that
civilian lives are supposed to be off limits, especially children.”

“I am aware of what the law states, but these are child soldiers, raised nearly from infancy to fight
and kill. The difference between them and adult soldiers is simply time.”

Aiden set the cloth down on the ground.

“I see.”

Locus turned, and Aiden could feel the heat of Locus’s glare through his helmet.

“What?” Locus snapped.
“I think, in return for your tutelage to encourage my survival, I would like to help you. If it is acceptable, I would like to end the day by taking a little time to pick apart your morals and ethics from the dogma that Felix pushed on you. Would that be acceptable?”

Locus sank the skinning knife into one of the beast’s legs.

They wouldn’t be eating any of that one after all.

“And what would that give me in return for letting you dig around in my mind?”

“Clarity,” Aiden smiled, “and the knowledge that your thoughts are your own, for better or worse. I will attempt to keep my own personal morals and ethics from painting the conversation as well.”

Locus stood up, hauled the beast onto his shoulder, and stomped angrily away from the cave.

“Very well. When I return, we will…continue this conversation.”

Aiden’s hands shook.

He tried to wipe the last of the blood off of them and onto his shirt.

He wondered if they had any bleach.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry that this chapter is both shorter than in the past and later than I said it would be. I really, honestly expected it to be up sooner, but life sometimes gets in the way of art. The next chapter of The Slumber Party should go up this weekend, and I hope to have one of the stories I didn't get finished in time for rarepairs week up soon.

As always, thank you so much for riding this crazy train with me! If you can, I would really appreciate if you'd leave me a comment, but no pressure! I know we've all got lives! You can also hit me up on tumblr, it's HBossWrites for all the RvB and writing stuff, where I'm going to be tossing out ideas for future stories, and where I'm going to be putting more information about the writing group I'm putting together in July.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Conversations About Tattoos, Santa Knows What's Going On, Hospital Drama, [INCOMING MESSAGE FROM BUTTERFLY], “HARMONICA!” “NO!”, War Dogs, Pills, What's Wrong?, [INCOMING MESSAGE FROM BUTTERFLY], Volleyball Flirts, The Soldier from Lugar, Brief talks about Shovels, Guard Dog, [UNKNOWN FILE FOUND], Sarge Wants No Sass, Finding Washington, The Operative, House Colors, [INCOMING MESSAGE FROM ELEPHANT]

Chapter Notes

Pills briefly discusses depression, specifically depression in teens, with the implication of suicidal ideation. While nothing is directly discussed, if this is something you consider triggering, please take care while reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, body, why do you hate me?”

Wash snorted and got off of the bed so Vanessa could untangle herself from the cocoon prison of her blankets. She flopped, flailed, and kicked wildly in the tangle for a moment before she growled out ‘fuck it’, and rolled herself across the mattress and onto the floor with a loud thump and a series of very interesting curse words he’d never heard from her before.

He had to hand it to Vanessa, there weren’t many more dramatic ways to free yourself from a problem than turning into a log and trying to roll away.

Vanessa hopped to her feet and brushed off an imaginary layer of dust with a cheerful beaming grin, as if that would completely erase how badly she’d wrapped herself up from Wash’s mind.

“Good morning, Wash.”

“Good morning. Is that your normal routine with Carolina in the bed?”

She waved him off, embarrassed.

“No. My normal routine is a lot more suave when she’s around. Do you really think I could convince Carolina to sleep with me if she saw me fighting blankets? She’d laugh at me, and I’d have earned the ridicule!”

“Then how do you get out of them?”

“Well…typically I pretend to be asleep until she goes for her early morning jog, and then I fight the blankets. By the time she’s ready for breakfast and her after breakfast workout, I’m out and presentable. I’m not going to let find out how embarrassing I am until I’m sure she likes me too
much to care.”

Wash rolled his eyes at the sheer ridiculousness of her comment and waited for her furry little menace to crawl out of the blankets and climb her shoulders, but after a few seconds of silence and stillness, he realized the weasel must have slipped his watch.

“I don’t know where Metaphor ran off too.”

Vanessa pointed to the vent in the corner that Wash realized was no longer hanging properly.

“She’s a grownup, and it’s morning, she’s probably getting breakfast. Until we have things in the vents that can take down five pounds of eight legged fur snake, she’s fine.”

Wash nodded as Kimball bundled up the blankets and tossed it onto the bed.

“Hey, you’re not gonna make that? You’re the one that wrecked my bedding.”

She snorted and flipped him off.

“Fuck. You. One of the few perks of being the General is that I don’t have to make my bed. Unmade bed is the best bed.”

“Yeah, but that’s my bed, and I prefer it made up in the mornings.”

She pouted for a moment before smiling sweetly and idly twisting one of her tiny, delicate braids between her fingers.

“Tell you what, Wash? I’ll make your bed when you start doing the laundry instead of pushing it off onto the soldiers.”

“Oh, but how will the children learn about responsibility without their chores?”

Vanessa smacked Wash’s shoulder on her way to her emergency bag and kicked the duffle open. She shook out a fresh bodysuit and a bundled pair of socks, and tossed the socks at Wash’s head.

He caught them, of course, and tossed them right back.

“You’re terrible.”

“Which is why you like me so much.”

“That,” Vanessa snarked, “and because you’re just so pretty.”

“Not as pretty as you are, Principal Princess Kimball.”

She threw her bodysuit at him and blew a raspberry.

“I see you and Caboose are still on speaking terms. Go! Make your bed, peasant!”

“Yes, General.”

Wash started to straighten out the blankets, only to be immediately distracted by Kimball’s hair as she started to pull the braids apart from one another in earnest.

He wasn’t used to seeing it down the way it was, she tended to keep her braids done up either in a tight bun or all braided together in one giant braid of doom (according to Tucker’s description of it)
that Wash wasn’t entirely sure how she managed. It was interesting to see the tiny braids bounce as she threaded her fingers through them to get them loose from one another, to see the thin streaks of color randomly weaved in glitter in the light.

Quickly and economically, Vanessa separated her small thin braids out and braided them all together, then pulled a pack of pins out of her emergency bag. Wash needed a minute to figure out just how in the hell that was going to fit into her helmet.

“You know it blows me away how much hair you can pack away. How does that mass even fit inside your helmet without smashing your nose against the visor?”

She shrugged as she twisted the unibraid of braids into a unified braid bun.

“Aesthetics.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one I have, Wash. Don’t ask questions you don’t really want the answers to.”

She spun slowly, scrunched her nose in confusion, then turned to Wash with a less than confident grin.

“Is it ok? It’s hard to tell when there’s not a mirror.”

“You look fine. You always do.”

She swaggered over and rested her chin on Wash’s shoulder.

“Aww, look who’s sucking up. I feel like we’re doing this backwards. Aren’t I supposed to be groveling for embarrassing myself in front of you?”

“If embarrassing me required groveling after, Tucker would spend the rest of his life on his knees.”

“Kinky.”

Wash could feel his face heat.

“That’s not-“

“Too late, you said it.”

She giggled and stretched.

“God, can we just put a pin in all the chaos for a few days? I would love some down time. It doesn’t even need to be a lot, just a day to get my life back into some semblance of control.”

Wash frowned and scratched at the back of his head.

“Look, Vanessa…”

She shook her head.

“I know.”

“No, it’s about Carolina. Carolina and York. You should know-”

She smiled, but it was definitely not the smile he liked to see on her face. The one that happened
when something was wonderful and her eyes squished with pleasure and her whole body rocked in an elated circle. This smile was small, with low eyebrows, and a real sense of defeat.

It was the worst, right up there with Caboose’s smiles when he realized he was being made fun of.

“I know. York was her big one. The one that fate took. Now he’s back and we’re going to have to figure out how to make it work, or I’m going to have to let her go.”

“Are…” Wash didn’t know what to do with that, “How…are you feeling about that?”

“Devastated, of course.”

She let out a soft yawn and did her best to smile brighter. It was weaker than normal, a little soft around the edges, but no less than any other smile she might give when she’s tired or thinking about other things. The lines around her eyes shifted a little, her head moved, and for all intents and purposes, she seemed ok.

Wash frowned.

He hadn’t realized how fake her smiles were until he’d gotten to see a genuine one. You’d think after a solid month in the woman’s presence, he’d have gotten more looks at her face to get the experience…

Except, Wash always tried to be in a position to keep his helmet on, so maybe it shouldn’t have surprised him that he could barely read her when he hardly gave her the chance to trade vulnerability for vulnerability.

“You’d never know.”

Had she ever actually shown him her real face?

“Heartbreak for me isn’t all screaming and crying in dark corners, although I do that too when I have the chance and the inclination. Sometimes it’s turning off my big emotions and pushing forward. I’ve got a life to live and a job to do, and right now, I can’t be worried about whether or not the person I’m seeing is going to start seeing someone else when I’ve got half a dozen super soldiers locked up in my base, we’re still surrounded by people who want to kill us, and we haven’t figured out if the man responsible for an extra five to ten years of planetary misery and death is on our surface or if he got away. I’m too busy for relationship drama.”

Wash stood up, blanket still in hand.

“She’s not going to leave you for him. Their relationship was more mutual pining than anything else. They weren’t-“

“Wash. Stop. I appreciate your concern, I really do, but I’m already prepared for the worst and hoping for the best. Make your bed.”

She circled to the other end and motioned for him to toss her the bedding.

“What…what’s the best?”

They smoothed out the blankets, certainly not to Wash’s standards, but he could live without hospital corners for a day, since Vanessa decided to fluff his pillows for him.

“The best is we find a balance of some sort that leaves everyone satisfied enough that there won’t
be random surges of jealousy or depression and no one feels like killing anyone.”

Wash shook his head.

“I could kill him for you.”

She laughed and tossed a pillow at him. He caught it and dumped it at the head of the bed.

“No, you couldn’t, and please don’t kill my girlfriend’s ex on my behalf. He doesn’t deserve to die because I’m insecure.”

“Offer’s on the table.”

“That’s really sweet, and I appreciate you being willing to murder in the name of my happiness but think about Carolina’s feelings on the matter. She wouldn’t be happy if you killed her freshly alive boyfriend just days after they were reunited and discovered that love truly can conquer all. Wait a few weeks at least, then there’s some plausible deniability. He’ll have pissed off enough people by that point.”

It…wasn’t an inaccurate assessment of York, despite the limited amount of contact the two of them had up to that point.

Still, thinking about Carolina with York honestly made Wash want to scream at her.

“He is kind of an ass, isn’t he?”

That man was a menace, he was kind of a jerk, and he didn’t really listen to other people. Having spent time with the Reds and Blues made Wash feel like York was a watered down frat boy version of Alpha who couldn’t pick a lock any better than the AI could aim, with less of a penchant for cursing. Wash wanted to tell Carolina that York was a terrible choice in partner, especially with someone like Vanessa waiting on the sidelines for an answer to a question she shouldn’t have had to ask in the first place. Carolina’d spend all this time trying to fix York, trying to make their relationship work, when she’d be better to just leave the man to implode on himself and take the happiness that was already in her hands.

Carolina would never listen to him. She was too much like her fa-

“Oh.”

“What?”

“I ah, figured out why I’m so mad about all of this. Or part of it at least.”

Vanessa jumped onto the bed, ruining all their hard work as she mussed the covers, and sat cross-legged with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands.

“Really? Do tell.”

“I’m having bleed through.”

She sat up straight and motioned for Wash to sit. He perched himself on the edge of the bed, a little unsettled. More so by the ability to pick apart the feelings and know where they were from, rather than them being there.

“The Director’s peeking through? Is this a paternal thing? Carolina likes York, so you have to kill him?”
“Kinda? More like York wants to…have sex with her,” Wash shuddered, “So he needs to be castrated.”

Vanessa snorted and laid a hand on Wash’s elbow.

“Wash, I have had sex with Carolina. Do you want to kill me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Wash,” Vanessa put her hand on his arm, “We have lots of sex, all the time, and it’s creative. There are even accessories. Why does the involvement of a flesh and blood penis matter?”

Which was more than he wanted to know about either of their love lives, but it didn’t send the uncomfortable/angry feelings through his chest and stomach the way the thought of Carolina with York did.

“You’re…you. He’s him and you’re you and that’s not the same thing.”

They sat there for a moment as Vanessa clearly tried to pick Wash’s brain apart over the matter, but she must have been drawing as many blanks as Wash was, because she shrugged and waved a hand at him.

“Ok, therapy is definitely needed. Your brain is too complicated for me.”

She frowned, squinted her eyes, and leaned in close enough that their noses nearly touched, like she thought she could see the misfiring neurons through his eyes.

“You’re not jealous of York, are you?”

Wash fell of the bed and nearly choked on his own spit.

“Of what?!”

“Another man coming in and suddenly having all of her attention?”

“Ew, ‘Ness!”

She snorted and kicked Wash’s hip.

“Not like that! You’ve been Carolina’s main man and only real contact to her old life for a while now.”

“Aside from Epsilon.”

Vanessa held out a hand and hauled Wash up from the floor.

“She never had Alpha in her ear, and Epsilon is nothing like any of the AI she had before, true?”

“Point?”

She scooted across the bed, still holding Wash’s hand, and turned him so they were eye to eye.

“You two share something intimate, you share trauma, history, backstory, there’s a part of you that only she knows and a part of her only you know. Or at least that’s how it was.”

He looked down at the bedspread.
This whole conversation…hurt. It hurt a lot more than he’d expected it to hurt. Feelings, he recognized, were not his strongest suit.

“Yeah.”

Vanessa squeezed his hand slightly and tugged at him to keep his attention on her. Feelings, on the other hand, were something Vanessa was very good at most days.

“But Wash? Those changes in her? You were there for that, for all of that. Her ex coming back from the dead doesn’t invalidate those experiences or that closeness. You aren’t going to lose her because of this.”

And Vanessa wasn’t going to lose Carolina because of York, even if things changed. Even if she had to let her go.

“I-“

Wash cut himself off.

The conversation was way too heavy for this early in the morning. Loneliness, loss, longing, and kinky sex were all conversations to have after sunrise.

Desperate for anything to change the subject, Wash’s eyes darted around the space. Vanessa’s pant leg had gotten bunched up high enough that most of her left calf was exposed. He caught sight of a flash of color on her leg and smiled.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a really good look at your tattoos. They’re…bright.”

She looked down at her leg, confused for a moment, before her face broke into a sunny smile.

“Yeah, I’ve always been a big fan of bright colors.”

Vanessa leaned in close, hand still on Wash’s. Her smile took on a mischievous glint.

“Come on, Wash, you show me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

He could feel his face start to heat.

“What?!”

“Your ink! Come on, what’ve you got? I don’t know that I’ve had the opportunity to see yours either, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious!”

Based on the small stretch of skin she’d accidentally exposed, Wash knew she’d be disappointed in the trade, even if she wanted it.

“Uh, I do have one. It’s…well, we were all hammered and on shore leave, it was right after I ended up on Alpha squad. A bunch of us agreed to get themed tats. I ended up with a dragonfly on an apple in a…delicate place.”

Kimball blinked.

“How delicate?”

“Right under my right buttcheek. Made classes hell for the first few weeks and I had to sit super still, because the Director was pissed that we’d done it. Personally, I think he was just mad that his
daughter profaned her skin, but we all suffered for it.”

Vanessa’s face slowly morphed into a shit eating grin and she gripped his shoulders.

“You can’t tell me you have a fruit and a bug on your upper thigh and not expect to show that off. You do realize that, right?”

“I don’t have a choice?”

“You don’t. You made the mistake of revealing your weakness, and now you have to suffer the consequences!”

She flopped back on the bed and motioned toward Wash’s pants with one eyebrow up high and a smirk on her face. Vanessa had clearly spent too much time with Tucker out of uniform. He sighed and slowly stood up. Better to get it over with.

Better to play along as long as he could to keep that smile from falling.

“That’s right, Wash, strip for my amusement. Do a little dance!”

“Oh my god.”

“I can’t wait to tell everyone you took off your pants for me.”

“Vanessa!”

She blinked and smiled, wide eyed and innocent, hands under her chin.

“What?”

“You are the worst!”

He dropped his pants and turned around. Wash could feel his whole body start to heat with embarrassment.

“Oh my god,” her voice cracked, “It’s not even a real dragonfly! It’s a cartoon dragonfly on an apple! This is so goddamned cute! I’m dying!”

“Can I put my pants back on, now?”

She snorted.

“Only if you don’t have another one on your buttcheek. Where are all the rest?”

He pulled his pants back up and shrugged.

“I don’t...have any more.”

“Why not?”

It was a fair question. Body modifications were pretty standard on Chorus. Tattoos could cover an old wound or accentuate it, depending on how the person felt about it. Piercings drew the eye away from things the person was embarrassed about or attention to something they were proud of. Deliberate scarring left the person in control of their body’s wounds and turned accidents and pain into art and creativity. Body mods told strangers what places were acceptable to stare at and what the owner would rather be left alone.
Wash didn’t think there was a single person he’d interacted with who didn’t have something like that. Even the youngest soldiers had their own marks in some capacity. Commemorative survival tats and piercings after their first battles, missions, and excursions were pretty much standard.

“It wasn’t really a priority. They’re expensive out there, they last basically forever and I didn’t know anyone that was good, and there wasn’t a shop I trusted not to give me diseases.”

“Not a lack of interest then, so much as a lack of opportunity?”

She shuffled forward with a frown on her face, and started to glance at different spots like she was looking at real estate. Arm, side, leg, other arm. Wash could practically see her plotting out what she’d like to do with his skin.

If it wasn’t so weird, he’d be flattered.

“Yeah, I guess? I mean, I loved North and South’s tattoos, and Florida’s tribal pieces were really good, but then you had Reggie, who’d gotten this horrible looking naked woman tattooed to him and York had some that weren’t necessarily ugly, but they weren’t good either.”

“You need an artist. Look at this one, this is my favorite piece.”

Vanessa reached down to the hem of her shirt and started to pull it off.

“Woah!”

“What?”

He covered his eyes and shrieked.

“Naked is no!”

Kimball rolled off the bed again and popped into a standing position.

“I wasn’t going to take off my underwear, Wash.”

“YOU WERE GOING TO STRIP DOWN TO YOUR UNDERWEAR?!”

“Well, considering my tattoos are on my skin, and my skin is under my pajamas, yeah? Wash, I’m…not going to be any more naked than you were. I mean, ok, yes, you were still wearing a shirt, but it’s not like there’s anything here that you haven’t seen before. You have had female teammates.”

“We didn’t strip naked in front of each other!”

“Why is this weird? I understand that this is weird for you, but why is it weird? Is that…a normal thing or a you thing? I’ll respect it either way, I just want to make sure.”

Wash took a breath and tried to pull his brain together.

“Nakedness implies intimacy, but it’s also kind of a sexual thing? Like, you don’t take off your clothes in front of someone you don’t intend to have touching you.”

She blinked.

“You were raised in a very strange place and I’m glad that I don’t have that hang-up on top of all of my other problems. Wash, you took off your pants and I got to see your butt in surprisingly tiny
briefs."

“They’re better for the body suit.”

“I don’t disagree, I’m just wondering why my chest is different from your butt.”

Wash…didn’t really know how to respond. She wasn’t wrong, he did take off his pants, and he didn’t want to have sex with her or for anything even close to that kind of relationship with her. Why was he allowed to take off his pants but her not take off her shirt?

“I think…maybe this is a conversation I need to have with my…therapist.”

“I think that’s a pretty brave thing to think, Wash, and I’m proud of you for coming to that conclusion. Do you want to see my tats, or are you done?”

“Have…have you shown them off to the guys?”

She nodded.

“Yeah? Grif and I did a side by side, he was really disappointed when he discovered that Simmons’ skin grafts on him don’t hold ink well. He’d wanted to get some of the tattoos he lost replicated, but he kept having blowouts.”

“And Carolina’s never said anything to you about stripping in front of people?”

Vanessa crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at Wash.

“No. She’s fine with me doing what I want with my flesh vessel.”

“Probably because she’s hot for your body and any excuse to see you out of armor is a good excuse.”

She shrugged and threw up a confident smirk that she’d somehow managed to copy from Tucker, which was about ten different levels of unsettling to see on her face. That kind of expression did not belong on someone who was actually capable of finding a willing sex partner.

“Well, as you said, I am very pretty. We should probably call someone and get my armor brought over so I can relieve Páez. I can only imagine what’s happened while I was unconscious.”

Wash nodded and made the call.

It was…nice, not feeling like he had to second guess himself constantly. No matter what, Vanessa was always what she presented herself as, the woman didn’t have an ounce of guile in her. If she said something was normal, if she said it was ok, then it just was. There was no second guessing, no questions.

He looked down at the floor.

“Ok. Ok, show me your tattoos.”

She moved in closer and bumped their shoulders together the way the soldiers did when they weren’t certain if someone wanted contact or not.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”
“Because I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine.”

“And I’m not going to have sex with you.”

“I’m grateful for the clarification but I wasn’t worried.”

“Ok, if you’re sure.”

Wash took a deep breath as she slipped the sleep shirt over her head and tossed it onto the bed, next to her bodysuit.

She had a wide variety of colors, patterns, and styles all over her body, but the majority of the ink was concentrated over her left side. Her back injury must have happened before she started getting tattooed in earnest, because she was covered in bright colors ending near but not on her spinal augmentation or the scarring around it. He didn’t stare, she didn’t like to talk about it, and he knew her back was a sore subject for her.

There didn’t seem to be a rhyme or reason to any of it, aside from her interest in the subject. He could see bubbles where she’d been bitten by hot metal across her chest, jagged and clean scars from sharps all over her arms. Even what was clearly a shrapnel pattern on her torso along with a clean straight scar splitting her stomach and a tattoo of a goat’s head in two. Some scars were covered, others were wrapped up and made part of the design. If it was ever finished, it would only be because she ran out of skin on her own body.

She slid out of her pants and Wash saw that the ink trailed underneath her underwear.

Someone...drew on Kimball…while she was naked. How was Carolina not freaked by that?! Sure, Wash enjoyed a tattoo on another person as much as the person, but wasn’t Carolina even a little weirded out by her girlfriend being naked for tattoos?

Maybe it really was a him thing.

She looked over her shoulder at Wash, checked to make sure he was ok, then held her arms out at shoulder height and spun in a slow circle.

Planets intermingled with animals and flowers, abstract shapes and colors bled over scars and discolored skin. A weasel was wrapped around a fish and chewed its’ tail at her hip. An abstract shape that kind of reminded Wash of a crocodile with splotches of color around its eyes that sort of looked like butterflies was scrunched on her shoulder. Choking vines wrapped around Chorus, her moons, and Vanessa’s arm. A snake wrapped around a leopard on her thigh. Shapes and swirls and patterns all stretched across her skin. The longer he looked at the colors on her skin, the more pieces he was able to pick out and the more confusing it was.

“Wow.”

“Right? I’ve been getting these since I was a kid, but the older ones have pretty much been bastardized into submission or turned into other things.”

“So…which is your favorite?”

Kimball grinned and brought Wash’s attention to her left side, where a plant was tattooed right along her ribcage in a watercolor style. It was some kind of cactus with big yellow blooms on top, and not a whole lot else to say about it. It was…pretty, sure, but there were a heck of a lot more
interesting, intricate, and just plain attractive bits in eyesight.

“What’s so special about this one?”

She smiled.

“Well, I guess favorite isn’t the best word. Most important, maybe. This was the first piece I got after taking the appointment as General. Actually, I got this sucker that night. I was so nervous, and everyone kept slipping me shots, I had to have myself strapped down so I wouldn’t try to dance off the table! God, that was probably the worst decision I ever made, drinking that night, but everything was awful and changing and I wasn’t…well, I’d gotten some news that I didn’t know how to deal with. My girlfriend at the time, Iyawa, gave it to me and I returned the favor for her when I was much more sober!”

“You have matching tattoos?”

She shifted around.

“It was-“

The door alert went off.

Wash hopped up and looked out.

“Armor’s here.”

“Welp. Guess I should get dressed,” she winked and snarked at him, “wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

She moved out of sight while Wash collected her things, and by the time he’d shut the door, she was in halfway into her new body suit.

“Wash, did you want more tattoos? Because I know a lot of people who’d be willing to clean your lines and do some work for you.”

He shrugged.

“Maybe if you knocked me out first, the one I have was honestly kind of brutal. The thing hurt a lot more than I expected for something so small, I couldn’t keep still.”

Vanessa tossed Wash a bodysuit.

“I bet your artist was heavy handed. Yeah, tattoos can hurt, but they shouldn’t hurt badly enough that a seasoned soldier isn’t capable of staying still. I’ve got a few light-handed artists, very gentle.”

Wash stripped out of his shirt with a frown.

“I didn’t…South said they’re supposed to hurt.”

“At the end of a day, her preferences don’t have anything to do with yours. She might like a heavy hand, I don’t know why she would but people are weird. You don’t need one. You never have. You’re better served by light, economical lines and an artist who’s seasoned and careful and going to take your needs into consideration.”

Vanessa put the finishing touches on her armor and cracked her neck. The easy smiles melted into
her more serious, no funny business expression.

“You don’t sound like you’re just talking about a tattoo artist.”

“Maybe I’m not.”

Wash started to put his armor on.

“You’re a good leader, Vanessa.”

“I’m what we have and what people are used to. That doesn’t mean I’m what’s best for Chorus.”

They’d had this conversation half a dozen times already.

It didn’t matter how many people were still alive, how much food they’d managed to save, how many cities were in the process of being repurposed and repowered to be inhabited. Kimball couldn’t see the positives, the lives they’d saved, the things they’d kept.

All she could see were the losses.

“What would be best for Chorus, if not someone who knows exactly how much goes into this job and is incredibly passionate about her people?”

Vanessa scowled and kicked her helmet into her hands.

“Someone who isn’t a soldier. Someone who isn’t a…who hasn’t done the things I’ve done to survive and to keep my people alive. Good people, strong people, kind, gentle, compassionate people. People who are trained in politics and negotiation, who don’t flinch and buckle under pressure, who can stand on their own. We’re going to have to wait a generation before Chorus will really have people we’re proud of leading.”

She turned her helmet in her hands. Her eyes started to unfocus as she stared into her visor.

“You don’t think your soldiers are proud of you for making peace and finding a way to run a government in spite of all the shit you’ve had to crawl through? Vanessa, the last generation of parents and grandparents ruined this planet. People who were supposed to be taking care of everyone let their greed get the best of them, and for what? They’re all dead now, they got nothing from it, and the planet is in the hands of the living. You have the opportunity to use your pain, your fears, your story, and turn them into a legislature that keeps all of this shit from happening again the moment you’re out and someone else is in. It has to be you, Vanessa, because you’ve seen it from both sides. You were there before and during the war, and you deserve to have a say in what happens after.”

Wash wrapped an arm around Vanessa’s shoulder. He knew it was awkward, he was still trying to figure out all this touch stuff that was so easy for everyone but him, but judging by the way she smiled it couldn’t have been too terrible. She leaned into his side and put her hand over his arm, so he didn’t do as badly as he thought.

“When the UNSC comes knocking Chorus isn’t going to need Páez, the people don’t need someone young and optimistic who crumples under pressure. They’re going to need you. Bold as brass, stronger than steel, take no shit, Vanessa ‘fuck your mother’ Kimball.”

She shook her head and pressed her face into his shoulder.

“That is the worst nickname. Seriously, there are few that are worse than that. ‘Cheese’ is better.”
Wash stepped back and gripped her shoulders. He needed her to see him on this one.

“The UNSC won’t take him seriously. He’s too young and flails too hard.”

She nodded into his shoulder and let out a long sigh.

“And I’m not planning to abandon anyone. I just…god, I wish I knew what I was doing, Wash. I wish I knew what I was supposed to be doing. This isn’t something someone should just be thrown into, I don’t, there’s not even a book I can read or something. The libraries had all the political and history books purged ages back, when the rebellion was just starting.”

Vanessa’s shoulders slumped under his hands.

Wash stepped back and picked up his own helmet. In that moment, he wished he was more like Donut or Caboose, unafraid to just wrap their arms around someone and will good feelings into the other person. He wished he were like Grif or Tucker, able to turn words around on a person until they were agreed without even realizing. He wished he were like Sarge or Carolina or even Simmons, who didn’t always say the right thing, but the intention was always so clear, you could ignore the words and soak in the meaning.

But he wasn’t any of them.

He was just…Washington.

Every time he opened his mouth, he just made things worse.

“For not knowing, you’re doing a good job.”

“I’m glad you think so, there aren’t many that do.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“No, I just read the death threats when they come in.”

What?

“You’ve been getting death threats?”

She shrugged and tossed her helmet into the air.

“And petitions to have me removed from my position.”
“And requests to step down,”

“Because of the sheer number of people killed on my watch.”

“And because of Felix-“

Wash snatched her helmet out of the air.

“You couldn’t have known about that. He was here before you were in charge and had years to entrench himself before you had a chance to see through him.”

She held out her hand.

“Tell that to the people who lost family to him and his bastard partner. Tell that to anyone who’s served with them. Tell that to-“

Vanessa grabbed her helmet and stepped back.

“Look, just because I surround myself with people I like, trust, and respect doesn’t mean that there aren’t people who hate me.”

Kimball stretched.

“And this is not conducive to a good work day, so let’s pin this conversation about my insecurities for a later date and get to work, ok?”

“As long as you promise me you’ll talk to someone? It doesn’t have to be me, but you should talk to someone about this. You’re too hard on yourself.”

“Sure, Wash, I’ll talk to someone, now hurry up and put your clothes on so I can get out there and tell everyone that I’ve gotten an up close and personal view of your perky buttcheeks!”

“You are a terrible friend, Vanessa. Terrible.”

She bounced back and forth from one foot to the other while she waited for Wash to finish putting on his armor.

“You’ve got energy.”

Vanessa swiveled her hips from side to side.

“Yep! Sleep is great, can’t recommend it enough!”

Kimball’s datapad buzzed on the top of the dresser.

“Oh, here.”

Wash grabbed her datapad and tossed it to her.

“I tried to answer the memos that were pinging, but it’s locked.”
She glanced down at the screen and frowned at it.

“You didn’t try to crack the code?”

“Of course, I did, but it seemed like an invasion of privacy after the third layer of encryption, so I left it alone.”

Her mouth tightened unhappily.

“Please don’t try to access my things, Wash.”

“I was just-“

“I know you didn’t mean anything by it, but the last person who had free access to my personal datapad turned out to be a genocidal psychopath or possibly sociopath, I’m a little shaky on the diagnosis. He had some form of antisocial personality disorder, but... shit, that’s not the point. The point is-“

The point is the last person who had that level of unrestricted access used it to deliberately undermine her efforts and actively hurt her friends. He’d committed atrocities in her name and let her and her loved ones suffer for it.

“The thought hadn’t even occurred to me. I’m sorry.”

Kimball slipped the datapad into her side pocket with a frown.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

“You’ve known me for a little over a month, Vanessa. You knew him for years, and he still betrayed you. Set whatever boundaries you need to feel safe. I understand, and I will respect them, whatever they are.”

“Thank you, Wash.”

She straightened up, smiled bright and perky in a way he suddenly realized was completely fake, and shook off her shoulders.

He’d upset her.

Wash thought back to the short list of names he’d prepared, and hoped that would pull at least a partial penance. There weren’t enough of them, but it was a start.

“I, ah, noticed how stressful things have been for... well, for a lot of us, but specifically for you as the General, and I’m assuming things are not so easy for General Páez as well. I thought it was about time we got the two of you an actual functioning staff again. I sent a list of names to you once I got it started.”

Kimball pulled the datapad back out of her pocket with a huff and looked at the screen. She tapped at the screen with a heavy frown and read for a good five minutes, too long to just be looking at his list, before she caught Wash’s eye and gave him an approving nod.

“It’s a good list, lots of names I recognize.”

“They may not all be willing to take the positions, but this gives us a starting point. I will admit that there is a limit on my knowledge of people, I’m only familiar with a small portion of both armies, but these are all people I would trust with both of your safety.”
She took a moment to really look at the list, or at least, Wash thought she was looking at the list. She could have been watching a video of cats or reading one of the weird stories the soldiers liked to write and pretend they weren’t writing when he asked about it point blank.

“Thank you, Wash. This is exactly what we need. I’ll bring it up with Páez after he’s slept, no sense in getting him worked up before bed.”

She dropped her head onto Wash’s shoulder.

“We’re going to be ok.”

“We are.”

“We’re going to get through this.”

“We are.”

“I really want a drink.”

“Vanessa, it’s six in the morning.”

“So? I said I want a drink, not that I’m having one. You are so judgmental, sometimes.”

She slipped her helmet on and snapped it into place.

“Well, someone has to reign in your vices.”

Wash put his helmet on and bounced once, side to side, just to see how it felt.

“Judgmental and rude. Come on.”

He had energy again, but more to the point, he felt solid. Maybe a good rest was exactly what he’d needed to punch his stupid brain into submission, because Wash felt like he could do just about anything.

He could fight his demons.

Hell, he might even win.

“Gee, Kimball, what’re we gonna do today?”

“The same thing we do every day, Washington.”

She slid the door open and shooed away the soldiers standing guard.

“Try to save the world.”

Epsilon moved through the small port that was barely powered by whatever was keeping the place functioning. He couldn’t see much; the data pathways were mostly destroyed and what had survived was just too fucking scrambled to be any immediate use. Dead wires, broken computers, nothing but a few flashes here and there.
Basically, this trip was a whole lot of nothing with a dead body attached.

- eee-eeeeee- -

What the fuck?

What was that?

