Summary

Project Freelancer is experimenting with giving their Agents AIs to help run their equipment. They're vague on the details of how they procured the AIs in the first place. And why those AIs are so fucking stupid.

What's certain, though, is that PFL is in for a whole lot of chaos.

Notes

Come and shout at me if this isn't updated every Sunday

See the end of the work for more notes
Florida’s AI drops into his mind a furious tangle of code and snarled thoughts, ready to kill from the first second.

He’s perfect.

“How do you feel?” a technician asks him, clinical and cautious. The Counselor and the Director are watching him through a bulletproof one way mirror, he knows. There are many soldiers with guns just outside the operating theatre, he knows.

He could take them all if he wanted to, he knows.

“Just fine,” he says with his friendliest smile and his warmest voice as the AI somehow gives off the impression of spiking in his head, a ball of raging pain. Aw, poor guy. What had him in such a huff?

<I>, an unfamiliar voice says in his head, sounding indignant and ready for the rant of a lifetime, but then it just… trails off. <I don’t rightly know.> 

It’s an old man’s voice with a Southern accent. It’s charming, Florida thinks.

“Can you feel it?” the technician asks him, nervousness beginning to bleed through her clinical demeanor. He had volunteered to be the first one for an AI implantation, after all. To his understanding, the theory has been studied and researched rigorously before now, but they’re treading entirely uncharted territory here. Anything could happen. He could have a stroke and just die right here on the operating table. He could abruptly decide to go on a killing spree. He could lose his mind.

Worst of all possibilities, nothing might happen at all.

Florida gives her a reassuring smile. “I can feel him.”

Shoulder slump around the room, relieved sighs are released, and he’s fairly sure he can feel the Counselor making a list of questions to ask him about everything he says and does right now for later through the glass.

<Busybody,> his AI harrumphs disapprovingly. Florida lets his smile widen, knowing no one will know what he’s smiling about.
“Can you mentally communicate with the AI?”

“Yes.”

“Does the AI seem mentally coherent?”

“Yes.”

She’s asking an awful lot of questions, ain’t she,> his AI comments suspiciously.

Florida spends a moment on trying to figure out how to mentally project a response before giving up. He’s among people who knows that he’s got an AI in his head, it’s fine, he can figure out the entirely silent conversation thing later.

“That is her job,” he says mildly, accidentally cutting off the technician as she opens her mouth to ask another question. She stares at him, then starts scribbling something down in her notepad.

What follows is more questions. Many, many questions. With each one, his AI seems to grow more and more surly and agitated, until the Counselor and the Director deem him safe enough to enter the room.

When the Counselor steps inside the room, his AI falls abruptly silent. Considering the running commentary he’s had running the entire time until now, it feels a little… wrong.

“It is now time for practical testing,” the Director says. The technician that Florida has been speaking with until now snaps her mouth shut, looking like she wants to protest but is too afraid—

Florida is directed out of the room in the direction of the sparring gym, and he goes along with it amiably. As he walks past the Counselor, he feels something like the AI’s hackles raising, a venomous <That snake’s up to something, I can tell.> ringing out in his head. <Shifty looking bastard.>

Florida feels like he should be telling his AI that the Counselor’s a perfectly nice and friendly man, but it probably wouldn’t be too tactful to speak up and let him know to his face that his AI’s insulting him.

(Besides, deep down, he agrees with him. Not that he cares whether or not the Counselor’s up to something. Florida can look after himself.)

He enters the gym, and the Director and Counselor thankfully stay behind to look on from behind an observation window instead, allowing his AI to finally start to relax. As much as he can seem to relax at all, that is. Florida doesn’t mind, it’s good to be alert. Someone hands him his armor, and he thanks them.

<Blue?> his AI asks him incredulously. <There’s no accounting for taste, I suppose.>

“There’s no need to sound so mournful,” he says playfully, putting his armor on. “Blue’s a perfectly fine color!”

A nearby soldier gives him an unnerved look. Hmm, looks like he’ll be getting even more of those now that he’ll be talking to someone inside his head, then. He doesn’t mind that either.

He seals his helmet on, and with that a little holo projection of his AI pops up. Like a little red soldier in his armor, glowing a strong red. Florida smiles at him. His helmet hides it, but the AI
might be able to just know.

“This is a perfectly fine color,” he argues in a gruff voice. Florida thinks he can see all of the scientists behind the observation glass look very interested about this development.

Through another door, some of the other Freelancers enter. North, South, Carolina, and Maine. Florida gives them a cheery wave.

“Hey guys!” he greets them. “Meet my new friend--”

“Sarge,” his AI interrupts him.

(There’s an explosion of interest behind the glass.)

“My new friend Sarge.” What a nice name!

“Nice to meet you, Sarge,” North nods at the little holo projection of Sarge, and Maine does his friendly growl thing. South and Carolina just get into some battle stances at the sight of them. So tense! They should get a massage or something.

“Agent Florida,” a voice rings out through speakers set in the room. “Please spar with your teammates until you are told to stop. Follow the usual sparring rules, with the exception of making sure that you yourself don’t get too seriously hurt. Agents Maine, Carolina, North, and South: you are free to injure Agent Florida as much as you want, short of death.”

A pause.

“What?” North asks.

“You heard him, North,” Carolina says, recovering from her own shock with the aid of having someone else to scold over being shocked.

South cracks her knuckles. “Well, if it’s an order I guess we don’t have much of a choice, do we?” Her excitement for the coming fight is barely contained in her voice.

“I don’t think that lady likes you too much,” Sarge mutters to Florida in an aside. She definitely doesn’t.

“Now, now, I’m sure she’s just looking forward to a good spar! I know I am.” And he is. He can already feel the adrenaline beginning to affect him at the idea of a four against one fight.

Did North just shudder?

“Four against two,” Sarge corrects him, and his holo projection disappears. Back inside of his head in his entirety.

“My apologies,” he says sincerely.

“Anything short of death?” North asks incredulously, but it’s in a low enough tone that people can choose to pretend that they didn’t hear him.

“AI… Sarge,” the voice over the speakers says, its robotic voice almost uncertain for a second. Florida feels the AI perk up in his head at his name. “Try and use and learn the special unit installed in Agent Florida’s armor during this fight.”

Sarge brings up his holoform for a moment just so he can do a mini salute and bark “Yes sir!”
before disappearing again. Adorable.

<i>I am strong and stoic and manly, not adorable,> Sarge corrects him with a growl.

“Of course,” he says indulgently. Sarge growls in a distinctly unfriendly way at him.


Maine gets into a runners sprint pose, ready to beeline for him the second they start. No guns, so close quarters combat is pretty much their only option.

“Two.”

Florida idly wonders what the unit they installed in his armor does.

“Three.”

<i>Let’s kick their behinds!> Sarge exclaims confidently.

“Let’s,” he agrees, and then Maine collides with him.

It’s like being hit by a truck, which has happened to approximately everyone in the Freelancer program at least once, like a rite of passage. His breath is knocked out of him, and he focuses on getting Maine into a hold that’ll let him flip him off of himself before they stop tumbling across the floor and Maine gets a good grip on him, or else he’s screwed. Maine’s raw strength will beat Florida’s any day of the week.

He manages to get Maine off, and hurriedly gets back onto his feet, only to be immediately tackled back down by South. Right. Four against one.

“I’ve got you now, you bastard--” South snarls, and Florida cuts her off with a punch.

“This isn’t the time for revenge fantasies, South!” North cries out, which gives him just enough time to grit his teeth and turn his face so North’s boot doesn’t break his jaw or his teeth.

Revenge fantasy? Did she resent him for something he’d done? Sure, he’d broken her arm that one time during training, and her ribs during that other time in training, and her jaw and legs during that other time in training, but that had just been in good fun, hadn’t it? He decides to send her a fruit basket once this is over just to be sure.

He uses South’s dazedness from the punch to buck her off and roll onto his front to push himself up, the world spinning in front of his eyes from the kick, but he doesn’t pause for a second even as nausea wells up for him, doesn’t--

Carolina stomps down on his back, slamming him back down onto the ground. He usually excels in sparring, but he’s already getting trounced. Well, it is a four against one.

Wait.

No.

It’s four against two.

“Sarge,” he grits out, breathless and dazed and pained.

<i>Hang on for one more minute, son! I’ve almost got this unit thingamajig figured out!>
One minute. He can do one minute. He has to.

“What do we do now?” North asks from above him.

“Like they said,” South pants, getting up from the floor, voice tight and furious. “Seriously injure.”

Clearly, he really has to.

He gets his hands underneath him in a flash, and pushes himself up sharply. Carolina’s foot slipping off of him, and finally he’s standing. Surrounded on all sides by his four very competent enemies.

What follows are some of the most grueling yet exciting sixty seconds of his life.

South goes in for a sucker punch while Carolina tries to trip him back down onto the ground. He lets Carolina trip him just to escape the punch, but only lands on his knee, and then he springs up fist first, trajectory firmly headed for Maine’s face. Maine barely reacts to the punch, as always, and takes hold of his arm and twists, and Florida has no choice but to let his body follow the motion or lose that arm for the rest of the fight.

His feet are unsteady on the floor, stance weak and unsteady, arm still in Maine’s grip. North takes the opportunity to punch him in the gut, and Florida barely restrains a wheeze.

He kicks at whoever he can reach, hits something, hears someone yelp, and then South gets him in a headlock. He winds back as best he can and smacks the back of his helmet into her visor. Fact: the visors are the weakest part of their armor, and that includes the back of their helmets. He hears the crunch of glass, and then a torrent of South’s familiar cursing, but her chokehold on him only tightens. He doesn’t try and restrain his laughter, here. North grabs his one remaining free arm as he reaches back towards South.

Carolina steps in front of him.

“Anything short of death,” she repeats to herself lowly.

Florida is being held in place by three Freelancers. He is winded and wounded, can feel blood trickling down his temple inside of his helmet. The number one Freelancer, notorious for her brutality and loyalty to everything the Director orders, is standing in front of him and cracking her knuckles.

He feels so alive.

She winds up for a punch, and it doesn’t disappoint. Carolina never does.

His eyes won’t focus and his ears are ringing. He tugs against the grips holding him in place. They’re like iron, all of them.

Carolina punches him again.

“Carolina…” North says.

“She’ll be fine,” she says shortly, and then punches him a third time. A fourth.

The speakers don’t crackle back on to stop the fight.

“Hey,” South says. “Can we switch?”
“Don’t be stupid,” Carolina says, and then punches him again. South’s grip on his neck tightens again. It’s getting difficult to breathe.

Another fifteen seconds like this passes without words, only the sound of armored knuckles hitting armored flesh ringing out, of armor cracking.

<Got it.>

And suddenly, everything’s fine. The amount he can breathe is fine. The solid holds on his body are fine. His swiftly accumulating injuries are fine. The iron punches that are raining down on him are fine. Barely registers.

He can’t feel any pain.

<Go get ‘em, soldier,> Sarge orders, and Florida springs to it.

He twists out of the grips the other Freelancers have on him easily, just powering through the resistance this time, his arms making a very fascinating wet crackling noise that he’s only ever heard on other people seconds before he’s killed them. South springs away from him, letting out a shocked and disgusted sound, North echoing her.

Maine immediately punches him, throwing his entire weight behind it, Florida’s face snapping to the side. He doesn’t feel it.

Nothing hurts. All of the grueling has been taken out, and now there’s nothing but excitement left to be felt.

“Sarge, you are just a peach,” he praises his AI as he immediately attacks Maine right back, who clearly hadn’t been expecting him to recover so quickly or so casually from his devastating assault.

He feels South jump onto his back and start trying to choke him out in earnest now, and just ignores her. She lets out an offended yowl at this.

<The peachiest,> Sarge agrees gleefully. <Now kick him in the jewels!>

Florida takes the suggestion, driving his knee so hard up into Maine’s crotch that he hears something crack, whether that be the armor on his knee, Maine’s codpiece, or his kneecap, Florida doesn’t know or particularly care. Maine doesn’t seem like much of a fan either way, which frees Florida to reach up with his hands to just nonchalantly rip South off of himself and toss her to the side, straight into North who had been preparing a lunge of his own.

He turns around and Carolina is there.

“Round two?” he asks in good cheer, raising his fists.

She doesn’t reply with words. She doesn’t need to.

What follows is bloody, and brutal, and fun. As they continue, Carolina gradually begins to slow down. Florida doesn’t. Florida is above pain now, and can just focus all of his attention on the fight now, on the adrenaline and that ecstatic, addictive buzzing he gets in his head whenever he hurts someone.

North and South makes several more attempts to jump into the fray, and he just smacks them out of the air like flies, away and to the side. Maine tries as well, but Carolina gives him a look and he backs off without a word (not that he’s ever been particularly talkative in the first place),
seemingly content with being just a spectator.

“Not gonna cry uncle?” she pants after a particularly acrobatic kick that he just shrugs off. “You’re starting to look pretty messed up, Florida.”

Is he?

“You must be in a lot of pain.”

He isn’t.

“You don’t want to do any permanent damage, do you?”

Well.

So long as he’s got Sarge, does it matter?

<\textit{I’ll tell you when you’re getting close to permanent damage. She’s just trying to psyche you out. Psychological warfare, the dirtiest trick in the book! Psyche her back, son!}> 

Listening to Sarge’s advice has worked out well for him so far. He reaches up and takes his helmet off. Smiles at Carolina.

She actually \textit{flinches} back at what she sees. He hears the twins swearing softly off to the side. \textit{His fucking face--}

“To you or to me?” he asks her, his tone far more pleasant than his words, and he casually tosses the helmet off to the side. \textit{I don’t need armor to beat you}, he says with his actions.

Predictably, prideful Carolina doesn’t take well to that. So much so, in fact, that she grows sloppy. She rips her helmet off, forcibly evening the odds, and lunges at him. Her teeth are bared, her eyes narrowed with concentration and rage, cheeks red with effort, forehead glistening with sweat.

Florida wishes he could see the faces of the people he’s fighting all of the time.

<\textit{So you can see the light fade in their eyes!}> Sarge enthusiastically agrees.

Florida punches her so hard her head snaps back, blood spurting from her nose and spraying in an arc with the motion of her head. He watches the blood catch the light as it falls through the air.

“Something like that,” he says, and punches her again.

Soon, she doesn’t have the time or presence of mind to punch back. Soon, she’s staggering backwards with his blows, and he steadily follows her. Soon, she’ll--
“Stop fighting,” the Director curtly orders over the speakers.

Florida stops his fist from connecting a fraction of a second before it lands. Carolina sways on her feet before him, but she refuses to fall. It’d just take one more hit, he knows it, can feel it.

He lets his hand fall to his side instead, and focuses on his expression so it doesn’t fall into a pout. He isn’t wearing his helmet, after all.

<Psht, coward. We won.>

“No arguments here,” he says, spirits cheering already, blood dripping from his knuckles. Having an AI is nice, he decides. Nicer than he could have ever possibly imagined.

It turns out that that four against two is much more manageable than four against one.

Chapter End Notes

The illustration was done by the incredible toastyhat! Check her stuff out!
Chapter Summary

North is not the first person to receive an AI in the program, so he thankfully goes into it with a bit of an understanding of what it might be like.

“You have to understand,” the Counselor tells him, “for your AI it will be like it went from not existing at all to suddenly being. It’s a little overwhelming and disorienting, from what we can tell. You can expect your AI to perhaps be scared, maybe angry, and almost definitely confused. In the end, how it will react will come down to what sort of personality it has, so you’ll just have to have an open mind and be prepared to respond to anything.”

“Just like a mission, then,” he says with a smile, because it is, and he wants to let the Counselor know that he’s prepared to handle this. (And he wants to distract from any miniscule tells that might have escaped him when the Counselor called the AI an ‘it’ even though he’s heard Florida refer to his as a ‘he’ in conversation. North doesn’t like creating conflict when he can avoid it, the Counselor probably didn’t even mean anything by it.)

So. North is prepared for a negative reaction, to help calm the AI down if they need it.

And boy is there a negative reaction.

North’s AI drops into his head like a cold ball of ice, his mental presence radiating dizzyingly intense fear and dread, and North gets his first disorienting dose of being able to literally sense someone else’s emotions, feeling the fear and at the same time not. He can feel the terror but it’s not his. All he’s feeling is shock, at the foreign feeling of someone else in his mind for the first time in his life, at just how scared the AI is. And, an emotion he’s more than familiar with, concern.

The concern wins out, as usual.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he says, keeping his voice soft. “It’s going to be okay.”

<Those are lies,> his AI shoots back immediately.

“No, they’re not. Come on. Everything’s fine, see?”

North looks around the room for the AI, assuming he can see everything North can see. Nothing but weedy, soft people in lab coats everywhere. All the armed guards are outside, out of sight.

<Armed guards!?>

Ah. So… white lies weren’t going to be a thing, then.

“Just for in case something happens,” he rushes to reassure him. “We’re only the second ones to do this, after all. And everything looks like it’s going just fine, right?” He looks to a technician at his
side at this.

She looks a little blank, and it occurs to him that she’s only getting about half of their conversation. It’s enough for her to nod though.

“How do you feel, Agent North?”

“Good.”

“Can you feel it?”

Obviously. A routine question, then.

“He,” North gently corrects her, hoping she won’t make a big deal out of it.

She gives him a peculiar look, and then gets a little faraway look in her eyes that tells him someone’s speaking into her comm.

“How do you know that it’s a he?” she asks him.

North opens his mouth to answer. Closes it. Thinks. “I just… know.”

Huh. That’s a little weird, now that he thinks about it. What’s up with that?

<Don’t ask me, dude,> his AI says, apparently beginning to calm down as the armed guards continue not to swarm the operating theatre to execute them. <I just started existing. Hang on…> North experiences the most uncanny feeling of someone rapidly going through his memories. <Freelancers, North, AI… I’m your partner?>

North feels his lips tug up into a smile and he lets them, satisfied that his AI seems thoroughly distracted from his fear now. “I like to think of it that way, yes. I’m North.”

<Grif.>

“Nice to meet you, Grif.”

There’s an immediate reaction to this, and it isn’t from Grif. Someone comes and brings him his armor and tells him to put it on as the scientists mutter to each other and into their comms, and he bemusedly follows orders. He stands there fully armored for a moment as the technicians look at him impatiently, as if they’re waiting for something.

“Your AI,” one of the technicians prods him. He could have just said Grif. “Bring it out.”

<Assholes,> Grif decides, and North doesn’t have it in him to disagree.

“Wanna come out, Grif?”

“Fine,” he says flatly, like a surly teenager forced out of their room to spend time with the family. (It reminds him of South, when they were younger. It makes him feel fond.) Grif’s holo flickers on, reminding him a lot of the one he’d seen Sarge make. A little armored man, except this one’s a yellow-orange, and looks fatter too. Why would an AI make himself look fat? … Well, why would an AI make themselves look like anything, really.