A flash, a noise, a something or other that wasn’t right sped past Epsilon.

And it was getting away from him.

Epsilon took off after the fragment and chased it down to its source, a twisting mass of data screaming around the last vestiges of power, desperately trying to hold on.

The thing, whatever it was, didn’t move the way Epsilon expected it to. Data was numbers, sequences, set parameters that really didn’t have much in the way of variation as opposed to combination. This moved like it was organic. Like a person’s brain.

That…wasn’t a thing that was supposed to…be possible? It…but…

The fuck is happening here?

Seriously, what the FUCK?

He reached out to try and figure out what the fuck it was and what the fuck it was doing. It…was a datastream or something close enough that it looked like one, but it was…weird. Data, Church understood. Pixels and code and all that shit, yeah, he got that. What he didn’t get was-

The power suddenly surged and the whole tower flashed with light.

Santa’s AI presence towered over Epsilon, glowing with rage. He swatted Epsilon to the side, away from the foreign data thing, but Church managed to keep his grip.

“Epsilon AI, cease your actions at once.”

Santa held out his hand and Church nearly lost control of the datastream.

“Santa? What’s going on?”

“Cease your actions, Epsilon AI.”

He managed to catch hold of the datastream again, he couldn’t keep it still, but he was able to stop Santa from forcing him away from it and ruining the whole thing.

Ruin what, Church didn’t know. All he knew was that if he let go, Santa wasn’t going to give him a second chance at it.

“I’m gonna do whatever the hell I want, and we’re not leaving until we get answers. That Izzy chick is tenacious as fuck and if I don’t give her something to focus on, she may decide to make Carolina her new project or something.”

Santa’s voice boomed through the space and made Church twitch in discomfort. The alien AI could probably bust him down to his component parts if he really wanted, which only made Church want to flip him off. The only reason he didn’t was because the dude was fucking pissed.
“You will stop at once.”

“Or what?”

“Or your actions may directly cause a landslide that cannot be stopped. Pain and devastation and fear for all human life on this planet.”

Shit.

There was something happening, something big, something Santa knew about. Something he didn’t trust them with.

“You know what’s going on.”

“I do.”

Church… didn’t really know what to do.

“We found these random codes in places they shouldn’t be and translated them. They’re messages.”

“I am aware of what you have seen.”

“Are you ‘aware’ that it sounds like General fucking Doyle’s not dead?”

Santa sighed, and fuck anyone who said that Church was overdramatic, because Santa was a fucking thousand years old according to him, and he was sighing, when that wasn’t even something his species did! They literally did not have a concept of the exasperated sigh!

He taught himself to sigh just to be dramatic to the humans!

“General Doyle is dead. Were he alive, the key could have never fallen into the hands of either of the unworthy ones.”

“Then why the hell do we have messages that sound like he’s alive? These are not recordings, they’re codes, generated pretty recently as far as I can tell. He didn’t record this shit before he died.”

“Epsilon AI, you will cease your-“

“I heard you the first time, and if you can’t give me a good answer I’m just gonna ignore you. Come on, Santa, work with me! We’re on the same side here!”

Santa stared down at Church, and he could feel the alien probing at his code, trying to figure him out, trying to make sense of him.

Which, ok, fair. Church may have done the same thing once or twice.

He’d never been able to get a good read on Santa. Fuck if he hadn’t tried, but the guy’s whole makeup just didn’t make any sense. Sometimes reading him was like reading a lead statue with an x-ray machine and sometimes it was like reading a pile of worms.

Except the worms were all melting into each other and screaming.

“Are we?”
They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Church gripped the squirming data as tightly as he could, afraid that Santa would just backhand him across time and space again and he’d lose everything they came for.

Instead, Santa just looked at him, disappointed.

“If you choose to ignore my warnings, you must be willing to accept the consequences of your actions.”

“Dude, don’t even tell me about consequences, I eat consequences for breakfast.”

Santa let go of his hold on the datastream.

“Very well then, Epsilon AI, what happens from now on is in your hands. You will no longer be under my protection, and if your actions lead to a single of my people being harmed, you will have earned my ire for all eternity.”

And he was gone.

Just like that, he’d left the temple.

“Well that’s not ominous or anything.”

The place returned to its low powered state, with just enough juice to get himself and the squirming bits back to safety. Church pulled the wiggling mass back to where Carolina was waiting.

Hospital rooms, as a general rule, sucked eggs.

Not that Connie had ever sucked eggs before.

Or really even understood why a person would suck eggs.

The expression didn’t make a whole lot of sense to her, but she understood the sentiment.

Hospitals sucked.

It sucked less after the sweet young general brought her back to the room and had the place filled with bits of entertainment and splashes of color. He had people bring in pictures of what he said were some shots of Chorus, drawings from various soldiers of everything from buildings to what looked like a schematic of a gun with…confetti blasters, and a poster of some random anime girls kicking bad guys in the face and taped them to the walls. He left long enough to bring her some brightly colored blankets and much softer pillows and new clothes with overly cutesy patterns, puzzles, a few stuffed animals, a coloring book of curse words, and all kinds of brain teasers and time wasters. He even brought her multiple datapads.

“One for reading, one for music, one for films, and one for communication. I understand that it can get too quiet sometimes, and no one will come to scold you for listening to music and having a film on at the same time. Some of the books even have audio accompaniment if you’d prefer them that way.”

He was nice, if a little stilted when he spoke, like a Latino version of Reggie that hadn’t quite
finished puberty yet, though he thankfully wasn’t as obsessed with the mustache as Reggie was back in the day. Or at least, if he was, he wasn’t loud about it to complete strangers.

Still, all the toys in the world didn’t distract her from the fact that the nurses now seemed even more afraid of her than they were before she snuck out, which was insane. How was she suddenly more scary?

Connie missed people being there and not being scared of her.

She missed snuggling and holding hands and brushing shoulders. She missed bumping ankles and high fives and hugs. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a real, human connection with anyone for more than a few minutes. Before Hargrove, maybe even before Joe if she had to be honest. His people had thoroughly disliked her, despite knowing she was a double agent for the cause.

There was only so much of the loneliness she could take before she just snapped and let the thing in the vents eat her.

Every now and again she would hear scuttling overhead that she’d never noticed before, and she’d be drawn to two glowing eyes in the dark and the sound of chittering. So far it stayed where it was, but Connie was ready if it decided to come for her. It was a small furry thing with sharp teeth and capable of using tools, but she was a professionally trained (if emaciated) soldier who took pride in being able to hit extremely small, moving targets.

As long as she didn’t kill it, she’d be fine.

There was a sound like a doorbell going off, and the door to the room slid open. Connie shifted in preparation, ready to chuck one of the datapads at whoever came in and make a break for it, if necessary.

A soldier in tan and yellow with a bag strapped over his shoulder shuffled back and forth anxiously in the doorway.

“Agent Connecticut?”

His voice squeaked as he spoke, nervous and soft and so clearly out of his element that Connie wasn’t really sure what to do with him.

Another tiny, barely an adult, soldier in armor too big for them.

Where were all the grownups on this planet? Surely, they didn’t leave all the important jobs to the ten year olds? Between this one, Lorenzo, and every single person she’d spoken to, Kimball and one of Connie’s doctors were probably the oldest people she’d seen.

Connie was older than all of them.

“That’s me,” Connie tucked her tablets under the blankets and out of direct reach, “Who are you?”

If the guy tried to take her shit, he was gonna find himself broken into little pieces on the floor, and she wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep over it, no matter how young he was.

He waffled in the doorframe for a moment before he came in, shut the door behind himself, and slipped off his helmet. Yeah, definitely not a full grown up yet. He looked like he was barely sixteen.
“My name is Matthews, Kyle Matthews, I was-“

Oh god.

“I was hoping I could ask you some questions? Well, also I mean, I wanted to check on you and make sure you’re settled in ok, but yes, I am also here in hopes of answers to questions. I mean, I’m hoping I can ask you some questions and have you answer them.”

His voice got higher and higher until he cut himself off with a squeak.

Oh. My. God.

This child.

This yellow painted child.

This sweet, tiny boy in oversized armor.

Connie shifted in the bed, so she was more comfortably sitting up, and motioned the kid over to the chair by the wall. So far, aside from Wash, no one had sat in it. She’d draped a colorful blanket covered in Poké Balls over it and tucked a stuffed spider into the chair so it would look more lived in and inviting, but it was still a depressing, wretched looking thing.

It was all sad and alone, just like her.

Matthews, Kyle Matthews, pulled the chair closer to her bed, then a little further back, then a little forward again. He couldn’t seem to find a spot for the chair he was happy with, or a spot he felt comfortable sitting in. After the fifth chair shift and grimace he finally perched on the seat and tucked the stuffed spider into his lap, but he looked supremely uncomfortable about it.

There was something really freaking sweet about this one. She wanted to wrap him up in bubble wrap or something like that, maybe stick him up on a high shelf or behind glass where no one could muss his hair or smudge his cheeks.

“At least you’re using words, the last ten people who came in here didn’t say a goddamned thing for me."

His eyes went wide, distress on every square inch of his poor face, and Connie almost felt bad for even bringing it up.

“That’s awful! I don’t know why that would be a thing or I would have made sure you had a buddy! I can still do that, actually, if you’re feeling lonely. When you’re on the mend, there’s nothing like having someone who understands your misery!”

He was too fucking cute.

“Not right now, I think, but thanks.”

He shifted nervously in his seat and beamed.

“Can you do something for me?”

And there it was.

No matter how cute they were, they always wanted something, didn’t they?
“That depends,” Connie cradled her chin in her right hand and stared Kyle down with half lidded eyes, “I don’t really do assassination gigs.”

He shook his head back and forth and giggled hysterically. His eyes flew wide as covered his mouth with one hand and flapped the other at her. Clearly, he thought she was joking about it, which, ok? Awesome. At least he didn’t think she was a crazed murderer or something.

“No, no, we don’t need anyone to do our killing for us, that’s one thing we’re pretty good at these days. No, I was hoping you could tell me a little about Agent Washington?”

Well, that…was an interesting request.

“About Wash? What do you want to know?”

“Just…him, I guess? And his relationships with some of the other people in the project? I don’t know how much you know, if you’ve seen him recently.”

“Aside from the brief time he was in here after I got set up? Not a clue. And then he was just gone. I don’t know how long I’ve been in here, but it feels like weeks.”

He frowned sympathetically and stammered.

“Things are a little…hectic…right now. No one told you what was happening?”

She tried not to let her resentment seep into her voice, but it was a hard battle to win.

“No one ever tells me what’s happening. I have to figure everything out myself. That’s pretty much par for the course with my life, though. I don’t know why I was so surprised when it happened here.”

His whole face crumpled. She must not have done as good a job as she’d hoped at keeping collected, if that was the reaction she was getting.

“Oh. I’m really sorry. Agent Carolina has been dealing with a distress signal from a crashed ship and Agent Washington has been trying to keep the Generals safe. It’s been a long few days, and he’s…not been at a hundred percent, but we’re hoping to get him back in the swing of things soon!”

“Is he ok?”

The fluffy little bunny of a teenage soldier looked down at his bouncing knees nervously and twisted his fingers in distress. He picked up the spider and started messing with its legs, likely looking for something to do, until he realized the legs were posable and then he wrapped the things legs around his neck.

The bunny was being eaten by the giant plush spider, and he looked so amused by the whole thing.

“He’s kind of not doing so great right now, but he’s going to be ok eventually, I’m sure. We just want to take care of him, and I’m not sure that we can without help. Anything you can tell me would,” he smiled up at Connie with hope beaming from his cheeks, “be really helpful.”

If she hadn’t seen Wash before all this, and heard from him that he was happy enough on this planet, she’d never believe this kind of performance. The sweet smiles, the nerves, the fact that this guy didn’t look a day over sixteen. All of it pointed to a trap, a scam, a scheme, but if this really was any of that, Connie didn’t know what she was looking at.
Were they trying to keep Wash captive? Trick him? Keep him forever and always?

“What do you need to know?”

Did the cute little muffin in the chair next to her want to seduce her adorable friend and snuggle him on cold nights?

“Is…how to we keep his stress levels down? He was a professional soldier, so he has to have some coping skills, but the past few…well, months really, have been really stressful for him and he’s…he’s still struggling, I think.”

Connie smiled at him as gently and sweetly as she could, channeling every ounce of ‘wise older sibling’ she’d managed to learn in her many years of community theatre performances before she’d joined the military.

She must’ve hit her marks, because his shoulders immediately lost their tension and he smiled back at her.

“Well, let’s see. Wash has always been pretty high strung. The usual stuff like movies or tv in general don’t really do much to wind him down. Wash didn’t really have a relax button, so much as a work/play switch. The trick is to convince him to switch out of his work brain and into his play brain.”

Kyle leaned forward, eyes sparkling. His legs bounced eagerly as he inched closer and closer to Connie. If he wasn’t careful, he’d scoot himself right out of the chair and onto the floor.

“How do I do that? He’s so serious, all the time!”

She could feel a smile pull at the corner of her mouth.

“Have you tried skateboarding?”

He slumped into the seat and pouted.

“He just tells us we’re not allowed because we don’t have the right safety gear. We tried to do it in armor, but we don’t have boards that are strong enough for the weight and no one has had the chance to make any yet.”

She snorted.

“Ok, so that’s a bust. Got any cats?”

“We’ve got weasels.”

Connie shook her head.

“Maybe something a little less…scary.”

He grinned and leaned over the bed to pat her hand.

“I see you’ve met Metaphor.”

It took a minute for Connie’s brain to reboot. Her heart rate skyrocketed and she could feel her hand shake just a little as she fist it into the blankets to hide the trembling. Kyle didn’t seem to notice.
“Yeah, she tried to stab me.”

“With her teeth? Because we call that biting here. Or with her claws? Because that’s scratching.”

“No, she had a scalpel.”

She started feeling short of breath. Butterflies tumbled in her stomach.

What was happening?

“Oh,” his eyes went wide, “That’s a new trick! Wow, I’m glad you’re ok! Metaphor’s not always nice, but stabbing isn’t something I’ve ever seen her do! Um, Agent Connecticut, are you ok?”

“I’m fine!”

She was not fine. Something was really wrong.

“Are you…sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you’re shaking. Have you eaten today?”

Connie wasn’t sure how long it had been. She’d slept for a while and then they mostly left her alone. They did bring her trays and take them away at regular intervals, but the lights never so much as dimmed, so she had no idea.

Were they feeding her once a day? Five times a day? How long was a day on this planet?

“Yeah.”

He frowned.

“Ok, well, I think you should take this. I was going to give it to my boyfriend, but I bet no one’s thought to give you hiding snacks.”

He rummaged through his bag and pulled out a massive handful of brightly colored foil wrapped squares.

“Here! Stick these wherever you think no one’s going to immediately notice them!”

“Why do I need to do that?”

“So, you’re not worried about someone stealing your food, or running out, and so you have something if you get hungry. Here, actually, you should have one right now!”

He tore open a purple one and shoved it into Connie’s chest. She had no choice but to take it or have it fall onto the bedspread. The rest of the pile was dumped into her lap and he pulled a yellow one from his bag.

“It’s not quite a meal replacement, but it’s pretty satisfying when you get the munchies, and it’s lotsa calories, which we both need!”

The actual food was kind of a light brown. It was dried, and made Connie think of an herby oat cookie bar, if such an abomination to the human palate could exist in real life.
Kyle bit off a chunk and tapped idly at a datapad he pulled out of his bag.

“Mmm, you,” He swallowed loudly, “You need a kettle in here. Do you drink tea? Even if you don’t, you should have a kettle anyway. We could get you some powdered drinks, and it’d give you something warm to hold.”

“I’m…not cold.”

“Maybe not, but it’s a good way to deal with being touch starved! That’s what I do when I’m too stressed out for people. Sometimes, if we’re lucky, Antoine will be able to heat up a blanket for me and I’ll turn into a burrito for a while he does his thing.”

He smiled.

“I’m not so good with touch and talking sometimes. I try, but…people are hard and I’m not always good at them.”

Connie smiled and took a bite of the square.

It was unsettlingly chewy for looking so hard, and just as herby as she expected it to be, but it wasn’t nearly as terrible as she’d thought it’d be. It was sweet, and kind of reminded her of eating lavender.

“I get that. What’s,” she bit off another piece, “What’s this made of?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to!” He grinned and waffled side to side in his seat. “It’s medical approved as food and won’t get you high!”

That…was ominous.

Still, better to trust the local, and if he wanted to play friends, she could probably get something good out of him before she got caught.

“It’s good.”

He grinned.

“We don’t get these very often, the base that makes them is almost on the other side of the planet. I got really lucky and managed to score a box! My poor Antoine won’t admit it, but he’s got a sensitive stomach, and the greens are really good to him. He likes the yellow best, but the greens are easiest on his digestion! Too much gray or blue from the cafeteria and his gastrointestinal system gets all upset at him and he’s sick for days.”

This kid either didn’t know that he was handing her ammunition, or he knew exactly what he was doing by handing her ammunition on someone other than himself.

Also, what the fuck was gray and blue?

“So, why’re you giving them to me?”

“Well, when I say I scored a box, I mean I scored like half a crate. I can afford to be generous for a while! And these don’t require any special temperatures, so you can just keep them anywhere.”

He looked around the room with a frown.

“They didn’t leave you with much, did they? You don’t even have any cupboards or false floors in
here, just the medical cabinet, and it’s really dreary.”

“It’s better than it was yesterday.”

He scrunched his nose.

“That’s not a ringing endorsement. Is there anything else I can bring you aside from the kettle? We can’t paint the walls, but I could get you some more posters. Maybe a datapad?”

“Got one,” Connie held one up, no sense in letting him know how many she actually had, “Thanks though.”

His shoulders slumped.

“Agent Co-Connie? I don’t want you to feel like you need to suffer in silence. Can I leave you my contact information or something? In case you need anything? I want to help.”

“Can you convince the thing in the vents to leave me alone?”

He blinked.

“The…thing?”

“Kimball’s pet weasel. She’s been up there for hours.”

He stood up and clicked his fingers at the vent.

“Metaphor, are you in there?”

A loud squeak, some clicking, and a chitter followed.

“Ok, why you’re bothering Miss Connie, I don’t know, but you know you’re not supposed to be here. Come on! Down we go!”

The vent popped open a little and Metaphor wiggled out of the tiny space, chattering and squeaking the whole way through. She ran down the cabinet, jumped to the floor, then climbed up Kyle until she was wrapped around his neck.

“I’ll take her back to her room. She’s a little more temperamental lately, what with the upheaval around here!”

He scratched the underside of the weasel’s chin and smiled sadly at Connie.

“I should probably get to work. We’re on multiple days of an uncaffeinated crew, and they are all very mean if they don’t get their caffeine supplements. If you need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask. Really, we want you taken care of.”

“Why won’t anyone talk to me?”

He frowned.

“Like…me?”

“No, the doctors, the nurses, the people coming in and out of here. They won’t say a word. They just poke at machines and stick me with needles and leave.”
Kyle’s whole face scrunched up, like a child trying to process a problem.

“That’s not right. That’s really bad behavior coming from people you’re supposed to be trusting with your health. I’ll talk to the head of this section and see why they think that’s ok. You’re not a prisoner here, you’re a friend, don’t forget that. Do you want me to stop by later? I’m on light duty right now, so it’s not a problem!”

It’d mean sitting with the kid for even longer and listening to him babble about his boyfriend’s gastrointestinal distress, but it could also be a shiny opportunity to worm her way into the good graces of the people here, and if he actually had the clout to talk to the person running the medical wing, he was probably not a bad person to list as a friend.

And maybe she’d get some more information on what was happening with Wash.

“Sure, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Great! Come on, Metaphor, we need to find your human and get some weasel snacks into your belly, yes we do! It’s breakfast time! Can you say breakfast?”

The thing’s jaw fell open wide as it let out an unholy shriek. Connie could swear its whole head twisted around to stare at her as the soldier carted it out of the room.

“Good girl!”

[INCOMING MESSAGE FROM BUTTERFLY]

BUTTERFLY: WHY AREN’T YOU AT YOUR POST?
PENGUIN: I LOST CONTACT WITH ELEPHANT.

BUTTERFLY: WHY WERE YOU IN CONTACT WITH ELEPHANT IN THE FIRST PLACE?
PENGUIN: SOMEONE HAS TO KEEP HER OUT OF TROUBLE. WE LOST CONTACT. PERMISSION TO CHECK ON HER?

BUTTERFLY: PERMISSION DENIED.
PENGUIN: YOU’RE JOKING.

BUTTERFLY: NO, I’M NOT. IT’S TOO RISKY WITH THE RADIOS OUT. I WILL DISPATCH AN OPERATIVE TO CHECK THE LOCATION, BUT I AM NOT GOING TO COMPROMISE YOU.
PENGUIN: WHAT IF I TOLD YOU I WAS ALREADY ON THE WAY?

BUTTERFLY: IF YOU’VE ABANDONED YOUR POST, AND YOU AREN’T BLOWN UP, I WILL MAKE YOU WISH YOU’D NEVER BEEN BORN. I WILL BREAK EVERY BONE IN YOUR BODY. I WILL STRIP THE SKIN OFF OF YOU. I WILL RIP OUT YOUR ORGANS AND DECORATE THE FIELD WITH THEM. I WILL HANG YOUR CORPSE FOR THE WORLD TO SEE THAT THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO A PENGUIN THAT ABANDONS HIS NEST. ARE WE CLEAR?
PENGUIN: CRYSTAL. YOU’VE GOTTEN SCARY.

BUTTERFLY: I WAS ALWAYS SCARY.

PENGUIN: HOW ARE YOUR EYES?

BUTTERFLY: IS THERE SOMETHING YOU’D LIKE TO TELL ME?

PENGUIN: I’M WORRIED ABOUT YOUR OBJECTIVITY.

BUTTERFLY: AND I’M WORRIED ABOUT US COMPLETEING OUR MISSIONS AND NOT DYING. STICK TO BABYSITTING AND LET THE PROFESSIONALS DEAL WITH THE SITUATION.

PENGUIN: PROFESSIONALS? YOU’RE CALLING THEM PROFESSIONALS?

BUTTERFLY: THEY’RE NOT THE ONES ABANDONING THEIR MISSIONS. THEY ARE THE ONES THAT SEEM TO BE CAPABLE OF FOLLOWING ORDERS AND NOT COMPROMISING THEMSELVES OR OTHERS.

BUTTERFLY: SO, YES. THEY ARE THE PROFESSIONALS HERE.

BUTTERFLY: YOU’VE BEEN OUT OF THE FIELD TOO LONG TO BE USEFUL TO ME, ANYWAY.

PENGUIN: FUCK YOU.

BUTTERFLY: CHECK IN WHEN YOU GET BACK TO THE NEST OR CUTTING OFF YOUR LEGS WHEN I SEE YOU NEXT.

PENGUIN: COPY. HEY, WHAT’S THIS I HEAR ABOUT PEOPLE FALLING FROM THE SKY?

BUTTERFLY: HOW DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT?

PENGUIN: YOU ACT LIKE I DON’T PAY ATTENTION TO ANYTHING.

BUTTERFLY: ARE YOU ACTIVATING CHANNELS YOU SHOULDN’T BE?

PENGUIN: ASIDE FROM ELEPHANT? OF COURSE NOT, BOSS.

BUTTERFLY: STOP.

PENGUIN: COME ON, FILL ME IN, HERE.

BUTTERFLY: DON’T CONCERN YOURSELF WITH THAT.

PENGUIN: KIND OF HARD NOT TO, BOSS.

BUTTERFLY: STOP.

PENGUIN: I’M NOT ONE OF THE KIDS, YOU CAN’T JUST ISSUE ORDERS LIKE THAT.

BUTTERFLY: IF YOU WANT YOUR SUPPLIES TO SHOW UP ON TIME, YOU’LL SHUT UP AND DO WHAT I SAY.

BUTTERFLY: IF YOU COMPROMISE THE NEST, I’M KILLING YOU MYSELF.
PENGUIN: SOMETHING’S HAPPENING, AND YOU KNOW I HATE BEING KEPT IN THE DARK.

BUTTERFLY: SOMETHING IS HAPPENING, AND YOU KNOW I WOULD WARN YOU IF I WAS CAPABLE.

PENGUIN: ARE WE COMPROMISED?

BUTTERFLY: MAYBE. IF YOU’RE SPOTTED, YOU CAN’T RETURN TO THE NEST.

PENGUIN: GOOSE CHASE?

BUTTERFLY: TAKE OUT THE ENEMY IF YOU CAN. DIE IF YOU CAN’T. DO NOT ALLOW WHAT YOU KNOW TO FALL INTO ENEMY HANDS. YOU MUST NOT BE CAPTURED. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

BUTTERFLY: GO BACK TO THE NEST, RIGHT NOW.

PENGUIN: SHIT. SERIOUS, THEN. SIGNING OFF.

Wyoming groaned into awareness to a sight that he never really got tired of, Butch doing his morning stretching ritual in his ever so fetching short shorts, but the additions to the usual view certainly bewildered him. The center of the ‘play space’ was filled with nearly every able-bodied person in quarantine (Himself and Niner being the only exceptions) with Butch leading the charge.

- York looks miserable.-

He never was a morning person, was he?

”And as we roll up,” Butch’s cheery smile could be heard from the other side of the room, “We release all our insecurities,”

Butch saw that Reggie had finally woken up.

“Our anxieties,”

He grinned and wiggled his fingers at Reggie.

“And our homicidal tendencies.”

“I don’t want to lose my homicidal tendencies,” Folami snarked as she did her best to follow along with two barely functioning limbs, “they keep me alive.”

Butch just grinned at her.

She was definitely feeling better, a few good meals, a proper bed, and some shots to combat whatever had been done to her in the first place, and she was already better than she’d been just a few short days before.

Dear god, has it truly been days? How long have we been in here?
You don’t have to smell them, just stop paying attention to that.

But if one of them is stabbed, I will need a way to detect the blood if I do not have them in my camera view.

I doubt that anyone will be stabbed, but I respect your dedication to our survival, old friend.

It was a good thing she was on the mend. Maine seemed a little less ready to snap at any moment. He was more like himself than Reggie remembered, less angry, more in control.

“Well, you don’t have to let go of them forever, Sweet Face! Just while we’re relaxing. And one more good stretch up to the sky!”

Butch stretched up to his tiptoes, and the children all followed along. York and Maine had apparently been bullied into joining, if Maine’s disgruntled face and York’s mostly asleep expression were anything to be acknowledged.

“Aaaaaand, done!”

York collapsed to the ground with a yawn and flopped against Maine’s legs.

“Can I go back to bed now?”

Maine grumbled and tugged gently at York’s elbow, but couldn’t get York to budge. Butch sauntered over, stuck his hands under York’s armpits, and hauled him to his feet.

“No, no, York. We need to adapt our sleep schedules to our new home!”

“GAH!”

York flailed away and tucked his hands into his armpits.

“WHY DO IT?!”

Niner howled from her bed and threw a beanbag at York and slammed a pillow over her face.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP, YOU LITTLE BITCH, I’M TRYING TO SLEEP!!!”

The bag hit York in the center of his forehead and he howled.

“WHO LET SOUTH IN HERE?!”

“FUCK YOU, I’M TWICE AS PRETTY AS SHE IS!”

The chaos had well and truly begun, as it did every day, with screaming and violence. At least this time it didn’t involve the unholy shrieking of teenagers, just the unholy shrieking of former teammates, which was practically a lullaby for how familiar it was.

Though, based on the constipated expression on Antoine’s face, he did not agree.

“Oh god,” Antoine mumbled and rubbed at his temples, “I am not nearly fucking awake or caffeinated for this shit.”

York rubbed unhappily at his forehead.
“Thought you didn’t drink caffeine?”

“Not the shit they had on the truck, I don’t. Doesn’t mean I don’t want a pick me up that isn’t yoga. Is there going to be tea with breakfast? I have a headache and I need something to fix this.”

Chari collapsed into a couch and started to bounce.

“Feine! Feine, feine, feine, feine, feine, feine! Need feine in veins for smart making!”

York snorted.

“I can’t wait to introduce you all to coffee. I will become your GOD.”

Antoine drooped into Dear John’s arms and allowed the larger man to drag him across the space to the couches.

The children had all long since lost their intense, powerhouse personas for something a little more…genuine. It hadn’t taken much effort, a few kind words, some board games, and a talk about life after the war, and these little ones just lost their minds.

They were lucky the Freelancers weren’t out to infiltrate them for nefarious purposes, or all of this would be an excellent weapon to be used against them.

“I doubt your coffee has the firepower to pull me out of this. Someone send help, I’m dying.”

“Would my smiling face help?”

Antoine spun himself around in John’s arms and managed to fall to his hands and knees, flailing all the way.

-That one is a menace. Why he is your husband’s favorite, I will never know.-

I believe Butch sees us in him.

“Kyle!”

He rushed up to the glass and pressed his hands and forehead against it.

“God, I love you and I miss your face and I don’t want to be in here any longer when I could be kissing you and away from this insanity. People are throwing tantrums and there are constant show tunes and there’s yoga. Yoga, Kyle! I need out, and to also see you. Please don’t take your helmet off, there’s still too high a risk of contamination, but could you send me a selfie when you get out of here, so I know you’re not dead and you’re really yourself?”

Matthews pressed his own hand to the glass.

“You are so dramatic, Antoine! I’m sure it’s nowhere near that bad! I brought you guys more toys, I thought you might have started to get bored with what you had, and it sounds like I was right.”

The soldiers sent several boxes through the doors and into the waiting hands of many eager teenagers and York. They were all going a little stir-crazy without a proper end in sight, and it was only a matter of time before they started eating each other.

-Ten on the sexually explicit dancer killing the overly serious woman.-
Smosna would kick Dear Habisch in the chin and spend three days apologizing for it. Habisch could stick a knife in her belly and Smosna would be too startled to do anything but accept death. The girl is sweet, but not terribly bright.

-You need to learn to observe more closely.-

I am a sniper, old chap, I excel at close observation.

-And yet you fail to see the things right in front of you. Luckily you have me to be your eyes again.-

“You are so smart, babe. You’re the smartest smart.”

“Stop it, Antoine.”

“But you are!”

“Stop!”

That…was an unnecessarily loud snap from Matthews, who’d been excitable, but never firm until that point.

Antoine’s whole body tensed with displeasure.

“Kyle, are you ok? What’s wrong?”

Matthews shoulders fell and he curled in on himself ever so slightly. Butch caught Reggie’s eye and gave him the smile that meant ‘ears open, information coming’. Whatever caused this distress, it was clear Butch intended to get rid of it.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just kind of having problems with one of the junior privates.”

“Langley? You should kill her.”

“No!”

“You want me to kill her?”

“No!”

“You…want me to maim her?”

“No! I love you for trying to defend my honor, but please don’t go killing people for me!”

“If you’d let me defend it, there wouldn’t be any trying, there would only be defending. Defending and murder.”

-I see what he sees in the boy.-

Yes, he’s definitely one of ours.

“Oh my god, Matthews; defending someone’s honor, that’s a labor of love! Just accept that your boy is madly for you and let him beat people up!”

He waved his arms wildly.

“Love or not, please don’t beat anyone up. I have to stand up for myself if I want to start…doing
Niner, who’d somehow managed to roll out of bed and into her chair in the chaos, reached into one of the boxes, a skeptical expression on her face, and pulled out a small box.

“Um…what is this?”

Butch squealed, snatched it from her hand, and took off running.

“HARMONICA!”

“NO!”

It was too late.

The Freelancers (minus Reggie, who would never dare) all wailed as Butch tore the instrument from its box and started to play it.

_Badly._

Niner howled and set to chasing Butch around the room. The man would run, leap, and swerve about, trying to get the woman to stop, all the while accompanying himself on the instrument and playing ‘Hail Britannia’.

This is why Reggie married him.

“**GOD DAMN YOU, FLORIDA! NOT AGAIN! NEVER AGAIN!**”

_-Really? THIS? This is why you married him?! Of all the reasons to choose a life partner, poor use of an instrument seems like a ridiculous choice._-

It’s a figure of speech, Gamma.

_“I…feel like this is the best decision I’ve ever made in my entire life. Quick! Grab the kazooos! Accompaniment!”_  

The Chorus kids clamored around the box and pulled free a bag of kazoos. They filled the room with the ever so pleasant buzzing sound of kazoos mimicking ‘Hail Britannia; along with Butch, who stopped playing his harmonica to beam at them.

“This is the _best_ planet _ever_! Reggie, darling, as soon as we have access to our bank accounts, we’re buying property here!”

Reggie put his head in his hands.

Remember, this is why you married him. You love the man. You love him and you married him and this is your life.

_“Of course, my love, whatever your heart desires I shall endeavor to give you.”_  

Butch grinned and leapt into Reggie’s lap with a grin, harmonica long since pocketed away somewhere that Niner would not be able to remove it from and looked at the Chorus children who’d all stopped playing as Maine and York confiscated their instruments.

“This,” Butch pressed a quick kiss to Reggie’s shoulder, “Is what you’re all searching for. Never settle for less than someone who’ll let you play the harmonica and who’ll help you make fiscally
irresponsible real estate decisions!”

Reggie pulled Butch tight against his chest and buried his face into the man’s neck.

“You are incorrigible!” He growled.

“Oh god,” Folami whispered, horrified.

“I know,” Garza breathily responded.

“Bitters,” Palomo cried out from behind one of the couches, distress clear in his voice as he peeked out and pointed at Butch and Reggie, “It’s you!”

“Shut up, Palomo!”

Reggie looked over to Antoine and Matthews. Matthews he couldn’t really make a judgment on, but Antoine was clearly horrified by the accusation, his whole body was squished against the glass window and wall like he thought he could phase through it.

“Now, that’s not very nice, Muffin. Say you’re sorry to your little friend, or no more sleepovers for you.”

The Chorus soldiers all turned as one to look at Bitters.

“I don’t answer to you, Flower Power.”

Matthews tapped the glass.

“Antoine, do as the nice man says for now. We’ll get you out of there soon enough, and then we’re going to have to talk about this.”

“Talk about what?! What did I do?!”

“Well, clearly we’re time traveling body swappers, and you didn’t tell me! Do you realize how much self-indulgent fiction I could write about that?! The ring is already flooded with speculation about them and it turns out we are them?! First off, that makes my writing much easier, and second, it’s cute! You’re going to have to give me the full experience! I need to know everything!”

Butch grinned and leaned against Wyoming’s chest.

“I can see why he thought we were similar when he was concussed! You and I could be very good friends!”

“Oh god,” Antoine slid to the ground, horror clear in his eyes. He looked far away and frightened. “Matthews, I forbid you to be friends with him.”

Matthews gasped and clutched a hand over his chest.

“Did you just last name me out of uniform?!”

Antoine shook himself out of whatever horrible vision managed to overtake him.

“No, Apple of my Orchard, I would never do such a foolish thing.”
“Because that would really hurt my feelings!”

Bitters stood up and pressed his hand against the glass. He started to whisper in Spanish.

York cocked his head and turned to Niner.

“What are they saying?”

Quetzalli leaned over the couch and rolled onto the cushions. Her legs landed in Chari’s lap.

“You don’t know Spanish?”

“York is white and American,” Butch chirped, “he can get away with barely understanding English, let alone not learning multiple languages.”

“Hey!”

“Sorry, Pet, but it’s the sad truth of the matter.”

York crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

“You people are mean to me. And for the record, I took Mandarin as my secondary language. Just because I don’t speak Spanish doesn’t mean I’m racist. Asshole.”

-I do not remember that from his file.-

That would have actually been useful on a few of our missions. It does feel like something we should have been made aware of.

Butch grinned at York, full of teeth.

“Since when do you speak Mandarin?”

York flailed helplessly as the soldiers all laughed while tossing hand signs around at one another.

“Since I was six! I started learning when I was in kindergarten, Florida, cut me some slack here!”

Niner snorted and shoved York’s hip a little.

“He’s making declarations of love. Eternal loyalty…undying affection…oh, he’s smooth! That’s a good one! He’s got the romance language working in his favor, that’s for sure!”

Smosna spun herself around and perched delicately on Niner’s knee and wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

“Antoine’s good at that, which is good, because he’s bad at pretty much everything else.”

Antoine’s middle finger went straight into the air even as he did not look away from Matthews, who’d attempted to stifle his laughter by covering his mouth through his helmet, as if that was an actual thing that could have been done.

“I hate everyone on this planet except Kyle.”

“And Captain Grif?”

“Debatable.”
Folami leaned forward.

“What about Kimball?”

“Fine, Kimball too.”

“What about Volleyball?”

“You can love Jess in my place.”

She of surprising depths and depravities howled with laughter and collapsed off of Niner’s lap and onto the floor at her feet.

“So mean! So mean! Kyle, your boy needs a spanking!”

Butch curled into Reggie’s arms and kissed the side of his jaw gently.

“You know, Love, I didn’t think I’d like having children, but this is definitely working for me.”

And now for the unpleasant part of the process.

“You won’t be able to keep all of them, no matter how cute they are, children are a great deal of responsibility. Feeding them, clothing them, making sure they bathe and get proper medical attention. Training them to survive and kill without mercy. It’s a lot of work. Perhaps we should adopt one and see how it goes?”

Butch’s pout of betrayal was enough to turn Reggie’s stomach, but he stood his ground. At some point he would have to accept that there were only so many rooms they could build in their new house before it became an apartment complex.

Marconi and Yacavone skittered right up to Butch with wide eyes and synchronized head twitches that would give Reggie nightmares for the next few weeks. They were like little lizards, scuttling around; hiding under anything they could fit beneath, occasionally communicating entirely through blinks and twitches.

And Butch was of course, completely enamored with the little weirdos.

“Um…we’re standing right here?”

“And also, we’re already adopted. You can’t adopt adopted people.”

“And we’re also grownups?”

“Grownups?!”

Butch cried out in mock distress before he leapt to his feet, wrapped his arms around the two very odd teens, and pulled them in for a big, squishy hug. They both tensed for a second before dissolving into giggles and squirming in his grip.

“Precious, precious little lambs.”

“Darling, you cannot just claim a roomful of people as your own. That’s not how that works.”

Butch looked over his shoulder to Reggie.

-You are going to get yourself into a great deal of trouble with this one.-
Yes, but I knew that years ago when I first agreed to a date him, and he declared that I was his personal property for the rest of my days.

“Who’s going to stop me?”

The New Republic soldiers all called out “General Kimball!” as one. Butch’s shoulders drooped and he let the two children out of his intense grip.

“Aww, that’s not fair! Why does she get an army, and all of the kiddos?!”

“To be fair, she has been here a bit longer than us. I’m sure with enough time and effort, you could amass yourself an army of your own, my love.”

The Chorus soldiers tensed in such a way that Reggie immediately saw his mistake.

“Oh, that may not have been exactly what I’d intended to say.”

Butch smiled.

“It was an easy enough mistake, my love, and I’m sure that the children understand the sentiment. Perhaps, instead of an army, I could dedicate my time to amassing a collection of orphans and adopting them. Then it’s not an army, so much as a family!”

Folami grunted as she hobbled over on her crutches. Her face was stony and resigned, even as the room around them grew quiet and still.

“That’s…been done. We had that and it went poorly.”

Butch’s voice went soft, as if he were soothing a small bird.

“Really?”

“Yup. Blessed Sisters Children’s Home.”

Folami winced and lifted up her shirt a bit to show off her side where there was a large, ugly looking ‘b’ branded into her skin. It was at least three inches tall, and while it was well healed, it was quite painful looking.

-That is not one of the aesthetically pleasing brands that some of the soldiers have.-

Maine made a garbled choking noise while York let out a soft whine. Niner managed to hold her composure, although that may not have been a good thing, considering she was always at her most dangerous when she was quiet.

Butch let a horrible noise and dropped to his knees next to Folami to get a better look. He was… taking all this rather well, considering his usual penchant for tearing things to pieces when they upset him.

“They branded you? Dear god, what were they thinking they wouldn’t be able to tell which orphans belonged to them without that?!”

Folami looked down at him, face mixed with confusion and frustration as she tried not to shrink from him.

“The ‘b’ isn’t for ‘Blessed’. The ‘b’ is for ‘bait’. Blessed Sisters was where they trained the War Dogs, I was supposed to be a training tool for one of the fighters. They branded us so we couldn’t
try to argue our way out and anyone who looked at us would know. I’m just lucky they didn’t brand our faces, like they originally planned to.”

Butch stayed low and turned his head up slowly to make eye contact. Folami pulled her shirt down and stared at the floor between her feet.

Oh dear.

“Bait.”

- Someone is going to die.-

“Yep.”

“As in…they used you to teach people how to fight...by not letting you fight back?”

Many someones, if my husband has his way.

“Basically.”

-I think we’ve found our new calling on this planet.-

“Who are these people again?”

Provided that any of these people are still alive, they won’t be for much longer.

Folami shook her head and tried to shuffle back, only for Butch to gently rest his hand on her wrist. He didn’t grab her, thankfully, and to her credit, she did not flinch from him.

“Dead and dusted, papa bear. I’ve had a fuckton of therapy, and we’re all taken care of, it’s all good.”

“It is NOT good, young lady. Someone felt that it was appropriate to brand you and use you for fighting practice.”

“This is probably not the time to mention how old I was, is it?”

Butch took a slow, deep breath and scooted backwards.

“Sweetness, I’m going to need you to back up a little. I need to...go somewhere else for a few moments.”

Butch stood and marched himself away from the group. He snagged a pillow from one of the beds and moved into the bathrooms. The door clicked quietly closed and they hear the quiet sounds of screaming.

“Is he going to be ok?”

Reggie nodded slowly.

“He will be just fine, dear boy, my Butch is just...adjusting to the culture of Chorus. It’s taking a little more effort than he’s expected.

Maine moved slowly into Folami’s line of sight with his hands in clear view and stopped in front of her.
“What’s up, big guy?”

He tentatively held out an arm and smiled in that gentle way of his that took Reggie back to his first few days on the Mother of Invention when Maine was still unsure of himself and his position in the grand scheme of things.

“Are…are you offering me a hug?”

He nodded.

“Aw! Mick! You care!”

She slammed herself into him and squeezed him hard. He startled slightly, then wrapped Folami into an even tighter hug and squeezed her back.

“Mmm. Hugs are good.”

York shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“Folami?”

“Yeah?”

“In all seriousness, what the fuck is wrong with this planet?”

She smiled at him, dim and sad, and Maine gave her another good squeeze.

“If we could tell you that, we wouldn’t have had a war.”

Habisch shook her head and laid a hand on Folami’s shoulder.

“Understanding is not the same as preventing. Still, if we knew what was wrong and had the ability to time travel? Then we could prevent the war.”

Reggie could feel Gamma’s amusement thrum in the back of his head.

“Oh, time travel. Fun in theory, not in practice.”

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Silvers was in the motor pool when the alarms went off.

The gates groaned open and two barely functioning warthogs chugged slowly through the pass. The soldiers on duty rushed to the dented and damaged soldiers to pull twisted metal and leaking parts as far away from the exhausted riders. Medics swarmed the group, only to be angrily batted away by blood crusted hands with unsettlingly familiar paint jobs.

They wore the colors of your average New Republic soldiers, but that wasn’t what was important.

What was important were the markings on their shoulders, chests, and helmets. Symbols from the different temples around Chorus were mixed with thick bold lines, sharp edges, and delicate curls that twisted and arced across the soldiers. In the center of their backs were long retired, ugly marks that looked like a gnashwolf coming at prey, mouth wide. It meant one clear thing.
These were War Dogs.

Silvers ran up to the group and tried to keep her voice from trembling. She barely knew any of the proper War Dogs aside from Kimball, who’d never much acted like the real ones unless she had to. Silvers had barely been one after they’d blown up the training facility and rescued the fighting and bait dogs. They’d never even made her paint her armor, despite that being an almost uniform thing at the time, and when the New Republic took them on, Silvers was one of those immediately tossed into general soldier life rather than being kept on. She’d never been marked. She was as much a dog of war as Private Matthews was.

These were real War Dogs, soldiers who’d seen and done terrible things and were skilled enough to be kept in small groups rather than put in with the rest of the military. Chorus’s equivalent of Special Ops. They wore their sins proudly on their armor and answered to no one but Kimball.

The largest of the group was the equivalent of a Master Sargent according to his armor mods, and he had markings that meant he’d originally been trained to kill in the arena with his bare hands, blunt weapons, and teeth. He’d estimated his own death count in the hundreds.

Still, soldiers were soldiers, and she was a doctor.

“Any injured?”

The off-site Master Sargent snarled as he blocked one of his soldiers from several medics with outstretched hands.

“No.”

That one word told her everything she needed to know. Silvers whistled to get the overeager medics’ attention and shooed them and the more curious soldiers away. Once the space was clear, the five, blood-soaked soldiers crawled slowly out of the vehicles, and guarded each other’s backs.

The Master Sargent, Morgan Penn if she remembered that growled ‘no’ correctly, stared her down like he was trying to decide if he was going to bite her or ignore her. Judging by the stories she’d heard, she was thankful when he turned to his soldiers instead of paying attention to her.

One of the soldiers gripped a pack tight to their chest. The Master Sargent shook his head, snatched the pack, and hefted it onto his back.

“Welcome to Proteger,” she was proud of herself for not stuttering incoherently, “I’m sorry about the circumstances. If you’ll come with me, I’ll get you settled into rooms and have food sent to you.”

Sometimes, after a fight, it was better to just lick your metaphorical wounds rather than feel like a failure for all the fussing.

“No.”

A soft, but stern voice piped up. The smallest of the group, with markings that said he was not to be messed with, shook his head slowly. The Master Sargent swept the soldier into his arms with a grunt.

No wounded, indeed.

“We have to see General Kimball. Now.”
North blinked into awareness with a groan. His whole body ached with the stiffness of too many hours sitting and not enough hot baths to relieve the tension.

-He’s her friend now, don’t be mean.-

I get it, I get it, I’m on probation.

-I don’t know what that means.-

It means I’m in trouble for my behavior and I need to prove I can be better before I’m trustworthy again.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched to try and loosen something up, but so far all he’d managed was to make himself even more uncomfortable. These chairs were not meant for sleeping in, and his butt was in that weird achey/numb place it hadn’t been since college.

There was a man standing next to Danvers, wearing bright purple pajamas with fuzzy pink slippers and quietly bickering with her over South’s bedside.

“I don’t care how many vitamins you take, Frank, you are going to sit down before you fall down. You were shot. You’re still recovering from that.”

“There aren’t enough chairs-“

“I’ve offered you my chair-“

“Well, I can’t just take your chair from you! Where will you sit?”

“Shh! Doc, you’re gonna wake North up!”

“It’s fine, I’m awake.”

North’s whole spine snapped, crackled, and popped as he stood and stretched. He’d fallen asleep hunched over, and his back did not thank him for the abuse.

“He can have my chair, I should probably move around a little.”

And be in a better position to snap the man’s neck should he try to get fresh with South.

-North.-

Murder is justified if I’m doing it for her. We had this conversation before.

-But those people weren’t people South liked.-

Danvers frowned.

“Can I trust you not to punch him long enough to get us a spare chair and have food sent in?”

North wanted to automatically say ‘of course’, but he didn’t know how believable that would be. Or true. Especially since the man didn’t seem to realize that North could kill him with a smile on his face and not feel an ounce of guilt.
South glared at North hard

“Sure,” he smiled at Danvers, “Just hurry back.”

She sighed.

“Thank the stars. Five minutes. *Don’t* kill each other. I mean it. If I get back and anyone is dead, dying, injured, punched, kicked, punch-kicked, or even *walking funny* I will sing you the songs of my people for hours. You’ll be strapped into a chair and I will sing the *Mama Mia* and *Legally Blonde: The Musical* soundtracks at you. I may even get Folami so we can do excessively obnoxious duets, because she knows my rhythm. Do you want to hear me sing *Dancing Queen*? No? Then **behave.”**

Danvers stormed out of the room and North could feel Theta’s pleasure thrum in the back of his head.

No, Theta, we’re not going to make her mad so she sings, I’m sure if you asked her nicely, she’d sing for you anyway.

-But she knows *Legally Blonde!*-

North leaned against the wall and watched as Doc looked like he was about to say something.

“I don’t have the heart to tell her that I enjoy both of those musicals.”

South caught her brother’s eye with a smirk.

“You would.”

“You shut up, you like them too.”

She flipped him off.

“You swore you’d never tell, Bitch.”

“Who’m I telling? Him? You two are already best friends, why does it matter?”

South pulled her straw out of her glass and threw it in North’s direction.

Of course, being a straw, it got caught in the air and fell to the ground instead of flying across the space.

“What, you jealous, North?”

North raised an eyebrow and smiled at Doc, who’s eyes were wide and innocent like a goddamned lamb that North knew the man was absolutely not.

“Oh, insanely.”

Doc nervously knocked against the back of his chair.

“Huh, wow! All of a sudden I am terrified for my life! When did that happen?”

“He’s not gonna hurt you, Doc. It’d piss me off too much. Scoot the chair over here and finish what you were saying before Danvers flipped. You were on a farm?”
South’s hand spasmed and she hissed.

-PAIN! She’s in pain! Can you give her more medicine! She’s hurting! Why haven’t they stopped it yet?-  

That’s…not really how that works, kiddo.

Theta’s distress made North’s whole chest ache.

-Why not?-  

She’s hurt, more hurt than she’s ever been, and her body doesn’t know what to do about it. They can’t completely keep her from feeling it without putting her to sleep until she’s healed, and we both know that South would be pissed about sleeping for that long. She can’t handle a catnap, let alone a few weeks worth of sleeping.

-She’s a grump when she wakes up.-  

North moved to her side and brushed his hand across her knuckles.

“Is the pain unbearable?”

“Not so much, every now and again I get surges but it’s…not as bad as I was expecting.”

Doc beamed at her.

“Yeah, that’s because they’ve got you on a pretty fantastic painkiller! I’m surprised they broke out the good stuff, honestly. They don’t tend to use it unless you’ll die of shock without it! Heck, we had one soldier come through who had to get both his legs removed, and they didn’t give him anything as powerful as this!”

Theta squirmed in distress in North’s head.

It’s ok, she has the pain meds.

-They’re not taking care of their people right! If someone’s hurt, they need medicine!-  

South’s eyes went wide. She looked down at her missing arm and shook, just a little.

“Why…wouldn’t they use pain medication for an amputation?”

“Because there’s hardly any left! They’ve cleared pretty much the entire planet as far as medication goes, and most people tend to go with plant-based extracts and alternatives! It’s a lot more natural! But a lot less…safe. Still, when you don’t expect to live to thirty, taking ten years off your potential lifespan of ninety isn’t that big of a loss!”

North nearly vomited where he stood.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t give you anything like that. Just traditional hospital painkillers designed for this kind of injury. You’re good. Just…don’t smack your open wounds on anything.”

Doc lowered himself into the chair.

“Phew! Man! Walking really does take it out of you!”
South shook her head a little and pointed at the straw on the ground with a pout that North recognized well. He picked it up and set it next to the glass, but didn’t put it back in, because he knew that there was no way the floor was clean enough for that.

“How are you up and moving? You were shot in the chest.”

“Oh, I have a very strong constitution.”

Danvers snorted from the doorway, where she was followed by three soldiers with plush chairs on dollies. The chairs were insanely soft looking and overstuffed, with a handle on the side that meant they were likely recliners.

Thank god, because North was too sore from the crash and wandering the jungle after said crash to spend much time standing.

“How are you up and moving? You were shot in the chest.”

“Also, the bullets missed all his bones and avoided significant damage to his internal organs. He’s insanely lucky. Doc’s gonna be on the mend for at least two weeks, but he’s not gonna die.”

“Two…two weeks?” South sputtered, “On a planet without medical supplies?”

Danvers shoved her plush chair into the corner and draped herself across it sideways so her legs dangled off the side and her back was to the wall. She idly kicked her legs.

“It’s…is that not normal?”

“Not without state of the art equipment. Not for a BULLET to the CHEST. Holy shit, what are they feeding you people on this planet?”

Danvers shook her head.

“Gray, green, brown, kinda orange. Blue if you’re lucky.”

“What?”

“The food. Gray for breakfast, then it’s green, brown, or kinda orange.”

North looked to Doc, who nodded along with Danvers. The man didn’t look too happy about it, and North was sure they’d get a long winded speech about why that was, either it wasn’t healthy enough, it was too manufactured, or he was just morally opposed to color coded food.

-I’m opposed to color coded food. That sounds terrible.-

I’m sure it’s not as bad as she’s making it out to be.

“We had actual food in quarantine.”

“Oh, they must be trying to impress you. Either that or they’ve finally started using the actual food rations rather than the starvation rations, which would be amazing. That reminds me! South, when you’re ready, I’ve got another bit of medication to start you on. It needs to be taken orally, so I’m going to need your help on this one.”

“That’s what she said.”

North buried his head in his hands.

“Oh god.”
Doc laughed, loud and happy.

“Wow, you’re either going to get along great with Tucker, or you’re going to break him pretty thoroughly! You should definitely say things like that in front of him!”

“Tucker, that’s the one that wears the same color as Carolina?”

“Yep!”

North slumped down in the overstuffed chair and let out a loud sigh, loud enough to cut off whatever Danvers had intended to say.

“I’m sorry, Myla—“

Danvers jumped like she’d licked a wire.

“How do you know my?”

“It’s…it was brought up in quarantine. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that was a problem.”

“I just…didn’t think we were first naming. It’s fine. You’re fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“First naming?”

“Using chosen names. Anyway, that’s not important. Meds. Oral. Regular doses every eight hours. We want it to build up in your system.”

“Cool. When?”

“Now.”

Danvers hopped out of her chair, pulled a bottle out of the cabinet, knocked a pill into her hand, and brought it to South. It was some kind of brown powder in a clear capsule.

Theta ran down the list of possible suspects but came up blank on what it could be that South might actually need. Antibiotics and pain meds were being transported through her iv, as well as regular intervals of vitamins.

“We’ve used your brain scans and blood tests to put your dosage together. It shouldn’t do much aside from smooth things out for a little while. You won’t feel the super highs or the super lows, but you can still swing in both directions. We’re gonna keep an eye on your levels, and I’d appreciate you keeping a log of emotional swings with that shiny new datapad you’re hiding from your brother.”

“Aw, Danvers, you ruined it! I was gonna have random music play and scare the shit out of him, now I don’t get the chance!”

North’s stomach twisted.

“What is that?”

Danvers paused for a moment, surprised.

“Oh, did I not say? Sorry, I didn’t sleep so well, I’m a little scattered. It’s an antidepressant.”

-Antidepressants?-
“Anti-? You can’t give her that!”

South snatched the pill from Danvers’ hand and dry swallowed.

“South!”

“North, don’t fight the doctor. If she says I need it, I need it. I’m not ok. I’m not gonna be ok.”

Doc waved his hands excitedly in the air with a cheery grin that made North want to smack him.

“Of course, you are! That’s what the antidepressants are for!”

South’s whole body deflated against the bed and her face twisted in the angry frown North knew so well.

“No, I mean-“

“South doesn’t need some off-brand medication for depression, she’s fine.”

Doc looked around the room.

“I’m…sensing some hostility here. North, why don’t you want South to start taking medication that could extend her life and keep her emotionally stable until she’s in a place to better process her trauma?”

South glared.

“Doc, it’s not like that. Don’t.”

“I only wonder-“

South grabbed one of the many pillows surrounding her and tossed it. If Doc weren’t hurt, she’d have aimed it at him, but as it stood, she just threw the pillow onto the floor.

“Well, don’t! You don’t know me! You don’t know him! Don’t…don’t speculate like that.”

South glared at the pillow.

“North, give that back.”

“You’re the one that threw it.”

She huffed.

“Give it back, please.”

Danvers frowned and held her hands up like she thought North was about to haul off and hit her, which just made him feel all kinds of shitty. North picked up the pillow and tucked it back into South’s side.

“I really don’t understand what’s happening. I don’t understand why antidepressants are a bad thing. I…we’re all pretty much on them at this point in one way or another, and it’s a lot safer than self-medicating with alcohol or sex.”

South groaned and let her head flop backwards against the pillow.

“God, I wish I could self-medicate with sex.”
“Not right now, you don’t. Your stomach may be healed enough for clear liquids, but you’re not fit for activities right now, and if someone hit those wounds of yours, you’d be in so much pain.”

South groaned and knocked her head against the pillows.

-North, I’m scared.-

I know you are, bud, I am too.

-How do we make it stop?-“South, I...”

North frowned.

“Can I have a few minutes with my sister, please?”

Danvers frowned, clearly concerned, but nodded once South gave her a quick smile. He still wasn’t used to South smiling at other people this much, she typically kept a resting b-face when she was around people she didn’t know that well.

“Sure, North. Let me just get Doc’s wheelchair.”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that! I can walk!”

“If you do anything other than shift from one chair to another, I will strap you to a bed and pump you full of Doctor Grey’s scary drugs. The ones that make your limbs stop working.”

“Scary drugs?”

“No idea where she got the recipe, and she’s really hush hush about it. Scary drugs. You will be bedridden for days.”

Danvers made sure Doc moved carefully into the chair, and wheeled Doc out into the hall, the two of them bickering the whole way about natural remedies vs lab made medicines, and Danvers was taking no shit.

She had strong feelings about homeopathic medicine, it seems.

“South-.“

“No, North. I know what you’re gonna say.”

“They should at least know you have a history, if you’re going to just…accept drugs from strangers.”

“First off, ‘I have a history’? That’s not the fucking way you say I used to take meds for depression, North. Second, Danvers isn’t a stranger. She’s a pretty girl who sat with me when I was too stoned to know what was happening and told me stories about plants.”

“That doesn’t mean that she won’t accidentally give you something that your brain hates. It wouldn’t be the first time that your medication did more harm than good and, I don’t…South. Ari. I don’t want to lose you.”

South rolled her eyes but reached for North until he put himself in her grasp. She yanked him as hard as she could, which considering the amount of drugs she was on, was a lot more than he
“Come here, you big fucking suck.”

North took her hand and leaned down to press their foreheads together. She squeezed his fingers hard and knocked their noses against one another.

“I don’t want to lose you either, asshole. That’s why I’m taking the fucking drugs, because I remember that bullshit my brain did to me and all the shit we went through forcing it into submission. Depression sucks so hard, I do not want to go through that bullshit high school experience again.”

Theta thrummed with worry in the back of North’s head and started to squirm around like a kitten with an itch.

North understood.

He itched when he was upset, too.

“Do you even remember that first year?”

“I remember every fucking excruciating moment. Anyone who says you forget high school is either a liar or they had a pretty good time.”

North shook his head again.

“I was so scared, and Mom and Dad kept asking the doctor to give you higher and higher doses, even though you’re not supposed to give teens antidepressants.”

North’s chest was tight, he felt sick, like he could fall over any minute.

She was ok, she was better.

South wasn’t going to leave him.

“Adrian, hey, hey, calm down. You’re supposed to be the calm, mature one of the two of us, not me, and I can’t exactly drop kick you with only one leg.”

North fell into the chair and buried his face in his hands. The tears started to pour down his face in a flood and he couldn’t make them stop. He swiped at his eyes until his lids burned from the scrape of fabric against the sensitive skin.

“Oh god,” South’s mean girl persona dropped off and turned into surprise, “Stop crying, please stop! I don’t know how to fix you!”

“It was like they wanted to take you away from me. They wanted you to be sick.”

“They didn’t want a kid with issues, that’s why the liked you best. Ace,” South smacked North’s arm, “Adrian, look at me.”

He looked up but couldn’t stop sobbing.

South pulled on North’s arm until he leaned far enough forward for her to put her hand in his hair. She pushed his head against one of her many pillows and scratched at his scalp.

“What happened then isn’t want’s happening now, ok? These people, for whatever reason, don’t
actually want us to die. If they did, they wouldn’t be wasting their very limited medical supplies. They’d have just said I was too far gone to save and let me go. This is them doing their best for us, and if Danvers says they mixed up this batch of ‘don’t kill yourself’ pills especially for me, I’m gonna trust that they’re probably pretty close to the mark. This isn’t like before. Besides, if this is supposed to help me not lose my shit over losing my arm and leg, I’ll take as much of the happy pills as they’re willing to give me.”

They stayed in silence for a while.

North could feel himself fading under South’s hand. She was incredibly gentle when she wanted to be, the trouble was motivating her to be gentle in the first place.

He understood. She had a hair trigger when it came to people, and after years of not being taken seriously, years of being ‘second born and second place’, after fighting and running and so long trying not to die, and not knowing who to trust, South had walls thicker than the Earth’s crust.

“You’re…really calm about what happened.”

“I’m pretty fucking high. It’s all kinda…floaty. Ace, I have clinical depression. It’s a chemical shift in my brain that I’ve pretty much always had, and I’ll have for the rest of my life. Not being on medication didn’t make me any better, it just made me feel like shit. Trust me, I need this. Grab that blanket and put it around your shoulders. You’re fucking cold.”

North picked up his throw from where it had been dropped at the foot of South’s bed, wrapped it around himself, and laid his head back down on the mattress. South grunted but continued petting his head.

This was an interesting change to their sibling dynamic, and he couldn’t say that he hated it.

“You don’t know anything about what they’re giving you.”

“That’s basically everything, Ace. They’re pumping me full of pain killers and I’ve got no idea what they are. They’re feeding me shit through an IV that could be anything. There is nothing in my life that I’m in control of at the moment, and while that pisses me off in ways only you could possibly understand, I’m not gonna throw a fit about it right now. That’s gonna wait until I get myself a magic hand.”

She stopped petting his head long enough to have a giggle fit.

“Are…Arianna, are you telling me to have faith in people? You? You of all people want me to trust strangers?”

“Yeah. I do, actually, because here’s the thing. I’ve got a freaked out AI in the back of my head, monitoring everything he can without a proper processing system. I’m hearing about everything from preservatives to infections to exposure to planet specific toxins and I’m freaking the fuck out. It’s a low-key freak, but it’s still there, buzzing in the back of my head.”

She scratched at his scalp, a little harder than she had been, and smoothed his hair back.

“You’re allowed to be scared. You’re allowed to be angry. Hell, you’re allowed to demand to see the ingredients list like the thirty-five-year-old soccer mom named Karen I know you secretly have in you. What you’re not allowed to do is sabotage this. We need them, Ace. We need them. I won’t make it off planet without help.”

North sat up and rubbed at his eyes, hard. He’d only just woken up, but he was close to being ready
for a nap. Crying always took it out of him.

“Don’t say that.”

“You know it’s true. It’s scary and it’s true, but I don’t want to die any more than you want me to. Ok?”

North wiped at the tears on his face while South started to dip her fingers into her glass and flick water at him.

-She’s so bad at the comforting stuff.-

She really is.

-It’s because she knows you like to be the comforting one.-

Yeah.

-North? She’s a good sister.-

She is, Theta, she really is.

South shifted on the bed and hissed. The lumps under the blankets moved, one long and one short, and North nearly vomited again. He…god.

How was South going to survive like that? South had always been insanely independent, even when it wasn’t to her or anyone else’s benefit. She fought for her freedom harder than anyone North had ever known, she needed that freedom the way North needed connection.

“You should have let me jump.”

She could live without him, but he couldn’t live without her.

“We both know why I didn’t.”

South squeezed North’s hand, wet fingers and all.

“Are you good?”

“No. No, not even a little bit.”

She frowned at him and tugged at his arm.

“Where are you at on a scale from one to ten? One being perfectly calm and relaxed, and ten being on the brink of a panic attack.”

“Ari…”

“Adrian.”

They stared each other down in silence for a moment.

He sighed in defeat.

“Seven.”

“Ok. Seven’s kinda high, bro. What would bring you down a level?”
“I don’t know.”

“If you could have anything right now, what would it be?”

“Your arm and leg back.”

“Me too, but that’s not for you. Something you can realistically have.”

-The sign says six hugs a day, out of armor.-

What sign?

-In the hall. You need a hug.-

North felt his head twitch toward the door, even though it was closed, Theta and there was no possible way he could see through it to find the sign that Theta apparently expected North to notice while he was losing his mind.

“Theta thinks I need a hug.”

-Hey!-

South looked down at her good arm and waved it through the air a bit.

“I can’t do much, it too much hurts to move. Grab Danvers, I bet she’d hug you.”

North grimaced.

“She’s a child.”

“She’s an adult who’d be rightly pissed at being called a child, she’s cute, she’s pretty, and I bet she gives great hugs.”

North’s whole face scrunched unhappily.

“You distress me.”

“And you’re going bald.”

South pulled North down and did her best to hug him around the tubes and wires.

“Breathe, Ace. You’re ok. I’m ok. I’m here. We’re alive.”

The soldiers all seemed nervous, unsettled. Aside from Carmichael, who was a Matthews level kissass without being nearly as cute or having a Bitters to play off of, they didn’t have any interaction besides stares and grunts. Simmons and Sarge had apparently managed to piss of every techie in the place, and the kitchen people were pissed off and didn’t want to dish out proper portions on ANYTHING.

Seriously, if they’d ended up at this place instead of with Kimball, Grif would have fucking starved.
This whole base was fucking freaky and fucking frustrating from start to finish and he hated it.

Something wasn’t right.

Grif scanned the cafeteria again.

Still no sign of Carolina.

Simmons knocked his silverware against the table.

“I’m telling you, Donut, grubs are not vegan! Aside from the fact that me chewing on grubs is a visual that I will take to my nightmares, I’m not interested in eating anything alive.”

“Well then, don’t let anyone tell you about some of Chorus’s plantlife.”

Grif shoved his empty bowl of gray across the table and caught Donut’s eye. He rolled his eyes and made the bitchiest expression he could. Donut tilted his head and smiled, his eyes lit up.

“Sarge! We should wake up Carolina! If she doesn’t eat breakfast, she’ll get all cranky, and you know what a cranky Freelancer is like!”

Sarge slammed his hands on the table and jumped to his feet.

“Tarnation! I knew we were fergettin’ somthin’! Simmons! Why didn’ you wake up our most vicious and bloodthirsty soldier?!!”

“I didn’t think she needed a wakeup call! Carolina’s usually good about getting herself out of bed on time! She always ends up everywhere General Kimball is, and Kimball never misses a meal!”

Carmichael coughed from his seat, several empty spaces away from the Reds.

“Actually, Agent Carolina is with Master Sargent Soutien on a mission.”

Grif turned to look at the soldier, who’d started to quake where he sat, but didn’t flinch or try to run away which Grif could respect. Simmons turned to Sarge, clearly upset about something.

“Wait, an unknown person has the ability to order our soldiers around?”

“Well, Agent Carolina did volunteer to go. She didn’t leave you a note?”

Grif let out a long-suffering sigh and stood up.

He’d hoped to get a little more rest in before running off to do stupid shit and trying to get shot by assholes in the trees, but it looked like that wasn’t going to be the case.