The Counselor and the Director walk into the room, and Grif’s holo flickers so quickly North wouldn’t be sure he’d actually seen it if it weren’t for the explosion of paralyzed terror that washes over his brain at the same time.
“We would like to ask ‘Grif’ some questions now,” the Counselor says.

North would be busy debating with himself whether he’s happy the Counselor used Grif’s name or upset at the tone in which he said it, if it weren’t for the distracting way the fear spiked to nauseating degrees when the Counselor spoke up.

“When anyone will do,” the Counselor finally answers him.

North blinks himself back into dizzy focus to see the Counselor looking at the two of them expectantly. North clears his throat, forces himself to shunt the confusing… whatever that was, to the back of his mind.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” he asks for Grif, whose holo is still suspiciously frozen.

“Why is Grif your name?” the Director asks impatiently, cutting off the Counselor before he can do more than open his mouth.

“Oh,” Grif says, breaking out of his trance, focusing on the Director. “It just… is? It feels right? I dunno, man, wait until I’m more than five minutes old before you break out the interrogation, huh?”

North stiffens and thins his lip to hide any visible or audible reaction to witnessing someone being so casually rude to the Director, whether that reaction be deep amusement or profound horror. A mix, perhaps? He’s just grateful he’s wearing his helmet.

The Director and the Counselor exchange looks. They’re both stoic men in their own ways, hard to read, but North thinks he can see something like relief in their expressions at Grif’s answer.

<Playing dumb is always the right answer,> Grif says inside his head, even though his holo’s still out. North twitches, but the Director and the Counselor aren’t looking at him at the moment.

If North could speak freely, he’d say that that was one of the most cynical things he’s ever heard.

<Hey, you can’t argue with the results, right? We’re not in trouble yet.>

Hmm, maybe this silent communication thing is manageable after all. It certainly would be nice to not be having apparently one sided conversations with himself to all outside observers, the way Florida does now, like he wasn’t creepy enough before. That may just be mostly because of the kind of conversations he has with his AI though; Sarge definitely seems to have a much less hidden lust for violence. He feels a pulse of smug excitement from Grif at the idea of having entirely imperceptible conversations in front of other people.

Also, yet? Grif better not be planning to get in trouble.

<A little stealthy rule breaking never hurt anyone.>

Actually, that sounds like something that’s definitely hurt people before--

“We will now test your unit,” the Director declares, pulling North out of his silent conversation.
An image of Florida that’s burned into his skull springs forth in front of his mind’s eye: Florida, in armor but lacking his helmet, long dark hair almost entirely out of his braid, smiling a ghoulish excited smile with teeth entirely coated in blood, blood in the white of his right sclera, nose broken, gashes littered over his face from the beatdown he’d received, arms held at the ready to deal more punches despite the way they bent in a way arms definitely shouldn’t, Carolina swaying in front of him, her face almost a ruin--

<Dude, gross!>

North snaps out of it.

“Um… What does my unit do, exactly?” he asks.

“We will want to see if your AI can figure that out without any clues,” the Counselor gently shuts him down with a mild apologetic smile.

North hopes to god he doesn’t get the same unit as Florida. That would be redundant, wouldn’t it? Feeling pain might be unpleasant, but he thinks he’d prefer it over what Florida’s got going on now.

From the way Grif’s radiating how unsettled he is, he thinks he’s not alone in that.

North leaves for the gym, and he tries to take a path that will keep him the most amount away from the Counselor without even thinking about it as he does so. Instinctive.

The quiet man radiates a sense of danger to North in a way he never had before.

North enters the gym. Some of the other Freelancers do so as well a moment later. Carolina and Florida are still on medical rest, and he’s grateful to see that South isn’t here either. She can get pretty heated up about competitions. It’s York, Maine, Wash, and Connie. He waves at them.

“Hey, guys!” he says.

“Hey, glad to see your brain didn’t melt out of your ears!” York replies. Maine gives him a stoic nod, Connie a wave back.

“What are they like? Your AI?” Wash asks, immediately zeroing in on what excites him the most.

“Grif’s great,” he says, his mouth tugging into a smile on its own. He hasn’t known him for long, admittedly, but he likes Grif so far. He thinks they could be really good friends.

Grif doesn’t have anything to say in reply to that, but North can feel how flustered he gets.

<Fuck off!> he barks, immediately getting more flustered at noticing North noticing how flustered he is. Sucks to be him; all it does is remind North of his aggressively defensive sister, who he loves

Sister

“—ne… two… three!” a voice over the speakers says, and North blinks himself back into focus just in time for the not particularly comforting sight of Maine throwing Connie at him as Wash and
York sprint in his direction. Oh, shit.

He quickly dodges the Connie projectile, and he notes to keep it mind that she’s at his back now as the other three close in.

“Grif, the unit!” he barks, because he can feel that Grif’s just as disoriented and confused by whatever just happened as he is.

<Uh, shit, right!>

York reaches him first, and they manage to exchange and break out of six different holds before Wash reaches him, which is when things start to get more complicated.

He punches Wash hard in the solar plexus. It clearly knocks the wind out of him, but he goes in for another hold without pausing anyways. The brief moment his focus is diverted on getting out of that, York takes the opportunity to elbow him in the visor. His head snaps back, and he wonders if he just got whiplash as he staggers and punches blindly.

He can hear Maine’s thundering footsteps, coming closer. Fuck, he has to do something before he reaches him or else he’s going to end up just as messed up as Florida.

North pulls a dirty trick that he prefers to keep in reserve because it makes him feel kind of bad, but also because the more often he pulls it the better York is going to get at working around it. North goes for York’s blind spot, his injured eye, and manages to trip him up, and even into Wash’s legs at that. They both fall to the floor with undignified squawks, and North grins as he moves to move away--

Connie tackles him to the ground right along with everyone else.

He’d forgotten to keep in mind that she was at his back now.

Suddenly, he’s in a confusing tangle of limbs, all of them hostile. Literally the only upside here is that everyone else seems just as confused as he. He almost even gets out, prying himself loose of holds as agitated swearing rings out around him, but then--

Maine stomps down on his wrist.

North can’t stop a cry from escaping him in time, but he realizes that Maine’s going easy on him. His wrist isn’t pulverized, after all.

Connie, crawling over him onto his back. Wash, sitting down on his legs.

“Gotcha,” York breathes, standing up. “Feel like surrendering?”

Damn. He hadn’t even lasted as long as Florida before being successfully pinned. The leaderboard is such bullshit.

<Fuck, I think I’ve got it,> Grif mutters, which is all the warning North gets before a yellow bubble expands out from his armor, shoving all of the other Freelancers off of him on the way.

North blinks incredulously as he slowly sits up, looking around himself at the yellow tinted world.

“Okay, that’s a neat trick,” Connie admits, voice muffled through the shield.

It’s definitely better than being able to turn off your pain, that’s for damn sure.
“So cool,” Wash says in a hushed voice, rubbing the back of his head where he presumably hit it as the yellow shield catapulted him away.

<i>I think it's more of an orange color,> Grif says, sounding a little incredulous as well, but proud too.

“Agree to disagree,” he says, and then lets himself smile as Maine knocks experimentally on the shield to no effect. “Good job, Grif.”

<... Thanks.>

North thinks they could be really great friends.
The person you love

Chapter Summary

York is strapped down to the table when he comes back to himself.

York is not the first Freelancer to get an AI. He’s talked to North about it, and even managed to make himself have a conversation longer than one minute with Florida, which was definitely disconcerting. That guy’s got multiple layers of creepy going on. Anyways, York is prepared.

Or rather, York thought he was prepared.

Florida says Sarge was angry, North that Grif was scared (which said AI was indignant enough about North admitting to that he projected himself just to tell everyone about his Freelancer’s lactose intolerance), so that’s what York’s expecting. Something like that, something negative that’ll calm down in five minutes.

York eats, works out, has awesome unspoken-I-hope-you-don’t-die-tomorrow sex with Carolina, showers, and sleeps. Doesn’t eat breakfast on the doctor’s recommendation. Gets wished luck by most of the guys, and gets escorted to the operating theatre, is told to put on some unflattering scrubs and not much else. Whatever, he’s totally rocking these scrubs. Lies down on a table face down. Endures the horribly unsettling, foreign, invasive feeling of something connecting with the port in the back of his neck for the first time.

Feels

York is strapped down to the table when he comes back to himself. The guards that had been waiting outside are now inside of the theatre, looking tense and wary, fingerling their weapons as they stare intently at him.

Something is inside his brain that’s never been there before. Not just an AI, but sheer uncontrolled panic. York can feel tears streaming down his face, can’t remember the last time he cried.

“Ffffuck?” he asks, more confused than anything else. His heart is galloping. His knuckles sting. Are there less technicians in the room than there had been?

<can'tmovecan'tmovecan'tmoveICANTMOVE>

York reflexively begins to struggle against the straps holding him down. “Lemme go,” he slurs. Did someone punch him in the jaw? Sure feels like it.

<havetoMOVEgetoutgetoutGETOUT>
“Let. Me. Go.” He can’t stop straining against the straps even though he knows it’s fruitless. Can barely think past the panic clouding his mind. This wasn’t how North had described it. This is beyond any fear he’s ever felt before.

“Are you back to yourself, Agent York?” the Director asks, his tone exuding disdain.

“Hhhh,” York struggles to breathe evenly, normally. “How long was I...?”

He’s lost time, he realizes. That seriously doesn’t help with the fear.

“How long, now.”

He’s losing circulation, struggling against the straps like this. Can’t stop.<h1>havetogetoutofhereimgoingtodie</h1>

He just has to... breathe evenly. Take deep breaths. Close his eyes. Let his thundering heart slow. Remember what North said: this isn’t his fear.

“I believe you’re having your first panic attack, York,” the Counselor soothingly explains.

It has the exact opposite intended effect. At the sound of the Counselor’s voice, the fear somehow strengthens, there’s somehow more, how is there more--

<imgoingtodie>

It’s like there’s a brand new hole in York’s head, a black hole that’s sucking in all of his sanity and composure. He’s going to die. He knows it. He can feel it. It doesn’t make sense, except it makes all of the sense in the world. He has to move. He has to get out of here.

York’s going to die. This is what dying feels like. Makes sense.

He hears footsteps approaching him where he’s trapped and dying, the Counselor’s footsteps, the Counselor’s voice saying,

“Don’t worry, we’ll make sure you forget all of this.”

He doesn’t even hear him, his words don’t even sink in. The Counselor and his men and his machine and his gun are approaching him, but he can’t bring himself to look away from

“--breathe with me. In... and out. In... and out.”

Eventually, York starts following orders. Eventually, he starts breathing properly again. Eventually, he stops crying, stops uselessly struggling against his bindings. His heart calms down, his thoughts become rational again.

But the fear that isn’t his doesn’t shrink in the slightest.
York doesn’t spar against his teammates like Florida and North did, because he keeps having to say no to a certain question. *Does your AI seem mentally coherent?*

They keep him in the medical bay, although thankfully not restrained any longer. He’d apparently attacked some of the technicians immediately after the implementation, rather blindly and incompetently, but still. So, he’s got a couple of guards.

He lies there with his eyes closed, trying to coax his AI out from where he’s trying to hide deep within York’s mind.

“We should have inspected their files more thoroughly beforehand,” the Director says, just on the edge of being able to be heard. Standing in the doorway?

“I’m sure this will pass soon,” the Counselor says, instantly undoing any progress York made in the last hour. “It says here that it was just a common anxiety disorder--”

And then they pass out of hearing range. Just walking by.

<imgoingtodie>

“No, you’re not, buddy,” he repeats for what feels like the one thousandth time. He’d be starting to feel exasperated around now if he couldn’t literally feel how scared he is, so. York just tries to remain calming and calm.

<hesgoingtokillme>

“Who?”

“Having a riveting conversation?” Carolina asks, and York opens his eyes and smiles tiredly. Maybe his AI will benefit from being left alone for a little bit. Hey, York’s had a rough day too.

“He’s still kind of in panic mode,” he says, turning his head to look at her. Ah, a sight for sore eyes, even with the colorful bruises splashed across her face, a red splotch of burst capillaries in her left sclera, her broken nose still healing. She had to get two teeth replaced after what Florida did to her. He hopes the Director’s no doubt short and dispassionate yet scathing reprimand will stop her from taking off her helmet during an armored fist fight ever again. She puts a lot of stock in his opinion and orders, maybe even more than she should. Carolina’s wearing a tank and shorts, no doubt fresh from yet another workout. He seriously appreciates the unhindered view of her incredible biceps. She sits down on his bed, ignoring the guards nearby.

He enjoys how close she is.

“Do you think he’ll calm down any time soon?”

“Well, he has to eventually, right?” he says trying to inject more confidence into that question than he feels. It’s been several hours now, and so far he’s felt nothing but fear from his AI. But he’s just having a particularly tough activation, is all. Has to be all.

Carolina makes an aborted movement towards his face with her hands, visibly remembers the guards, stops it, and frowns. York suddenly resents their presence where before he’d been fine with it.

“You’ve been crying,” she points out. “You’ve never…”

“Hey, it doesn’t count if it’s AI-induced, alright?”
Carolina rolls her eyes. “Boys.”

“You say that like you’re not the proudest person on the ship.”

“Proud with reason,” she huffs, only half serious. Only half joking. York can’t help a fond smile. “Get it together soon, okay? I want to see what kind of unit you have.”

“Roger that, sir,” he says with a little salute.

She squeezes his hand quickly, furtively, and then she leaves. She was here for such a short time, but he already feels so much better.

Being around the person you love is so

I love you.

It’s so important for him to say it. It’s never been more important for him to say it.

The words stick in his throat, his lungs struggle for air, and he can do nothing but sob without meaning to.

He’s running out of time.

I love you.

He has to say it.

I love you.

He has to speak up.

I love you.

He has to say it now--

York comes back to himself again, blinking dazedly up at the ceiling, not knowing where he is for a moment. Then he frowns up at it, confused and kind of pissed off. Goddamnit, these weird… flash things weren’t a one time thing, apparently. What the fuck is up with them? What is going on with his head? They don’t even make any sense, completely out of context nonsense. Is the implantation making him lose his mind?

“York?” North asks, and York freezes up a little and then looks at him. North, standing at his bedside in full armor. How did York not notice that until now? How out of it was he? For how long was he out of it? He could ask the guards how long it’s been since Carolina left.

He looks to them only to see that there are entirely new guards.

He decides not to ask anyone.

“Yeah?” he asks, and then licks his suddenly dry lips. He wouldn’t really have guessed that North
would have visited him, at least not before certain other Freelancers; they’re not the closest, and probably wouldn't even be as close as they are if there were more people to choose from the Program to hang out with.

“I just wanted to…” he says, and there’s a certain hang-dog quality to his voice. “I’m sorry my advice wasn’t good.”

York blinks at him, and then takes a deep breath and sighs quietly through his nose. Smiles. “It’s fine, dude. I’m literally only the third person to ever do this, we’ve kind of got a limited-data problem. And it did help, at least a little. I just think mine’s a little more… nervous, than yours.”

And now that he’s thinking about his AI, he’s been silent for a long time now, actually. Has he calmed down any? He mentally pokes him, and gets a wave of mindless fear for his troubles, just like last time. York restrains another sigh.

“Well, I hope you guys get along better soon. Grif and I--”

Grif’s holo pops up, interrupting North. “Dude, you have to stop casually saying sappy stuff, okay? Nobody wants to listen to that. You make us sound like fawning newlyweds.”

And the fear just… stalls.

<Who is that?> his AI breathes, his first sentence that hasn’t been a fearful rush since York got him.

York is flabbergasted. York is… so pleasantly surprised. He smiles, wide and genuine.

“That’s North’s AI, Grif,” he says. So all he had to do to calm him down was introduce him to another AI? Done. “Want me to tell him your name for you?”

He’d poke him into just doing it himself, except York isn’t currently wearing any of his armor, so no projection capabilities. Later.

<I’m Simmons.>

Simmons. York has been unable to get that out of him until now. It feels so good, to have him respond to his questions, to not have that pulsing fear in his head any longer, like a throbbing headache finally relieved.

“If he’s like Sarge, forget it,” Grif grumps, crossing his arms. The two AI didn’t get along, apparently.

York recalls Sarge’s violent confidence and Simmons’ frozen fear. “Definitely not,” he assures him. “Simmons is pretty different.”

Grif’s holo seems to stutter for a moment.

“... Simmons? That's, uh. An okay name.”

North turns his head to look at the holo floating to his side. “... Someone you--?”

“I know everyone you know and that’s it, dumbass,” Grif shuts North’s question down. “It’s just. A good name.”

<Grif’s a good name too,> Simmons says, sounding like, no, feeling like he can’t take his focus off Grif’s shining little form. The fear is entirely forgotten.
York can’t believe he’s about to arrange a playdate for his Artificial Intelligence.
i.e explosively

Chapter Summary

So, South is going to get an AI. And she *deserves* it, and she’s going to *kick ass* with it, and she’s not going to be a little baby about it. It’s not going to be crazy like Sarge, lazy like Grif, or neurotic like Simmons.

Her AI? Is going to be a fucking badass.

South is the fourth person to get an AI, and frankly, it’s about fucking time. She finally had the chance to kick Florida’s ass, and she lost it. North has an AI, and she can’t get through a single conversation with him without him bringing it up in some way. Freaking *York* got an AI, and all he did with it was have a meltdown and then not even give her a fight once he’d calmed down.

So, South is going to get an AI. And she *deserves* it, and she’s going to *kick ass* with it, and she’s not going to be a little baby about it. It’s not going to be crazy like Sarge, lazy like Grif, or neurotic like Simmons.

Her AI? Is going to be a fucking badass.

When her AI enters her mind, he’s scared. She’d have prefered angry, but fine. She can deal. She can *make him* calm down.

“Hey,” she says. “CALM DOWN.”

The technicians flinch away from her, but what’s more interesting is feeling someone try and flinch away from her *inside of her own head*.

“No, I said CALM! *DOWN!!*”

“Agent, would you please--” a technician tries.

“Don’t try to tell me what to do with my own AI,” she snaps at her, and then turns her focus back on the only other person that *matters* in this room.

She’s pleased to see/feel that he’s already taking all of his negative emotions, rolling them up into a ball, and locking them somewhere far away. Not how she’d prefer to deal with it (i.e explosively), but that works too.

<*Sorry,*> he says. <*Who are you? I’m Donut.*>

“Dumb name, I’m South.”

<*Like the direction on a map…?*> he asks with perfectly polite puzzlement that South sees right through. She already assumes the worst of people because that’s always the truth, but now she’s sharing headspace with someone and it’s easier than ever to see right through the lies and facades: that was nothing more than a petty revenge jab for the ‘dumb name’ thing. It endears and pisses her off at the same time in equal measure.
“It’s a code name, dumbass.”