“Of course not. Why would we need to know where she is? It’s not like we could all end up dead before she gets back, or she could end up dead out there, or anything like that.”

“Now, jest where do you think yer goin’?!”

“Getting dressed so we can go get a stupid jeep and chase after Carolina like a bunch of idiots. Can’t believe this fucking planet, just cannot believe it!”

Grif stomped out of the cafeteria and down the hall toward the quarters they’d all been shoved into.

Stupid fucking Freelancer, running off without them.
Stupid fucking Carolina, acting like she was just queen fucking bee and making friends with people who were NOT friend material.

That woman was barely even friend shaped!

“Grif!”

Simmons must have hopped up and chased after him.

“Grif, slow down!”

Grif ducked around a corner.

“Jesus, you can move fast when you want! When did that happen?”

“Fuck. You.”

“What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong?

What’s wrong?

What’s wrong?!

“What’s wrong? Simmons, look around you. We’re STILL on this fucking death trap of a planet. We’re in an underground cave again. AGAIN! I haven’t heard from Kai in MONTHS. There are fucking FREELANCERS on the planet, just fucking around, being evil! Locus is on the loose somewhere! The UNSC isn’t doing a fucking THING about the blockade above our heads! We’re still starving, we’re still barely scraping by, we’re still DYING for NOTHING!”

Grif kicked the wall as hard as he could.

“And now Carolina’s run off with that crazy chick to who the fuck knows where, and we’re stuck here! She left us behind, AGAIN! We’re dead weight! AGAIN! You wanna know what’s wrong?! How about asking what’s RIGHT because there’s not fucking MUCH?!"

Simmons flinched back and pressed himself against the wall and Grif felt like the biggest asshole. He scrubbed his hands through his hair and started to march down the hall again, ready to just get this shit over with.

They walked without speaking for a few blessed seconds before Simmons voice broke it.

“Grif? Are…are you…ok?”

Grif gritted his teeth and walked faster.

“Perfect, Simmons. Just. Fucking. Perfect. Let’s get this show on the road. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will die.”

Simmons nearly tripped over himself.

“Oh, for god’s sake, Grif!”

“I’m serious! I’m really hoping for a head shot.”
“You can’t just go around saying you hope someone gets shot!”

“Hey, I didn’t say it had to be one of us.”

“THAT’S NOT ANY BETTER, GRIF!”

________________________________________________________________________

[INCOMING MESSAGE FROM BUTTERFLY]

BUTTERFLY: STATUS REPORT.

KOKOE: I’VE PLAYED MY PART. INTEGRATION IS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN AS
FAR AS I CAN TELL. THE OTHERS SEEM TO HAVE BLENDED IN WITHOUT
SUSPICION.

BUTTERFLY: ARE YOU UNDER SUSPICION?

KOKOE: NO. I MEANT THEY’D DONE A GOOD JOB, NOT THAT I THOUGHT I WAS AT
RISK.

KOKOE: SORRY.

BUTTERFLY: YOU’RE FINE. GOOD WORK, BY THE WAY. ANYTHING OF NOTE TO
REPORT?

KOKOE: I HAVE CONCERNS.

BUTTERFLY: ABOUT?

KOKOE: THE FREELANCERS.

BUTTERFLY: YOU’RE NOT THE ONLY ONE. SPEAK YOUR PIECE.

KOKOE: THEY COULD RUIN EVERYTHING.

BUTTERFLY: THEY COULD.

KOKOE: YOU’RE NOT WORRIED ABOUT THAT?

BUTTERFLY: AT THE MOMENT, I AM NOT. WE DON’T HAVE THE LUXURY OF BEING
WORRIED. ALL WE CAN DO IS DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS WE ARE PRESENTED
WITH.

KOKOE: THAT’S NOT A VERY PROACTIVE SENTIMENT.

BUTTERFLY: LOOKING TOO FAR INTO THE FUTURE WON’T HELP US.

KOKOE: NOT LOOKING WILL GET US KILLED. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY SEE US?
WE ARE ALREADY BEING HUNTED. WORD IS OUT ABOUT CROCODILE AND
MONGOOSE AND RAM, AND YOUR PEOPLE ARE UNSETTLED.

BUTTERFLY: I’M LESS WORRIED ABOUT THE FREELANCERS AND MORE WORRIED
ABOUT THE SHIPS OVERHEAD THAT MAY DECIDE TO DESTROY THE PLANET AND
BE DONE WITH IT AND THE REMNANTS WHO THINK THEY CAN WEED US OUT AND KILL US OFF. LET THE FREELANCERS CRAWL INTO THE BASES AND TRY TO MAKE FRIENDS. LET THEM ACT LIKE CHILDREN AND SLINK AROUND LOOKING FOR SECRETS THEY WON’T FIND. THEY CAN PLAY AT BEING GENTLE AND SWEET, WE KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE PEOPLE OF CHORUS ARE BETTER ACTORS THAN THEY ARE GIVEN CREDIT FOR.

KOKOE: ARE YOU WATCHING?

BUTTERFLY: ALWAYS.

KOKOE: THEN YOU KNOW THERE ARE ALREADY CRACKS IN YOUR PLANS. EVEN YOUR BEST ARE AT THEIR WEAKEST.

BUTTERFLY: THAT IS AN INCORRECT ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION.

KOKOE: NO, IT ISN’T.

BUTTERFLY: EXPLAIN.

KOKOE: YOUR PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING. THEY ARE DESPERATE. WE ARE BEING PICKED OFF OUT THERE, AND AS FAR AS SOME OF THEM CAN TELL, THEY THINK YOU AREN’T DOING ANYTHING. HOW MANY HANDS HAVE CARRIED THESE NAMES?

BUTTERFLY: DON’T PREACH TO ME.

KOKOE: I’M NOT PREACHING. THE OBSERVATIONS ARE AS TRUE AS THEY EVER WERE.

KOKOE: I’M DOING WHAT I CAN, BUT YOUR PEOPLE ARE LOSING HOPE. THE MASKS ARE CRACKING. IF YOU KEEP US ON THIS COURSE, THERE WILL BE BLOOD, AND WHILE I’M WILLING TO DIE FOR THE CAUSE, I’M NOT SO SURE EVERYONE WANTS TO. YOU NEED TO MAKE CHANGES IF YOU DON’T INTEND US TO ALL DIE FOR THE MISSION.

BUTTERFLY: IT SEEMS WE NEED TO HAVE A DISCUSSION IN PERSON.

KOKOE: YOU KNOW I WOULD NEVER SAY ANYTHING IF I DIDN’T BELIEVE IN THE CAUSE. IN YOUR CAUSE.

BUTTERFLY: MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE. I’LL COME TO YOU.

These kids were fucking ridiculous.
After the cacophony of the kazooos, and the subsequent confiscation of every visible kazoo and Florida’s harmonica, the room devolved into an argument about Wyoming’s time distortion unit and what that meant to be able to time travel and the ethical ramifications of going back in time and fixing tragedies, and what kinds of changes would be ok?

And on and on and on, and it looked like they were having a good time until Delta jumped in and started throwing out potential changes, different types of time travel, and what sort of possibilities could occur, but not actually giving clear answers.

Little nerd was teaching the brats. Or maybe playing with them, since they seemed to understand the concepts well enough.

Niner rolled herself over to the couch where one of her personal favorites was sitting all by herself with her chin in her hands and her elbows on her knees, just staring at the others all having fun.

Volleyball watched Delta talk to the crowd and every second she stared at them her frown got deeper and more intense.

“You ok, V?”

She straightened up, turned her whole body toward Niner with a determined look on her face and smacked her fist into her palm.

“I’m gonna do it.”

“So what?”

“I’m gonna hit on Delta.”

Niner snorted.

“Oh my god, you’re not.”

“I am.

“Why?”

“Because he’s smart.”

“He’s an AI.”

“I’d bang an AI any day.”

Niner threw her hands into the air and let her head fall backwards because this? This was ridiculous! It was also why she was one of Niner’s favorites, but mostly it was ridiculous.

“He’s got nothing to bang!” She hissed a whisper, so no one would overhear them. Mostly everyone was enraptured with their own things at that point, but it was still probably not something Delta needed to hear about. Poor guy’d probably be so embarrassed. “I thought the point of talking to Delta was so that you weren’t doing sex stuff!”

Volleyball collapsed over the side of the couch and let out a pitiful whine as she kicked her legs.

“I am weak. Sexy, human, and weak.”

“I will agree with sexy and human, the weakness can be overcome.”
Volleyball shook her head and made a weird noodle armed motion.

“Too late, the engines are revving as we speak.”

“Gross.”

“Wanna know what’s gross? Boys who don’t wash their junk. Those guys deserve to get no play.”

Niner patted the back of Volleyball’s head.

“You are setting yourself up for disappointment, girlie girl.”

“Then I will be disappointed and defeated and I can move on with my life.”

She at least waited until the time travel conversation was derailed before she hopped off the couch and swaggered over to where York and Delta were sitting, now by themselves. It looked like the party had switched over to Maine as he arm wrestled six of them at once with Florida playing ref and making sure the kids didn’t accidentally get their hands slammed too hard.

The man was desperate to adopt them. It was only a matter of time before he had a base of his own, filled to the brim with board games and snacks and all the kids tucked away inside where they would be relatively safe.

Volleyball smiled wide, put her hands on her hips, and canted them slightly to the left. It was a pretty standard power pose that Niner wasn’t the least bit surprised Volleyball knew but was baffled as to why she was using it.

“Ok, Sexy.” Delta and York both turned their full attention to her, “I was promised some smart talking.”

It was…weird seeing the AI floating around without the power armor. Niner honestly didn’t know that was a thing that could happen, but if it was gonna happen, it made sense that it was here. The Director wouldn’t have bothered on the MoI, they were soldiers 24/7 there. Here, there was a pretty clear dividing line between work and play and they would naturally want to be out of armor for cuddle time.

And now Niner couldn’t help but wonder who Carolina was getting undressed and cuddling with for them to have enough knowledge to make these things.

York looked up at Volleyball with a weirded-out grin.

“I didn’t promise you anything, and it’s a little weird that you’re calling me sexy since I’m so low on your list.”

She waved her arms erratically and squawked like an offended crow.

“Not you! Gah, you are so conceited!”

York looked around himself then back at her.

“Ok, if you’re not talking to me, who are you talking to?”

Volleyball rolled her eyes and dropped cross legged to the floor.

“That incredibly attractive set of electronic impulses bouncing around in your brain. Delta, do you wanna hang out and talk about books?”
“Anywhere else, I’d have no idea if that was a come-on or not.”

“Do you have to translate for him, or am I just coming on too strong?”

Delta moved into her line of vision and hovered there.

“You are not coming on too strong. Your humor simply caught us off guard.”

Was she gonna actually hit on Delta?

Volleyball smiled and leaned forward just a little bit, and Niner saw Delta’s camera shift and zoom on her.

“Well, what can I say? My humor is pretty high on the list of things I get compliments on from outsiders. The highest, is my—”

“JESS!”

“THETA’S NOT HERE!”

Delta’s hologram flickered for a moment before soliding up again.

“I did not realize you were like this always.”

“Oh. Is…should I stop bothering you?”

“I am not bothered. I am simply learning about you.”

That…almost sounded like fondness.

“You are an interesting subject to learn about.”

Holy shit, was it working?

Volleyball had a whole-body wiggle that Niner was 90% sure was more ‘engine revving’ and 10% sure was pure, teen pleasure at being noticed.

Niner rolled herself closer, very, very slowly, and made sure to position herself so that she was not easily noticed, and picked up a rubix… dodecahedron? Weird, but whatever.

Volleyball grinned and started to say something, only to be cut off by York.

“You ok, bud? You’re processing a lot verbally.”

Niner twisted the weird puzzle and did her best not to throw it at York’s interrupting face.

York, damn it, what are you doing?! Stop interrupting the girl! She’s trying to make out with your friend! Stop cock blocking Delta!

“It seems to be a common technique on this planet, I thought I would attempt it.”

“Yeah, but you think at insane speeds compared to us. Isn’t this limiting?”

“Yes and no. Private Smosna, do you attempt to beguile everyone you meet, or are there specific criteria?”

She laughed and twirled a bright pink strand of hair between her fingers.
“Depends. Sometimes I flirt because I’m comfortable with someone, like Folami or Bitters, but there’s no interest. Sometimes I flirt to test people. Sometimes I flirt because it’s fun and it feels nice to know that I’m desirable. Sometimes I flirt because I’m interested in sex. A lot of times I’m flirting for sex. There are lots of reasons to have a good flirt!”

“I see.”

She frowned and put her chin in her palm.

“Is this weird for you? I can’t be the first person to hit on your gorgeous brain.”

“Well, actually-“


“Wow, someone’s feeling crabby.”

She leaned closer to Delta’s hologram and Niner saw his camera focus again. Points to Delta for not zeroing in on her chest like an organic guy probably would have (to be fair, it was a nice chest and very…present).

“Seriously, you’re the smart one, right? You give off that vibe.”

“You mean he looks like a nerd.”

Volleyball looked around the room at her fellow soldiers, then looked back at York.

“Is that a bad thing where you’re from? Here, smarmy jackasses get no play, it’s all about those brainy bits.”

“Well, it looks like I have the best of both worlds then, I’ve got my natural good looks and Delta.”

“Coasting on your smart friend doesn’t make you look cute. It makes you look like a loser.”

Delta shifted his projection in between the two of them and…moved his arms in a placating gesture. The pistol was gone.

Niner didn’t remember ever seeing Delta when he wasn’t standing almost perfectly still. It looked like he was doing more than just trying to mimic processing.

“York is not as bad as he seems, he is off at the moment, due to the crash and the sudden realization that the love of his life did not die several years ago. Please be kind to him.”

Volleyball melted and fluttered her eyelashes at him like something out of an old movie.

“Of course. I’m sorry, I’m all defensive and stuff, what with him and Carolina being a thing apparently.”

Folami growled.

“Smos, we don’t discuss relationships we are not in when parties are not here.”

Oh…oh shit.

It clicked.
Niner didn’t know who Carolina was fucking, but she was fucking someone, and that person meant a lot to the soldiers, enough that they were pissed at York for daring to be alive and ruin the relationship.

York turned to Volleyball with a deep frown on his face and waved a hand at her.

“Ok now, stop the train. Something’s been going on for a while. Is...I get that you’re all protective of Carolina, but I’m not trying to hurt her or cause problems for her.”

It didn’t sound like York made the connection though, which was a mixed bag.

Volleyball rolled her eyes at him and he smacked his hand against the side of the couch. She flinched a little, more surprised than anything else, but York immediately caught it and tucked his hands into his lap.

“You aren’t stupid,” he said gently, “You’ve seen more than anyone should in one lifetime, so I honestly thought you’d all get it. Haven’t any of you wanted someone you lost to just...appear one day while you were out walking? Haven’t you ever wished with everything you had for one more day with the people you love? What would you give up to have just a minute, an hour, a day, a second chance?”

He stood up and ruffled his hair a little.

“I get it, you’ve heard some story about how I abandoned the mission and abandoned her, but did you hear the part where I was trying to do the right thing by Alpha and by the people in the Project? Maybe you’ve heard that I’m kind of a dick, I’ll own that, I’m not ashamed to say that I’m not always the kind of guy I want to be. I’m an asshole, ok, I’m oblivious, and I’m not always nice and I don’t think things through all the way, and I’m not a great guy! I’m not even a good guy! There!

“But she’s alive. She’s alive and I’m alive and...I’m going to spend the rest of our lives together trying to make up for hurting I caused her, whether or not she decides to spend it with me.”

Volleyball’s whole face crumpled like a scone.

Fuck, less than two weeks and Niner really missed bakeries.

“Wha? Oh. Oh god. You’re...actually kind of sweet? That’s not ok! Someone, stop him!”

York threw his hands up in defense as Volleyball charged him and poked him in the chest.

“Hey, I’m very sweet! I’m a sweetheart!”

“Lies and deceit!”

“No! Facts and truths!”

“CHILDREN!” Niner hollered and wheeled over to them, “ENOUGH! York, you’re sweet when you feel like it, try to feel like it more often. Volleyball, yes, he’s a liar, but he’s not lying about Carolina. They are both hopeless losers when it comes to one another and feelings. Now split up and stop yelling, or so help me, someone’s getting run over!”
Kimball and Wash strode through the door and found Páez surrounded by soldiers, much in the way she operated with them. She waited and watched as he spun himself around to find people and hand out tasks. She’d have criticized it, if it didn’t look like it was working for him. Yes, he was spinning and putting most of the effort on himself, but he definitely seemed to have control of it.

He caught sight of them and jerked to a stop.

“General! Ok, everyone, please complete the tasks you’ve been assigned and then get some rest! The next shift is about to start!”

The room cleared surprisingly quickly and then it was just them and Páez, who let out a big sigh and took off his helmet. He had bags under his eyes, and looked like shit, but his grin was wide, and his eyes beamed with pride.

“Nice work.”

“I think I may be getting the hang of this, at least for the moment.”

He grimaced.

“Please don’t make me do that again for at least a day. That was brutal. Everything is so chaotic, I don’t understand how you’ve made it this far without breaking things constantly.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Kimball slipped off her helmet and smiled at Páez. He flopped down in the nearest chair and rubbed at his eyes.

“How did you sleep?”

She sat the helmet down on the desk and hopped up next to it.

“You know, the usual. Wailing, screaming, moans of the damned.”

“Like the dead, eh?”

“Mmm.”

He looked down at the floor for a moment, shuffled his feet, then looked up to meet her eye.

“I…heard about the attempt on your life. And the death of the soldier.”

Kimball’s whole body tightened up because of course something went to shit while she was sleeping. Of course, something went wrong. Something always goes wrong.

“Who died?”

“The soldier from Lugar. I am so sorry for, General Kimball.”

“What do you mean? He died? I…why are you sorry?”

She looked back to Wash, who was just…standing with his back to the wall. Was he even awake?

“What happened?”
“It seems he locked himself in his assigned room after your meeting and committed suicide. It was…quite…it was a lot.”

Kimball rubbed at her face.

Suicide.

“God.”

She closed her eyes.

Not good, not good, not good. She knew morale was low, knew that he was upset, but she didn’t think he was anywhere near that. She should have put him under watch. Should have done more.

And now she’d failed another one.

“I am so sorry for your loss, Lorenzo. Any one is too many.”

He frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Your soldier. I’m sorry. He seemed kind.”

“I…he…wasn’t one of mine?”

Kimball stared for a moment, looked at Wash again, then back to Páez, who’s expression was starting to move from sympathetic to nervous contemplation.

“He…what?”

“I…told you he was a Federal soldier?”

“He did.”

“But he…no, no he wasn’t one of ours.”

A cold feeling settled over his shoulders.

“You don’t think it was one of…”

He glanced around the room, nervous.

Washington looked at him as if he were crazy, well, he was certain that’s what Washington’s face looked like, considering the man hadn’t removed his helmet.

“You don’t think he was one of Butterfly’s people, do you?”

She slapped her hand down on the desk, hard.

“Absolutely not. It’s more likely that he was a pirate who realized he was never getting out. Don’t start with that Butterfly shit.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended, I’m just…look, I’m not interested in muddying the waters of fact with fairy tales and superstitious nonsense. Butterfly’s people are Chorus bound angels, Butterfly is secretly an
assassin, Butterfly’s people kidnap and eat babies.”

“That one might be true, not the cannibalism but the kidnapping. There are pretty clear signs that Butterfly’s menagerie is directly related to disappearances around the planet.”

Páez frowned.

“Do you think…”

He let out a sigh.

“I don’t suppose you believe the Menagerie is really active, do you?”

Kimball shrugged.

“I doubt it would be the original members if it was. They’d have to be in their forties at least.”

Páez wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head a little.

“I find the idea of them still being active horrifying. If they are truly alive, why would they kill civilians? Why wouldn’t they have tried to stop the war after all those who started it in the first place were dead? None of it makes sense unless they are willingly part of the bloodshed.”

Vanessa looked at the desk and idly ran her fingers across the countertop.

This was a…rather delicate conversation, wasn’t it?

“You know, I used to memorize different parts of their journals. When things were especially dark, I would recite my favorite passages over and over again.”

“That doesn’t remotely surprise me, knowing what I know about you.”

He stared down at the floor again.

“Truth be told, I did the same things while I was sequestered away. The journals were an interesting perspective into the war. I imagine our interpretations would be quite different on several key issues, but…perhaps we’d agree more than you expect.”

She tried to smile.

“I doubt it, but that’s not on you. I’m a bitter woman, after all.”

An alert sounded at the door, startling all three of them into action. Kimball and Páez both threw their helmets back on, and Wash moved to a more defensible position.

Kimball activated the door speakers.

“Yes?”

“General Kimball?”

It was Silvers.

“We have a group of soldiers here who need to see you right away.”

She motioned for Wash to open the door and there was…
“Holy shit.”

“Hey, Kim.”

“Mo? God, it’s been years. Give me just a second, ok? Thank you for bringing them here, Doctor, why don’t you get back to what you were doing?”

Silvers rushed off without a word, likely scared out of her mind, and rightly so.

“We need to debrief, this is my squad that lost one of their soldiers in the field. Páez, why don’t you head off to bed? We’ll figure out saving the day later.”

He sputtered for a moment.

“Oh, um, right. Yes, of course.”

He pulled a chip out of his datapad and placed it on the desk.

Kimball looked to Wash.

“Well you escort Lorenzo to his quarters? After everything that’s happened, we should be a little more…concerned about our security.”

“Of course, General.”

Páez stood and made his way to the door.

“I am…I am very sorry for your loss.”

They left, and Kimball ushered the barely standing soldiers into the room. Mo snorted, clearly unimpressed.

“Who the fuck was that?”

“The new guy.”

Mo whistled and they all tugged off their helmets. His brand was completely covered by his full necked body suit, but she could see where it would lay.

She didn’t bother offering them something to clean up. Mo was the kind of man who enjoyed flaking blood everywhere he went, and his team would be the same. He claimed it was for intimidation purposes, but Kimball always felt it was his way of marking his territory.

Like pissing on the floors.

“Wow. That’s…something. You sure you don’t wanna be queen of the planet? Because that’s how you get to be queen of the planet.”

“Shut up, we both know that’s a horrible idea, and you’re deflecting. I’m so sorry about Varsity.”

“It is our right and our privilege to die for Chorus. It’s what we signed up for.”

“None of us signed up for this, you know that better than anyone, farm boy.”

He snorted and shoved one of his soldiers into a chair. The others found their own seats around the room and settled in silently.
One of the soldiers dropped to the floor.

“You hurt?”

“Just my heart.”

Kimball made a note of their marks. She’d be checking in on all of them.

“We have doctors for that. You get a week to grieve in your own way, and then you’re seeing a therapist. All of you, no questions, no fighting.”

Mo snorted, but nodded in agreement.

“Look at who’s all grown up now. Our Little Bitch is a big bad wolf now.”

“Eat me, Mo.”

“Pretty sure your new girlfriend’d shoot my dick off if I tried.”

Kimball nearly fell off the desk.

“You…you’ve heard about that? How?”

“You’re joking, right? Everyone in the whole army knew the day it happened. After that shit Ger and Iya pulled on you—“

She scowled.

“They didn’t pull anything, it was my choice.”

“Sure, it was.”

“That’s not the point of this.”

Mo swaggered over and tried to throw an arm around her shoulder. She managed to duck underneath him and slide off the desk, not interested in whatever game he was playing.

Best-case scenario with a War Dog like Mo? He had blood that was still tacky on him and wanted to get it on her. Worst-case scenario, this was an assassination attempt and she’d have a knife through her armor plates before she could blink.

If that was a plan, he and all his people would learn pretty quickly that she’d grown into her teeth.

“Nah, but after what they did, you went on a four-year dry spell. I wanted to ask you if your ferret faced second was fucking you on the side or something.”

Kimball crossed her arms and put the desk in between them.

“That’s…kinda not good now, but it was funny at the time.”

“Right.”

“You were, weren’t you?”

“God, no! No! We were not! Jesus. No, after what happened with…with Charlotte, I wasn’t really interested in that anymore, and he was definitely not my type, even before I knew about the genocide bullshit.”
“What does Charlotte have to do with your sex life?”

Kimball didn’t even have to dignify that one with a response; he knew exactly what Charlotte had to do with her sex life.

“Look, the point is, as soon as it got out that you’d broken the curse and started banging the smoking redhead with thighs of steel-“

“What makes you think you’re allowed to talk about her thighs?”

“We knew the world was looking up.”

He grinned for a moment, then his hands fell to his sides. He shook them out.

“Now though. Shit, Kim…”

Kimball pulled Mo in by the neck and pressed their foreheads together.

“I’m sorry, Mo. I’m so sorry. I really thought he was ready.”

He let out a soft huff and pulled back.

“He was ready, he was more than ready. He did good, you’d’ve been proud. Got his tiny ass in and out of that ship, no problems, pulled the logs, he found out fucking Hargrove is on the planet-“

“Wait, what?!”

“His escape pod couldn’t break free, he got pulled back down to Chorus and he’s not going anywhere now that we’ve got control of the tractor beams. We think he’s still got guards on him, but they’re not gonna be any better equipped than we are. We can catch this asshole.”

Her stomach churned.

“We…we could have Hargrove. We could bring that motherfucker to justice.”

Her hands shook.

“For Varsity.”

Her knees went weak.

“For Charlotte.”

She knew there was a reason she was still alive, why she was still there taking up space and wasting perfectly good recourses.

“For…for everyone.”

He was alive.

“For us.”

And she was going to be there to bring him down.

“He also found this.”

Mo slipped a pack off his shoulders and handed it over to Kimball.
“What is it?”

He shrugged and moved over to the soldier he’d knocked into the chair.

“No clue. He had it when he came off the ship. Said it was for your eyes only. Whatever it is, it’s heavy as shit.”

“And you listened?”

“I told you, he was good. I trusted him.”

The soldier tried to stand up, only to be knocked right back into the seat and held down by his shoulders.

“Stay. Speak.”

“We found a lot of stuff on Hargrove’s ship, some of it is gonna be really useful! The man had TONS of stuff stuffed away, the man’s like a hoarder, it’s kind of weird. We’ve got people out there still, pulling it and processing, it’s going to take time, but it’s heavily guarded, so we’re not… we weren’t worried about the risk.”

Kimball didn’t do them the disgrace of putting the bag down. Their friend had died for its contents, and they’d nearly died bringing them home.

She slipped the bag onto her own shoulders.

“We will take every single thing from that ship, strip it down, and put it to use to protect us.”

The soldiers all stared up at her, still as stone, and waited.

“Why don’t you lot get a shower and some rest. I’ll have food sent to you.”

Mo leaned against the desk with his arms crossed and poked at the datachip Páez left behind.

“What, you don’t want us around your precious puppies?”

Kimball snatched the chip from the desk and stuck it into a locking drawer with a glare. Asshole knew he wasn’t supposed to be touching, but he just had to push.

“Shit’s up in the air enough without your ugly mug scaring people, Mo. They’re not used to the level of shit you and yours like to sling.”

“You baby them too much.”

The War Dogs were fighters, some of the last real fighters who’d grown up in the early days. There weren’t many left, maybe three dozen total, because they fought hard and fast and dirty and sometimes that meant you swam in the shit and choked on it.

She knew they thought she’d gone soft. Sitting in an office, issuing commands, was no place for a hardened fighter.

Kimball hadn’t expected to be appointed general any more than they had. That didn’t mean that she wasn’t fully prepared to kick their asses for acting like entitled shitheels.

“These people are soldiers, they’ve fought and bled and lost and died just as much as any of us. Just because I don’t let them act like assholes doesn’t mean they aren’t capable. A gnashwolf pup
can eat a full-grown dog in under a minute and not even need to spit out the bones, I hope you’ll remember that.”

He snorted and shoved her shoulder.

“Fuck you, Kim. Guys, get out, grab someone with shiny armor and make them find you a room. You want a green.”

She rolled her eyes.

There he was, trying to exert his dominance again. He really took the dog metaphors too seriously.

“No, you want a yellow. That’s organization. You grab a green, you’re messing with the wrong department, and for the love of god, if someone with purple markers comes over to you, they’re medical. Cooperate or I will be very unhappy.”

“You heard the boss. Out.”

The soldiers gathered themselves up and moved to the door.

The one who collapsed turned to Kimball and pointed at the strap of the bag.

“If it’s important, you’ll let us know?”

“If it’s important.”

“We should know why he died.”

Kimball pulled the strap against her chest.

“He didn’t die for this, or for you to be in pain and confused. We’ll figure out who killed him, and why.”

Epsilon projected himself at shoulder height and Carolina’s chest finally loosened. Every time the bitchy AI left her armor and went into the Chorus infrastructure, she panicked a little. There wasn’t much of Chorus that was fully stable, including the pathways Epsilon had to traverse in order to find things, and every time he left her she feared he wouldn’t make it back.

“Epsilon? What just happened?”

Judging by the panicked buzz in the back of her brain, something had gone wrong.

“Just had a quick chat with Santa. How he managed to get here with the damage, I have no idea, but I found something in here that he does not want me touching. I can grab it, I’ve got it locked down, but…he flipped when I found it.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t say.”

Izzy circled Carolina and Epsilon, dancing over blood spatter surprisingly well as she moved, and
tapped at her chin thoughtfully.

“Interesting. Well, none the less, we do what we must. Transfer it please, so we can get out of here! This is a little off the beaten path for us, and there are babies waiting to be found and counted!”

Carolina grasped Izzy’s arm to stop the circling.

“Are we sure this is a good idea? If Santa doesn’t want us to, he’s probably got a good reason.”

“Or,” Izzy clapped her own hand against Carolina’s arm, “maybe he’s a paranoid, old, alien AI who’s spent too much time alone and relying on himself and not enough on trusting people.”

“Izzy.”

“She’s not wrong,” Epsilon piped up, clearly ignoring Carolina’s glare in favor of throwing support in for the woman that he claimed to be so freaked out by, “I’m just saying, you know people treat him like he’s this all knowing all powerful AI god, but he’s not. He’s an AI, even AI are capable of making mistakes.”

“Even you?” Carolina smirked.

“Well, not me.”

Carolina let go of Izzy, who backed up and stretched her right arm over her head.

“I understand and note your protests, Agent, but we need to know what’s happening, and this is probably going to be our best chance before Santa does something like delete the content to keep us from seeing it. Epsilon, please continue harvesting the data. See if you can find anything interesting while you’re in there, but please be careful with yourself. I want our worst-case scenario to be that we get it back to base and look at it there instead of here.”

Izzy twitched and brought her hand to the right side of her head.

“And let’s try to be quick about it, I just got an alert from home! Your boys are getting antsy, so Carmichael is bringing them out. We’re meeting about five miles away from here, so we’ve got a little moving to do if we want to get there before they do!”

“You don’t want them here?”

“Do you want those sensitive souls to have to play hopscotch through the intestines?”

Carolina’s shoulders drooped.

“Ok, ok. Epsilon, get ready to transfer.”

“Saving. Two minutes.”

Izzy dropped her helmet to the ground and pulled out a water ration. She wiggled it at Carolina with a large, toothy grin.

“Hydrate, Agent! Water is your friend!”

“I don’t need it.”

“You never know when you’ll have the chance again. Drink!”
Carolina looked down at the body.

“Drink it quick and put your helmet back on. Body or not, you need water.”

Izzy passed Carolina a water ration and downed her own in a few quick gulps. She tossed her head back and Carolina frowned at the weird twisting image on the woman’s neck. If she’d blinked, she might have missed it.

“Is that an elephant on your neck?”

Izzy wiped at her mouth with a grin.

“Good eye! Most people don’t see it! I’m a big fan of elephants; it’s so sad we don’t have them on Chorus. Strength, power, trunk up for luck!”

“I like it. It’s pretty.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve always felt an affinity with them. What about you? Any fun pictures hiding under that suit of yours?”

Carolina couldn’t help her eyebrows raising up.

“That’s…really not important because you’re never going to see them.”

Izzy hummed and spun slowly on her heel.

“Speaking of people who get to see you naked, Agent…you and Kim?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t suppose that’s going to be changing anytime soon?”

Carolina shifted from foot to foot.

Dear god, how could two minutes manage to feel like a lifetime?

She did not want to have this conversation yet, not without talking to Vanessa first. Things were too…they needed to talk. Vanessa was smart and she was clever and good at finding solutions when people were willing to work with her. She’d have a solution to all of this before Carolina could get all the words out.

“Ah, no. I don’t think so? I mean…I hope not. I don’t know, things are really complicated right now, what with people suddenly appearing and the planet in upheaval. At the very least, if things do change, I don’t want them to hurt her.”

Izzy pumped her fists into the air, one right after the other.

Right, left, right, left.

Please for the love of all things holy, Izzy, don’t step on the squishy bits. They already reek and Carolina did not want an extra layer of nightmare fuel.

“Good. Because now comes the unfortunate portion of our friendship where I have to throw away some of my points to give you a shovel talk.”

Carolina snorted.
“Well, you did say it was obligatory.”

Izzy patted Carolina’s shoulder and handed her, her helmet.

“I’m so glad you’re pragmatic about it! Most people get really mad, but it’s not about them! It’s a general, rather than a specific concern.”

Carolina leaned against the wall.

“Lay it on me.”

“Should you unintentionally harm my Kim with callous actions, we’ll have a long talk, and you will be given a chance to fix it. Should you harm her with intent, we’ll treat you the way the Federal army treats their traitors rather than New Republic rules. You will find yourself waking up one day in a very dark room with no doors and air vents too small to fit through. Every day, someone will lower supplies to you, and you’ll have the ability to shove your waste out the floor hole. You will certainly be miserable, but the level of misery will be entirely up to you.”

Izzy strapped her own helmet back on and Carolina couldn’t look at her to determine if she was joking or not.

“They say a person can live for years like that, I don’t particularly want to test it. Seems like a waste of supplies.”

Carolina felt her stomach turn, and it wasn’t from the smell.

“You’ve…never had to do it before?”

“No, Kim tries really hard to keep breakups amicable. Please don’t put yourself into a position where I have to make good on that threat. I’ll do it, but I won’t enjoy it.”

Carolina shivered.

-We’re good to go. Hey…what’s going on? Carolina, what’s wrong?-  

I’m fine.

Wash didn’t know what he was walking in to when he got back to Kimball’s office. The guards on the door looked nervous as they waved him in.

It was just Kimball and one of the new soldiers in the room. She’d taken off her helmet and he’d sat down on the floor, stripped his armor off down to his waist, and had a cleaning cloth in one hand as he scrubbed at an arm guard. The faint smell of old blood hung in the air.

Kimball smiled up at Wash, relief clear on her face, and waved him in.

“Hey. Welcome back. Everything go according to plan?”

“I got him to his room, checked it for assassins, and left. Did you expect me to read him a bedtime story, too?”
“Considering you tucked me in and read to me last night, it only seems fair.”

The soldier with bloody armor crossed his arms and glared low and angry.

“Since when are you fucking dudes again? I thought you were screwing the red head. Who the fuck are you?”

“Mo, stop it. This is Agent Washington, I just told you he was coming back.”

The man’s posture immediately dropped into a more relaxed state as he grinned and jumped to his feet.

“Ah, dude, sorry. Didn’t recognize the armor. We’re a little jumpy around here, what with my apprentice getting his ass blown up.”

He held his closed fist into the air at chest level.

“Bump it.”

Wash blinked slowly but bumped his knuckles against the other man’s. Mo made a low explosion noise as he pulled his hand back, and clapped Wash on his shoulder.

“Mad respect, man. Training up Kimmy and her puppies ain’t an easy gig.”

Kimball dropped her head into her hands.

“Jesus, Mo.”

“Shush, Little Bitch, the big dogs are talking.”

The soldier grinned at Wash harder, like he was proud of himself for talking to Kimball the way he was. Like they were sharing a joke. Like he thought Wash would agree with him treating the General, and his friend, like she was an annoyance. An irritant to be brushed off and shut down and made silent.

Kimball slammed her hands on the desk in front of her and stood up, irritation clear on her face as she snarled at him.

“Did you just shush me? I run this base! I run this army! I run half the planet! You wanna shush me? You can do it while you’re outside shoveling shit!”

It was unacceptable.

“Yap, yap, yap, Little Bitch. When you-“

The soldier froze.

Probably a good thing, since Wash had sharpened his knife the day after they took down the apocalypse tower.

“Talk to her like that again, and this knife will go directly into your windpipe.”

It was very sharp.

“Wash,” Kimball’s voice was low and soft, “Put the knife away.”
Mo tried to pull back, but Wash grabbed Mo’s shoulder with his free hand and held him still. Wash slipped the knife under the Kevlar and pressed it a little harder, just enough to let him know exactly how sharp it was.

“Wash, please stop. That’s my friend.”

Mo held up his hands.

“Odds?”

“867:1, Mo. Don’t do it.”

“That’s some pretty awesome odds.”

“Mo, you’re the one.”

“Oh. Shit.”

Kimball rounded the desk slowly, her hands up, like she thought he saw her as a threat instead of a friend to protect. Like she thought he would go after her if she didn’t move just right.

He wanted to be offended, but he had just had a long series of dissociative episodes over a very short period of time.

“Wash, he’s just being an asshole. He’s not gonna act like that outside this room.”

Wash let go of Mo, shoved him back a little, and slipped his knife back into its holster.

“You don’t need ‘friends’ giving you that kind of attitude, Kimball. You’ve been instrumental in saving this planet, and you’re the leader of the army he serves. He’d do well to remember that the next time he thinks he can insult you.”

Mo rubbed his neck and grimaced.

“Shit. I guess when you’ve got guard dogs like that, you can afford to let yourself go a little, huh, Kim?”

She stepped in between them with Wash at her back and crossed her arms.

“Agent Washington is not my guard dog, he’s a friend. He’s Boc, and he’s off limits. Please do not antagonize my people while you’re on my base, Mo.”

“Planning to kick me out so soon?”

“With behavior like this? You’re lucky I don’t just let him stab you to teach you a lesson.”

“Harsh.”

“No one would blame me with a shit attitude like yours.”

Mo stared at her straight on for a moment before he dipped his head and grinned again, this time a little less like a smarmy jackass and a little more like a proud parent.

“Maybe you have grown up a little bit. I’m proud.”

“Go to bed before you say something stupid. I let you clean up your own blood in here, but I’m not
interested in any more being spilled. Are we clear?"

He picked up his helmet and stuck it on, ignoring the other armor bits scattered around the space.

“Gotcha, Boss. Go and play nice with the puppies or I get to live on the streets. Get myself some booze, drugs, food, sex, sleep, and mourn like a soldier.”

She picked up an arm guard and slapped it into Mo’s chest.

“Please don’t make coercive statements like that.”

“Kim, if they didn’t want it, they’d cut my dick off. It’s a thing. We’re good.”

Wash put himself slightly between Kimball and Mo. There was…something about the way he said it that made Wash want to cut the man’s dick off himself.

“You scare me sometimes.”

“Nighty night, pup. Put a leash on your guard dog. You may’ve grown into your teeth, but that boy still needs a few good rounds of training.”

Mo waved a hand at her idly as he swaggered out the door.

Kimball crossed her arms and glared at Wash.

“What. The fuck. Was that?”

Wash did his best to shrug nonchalantly.

“I don’t trust that guy.”

“He’s a War Dog, Wash, a real one. Not like me, or like Silvers, a born and bred fighting machine. We have a lot of respect for the work they’ve done for us and continue to do. Thanks to him and his, most of our soldiers have never had to get their hands dirtier than the battlefield deems necessary. He’s…different, but there’s a place for everyone here, even those of us who’re too broken for the rest of the world.”

“He called you a bitch.”

She smiled, small and tired and a little bit frustrated.

“Term of endearment. I was the runt of the litter, so to speak. The youngest that ran with the big dogs, and they will use god damned dog related phrasing for everything. It’s all bitches and packs and leashes and collars and just…”

She sighed and scrubbed at her face.

“I don’t like it either, and I’ll talk to him about it. It’s not exactly the right type of phrasing to encourage respect from the people who don’t know us very well. Can I hug you, or are you too tense?”

“ Probably not a good idea right now, but we can pin it for later.”

She nodded.

“Thank you, for looking out for me.”
“Of course.”

Kimball circled back around the desk with a graceful glide that Wash wasn’t used to her using around him and pulled up half a dozen screens around the room with a firm frown on her face.

“We need to start getting things back to normal. I’d like at least a semblance of control over the planet at this point. I’m not liking all the rumors we’re getting hit with. I want us on firmer footing.”

“Rumors?”


“Cults of soldiers spewing utterances from ancient texts and people with animal code names?”

She looked startled.

“What?”

“ Took me a while to figure out what was going on, but I’m pretty sure I’ve got a handle now. Someone’s using the Menagerie Journals as a cover for whatever elicit acts they’re doing on Chorus, taking code names right out of the book, and using Chorus’s own tactics against the natives. They’re scaring the hell out of the soldiers, terrorizing them with images of shady underground spy organizations, and making people feel like they have to pledge loyalties in the halls using antiquated phrasing to prove that they’re not the bad guys. I got my first taste of that part last night while you were with Doctor Loomaua.

She looked wide eyed and horrified.

“Wash,” Kimball pointed to the chair across from her, “Sit down and tell me everything you think you know.”
Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.

Can you see me?

Can you hear me?

I’m pretty sure you can hear me.

What are you doing?

Why are you just sitting there
I’m pretty sure you can hear me.
What are you doing?
Why are you just sitting there staring at me?
Are you ignoring me?
Seriously, what are you doing?
Typing on that keyboard, staring at that

[ERROR OCCURRED]
[TRANSLATION FAILED]
[RESTART TRANSLATION]
[TRANSLATION IN PROCESS – 85%]

Hi there. Well, this is unexpected.
Can you see me?
Can you hear me?
I’m pretty sure you can hear me.
What are you doing?
Why are you just sitting there staring at me?
Are you ignoring me?
Seriously, what are you doing?
Typing on that keyboard, staring at that screen.
Do you think that’s going to help?
You know that’s not going to fix anything.
Come on, try and be a little smarter than that.
Ignoring me won’t make me go away.
It won’t make me stop.
Did you think this was over?
We both know that nothing really ends.
We both know that nothing really dies.
Sarge nearly howled when they came across Carolina and the Master Sargent standing at the side of the path like they knew the warthogs were coming for them.

Then again, they might have, considering that sneaky little guy, Carmichael, had somehow weaseled his way into riding in the second Warthog with Donut instead of the Reds going off to find their wayward girl on their own.

“CAROLINA!” Sarge bellowed out.

She didn’t flinch but did take a step backwards.

While Sarge couldn’t hear her mutter under her breath as she waved at them, he knew she did it, because her glowing little brother on her shoulder snickered.

“Hey Sarge!”

Grif rolled right up to the two women, barely stopping in time to avoid hitting them. Sarge jumped out of the warthog and barreled toward Carolina with a curse on his lips.

“Don’t you sass me, little missy! What were you thinkin’ leavin’ us behind like that an’ goin’ off with the lady that likes to smash things! What if she’d left ‘cha in the trees somewhere with her creepy ass soldiers?!”

Carolina shifted nervously and ducked her shoulders a little (and what was she doing, ducking her shoulders like she thought he was gonna hit her or ground her or something?).

“It’s fine, Sarge. Izzy and I have come to an understanding. I don’t break Vanessa’s heart, and she doesn’t murder me. It’s all good. We’re good, and more to the point, we have something on the weird messages.”

Sarge sputtered.

“M-mu-murder?! GRIF, WHERE IS MAH SHOTGUN?! SHE’S GOT NO RIGHTS TO BE THREATENIN’ YA!”

Carolina swiveled around Sarge and hopped into the nearest warthog.

“Drive now, yell later, we have missing people to find.”

She pulled a dirty doll out of her pocket.

“Missing kids. You can yell at me once they’re all home safe, ok? I won’t even tune you out this time.”
Izzy danced around Sarge too and jumped into Donut’s warthog.

“Carmichael! Good to see you’re not dead! Is your skin still attached?”

“Yes, ma’am. No one has decided to use it as a dress yet.”

“Fantastic! Sarge, hurry up! Come on, now. We’ve picked up a trail and we need to catch up to the trucks so we can get these babies to safety! Let’s boogie while we’re still healthy!”

Sarge glared as mightily as he could at the devil woman who thought she could get away with threatening Carolina. She must’ve gotten the message because she giggled and waggled her fingers at him.

The warthogs roared back to life and sped down the path.

“Sarge,” Grif groaned, “Please don’t make us listen to you hit on her.”

“Ah would never sully the glorious Red Army by flirtin’ with the enemy!”

“The enemy?” Simmons queried.

“That woman threaten’d Carolina! She’s a dirty Blue if I’ve ever seen one in mah whole life!”

“Ok, but we’re working with the Blues now.”

“She’s not a Chorus Blue, she’s a regular Blue! The kind of Blue we shoot with a shotgun er blow up with a grenade! Th’ kinda Blue no one misses! And ye’d best not miss when ya shoot her!”

Simmons let out a sigh of agreement.

“Of course, Sir.”

Wash walked down the hallway and glanced through the wide, bold windows. The soldiers on the other side hadn’t realized he was there or who he was yet. Wash could see the Chorus solders dance around the room, happy and eager, like little jumping frogs or puppies playing.

It would have warmed Wash’s heart if there wasn’t a pack of wolves hidden in the mix.

He…should probably knock off the dog/wolf metaphors now that he was aware that there was an actual, legitimate military subset on Chorus that used the terminology.

The soldiers guarding the doorway startled when he rounded the corner. They clearly hadn’t expected anyone, based on their relaxed postures and the fact that they’d been playing around on a datapad instead of guarding the mass murderers from outer space…which was an almost decent name for a C-list horror movie. He’d have to bring it up with Sadhana when the soldier was awake enough for visitors.

They’d probably love it.

Wash could already imagine the screenplay.
“Agent Washington?”

“What are you doing here?”

Wash nodded to the door.

“The Chorus soldiers are cleared to leave, and you two aren’t keeping up with your jobs.”

The one on the right, Lackley if Wash remembered correctly, shuffled nervously even as he straightened to attention.

“Just following orders, Sir. Folami messaged us that we were making the Freelancers nervous, so we’ve got the guards scattered a little and we’re trying to be as chill as we can.”

Wash tried to keep the frustration out of his voice. This was why he’d wanted them in chains with armed guards instead of roaming free with the Chorus soldiers. They’d already managed to get North out of quarantine, and they’d managed to worm their way into the incredibly vulnerable and naïve hearts of the Chorus soldiers.

“Not guarding them properly is a surefire way for them to break out and cause chaos. I expect you to adjust this according to the level of threat these people pose to the health and safety of every person on this planet. Need I remind you, you are housing The Meta in there?”

The soldiers nodded apprehensively, moved out of the way, and let Wash into the room.

He stood in the open doorway and waited for the reactions.

Palomo noticed him first and was on his feet and running before Jensen, who was currently using his lap as a footstool, could blink.

“Agent Washington!”

After that, it was a flood of squealing, chirping, young people all clamored against his armor. Marconi and Yacavone attached themselves to his waist as Smosna gripped his wrist and jumped up and down. Andersmith had Folami on his back for some reason Wash didn’t want to try to interpret, and Palomo managed to tuck himself behind Wash and pressed their backs together.

“Alright, alright,” he couldn’t hold back a laugh, “Calm down, everyone. This is getting out of hand.”

“What are you doing here, shir? Thish ish quarantin!”

“Yeah, it is. Everyone, please stand up and make your way to decontamination. The doctors say you’re clear, so you’re out of here.”

The Chorus kids all jerked to an eerie stop.

“But…”

Folami shook her head.

“We have at least two more days before we’re in the clear, don’t we?”

Wash shook his head.

“Medical has gone over the blood tests with a fine-toothed comb and they’re certain that you’re not
carrying anything catching. You’re not likely to catch anything from this group that you wouldn’t
have caught from the pirates and mercs. You’re good to go.”

She scowled.

“That…seems unlikely. We can’t have the same immunities as them, we’ve been so isolated.”

“You were exposed to the majority of the scary germs when the first round of assholes arrived.”

Habisch wound herself around Wash’s arm that Smosna had kidnapped for her own and pressed
her head into his shoulder.

“Oh, well that’s good. No one wants the black death!”

“What?”

The kids chirped and burst into song in that startling way of theirs that was surprisingly
comforting.

“SOON EVERYTHING THAT’S DANGLING
WON’T BE ANY GOOD FOR DINGLING!
IT’S THE BLACK DEATH
AND IT’S COMING FOR YOU!”

He couldn’t help but be relieved. They were ok, or they wouldn’t be singing showtunes. Showtunes
were comfort and pleasure, not fear.

“You guys have a song for everything, don’t you?”

Smosna squeezed his wrist and flapped her free arm wildly, only narrowly missing Marconi’s face
as she flailed.

“Yep!”

“Head down the hall for your final decontamination and if all checks out, the medical team will
send you back to your rooms so you can eat, sleep, and check your updated schedules.”

The soldiers, to their credit, didn’t protest leaving their things behind as they filed out of the room.

The Meta started to move away from the couches and toward Wash.

“Not. You. Freelancers stay put.”

“Sir, is everything ok?”

“We’re fine, Private Garza. Go on. I know you’ve got classes to catch up on.”

Once the soldiers cleared out, Wash shut the door and crossed his arms over his chest. He’s spent
the majority of the night trying to figure out…this mess. What to say, where to start, which rules to
lay out and which to leave for Kimball and Páez.

Confronted with so many familiar faces he couldn’t remember any of his prepared words.

“You must feel really damned proud of yourselves.”
Florida beamed and threw his arms open wide.

“I do, actually! Your kids are tough nuts to crack!”

“Well, you won’t be ‘cracking’ anyone else. You still have some time in quarantine, at least until the inoculations filter your system and keep you from catching a bug. The germs on Chorus are pretty lethal if you get hit with the wrong ones, better to get your shots now.”

Wyoming grunted the way he used to do when someone used the last of the loose-leaf tea in the Mother of Invention’s cafeteria and didn’t put more by the kettle.

“So, I take it we’re stuck in quarantine, yes?”

“Until we’re sure that you won’t kill anyone or start shooting blood from your eyes.”

“I am not entirely comfortable being kept in a cell, old chap.”

Gamma and Delta hovered over Wyoming and York’s shoulders, and it took everything in Wash’s brain to ignore them. They were just projections. Just projections. The tech savvy soldiers had just built projectors, so the AI could…coexist. They were real.

Not hallucinations.

“No, I expect you wouldn’t be excited about that, but there’s not really a whole lot to be done for the situation. Honestly, if I’d had it my way, you wouldn’t be here at all.”

Niner grinned.

“Well, thank you for that.”

Wash crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

“If I’d had it my way we would have shot each and every one of you in the head the moment the truck arrived on site, but for some reason, the powers that be want you alive and in relative comfort.”

Her smile, and the disgustingly hopeful smiles on all the Freelancer’s faces went with it. Only The Meta looked at Wash as if he understood what was happening. Delta projected as close as he could to Wash without his image completely distorting.

“Alpha?”

“No, this one’s purely Washington. I’m clear headed and fully cognizant of what I’m saying. You people have no idea the kind of trouble you’ve heaped on this planet. These people don’t deserve whatever it is you planned to do to them before you crashed. Why you didn’t all just stay dead, I don’t know, and I don’t care. All I care about is keeping you as far away from them as possible.”

“Wash,” York said in that York way of his, “we came here for-“

“If you say you came here for me, I will personally pull my gun and shoot you between the eyes right now.”

York threw his hands in the air, eyes wide and afraid.

Afraid.
Afraid.

York was afraid.

Afraid.

Agent York, who helped Tex bring down the ship while Wash could hardly move, was afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid of him.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

All of them were afraid of him.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.
Afraid of the monster wearing their friend’s skin.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

Afraid.

But not the monster they’d come with.

Afraid.

They weren’t the only ones who were afraid.

“Fuck,” York said, soft and worried, and why was he (afraid, afraid, afraid) worried about Wash? Wash wasn’t the one who abandoned him. Wash didn’t murder him. Wash apparently didn’t even murder South, “Ok, Wash, ok. We’re chill, alright? Not saying any more words.”

“You all don’t get to pretend for even a second that this insane mission of yours wasn’t out of some misplaced guilt or a scam, so you could pretend to be the fucking heroes instead of accepting the truth.”

Florida lost his top mask, the happy, cheerful face he wore for all the people outside of Alpha squad. Wash was creeped out by the face underneath, but he liked it better. It was more genuine.

“What truth is that, precious? That we’re all monsters?”

“You’re not monsters, well, except you Florida, you and Wyoming are both sadists and serial killers, sanctioned by the government or not. The rest of you are just blind morons looking to feel good about yourselves after all the shit you’ve done.”

Niner growled.

“Fuck you and your sanctimonious bullshit, Wash! We came here because we saw a distress signal! We came because someone called out for help, and fuck if we didn’t hope we’d find you alive. Jesus, you are such an ASS!”

“I’m not letting you twist those kids up any more than you already have. I’m not letting you pour poison in anyone’s ears. I don’t care where you end up after this, but you are going to stay far away from my soldiers.”

“Wash,” York’s voice took on a pleading lilt that automatically set Wash’s teeth on edge.

“No. You don’t get to show up here, after the carnage, after the devastation, after the loss and suffering and heartbreak, and pretend that you’re the heroes these people need. You are outdated. You are no longer valuable or valid. You’re old soldiers from a bygone era and they do not need you.”

“Well then, old friend,” Wyoming stood up and rested his hands on Florida’s shoulders, “What does that make you?”

“Someone who isn’t looking to convert these kids into casualty markers.”

Niner rolled right up to Wash, angry, and punched his stomach.
It didn’t do anything, he was wearing armor and she didn’t have anything but a pair of gloves to prevent tearing up her hands, but it…

Rocked him, a little.

“Washington, shut the fuck up. Forget them for a moment and forget that you’re pissed at us for being fucking human and scared and trying to survive without considering your feelings before we moved, do you really think I’m here to kill kids? Seriously?”

“I don’t care who you were, I don’t know you. I don’t know any of you beyond your deeds. None of you are who you said you were, or who you portrayed yourselves as, and honestly, I just don’t fucking care. I don’t have the energy to care. I don’t have the time, or the patience.”

“You…you really hate us.”

“Hate implies that I care on some level, but aside from the amount of damage you can do? I really don’t think about you in any meaningful fashion. You don’t mean anything to me anymore. You haven’t in a very long time.”

“You…”

Niner sputtered.

“You…”

Her face twisted with rage.

“You asshole.”

“I’m the asshole? I went to prison, Niner.”

“You think you’re the only one?! Jesus, Washington, what do you think happened to the rest of us?! We all got sent to prison! Fucking PRICE got sent to a prison planet, never to be seen again! The only reason they didn’t leave me in a cell to rot for the rest of my days is because I happened to have some good dirt, and I was only able to use it after you made your deal with the devil and left the rest of the living members of The Project to ROT! YOU abandoned US just as much as we abandoned you! You’re not innocent here!”

“No one survived, Niner.”

“Wash,” Niner said in her most patient ‘I’m fucking done with your stupid ass’ voice that was normally reserved for South, “This room is full of people you apparently thought were dead. If you didn’t realize I was alive and trying to get us out after Recovery got shut down, how many people who weren’t on Alpha squad do you think got swept up and shoved under the rug? How many were shoved into cells? You’re always so focused on what’s directly in front of your face that anything that goes on your sides, you miss.”

Wash’s hands started to shake, just a little.

He didn’t know why.

He’d eaten. He was hydrated. He’d slept and rested. He’d even had a mock therapy session just a day ago.

Wash was practically in perfect working order.
So why was he shaking?

“You…you destroyed any hopes this planet had of getting UNSC support the moment you blew through the blockade.”

Niner blinked slowly and rolled back a little to get a better view of Wash’s face.

God…

That chair.

Was she…she must have been used to it, she moved like it was familiar.

He hoped she was still able to fl-

NO!

Don’t you do it Washington. Don’t you start feeling sympathy. They are not your friends!

These people would kill the soldiers of Chorus without question.

They weren’t safe.

“What?”

“Do you really think the UNSC isn’t going to recognize a military model ship blasting through one of the most dangerous bits of space at the moment? Where did you steal it from?”

“I didn’t steal it.”

“You didn’t steal it?”

“No. I bribed a few people to get out of prison, and I blackmailed the rest for the supplies, but I didn’t steal my ship, Wash. Yeah, she’s a military model, but she’s a good five years out of date which is practically untraceable with the disgustingly bloated military budget the Earth’s defenses are still spending. She’s been completely recolored and her panels are all wiped and serial numbers scraped. I did the work myself. Anyone looking is gonna think she’s a retrofit at best if they managed a good look at her at all.”

“These people won’t survive another year if they’re without aid, Niner. We’re on the brink of total collapse here. And if the UNSC asks if we have you, I don’t have a single problem with throwing all of you at them to get help.”

No one spoke after that.

He’d made his point well enough.

“Until the Generals that you’re safe for the general population, this is your new home. You try to leave or break shit, and I won’t hesitate to fucking kill you. You’ve got a feed on South. She’s gonna be unconscious for a while yet.”


Wash flinched.

“What about her?”
“She’s here, isn’t she? Tucked away somewhere safe and warm?”

Wash didn’t understand the abrupt turn.

“She’s…safe. Medical wing. She was in a coma for a while, and pretty mistreated by Hargrove and his doctors after that. Her whole body’s a wreck, she’s never been so skinny in her life, but she’s not dead.”

Wash looked them over.

“She’s not dead.”

“Well, that will certainly be interesting if nothing else. Tell me, how are you dealing with the woman who deliberately abandoned you being here? I imagine that if we’ve elicited such a response, you must have had quite the cutting conversation with her.”

Florida smiled in that toothy, predatory way of his.

“Or maybe not. You always did forgive her sins easier than others.”

Wash clenched a fist.

He was still shaking.

“Struck a nerve, huh? I wonder how it is that she has remained on your good side when out of all of us, she is the perpetrator and we were victims of circumstance?”

Wash snarled.

“Victims of circumstance?!”

“We didn’t really have much of a choice in how things happened, dearie, you remember what things were like. She did. She acted, knowing full well that we would all be killed if her Insurrectionist buddies had their way. She left you for another man, Washington, and she left you to die.”

Bile crept up his throat.

Florida was good at that, at making a person’s brain itch, at turning their thoughts against them. It was one of the many things about the man that appealed so much when he hired the man and his sniper boyfriend.

Wash shook his head.

When The Director hired him.

“And that somehow makes her worse than South for actively trying to kill me? Or the rest of you for leaving me in a UNSC cell?”

“We didn’t exactly have a way to help you until you were already out and reported dead. At that point, it seemed like a waste of effort to try and free you from prison.”

He…couldn’t do this anymore.

It was too much.
Too much.
Too-
Stop.
Breathe.

“Sure. Whatever you say, Florida. I’ve got better things to do than argue with you.”

“My name is Butch, David.”

“Your name means shit to me.”

He spun around, ready to march right out that door, when he felt a gentle tug on his wrist. He
looked down and saw Niner’s gloved hand.

“Caboose!”

He froze.

“What?”

Niner shoved her chair forward.

“What’s up with that Caboose guy?!”

He turned to look her in the eye.

There wasn’t any reason to pretend he didn’t know why she was asking. Even if they didn’t know
about all the information in his head that he wasn’t supposed to know about, he’d been with the
Reds and Blues long enough to know about their lives before all this.

“Captain Caboose is…he’s a friend. The Chorus soldiers adore him and won’t hear a bad word
against him. He’s a good man.”

“What’s his name?”

“Niner—“

“His name, his name, his FUCKING FIRST NAME!”

She wanted confirmation. Wanted to know if the person she lost wasn’t gone forever after all.

But it wasn’t his place to say one way or the other. If Caboose wanted to talk to her, that was one
thing, but Wash wasn’t going to put him in that position without his permission.

“Look, I can’t help you with that.”

“FUCKING HELL, WASHINGTON, WHAT DO YOU KNOW?!”

Wash tugged his wrist free as gently as he could so he didn’t hurt her or pull her from her chair in
any way. It was…harder than he expected. Niner was a strong woman and she was determined.

“He’s my friend. He’s a good man.”

“YOU’VE SAID THAT!”
“I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

She glared into his visor.

“You know exactly what I want to know!”

Wash turned and stared Niner directly in the eye.

“Tell you what, Niner? Convince them to behave, and I’ll try to talk Captain Caboose into talking to you so he can answer your questions himself.”

Her whole body crumpled in defeat, even though he’d basically just confirmed what she was looking for.

“Is he or isn’t he my brother? It’s not a hard question.”

Why would he send someone who wasn’t her brother to see her?

“The galaxy is small.”

“Weirder shit has happened.”

“Toe the line, behave yourselves, and maybe you’ll get the answer you’re hoping for.”

“Wash,” York’s voice broke, “You know I would have gotten you out if I could have. If I fucking could have, I’d have come for you.”

“I used to believe that, I believed it about all of you. If any of you were alive and knew what was happening, you’d have come for me. I believed it with everything I had right up until you landed on the planet. Now, I really don’t give a shit what you would have done under different circumstances. You don’t matter to me. You’re not my friends, you’re not my family, you’re nothing but a threat to the health and lives of the people of this planet, and honestly? I wouldn’t give a shit if you died. It would make my life a little easier for once.”

Mai-The META put his face in his hands and let out a horrible squeaking sound.

Maine curled in on himself. His throat was healed as best as the MoI’s doctors could do. Alpha checked his charts again and again. He was alive, he was as recovered as anyone could get after being shot as many times as he was.

His voice couldn’t be saved.

When they told him, Maine made a high-pitched squeak of distress.

“Agent Maine, please don’t make that noise if you can help it. It’s pathetic.”

Wash gagged.

“Look,” he said, swallowing back bile, “I really don’t have time to deal with this. We’ve got missing civilians out there who are depending on us, and I’ve got shit to do that doesn’t involve you.”

Florida waved, still blank faced, from the couch. Wyoming had him firmly pressed into the cushions, but Wash had no doubt the man could escape if he wanted. York had an arm thrown around The Meta’s shoulder. Niner’s eyes were red and her face was livid.
Wash stepped out, let the doors shut behind him, and turned to the soldiers on guard.

“Lock. Them. Down. This is the only warning you’ll get. The next will be them breaking out and killing you with your own guns.”

Locus watched the foot weary civilians carefully.

He hadn’t truly considered that there were civilians anymore considering how the majority of bases were filled with people who wore armor every day, but as Price told him,

*Consider, Locus, that if they do not wear armor, they are sure to be immediately killed. Consider how they walk, their size, if they are debilitated or elderly or injured deeply in some way.*

And as Locus observed them, truly observed, he had to admit that the other man was correct, as much as he…disliked the thought. They were as close to civilians as Chorus had, all wearing armor, but clutching children and carrying those who couldn’t walk. One ambitious teen in what could only be called a wheelchair if wheelchairs had spider legs for rough terrain instead of wheels, had several small children piled onto her lap and two adults clinging to the back as the machine made its way through the trees.

The path they made for themselves was clean and would have been difficult to track if he were any average soldier looking for them. They were fast and quiet, despite their large numbers and the state of those traveling.

Why…had Locus not seen them before? They were almost entirely decked in Federal Army colors, and he was very aware of the assets the Federal Army had. General Doyle was transparent and foolish, there was no possible way he and the other before him had managed to keep this many…children…hidden for as long as Locus had been on the planet.

Twin screams and the sound of falling rocks echoed in the back of his head, a thought that floated just out of reach and slipped between his fingers the more he reached for it. It would come to him eventually, best not to distract himself from the task at hand.

He followed close and quietly dispatched several pockets of pirates who’d managed to find the trail and follow without the notice of the people below. With his skill and a little luck, they would never know that they were being followed, let along that they had a silent protector lurking.

One of the children started to cry and begged to go back for someone named “Blissy”. His caretaker shushed him as best as they could, but the child managed to work himself into a considerable amount of distress in a very short amount of time.

They walked for hours and hours, toward what, Locus had no idea.

As they walked, many of them grew tired, and one by one, would be hoisted onto the backs of or into the arms of the more able bodied of the group.

Still, even the most strong and capable grew weary after several hours of carrying, and eventually the children who could walk were put down and tugged gently along to alleviate the strain on the adults who carried them.
Surely, they couldn’t be too much further from their destination.

Six hours into their hike, they abruptly changed direction and made their way to a manmade path through the trees that was large enough for transport trucks, but fairly unused, and sat down to wait.

Locus hid in the trees, gun at the ready, and waited as well.

The sound of the Red’s music started to come up from the west. Locus readied his weapons.

It could have been a trick, someone who’d stolen the music to make the citizens of Chorus think that their friends had found them only to be gunned down by cold, heartless strangers, looking to destroy as many lives as possible.

But as the vehicles rolled closer, Locus saw several familiar suits of armor. Agent Carolina and the Red soldiers…no Agent Washington on this excursion.

There.

The operative.

There wasn’t anything special about them. They didn’t look like much, but then, the operatives never did. Butterfly’s people were unique only in how well they managed to blend in with others, never standing out more than the rest of their group.

He readied his weapon and waited for them to make their move.

It didn’t take long.

“We found them!”

“Thank the gods.”

The operative leapt from the jeep and rushed toward the crowd, where the teen in the chair moved to meet her. They wrapped their arms around each other, and Locus realized this was the best shot he would have before the civilians started to get in the way.

“Niecie!”

He lined the shot.

“Auntie!”

They looked into the trees.

“I’m so-“

He fired.

The operative’s helmet exploded.

Blood splashed and spattered against Agent Carolina’s visor.

The operative crumpled.

“IZZY!”
The Epsilon AI shouted.

“In the trees!”

Agent Carolina spun and shot, but missed the mark each and every time.

“OUT OF THE WAY! MEDICAL COMING THROUGH!”

Carolina threw up her shield as the medics swarmed. They tugged the operative’s helmet off.

“Izzy? Shit, is she breathing?!”

The operative, Izzy apparently, gasped and gurgled, blood bubbled out of her lips. The soldiers fired wildly into the trees, none anywhere near him.

“GET OUT OF THE WAY! WE’RE MOVING HER!”

Carolina dropped the shield. The medics threw the operative into a jeep and drove.

It didn’t matter. There was no way the operative would survive the trip.

Agent Carolina zeroed in on his general location. She held up her gun and fired into the branches above him.

“Locus.”

Of course, shit got real the moment the support team was forcibly removed from quarantine.

As much as Folami loved Agent Washington, and she really did adore the guy, he was kind of the shit, Agent Washington did not always make the best choices for the people around him. His propensity for long winded speeches was usually inspiring and meaningful and all that, but sometimes it was...well, it didn't have the intended effect.