“Agent South, how do you feel?” the technician rudely interrupts their conversation.

“As if,” South says, and swings her legs off the table and leaves the room. She didn’t join Project Freelancer or get an AI injected into her brain so she could do Q&A with the eggheads or talk about her feelings. She’s here for one thing and one thing only (North--), and that’s to kick ass.

<We can kick ass and talk about our feelings,> Donut says as South gets a weird tingly feeling in the back of her head, like someone rapidly flipping through files in a cabinet.

“Fine,” South grants, because her brother’s talked her goddamned ears off about compromise her entire life and maybe a little something’s sunk in by now. “But only if they’re threatening or intimidating feelings. Cool feelings.”

Donut doesn’t feel satisfied with this compromise, but he doesn’t say anything about it so whatever. Someone wasn’t happy to compromise, clearly. And people call her undiplomatic.

“Agent South!” someone cries out behind her. She doesn’t look to see who it was; it wasn’t the Director, who’s basically the only person she has to listen to here because he’s like the principal or whatever, so it doesn’t matter. “Where are you going!?!”

“To the gym!” she shouts back over her shoulder, striding on determinedly past confused and hesitant guards. She gives them her best, sharpest smile as she casually shoulder checks them aside. “Send my armor--with the unit!--and my sparring partners on ahead.”

God, she hopes Florida’s one of her sparring partners so she can make him eat dirt.

God, she’d better have a fucking cool unit.

South makes it to the gym first, of course, and ends up being the first and only person there for a while. She stands there impatiently tapping her foot for a while, arms crossed, fingers drumming, until she gives up with a frustrated snort and starts warming up for her match instead. She’ll be damned if she’s going to lose this one.

<It’s important to stretch and work yourself open before you start a rigorous session with your partners!> Donut chimes in as South reaches down to her toes. Her brows furrow.

“Work myself open…?”

<Oops, I mean work yourself loose.>

There’s a sense of amused mischief coming from Donut and it makes her eyes narrow with suspicion, but then a guard abruptly slams through the gym doors while holding her armour, thoroughly distracting her.

“About time!” she barks at him.

“You were supposed to stay for the--”

“Just give me my armor,” she snaps, snatches it out of his hands before he can comply, and starts strapping it on.

As soon as the last piece clicks into place she says, “Figure out what our unit does, Donut.” because she’s not a dumbass that’ll wait until the last minute like those other guys. She’s gonna
curbstomp whoever they put in front of her.

<Gently curbstomp?> Donut suggests, but gets started on figuring out the unit straightaway. South approves, but she still snorts contemptuously at the question.

“We won’t kill them, how’s that for gentle?”

“Impressive going by your standards?” a familiar voice says from the doorway.

Ah, fuck.

South turns to see North.

Here’s the thing: her brother’s an infuriating, condescending, overbearing jerk who’s got everyone fooled thinking he’s the nicest guy on the planet when in reality he’s hospitalized almost as many guys as South has in bar fights (never mind that she was the one who started most of those bar fights), probably laughs inside his head when people fuck up in front of him every time, and definitely enjoys it a bit too much when he gets an excuse to use the fun weapons on enemies. He’s just as big of an asshole as South is, he just hides it better. Or tries to hide it all. South thinks he’s an annoying, hypocritical buzzkill and she’s right, but--

But.

She still doesn’t want to seriously hurt him.

<Awww,> Donut coos.

Oh fuck, someone can hear her when she’s accidentally sappy inside of her head now. She reminds herself to threaten him to stay silent once the fight’s over.

<I can just pinky swear you instead?> Donut suggests. <Uh. Mental pinky swear.>

Maine enters the room just behind North. And then, Wyoming, who South will enjoy making pay for forcing her to listen to all of those shitty knock knock jokes. And then--

Carolina.

Now there’s someone South wants to seriously injure. She can take it, can’t she, prissy Miss Perfect?

South cracks her knuckles. Buzzkill not-expendable brother present or no, she’s going to enjoy this.

“Normal sparring rules are in effect,” a voice crackles over the speakers. The ship’s AI she thinks, with some shitty librarian lady name cobbled together out of a terrible acronym. “As is the usual warning: South, do not seriously harm your teammates.”

South glares up at the ceiling. This is such bullshit. Shouldn’t she be able to test out her unit to her heart’s contents? For science or something?

<Ooh, do I detect a hint of cattiness there? South, you should totally befriend that woman, I feel like she’d be super fun to hang out with after a couple of margaritas.>

“She’s a dumb AI, dumbass,” she grumbles.

<Well, there’s no need to stoop to name calling!> he huffs, and South neither knows nor cares whether he was referring to himself or the AI.
“Don’t you want to introduce your AI, South?” North calls out.

Donut immediately projects himself into a shining little pink man hovering over her shoulder just so he can bounce excitedly on the tips of his toes. “Ooh, ooh, oh, yes! Introductions!”

South barely stops herself from smacking a hand against her visor. Why. And in front of Carolina, too. And her brother!

Donut clearly and shamelessly ignores the wave of embarrassment she’s sure she just emanated inside of her own skull.

“T’ain’t Donut,” Donut says proudly, like that name’s anything to be proud of. “And you must be North! I’ve already heard so many stray thoughts about you! And Carolina! Nothing but good things, sort of, if you squint and think about it in a roundabout way! And what about the two handsome gentlemen in white?”

Oh god, is that a hint of interest she feels as Donut glances in Maine’s direction?

Well… he is pretty big and tall and strong, and almost never talks, so he never has a chance to make a dumbass out of himself and lose her respect. A much worse thought suddenly occurs to her. Oh fuck, what if she and Donut have the same taste in men? For some reason, the thought is unbearably mortifying.

South considers how much of a twink vibe Donut is giving off.

Well, at least they probably don’t have the same taste in women.

“Grif, stop groaning, it’s rude,” North mutters. Does he not realize that no one but him would know about that if he’d just kept his mouth shut? Dumbass.

“Maine,” Maine says, which is the first thing South’s heard out of him in weeks now.

“And I’m Wyoming, pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Wyoming says with a polite little nod that is for some reason one of the most irritating things South has ever witnessed. Probably because Wyoming did it. Ugh, Wyoming.

“Match starting on three. One,” Donut’s holo turns off with a parting wave, and he goes back to working away on the unit which is what he should have been focusing on in the first fucking place anyways, “two,” everyone gets into battle stances, “three.”

South doesn’t wait for them to come to her.

Carolina is the fastest, and South hates her the most, so she’s the one she collides with first. Two objects at high speeds, rushing to meet each other. The impact is bone rattling.

South is heavier, so they ought to go tumbling ass over teakettle Carolina first, but Carolina’s footwork and reflexes are infuriatingly flawless, and so they instead just smack to a standstill, straining against each other, momentum slamming to its fullest against them. South grits her teeth and pushes against her as hard as she can. Carolina pushes back. For a long moment, neither of them budges.

And then, South’s left foot skids an inch backwards across the floor.

This is why she hates Carolina more than anyone.
North barrels past them, and on his way he briefly crouches, not giving up his momentum, and he brings out his arm to sweep her leg out from under her, sending her tumbling into Carolina’s chest plate. North never hesitates to give her a good fight during sparring; the lack of coddling from him is always refreshing.

Slightly less refreshing when it gives Carolina an opportunity to get her into a good, solid hold. South struggles against it, snarling, falling back into wild, jerking, strong movements with as much weight behind them as she can muster in a fraction of a second instead of going for the predictable accepted counter maneuvers they’ve all been coached on. Carolina’s been taught them as well, after all, and she’s seen how well they work against her too. It actually works for a second, for a moment, long enough for her to get enough room between the two of them that she can snap up with her fist into a beautiful uppercut.

She’s going to fondly remember the sound her reinforced glove made when it crashed against the chin of Carolina’s helmet for the rest of her life, she swears to herself.

She presses her advantage, headbutting Carolina before she has a moment to regather her composure--

Maine doesn’t yank her back, he just picks her up, ripping her out of Carolina’s hold. South decides she hates him after all. She turns on him the way a cat not ready to be picked up would, yowling furiously like one as well. His grip on her just tightens, and she knows there’ll be hand shaped bruises there tomorrow, and not even in the hot way.

“Hold her still for me, would you?” Wyoming politely requests. Oh, fuck no.

She’d rather burn the entire ship down than let Wyoming humiliate her.

<Well, that’s good to know, because it might just come to that!> Donut suddenly speaks up. <I figured it out, South! And it’s a good one. Reach your hand out in his direction.>

South reaches her hand out in Wyoming’s direction. Wyoming, squaring up just outside of her reach, doesn’t even bother batting her hand away.

<And whenever you want me to trigger the unit, you just do that and think--> excitement bleeds through his voice, through her head, pouring into every crack and crevice in her brain, permeating her and him and everything is good and wonderful and sharp <--boom.>

There’s a boom.

There’s a whole lot more than a boom.

Heat that she can feel even through her armor, brief but intense, her visor dimming for a flicker of a second as light consumes everything in front of her, all sound cutting off before the sound washes over her, like the world’s stopped existing, like she wiped everything clean.

When it’s over (it was so short, so quick), it becomes clear to her that everyone else’s armor hadn’t immediately compensated for the light and the noise like hers had. Not even North’s. Maine drops her. Carolina is cradling her helmeted head. North is on his knees. Wyoming has been blasted to the other side of the room, and he isn’t moving.

“You were told no serious injuries, Agent South,” the voice over the speakers says sternly, like a kindergarten teacher scolding a kid for pulling a classmate’s hair.

<Oh, I’m sure he’s fine!> Donut says dismissively. <My calculations are sound. He just needs
She instantly realizes that because of what she just did to Wyoming, because they just figured out their unit, because it’s clear that South will easily win this fight now, that the next words out of that shitty fucking AI’s non existent mouth will be ‘match over’.

She points her hand Maine-ward and thinks *boom* to drown out her voice, to preserve plausible deniability. She’ll be fucked if she’ll let anyone take her inevitable win away from her now. She wants this. She *deserves* this.

Maine, ridiculous tank of a human being that he is, barely stumbles backwards at having a fucking explosion set off practically in his face. South is going to hospitalize him for that.

She stands up and advances on him, closes the distance he had created. *Boom.* Another few steps back for him. Another few steps forward for her. *Boom.* There’s just enough time between the explosions for her to hear the crackle of the speakers and she pretends not to notice it, makes the explosions happen faster. *Boom.*

A yellow shield materializes around Maine, and her next explosion washes harmlessly over it. She feels her face twist into a scowl.

“South--”

She doesn’t have to listen to him. If she can hear him, that means she’s going to hear the AI telling her to stop any second now. *Boom.* Useless, blocked by that fucking shield. Is this why they picked her brother?

Carolina pounces on her. A target that isn’t hiding behind a shield. *Good.*

They tumble together across the floor, and South thinks *boom.*

<But the explosion will be so close to you--->

*Boom.*

<Well, your funeral I guess! I recommend lilies, and a white headstone.>

Fire washes over the both of them, licks and scorches across their armor, and it’s so hot it *hurts,* but Carolina makes a sound of pain and it’s all worth it.

South gets on top of her and slams her down. Reaches back to give her a spectacular punch, but Carolina fucking catches it.

Perfect.

*Boom.*

The explosion is pitifully small this time, but Carolina still screams. South can’t help doing so as well, so it’s not as satisfying as it could have been. They both just experienced an explosion practically in the palms of their hands, after all. A very small and pathetic and *tiny* explosion though--

<Hey! If I’d made it any bigger I would’ve done permanent damage to your hand, missy!>

Ugh, fine.
“Agent--” the speakers say, and South rushes to drown her out, to reach out and think--

Yellow incases her. Her fingers scrawble over the hexagons, Carolina just out of her grasp.

“Agent South--”

She has to make an explosion now if she wants to make this fight continue. She turns around and sees--

North. Of course.

Just North.

Just the two of them, stuck in his dumb fucking bubble.

Only one target.

“--please stop--”

Time is running out.


That familiar sibling hatred overwhelms her for a moment, silences her, stills her. For a moment, she’s sure she can bring herself to do it. She’s so close to victory she can taste it.

Donut feels anxious, stressed, uncomfortable.

She let’s her hands stay at her sides, her mind remain blank. She let’s the second pass.

“--fighting. The match is over. You have won.”

At the edge of her vision, Carolina rises to her feet. South is still on her knees.

A hollow victory.

North’s shoulders slump. Relief floods from Donut like a wellspring.

She has that, at least.

It doesn’t feel like enough.
Chapter Summary

South and Florida get along with their AI like houses on fire, which isn’t quite how he’d like to get along with his AI, but he’d prefer that to what York got, which was strapped down to a bed and put under observation for nearly a week.

Hopefully something like that won’t happen to Wash.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: mention of animal death and a shitty family situation

Wash is far from the first Freelancer to get an AI, but he’s still unspeakably nervous. He tries his best to hide it, but he thinks from the way he fumbles all of his sentences like he’s talking to a girl he likes that he’s pretty transparent at the moment.

South and Florida get along with their AI like houses on fire, which isn’t quite how he’d like to get along with his AI, but he’d prefer that to what York got, which was strapped down to a bed and put under observation for nearly a week.

Hopefully something like that won’t happen to Wash.

He sits stiffly down in the dentist like chair in the operating theatre they’ve been doing all of the transplants in, and then tries not to freak out when they tie his wrists to the arm rests.

“Um!?” he calmly asks.

“Just a measure we’ve decided to implement after Agent York’s… lapse,” a tech explains, checking his circulation after he ties Wash’s left arm down firmly.

York had punched some techs, right. Pretty ineffectively considering that the worst any of them came off with was a black eye, but still. He doesn’t remember hearing about this from South, though.

“Did South have to go through this?” Wash asks.

“Maybe she should’ve,” a tech mutters darkly, and he decides to stop asking questions that are clearly just pissing people off.

Soon, he’s restrained and something is pressing up against the back of his neck.

“One,” the tech says. “Two.”

They inject the AI on two.
One second, Wash is tense and nervous. The other, he’s *devastated*.

When he was a kid, he had this cat. He wasn’t supposed to have a cat. Couldn’t afford it. Waste of money. But it had been so small and hungry and alone and it had *purred* when he’d scratched it behind the ear and he’d fallen in love instantly. He managed to hide it inside of his closet for almost two whole months, sneaking it bits of his own meals, until he came home one day from school to find that his dad had found it. He had killed it, left it where he found it, and left the closet doors wide open for Wash to see once he got home. A lesson.

It’s the closest he can come to how he feels now, but it isn’t quite there. Maybe if his dad had made him *watch*.

“Agent Washington.”

“Good thing we tied him down after all.”

“Agent. Washington.”

Wash blinks the tears out of his eyes and makes a confused noise around the taste of blood in his mouth.

“How do you feel?” the tech asks, a tone to her voice telling him that this is far from the first time she’s asked that question.

“Uh,” he says numbly. “Sad?”

That was the largest understatement ever. Of all time.

“Can you feel it?”

What else could possibly be the sudden source of this unimaginably huge amount of despair?

“Gimme a moment,” he says anyways, closes his eyes, and tries to focus.

He does his best to give the lump of horrified sadness inside of his head a mental poke.

<What!?> is what he gets in reply. Progress?

“Hi?” he tries. “You… okay?”

<Yes,> he immediately lies. <Yeah. Duh. Obviously.>

Wash just spends a moment making disbelieving faces that his AI can hopefully notice.

<I’m fine!> he insists. <There’s nothing to be not fine about! Let’s just-- let’s just…>

And then Wash gets to experience the sensation of someone rapidly going through his most immediate memories. He shudders uncontrollably in the chair, tugs helplessly on his restraints.

<Let’s spar some of your friends. Yeah. Yeah, that sounds fun. We’re gonna kick their asses!>

He blinks dizzily up at the ceiling as he feels his AI practically push the despair away and force himself to focus on half hearted, faked excitement instead.

<Fake it til you make it, pal,> his AI says.
“Uh,” Wash says. “Yeah, he’s definitely there.”

There are more questions, but Wash can barely answer them with Tucker rushing him through the whole process.

<Come on! Let’s get out there and work up a sweat! Best way to stop thinking.>

“How would you know?” he asks. “You’re code, you don’t sweat.”

He can feel his AI (<Tucker, the name’s Tucker>) gearing up for a snarky response to that, but then the Director and the Counselor walk into the room.

It’s like there’s an electric ripple of dread that washes through his body as his eyes land on them, starting from deep within his brain. It’s a very, very disorienting, upsetting feeling, like the tactile version of hearing nails on chalkboard. Like all of his nerve endings are unpleasantly tingling.

“Perhaps questions can wait until Agent Washington can pay attention to them,” the Director says, and Wash winces at the reproval in his voice. “Hopefully you will be able to focus more on the practical testing.”

“Yes sir!” he says, a little breathlessly. Had he been holding his breath?

They finally untie him, something inside of him relaxing at the freedom of movement, and he stands up. He realizes that Tucker had relaxed along with him.

<Bondage is not my thing, apparently,> he says, and Wash would have flushed at that if walking past the Counselor didn’t leave him feeling so pale and shaky.

He’d ask why Tucker seems to be so creeped out by them when he’s never met them before (when they pulled Wash out of the fire and he owes them), but he really doesn’t like the idea of doing that in front of the Counselor and Director. He is, in fact, capable of tact. He’s handed his armor and he suits up.

<What’s this sexy piece of machinery?> Tucker enquires, his awareness bleeding into Wash’s armor (carefully turned away from the two men and their guards following them, just don’t think about them, there’s nothing to freak out about).

“My armor,” he answers without thinking, and then grimaces a little. He just talked out loud to apparently no one in front of his boss-- but of course, the Director should know better than anyone that he’s not just talking to himself. It just feels weird, is all.

Just imagine you’re talking to someone on comms, he tells himself.

<Not the armor in general, genius, what’s this-->

The world blurs around the edges, and Wash’s foot shoots out weirdly on his next step. He stumbles, staggering into the wall, just barely not falling flat on his face.

There’s a muttering behind him, and he turns around to see three guns and the Director’s keen green eyes fixed on him appraisingly, the Counselor whispering into his ear and looking interested.

“Oh, sorry,” Wash says, face flushing. “Just a little dizzy, I guess.”

He waits until the Director gestures for the guns to go down, and then cautiously gets back up.

“Watch it,” he whispers quietly to Tucker.
"I didn’t know it would do that!" he protests. "And that they’d react like that. You just tripped. This place is full of assholes!"

“They’re just a little on edge,” Wash says, feeling obligated to defend them. “An implantation could theoretically go pretty badly. There has been violent incidents before.”

The one violent incidence being York having a flailing panic attack, but he feels like his point still stands. There’s nothing wrong with being cautious. It’s not like they actually shot him.