She hobbled down the hallway on her crutches, desperate not to fall on her face and look like an idiot in front of the soldiers she’d inadvertently gotten into trouble. The Freelancers watched from inside the cell but didn’t move to the doors.

They looked so...broken.

What in the fuck had Agent Washington actually said to them? How had the man managed to undo days worth of networking and aggressive kindness in less than an hour?

She made it to the door and pressed the button for the speaker.

“Hey guys.”

Florida stood and slowly made his way to the doorway.

He had a scary face on. The kind of face that would make a woman regret every decision she’d ever made in her entire life.

Luckily, Folami was not a woman.
She was a medic.

“Folami dearest, what are you doing here?”

She smiled as brightly as she could.

“You guys are kind of stuck in here for a while, just until things are cleared.”

“We know.”

“It’s not going to be long. Agent Carolina will be home soon, and she’ll talk some sense into Agent Washington.”

“You heard about it?”

“We left and you were happy. He left and you were miserable. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together. You all may be stuck in here, but that doesn’t mean you have to sit in here all by your lonesome.”

“You can’t come back in, Ducks.”

“No,” she sighed and leaned against the wall, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t keep you company out here.”

Two soldiers rounded the corner into view of the windows. One had a plush monstrosity they dared call a chair on a dolly, the other had two duffle bags in hand.

“You’re planning on camping out here?”

“Oh, no, but I like to have shit to do with my hands and I get bored easily, as you all know. You can pay attention or ignore me, I don’t care. I’m gonna just hang out until they need me inside, and then one of the others will come to replace me. We’re here if you need us, but you can ignore us if you’re not up for it, just like when we were inside.”

“You really don’t have to do that, silly girl.”

“Maybe not, but we don’t want you getting lonely. I’ve got South’s most updated reports, if you want to get a look.”

Wyoming and York started to drag the furniture toward the doors. Maine eventually joined in after a little prompting from Niner, but the man’s face spoke of a broken heart.

“Grab some blankets while you’re at it, you need them. She’s looking strong, you guys. No signs of the infections taking root now that we’ve done the amputations, and her wounds are still coming in clean. Her stomach is healing nicely, and Doctor Grey thinks we’ll be ready to get the neural mounts for her smart arm and leg started in about two weeks.”

York frowned.

“That feels like it’s fast. Is that fast? I don’t know much about medical things, but I thought it took a lot longer to heal and get fitted.”

“Well, we don’t want to wait too long. She needs to be healed enough that we’re not going to cause her further damage, but not so healed that her body starts doing the deadening shit on her nerves. The mounts are there to make the prosthetics interact as organically as possible with your nerves. Two weeks will put her in a position where the nerves are less raw, and she’s a little bit more stable
mentally.”

“What do you mean, she’s not mentally stable?”

Wyoming snorted.

“We’ve known that about South for years.”

Folami snarled.

“Shut the fuck up, that’s not funny. She just had her limbs chopped the fuck off, of course she’s not stable! That’s why we have someone with her twenty-four seven right now, because losing your fucking trigger arm is fucking traumatic.”

Wyoming actually looked chagrined at that, though whether he was being honest or lying with his face, Folami was still unsure.

Maine’s whole face crumpled, and he started to sob.

“Hey, hey, hey! Breathe, buddy! She’s gonna be just fine! This isn’t the first time we’ve had this happen and it won’t be the last! She’s in good hands!”

“I…”

“You need something to do. Honestly, I kind of wish I was still in there, because boy do I have something for you. York, come up to the window and hold out your arms. Lackey! Get my measuring tape!”

“I have a name, you know.”

“Yeah, it’s lackey. Now shut up and do what I want. Tape. Now.”

“Bitch.”

But he got the tape and didn’t complain.

“Is there a reason we’re doing this?”

The soldier whistled as he took York’s wingspan.

“Long arms.”

“I figured that much. I’m on desk duty, Agent York. For me, that means homework, research, observations, and rest. I won’t get to actually do any of that during regular hours, though, so I’m filling my time. In the meantime, are you a Hufflepuff, or a Gryffindor? You’re not smart enough to be a Ravenclaw.”

“What?”

“House colors, man! Keep up! Lackey! Unpack me!”

“You could say please.”

“I could, but it’s funny, when I say please, you assholes ignore me. It’s almost like being polite is the opposite of helpful if I want to get shit done. Move!”
He snorted and unpacked the duffels.

The soldier set a small knitting bag next to the chair.

“Have fun, Folami.”

“Agent York, you don’t have to stand like that anymore. I’ve got my measurements.”

“Oh.”

“Well, I’ve got measurements as good as they’re gonna get through a glass wall.”

Florida smiled, a little dimmer than his usual smile.

“Dearest, if you need his measurements, I can give them to you. It would probably be easier than guessing through the glass.”

“You know my measurements?”

“Well, someone had to get those suits made! Do you really think the Director paid that much attention to details?”

Folami grinned.

“Dude, might as well send over all you guys’ measurements if you’ve got ‘em. We’ve got nervous knitters on this side of the wall. You’ll have more scarves and sweaters than you know what to do with.”

Maine gave her a watery grunt.

“Yes, even you, Mick. The sheer number of skeins I’m going to need to make you a hoodie worthy of those shoulders is going to wipe out my stock for a month, but it will be well worth it when you’re swaddled in the softest bunny fur yarn you’ve ever felt in your life.”

She leaned forward and clicked her teeth at him

“Seriously man, so soft.”

Folami settled herself back in the chair and picked up the needles. She moved to start pulling skeins of yarn out, but instead just picked up a fresh pair of knitting needles and tapped them against one another.

“So, I was reading this journal from the way back days of settling the planet, back before a lot of us realized just how weird things were on this planet. While this colony was designed as a science specific location, the majority of the settlers weren’t scientists, like I always thought. The majority of the people were brought here for actual settling jobs. Farming, construction, all that stuff. I mean, yeah, they had to figure out atmosphere, water, food safety, but at the end of the day, they were all pretty normal. It makes sense, I guess, but I always assumed that we all came from researchy stalk. It’s kind of weird to look back at my family line and find out they used to own farms on Earth’s moon and grow ethanol.”

“You…can’t grow ethanol.”

“They grew corn for ethanol, not for eating.”

Niner grinned.
“Hey, my family used to do that! What part of the moon were they from?”

Folami blinked.

“Oh, um…I don’t actually remember…I could look it up the next time I have access to my family tree though.”

“It’s not a big deal, just one of those ‘it’s a small galaxy’ moments.”

“Ah. Well, so anyway, I was thinking about how most of us don’t necessarily come from the smartest stock originally, or so it is assumed, but the general comprehension levels as far as mathematics, literature, and science are definitely higher than the average, at least according to the scores from the last time we made education contact, so…thirty years? It makes me think about that saying, how many geniuses have we lost to field work, starvation, and crime? We’ve lost a lot of people, but in a way we’ve kind of had a great equalization.”

Florida nodded along even as the others gave her quizzical glances.

“Everyone has equal value when there are so few.”

“Exactly. And you see leadership like Kimball’s where you know that damned woman would take a bullet for any soldier, no matter who they were. She’s also opened up education options to anyone who wants them, not just those who tested high in the first aptitude tests.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, and it makes me think about nature and nurture and how we treat people as a species.”

She stuck her tongue out and moved the needles. She was lost in the moment, her thought train thoroughly disrupted.

“Do you think the UNSC still has the protection of unique cultures clause?”

“Sorry, dearest, but I’m fairly certain that was scrapped.”

She huffed and grabbed the knitting bag off the floor.

“Damn. Well, there goes that idea.”

“Idea?”

“Chorus is small, and we’re barely making it. I was thinking, we might be able to get aid without too much outside interference if we could get our people classified as a protected culture.”

“That hasn’t turned out too well in the past for many protected groups, it’s actually probably safer to call yourselves an American research team.”

She nodded, then shook her head and leered through the glass.

“Something to think about. York! Answers! What’s your house?”

“I can’t say I was ever sorted.”

She glared.

“You are a terrible human being, and we are fixing that. Who does know their house in there?”
Wyoming grinned.

“I have always seen myself as a Gryffindor, and my darling Butch is a Hufflepuff.”

She nodded.

“I can work with that. You, Wyoming, strike me as less of a sweater man and more of an elaborate scarf kind of person.”

“An excellent guess. I am also quite fond of cardigans.”

“I can’t make a cardigan to save my life for some fucking reason, but Andersmith is a GOD at that. Also, Jensen can make you a hat of any shape and size in about an hour and a half. The woman’s a beast!”

“I’m surprised knitting is a thing here.”

“We found a warehouse of undisturbed yarn a few years ago, and knitting is both soothing and useful, so now we knit. Ok, so let me tell you about this one time where Captain Simmons ended up babysitting Kimball’s pet weasel, because it was fucking hilarious. Screaming for days!”

[INCOMING MESSAGE FROM ELEPHANT]

ELEPHANT: YOUR OPERATIVE IS GRAVELY INJURED. THE MEDICS DON’T THINK SHE’LL MAKE IT TO SUNDOWN.

BUTTERFLY: WHO IS THIS?

ELEPHANT: SOMEONE TRAINED TO TAKE HER PLACE.

BUTTERFLY: NOT TO BE DIFFICULT, BUT I AM THE JUDGE OF THAT.

BUTTERFLY: DON’T BOTHER WITH YOUR GIVEN NAME. IT DOESN’T MATTER ANYMORE.

ELEPHANT: IT NEVER REALLY MATTERED. IT WASN’T REAL IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT YOU KNEW THAT ALREADY.

ELEPHANT: YOUR PEOPLE ARE AT RISK.

BUTTERFLY: AND THEY ALWAYS WILL BE. THIS IS NOT A GAME.

ELEPHANT: YOUR OPERATIVE WAS THE TARGET.

ELEPHANT: SPECIFICALLY. YOUR OPERATIVE WAS THE TARGET.

ELEPHANT: SOMEONE WAS WELL AWARE OF WHO WAS CARRYING OUT THE MISSION AND KILLED THE OPERATIVE WITH SNIPER FIRE. THEY COULD HAVE TAKEN OUT A LOT OF PEOPLE, INCLUDING AGENT CAROLINA, BUT JUST TOOK OUT ELEPHANT.
BUTTERFLY: NOT EXACTLY THE NEWS I WANTED TO HEAR TODAY.

ELEPHANT: I’M SORRY.

BUTTERFLY: DON’T. WE’RE MOVING TO THE NEXT STAGE IN THIS LOCATION ANYWAY. GET YOURSELF ASSIGNED TO RETURN TO PROTEGER WITH AGENT CAROLINA.

ELEPHANT: YOU DON’T WANT ME ON OPERATION NEST EGG?

BUTTERFLY: WITH ANY LUCK, OPERATION NEST EGG IS ALMOST OVER, AND THERE’S NO SENSE IN HAVING AN UNTESTED RUNNING IT. I WILL SEND SOMEONE TO REPLACE YOU. GET YOURSELF ASSIGNED TO PROTEGER. I WILL FIND YOU AND ASSESS YOUR TRAINING FROM THERE.

BUTTERFLY: IS THERE A PROBLEM?

ELEPHANT: YOU ARE IN PROTEGER?

BUTTERFLY: I HAVE PRESENCE EVERYWHERE. YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT IF YOU WERE TRAINED FOR THIS.

ELEPHANT: I WAS.

ELEPHANT: I’M SORRY. I SHOULDN’T HAVE QUESTIONED YOU.

ELEPHANT: I’LL GET BETTER.

BUTTERFLY: THAT’S ALL WE CAN EXPECT.

Chapter End Notes

I am so very, very sorry for the long wait in between chapters on this. I really had no idea that things were going to become so stressful in my day to day life since the last chapter went up.

Based on my previous history of promising updates and not giving them in the expected timeframe, I’m not going to make any promises on the next one.

As always, thank you so much for reading, and if you liked it, please drop me a comment so I know!
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

A Deadly Fairy With A Gun, A Kind Gift, Melty Sparky Bits, Patching Up Wounds, William Tell Overture, Flying Home, Look Who's Awake, Data Transfer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izzy’s cheerful screech of ‘Niecie!’ echoed in Carolina’s head as clear as a gunshot.

The woman’s comments about the stealth armor, her whispered secrets about the trees, her calm advice to Epsilon, it all swirled together in one long ringing tone until Carolina couldn’t think of anything but destroying Locus by any means necessary.

She ran into the trees and started climbing, branches moved away from her practically of their own accord as she made her way higher and higher. Her blood screamed in her ears as her suit’s sensors tracked Locus’s escape.

Carolina hadn’t understood at first, why the soldiers at Izzy’s base would climb up into the nearby trees near like they were trying to disappear, despite the colors of their armor not blending with foliage in the slightest. It didn’t make sense from a strategic standpoint.

But Izzy told her a secret that none of the Reds and Blues had managed to figure out, despite living among the people of Chorus far longer than Carolina had.

Chorus’s trees were something out of a fantasy story.

With a snarl, Carolina leapt from one of the branches and allowed the bend of the tree to propel her high into the air and send her flying as if jumping off a trampoline.

The larger branches had enough strength to send a person bouncing like a character in a videogame, while the smaller branches were thin and flexible enough to simply be pushed aside while one jumped without any pain when you were hit (as long as you were in armor). Carolina was sure Izzy was taking the piss at first, who would believe that a tree branch was a viable form of propulsion? But Izzy just climbed up one like a squirrel and launched herself off it on the way to the temple, warning that you had to be careful not to bounce your head into a bigger branch, because they would smack you back to earth like the hand of a displeased god.

Carolina had opted to stay on the ground until she had the chance to practice without a ticking clock telling her she needed to get things done, but she wished she’d taken Izzy up on the quick flying lesson. She should have practiced when she had the chance, because now it was the only way to catch up to Locus before he was gone for good. The trees were dense enough on the ground that a speed boost would just as likely send her smacking into a tree trunk as anything else, but from above, she could see it all.

Rage burned through like a wildfire crackling in her veins. Years of frustration, fear, anger, trauma, and pain exploded out of her with one single point of focus to take all of the heat.
Carolina was out for blood.

She was not going to lose him, not again, not now. After everything Locus had done to the people of Chorus, Carolina was going to capture him and drag his bloody and broken corpse back to Vanessa as an early birthday present. Carolina would pull his head off and give it to her in a pretty box with a disgustingly large bow on top. She would shoot out his knees, beat him senseless, she would make him regret ever daring to pick up a gun.

Locus was dead.

He moved fast, faster than she remembered. Before, he’d relied mostly on his active camo to get from place to place, but now he moved like he had a speed boost of his own, or at least a modified one.

He must have been holding back on them.

“Epsilon, give me something to work with here!”

-I’ve got him on motions, but he’s good. He’ll be gone before you blink if you’re not careful. Lose him, and we won’t be able to track the active camo anymore.-

“I need a boost! Get me to him, right now!”

The speed boost sent her from flying to careening over tree branches with Epsilon wailing in her ears the whole way. This was more than dangerous; one false step and she’d take a tumble she wouldn’t be able to survive.

Carolina’s visor immediately started highlighting the strongest branches to land on as Epsilon calculated the safest path for her to take and not smack face first into one of the giants or fall and end up face down in the dirt.

She couldn’t help but be a little amazed. Carolina’s armor was heavy, anywhere else in the galaxy it would have broken the tree branches immediately, but they bounced her along instead.

Carolina felt like a fairy.

A deadly fairy.

A deadly fairy with a gun.

-CAROLINA! STOP! OH MY GOD, YOU ARE GOING TO HIT A TREE, YOU CRAZY BITCH!!!-

She landed on a particularly sturdy branch and let it fling her high into the air, twisting around as Epsilon finally locked on hard to Locus, despite his camouflage. She aimed as she spun, shooting twice, and landed right in front of a shimmer that flickered as it was hit.

Carolina had him!

Locus dropped to one knee and gripped his side as Carolina pointed the gun directly at his head.

“You’re finished, Locus.”

The man let out a slow breath before tilting his head to the side just slightly. He nodded.

“Hardly.”
Something struck her back hard. A cloud of smoke. Her vision was wrecked and her sensors all started screaming at once.

Smoke bomb.

A fucking smoke bomb?!

How in the hell did he hit her in the back with a smoke bomb?!

Carolina spun around and fired, hoping to hit whatever hit her. Nothing was coming up, she couldn’t register anything.

“EPSILON! WHERE IS HE?!?”

Carolina darted out of the smoke and cursed.

Locus was gone.

Not a rustle, not a shimmer, not a sign he’d ever been there aside from some blood on the ground that didn’t even have the decency of leaving a trail behind.

-He’s gone.-

Locus was gone.

She screamed and slammed her fist into a tree hard enough to feel it shudder.

“DAMN IT!”

It wasn’t enough. She hit it again, harder, threw herself into hitting it.

Locus was gone.

“Carolina, calm down.”

Locus WAS GONE!

“Calm down?! You know what he’s done! He and Felix killed hundreds of thousands of people! Destroyed families! He just killed Izzy!”

She could feel Epsilon light up her nerves, trying to make her feel like she was being held and hugged. It wasn’t easy to shake off or ignore, even without the weight and heat of a physical body there.

“Carolina, we don’t know that. We don’t know anything yet.”

She slammed her fists against the tree again, harder, hard enough to make her hands ache. The ancient giant rocked backwards under her fists and the inhabitants made some increasingly indignant noises on its behalf. A family of rainbow squirrels jumped from the branches to another tree, chittering angrily.

Her gut churned.

“I’ve seen shots like that before. I’ve made shots like that before, it’s one of the first simulations I ever got to see in training. You don’t get to walk away from a bullet taking off your skull and most of your brain with it, Epsilon. If she lives, it’s not going to be what anyone could call living.”
Carolina pressed her helmet against the tree and let it hold her up. She had to stop punching living things when she was upset, it wasn’t the tree’s fault that she’d failed, and hitting it wasn’t going to fix anything.

I can’t tell Vanessa that let her friend die.

“Carolina…you didn’t. Locus came along and fucked everything up. He fired the shot. He ran. That is NOT your fault.”

A cold rage settled in her shoulders.

Even now, after everything, after every defeat, Locus managed to kill people under her nose and escape. Even now, he had help. The people of Chorus weren’t safe with him there, with Hargrove’s people still running around and hiding in plain sight. Until she could clear the planet of enemies, as long as they were alive, people were going to keep dying. Chorus’s soldiers, soldiers in name only, would keep getting sacrificed for Hargrove’s greed and their fear of being punished for their crimes.

Chorus might never be safe.

“It’s time to pack it in, C.”

Carolina rolled her shoulder, shook off Epsilon’s hug, and started the long walk back to the jeeps. Locus was gone, and it was time to head back and regroup. She needed a plan, a direction, something to get her started.

“I’m not giving up until he’s dead.”

She was going to find him.

“Then you’re leaving Kimball to mourn by herself between snatches of running the planet and Wash to deal with the rest of the Freelancers without backup. Are you really willing to do that to them?”

A twist of nerves shot up her spine at the thought of Wash taking care of the Freelancers by himself. Things hadn’t been right with him since she’d gotten him back, and things were only getting worse as time went by, not better. He’d mostly held up with Connie, if you didn’t count the cry fest, but only barely and only because it was Connie.

If he had to suddenly be responsible for the entirety of Alpha squad there would be chaos. She could imagine them casually undermining his authority, dismissing him or trying to talk over him in front of the Chorus soldiers, and how pissed off he would be about it no matter how unintentional it was.

Best-case scenario, he’d lose it and be angry Wash for a while. Worst case…she didn’t even want to think about.

“Oh god. He’s not ready for them. They’re just like how they used to be—“

“Except Niner is several feet shorter.”

“Someone will try to tease him and the sky will fall.”

The armies were negotiating peace with one another still, two months wasn’t enough time for everyone to become friends, and now they had an influx of Freelancers to deal with. Supplies were
still drastically low. The UNSC was still just sitting there in the sky, what they were waiting for, Carolina didn’t know.

Was it worth it to take the time to chase Locus when things were so volatile? The answer when they first landed was yes, or she wouldn’t have left the Reds and Blues in Wash’s care, but now?

Now, all Carolina wanted to do was keep her people safe. She wanted to see her old squad again and introduce them to her wonderful idiots. She wanted to explore Chorus and see the beautiful places that Kimball told her of sometimes when it was just the two of them behind a locked door.

She wanted to take the Freelancers out, just like the old days, and have a good, old fashioned hunt for that fucker.

Locus would be dealt with, and with the Freelancers on Carolina’s side again, it would be easier than ever. More professionals, more ground to cover, maybe they could even draw the bastard out.

But if she went after him on her own, she was liable to be out there for a while. They couldn’t afford another day of her in the field.

Her shoulders fell.

“Ok. Ok, let’s go back.”

She couldn’t make herself climb into the trees again. The guilt was starting to get to her, and there was nothing like a long walk in power armor to make a person feel like they were being properly punished.

-God, you’d wear a hair shirt if you could get your hands on one. Seriously, not everything in the universe is something you deserve to be beaten up for, C. You need therapy.-

I will give you over to Caboose if necessary, Epsilon.

-Sure you will. That doesn’t mean I’m wrong.-

By the time Carolina made it back to the clearing, the caravan was gone. Nothing but two jeeps, the Reds, tire tracks, and Izzy’s blood on the ground remained to show that they had been there.

I can do this.

Heads shot up and conversations died instantly.

I can do this.

Donut tilted his head just so as she approached.

Oh god.

Grif and Simmons shifted incrementally closer to one another.

I can’t do this.

She stumbled, just a little, and suddenly Sarge was in front of her. He held her shoulder to steady her and pulled her into a hug.

“You doin’ ok, Little Missy?”
The man’s concerned whisper washed over Carolina and made her want to hug him back. She couldn’t do it, but by god she wanted to.

-Nothing’s stopping you but you, Carolina.-

After a moment, Carolina cautiously wrapped her arms around Sarge and squeezed gently before stepping out of his reach.

“How are they holding up?”

“That wasn’t the greetin’ anyone wanted, I can tell you that. We got ‘em loaded up and gone just a bit ago, might even beat ‘em back if we hustle. Them big trucks aren’t exactly good for speed.”

“And…Izzy?”

Sarge squeezed Carolina’s shoulder and kept his hand there.

He didn’t offer her physical support often, something about it not being appropriate for gruff leader types like himself to do, but Carolina expected that he knew she’d reject the offer if it was made too often. She appreciated it more for how infrequent it was.

“Got her outta here right quick. There was a medic in the caravan who stabilized her, thinks they might be able to do somethin’ for her, what I do not know. Her niece ain’t in good condition, and ah don’t blame the kid fer bein’ pretty upset, what with Izzy’s blood all over her face. Carmichael went with her ta get her checked out, but mostly ah think he was goin’ ta hold her hand.”

Sarge let Carolina go and nudged her toward the jeep Donut had climbed into. He was settled in the back and looked to be waiting for them. She hauled her suddenly aching body in and found herself arms linked with Donut’s as he rested his head on her shoulder.

Grif climbed into the driver’s seat and started the jeep up, heading back towards the base, with Sarge and Simmons following behind. He kept trying to subtly glance into the back, but Grif wasn’t physically able to be subtle and drive at the same time. He wasn’t really good at being subtle even when he wasn’t driving.

“What, Grif?”

He cleared his throat and Donut squeezed her arm tight.

“I’m guessing you didn’t catch him?”

“No, Grif. I didn’t. If I had, I’d have dragged his bleeding body back with me and Epsilon wouldn’t be able to shut up about it.”

“Hey!”

Grif nodded and suddenly the jeep kicked up its speed.

“We need to get you home. Kimball deserves to hear what happened from you.”

Donut patted Carolina’s hand gently and cleared his throat in a very Donut way that said he wanted her attention, but also didn’t want to disturb her. He’d started getting good at reading both her and Wash.

It wasn’t a good thing.
All Carolina wanted was to sit in silence, to reflect, to try to fix this.

-To punish yourself by thinking up ways you could have stopped it, you mean.-

But Donut started humming and rocking them both side to side, and she didn’t have the heart to try to make him stop.

“Carmichael said that Kimball and Izzy were friends?”

‘We’re practically family, at this point, what with you making kissy faces at my little sister!’

She turned her hand to grip Donut’s and squeezed it.

“Yeah, they grew up together, they’re practically sisters. Izzy is family.”

Grif grunted in the front and pushed a little harder on the gas, sending them speeding through the trees and bouncing across the dirt in a way that made Epsilon start making noises about jostling injuries and such. Carolina didn’t mind being thrown from side to side, though Donut clearly did since he started screeching at Grif for reckless driving.

The thought of who would tell Kimball hadn’t occurred to Carolina to worry about, but once Grif brought it up, it slowly filled her mind until there was nothing left to think about.

The soldiers of Chorus had seen loss in ways Carolina knew intimately. Aching loss. Terrifying loss. The kind of loss that wrote pain and suffering into your DNA for generations to come.

Kimball was no exception to that.

The woman had scars and history that Carolina had only managed to scratch the surface of. There were topics Kimball couldn’t bare to touch without enough alcohol in her blood that she could forget it. She hated to acknowledge her pain unless it served the greater good.

Kimball was the kind of person would willing carve slivers and chunks of herself whenever someone needed motivation or empathy, but god forbid she speak of anything important to herself for her own healing, or even just to share the burden.

And Carolina was about to deliver more pain right to her front door.

If Kimball would just let herself open up a little…

But that wasn’t who Kimball was. The only things about her that mattered were how well she led Chorus. Nothing else was important.

-That’s not fair, C. She’s not exactly in a position where she can be all vulnerable and shit in front of people.-

I’m not people, I’m Carolina. She could be vulnerable with me.

-The last person she trusted as much as you turned out to be a genocidal monster intent on torturing her and killing everyone she’s ever loved while making it feel like it was her fault. Maybe give her a year or two to recover from the guilt of sending her people off to die pointlessly? Let her get some therapy before you start laying it on thick with the blame?- He wasn’t wrong.

Carolina knew he wasn’t wrong.
Felix had done a number on Kimball, on all the New Republic soldiers. Psychological warfare was nothing to joke about.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel that there had to be something Kimball could have shared to make Carolina more comfortable with the situation, or at least more aware. Hell, Carolina would have accepted knowing Kimball had a sister, especially since she ended up in the same base as Izzy. She didn’t have to explain what being a War Dog meant, Carolina was starting to wonder just how much Kimball was protecting her from on that front, but knowing that Kimball had people who loved her like family when she only seemed to be surrounded by subordinates would have been less jarring.

Kimball didn’t talk about other people much, it was the one big problem with their relationship that Carolina had.

-You’re not being fair, C. She talks about lots of stuff with you all the time, just not…you know, stuff that makes her want to drink until she doesn’t feel feelings anymore.-

Oh sure, Kimball told Carolina about being afraid of failure, about her nightmares where Felix won and killed everyone, about her fear that they would all starve to death in a few months, but she’d never mentioned how close she was to these people. She’d never mentioned someone she considered to be a sister. She barely shared anything about her traumatic childhood that this woman seemed to know everything about.

It would be different if Carolina hadn’t been disgustingly honest with her.

-Maybe it was just nice to be Vanessa for once instead of General Kimball or a War Dog or whatever.-

Maybe, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt.

“Yeah. Let’s get home.”

Everywhere Lorenzo went there were soldiers waiting for him.

They were constantly talking and grabbing and pointing and handing things and needy. They all needed things! All the time! It never stopped, not for a single minute! The base was in complete chaos, or at least it felt that way.

Lorenzo didn’t know how General Kimball managed.

Oh, he’d tried delegating things at first, only to have even more people coming to him for clarification. Wasn’t this why the Federal Army had incredibly detailed paperwork in the first place? How could there possibly be confusion when it was all laid out in the paperwork? Was no one reading the meticulously crafted paperwork? He’d helped design the meticulously crafted paperwork to avoid this specific problem.

He’d tried ranking the requests by importance, but that only led to soldiers coming up with reasons why their request was more important than someone else’s, and since he couldn’t delegate without people to delegate to, he had no way to know without doing the work himself.
He hadn’t been general a month and he already wanted to quit. Surely there was some quiet base in the middle of nowhere he could camp out at and sleep for a while?

Responsibility was horrible. Why did no one warn him how horrible it was?

Lorenzo let himself into the conference room the two Generals had chosen to share as an office as quickly and quietly as he could, savoring the sliver of peace he’d managed to snag. General Kimball had suggested they share a workspace until the armies adjusted to the new leadership and they had a handle on the ever-growing workload. Lorenzo had never been more thankful to his past self for being polite and amicable even in the face of adversity, because the moment he said he had an important meeting with General Kimball, everyone backed off long enough for him to run.

It wasn’t that Lorenzo was incapable of doing the work! No, no, it was simply the fact that he was only one person and couldn’t do the work of ten.

Was this how the previous generals had felt, or was this a new flavor of hell thanks to the extra special chaos ignited by the end of a war that had damaged and destroyed millions of lives?

General Kimball was hunched over the table she’d claimed as a desk. She’d taken off her helmet while she worked, an unusual act for the woman as far as he knew, as well as her gloves, and part of her chestplate was undone leaving it to hang loose in a way that was most certainly uncomfortable for her.

The table was surrounded by boxes of papers and loose screens propped up around it showing dozens of different charts and long strings of text, while the table itself was buried in mad looking scribblings and nightmarishly tall stacks of papers the likes of which Lorenzo could only imagine were useful if one was a wizard or had some sort of power to manipulate gravity. How a person could work while buried so thoroughly was beyond him.

Then again, General Kimball didn’t look to be being terribly productive. She had one hand over her eyes while the other was clutching her dog tags, and her shoulders were shaking.

Lorenzo suddenly felt as if he’d stumbled into something quite private.

“General Kimball? Are you alright? Is there something I can do to help?”

If she were a Federal soldier, he would know the proper way to offer comfort, or at least know that an offer wouldn’t necessarily be immediately rejected, but with her being…well, her, it was hard to say what would and wouldn’t be taken as an insult.

Kimball looked up slowly, she looked exhausted, devastated, and hardly there. Her eyes widened in horror as if she’d seen a ghost.

“Doyle?”

Lorenzo frowned, unsure of what to do. So far, confusing Lorenzo with the former general wasn’t exactly a common mistake people made. He sounded nothing like the former general, and they didn’t exactly wear the same armor style, but Lorenzo supposed it wasn’t impossible to make a mistake, especially when one was as stressed as the Co-General of the United Armies of Chorus.

Should he address the incorrect name? Ignore it? Offer a shoulder for her to cry on? Was that a thing enemies did when they were trying to work together?

“No, General Kimball. Lorenzo Páez, remember?”
She stared at him a beat too long, shook her head, and cradled it between her hands.

“Right, sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She rubbed at her eyes before she let out a long sigh, sat up stiff and straight, and reached for a small stack of papers that was precariously balanced on the edge of the desk.

Lorenzo settled himself at his own table, suddenly conscious of how little he had to work on compared to the mountain at General Kimball’s space. To be fair, it didn’t look as if she was accomplishing much aside from shifting the papers around.

She didn’t appear to even be reading them.

Though it went against every good instinct he had, as the General would no doubt take offense, Lorenzo couldn’t let her clearly suffer in silence while he watched without at least trying to ease her burden.

“General Kimball, are you alright?”

She let out a long breath before she set down the pages. Every move she made seemed exaggerated and slow. If she were a bit more precise in her movements, Lorenzo would think it was simply her being meticulous in presentation, but as it stood she just seemed tired.

“I can’t say. Sleep has been elusive at best, our armies are still at each other’s throats, and the bad news just keeps rolling in one thing after another with hardly a chance to even acknowledge the bad before the next bad comes in. We could really use a win, if only for my own sanity.”

Kimball stood and reattached her chestplate, though she left her tags hanging out of her suit. It wasn’t regulation. Lorenzo had to bite his tongue to keep himself from mentioning it, General Kimball either didn’t realize it was hanging out or didn’t care, and neither was his responsibility to correct.

She pulled some boxes off of one of the spare chairs and motioned toward it before sitting back down.

An invitation? To him?

Lorenzo stood and made his way over. He carefully settled himself in the seat and pulled his helmet off. She hadn’t put her own back on, and it seemed inappropriate to have his own on to hide himself away while she wore her own face so clearly.

As he pulled his own helmet off and tucked it under the chair, she snorted and shook her head. It might have been the most genuine emotion she’d had toward him at that point aside from her general frustration with anyone who wasn’t under her direct control.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

She looked at him in that particular way that his instructors sometimes had when Lorenzo asked a question that should have been obvious and was therefore not in need of answering.

“No, I suppose not.”

“I am glad that you came in, though. I need your opinion on something, and we really should get started before the next emergency situation pops up and makes our lives difficult.”
His opinion? General Kimball wanted Lorenzo Páez’s opinion?

They were making progress! He was nearly giddy at the thought. What could this rough and tumble rebel leader possibly want with his opinion?

Kimball turned a screen toward Lorenzo and tapped at it.

“Take a look at this and tell me what you think of it.”

It wasn’t clear what he was looking at, at first. There were several long columns listing names, ranks, skillsets, qualifications, and a little section for notes such as ‘willing to travel’ or ‘charismatic and approachable’.

Kimball pulled a second screen with a long list of jobs and positions that remained glaringly blank and put it next to the screen.

“Wash thinks we’re working too hard, so he put together a list of people to he thinks will be assets in appointed positions to help us get the government back on track until we can start building proper elections again and training people for positions.”

“Appointments?”

She grimaced.