He arrives at the door to the sparring room, and the Director and his cohort split off from him to the observation deck. Tucker relaxes inside of his mind, relieved.

“The Director really isn’t that bad,” he says now that they’re alone. “So long as you follow orders.”

"Yeah, well, he’s got a nasty resting bitch face," Tucker grumps.

Wash chokes on a snort and thanks god that no one but him will ever hear that particular remark.

“Point,” he says, mouth twitching upwards in a wry smile.

Wash enters the room and starts doing warm up exercises.

"Laaame," Tucker declares, and Wash rolls his eyes. As if he doesn’t get enough of that from South.

Speaking of South, there she is, stalking into the room, and he swallows nervously. South has never been the best at holding back during sparring, and she has explosions now. Everyone knows. It’s not exactly a subtle, quiet unit, and she’s so proud of it he’s half surprised that she hasn’t charged communications to announce it over the PA.

And then North, yet another Freelancer with an AI and a badass unit enters the room. Wash hadn’t even been able to touch him during their sparring match after he’d gotten his unit going. No one had.

Carolina then prowls into the room like she isn’t still covered in first and second degree burns from her fight with South.

"Talk about a lineup of babes," Tucker comments, completely failing to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Florida enters the room.

“Fuck,” Wash breathes. Is Florida even supposed to be out of the infirmary so soon? He walks smoothly like there’s nothing wrong with him, but that means nothing now. Pain doesn’t touch him if he doesn’t want for it to. Which means that even if Florida is still messed up, he can mess Wash up right back. And he’ll actually have to feel it. “Tucker, you have to figure that unit out, pronto.”

He must feel how seriously Wash is taking this fight (North with his shield unit, two people with units who don’t bother holding back, and Carolina who doesn’t need a unit and isn’t much better on a bad day, he’s so outclassed), because Tucker doesn’t stop to whine before he gets to work.

“Hey, Wash,” North calls out, and Wash grimaces at how he’s pitching his voice to sound as calming as possible. He knows that Wash is fucked too. “How’s the AI?”

“Fine,” he replies. Normally he’d elaborate a bit, but… he’s kinda nervous.
Damn right I’m fine., Tucker shoots off almost automatically. Fine as hell.

“Focus,” he hisses, tense.

I am., he responds, and Wash bites his tongue because he knows that replying will just distract him worse.

“I’d love to chat with him!” Donut says, popping into visibility above South’s shoulder. She’s standing off to the side, far away from the rest of her team. As far as he can tell, she’s on the outs will all of them, even if she never got along particularly well with Florida or Carolina before.

“Later, Donut,” she says, arms crossed. Donut shimmers out of sight without a protest. Not any ones that the rest of the room can hear, anyways.

“Normal sparring rules are in effect,” Fills announces. “As is the usual warning: South, do not seriously harm your teammates.”

South flips off the ceiling.

“The fight starts on three,” Fills goes on, unbothered. “One.”

He gets himself into a ready position.

“Two.”

His heart is beating far too quickly.

“Three.”

They all start sprinting for him, and Wash knows that Carolina’s going to reach him first, she’s the fastest--

There’s an explosion, and he quickly shuts his eyes closed at the burst of flame, sunspots dancing in his vision. His ears are ringing. The explosion came from the other side of the room, didn’t even graze him. South isn’t allowed to use explosions big enough to seriously damage the ship. He squints his eyes open, trying to get his bearings back as fast as possible. There’s North, his shield falling away from where it had covered him. Carolina, getting back to her feet, having been thrown by the explosion, apparently. Florida, still running towards him--is he laughing?--apparently not affected despite the soot he can see on the edges of the left side of his armor.

Where the hell is South?

For a moment, he thinks that she’s actually left the room for some reason. There’s nowhere here to hide and he can’t see--

She lands onto him from above, propelled into the air by her explosion. It’s like being smacked by a cannonball. He’s suddenly dazed and lying on the floor, South on top of him, grabbing at his wrists and slamming them down.

Okay, hot yet kinda scary at the same time, Tucker says and this is so not the time. Focusing!

She’s shoving one of her hands into his face now, palm flat and only inches away from him, her other hand still holding onto his wrists. A glimmer of pink at the edges of his vision that’s tunnel focusing on that hand.
“You wanna safeword out?” Donut asks.

“Wha?” he says intelligently.

“Surrender,” South says with flat impatience.

Wash isn’t a sore loser, but. It happened so quickly.

“South,” North says. “Don’t--”

“I’ve got this!” she snaps.

<I think I might be a sore loser.>

The world goes strange again, like in the hallway when they’d freaked out the guards. He struggles against South’s hold on him and-- she’s so slow, she’s so slow to react, she should know how to stop him from doing this, it’s so basic. But he manages it anyways. He gets his hands free and South on the floor and he stands up so quickly he goes sprawling back onto the floor on his front this time.

The world clears back up and he can suddenly hear South shouting, “--ou distracted me!”

He stumbles back onto his feet, a little dizzy, and looks around. Everyone is unfortunately close to him. Florida reaches for him and Wash cries out, “Tucker!” without even thinking about it and then Florida’s movements slow to a crawl. He moves out of the way of his swipe, misjudges his steps somehow, and almost stumbles headfirst into North.

Time snaps back into proper order.

“That’s interesting!” Florida exclaims goodnaturedly, and then immediately lunges for him again.

“Eep!” escapes him, because he knows that if Florida gets him in a decent hold he won’t be getting out, what with most countermoves consisting of getting the opponent to hurt enough that they let go.

Tucker slows the world down for him again without being asked. <Alright, I think I’m getting the hang of this!>

Wash evades Florida, carefully minding his steps, when he suddenly glimpses Carolina out of the corner of his eye, her hand so close to him, moving almost at normal speed even in this slow-as-molasses world. He hurriedly dives away before she can catch him, and lands flat on his face again. “I don’t think I am,” he groans.

The world goes normal again.

“Did he just say something?” North asks perplexed.

“Catch him!” Carolina shouts. “Before he uses his unit ag--”

The world goes weird.

<I think you’re gonna have to, dude.> Tucker says. <I’m pretty sure the only way we’ll be able to win this fight is to drag this game of tag out long enough that the audience gets bored. Get up and running!>

“Oh my god,” he says. “This is the worst unit ever. Of all time.”
Well. It’s at least better than Florida’s.

He gets running.
Chapter Summary

Carolina is prepared for her AI implantation, and even if turns out that she isn’t, she’ll handle it.

Her AI isn’t scared or angry, when they first meet. He isn’t like any of the others, in that way. And in many other ways.

A foreign feeling of vague confusion is her first hint that the AI is there. (She would soon grow to be very familiar with this specific sensation.)

<Hello?> he calls out. <What?>

“Hello,” Carolina replies, ignoring the second question. Too vague.

<... Neat.>

“What’s your name?” she asks. So far, she’s kind of pleasantly surprised by her AI’s behavior. No panicking, just some disorientation. Maybe she got a really good one.

<Choo choo,> he says, and she blinks. <Wait, no. Car door. No! Caboose. Yes, I am Caboose.> He radiates satisfaction at having recalled his own name.

“... Are you sure about that?” she asks doubtfully. Caboose doesn’t really sound like a name either.

<Yes,> he says firmly. <... No. Maybe? Agh, I don’t know!>

And just like that, he’s switched over to frustrated confusion, before it swiftly slips away like the tide, forgotten.

“I’m Agent Carolina,” she says, not knowing what else to say. This AI’s rapidly making her feel as confused as he is.

<Hello, Agent Carolina,> he politely recites. <It is nice to meet you. Where am I?>

“You’re on the Mother of Invention,” she tells him, starting to settle down now that he’s making sense again. Those were all reasonable things to say. He’s just a little disoriented from the implantation, is all. She’s glad it seems that she’s gotten a polite AI, instead of, for example, the sex obsessed mess that is Tucker.

<Stupid Tucker,> he says immediately. She blinks, not quite sure what--

“Agent Carolina?” a technician asks her. “Are you well?”
“Yes,” she answers promptly, and from there commences a long string of questions that she answers diligently.

Or at least, she tries to.

<Who’s that?>

Just some technician--

<Who’s that?>

Also just some technician--

<How is her hair doing that?> he says in a wondering awed voice, and Carolina looks at a technician with a beehive haircut with disbelief.

“Agent Carolina?” a technician prompts her for the sixth time, and she grits her teeth and answers the actually important question she’d been asked.

He’s just new to the world. He’s just curious. He knows literally nothing, this makes sense--except, none of the other AIs are like this. Simmons does not interrupt York mid conversation to make him explain a haircut to him. Grif accepts that he isn’t going to know absolutely everyone on the ship and lets North go about his business.

<... What is that?> Caboose asks, and Carolina twitches and then resolves to ignore him until the questioning is over.


“Caboose!” she snaps. “The machine isn’t important, be quiet and stop distracting me.”

The technicians trade looks in the room, and she tenses, embarrassed. She can handle this. It looks like she can’t handle this but she can.

“Yes sir,” a technician says, hand at her ear, and then she’s gesturing at two other people and they’re picking up a machine and carrying it away. The one Caboose had been so interested in. The one that had implanted the AI into her, she realizes. It looks like an incredibly strange and unwieldy large alien gun.

Caboose radiates a deep, abiding fascination with it, and she can’t tear her eyes away from it, like that machine is the center of gravity in this room. And then it leaves the room, the doors closing, and it slips out of Caboose’s head entirely, attention already wandering in some other direction. She blinks, disoriented. That was… weird.

Caboose gasps. <Scalpels! Can I play with them?>

She takes a deep breath through her nose and releases it through her mouth. Calm. She can handle this. Even if there’s obviously something wrong with her AI--

“Enough,” the Director says, and her eyes snap open and dart over to him. He’d entered the room when she’d been distracted.

Embarrassing.

“Put on your armor and get yourself in the training room,” he tells her with a dissatisfied look. He
always looks dissatisfied, of course, but it feels worse when she knows he has a right to look that way. A technician moves to unstrap her.

<He seems grumpy,> Caboose whispers, like someone besides her could actually hear him. <We should hug him!>

Good god, no. She has to bite back a shudder at even imagining what that would be like.


She looks. The Counselor. Another resounding hell no. Honestly, she’s not a huggy person in general.

“Yes sir,” she says, one long awkward moment too late. Fuck, she’d let the AI distract her again. Jaw set, she determines not to let it happen again and she gets up to go and put her armor on.

The Director and the Counselor move on without waiting for her.

She jams her helmet on, the last piece, and she walks towards where the training room is with quick, long strides. Caboose asks her if he can play with a fire extinguisher they see on the wall along the way, who seven people she’s never talked to before are, if they’re on the moon even though she’s already told him that they’re on the MOI, and what her favorite color is.

She gives all of those questions the attention they deserve, and ignores him. He doesn’t take the hint and keeps rambling.

By the time she shoves the training room doors open, she is ready to kick some ass. The days of being beaten by Florida, South, of chasing Wash around a room like a headless chicken and being unable to catch him because they’ve got a fucking AI unit and she doesn’t are over.

<Can we hug them?>

Her eyes land on York, and her gut reaction isn’t a resounding no. She’s still too relieved at seeing him up on his two feet without an anxious frown on his face. He gives her a handsome smile, a wink, and puts his helmet on.

<YES!> Caboose cheers.

“No,” she mutters to him. “That was not a yes, okay--”

“Knock knock!” Wyoming calls out, and she suppresses a groan.

<Answer the door!>

She sighs. “Who’s there?”

“A knock down!” he happily replies.

Wyoming is terrible at pre fight banter. And jokes in general.

<I don’t get it.>

The other two Freelancer’s she’s going to fight, Connie and North, nod and wave at her respectively. She wonders if she has a unit that’ll be able to work around North’s shield. She knows she’ll be able to work around York’s unit, he’d figured it out on his own time while he’d been stuck on forced sick leave with nothing better to do and had immediately told her like that was a
thing that was at all smart or reasonable to do--

“Normal sparring rules are in effect,” FILLS speaks up.

<Who’s that?> Caboose asks, apparently his immediate response to meeting someone new if they didn’t set off his ‘can we hug them’ reflex first. <She sounds so pretty!>

She sounds like a phone tree operator bot.

“The fight will start in one.”

“Caboose, you have to figure out how my unit works, okay?”

<Your what?>

Wait, fuck.

“Two.”

“My unit, Caboose, the thing in my armor that’s special! The one you’re supposed to operate for me!”

<Ummmmmmmmm.>

Shit shit shit shit--

“Three.”

She is not going to lose again.

She storms them. York reaches her first, because he’s fast, because he knows not to hold back when he’s fighting her because he knows she’d kill him for it and that he needs every possible advantage anyways. She punches him in the face. His visor shatters, parts of his helmet collapsing and breaking, pieces flying.

Connie swears and freezes in her tracks before she reaches her, Wyoming recoils several steps, Grif shimmers into visible existence by North. Carolina stares.

“Fuck,” York breathes, hand coming up to his partially exposed face. “Fuck.”

Panic’s starting to creep into his voice, and it’s crawling up Carolina’s throat too, like bile. There’s broken glass sticking out of his remaining functioning eye, blood and fluid dripping down his face. She can’t breathe, suddenly. Caboose is finally quiet.

“York, are you okay?” North asks.

“Simmons, help,” York says.

“How did you do that?” Wyoming asks her.

How did she punch through a fucking helmet in one go. Not on her own. She could never do that on her own.

“I thought you didn’t know how to activate the unit,” she says.

<The what?> Caboose asks, now sounding scared in addition to confused.
“That strength,” she hisses.

<Isn’t everyone that strong?>

All of the other Freelancers got AIs that already instinctively know how the world works. And she got this broken buggy obstacle.

“It’s okay,” York says, but he sounds shaky. Blind. What if she blinded him. “It’s going to be okay.”

Is he talking to Simmons? Simmons, the unit. York has a healing unit. It’s going to be okay. It has to be okay.

“Match over,” FILLS says, and doesn’t declare a winner.

She looks up at the observation deck, tries to read the Director’s expression. She can’t, from this distance.

She’d promised herself she’d handle this, and she’s never broken a promise to herself yet. It isn't going to happen.

<Is he okay?> Caboose asks, as if he isn’t obviously not.

She grinds her teeth, clenches her fists. Reaffirms her resolve. She’s not going to ask for another AI, a better one. She can work around this burden. She’s going to succeed despite everything and anything and everyone.

She ignores him.
stealth mission

Chapter Summary

Two of the chattiest AIs in the program, a cheerfully violent probably-sociopath, and an angry woman currently obsessed with explosions all jump out of the plane and into the water for their mission that would hinge on their talent for subtlety, sneaking, and being quiet in general.

Donut doesn’t want a chilly silence. Sarge doesn’t want a chilly silence. Florida doesn’t want a chilly silence. 479er doesn’t want a chilly silence. Every single person on this ship doesn’t want a chilly silence, isn’t accustomed to them, prefers to fill the air with words and mostly friendly smalltalk.

Every single person except for South. She’s trying her damndest to make up for being so poorly outnumbered.

<Why are we supposed to hate them now again?> he asks her.

Rude, chilly silence.

<They sent us such a lovely fruit basket!>

He thinks he can hear her teeth grinding now. She had burned it, he recalls. Such a pity; he’d have loved to piggyback on her senses for those strawberries. Or those cherries. Or those apples. Lots of red fruits, now that he thinks about it.

Sarge pops up, his projection bright red, and Donut realizes the likely cause of that.

“It’s more frigid than the Cold War up in here,” he says, which Donut knows is a mistake, because the single fastest way to make an awkward situation even more awkward is to acknowledge it.

You’re just supposed to cheerfully power through it!

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sarge!” he chirps, making his own appearance.

“Environmental suit controls are functioning a-okay for us over here!”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that, Donut--”

“Are yours not working properly?”

“No, they are--”

“That’s such a pity! You should have R&D take a look at it, or--” a fact that he’s never learned, something he’s just casually absorbed from South’s mind without even noticing, “North! He’s good at tinkering with the armor suits, he doesn’t like bothering people with the minor stuff that he can fix himself.”

The chilly silence goes even chillier as Donut slowly realizes his mistake. Ah, right. The twins, they aren’t, uh, they aren’t getting along perfectly at the moment, which is just temporary, he’s sure--
South smacks the side of her helmet like it’s a television on the fritz, like that’s where Donut’s actually situated at all, and says, “Stop that.”

He stops that, pleased that he managed to get any words out of her at all. And she didn’t mean it in a mean way anyways, even if it undoubtedly sounded rude. He can feel her intentions.

For a moment, the silence continues, except it’s much less chilly now.

“I haven’t seen much of North lately,” Florida notes, idly crushing both the silence and the not blatantly hostile aura of the ship with his voice. It’s a nice voice, but South doesn’t seem to be much of a fan.

“He’s always visiting that blind friend of his in the infirmary,” Sarge grunts.

He feels a prickly thought flicker through the deep darkness of South’s mind, barely acknowledged, an insecure is he just doing it to avoid me? Even though she’s avoiding him. It’s so silly.

“York isn’t blind!” Donut protests. “I’ve heard that he’s going to perfectly fine.”

“You also heard that Connie and the Director have been making out,” South mutters.

“It’s not my fault someone saw fit to spread such a juicy lie like that,” he huffs. “And anyways, I think it’s more like Grif is visiting Simmons! Ooh, what if they’re making out?”

“You’re the one who’s spreading the lies,” South says, and the reluctant fondness is only perceptible inside of her mind.

“How would AIs even make out?” 479er chimes in over the speakers with something that sounds like morbid fascination. “Would they… hack each other?”

“Don’t be vulgar!” Donut gasps, scandalized, even though what she just said is actually just nonsense.

“Okay, so pinkie just opened up a the AI-sex rabbit hole for me, thanks for that, but it’s time for you guys to exit. And remember--” the ramp of the plane lowers, revealing the roaring wind and the dark scenery of the ocean at night rushing past them, surprisingly close by, “this is a stealth mission.”

Two of the chattiest AIs in the program, a cheerfully violent probably-sociopath, and an angry woman currently obsessed with explosions all jump out of the plane and into the water for their mission that would hinge on their talent for subtlety, sneaking, and being quiet in general.

“A stealth mission?” South repeats with incredulous derision, as if the Director had just slid a dead rat to her across the table instead of the pre-briefing mission dossier.

“Yes,” the Director says.

“Fun!” Florida says, flipping through his own copy of the file. “Is there going to be an assassination at the end?”

“No,” the Director says.
“Oh god, please don’t tell me it’s a--” South groans.

“Ohhh, it’s a recon mission,” Florida interrupts her. Donut can feel her grind her teeth at that. He wants to reprimand her, protecting your smile is important, but--

The Counselor is standing behind the Director, off to the side, silently watching them. Donut wants to be quiet, even inside of South’s head. Silent and unseen.