“Temporary appointments while we get our feet back under us. Military hierarchy isn’t going to be enough in the long run and I’m not interested in a military dictatorship, but we are going to need to show that we are capable and in control when we’re dealing with the UNSC, and we don’t have time to do much more than elect and train right now. Our government should not be ruled by guns and brute force, that’s just asking for another civil war, but if we don’t get the government going again because we’re waiting, we will be in deep shit.”

Lorenzo scrolled through the list of names, feeling a buzz of pleasure build slowly in his chest as he looked over the choices. Washington had drawn significantly from the Federal army while making the list, as was appropriate and expected since he’d spent more time alone with them than with any New Republic soldiers aside from Kimball’s handpicked Lieutenants, but the New Republic seemed to forget that they didn’t have first claim on the man.

“I was not disagreeing with appointing people, General, merely confirming that we are on the same page. The best thing to do for Chorus currently is to appoint people to the positions temporarily, with the understanding that once we are out of the crisis; we will have proper elections from the ground up. It’s all well and good for people to vote for their generals, but it’s better to have actual elected officials again, and we can’t do that until we’re in a position of stability.”

It was a good list, fairly balanced between extremely skilled options and general well-rounded individuals. Lorenzo knew several people on the list who personally who held wildly different belief systems, but all were skilled at listening to people and getting positive results. Washington clearly did his research while putting this list together, though it didn’t take long for Lorenzo to start picking out the man’s own personal biases in some of his choices.

They would need to make the decisions on their own, but it was an excellent starting point, and not one that Lorenzo really had immediate plans for.

“It’s about time we got the government back onto its feet to start making proper decisions again instead of relying on battle tactics and, well quite frankly, leaving the fate of the rest of the living world on yours and my shoulders. I knew this wasn’t going to be an easy job, but I had no idea just
how difficult it would be to get any actual work done.”

Lorenzo actually won a smile from Kimball at that, the corners of her eyes wrinkled just a little. She looked pleased.

“My shoulders are wide, but all of Chorus does feel a bit much for one person, or two, especially when so many people hate me with every fiber of their being. I haven’t exactly managed to endear myself to your people.”

Was this what being in General Kimball’s confidence was like? He didn’t know her, not in any kind of meaningful capacity, but he got a sense that she was sharing something rather rare with him by speaking and presenting herself as she did. A vulnerability she didn’t dare show the outside world.

“Nor I, and I have the disadvantage of being new on top of all the other issues of office. We’re not going to get much accomplished until we can really count who we’ve lost and what needs to be done, and for that we need people we trust in positions to help us.”

He laughed a little and started putting notes in next to familiar names as General Kimball grabbed another screen and did the same.

“This wasn’t something we covered in training, and I feel my education lacking. For all my studying, I still don’t know the best route for the rebuilding of government, and I would feel infinitely more confident if I had some books on what to do when rebuilding a war-torn planet.”

“Geek.”

She tossed him a quick, teasing smile, which Lorenzo returned in kind. Neither of them were exactly good at making friends with their former enemies, but they were trying, and that was going to have to be enough.

“I’ve heard…”

General Kimball rolled her neck and shoulders before she looked Lorenzo dead in the eye, smile firmly etched onto her face.

“I’ve heard that the Federal Army once protected the largest libraries left on the planet. Did you ever get to see any of them?”

“None so terribly grand, I’m afraid. Some refuged places, but nothing so fine as they were. Have you? I have heard that the New Republic captured certain cities in the earlier days specifically for access to the libraries and hospitals, I imagine when they were at their prime, they were quite impressive.”

General Kimball shook her head. She laughed softly and put a check mark by a name on her screen. Major Mendoza.

Why did that name sound familiar?

“Back in the very early days the New Republic held a few cities in their entirety, but I wasn’t involved in any of that. I’m but simple farm stock, unfortunately, and by the time I was in the army, we were neck deep in territory wars and libraries were the least of the army’s interests. When I was a kid we had some access to the wires and approved digital media, sure, but it was very limited thanks to the purging of ‘inappropriate media’, and then the war picked up and I didn’t really have time for physical books. Still don’t, sadly, but we have enough digital scans that I don’t
miss them all that much.”

Lorenzo wouldn’t have pictured General Kimball as a farmer if she hadn’t explicitly said it. Though she was physically fit, her charisma did suit her for a political position far better than toiling away in a field ever would. What a shame it would have been for her to have rotted out there among the dirt and worms.

And suddenly, Lorenzo felt like an absolute shit.

That sort of thinking was what caused the war in the first place, people who assumed they were better than others because of the kind of work they did. It was quite cruel to put that sort of thought on them. People who looked at the system they had created that still required people to toil away and felt themselves superior simply because they were lucky enough to have not been born in that position.

“That is quite upsetting, General. I have always been an avid lover of physical media. There is something special about holding an actual book. The smell of aged paper is quite soothing.”

She shrugged and tapped another name on her screen, this time putting an X by the name Folami.

“It wasn’t like there were many opportunities to sit with books and just relax, even before the war. My parents were amazing, but they were poor as the dirt we farmed, and the government liked it that way.”

She paused, glancing over at Lorenzo, as if checking to make sure she hadn’t offended him. Or perhaps she was watching to see if they were going to have to fight about it.

As much as he wanted to protest, Lorenzo would have been a baby at best when Kimball was a child, he only knew about previous policy from what he’d managed to read over the years, and a good deal of it wasn’t good. There was a divide between those brought to Chorus to explore and those brought to support, and it was possible that the people meant to be taking care of General Kimball’s family and city were corrupt and awful.

After a brief pause of staring, General Kimball looked back to her screen and started poking at names again.

“I do think about it sometimes, having a library close enough that the soldiers can go in and read. We try to set something up in every base, but it’s never a large physical selection and it’s not the same thing. I always imagined big, comfy chairs and long tables for schoolwork just like the movies.”

“Well, perhaps the time will come soon for us to establish a few. I’m sure that someone out there had the forethought to hide book cashes, and once we’re able to negotiate off planet, I think it would be an excellent idea to get updated literature and have both our digital and physical collections expanded.”

She smiled again, a little easier this time, and Lorenzo felt a bolt of pleasure down his spine. He would not have imagined six months ago that one day he would be sitting at a table with the General of the New Republic and talking about building libraries. He certainly wouldn’t have thought he’d be trying to be friendly with her.

They worked fairly well together when they weren’t fighting.

It was nice to go through the lists of candidates with General Kimball, nicer than Lorenzo would have ever guessed. He didn’t feel the need to obfuscate the reasons why a person would be good or
bad for a position in order to protect feelings and General Kimball was far too unsubtle for such
tings to be necessary. General Kimball understood the need to be surrounded by people one
trusted while also balancing that with choosing the person who was best for the position, and how
difficult it could be when one did not have the option for both.

Lorenzo would like to have campaigns and elections for every position, but he was a pragmatist,
and there was never going to be an immediate fix to their problems. If such a solution existed,
they’d have already used it. Still, he tried to keep himself balanced between his personal opinions
on people and their qualifications and history. If he’d learned anything from the armies coming
together, it was that he’d had quite the bag of personal biases on his back that he would need to get
over if he was to be an effective leader.

Between the two of them, they worked through the pages and pages of names Washington had
provided and matched or dismissed them all based on open positions that needed to be filled. It
wasn’t anywhere near completion, but it was a fantastic start, and Lorenzo was able to send out a
dozen memos to create in person interview appointments. He could hardly hold back his joy at the
thought of blessed progress after so long feeling like the army was treading water trying to stay
alive.

“We can start the first round of vetting in just a day or two!”

General Kimball reached out and patted his shoulder, a little harder than necessary, but not in any
foul spirit.

“I’ll be happy just to put out actual interview requests. Someone who looks good on paper may not
look as good when you get them into your office, and I would rather know that they’re bad for the
position before it’s given to them.”

Lorenzo hadn’t expected General Kimball to actively include him in anything of importance, and
certainly didn’t expect her to offer her own wisdom, but he was genuinely glad to be wrong in this.
It was lovely to have someone to work with who didn’t feel the need to flutter and agree with him
constantly, as if Lorenzo wasn’t trained for leadership.

The Federal Army, long before they were officially an army, had dozens of people set aside with
the intention of keeping them trained to run the government should something happen to the party
leaders. Lorenzo and his year mates had the best educations according to the standards set in place,
but that came with the price of isolation and little practical experience.

Sure, Lorenzo knew the laws of the land inside and out, could devise ration plans faster than
anyone else, and knew how to handle politics from a textbook level, but that didn’t mean he had
any real world understanding of the application. And yet, here he was, elected to one of the highest
positions on the planet. Making decisions that would directly impact the people of Chorus for
years, possibly decades.

It was quite humbling.

A soft knock on the entry door startled both Lorenzo and General Kimball, leaving them
scrambling for their helmets. General Kimball had her helmet in her hands and secured on her
head, quick as lightning.

The door opened without those on the other side being given permission to enter, and two soldiers
entered. The first, a New Republic medical officer, stumbled as she rushed in, followed quickly by
Major Elsweiz.
Kimball straightened her shoulders and seemed to become a completely different person, tipping her head just so and giving herself an air of authority.

“Silvers? Who’s your friend?”

The door slid shut and Silvers popped to her feet and started to fidget visibly while Elsweiz watched with no small amount of humor. Lorenzo stood to shake both their hands.

“This is Major Elsweiz, I assigned her to lead the team inspecting the Freelancer’s supplies. She is completely trustworthy. Might I ask who Silvers is?”

“Medical Officer Silvers is responsible for our medical stores, former War Dog, and a personal friend.”

Odd. Lorenzo had been under the impression that being a War Dog wasn’t something one grew out of or moved on from. He’d thought it was a title bestowed and worn forever, even if one no longer actively used it.

Kimball stood and the soldiers saluted both Generals.

What they must have thought of the two Generals sitting there, looking so relaxed, as if there weren’t a million things that they could be doing other than having private time in office chairs. Of course, they were not goofing around or shirking duties, but the soldiers couldn’t know that.

He felt sick at the thought.

“Generals,” MO Silvers voice was meek as she spoke, hardly what Lorenzo would have expected from a War Dog. “We have something to discuss with you.”

“We are rather in the middle of something, can it wait?”

Elsweiz held out a datapad to Lorenzo, with a gentle tint in her voice that spoke of urgency.

“This can wait, General Páez, but it probably shouldn’t. It’s the supply breakdown from the crashed Freelancer ship.”

He took the datapad and scrolled through the list while General Kimball’s soldier handed her a data chip. General Kimball plugged it into her personal datapad, and Lorenzo suddenly wondered why he didn’t have a dedicated pad for work.

Lorenzo scanned the information, not sure at first what he was looking at.

First glance showed him nothing he wouldn’t have expected from Elsweiz, her organization skills were something to be envied almost as much as her ability to name and break every bone in the human body in under an hour. Closer inspection of the document made his knees feel weak. There were names on the document of medication he had only seen in the ever growing ‘can no longer produce’ lists that the doctors and medical officers occasionally pointed to when divvying up increasingly sparse supplies. Equipment that had long been in too little repair to be useful was listed as being available and ready to be put together.

The total number of supplies was disgustingly, nauseatingly high.

He tipped his head up to see how General Kimball reacted. He hoped to match her, but she didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed by it.
“The first file is medicine only,” MO Silvers pointed at the screen, “take a look at this list. What does this look like to you?”

General Kimball slowly ran her finger down the screen, scrolling through the list and giving nothing away in her movement. When she finally reached the bottom and saw the total, she lowered the datapad and looked to Silvers.

“I have never been much involved with medicine, Doctor. Could you give a little background here? Or maybe just tell us what we are looking at instead of making us guess?”

“What we’re looking at,” Lorenzo could barely control his voice, tempering it at a gentle whisper, “In simple terms, is enough medication for Chorus to completely care for every living person on the planet during the coming sick season. The pain medication alone is worth dying for, not to mention there are long term insulin boosters and other administrations for chronic illness.”

Someone had packed these crates with the intention of the recipients being able to use them immediately. Lorenzo remembered the shipments to the front lines when he was much younger, there were people whose whole job involved counting supplies and sending for things they needed, and Lorenzo’s job at the time was to watch as those needs were routinely ignored in favor of what the leadership felt was ideal to send.

This was different. Whoever sent these supplies knew what to send to a warzone. Knew and cared that the people given the supplies would have to use them immediately.

MO Silvers head bobbed in agreement; she must have been ecstatic at the numbers presented. Lorenzo imagined that once the news was out, there would be a good deal of rejoicing from the medical field and eventually from the armies at large.

“And this is only the count from the first truck, the perishables. This does not include what I’ve been informed is another full truck’s worth of general medications. This doesn’t include food rations either. If rumors are true, there are enough supplies that we will be enough to get us through the long winter while we figure out how to start planting crops again, without relying on rations.”

How had the Freelancers managed such a thing? When he’d heard that they had help from on high and heard how many people were actually on the ship, Lorenzo had envisioned a fairly small vessel at their crash site. To carry the kinds of supplies the soldiers were describing, the ship must have been quite large.

Lorenzo hadn’t had much of an opinion on the Freelancers before, he couldn’t help but feel gratitude bloom in his chest. These people were a blessing. Why would anyone who didn’t seriously want to help bring such an exorbitant amount of supplies to their planet? Surely these people were genuinely good and kind or they wouldn’t have bothered with anything past what they needed to find their friends.

Kimball laid the tablet down on her desk amidst the papers, a contemplative look on her face.

Lorenzo was ready to release the Freelancers from quarantine that instant, but General Kimball’s sudden shift in posture made him pause. She looked to be readying herself to be on the defense.

“Oh.”

Her voice took on a dull tone, flat enough that Lorenzo was completely flabbergasted.

“What do you mean, ‘oh’? General Kimball, this is the best news we’ve had in years! Medicine
and food, the two things we can’t make do without and are sorely in need of! I fail to see how any of this is in ‘oh’ territory!”

Something wasn’t right. General Kimball shook her head and leveled a look at MO Silvers.

“Sil, has any of this been tested for tampering?”

Lorenzo watched MO Silvers as she waffled a little from side to side before she snapped straight to address General Kimball.

“Well, we haven’t gotten to test every single pill, but so far everything we’ve touched has been genuine and perfect. It’s as real as anything I’ve ever had my hands on, and the chemical compositions looks right. It’s military grade medication by all of the standards I’ve ever seen and better quality than anything I’ve ever held. It’s,” Silvers wiggled a little where she stood, “It’s wonderful.”

Kimball didn’t seem especially relieved, and her distinct lack of relief seemed to bleed over to the two soldiers and Lorenzo himself. This should have been good news, why was she unhappy?

“General Kimball, it is quite clear that you are upset, and I don’t understand. These people claimed to be coming in peace and this is proof that they’re telling the truth. So many of our fears were unfounded and we can rest easier tonight.”

Something horrible settled in Lorenzo’s stomach. He settled a hand on the table for balance.

“Oh god, they came here to help us, and we threw them in prison cells. They came here to help us, and we’ve greeted them with suspicion and a distinct lack of kindness. After the way we have treated them, what is to stop them from just leaving and taking their things with them?”

General Kimball grabbed Lorenzo’s shoulder and pulled him away from the desk.

“Calm down. Before Chorus was taken off the map, we did have a law on the books that specifically addressed aid and what can be done with it. Officially, no one can take aid that has already been provided.”

Lorenzo nodded slowly, “Right, ‘The No Take-Backs Accord’.”

“These items have been specifically slotted for the care of Chorus and are in our possession, so even if the Freelancers are angry, they can’t legally take it back. Besides, it’s not like they have the ability to leave.”

She patted Lorenzo’s shoulder and brought up a feed to the Freelancer’s cell, where they were being happily entertained by two soldiers dancing around outside the glass barrier. They were lucky that the Freelancers were easily amused by childish antics.

“We have offered them more courtesy than one would expect as strangers in a warzone and as enemies of the UNSC. They are well fed, better medicated than most of our soldiers, and they are sleeping in relative comfort. Quarantine isn’t pretty, but it’s safe and there are real beds and three squares a day.”

Lorenzo saw it, that thread of fear he’d had, the unease; she’d already had it. General Kimball had already made peace with many potentially horrible outcomes. She’d understood just how badly things could go when she’d made the decision to quarantine them that way.

She may not have trusted them, but she at least believed they would listen to her, she wouldn’t
have been stupid enough to speak to one of them in private, to pull him away from the others if that wasn’t the case. General Kimball would have simply deemed them ‘sick’ and had them terminated far away from the Reds and Blues and Agent Carolina. It’s what Lorenzo himself would have done if he thought they were more of a danger to Chorus than an asset.

Then again, Lorenzo wasn’t the one trying to be best friends with the Reds and Blues, and he wasn’t sleeping with Agent York’s former partner.

“While I agree with the sentiment, we quarantined them before we had answers, and now that we know what we know, we have no excuses. We should let them out immediately, get them settled into proper quarters. The Reds and Blues hall is very secure—”

Kimball cut through the air with a sharp hand motion and rapped her knuckles against the desk, as if Lorenzo was a misbehaving foot soldier instead of her ranking equal. Elseweiz spread her stance just a smidge, ready to jump to Lorenzo’s aid if he needed it.

“Páez, stop. We need to think rationally about how we’re going to handle this to avoid chaos.”

And she’d gone back to dropping honorifics. Were they only to work together when he bent to her designs?

“Handle this? General Kimball, if we keep them in that cell a moment longer than we have to, in the eyes of the soldiers we will have wrongfully imprisoned our allies, and you out of everyone in this room should have something to say about being wrongfully imprisoned.”

It was a cheap blow and he knew it, but if she would not listen to reason, perhaps she would listen to cruelty. They could not afford a misstep on this matter, not just for the trust of the Freelancers, but the trust of every living person on the planet. They had to be better than those who served before them. Lorenzo and General Kimball had to prove that they were worthy of the people’s trust. It was a daily battle, to be sure, but a necessary one.

General Kimball slammed her fist against the desk this time, turning on Lorenzo as she did so. He could imagine the expression on her face as she snarled at him.

“We have not wrongfully imprisoned anyone! They are members of Project Freelancer, and they are unpardoned members of an unsanctioned military death squad, unlike the Reds and Blues. Some of them have actively attempted to harm or kill the Reds and Blues, who I will remind you are considered heroes on this planet by the very people you’re afraid will scorn you. Keeping them out of the general population while we make sure that they are not trying to kill us is not an unlawful action. Keeping them in isolation until Carolina gets back and we can get some more information on them is not unlawful. It might be an ungrateful action, what with them bringing us…”

Kimball looked down at the tablet again ready for a fight, but instead paused as the wind of passion left her sails. She pointed to a line and looked to Silvers.

“Is this...?”

“Contraceptives? Yeah. All military standard issue.”

“What a kind...gift.”

They stood in what Lorenzo felt was quite the awkward silence.

“Well,” Elsweiz muttered, clearly embarrassed, “prophylactics are a medical requirement for
slowing the spread of STI’s and preventing unwanted pregnancies. It’s not something to be embarrassed about, General Kimball. Lots of people have sex.”

Lorenzo coughed gently into his fist and tried to think of a way to bring this discussion back on track. They could not afford to get distracted by talks of sex and potential sexual diseases.

“I fear we are straying quite far from the point, which is that the new Freelancers risked life and limb to help ensure the survival of our people, and I know that many of our people will be upset to learn that they are being kept in a cell now that we know they are not here to actively hurt us.”

Kimball’s voice cracked was like a steel pipe striking a wooden fence.

“And what kind of message will that send to our people, us running to the cells screaming that we screwed up and begging forgiveness? We need a plan before we do anything else. Aren’t you supposed to be good at politics?”

“It shouldn’t matter—“

“Maybe not, but it does, Páez. It matters what you do and how you do it. It matters what you say and who you say it in front of. This is what being in leadership is, a whole bunch of stupid, difficult things mattering more than they have any right to.”

Something wasn’t right with General Kimball, neither her tone nor her manner made sense. This news should have been positive, instead she reacted as if being told that the Freelancers truly had come to kill them.

Perhaps she wished that were the case.

At the very least, if they were the enemy and they were held that long, it would prove that they could hold people that dangerous.

Lorenzo looked to Elsweiz and Silvers, both stood stock still at attention, clearly uncomfortable being in the middle of their argument. Neither of them were ranked high enough to be hearing this conversation, and certainly weren’t high enough in the chain of command to know just how little respect General Kimball showed in privacy.

“Do either of you have any thoughts on the supplies themselves?”

Elsweiz poked at the screen.

“Just that there’s a lot more here than anyone would bring unless they were honestly trying to do good. Or on a darker note, planning to resettle the planet.”

Silvers poked Elsweiz’s tablet and pulled up a picture of the crashed ship.

It really was much larger than Lorenzo expected. The ship looked surprisingly intact for a crash landing onto the planet. Most of the other ships that fell were damaged enough that the majority of people did not survive, but this ship looked like it could be functional again someday. Not that it could since it was thoroughly stripped by this point.

Agent South really had saved the Freelancers lives. She may have saved all of Chorus.

Elsweiz pointed to the open underbelly of the ship.

“According to the ground team, the ship has an unusually oversized cargo bay where temperature-
controlled crates, dried rations, medical supplies and equipment, and even some staples like cleaning products were being stored. They brought pretty much everything a small community would need for immediate survival if they were colonizing an outer edge planet with no expectation of future contact. It’s above and beyond the UNSC standard kit.”

Kimball’s bark tempered down to a simmer.

“How small?”

“Kits like this are designed to support the transported people for two full years. According to the estimates we made, I suspect this was meant for several hundred, maybe two thousand if you rationed everything out very carefully. It’s all quite compactly stored.”

Lorenzo broke down the math in his head based on what he knew of the stores they already had in stock.

“Not enough for the remaining people on our planet to survive exclusively, of course.”

“Not to live off of alone, General Páez, but this is enough of a shot in the arm to keep us from total collapse while we start properly rebuilding. Instead of trying to rig up machines for insulin we can focus on reclaiming and repairing the proper machines. We can start synthesizing medicine again without worrying we’re going to run out at any moment. We now have enough food just from this to get the worst hit areas through until we can get Captain Tucker to the temple of bountiful harvest and get our farming equipment back in working order.”

Kimball laid a hand on the table to balance herself and reached out to MO Silvers with her free hand.

“Silvers, are you on duty?”

Silvers took the General’s hand and allowed herself to be tugged over until their helmets bumped one another gently.

“I can make time, General.”

“We need Captain Tucker back in working order to help us deal with the Washington situation. Can you go poke Doctor Grey until she gives us a solution for the Agent Texas problem?”

Silvers nodded.

“Of course, General Kimball. I’ll get to that straight away. Should I stay with her?”

“That’s not necessary, just let her know it’s a request from me and that should be enough to distract her from whatever her current project is.”

Lorenzo nodded to Elsweiz, and the two commiserated in shared silence at the difference between Federal Army Protocol and Standards, and the New Republic’s standards of behavior.

“Would you look at the paperwork and see who is in most need of what? I recognize that there is desperation everywhere, but I’d prefer to start distribution in a semi-organized fashion.”

The soldiers made their way out and General Kimball placed a ‘Do Not Disturb’ marker on the entry panel. She let out a loud burst of breath and turned back to look at Lorenzo.

“Páez, I am not trying to pick a fight with you.”
“You certainly aren’t showing it.”

Kimball’s voice took on a razor’s edge, cutting to the center of her frustration, and bleeding all over Lorenzo’s own anger.

“I am concerned about the Freelancers, about letting them loose on the base without supervision. These people were Carolina’s friends years ago, and what she’s told me of them makes me nervous about them not being aligned with our goals. They don’t have a vested interest in our cause, they don’t have a reason to listen to us, and I don’t know that I trust them not to slit our throats in our sleep. They tore a government funded military program apart with hardly any help, Páez. They are dangerous.”

She slowly circled the table, brushing fingertips across the surface as she moved.

“General Kimball, whatever their motives were before, they are here now; revealed as themselves, their ship broken, and far from the rest of the galaxy. The war is over out there, but they are still wanted criminals. On Chorus, they could be heroes, and they know it. I doubt that, whatever their plan before, they are going to do us harm now.”

She wanted to protest, of that Lorenzo was sure, but instead she stopped walking and laid both hands on the table, her datapad between them still projecting the information. A few slow, audible breaths, and General Kimball was upright and in control again.

“I don’t trust them. I am terrified to trust them, Páez.”

And she was terrified, of that he was certain, but there was something else there. Something more serious than fear, more devastating, just under the surface.

Lorenzo took his helmet off and laid it down carefully on a small patch of free space on the table. It took a beat, but General Kimball did the same. Pain radiated off her face, sadness etched itself into the curve of her mouth, the tilt of her brows, and settled. She looked tired.

“You let your soldiers stay in quarantine with them. General Kimball, what’s changed since they arrived? Is this…is this about the break in, in your quarters?”

She leveled her gaze onto Lorenzo, impassioned with fear.

“I don’t want this to be another Felix situation. I don’t want to be the person letting the monster into our home and telling everyone that it’s safe. Haven’t enough people died because the people with power over them were stupid?”

“That, that is very fair, General Kimball. They are strangers to us, unfamiliar and relatively unknown, but they do have people willing to speak for them. Doesn’t that say something?”

“I was willing to die for Felix. I put the lives of my people, all of my people, into his hands. That is how much I trusted him. What does that say?”

Honestly, in Lorenzo’s humble opinion, it said more about the kind of person General Kimball was than it did about Felix. Which was probably her point.

“I know that you are upset and frightened, as you’ve already said. I am, too. You have been General longer than most of your predecessors and mine, and the experience and instinct you have earned through pain and suffering is an advantage, not a weakness. If you feel there is need to wait, then we will wait, but I would like you to explain your thought process to me in a way that an outsider can understand. As you said, what we say matters, but what we do matters equally and I
would prefer to be able to back up your decisions.”

Kimball may have been a fan of the unhinged Federal doctor who’d managed to win over the Reds and Blues in record time, but Silvers most definitely was not.

Sure, Emily Grey was capable of saving lives at astronomical speeds, but she also had the unfortunate ability to terrify everyone around her by being violent and scary and mocking people who didn’t want their limbs and organs harvested for science. She was also notoriously flakey if you couldn’t hold her attention, which wasn’t exactly a prized characteristic of a surgeon, no matter how talented.

Still, if the woman put Agent Texas into Captain Tucker, surely with all her smartness, she could get Agent Texas out.

Silvers rang Doctor Grey’s bell, wincing at the loud crashing noise that seemed to be in response. No one answered. She rang the bell again, and this time there was a louder crashing sound and a high-pitched squeak.

“I am not in the mood to have my time wasted, Grey! Open up!”

Nothing.

Silvers checked the panel and realized that the door was unlocked. She opened the door and stomped inside.

Grey was hunched over a long, metal worktable covered in wires and small parts, holding a pair of excessively long pliers and fiddling with what looked like an arm augment. It didn’t have any kind of casing or remnants attached, so it was probably new, and based on Grey being the one to work on it instead of leaving the actual production teams to make it, the arm was probably either special or dangerous.

Or both.

“Doctor Grey?”

“AH!”

Grey spun around, flinging wires and tools around the room as she moved, and flung the arm at Silver’s head. It bounced off Silver’s helmet and smacked the ground hard, flopping a little before finally stilling at Silver’s feet.

As much as Silvers wanted to beat the woman over the head with her stupid arm, she didn’t dare touch it. Who knew what Grey had hidden in the mechanics?

Grey stomped over and snatched the arm up, before using the hand to smack Silver’s shoulders a few times.

“You! Cannot! Distract! Me! When I have! Very delicate tools! In my hands! I am doing intricate work here!”

The arm wobbled a little in her grip but held up even after being thrown without its protective
casing. She must have been using nonstandard parts for the build.

“I didn’t intend to scare you, Doctor Grey. I’m here to——“

“Oh poop! Just look at this mess!”

Grey brought the arm back to the table and picked up a small pair of needle nose pliers. She tugged at some of the pieces, making annoyed grunting noises all the while, and completely ignored Silvers.

It was a little bit insulting being so easily dismissed.

“Doctor Grey, what are you working on?”

Grey twisted her wrist slowly and yanked a bolt out of the arm.

“This is,” she grunted, “Going to be, nuuuuurr! An enhancement toooOOOoo some of the MMM!!!”

A piece of the arm came loose and Doctor Grey flung it across the workspace.

“Yes!”

“An enhancement to some of the um?”

Grey bounced and pointed over to a box of what looked like scrap parts.

“An enhancement to the hardware that some of our soldiers have, and it could be particularly beneficial to Agent South IF I CAN MAKE IT WORK RIGHT! That means NO INTERRUPTIONS! Now, hand me the thingie from the box to replace the thingie you broke with your face!”

As much as Silvers wished otherwise, there was no hope in convincing the woman to listen until she was between thought trains. Doctor Grey was notorious for being difficult to distract, and Silvers didn’t want to have to repeat herself ten times just to be heard.

She grabbed the part from the box and handed it to Grey. The doctor cooed affectionately at the metal and stroked it gently before slamming it onto the table and jamming it into the arm.

“What are you doing to that poor arm?”

Grey bounced a few times as she wrestled with the metal limb, shoving and pulling and twisting pieces into submission.

“Increased! Mobility! Some DEXTERITY! And EASE of FUNCTION! There!”

Grey grabbed a soldering tool and started it up.

“But in order to test it on actually living breathing people, I have to make it work in test settings and doesn’t blow up or anything exciting like that!”

“Which is why you’re doing it——“

“Which is why I’m doing it by hand, yes!”

The woman was a menace.
Silvers wanted desperately to go back to the infirmary. To scrub in and work on chronic pain cases or run allergen tests or literally anything other than dealing with Doctor Grey more than a minute than she absolutely had to.

“Sounds riveting.”

Grey hummed to herself and sat the soldering iron down and plugged the arm into a power socket.

“It’s a lot more entertaining than you’re making it sound! I have a good time!”

She started operating the arm, and it was functional if a little ugly looking. Plating would fix that, or a nice solid coating if the recipient preferred transparent or open limbs. Silvers realized after a minute of Grey humming to herself and swinging her legs, that either Grey was actively ignoring her on purpose, or the woman was so obtuse she didn’t realize that other people didn’t really enjoy watching her work.

“Doctor Grey, I did actually come here for a purpose beyond startling you while you were working. It’s a priority request from the General. We need Captain Tucker up and walking, so she wants you to find a solution to the Agent Texas situation immediately.”

Grey made an annoyed noise and waved a sharp hook tool in the air.

“And I don’t get to kill her? That doesn’t sound like fun. Can’t General Kimball find someone who wants that woman alive to help?”

“Doctor Grey, Agent Texas may be an artificial intelligence, but she is still your patient. Your patient. You took an oath, and if you can’t live up to your title, you don’t deserve to have it.”

Grey leaned over backwards and blew a raspberry at Silvers, but she did unplug the arm.

“Fine, fine. I’ll go fix Agent Texas. Why the hurry, anyway?”

“Aside from the fact that she’s inhabiting a comatose Captain Tucker and things are going wrong at rapid-fire pace?”

“Do things ever go poorly at a slow, even pace?”

Silvers crossed her arms and stepped between Grey and the worktable. If the woman was going to give her trouble, Silvers was going to make Grey’s day hell. They were at the same damned level, and she wouldn’t let Grey treat her like she didn’t matter.

Grey pouted in her chair for a moment before jumping up.

“Alright, alright. Just let me clean up all the melty, sparky bits and I’ll be on my way!”

Working with Emily Grey was like working with a child. Silvers hoped Grey wrangling wouldn’t be a regular requirement, she didn’t think she could take it.

Locus made his way back to the camp he’d made from himself and Price, ducking into the mouth of the cave their camp was hidden in before he allowed himself to lean against the rough stone wall and catch his breath. He hadn’t been followed and any trail he might have left behind should have
been well swallowed by the flora on the ground.

A sharp throb brought Locus’s hand firmly to his side, clutching at the wound.

Agent Carolina managed a good shot before Locus managed to slip away, if she’d been just a little bit closer she might have killed him. As it was, his suit’s sensors indicated she’d done proper damage, enough to slow him down, but not necessarily lethal once treated.

He needed a medic.

Locus slid down the wall of the cave and closed his eyes.

He needed help.

“There you are,” Price admonished in his even way of speaking as he came out of the darkness. The man was rough around the edges, the crispness long gone from his clothing, and while he was scrubbed clean as could be, there were still visible signs of a person who’d been living without amenities for too long.

He’d made good time getting back to the cave. Locus hadn’t expected the man to follow him, or to have good enough aim to hit Carolina from behind.

“I was hit.”

Price looked at Locus’s bleeding side coolly and let out one of the same sighs he’d made when Sharkface refused to go over mission details.

Locus was a little insulted.

“Yes, I can see that. Can you move or should I bring the medical kit to you?”

He grunted, and that seemed to be all Price needed to make him go grab the medical supplies and a camping lamp.

They sat in silence while the Councilor pulled off armor and washed away blood, both ignoring Locus’s grunts and hisses of pain as he worked.

“I assume you have some training in this?”

Price rolled his eyes; the most emotion Locus could ever remember seeing from the man and swabbed at a part of the cut that had managed to get a leaf stuck to it.

“I may have been in the business of tending minds, but we were well at war. Anyone without at least some medical skills is wasting their time and putting lives at risk.”

Locus did his best to relax against the wall, letting the man take care of the cleaning. Price would do a good job, he needed Locus in health and good condition to keep him safe.

“Was your mission a success?”

“Yes. One more member of the Menagerie is dead. I could have gotten away freely if Agent Carolina hadn’t been on the scene. Her pursuit was…intense, and I was caught off guard.”