He can tell that he’s annoying South even worse with the inexplicable unease that he can’t shake off, and she’s already pretty ticked off over the entire situation in general.

“How is Florida being sent on this mission with me?” she demands.

“While I expect all of you to be able to stand on your own, you should also be able to work together well enough when I tell you to that you don’t outright sabotage the objective instead of achieve it,” the Director says coolly.

There is a brief moment of silence, left deliberately open for denials, excuses, or disagreements. Nothing fills it, besides the quiet grinding of South’s teeth. The Director nods once, test passed. The Counselor makes a note on his tablet. Donut does his best impression of being just a dead, offline bundle of wires and circuits, nonalive and uninteresting. Florida chuckles for no noticeable reason.

“Why,” South breaks the silence, “are we going on a stealth mission?”

It is indeed definitely not her specialty. South views stealth with disdain. After all, so long as she’s strong enough to fight her way through any enemy, what does being noticed matter? And that’s without taking her unit into account.

“Agent South Dakota,” the Counselor chimes in smoothly, and Donut is so quiet and so hidden and so still.

(This is ridiculous. He’s-- he might be a perfectly nice man. Donut likes nice men. He never assumes the worst of people, usually. But he just feels so...)

South turns towards him slightly and grunts grumpily, a spit it out already noise.

“Are you implying that you’re afraid that you won’t do well on this mission?” the Counselor asks. He smiles. “That’s perfectly al--”

“I’m in,” she snaps, snatches the dossier up, and storms out of the room.

Some hours after that meeting, after some smalltalk on a ship, Florida and South walk out of the sea onto the shore in full body armor, in the dark of the night.

“This is so exciting!” Donut says, bouncing a little on his holographic toes to help demonstrate it. “Oh, should we all have secret spy code names?”

“Do you think my parents christened me South Dakota,” South says.

“Cutesy gimmick twin names are always in!” he defends himself. “And anyways, people always call you South, even when you’re just eating Mac and Cheese.”
That’s because my goddamned life is classified, twinkles,” she says.

“Speaking of which,” Florida says, “you should maybe go back into hiding, Donut. You stand out.”

Donut abruptly remembers that he shines like a lightish red flashlight in the dark, just begging to be used as a bullseye to get the Freelancers sniped. “Sorry!” he says, and turns off the external projection of himself.

He feels a spike of irritation from South, but he can’t even tell at who or what it’s directed at at this point. It could be anything, honestly.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she says, and starts the long walk to the building they have to sneak into to get what they need.

For lack of anything better to do, he does what he’s actually supposed to do and surveils their surroundings for enemies or dangers as they walk. Lots of foliage. He has to mess with some code to properly see the fetching colors of it all in the dark without startling or distracting South.

<At least the scenery is pretty,> he says.

She crushes some flowers underneath her boot as she walks. He feels like she maybe could have easily avoided that.

For a moment, he wants to huff ‘well, be that way!’ Except she’s South. She would just be that way. She would continue to be that way. She would never stop being that way if he let her. He shrugs off the urge to be dramatic and focuses on staying positive instead.

He’s very good at staying positive.

<The company’s nice too!> he says, because he genuinely thinks so, and also half to lure South out of her sullen silence.

“The company’s psychotic,” she hisses, and he’s willing to count her low volume as a promising token attempt at tact, nevermind that they’re on a stealth mission.

<Sarge and Florida aren’t that bad,> he insists, cheered at her responding to him at all. She is pretty easy to goad, admittedly.

“Spines don’t work that way, Sarge,” Florida chuckles behind them, presumably responding to his own half heard conversation. Logically speaking, it should be less disturbing to them than it would be to most other people, as they know for a fact that Florida isn’t just crazy and are even going through the same thing themselves (that thing being having another person inside of their head). “Trust me, I know.”

If it only weren’t for the kind of conversations they had that they could only catch snatches of.

South, after a moment of radiating pure dislike for Florida, neatly switches mental tracks to radiate pure smugness at Donut, of the ‘I told you so’ variety. Donut doesn’t appreciate it.

<That doesn’t prove anything,> he tries. <They could be talking about anything! I frequently wonder how far our teammates could possibly bend, you know.>

“Blerg,” South says, not even bothering to inject any proper disgust into the word.
Donut thinks about Wash bending, very hard.

“BLERG,” South says with much more heat this time. “Stop that.”

“Stealth mission,” Florida reminds her in a sing song. Donut can feel her metaphorical hackles rise.

<Not a fan of Wash?> he asks in a gambit to distract her from starting an argument with a man who would cheerfully refuse to argue back.

It works. She wrinkles her nose up. “Not like that. He’s so…” She struggles for words, and as she does so he feels the general gist of what she’s trying to describe. Hundreds of tiny moments flicker through her mind, snapshots only seconds long, showing Wash messing up and shrugging his shoulders instead of stewing over it, or letting himself be the butt of a joke or happily play along with being the goofball, of accepting not being taken seriously and not really seeming to mind it. From South’s point of view, her emotions coloring the memories, Wash almost seems like nothing more but an easygoing jokester, lazy and ambitionless.

This isn’t really the impression of Wash that Donut himself has gotten. He’d tell her to go easy on him, except that South doesn’t go easy on anyone. She’s very hard. He’d love to help her get some relief and relax.

“Goofy,” she finally settles on. Donut doesn’t bother arguing with her.

<Mmm, so you’re more into the strong silent type,> he says knowingly.

She rolls her eyes. “Shut up,” she says, but there’s no sting in it. “You caught me checking out Maine’s ass once.”

He’s almost got her in what counts as a good mood for her, he happily notes. And that’s with Florida at her back and the two of them trudging through nature in the middle of the night instead of sleeping to go and fulfill what South would describe as ‘the most boring ass kind of mission in the galaxy’. He’s a miracle worker.

“Aa, I think that’s it,” Florida notes.

They pause and look. Sure enough, a few hundred meters away, there it is. A dark building, it’s silhouette just barely made out in the darkness, and past it Donut thinks he can see more buildings. The edge of a remote town.

“What we want is inside of that building,” he goes on.

“I know,” South says.

“On the third floor in commanding officer’s office, if we’re lucky.”

“I know,” she repeats herself.

“Now, it’s the middle of the night and they don’t seem to think that there’s any special reason to worry, so we’ll only have to work around a sparse night shift of guards and patrols—”

“I read the dossier too, Florida,” she snaps.

“Really?” he asks, and Donut can feel anger boiling up inside of South’s brain like steam at his genuinely surprised tone. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, you don’t know everything,” she says, and stalks off ahead.
“I thought you just let your brother give you the summary,” he says, following after.

Donut realizes that what Florida is saying is right. He can feel the memories bubbling up in her mind, dozens of moments of tossing the dossier away and waiting for North to give up and fill her in on all of the really essential stuff. Everyone else can memorize the unimportant shit.

But South isn’t talking to North, isn’t letting him talk to her, so she stubbornly read the dossier herself from front to back.

There’s a very, very brief moment of longing. And then a roiling wave of anger appears to cover it up. Anger directed at North for making her mad at him, at herself for missing him, at Donut for catching the moment of longing, at Florida for bringing it all up. Him being right certainly doesn’t help matters.

Almost-good mood lost, just like that. Donut wants to sigh.

“I can read on my own,” she hisses, and then recklessly storms off ahead towards the building.

“Oh dear,” Florida says. “Do you think I hurt her feelings?”

South is two seconds away from turning around and having a fistfight with Florida in the middle of enemy territory, Donut realizes.

<Oh, look!> he says brightly. <A hole we can squeeze into!>

“What?” South asks, taken entirely off guard.

“Oh, I wasn’t talking to you,” Florida says.

“And I wasn’t talking to you,” South says. “Donut, speak English.”

He highlights what he’s talking about on her HUD. <I don’t see what the confusion is, I was being perfectly clear.>

“A vent grate,” she realizes. “We could sneak in through there without being noticed, probably.”

Florida walks up next to her. Or rather, he appears next to her. They didn’t hear him approach, and Donut is impressed by his cats feet. South bristles silently.

“Hmm,” Florida says. “Do you think we’d fit?”

They all look at the far off vent for a moment. It’s a bit hard to judge from so far away, but it really does look like a tight squeeze. Florida and South both have broad shoulders and more than enough muscle.

“Maybe if we take off the armor?” South suggests.

<Maybe with some lube?> Donut suggests.


“I don’t think you will,” she says after they’ve approached the vent grate, eyeing it doubtfully. Donut hates to be a downer, but he has to agree. There’s no way that tiny little thing will let Florida’s big handsome broad shoulders pass. Or South’s, for that matter.
“At least let me try!” Florida says, and kicks the grate in with a dull clang.

“Fine,” she says. “I guess it’ll be fun to watch you try and fit, like a dad who’s outgrown his highschool jeans and refuses—”

Florida casually hooks the elbow of his left arm around the elbow of his right arm, his left arm held vertical, his right horizontal. Like he’s stretching out for a fistfight to make sure he doesn’t pull something in the doing, except then he keeps on stretching and stretching, his left hand grabbing onto his right shoulder, his arms going tighter and tighter, until something wrenches--

South is interrupted mid sentence by a sort of… wet sound. Florida lets go of his arm. It hangs limply, several inches lower than it used to.

“Care to do my other arm for me?” Florida asks.

South gapes.

“That’s alright, I can do it myself.” Florida slightly bends and locks his knees, bracing himself, and then drives his left shoulder into the wall of the building hard. When he sways away from the wall there’s a small new shoulder pauldron shaped crater in it, and both of his arms are as unmoving and limp as a corpses. “Now I’m sure I’ll fit.”

Florida gets on his knees and wriggles into the vent, his arms flopping along with him.

“... I just passed up dislocating Florida’s arm,” South croaks in realization eventually.

Donut wonders if there’s some sort of AI version of puking, because he feels like it’d be fitting right now.

“Wait,” she says, and crouches down next to the vent. “Florida!” she hisses into it. “What the fuck am I supposed to do!”

“Hmmm,” Florida replies from within the vent, his voice echoing eerily. “You could stand watch for the exit while I retrieve the objective?”

“Oh hell no,” she says. “Don’t try and sideline me! Do I look like some fucking grunt to you? I’m not gonna stand watch, I’m gonna win this piece of shit mission!”

<I thought you didn’t want to do this mission,> Donut says.

“I don’t, but I’m gonna and I’m gonna do it amazingly.”

“Pop out your shoulders and follow me then,” Florida’s voice says pleasantly. “You’ll catch up to me, right? You read the dossier. You know where the office is.”

Her breath catches with anger as she opens her mouth to say a retort that turns up blank. She really will have to dislocate her shoulders if she wants to use this entrance.

<Well I’m afraid explosions won’t help you with that,> Donut says.

“Florida,” South says. “Get back out here and we’ll find an entrance both of us can use, you asshole.”

No answer. He’s too far away to hear her.

“Don’t ignore me, fucker!”
Or that, if you’re a cynic. Still no answer. South swears quietly to herself.

<What now?> Donut asks.

South slowly hooks her left elbow around her right elbow.

<Oh no no no NO NOPE NOT THAT NU UH,> Donut says.

“Stop shouting,” she says, and pulls, harsh and quick. Pain blooms in her shoulder, a slight noise is torn out from between her gritted teeth, and her shoulder stubbornly doesn’t dislocate. She’ll bruise later, probably.

<Soooonuuuth,> he says.

“Stop--” another harsh, painful tug, “--distracting--” pulling, harder and harder, a viciously repressed whine building at the back of her throat, “me!” She lets her grip go slack with a gasp. And then she starts pulling again.

<Stop tugging on it, it’s sensitive!> he cries.

“He’s obviously challenging me,” she says. “He thinks that I can’t do it, he thinks that he can just leave me here like I don’t matter and can’t help while he does the whole mission himself. I can do it. I will do it. I’ll fucking show him, he’ll be so--”

Her shoulder is really, really starting to hurt, pain starting to drown out the coherency of her thoughts.

<He cheated!> Donut shouts, like an epiphany. <He cheated, South, he didn’t even do what you’re trying to! You feel pain and he doesn’t. It’s not the same thing at all! He’s playing on easy mode and you’re stuck being hard.>

South stops pulling. Turns his words over in her mind.

“... You’re right,” she says, a rare occurrence.

<Yeah,> Donut says with relief. <Yes.>

“He was probably baiting me to do that,” she goes on.

<Um,> Donut says.

“That son of a bitch! He tricked me, tried to get me to dislocate my fucking arms. Sick fucking psychopath--”

<Volume. Stealth mission.>

South snarls at being essentially told to be quiet, and at the fact that he’s right to do so. At least she snarls quietly.

And then she walks away from the vent.

<Where are we going?>

“To find an entrance that we can actually fit through.”

Well. South obviously isn’t going to just watch the vent for Florida’s return, and Donut would very
much rather if she didn’t dislocate her arms, so. He supposes this is what they’re doing now.

She walks around a corner and sees four guards clustered around a door. She freezes for a moment, and then takes a slow step back to behind the corner.

<... Do you think they saw us?> Donut asks.

“Judging from the fact that they aren’t shooting or shouting at us,” South says, “I’m guessing no.”

She walks in the opposite direction, and this time peeks around the corner more cautiously. She darts back at the sight of two guards about a dozen feet away.

“Do you think I could kill them without making too much noise?”

That really isn’t South’s specialty.

<We’re not supposed to leave any trace of us even being here,> he points out.

“Oh, like they won’t guess when the USB stick goes missing. What, is the boss here gonna assume that he forgot it in his jeans pocket before he threw it into the washing machine?”

<I feel like they’re supposed to not be able to guess that it was us that did it. Also to give us a headstart with using the information maybe?>

“So it just has to be not obvious what was taken or done, or who did it,” she decides.

<I… guess?>

South turns around towards the wall, grabs a pipe, and starts hefting herself up.

“Does a broken window scream PFL to you?”

<Well now that our lockbreaker’s blind…>

South smiles slightly as she climbs. “I’ve heard somewhere that he’s going to be perfectly fine.”

<Well I’ve heard that he’s blind as a bat!>

“Oh, I don’t know, Donut. My source is pretty legit.”

<Your source doesn’t know what he’s talking about,> he huffs.


She reaches a third story window and wiggles it. It doesn’t budge. She sighs and punches it. Broken glass falls to the ground below. It’s stealthy by South’s standards, he supposes.

There are raised voices of alarm, approaching footsteps. South hurriedly pulls herself through the window, breaking more glass along the way.

<We’re like ghosts,> Donut says. <Apparitions. They’ll never know we were here!>

“Someone’s broken a window!” the faint voice of a guard outside says. Flashlights light up the broken window. South flattens herself to the floor and crawls down the hallway.

“They’ll never know we were here, at least.”
She opens a door and walks inside to the sight of Florida lying on the floor strangling a man in a suit to death with his legs, his arms still lying limp and useless. She stares. Then she closes the door behind her and heads for the desk. Rips out a desk drawer and upends its contents on the desk, rifles through it. No USB stick.

“Help,” the man gurgles faintly, clawing at Florida’s armored leg.

“South,” Florida says warmly. “What a surprise to see you here!”

South roughly swipes everything on the desk onto the floor, rips out another drawer and upends that onto the desk as well. Starts searching. “I said I’d come too, didn’t I?”

“Please,” the man wheezes, his face turning some pretty interesting colors.

“So you found another entrance?”

“Yup,” she says, popping the p. “A better one.”


“Yes,” she says.

And alarm starts ringing throughout the building.

“Before you say anything,” she says, “you’re the one who started killing people first. Murdering some guy definitely doesn’t count as ‘leaving no trace’.”

“I was going to stuff him into the vent,” he says.

“Ugh, that would’ve reeked.” She scrunches up her nose.

“Sure, but it would’ve taken them a while to figure out what and where it was!”

“Also,” she says, and victoriously holds up the USB stick, “I’m the one who found the objective first, so I technically win this mission.”

“Oh, are we not doing this by highest kill count?” Florida asks sweetly.

"I think this is it!"

Florida finally unwinds his python like legs from around the dead man’s neck, and he slowly stands up without the use of his arms. “Care to pop these bad boys back in for me?”

Donut can feel her considering, thinking about making Florida run the rest of the mission without arms.

(“While I expect all of you to be able to stand on your own, you should also be able to work together well enough when I tell you to that you don’t outright sabotage the objective instead of achieve it,” the Director says coolly.)

“You did miss your chance to dislocate one,” he points out. "Maybe setting them will be fun?"

“Fine,” she says with a roll of her eyes. “I’ll do one for you, since you’re so helpless.”
Florida chuckles. South grabs his right arm, positions it, and shoves harshly. There is no hiss of pain from Florida, no tensing. It pops back into place neatly, with another disgusting sound.

Donut ignores South’s disappointment and focuses on the approaching footsteps instead. Looks at the ransacked desk, the dead man on the floor.

“I think they’ll be able to guess what was taken pretty quickly,” he says, popping into being over South’s shoulder.

“We could steal a bunch of other thingamajigs before we go!” Sarge suggests brightly, following suit. Florida wrenches his left arm into place.

“Hi, Sarge!” Donut says. Sarge waves at him.

The office door is slammed open by a guard. South shoots him without hesitation.

“If we are going by highest kill count,” she says, “then we’re tied for that.”

“I don’t think we’ve got the time to take a bunch of other stuff,” Florida says thoughtfully. “But I can think of another way to make sure that no one sees us or figures out what was taken.”

Florida makes a suggestion for once in his life that South actually reluctantly loves, and she explodes as much of the building as she can. The building crumbles, people scream and die, fire spreads, and technically, they leave no trace of them behind in the smouldering ash heap. Florida oohs and ahhs like he’s watching a fireworks display and she tries not to preen.

South has the objective. South killed the most people. She won this stealth mission.

<Forced shutdown imminent,> Donut says. That explosion took every drop of power the armor had. It’s unpleasant, but-- he’s happy that South’s happy. He hopes the fact that the armor’s going to be so heavy to lift without any power in it to assist that Florida’s probably going to have to carry her won’t ruin that good mood again.

Ah, who is he kidding. She’s definitely going to be in a mood.

"Good work, Donut," she says, and he goes under.
Carolina is sad. She misses her best friend. She won’t visit him for some reason. It’s pretty stupid.

She’s also been training all day and it’s so boring, which is also stupid.

“Can we go get lunch now?” he asks her. “Oh, but only if it’s not gross!”

She punches through him and lights up one of the many, many small floating, rotating hexagons. It lights up in good job green.

“Ow,” he says, except after a moment of waiting he realizes that it hadn’t hurt.

--because it wasn’t his real body she hit it was just light and color his real body is connected into her port on the back of her neck chips and wires and faint humming electricity touching and going into her brain meats and he wishes so much for hands of his own so he can take it out and take it apart and try and figure out how it works and see if he can put it back together again or change it make it do something different--

“Stop that,” Carolina says. She isn’t twisting and twirling and kicking and punching any longer, the shapes circling around her in patterns he keeps losing track of undisturbed. She’s standing still, hands clenched.

“Stop what?” he asks.

“Obsessing about machines,” she says. “I can barely think when you do that. You’re… taking up too much bandwidth in my brain.”

“Should I end the training session, Agent Carolina?” Sheila asks. She’s so nice. Caboose likes her a lot. She talks to him while Carolina trains, which makes it less boring. Except for when Carolina tells them to be quiet and let her focus. Caboose usually just ignores that because she says it all of the time, but Sheila always listens to people, which is nice except for when people tell her to be quiet. Carolina told Sheila to be quiet and let her focus hours ago. Ages. Forever.

He feels restless and antsy, wants to crawl out of his own skin-- Carolina’s skin-- his port. Caboose wants to move, except Carolina’s already doing plenty of moving. A different kind of moving. Something that’s fun instead of work. He thinks he wants for her to climb something instead. And to shout while she’s doing it. She’s so quiet while she trains and fights, doesn’t even grunt. Clenches her teeth and her jaw and focuses on moving perfectly. Soooo boring.

A brief mental image flashes through Carolina’s mind. Her best friend’s face, except it’s when he’s got glass and blood and fear on it. Caboose immediately tries to get away from it, unhappy. He’s, he feels-- it wasn’t his fault! He didn’t do that, he didn’t mean to do that.

“No,” Carolina says, cold in her voice and her head and the pit of her stomach. The shapes keep
moving and Carolina attacks them.

Caboose makes his fake lights color projections body fall away, wants to hide as he makes himself ask for this.

<Can we go and see York?>

Carolina punches through the next shape like it’s a brick wall, like it requires more than just a light tap of her fist. She ignores him.

If they go and see York, maybe they’ll find out that he’s better now. That it wasn’t so bad. That he isn’t mad at Caboose or Carolina. That it’s okay, everything’s okay.

Maybe Carolina will finally stop making Caboose look at York’s bloody face over and over again, every single day, at random moments like the worst kind of hiccup.

Carolina is ignoring him and Sheila isn’t allowed to talk to him right now and Carolina’s doing the same boring old thing again and York’s face is still lingering at the edges of her thoughts were Caboose can see him too if he isn’t careful. He tries to hide in his chips and wires and electricity, in Carolina’s brain meats.

She wonders if she can just accost North in a hallway to find out York’s situation without visiting him in person. The thought makes her grimace instinctively, a sour taste in her mouth. The idea smacks of cowardly avoidance to her, cheating. Like getting the answer to a problem by peeking at the person sitting next to you instead of doing the hard work and finding out the answer on your own.

<Dizzy,> Caboose thinks. <Dizzy!>

Carolina stops moving again, grinds her teeth for a moment before consciously lodging her tongue between her teeth to stop herself. “How. Are you dizzy. I swear to god, if I got an AI with motion sickness I will take you to R&D.”

<That was weird,> Caboose groans. <Can we go and see York now?>

Carolina pauses, doesn’t immediately say no. Caboose cheers up.

“There’s no reason for me to go and see him,” she says. “It won’t make him better, it won’t fix anything, I won’t be able to do anything, I’ll just be disturbing his recovery--”

Caboose recognizes that small scared feeling as he’ll be mad at me.

“But you’re best friends!” he says, popping back into being, close to her face. She takes a step back, but his light self just follows her without having to move. “He’ll be so happy to see you!”

“I hurt him,” she says tensely. “Friends don’t do that. And who said that we’re best friends? This isn’t middle school, Caboose.”

“Friends accidentally hurt each other all of the time and it is totally normal and fine okay,” he says in a rush. “And duh, of course you’re friends. You are super worried about him!”

Carolina shifts uncomfortably, opens her mouth and closes it. Blood is rushing to her face, he feels.

“You are being dumb,” he declares.

“I’m being dumb--!”
“If we go and visit him you will see that he’s fine and you will stop worrying and he will be happy because his best friend came to visit him! It is really so simple, Carolina.” He can’t believe it isn’t as obvious to her as it is to him.

“And what if he’s not fine, Caboose? Huh?” she says, crossing her arms and leaning closer to his light self. “What then?”

“He’s fine,” he says firmly.

“You have no reason to believe that,” she says.

“Yeah, well!” he says. Fumbles for a response for a bit, before an idea plops into his head. “Neither do you!”

He makes his light self give himself a pat on the back for that one. That was good. Really smart.

“... I don’t have a reason to believe that he’s fine? Yeah, Caboose, that’s my point.” She huffs and starts hitting targets again.

“What-- no! That is, that’s not what I meant,” he splutters.

“I believe,” Sheila cuts in smoothly, “that he meant that your belief that Agent York is not well is just as unfounded as Caboose’s belief that he is. You cannot know anything for certain until you confirm it with your own eyes.”

“Aw, thank you, Sheila,” Caboose says.

“It’s FILLS,” she corrects him.

Carolina doesn’t say anything until she’s turned all of the targets green again. She wipes her brow, runs her fingers through her hair, tightens her ponytail.

“... Fine,” she says.

“HOORAY!” Caboose cheers, and explodes into every shade of blue he’s ever seen, and makes the sparkles that rain down Carolina aqua as thanks.

Carolina blinks rapidly, sunspots in her eyes. “... Don’t do that again.”
And then, heartbeat not slowing down, she realizes that York had noticed her first even though she hadn’t made a noise. A smile breaks out over her face, Caboose is yelling incoherently with glee in the back of her head and for the first time it isn’t annoying, and she takes a step into the room.

“Yes,” she says. “It’s me.”

Carolina silently lurks in the doorway of the infirmary, like an indecisive nervous little girl, like a sniper lying in wait for the perfect opportunity. She feels pathetic and monstrous in equal measure, which she feels isn’t particularly fair or reasonable. Why does she have to feel both? Shouldn't it be just one or the other?

Speaking up would probably disperse these feelings. But if she just stands here quietly and doesn’t announce her presence for long enough then York will notice her on his own and call out to her, and then everything will be fine anyways because he was able to see her. Or he won’t notice her at all, in which case she’ll have her answer without him having to know that she was ever here in the first place.

He’s lying on a bed in full armor, the bed propped up a bit in the way hospital beds can be, and she can’t see his face because of his helmet (must be a new one), so he could plausibly be awake. So he could notice her at any moment. Or he could plausibly be asleep, which could be why he hasn’t noticed her yet.

God, she’s losing herself to some sort of Schrodinger’s spiral of whether or not York is blind. Just rip the bandaid off. Just get it over with. Just grit your teeth and make yourself do it, and don’t stop or slow down until it’s over and you’ve won--

“Carolina?” York says, and Carolina does a full body flinch, like she just touched a live wire, electricity running through her and leaving her spine even straighter than it had been before when it leaves her, shoulders up high, breathless with how unexpected his voice had been. Like jumping out of your skin, except her feet hadn’t left the ground.

And then, heartbeat not slowing down, she realizes that York had noticed her first even though she hadn’t made a noise. A smile breaks out over her face, Caboose is yelling incoherently with glee in the back of her head and for the first time it isn’t annoying, and she takes a step into the room.

“Yes,” she says. “It’s me.”

“I was wondering if you’d visit,” he says, but there’s no jab or double meaning to the words. Just his curling smile, audible in his voice. Pleased to see her. Pleased to see her. She had been wrong on every count, Caboose had been right about everything. It’s a deeply wrong state of affairs, pure dumb luck on his part, so unfair that someone so smart and strong and hardworking as her should ever be wrong about anything but, but, but. Giddiness is rising inside of her chest. She was wrong.

<Told you so!> Caboose says cheerfully, and she doesn’t even mind. She doesn’t even mind!
Incredible.

“Well, I had to come and see how you were doing,” she says, as if she’d been planning on doing so all along. What matters is the end result: she did the right thing. It doesn’t matter if she was initially considering doing the wrong thing, so long as she ultimately succeeds. People have a lot of clever sounding things to say about the journey, but in the end it is the destination that is the goal. The journey is a side effect, an obstacle. No one would suffer it if they didn’t have to. “And… to apologize.”

Apologizing is rough, and hard, and unpleasant. People avoid it desperately, like hard work or pain. Which means that she of course never shies away from it.

“Carolina--” he says.

“Let me say it, York,” she says, firm and reasonable.

He nods at her.

“I’m sorry I hurt you so badly, York.” She doesn’t say that it was an accident. It was, but that smacks of making excuses, which is a quality she hates in herself and others. She shouldn’t have let it happen anyways. The fact that it was an accident doesn’t make York any less injured. It doesn’t make her any less guilty. “I’m not going to let it happen again,” she says, and it’s a promise to him and to her, and she’s never broken a promise to herself. Never ever.

“Good to know,” he says, and it’s not the most serious response but there’s a warm smile in his voice instead of a droll tone, so she knows it isn’t a joke. He’s taking her seriously. He believes her.

She abruptly, intensely wants to kiss him.

<www,> Caboose says.

Carolina makes the conscious decision not to consider how she’s going to have a romantic and sexual relationship with someone with a childish idiot inside of her head (or with York having a panicky idiot in his, for that matter) right at this moment. For now, she’s still flooded with relief at York being okay and she wants to bask in it. Deep thoughts and hard decisions and negative feelings and difficult solutions can wait a day or two.

“You better get used to it,” she mutters in aside to him. And then, to York, “Take your helmet off.”

York has never minded her bossing him around, which is yet another mark in his favor. She’s tallied all of his points, and he makes second place on her list as well as the leaderboard, which is exceptional considering that she’s around to snag first place and all.

“I can’t,” he says, which is rare of him to say to her. She blinks. “The healing unit works better if I’m wearing full armor.”

“The healing unit,” she says. “You’ve still got that thing on?”

Well, he is still in the infirmary. She had just thought-- hadn’t he said he wasn’t really supposed to use it for minor injuries? Which means he still has major injuries. But, he’d seen her--

“For my eye,” he says. “Simmons says he thinks he can do something, but he needs to focus--”

“You saw me come in,” she says, and she’s so caught off guard she forgets to keep it from
sounding accusatory. “You saw me.”

“Simmons saw you,” he corrects her. “You know that shitty recording camera in the helmet, he’s hooked up into that and he let me know when he noticed you. It’s just a little workaround until he fixes—”

Simmons is a nervous bundle of wires that got York strapped to a bed and punted down two slots on the leaderboard until he got well enough to regain his place through impressive shows of skill in sparring matches, more obstacle than help for York just like Caboose is to her (just like reckless Sarge is to Florida, encouraging him to use his body as a wrecking ball at every opportunity; just like Donut is to South, driving her up the wall with his cheerful chirping as if she isn’t mindlessly angry enough as it is, giving her the ability to make a big loud mistake at her fingertips at any moment of every day as if she even remotely has the impulse control for that kind of responsibility). As if he’s going to be able to fix York’s blindness? As if he isn’t just panicking, spiraling, making false promises and throwing himself at a wall trying to find a solution that isn’t there? Why should she trust him? When has he proven himself to her? Blind. York is blind and Carolina did it and York is going to have to be led around by an AI like an anxious high tech seeing eye dog for the rest of his career, his life, until the Project (the Director) decides to take even that away from him and put Simmons with someone newer, someone less damaged, better allocation of precious resources. What happens to retired Freelancers? She’s never met one. Been here since the start of the program, first to volunteer. Never seen what happened to a Freelancer who wasn’t killed in the line of duty who decided to quit. It’s never happened before. Is it even allowed? So many secrets, and you just get to leave?

York is shaking her arm. Not hard, but his voice is noticeably worried. “Carolina? You okay?”

Is she okay. She is standing here, without even a broken finger from her armor shattering punch, being forgiven without hesitation by York who is blind but doesn’t think it will last. She can’t bring herself to believe it for a moment.

<Um,> Caboose says, his voice sounding queasy and small. <Your thoughts are very fast and very loud and very many, right now. Could you pretty please stop?>

“I should go,” she says, by which she means I shouldn’t be here.

She’d been right and Caboose had been wrong. That did make more sense.

<You are not stopping,> he whines.

“Oh,” York says, disappointed. Disappointed that she’s leaving. She wants to laugh, and something else. A large feeling in her chest that she decides means more training. “--Wait!”

She waits. He deserves that.

York doesn’t say anything else, hand still held out vaguely in her direction, and she realizes.

“... I’m here,” she tells him.

“I just had a question,” he says.

“Yes?” she says instead of giving him an expectant look.

“Does Caboose ever…?”

_Caboose_. Really, he wants to talk about _AIs_? Carolina is already growing sick of them. So quickly,
she knows.

Caboose perks up at the sound of his name, and she wonders how she knows, what that feeling is, how to describe it. The tactile version of wiggling your mouse so your screen lights up, deep inside of her brain.

“... does he ever,” York rallies, unusually hesitant. “Okay, so I know this is going to sound a bit strange, so please don’t spread it around?”

“Of course,” she says. If there’s anyone whose secret she can keep.

“Does he ever get real scared of the Counselor?” York asks. “Does he ever-- does he ever seem to remember something? Something bad?”

“No,” she says without hesitation. Caboose wants to hug the Counselor, and he doesn’t remember anything that’s inconvenient for him, and half of the things that aren’t. “Not at all.”

“Oh,” York says, like that wasn’t the answer he’d wanted to hear.

“Simmons strikes me as an easily intimidated AI,” she tries to mollify him. “Someone whose mind will invent vague bad memories out of dreams and anxieties for them to fret over.”

Someone who shouldn’t be on the battlefield, in other words. The kind of person Carolina usually doesn’t have to suffer. Civilian material, if only he weren’t nothing more than a particularly advanced experimental computer program made to support violence.

“--right, yeah. It’s just-- never mind. It’s just us, then. Means it isn’t anything important. We’ll handle it.”

“Okay,” she says, and half believes him. York, she trusts. Simmons, not at all. AIs aren’t reliable, after all.

She leaves, hard work done, answers learned.
how Florida joins

Chapter Summary

Back when he went by Flowers (Butch to his friends, he’d always tell them, but they always nervously insisted that they follow army protocol), he fought aliens, just like the majority of the UNSC.

This is how Florida joins Project Freelancer:

Back when he went by Flowers (Butch to his friends, he’d always tell them, but they always nervously insisted that they follow army protocol), he fought aliens, just like the majority of the UNSC.

It had been interesting. Different from fighting other humans. There had been a learning curve, finding out by trial and error how to best break them, where they were most vulnerable. Where to shoot, to stab, to punch. Different joints, different weak spots. He learned faster than the rest of his squad put together. He’s always been a quick learner, especially when he’s interested in the subject matter.

He’d cut off a body part from one of the corpses (or soon to be corpses) after every fight. Head, arm, leg, something new every time.

“Just as a souvenir,” he’d tell his squadmates, to mixed reactions.

“ Weirdo,” Kane would huff under her breath.

“Just don’t let it stink up the barracks, Flowers,” Gordy would say.

“Dude, that’s way too big,” Yang would say, and would then go and find themself a much more manageable sized trophy, like a mandible or a claw, and they’d hold it up as an example to him.

He’d smile and take home his large unwieldy souvenir anyways. Because they weren’t souvenirs, not really. He’d have stopped after the first skull, if that was the case. He brought back body part after body part, and he’d inspect them. He’d take his axe and see at what angle he’d have to swing it to make the joints come apart easier. He’d bring down his knife over and over again to see if any part of the skull caved in faster than others. It was research material.

And some he would admittedly preserve, keeping shiny oddly shaped skulls and bones and fangs wrapped inside old t shirts. Some souvenirs, keepsakes from what he then considered to be some of the best days of his life. They were pretty. Maybe he could make decorations out of them, after the war. With some paint and polish and filing, he could turn them into all sorts of things. It was fun to think about, to prepare for. Just another hobby. Flowers liked to keep busy.

Something else that had been interesting was how those in charge dehumanized the aliens to the troops. (Well, they weren’t human. Depersonized?) Of course, dehumanizing the enemy was a longstanding tradition in human warfare. People preferred to not kill people they liked. People they felt sorry for. People that they empathized with.
Flowers has never quite gotten it, has never really minded fighting or hurting people he likes. He likes most people, after all. He’s a friendly guy. And he likes violence. There has never been any conflict within him when it comes to these two facts about himself. He likes people, and he likes violence. So what? Hurting people doesn’t stop them from being people. He can still enjoy them.

But while he might not quite get it, he understands the concept of it. People don’t want to kill people that they like, that they even think they might like. So the enemy gets dehumanized. Natural, explainable, predictable.

But what’s interesting is how the Sangheili get dehumanized. It’s different from how humans do it to other humans. When it’s done to other humans it’s all: oh, they’re so different. Oh, they’re so brutish, so unintelligent, so sly, so lazy, so cunning, so selfish, so greedy, so cowardly, so violent. They’re bad people.

Sangheili don’t get even that. They aren’t bad people. They aren’t people. They don’t have negative personality traits, they don’t have personalities period. They’re animals. They’re killing machines. No emotions, just instincts. Feel free to kill them without remorse, like mowing down virtual zombies in a video game. It’s fine. They’re not people. Don’t think about it.

Flowers doesn’t believe any of that junk for a second. It’s so silly. He has eyes, you know. He has ears. He can see the way they desperately struggle when he kills them. He can hear the horror in their strange voices when their own fall in front of their eyes. Can feel the furious determination with which they try to avenge their fallen comrades on him.

He knows that Sangheili are people by their fear and their anger and their grief-- and it changes nothing for him. He enlisted prepared to kill people, and that’s what he’s doing. Others though, when they notice, when they see the pure hatred in their enemies eyes, they pause. They flinch, they gape. They weren’t prepared. They came in expecting monsters and animals and killing machines, and instead they just found their own reflection, people like them, killing something unfamiliar and yet not.

And then they leave the battlefield and convince themselves they saw nothing, that it was all in their heads. They drink and they forget and they laugh, because people don’t want to kill people that they like, that they even think they might like.

A lot of them just die there on the battlefield though, frozen by the shock and realization, at not having their expectations met. Frozen by that fear and anger and grief, killed on the spot for hesitating, for empathy.

Flowers never hesitates, and this is why he’s still alive. He can recognize that he’s fighting people, though. He just doesn’t mind.

“Flowers,” Gordy says one day in a weird tone of voice. “What the hell is that.”

Flowers looks up at Gordy, smiling at him. He’s normally taller than Gordy, but he’s sitting on his rock right now. He likes to come out and sit on it to think, or meditate, or clean up his souvenirs. Remove the skin and flesh, that kind of thing. He has a fresh clean skull in his hands now, just polishing off the last of the blood.

“Is it lunch time already?” he asks.