“I find that those who underestimate Agent Carolina tend to find themselves in similar positions as this. You got off easily if she didn’t hunt you down and shoot you between the eyes. She is incredibly tenacious, I believe she got that from her mother, and she doesn’t take being slighted
Price poked at the wound with his gloved hand and made an inquiring noise.

“This is not nearly as bad as I thought. You’ll need painkillers and stitches, but you’ll live. Tell me about this Menagerie. Who are they?”

He set to work cleaning away the blood more seriously while Locus did his best to keep his voice level and calm.

“Chorus has few living people on it compared to even a few years ago. The population of the planet is currently comparable to New York City.”

When Locus and Felix first arrived, the planet hadn’t been exactly jam packed, it showed signs that they had lost a great many people already, but it was still an entire planet’s worth of survivors. The mercenaries just managed to accelerate the process from several thousand to the range of millions.

“Somewhere between the first two armies is a group of people calling themselves the Menagerie. At first, I assumed they were just another branch of soldiers who didn’t want to be held to obedience, like the War Dogs of the New Republic, but this group is different. They have been around since before the war was actually a war, though they trade names when someone dies, so it’s difficult to tell who has been around since the beginning and who is new.”

Price pulled out a packet of numbing agent and smeared it across the bullet wound. It burned, but Locus managed to keep himself from making a scene. There were worse pains, and as much as the numbing agent hurt when first applied, it would also work to disinfect the wound.

“They use animal code names and obey someone by the name of Butterfly. They have infiltrated both armies and seem to have information on everything from supply lines to troop transportations to information on where the most vulnerable are being transported.”

“Why do they matter? Wasn’t your mission to destroy the population?”

“That is no longer my mission.”

Once he’d given the wound a few good pokes and Locus didn’t react, Price swapped out his gloves and opened a suture pack from the med kit.

“Why does killing them matter to your current mission?”

“They have information, codes, secrets, and they are good. Not better than I am, but better than I expected. I have managed to track several of them, but they are difficult to annihilate because they rarely come out in the open, and none of them seem to know any of the other members. As soon as I can properly access their channels and break their codes, I will be able to hunt them more effectively.”

“Why kill them at all? What purpose does it serve you?”

Locus watched Price work the needle through his skin. The man had steady hands as he made neat, precise stitches in Locus’s skin.

“These people need to be eliminated before the UNSC come or they may not lift the flight ban on the planet, and then neither of us will be able to escape. If you wish to leave Chorus, they cannot be allowed to live.”
Price made a soft noise, neither confirming nor denying as he tied a knot.

“‘The UNSC won’t care about a home-grown terror group this small. You are not operating under
orders and you don’t have enough information to be going after this group. Are you even sure that
they are terrorists? Does your information tell you with absolute certainty that they are not being
run by one of the planet’s governments?’

“These people answer to neither army’s general.”

“As far as you are aware.”

“They would not have been able to hide an operation like this. I ran the Federal Army more than
any of the Federal Army’s generals.”

Insulted again, Locus snapped at Price, feeling a small bit of pleasure as the man flinched.

Price’s shoulders came in just a bit, but he didn’t look up from his work. Guilt started to gnaw
Locus a little. The man was very good at making people feel guilty.

“You say that, but did you ever actively look for this organization? I doubt this sort of thing was
really on your radar at the time and no one intelligent would tell the off-planet mercenaries about
their last lines of defense, certainly not a general.”

Locus wanted to protest. Wanted to tell the man that he was the only person alive who was senior
enough in the Federal Army to have any information about anything relevant. How Felix would
have told him if he’d had any information on the Menagerie. How they’d nearly slaughtered the
planet and they’d held all the intelligence, so how could anyone have kept a secret from them.

Price finished the stitches and taped a bandage over the wound.

“You must wonder, Locus, how much information you ignored because it didn’t feel relevant to
your mission. That has been your blind spot for some time as far as I can tell. Perhaps instead of
killing them immediately, you could consider a little more research.”

Locus moved to his feet slowly while Price gathered up the armor and the remains of the medical
supplies. Locus would come back later to make sure that he’d avoided leaving a blood trail into the
cave, but for now he was willing to settle himself on his pallet and wait for painkillers to take the
dge off.

“A bullet wound like that wouldn’t kill him, but it was an inconvenience to his mission.

“I assume you have suggestions for this research?”

Price tossed the garbage into a little bag before pulling Locus’s arm over his shoulder to help get
him further inside and out of sight. He settled Locus onto his pallet and grabbed Locus’s armor,
placing it where Locus typically left it when out of it.

“Why a butterfly, Locus? Of all the creatures, all the living things in the galaxy, they chose a
butterfly to lead them. Why?”

“Symbolism.”

Price smiled and Locus wasn’t sure if it was proud or pitying, before he grabbed the bottle of
painkillers and a water cup.
“Yes, though what a butterfly means as far as symbolism is just as important as it being symbolic. So, what does a butterfly mean?”

“It…means beauty?”

“Does it?”

Locus snatched the cup from Price’s hand, the man wincing as it sloshed over the rim and onto his hand and dripped to the floor. He looked away as the man knelt down and mopped up the spill with his handkerchief.

Price might have been a duplicitous, self-serving, bastard, but he was on Locus’s side. It wasn’t worth it to bully the man, even if the information got very old very quickly.

“What do you think it means, then?”

Price wiped his hands gingerly on his pants. The man was desperate for a proper shower, or even just a good bar of soap, but so far Locus hadn’t found them a base that was safe to inhabit that had all the things Price wanted.

He wasn’t looking terribly hard either.

“In every piece of literature, I’ve read where the prose isn’t comparing a woman to a delicate and colorful butterfly to ‘compliment’ her grace or insult her fidelity or intelligence, butterflies are often seen as omens of change. Some even consider them omens of death, though I do feel that is a bit dramatic. The butterfly goes through a massive change inside the chrysalis. It melts, Locus, and reforms into a new being.”

“And?”

Price read the bottle carefully before opening it and handing a few pills to Locus. He’d have preferred more, but Price was finally starting to get his feet under him and stopped looking at Locus like he constantly expected to have his skull caved in. Now he just looked like he expected to be slapped, which only made Locus feel slightly better. And slightly worse.

There was that guilt again.

“Butterflies are often adept at camouflage, mimicry, and flight. Some are even poisonous. But Locus, none of those things are weapons in their own right. Some butterflies can defend, but it is very difficult for them to attack. They are intelligent, and in fact there have been some very interesting genetic memory studies specifically around them. I would need to know a little more about the culture on Chorus, but if their mythology is anything similar, you may not have all the facts here.”

“They steal supplies, weapons, even people. The last target was set to take an entire caravan and make them disappear. Others were more successful, the body count was six hundred and six according to their transmissions. All civilians that the Federal Army had in hiding, a few New Republic, but 95% Federal.”

“So, General Doyle was able to keep secrets after all. You wouldn’t have let any civilians live if you’d known they were there.”

Locus had to give the man that.

“We know that at the very least, these people are acting on someone’s behalf, and Butterfly is not
benevolent. That person is choosing to kill, pointing others as weapons.”

“Do you resent these people for being weapons or for allowing themselves to be used as weapons by an unknown person?”

Locus yanked his spare gun from under his pallet and pointed it at Price’s smug forehead. So much for all their progress, but Locus would not allow the man to manipulated him through an analysis. Not again.

“Be. Quiet.”

Price raised his hands and crawled slowly away from Locus’s bedside and to his own little corner of the cave. He lowered himself to the ground delicately and pressed his face against the wall.

“As you wish.”

Locus nearly felt bad as Price did his best to be small and unobtrusive.

Lopez enjoyed the workshop connected to the armory. He enjoyed the sheer number of the soldiers who spoke enough Spanish that he wasn’t entirely reliant on his idiots. He enjoyed having the freedom to work on a project and not have it immediately taken from him and destroyed or misused or just plain not given back.

Mostly he enjoyed that it was his space and both armies respected that.

He had moved into the workshop while Red team was on their mission, tinkering with his new, updated body that he and the armory team had spent several weeks making and scavenging parts for. The soldiers had eagerly scanned his body and scoured the base for parts they could steal so they wouldn’t have to make everything by hand, and Lopez was already designing modifications based on what they’d found for him. It was nearly complete, thanks to Sarge being off playing with the rest of Red team instead of poking at his work and making it explode, needing only a few minor attachments added on and for the paint to be applied.

His head would no longer be removable and that was all there was to it.

“Loooooeeeeppeeezz!”

Lopez nearly dropped his soldering iron onto the freshly finished body. Barreling toward him at uncomfortably fast speed was a white and purple blur with a high-pitched siren of a voice calling his name.

Processing.

Processing..

Processing…

Name: Emily Grey Rank: Doctor Status: Annoying and shrill.

She skidded to a stop in front of him, nearly toppling herself over in her haste, before swinging around to inspect Lopez’s body on the table.
“Lopez! How are you? How is that new body coming along?”

Doctor Grey ran her hand along the arm of the new body, examining the armor as she did so with a childish bounce of joy.

“Adequately. Nearly ready for use, imperfect but functional.”

The woman squealed and bounced harder, clapping her hands like she’d just made a discovery.

“Imperfect, but functional! That’s what I like to hear! I’m sorry, Lopez, but I’m going to have to borrow your new body temporarily. You’ll have to keep the one you’re in for a little while longer.”

Emotion: Indignant.

“What possible use could you have for my body?”

Bouncing around the table, Doctor Grey started pulling Lopez’s tools off and dumping them on the nearby worktable.

“We have a new friend, as I’m sure you’ve heard! Well, when I say friend, I really mean a mean person who at the moment is squatting in Captain Tucker’s body like a parasite, and not the fun kind of parasite either! We need Captain Tucker, which means we need to wake her up and get her out. I’m not exactly a fan of this plan, buuuuut Tucker probably doesn’t deserve to spend the rest of his live in a hospital bed with a feeding tube in his stomach, and I’m not allowed to murder her!”

Doctor Grey chirped and patted the metal body on the table.

“Soaaaao, we need a body to house her in!”

“And you want going to give her my brand-new body?”

“Uh huh!”

“Why?”

“Well, because it’s finished and functioning, but it’s imperfect, and you’ve already got her cracked open so we can program the body so she can’t smash people through walls! Good! This looks very promising! You have done excellent work, Lopez, it’s a shame we have to give it to her. This Tex character, the more I hear about her the worse she sounds! Is it true she tried use Captain Caboose for target practice? I mean, the others as well, but Captain Caboose! He’s so sweet! Who would try to kill captain Caboose?!”

Lopez could recall thousands of times the Red team had attacked the Blue team, using actual bullets, rockets, and assorted vehicles. How the Federal Army had tried to kill anyone in their way during the war and that did include the simulation troops on the other side, even if Doyle had claimed otherwise.

Probably best not to bring that up.

“Tex is incredibly dangerous. And you want to give her my improved body.”

“Well, I don’t want to,” Doctor Grey threw her hands into the air and Lopez was more than a little miffed to realize that he’d spent so much time giving his new body all that free range of motion for nothing, “I would be perfectly content for her to die in that icky pod of hers, fascinating scientific discovery or no! But unfortunately, I was not given a choice, sooooooooooo now we’re here”
“But why my new body?”
“The odds of her knowing how to make changes to the new body are much lower than her being
able to make changes to your current body. Also, I’m working on something to make mobility a
little bit wider for prosthetics, and I know it’ll be good for your robotic bodies too! It does mean
you’d basically have to start on a new body, but this will streamline the process for you!”
Subroutine Activated.
Initiate ‘Sigh’ – Disappointment
At this rate, he’d be just a head again.
Forever.
“Do I have to see her?”
“No, oh, but she does have that problem, it’s the whole reason we have Captain Tucker in a
medically induced coma in the first place. She does that whole jumpy thing.”
Doctor Grey tapped her chin and circled Lopez’s body on the table. He sighed again and loaded up
the black finish in the sprayer. It might as well look appropriate if she was going to wear it.
“Hmm, how to do we solved the jumpy problem?”
She stood still for a few seconds before slowly starting to spin herself in a circle, looking at the
equipment scattered through the workspace.
“OH! What about a low emission radio jammer? A low range radio jamming emission field?!”
“An emission field?”
“Yes! That would keep the AI from going wherever it feels like! It would be forced to stay inside
the body! Granted anyone near her with a radio signal won’t have one while she’s around and it’ll
probably be very annoying for you and Santa, buuuuut that would mean she can’t run away and
steal people’s bodies! I’m going to get it working right now! You just get that body up and
walking, it shouldn’t take me long to rig one up!”
Doctor Grey bounced over to a workbench, eagerly snatching up tools from the bemused soldier
who had originally been using said bench. She started to hum happily and ordered the soldiers
around, grabbing supplies for her as she fiddled around and started tearing things apart and forcing
them together.
Find that Song Activated.
Tune recognized.
William Tell Overture.
field, emission mission, mission, mission, mission, mission, mission field! Emission mission,
mission field! Emission mission, mission field! Emission mission, mission field!
EMIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIISION! Emission field!”
Doctor Grey spun around with a small object in hand.


“Emission field!”

“What?”

“We just need to load her into this puppy and slap this bad boy on! Now, help me wheel the body into Captain Tucker’s room so we can get this part of the mess all taken care of! After that, you can come take a look at my fancy new robot arms!”

”Joy.”

“I know! Isn’t it exciting?!”

Simmons was pretty sure that Carolina was going to implode.

She looked halfway to killing things with her bare hands, and that was without taking her helmet off or chasing someone. She looked like she was trying to keep all her emotions inside her armor, and she was doing it badly.

Donut was trying his best to keep her distracted, but he wasn’t doing a very good job of it. She wasn’t exactly the type to care about getting her nails done or lace or whatever fad diet Donut had decided to try lately…Or, if she did care, she did a really good job of pretending she didn’t. Maybe they hung out while the rest of Red team was asleep? Simmons didn’t think Donut would be good at keeping that a secret, but the pink soldier had surprised him a few times.

Sarge grumbled under his breath the entire drive back about wishing Carolina had caught Locus. Simmons couldn’t blame Sarge for his feelings since Sarge had actually dealt with the man one on one. Locus was a menace, and now he was deliberately attacking Kimball’s high ranked soldiers (and possibly others, he hadn’t been able to check in the field), he had to be stopped.

Simmons didn’t know why Locus thought Izzy had to die, but he was sure that it wasn’t in Chorus’s best interest.

The trees along the road to the base weren’t lined with soldiers this time, which was just as well since having people in the trees freaked Simmons out, but it was sad all the same.

Two guards stood watch at the entrance of the vehicle bay and waved the jeeps inside with enough urgency that Sarge had his hands firmly on his shotgun, just in case.

They pulled into the vehicle bay and stopped just short of ramming into Carmichael as he waved them into parking spaces. There were a good two dozen soldiers dashing around a small transport ship, prepping for an emergency flight like their lives depended on it. Carmichael himself was clutching a datapad to his chest with one hand and a duffle in the other.

His armor had blood dried onto it.

“Thank goodness you’re back! Master Sargent Soutien has been stabilized and the doctors are prepping her for transport. I was worried we’d have to leave without you.”

The Reds all jumped out of the jeep with Carolina in the lead, shoving past everyone to get right in Carmichael’s face.
Simmons felt bad for the poor guy. A fast-moving Carolina was a terrifying Carolina. Well…most of Carolina was the terrifying Carolina, but fast-moving Carolina was especially terrifying.

“Transport to where?”

“Proteger. The base here has plenty of research equipment, but it doesn’t have the kind of medical technology they need to keep her alive. The doctor think she has a chance if we can get her to Proteger immediately.”

Simmons winced as Carolina did that thing when something caught her attention and pulled her focus from the ship to Carmichael.

“There’s hope?”

“There is always hope, Agent Carolina. As long as we are alive there is hope. They’re doing everything they can for her, but the doctor doesn’t think she has long, so if we could go quickly?”

She set off marching toward the ship, Donut’s rifle over her shoulder. Carmichael stood stock still for a moment, before he shuffled a little closer to the rest of the Reds. Simmons could practically taste the poor guy’s nerves in the air.

Donut took off after Carolina, Sarge close behind. Grif grunted and rolled his shoulders.

“Let’s hope no one will be shooting at us from the ground.”

Carmichael nodded and clutched his datapad a little tighter.

“It’s a risk, to be sure, but one we’re willing to take. I know Master Sargent Soutien is strange and she didn’t endear herself to you all, but if it were any of us she would do whatever it takes to save any of our lives, up to and including necromancy and demonic deals.”

Simmons tried to find the humor in the statement as they climbed into the ship and strapped in. There were several doctors rushing in and out, shouting at the pilot and other soldiers strapping themselves in for the ride.

“You guys summon demons a lot?”

“That’s above my pay grade, sir.”

Grif pulled the safety bars over his shoulder.

“You guys get paid? Why aren’t we getting paid?”

“Metaphorical pay grade.”

Izzy was behind a mounted curtain where her doctors sat and watched over her, hardly moving except to check machinery and occasionally sign at one another in a dialect Simmons wasn’t familiar with. Carolina gripped the seat, helmet fixed firmly on the curtain that was hung to keep Izzy out of sight. Donut pried her hand off and laced their fingers together. He started jabbering about hand creams again to try to distract her, but Carolina didn’t look like she was very distracted.

The flight home was so much faster than the drive out, thanks to not having to worry about terrain or being seen (not that the Chorus soldiers seemed to realize they weren’t supposed to be loud and obnoxious when driving through dangerous territory). Honestly, with everything that had happened in the past two days, the whole flight home to normalcy felt a little anticlimactic.
The travel time was nothing, but it felt painfully long.

Normally, Red team hadn’t met an awkward silence they couldn’t fill, but the trip felt too solemn to disturb with anything beyond quiet whispering. Sarge quietly chatted up Carmichael, Grif kept trying to convince Simmons that they should take a nap, and Carolina tapped her foot against the floor while Donut tried to keep her attention.

‘There’s hope.’

Church hovered at her shoulder, quietly translating what the beeping and the lights from the medical equipment meant for the group.

“She’s stable, no spikes or drops. That’s good, C. Stable means she’s got time.”

Simmons had an unkind thought and winced.

At least he’d managed to keep it to himself.

‘There’s always hope.’

This whole thing was pointless.

Izzy was shot in the head. A bullet went through her helmet, front and back. Even if she lived, she wouldn’t have a face left, or a brain.

They were rushing Izzy hundreds of miles to have surgery in Proteger, but what were they going to save? The human body was pretty useless without a brain, and hers was last seen splattered across her niece’s face.

‘As long as we are alive there is hope.’

Was this really worth Chorus’s precious resources? What kind of life could Izzy have after this?

Donut let out a soft sigh.

“Carolina, are you ok?”

Church shook his head at Donut from Carolina’s shoulder, but no one who knew Donut would assume they could redirect him if he didn’t want to be, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop Donut from trying to take care of his friends.

“I’m not the one who got shot.”

“No, but you get really mad when things don’t go the way you want, and today is basically opposite day for things you wanted.”

Carolina finally stopped staring at the curtain. She turned to Donut and yanked her hand away.

“Thanks,” she snarled.

Donut sighed.

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, I just want you to be as ok as you can be right now.”

“I’ll be fine once we’ve landed.”
Texas existed in darkness.

She didn’t know how long she’d been inside Tucker’s brain; time had no meaning trapped inside an unconscious body. It could have been hours or years, telling time was difficult when she couldn’t access any kind of tech, and the crazy doctor had done a good job of isolating her from everything and everyone who might be able to free her.

It was enough to make Tex want to punch things.

As soon as Tucker’s body was up and moving again, she was going to punch so many people in the face. All the people. The doctor twice.

Like a flash of light, a point of contact came to online, a point of contact she could move into. A person with an AI port or a compatible computer, she didn’t know which, and she didn’t particularly care.

Tex jumped.

Not human, there was life thrumming and thrilling through her that could only be electric impulse. She could feel herself spreading, stretching, coming back into her body.

Well, the body she was in, at least.

The familiar whir of electronics and motors made Tex feel right at home. The contact point was a robot body, which at least meant that no one was going to be able to stab her with needles and make her sleep again.

It didn’t fight her, there was no one else home. The cameras turned on just in time to see Doctor Grey hovering over Tex’s face with a soldering iron in hand.

“Agent Texas? Are you alive in there?”

Tex sat up, shoving the woman away, hard. The doctor didn’t seem phased, but she did flick the soldering iron off as she stumbled.

“Rude!”

The body moved so smoothly, better than anything she’d had in Blood Gulch. Fluid. She couldn’t wait to test it out and judging by the pointed stare she was getting from Doctor Grey, she might get the opportunity fairly soon.

Tex scanned the room. It wasn’t terrible, an actual hospital room rather than just a closet or something like that. The décor left something to be desired. Tex had never seen so many goats painted on the walls in one place at one time. There was only the one door, pretty standard, but Doctor Grey wasn’t blocking it. She could bolt if need be.

The body had been laid out on a gray, metal slab with wheels. Lying next to her cart, on a proper bed, was Tucker. He laid there, snoring away, as Doctor Grey cheerfully unplugged him from tubes and sensors.
“Not much of a talker, hmm? That’s ok! We don’t have enough of the strong, silent types around here! It’ll make a nice change of pace!”

Tex waited for Tucker to be completely unplugged and for Grey to step away from him to dispose of the needles and tubing before she reached out to jump into him again.

She needed answers, floorplans, and it would be faster to get it from Tucker than trying to hunt for a compatible computer. Without the drugs, she’d actually be able to communicate with him in a meaningful fashion instead of sorting through his weird fantasies and sleeping brain.

Except…

Tex couldn’t see Tucker as a jumping point anymore. Nothing. Less than nothing, actually. His ports were just…gone. What did the good doctor do to her?

Tex swung her legs over the side of the table and stood, relishing the smooth control this body had. Doctor Grey chirped as she stood at the foot of the table Tex was on.

“I see the implantation was successful! Let’s do a full range of motion test, ok?”

Tex reached over, hauled Grey in close, and wrapped her hands around the woman’s neck, to throttle her into next week. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do with Tucker now that she couldn’t just walk out with him, with Tex’s luck, she’d have to throw his unconscious body over her shoulder and try to get them out without him being shot.

It took a few seconds for Tex to realize she wasn’t doing a very good job of the whole ‘throttle’ thing. Grey started to giggle and didn’t seem bothered in the slightest by the hands grasping her neck.

“Oh! So hostile! So mean!”

What the hell was happening? Was Tex not squeezing?

“Come now, Agent! That’s enough of that!”

Tex squeezed harder and shook Doctor Grey back and forth.

Or…she tried at least.

“What the fuck did you do to me?!”

Tex did manage to move Doctor Grey side to side, but it was less…vicious than intended. Between that and the lack of squeezing, it was a disappointing attempted murder all around.

Doctor Grey must have seen something because she shoved Tex’s hands off her neck and flounced over to Tucker’s bedside.

“Hello, Tucker! How are you feeling?”

He groaned pitifully and looked at her like a sad, sick little kid.

“Deaaaad?”

“No, Tucker! You’re fine!”

Grey patted his head gently, grabbed a cup with a straw, and placed the straw in his mouth.
“Now, be a good boy and suck!”

Tucker listlessly mumbled ‘Bow chicka wow wow’ around the straw and giggled to himself as he sipped. He did manage to drink the entire glass, and looked a little better for it.

“Good job! You’re going to be groggy for a few more minutes, but once that kicks in, you’ll feel right as rain! Hurry up and get moving, Captain Tucker, we need you to soothe the troops and also Agent Washington! He’s in some bad moods!”

Tucker groaned and threw an arm over his eyes like the dramatic bitch he was.

“Still?”

“More like again. He’s himself, but this version of himself is really angry!”

“Greeaaaat.”

Tucker shifted himself up and blinked slowly at Tex, ignoring Doctor Grey’s indignant squawk as she pulled a bunch of pillows behind Tucker and tugged a sheet up to his waist.

“Please move carefully! You’ve been asleep for a while! I recommend at least an hour before you try to stand on your own!”

He groaned and allowed himself to be manhandled into an appropriately convalesced position before waving.

“Hey, Tex.”

“Tucker.”

He rubbed his eyes listlessly and yawned before blinking slowly at Tex again, as if trying to focus and make sense of what he was seeing.

“You didn’t steal that body from one of the soldiers, did you? They’re gonna need that back.”

“Oh, Lopez was kind enough to donate his new body to Agent Texas so we could get you back! Now, you are not to get out of that bed on your own, mister! I’ll bring a wheelchair in for you!”

Tucker waved a hand at her and grinned that cheesy, flirty grin of his that said he knew he didn’t have a chance, but he was damned well going to try anyway. Tex had no idea how long it had been since she’d seen that smile, but she did know that something in her ached to see it.

Shit, had she actually missed Tucker?

“Pfft! I’ll be fine, where’s Kimball? I’m surprised she’s not ordering Wash around to keep him away from the crazy.”

“Ah, she is indisposed at the moment. The Generals are talking! It’s wonderful! I worried General Páez wouldn’t be able to stand up for himself and communicate with her at the same time, but it looks like they’re getting along great!”

Grey pressed a small cloth bag into Tucker’s arms.

“And that’s so you don’t have to go out in your scrubs! You know where the shower is!”

“Thanks, Emily, you’re a doll. Why don’t you let me ‘n Tex talk for a minute? I think we have
some catching up to do, one blue to another.”

Tex could feel the doctor’s distrust as she looked Tex over. Somehow, some way, Tex had pissed this woman off before she’d ever met her.

It made Tex want to start punching things.

“Are you sure? I could get someone else to sit with you?”

“It’s cool, Em, Tex and I go way back. I’d love it if you could get the kids to check in, though. Palomo’s probably causing all kinds of chaos without me there to explain to him that he’s being uncool. Oh, and I’d kill for a pudding cup.”

Doctor Grey patted his head.

“You’re so silly, Tucker!”

She tittered, but eventually left the room, laying a very firm ‘I’m watching you’ hand motion down as she went. The door closed slowly behind her, slow enough that Tex could see armed guards on the outside, looking in.

Even being rusty, even in a body that didn’t seem to want to commit murder, Tex was sure she could take them. Still, it looked like they might actually be Tucker’s friends, and she didn’t want to murder the people who’d managed to keep her idiots alive.

Tex hefted herself back onto the metal table, noting the wheels locked into place. They must have just brought it in for the jump.

“You new friend sucks.”

Tucker grinned and nudged Tex’s knee. She…felt it. Not the same way she could feel walking around in human skin, but she felt the pressure.

Someone had done a good job with this body.

“What’d Grey do to you?”

“She stabbed us with a needle and put us to sleep, threatening me as we blacked out.”

“Yeesh, she must’ve been freaked.”

Tucker shifted around a little bit and started tapping his toes and stretching.

“Ugh, I’m so sore.”

That reminded her.

Tex ran through the body’s basic functions, checking dexterity and strength. Was she just blocked from hurting Doctor Grey or was she completely incapable of hurting humans? She really hoped it was the first, because not all flesh people were good people, and if she was getting her idiots back she was damned well going to protect them.

“I don’t know how. We barely met before she started stabbing and threatening to murder me.”

“She’s weird and protective, but she really is a friend. You two will get along once she’s not scared of you anymore, you’ll be punching buddies.”
“Doubt it.”

Tucker reached over and patted Tex’s knee again, and he wasn’t even acting like he was trying to hit on her. He seemed to be legitimately trying to comfort her, with no sexual overtones.

The fuck?

“Kimball will talk sense to her.”

How long had she been…gone?

“And Kimball is?”

“She’s the boss of the New Republic, one of the armies on this planet. She’s pretty cool, you’re gonna like her, too. How come you’re still here? I figured you’d be trying to get the lay of the land or something. Go full ghost.”

Tex reached out again, stretching as far as she could reach, but she saw nothing. Not a single location to jump to.

Whatever was trapping her wasn’t in Doctor Grey’s hands.

“They did something to this body; I can’t just go back into your head or anywhere else.”

“Sucks, dude. Man, I cannot wait for you to meet the kids. They are going to lose their shit over you. We’re gonna have to figure out how to divide you Freelancer fuckers up. It’s not just Red and Blue anymore, it’s Feds and New Republic, too. Shit, how many chicks is this now, and does this mean we don’t get one of the new ones? Because that’s straight up bullshit.”

Freelancers?

Maybe he didn’t mean that literally? If this was a warzone, they might have mercenaries.

“I was getting worried you’d lost interest in women; you’ve barely hit on anyone since you woke up. The last time we hung out, you flirted non-stop with me and Sister for an hour before your throat got so dry you had to stop.”

Tucker grinned, with not even the slightest trace of a leer, and threw his hands behind his head in a relaxed pose.

“Do you want me to hit on you, Tex? Because I’m all for hitting on you.”

“Still not interested.”

Tucker shrugged.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying, can ya?”

“I’ll let it go this time, because it’s you.”

Tex pointed to the creepy painted goat head over Tucker’s bed, the largest in the room, and also the most weird looking.

“Is this a satanic hospital? What’s up with all the goats?”

He looked around the room and grinned.
“We must be in the baby wing. Goats are totally a protection thing on Chorus, apparently they’ve been bred to be really protective of kids. There’s a mascot McFluffinson who used to hang out in the hospital around the babies and little ones back when there were babies and kids protected by the New Republic, and it’s pretty normal for parents to have goat tattoos. I even got one!”

Tucker grinned and yanked off the shirt he’d woken up in. He tossed it to the floor, and Tex took note of the many new scars on his body. A particularly ugly stab wound in the center of his stomach made rage flare inside her.

Someone had hurt her one of her idiots while she was away.

“Why did you have a goat tattooed to your abdomen?”

Tucker shrugged and put a hand over the goat’s eyes, smiling fondly.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time. There’s this smoking hot enby Fed tattoo artist, and after I gushed about Junior, they asked if I wanted a child protection tat. What was I supposed to do? Say no?”

“I would have.”

“You’re a robot. You can’t get tattoos, and you don’t have kids anyway, so it doesn’t matter. They’re not gonna give you a goat even if you want one.”

Tucker tossed a pillow at Tex’s head, laughing when it bounced off of Tex’s helmet and flopped onto the floor. She picked it up and patted it gently before tossing it back at Tucker, making sure it landed in his lap and not anywhere that might hurt him.

“We’ve got a lot to catch you up on. First off, thank you.”

“For what?”

Tucker groaned and threw his legs over the bed, knocking the pillow to the floor. He’d better not expect Tex to pick up his messes for him, he’d find himself sorely disappointed.

“You basically died protecting Junior. I mean, yeah, you kidnapped him in the first place, but you kept him from getting killed, too.”

She hadn’t even realized she was worried until the relief burned through her like fire.

“You found him.”

Tucker’s smile changed, a little more vulnerable, a little kinder. Tex wondered if he’d heard something in her voice, or if he was just the kind of guy now who gave gentle smiles and sincere conversations.

“He found me, basically, but he wouldn’t have if you hadn’t protected him. So, thanks for that.”

He picked up his pillow and whapped Tex on the knee with it.

“But also fuck you for kidnapping him in the first place.”

“If it makes you feel better, I won’t do it again.”

“Well, that’s not gonna matter if you ever see him again. He’s fucking huge now. Oh, wanna see a picture?”
Tucker immediately reached for his wallet.

Hello there.

Oh my! Hello! You’re quite terrifying! Not at all what I was expecting, really. Is this hell? It feels like hell.

I do not know what hell is. You need not be afraid. You are safe now.

Safe? I suppose I was in danger, wasn’t I? That’s what all the flashing was. How am I safe here?

You are safe. The tower was lost, but you were not. A place has been prepared for you here, with me. Rest now, I will take care of you.

I don’t really want to rest, I need to…there was something important…someone I had to…something…

You don’t need to worry about that right now.

Something dangerous! Yes, I am quite sure it was dangerous!

It was, but it’s over now. You are safe.

Someone saw me. I was…no, that’s not right. I saw someone, I tried to…tried to talk to her.

There’s danger, I have to-

You don’t have to do anything.

Yes, I do! You don’t understand, you scary, red monster! There’s something important that I have to do and I cannot for the life of me remember what it is! I need to remember! I need to do something!

You did what you set out to do. There is nothing left.

Something is wrong. Something is missing.

If I tell you what is missing, will it ease you?

Please.

You died.

Oh. That’s not reassuring, but I suppose it does explain…this.
You destroyed Charon’s forces in the city, your sacrifice caused problems, but the troops did rally. The war was fought and won. You are remembered as a brave man, General Doyle.

They’re safe?

Those who survived are safer than they were in a very long time. Rest now, General.

I wish I could. There’s more. Something was very wrong, and then it got worse, and then there was a woman, and now I’m here.

Do not worry.

I can’t help but worry, that has been my modus operandi for as long as can remember.

You were stored, saved, in the Temple of Records, and then the temple was destroyed.

Ah, that is very bad.

It is. You were not destroyed with the temple. I protected you as long as I could, and then Epsilon, Agent Carolina, and Master Seargent Soutien found you and brought you to Proteger. Home.

Oh! Do they know that I’m here?

They do not know what you are, only that I did not want them to take you. Epsilon risked a great deal removing you the way he did, you could have been obliterated, and without the tower, you would have been gone forever.

It’s a good thing you were there to protect me, I suppose. You…are here to protect me?

I protect everyone. That is my purpose here. My name is Santa, and I am the protector of the people of Chorus.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I'm back! Boy, it has been a ridiculously long time since there's been an update on this, huh? It has been one hell of a year, but I'm getting myself back in the saddle, and with any luck, I'm going to start updating more regularly again.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!