“What the hell,” Gordy repeats himself, teeth gritted and hands clutching tightly at his rifle, “is
Flowers looks down at his hands, his new skull.

“A souvenir,” he answers, a little puzzled. Gordy already knows about his habit, doesn’t mind it so long as he doesn’t bring the smell of rot to where they sleep. “I was thinking maybe later I could paint it with a nice swirling design, flowery. Like the tattoos she had.”

“That’s Kane,” Gordy rasps, and Flowers isn’t sure why he’s stating the obvious like that, like it’s a stunning thing. Kane has a very distinctive head of hair, after all, ridiculously long for a soldier and a dark natural red. It’s all pooled at his feet, along with her brains and her skin and her flesh and her eyes--

“She was already dead,” he says, wondering if maybe that’s the problem, if Gordy’s remembering some of the times he’d take the things he wanted to keep from Sangheili that were still feebly fighting back. Flowers knows that it isn’t okay to kill the people on your side. “Shot by that Elite, remember? You saw.”

“What are you doing with her,” Gordy asks, like he hasn’t walked in on this exact scene dozens of times by now.

“She’s going to stink if I don’t clean her up first,” he points out. “You hate that.”

“Why-- why are you-- stop acting like this is normal, Flowers, what are you doing to her!”

Gordy doesn’t normally get this shrill, always a cool head under pressure. Flowers makes his voice extra soothing. “I’m cleaning her, Gordy, so that she’ll make for a nice souvenir. A good decoration. Something to remember her by.”

A long, stunned silence. And then: “You can’t do that to people, Flowers!”

The realization washes over him like ice cold water as the pieces click together for him suddenly. From Gordy’s point of view this isn’t at all the same as him keeping body parts from the Sangheili. Aliens aren’t people. They’re killing machines, monsters, animals. No emotions, just instincts. Gordy doesn’t think Sangheili are people. He thinks that Flowers has been collecting trophies from felled beasts, like a hunter with a hut covered in pelts and taxidermied corpses.

Flowers had forgotten. He’d just seen his squad be okay with him collecting people’s body parts, and assumed that they’d feel the same way about all people. Except they’d never thought he’d been collecting pieces of dead people. He’d been collecting dead animals in their eyes, dead non-human, not-people things.

Flowers has Kane’s skull in his hands, her blood on his armor, the remains of the rest of her head at his feet along with a knife, and Gordy is staring at him in horror, like he doesn’t understand the difference between animals and people.

He opens his mouth and realizes that there’s nothing he can say to make Gordy stop looking at him like that, to make him realize that he’s the one who’s wrong, the one who misunderstood.

It’s not like he killed Kane. He just removed her head from her body and took it back to base. Sangheili are obviously people, just like them. It’s okay to take parts from Sangheili. It’s okay to take parts from people. It’s okay to take parts from humans. All of these conclusions are logical, orderly, and make perfect sense to him. Except that people refuse to admit that Sangheili are people because they’re too weak to kill without the lie, not like him, and he’d forgotten, hadn’t fully realized, and here he is. Absolutely screwed.
Everyone in the army thinks like Gordy. That they’re people and the enemy isn’t. That Flowers is holding his very first stolen body part from a person in his lap.

He closes his mouth and smiles instead, for lack of anything better to do, and turns back to continue cleaning the remaining blood off of Kane’s skull. Might as well finish what he started.

Gordy reports him. Flowers gets into trouble. A man called the Counselor comes and praises his skills. Offers him an alternative, a way out.

Flowers keeps the skull.
how York joins

Chapter Summary

He looks at her flawless makeup, the scars going up her bare muscled arms, her silky looking red hair put up in a ponytail that looks fancy for some reason he can’t articulate, and immediately feels put on the spot. Like a surprise quiz, or a sudden unforeseen time limit, crushingly close to running out.

_I have to impress this woman now before she walks away or else I’ll have lost my chance with something incredible_, he thinks.

This is how York joins Project Freelancer:

He wouldn’t get on top of a bar and announce into a megaphone that it was because Carolina wanted to sleep with him. He wouldn’t confess it to a journalist. He wouldn’t boldly declare it from the rooftops for all to hear. But… he’s got a feeling that it played a part. Tipped the scales a bit. Just a hunch, really.

He meets Carolina in a nightclub when she walks up to him, a perfect stranger, and snatches his lighter out of his hand without shame or hesitation where he’d been absent mindedly fiddling with it along with an arresting green glare and a, “That is so fucking annoying.”

He looks at her flawless makeup, the scars going up her bare muscled arms, her silky looking red hair put up in a ponytail that looks fancy for some reason he can’t articulate, and immediately feels put on the spot. Like a surprise quiz, or a sudden unforeseen time limit, crushingly close to running out.

_I have to impress this woman now before she walks away or else I’ll have lost my chance with something incredible_, he thinks.

“I’ve got some bad news about my entire personality, then.”

He has always had the unfortunate tendency of all of his skills suddenly evaporating if he’s racing against a ticking clock.

But the woman huffs a semi laugh through her nose anyways, rolls her eyes, and sits down next to him, his lighter in her hand.

Charming, be charming. He sticks his hand out. “Pleasure to meet you--?”

“Carolina,” she says, and she enunciates it slowly and clearly, deliberate in a way that instantly makes him think it isn’t her real name. That’s alright. This is a nightclub, he doesn’t need to know her real name.

“Pretty name for a pretty woman,” he tries.

Her eye roll this time isn’t accompanied by an amused huff of laughter. Damn. He better reel it
back in.

“I saw you arm wrestling that guy over there,” she says, and then tilts her head towards a pouty muscular man in the corner nursing a drink.

“Oh, him? You saw that?” He preens for a moment, glad that she had, but then remembers that she seemed to like the self deprecating stuff more than the cheesy pickup lines. “To be honest, that guy’s just a walking pile of glam muscles.”

She smiles a little. Tired of bragging men, that must be it. Well, he can be humble. He can be the humblest.

“And then he had to buy your drink for you?”

“Contests aren’t much fun without stakes,” he says.

“Sometimes winning can be its own reward,” she says.

“Winning and free drinks, though?”

Her smile goes wider. He can’t help but smile back.

“You raise an excellent point,” she says, and then she props her elbow up on the bar, her hand open and waiting. “I have to warn you, I’ve got expensive taste.”

For just a moment, he blinks at her, and then he grins again, propping his own elbow back up on the bar. “Are you trying to get me drunk, Carolina?”

She laughs at him. “You won’t be getting another drink for the rest of the night.” And then she clasps his hand, counts to three, and slams his hand down onto the bar so hard that for a moment he thinks he might’ve honestly broken something.

“One Long Island Iced Tea, please,” she tells the bartender, casually plucking his wallet out of his pants pocket. He has to laugh at her sheer audacity, even though it comes out breathless from the surprise and the pain.

“I want a rematch,” he says. “I was not prepared.”

“Are they ever?” she asks. “Let me get through my drink first.” Stone cold confidence. It’s cheeky and attractive as hell.

They arm wrestle four more times, have a dance off, a drinking contest, race down the street, and then do parkour on their way back to his place, which is a great idea to do when drunk. Carolina wins every single time, and he isn’t even upset. He’s never been a sore loser, and Carolina is a fantastic dancer (but an hilariously awful singer), and she can do so many backflips. While in heels.

They stumble giggling up to his door, drunk off of booze and each other and winning (that one’s just Carolina, although he sure feels like a winner as well). He pats himself down, trying to find his keys. He frowns.

“I think I-- I lost ‘em. The keys.”

Carolina groans. “You dork. Is, is there a window we can climb through?”

“Hang on, I know what to do,” he slurs, dropping most of his vowels. He scrounges through his pockets, and victoriously holds up his wallet. At least he hadn’t lost that as well! He opens through
it and comes back up with his credit card (now covered in Carolina’s smudged fingerprints, the minx) and slides it through the door crack, down towards the lock.

Carolina leans against his back, her hot breath against his ear. It’s utterly distracting, but also works as an incredible motivator to get through the door faster.

“I don’t know how to do that,” she marvels.

“Well-- it’s, it’s not like people hold courses about it, right. Kinda, heh, not suuuuper legal.” The door clicks open, and he does a ta dah motion.

She stares at the door for a moment, and then stares at him. “It’s a useful skill,” she says. “Practical.”

“Especially if you’re drunk off your ass and keep losing your fucking keys, eh?”

“And in other circa--circumcision--circum-- in other situations,” she says, nodding wisely.

“I guess,” he says, scratching at the side of his nose and trying not to think too hard about breaking into people's houses and taking food and showers and naps on soft beds and taking any clothes that fit him and anything he thought he could sell and even just sitting on the sofa and watching TV, pretending to be a normal kid for a bit. Pushing his luck.

She suddenly leans into his chest, arms around his shoulders, red lips and green eyes and flushed cheeks and her pretty hair mussed from the night’s physical activities. She smells like fresh sweat and sticky sweet booze and some kind of floral perfume. Drunk off his ass, he does exactly what his hindbrain tells him to and just closes his eyes and inhales deeply like a creep, soaking in the intoxicating scent of her.

“What’s your name?” she breathes against his lips.

His eyes spring open as he realizes that he’s spent this entire evening with her and he’d completely forgotten to give her any kind of name at all. Ah fuck, he’s an idiot.

“I’m,” he says, and then he actually brainlessly fumbles for his own damned name for a moment. God, he really is drunk.

She’s looking at him thoughtfully, wondering, considering. “How about York?” she says.

“What?” he says.


He laughs. “That’s where that’s from? Which one are you, North or South?”

“Both,” she says. “I’m good enough for two states.”

“Of course,” he says, nodding. It makes perfect sense, really. “Whatever you’re into, North South Carolina.”

“Remind me to talk to you about PFL, tomorrow,” she says, and then she pushes the door open and him through it.

York forgets to reclaim his lighter, so he obviously has no choice but to follow her to her classified military operation.
Recent dislocations at the shoulders, knees, hips, and ribs. Florida really does love that trick, twisting around to punch at or reach an opponent in an unexpected way that shouldn’t be possible, that defies what humans joints should be capable of. They’d been put back into place, but there’s swelling, some minor tearing to a ligament in his right shoulder, and a hairline fracture in his left leg bone. They should heal alright on their own in a few weeks if there ain’t stress put on them, Sarge reckons.

Florida’s movements are as fluid as ever, smooth as a stalking panther.

“Easy on yer left leg, soldier” he says. It makes him feel all… coddle-y to point it out, but the lack of limping isn’t great for the facture.

“No kicking doors in with the left leg, got it,” Florida replies.

Not exactly what he’d meant, but it’d do.

It turns out to be unnecessary for him to kick any doors down down anyways, as the infirmary ones slide open for him near soundlessly at his approach.

“So accommodating,” Florida hums. “Hey, Yoooork!”

There’s a startled yelp, and then a very loud clatter as a full grown man in armor falls out of his bed onto the floor.

“Hi, how are you doing?” Florida says, friendly as you please, still approaching. York fumbles his way into a standing position, knees slightly bent and hands held in front of him like he’s cautiously making his way through the dark.

“Florida!” York says, a little high pitched. “Wow! Hi! What’s up! Please stop where you are!”


“It’s just, uh, I kind of feel like I’m in that scene in a horror movie where the power goes out and the killer’s slowly approaching with a knife, is all. It’s kinda weird not to be able to see you.”

If York gets this jumpy every time he gets a visitor, then Grif is being mighty selfish coming over
so often. Lousy Grif.

Florida laughs. It last for an appropriate two seconds and is warm and joyful, and it sounds exactly like his last laugh half an hour ago did, and the one he had a week ago, and the one he had two weeks ago, and the one he had the day Sarge met him. Florida, with very few exceptions, laughs the exact same way every time.

People get more nervous the more often they interact with Florida, Sarge has noticed.

Sarge doesn’t care. He just really likes the times Florida’s laugh gets all different, usually in the middle of a glorious battle. It’s a pretty and wild sound, instead of plastic perfect.

“We’re both killers, York,” Florida says, like York had just cracked a particularly clever joke.

“Right. Right.”

Sarge activates his hologram, not that York can appreciate his handsome red armor at the moment. Florida’s admiration will just have to do.

“How’re you doing, son?” he asks. Not because he’s concerned, injuries happen to a soldier and it’s completely natural and nothing to be upset about. He’s just making chatter. Just checking in. Just staying on top of things.

“Oh, Sarge,” York says, sounding flatteringly pleasantly surprised. “Well, from what I can gather, it’s about shifting stuff around, recycling material, reconnecting nerves, returning synapses the ability to fire off correctly. Something about cones? I honestly have no idea what Simmons is constantly mumbling about inside of my head.” He laughs self deprecatingly, posture relaxing as he talks.

“Let him report to me directly then,” he says.

York lapses into a brief silence, murmuring quietly to himself. To Simmons. And then he speaks up. “Ah, no can do, Sarge, sorry. Simmons is very sorry, actually, but he’s busy with work right now.”

Sarge huffs at this, but is then a little proud of the boy. He must be up against some hell blazing odds, if he can’t even talk to Sarge for a moment.

“Well, that’s too bad,” Florida says, voice going all ‘aw shucks’ but still with a smile audible behind the words. “And when we came to visit you as well.”

“Ah, um, well,” York says. “I wasn’t really expecting you! You don’t tend to visit me when I’m hurt. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

Florida stalks forward. Smooth, fluid, silent. Putting subtle, infinitesimal stress on that fracture in his leg. It’s fine. It’ll be fine, it isn’t a serious injury.

Florida pushes his bounty into York’s chest, and York recoils and chokes on his spit in surprise.

“For you,” Florida says.

York takes the item pushed into his chest automatically, and gropes at it blindly, trying to figure out what it is, most likely.

“What is it?” York asks, tone a little thready, shoulders raised.
It’s a good gift, Sarge thinks with satisfaction.

“Pudding cup,” Florida says, and smiles wider. “South asked me to give it to you as a get well soon present.”

“How…… nice. Of her.”

“Isn’t it?” Florida asks. “Donut wanted for her to get you something, but you know how shy she is, so she was resistant to the idea.” York has a brief coughing fit at the word shy. “She seemed so pleased with herself when she came up with this. I’m happy to play messenger! Just don’t shoot me, okay?”

“I don’t think I’ll be shooting anyone for a while, Florida,” York says.

Sarge feels a sympathetic pang go through his circuits for the boy at that.

“Do not surrender yet, maggot!” he barks in his most encouraging voice. “You will slaughter the enemy once again! You just have to believe in yourself, and the power of technology, and friendship, and warfare, and magic and miracles a little bit too probably!”

“... Thank you, Sarge, I was real broken up about that.” He smiles, wry and amused. “Really, thanks a bunch.”

“I only wish we’d gotten you a gift of our own,” Florida sighs. “If only this ship had a gift shop.”

York chuckles. “I want a classified military project keychain.”

Simmons flickers on.

“Florida,” he says, all clipped tense no nonsense. “I know what you could get us as a gift.”

“Oh?” Florida says, intrigued.

“Simmons?” York says, surprised.

“Get us an eyeball,” Simmons says.

“Can do!” Florida chirps.

“WHAT,” York says.
Chapter Summary

What had York’s old eye color been again? Brown? Gray? Green? Blue? Something dull enough not to stick in Florida’s memory, anyways. Oops. He’ll just have to pick the prettiest one he can find and hope he likes it.

He’ll also have to pick an eye from someone who’s acceptable. After a long, long argument Simmons eventually brought York around to the idea, on the condition that Florida doesn’t take an eye from just anyone. Florida already knew that it isn’t okay to take an eye from just anyone, okay. He knows how laws work, how people react to violence. He has to pick the right victim. Not an ally, not a superior, not someone too important, not someone too sympathetic.

An enemy is perfect.

He volunteers for a mission–there are always missions--and he nabs one on his way out the door during his exit. There’s some commotion when he comes back, people in the hallways double taking, wide eyed and reaching for their comms, but he holds his head high and walks with purpose. Confidence that what you’re doing is fine is enough. So long as you aren’t caught doing anything too drastic. But since when has harming enemies been forbidden? Florida has always been permitted to do more things here in PFL than he has anywhere else, to be his most authentic self yet. PFL is his peak, and he hopes he never has to come back down.

No one stops him. He enters the infirmary with his gift and plunks it onto York’s lap.

“Here you go!” he sing songs.

“As promised!” Sarge chimes in. “We deliver.”

“What-- what is this, Simmons--” York says, touching the gift.

“--didn’t ask for a person!” Simmons says, appearing mid shriek. “We need an eye! Just an eye!”

“Oh, I know!” Florida says. “But body parts go bad so fast once they’ve been detached from the whole, so I thought this would be the best delivery method. We can unwrap it right here in the infirmary!”

“Oh my god,” York says. “Oh my fucking god, I knew this was bad idea--”

The gift makes a muffled groggy pained noise through their gag.

“--they’re still alive!??”

“Body parts also go bad very fast if the whole is dead.”
Before York or Simmons can say anything about that, guards storm into the infirmary and casual conversation becomes quite impossible over all of the ruckus.

Florida’s gift gets confiscated. Apparently, bringing in live enemies isn’t allowed. Spending extended time around live enemies isn’t allowed.

“Was he wearing a gag the entire time?” the Director asks.

“Yes, sir,” he says pleasantly. It’s basically the truth. Sure, there’d been about a minute at the start there where that hadn’t been true, but the enemy had only used that time to scream, so so what? Screams start to blend together after a while, all sounding the same. Although Sanghellis have a certain subtle underlying chirr to them that distinguishes them from humans at least. Florida suppresses a nostalgic sigh. It’s been too long since he’s killed a Sangheili. Not since he joined PFL.

“Don’t do this again,” the Director says. “You’re dismissed.”

Florida obeys the man that lets him play on the battlefield without repercussion.

He isn’t told what they do with the live enemy he brought in, and he isn’t curious enough to ask. Eyes can be found everywhere. It’s no big loss.

“Maybe if we rip out the eyeball and then put it in a bottle of vodka…” Sarge muses. “Strong liquors basically like formaldehyde, right?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve certainly disinfected wounds with alcohol before,” Florida says.

“Hey, asshole!” South hollers from across the training room. Asshole isn’t his name, but there also isn’t anyone but the two of them and their AIs here, and South wouldn’t have to speak, much less shout, for Donut to hear her. Florida waves. “You watching!?”

“Looking good!” he shouts back to her, giving her a thumbs up.

South turns around and explodes a training dummy. Plastic limbs fly in separate directions. She whirls around and looks at him expectantly.

Florida dutifully claps. Sarge whoops and hollers in enthusiastic approval. South struts in a particularly self satisfied way to the various blown up dummy parts around the room as she gathers them all up to put in a messy pile all together.

“You know that child that insists her mother look as she does a backflip on the trampoline?” he quietly asks Sarge.

“Possibly,” Sarge says, cagey but fond, still looking at South as she lazily tidies up. Florida hums around the amused curl to his lips.

They consider other possibilities together as South annihilates three more dummies. Perhaps they could get one from the blackmarket? Those must have eyes, right? Somewhere? And they had to be ready for implantation, right? Otherwise what was the point?
“Well,” Florida says.

“Oh ho ho no, sonny, I’ll have you know that I have it on good authority that havin’ a bunch of your fallen foes gussied up dismembered body parts strewn around the bedroom is apparently not the norm, although it is a shame, that.”

“It’s good interior decorating,” he defends himself.

“Hey, yer preaching to the choir here,” Sarge says. “Drinking out of your enemy’s skull is a classic.”

“Well I don’t do that,” Florida protests. “I have a very nice tea set and you know it.”

“How would you even decorate with eyeballs?” Sarge wonders. “Put em in a lava lamp?”

“What the fuck are you guys talking about?” South asks, having apparently approached them while Florida was distracted. Sloppy of him, honestly. Just because he’s in his home and among allies doesn’t mean that he should let his guard down like that. “And why does it involve eyeball lava lamps?”

“And why am I only hearing about this amazing tea set now!?” Donut demands, appearing.

“South never RSVPs to my tea parties,” Florida says with a pout.

“South,” Donut says, aghast.

“Fuck off,” she says. “We are not drinking tea with the psycho.”

“Oh, but he can watch you explode things!?”

“I don’t have an official diagnosis, actually,” Florida says.

“What’s your point?” South asks Donut, ignoring him.

“So you can do things you like with Florida and Sarge--like being applauded for gross property damage--but we can’t do stuff I like with them?”

“You like tea parties!” South says indignantly.

“So!? Donut says, echoing her tone.

“I don’t like tea!”

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH TEA YOU HEATHEN?”

“Do you think this is actually about tea…?” Florida quietly asks Sarge.

“This argument could go one of two ways,” Sarge says. “Either we get a highly entertaining deathmatch, or this devolves into tears and emotions.”

“It is literally impossible for this disagreement to come to blows,” he reminds him.

“Odds are in favor of wailing and crying then,” Sarge says grimly. “Agent Florida, I suggest a strategic retreat is in order.”

“I trust your judgement,” Florida says, and leaves without being noticed.
Florida takes a bottle of vodka to his next mission, and when he returns it has something new floating inside of it. It occurs to him to stop York from drinking from it just in time.
the cold shoulder

Chapter Summary

South feels her shoulders go up at the laughter.

The tea argument spirals out of control.

South is venturing into exciting new and unexplored territory when it comes to giving someone the cold shoulder. Cold shouldering your twin brother? Old news, overdone, easy mode. Cold shouldering an entity that lives inside of your brain? Now she’s taking shit to the next level.

She had not expected for Donut to cold shoulder her right back, considering he has no shoulders and also he couldn’t shut up and stop trying to be everyone’s best friend for five seconds for the life of him. She resents him for the sudden wellspring of silence he’s found now, finally when she wants for him to constantly want her attention like always, just so that she could deny him it. He’s not supposed turn the tables on her like this.

He’s clearly doing it just to spite her, and it makes her fume with impotent fury. She wants to shout at him, except then she’d be the one breaking the cold silence first, and then he could blatantly ignore her first, making her the loser in the relationship. And she is not going to lose to fucking Donut.

She decides to give herself an easy win to help her handle the surprisingly difficult cold war she’s got going on with her AI, and goes and stands in North’s general vicinity, as if it’s just a coincidence.

“South,” he says almost immediately, cautiously, giving in for her instantly. It’s so easy it even robs her of some of the satisfaction. She scowls at the wall she’s looking at instead of him, frustrated. It’s like everything she does just makes her more angry.

She doesn’t say anything. After a moment, there’s a soft pink glow out of the corner of her eye.

“Hi, North!” Donut chirps.

South stiffens, anger sharpening like it always does. It can always go sharper.

“Oh, hello, Donut,” North says.

North isn’t paying attention to her any longer. Now she’s just standing around, quiet and silently paying very close attention to what’s they’re saying while they ignore her and talk to each other instead.

“Do you want to come out and say hi too, Grif?” North says in a familiar coaxing voice, except it isn’t directed at her.

“Oh, please!” Donut says. “I’ve never even gotten to talk to him!” Because South has been avoiding North, and therefore Grif as well, ever since she got Donut.
He’s manifested just to make his cold shouldering more obvious, and now he’s found yet another way to rub it into her face.

“--fine, fine, quit nagging me,” Grif says, appearing. She can already see what they intend to do. All three of them having a pleasant conversation together like she isn’t silently fuming off to the side. Mocking her.

“Heyyyy, Grif!” Donut singsongs. “How are you! And how’s Simmons? Is it true that York has eight eyes now like a spider?”

“--what?”

“Come on, dish the hot goss, Grif!”

North is doing that quiet laugh thing. Not wheezy and tearfully breathless like Wash gets, but keeping it quiet so that no one thinks he’s mocking them, and shaking all the more with amusement for how much he’s concentrating on being silent. It’s so fucking noticeable, the dumbass.

_He’s laughing at me_, she thinks with absolutely certainty. She knows.

Donut stops talking mid sentence, like something had just startled him speechless. He feels unsettled.

“You know what, no, actually, he’s got one eye now, except it’s gigantic and centered on his forehead like a cyclops.” Grif goes on.

“I will testify under oath in a court of law that York has to now shriek and use echolocation to see,” North says, and Grif snorts.

South feels her shoulders go up at the laughter. People are always laughing at her like she’s a joke, like she’s missing something obvious. She knows a quick and easy way to make it stop though, a way to make the laughter abruptly stop every single time.

It’s her brother though, so she doesn’t lunge at him. Instead she jerks into movement, violently shoving something she barely glances at to loudly clatter onto the floor, and she stomps off, wishing she could slam sliding doors closed.

“... What’s her problem?” Grif asks as the doors slide closed, North silent, laughter gone. She’d succeeded, she’d punished them for laughing at her and put them in their places. She’s not far enough below them to be mocked. She can knock them over whenever she wants to, and she won’t stand for the slightest insult, so they better tread lightly.

_Everyone_, she thinks. _Everyone but me._

Donut is still quiet. It makes her angry. She wishes she could _shake_ him and shove and push and hit him until he had no choice but to acknowledge her, to stop fucking with her. But that isn’t an option. It’s makes her boil with rage, because she knows that there’s nothing she can say that will make him stop, nothing that she can say to change his mind. The most words can ever do is briefly shock people enough to show weakness. Action is what makes people bend and break.

So talking would just be digging her grave deeper, giving him more ammo, make her look weaker, waste her time and effort. It’s hopeless and futile and she already know what works one hundred percent of the time. So long as you can win the fight, so long as you’re stronger and more willing to hurt the other person, the one willing to hurl yourself into a fight first, you won’t be laughed at.
People can’t be made to like you unless you’re willing to live as a desperate people pleaser like North, but they can be made to fear you, easily. And that’s as good as like.

<... South,> Donut says slowly, and she stumbles a bit in her stalking down the hall in surprise, knocked off her train of thought. <I’m sorry.>

She stares off into the hallways, surprised. And then she starts walking again, doesn’t answer, and smirks. She did win. She knows this is something to be smug about even if she’s still too angry from what just happened to feel it. A low, deep kind of angry that makes her think of black scribbles and static and sewers, consuming and tainting her. A foul mood.

<You feel like that all of the time,> Donut says quietly, and she doesn’t bother listening to him. She’s giving him the cold shoulder, after all.
Carolina ignores him.

Carolina’s brain feels all messy. Caboose’s brain is all messy too, but he’s used to it. He knows where everything is, more or less, or if it’s moved while he wasn’t looking then he can find it again pretty easily. So long as he doesn’t get distracted. Carolina’s brain is a new kind of messy. Unfamiliar. Unpredictably kind of hurts to try and touch, like picking up dropped thumbtacks from a rug, the nice soft kind that it’s fun to pet and all of the thumb tacks are invisible and hiding in it. Cutting himself on corners and sharp edges he doesn’t know to look out for.

<What game are we playing?> he whispers in her head, because she’d told him to be quiet. Maybe because they’re playing hide and seek. He doesn’t remember hide and seek involving the hider and the seekers all shooting at each other though.

Carolina ignores him and shoots at a man, and the bullet goes through his head and then the head of the man behind him too.

Whatever they’re playing, Caboose feels like Carolina’s probably winning.

<BINGO!> he cheers, because they’re on the same team so Caboose is winning too.

Carolina flinches and mutters a naughty word underneath her breath, shoots three more people.

<Are we going to get blackout,> he says excitedly, <and do we have to paint our armor black if we do?>

Carolina reloads.

<I hope we don’t have to, because blue is my very favorite color.>

Carolina vaults over her cover and charges for the remaining people who are still moving. They scream and run away even though there are more of them. Carolina shoots them too.

<If you win Go Fish, do you get a fish?> he wonders.

Carolina kicks a door down.

<That’s dumb. Machine pet friends are better.>

Carolina looks around the room for anyone’s who’s hiding. When they started the game, Carolina was the one hiding, but he guesses now that they noticed her their roles have switched.

<Because, um, because if they get broken you can fix them easier. Duct tape does not work on meat pets.>

Carolina finds a man hiding in a closet, and instead of shooting him just hits him very hard in the throat.
<And they don’t make a mess.> Blood spreads in a puddle on the floor where the man lands.
<Except for oil sometimes. Or sparks. Which can turn into fire. Which turn into ash, which is very hard to wash off of your hands even if you use soap.>

“Location cleared,” Carolina says.

Caboose is so surprised and happy that he feels like he glows, floats, and he accidentally activates the little jetpack boosters on the back of Carolina’s armor that’s supposed to help her move if there’s no gravity or if she needs to run extra super fast. She stumbles, her hand coming up to support herself on the wall. Her hand goes right through the wall and she stumbles some more against it. She makes a frustrated growl-snarl noise.

“Roger that,” someone says over her comm, and Caboose realizes that she wasn’t talking to him after all.

He feels dim and heavy, disappointed. Like being promised cookies and then not being given them after all.

She wrenches her hand out of the wall, and then looks down at her gun. While falling, she’d squeezed it with her hand and now it doesn’t look like a gun any longer. It looks like a weird pointy ball of metal with finger shaped indents. Like squishing clay in your hand.

“Caboose,” she says lowly. Cautious, he waits for someone else to speak up first to see if she’s really talking to him this time. And then he realizes that that’s his name.

<Carolina! Hi!!>

“Get out of my armor,” she says, “and just stay inside of my neck implant. Out of my way.”

Caboose doesn’t know what to say. Or how to think about that in a way that doesn’t hurt. So instead he takes his code and he pulls it slowly and carefully out of the armor, like maybe Carolina will change her mind if he gives her enough time and he radiates enough sad while doing it.

Carolina doesn’t say anything. He hates that. He hates it when she does that. She does it a lot.

And now Caboose is all rolled up tight and gathered in her neck implant instead of spread around everywhere he can reach, and. He hates that too. It’s like trying not to move or fidget. It’s easy to just be in the brain when the brain is all there is, but now there’s more and it’s moving and doing stuff and Caboose isn’t allowed to hear or feel it.

Carolina wins whatever the game is. She doesn’t invite Caboose to play.
sexual jumper cables

Chapter Summary

<Where fucking is it.>


<It has to be here somewhere!>

Wash grimaces at the feeling of someone rummaging through his brain with electricity. It doesn’t hurt exactly, but it’s weird and definitely not conducive to falling asleep.

“Tucker I don’t know what to tell you,” he sighs. “If you can’t find it then it’s just not there, I guess.”

<How? How does that work!?>

<Where fucking is it.>


<It has to be here somewhere!>

Wash grimaces at the feeling of someone rummaging through his brain with electricity. It doesn’t hurt exactly, but it’s weird and definitely not conducive to falling asleep.

“Tucker I don’t know what to tell you,” he sighs. “If you can’t find it then it’s just not there, I guess.”

<How? How does that work!?>

He rolls over onto his side and squints into the darkness of his room. The glowing numbers of his alarm clock tells him that it’s three in the morning. He sleepily wants to murder something. Or scream into his pillow. But then he’d really wake up, and he’s not entirely ready to give up hope yet.

“Not everyone has as large a libido as everyone else.”

<You have to have some libido though! If I can just find it and attach some-- sexual jumper cables->

“You’re not making any sex, Tucker.” He pulls the covers over his head like this will in any way muffle Tucker’s voice. “I mean sense.”

<You’re not making any sex. Or sense,> Tucker grumbles. <Maybe it’s behind your cerebellum?>

“Okay, I’m getting up,” Wash decides.

<You are!?> Incredules hope.
Wash pulls his covers away and stands up.

<Oh. You mean like that.> Disappointment.

“Please stop thinking about my penis.”

Wash spends ten minutes hunting through his room for armor pieces and putting them on in the dark, repeatedly slamming his toes and elbows on various things. By the end, he’s thoroughly, regretfully awake.

Might as well make something out of this artificial insomnia. He heads towards the training room.

He finds Carolina twisting and kicking and punching at floating spiraling targets, and he isn’t even surprised.

Tucker mentally gasps. <Sexual jumper cables.>

Wash trips and almost falls on his face. “Don’t call her that!” he shrieks.

“Call me what?” Carolina asks.

Wash looks at her guilty. His near faceplant and urgent protest has basically obliterated any chance of stealth that he had. “Uh,” he says, “nothing.”

“Hmm,” Carolina says, and turns her focus back onto her targets. Wash relaxes.

Tucker is poking at his brain again. <How is something still not stirring?> he asks, disbelieving. <Look at her!>

“She’s wearing full armor,” he mutters to himself as he heads over to the weights.

<Yeah but look at that ass!>

He briefly hides his face in his hands and groans.

“AI bothering you?” Carolina asks without stopping her workout, sounding a little sympathetic.

“You could say that,” Wash says, settling down with some dumbbells.

“Just ignore him,” she advises him.


“Easier said than done.”

“The trick is to not say anything at all.”

A small glowing blue man in armor appears behind Carolina’s shoulder, and he waves enthusiastically over at Wash.

“Hi! Hello! I’m Caboose!”

There’s a feeling rolling through him like some just gutpunched him breathless, and Wash holds his breath for a moment instinctively.

Caboose wilts a little as Wash doesn’t respond, his hand going down and his shoulders slumping.
Tucker, in glowing aqua, appears floating besides Wash.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m Tucker.”

Caboose glows so brightly that Wash has to squeeze his eyes shut, blue penetrating his eyelids like taking a nap underneath the sun.

“HI TUCKER,” Caboose hollers so loudly that Wash wonders what the volume capacity is on their armor.

“--you don’t have to shout!” Tucker protests belatedly. He doesn’t feel angry or exasperated. He still feels off kilter and shaken and a little bit confused.

“I’M NOT SHOUTING,” Caboose shouts. “I’M JUST HAPPY!”

“Caboose, stop glowing,” Carolina says, sounding deeply annoyed. Wash still has to keep his eyes shut. It must be difficult hitting targets like this.

Wash can feel Tucker’s urge to walk closer to them tingling in his toes.

“I’M NOT GLOWING, I’M JUST HAPPY.”

“You’re so stupid!” Tucker says, and radiates desperate confused happiness inside of Wash’s skull. Wash puts a hand up to his visor to try and block out the blue glow more and takes a deep breath, trying to breathe through the emotions.

“You’re stupid!” Caboose says joyfully.

“No, you’re stupid!”

“No, you!”

“No, you!”

This is weird and stupid and intense and completely inexplicable. But at least Wash doesn’t have to try and explain to Tucker what asexuality is three in the morning. He’ll take it.
off the bench

Chapter Summary

“Oh come on, baby, don’t be like that.”

<Don’t call me baby,> Simmons hisses shrilly.

“Don’t be like that, bro.”

The doctor’s finger traces slowly along the chart, pauses at a new, smaller shape. A new letter.

<E,> Simmons says.

York’s mouth twitches. “E.”

Her finger starts moving again. He’s distracted by how blue her eyes are. Simmons has to mentally poke at him.

<F,> he hisses.

York coughs. “F.”

They continue like this for a while, and then eventually, thankfully, the doctor leaves.

“Simmons,” York says the second the door closes behind her. “You didn’t need to help me cheat.”

Simmons pops up. “What’s wrong with a second opinion?”

“On a letter test? Simmons, either you succeed on that one or you don’t. They’re just checking to see how blind I am so I don’t accidentally shoot one of my teammates by mistake on the field or something.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen!”

“But I can see on my own! You don’t have to help me with this!” He laughs. “You’re being ridiculous.”

Simmons radiates flustered anger, and disappears in a huff.

“Oh come on, baby, don’t be like that.”

<Don’t call me baby,> Simmons hisses shrilly.

“Don’t be like that, bro.”

<I’ll be however I want to be and also my actions are completely justified and you’re being ridiculous!>

“Okay,” York says.
Simmons, who can feel York’s feelings, radiates dissatisfaction. York grins. This is already better than the constant determined anxious stress of the last few weeks. And hey, he really isn’t blind. He hadn’t let himself dwell on the possibility that he was, but… yeah, he’s relieved.


<You have a message from the Director,> Simmons says, presumably the nanosecond it’s received.

“Orrr I could just immediately go back to work the second I’m okay again, I guess. That sounds fun too.”

York was being facetious, to be honest. Just a little bit. Sure, he had the leg up of being recommended by the first Freelancer PFL had at the time, but he still got accepted. And to be accepted into Project Freelancer you kinda have to be a bit of a workaholic adrenaline junkie. Someone who lives to be shot at, and to shoot at others. York may not be as bad as Carolina’ but Carolina’s a high fucking bar. It’s been weeks since York’s last mission, and the inactivity and boredom (and the fear, the worst kind of fear, the kind he couldn’t do anything at all about except just sit there and wait and see and try and not let Simmons’ constant background hum of sick anxiety drive him crazy) is itching underneath his skin.

He may bitch about it some, but he walks quickly and with a perk in his step to the Director’s office.

Simmons is buzzing with nerves in the back of his head, but not like when York still couldn’t see shit.

“What’s up?” he asks.

<Hmmmmm?> Simmons hums with panicked innocence.

“This thing you do, where you try and hide that you’re having an emotion from someone who can feel your emotions? It’s so stupid, dude. But also what’s up? You feel all… jittery.”

Simmons radiates intense discomfort. York would love to know why reacts to every inquiry into his feelings as if it’s a vulgar personal attack.

<Just,> Simmons eventually haltingly manages to make himself say as York patiently continues not to save him from the increasingly awkward silence, <I don’t know. You can see now.>

Another long pause. York nonchalantly whistles.

<Which is good!> Simmons rushes to say in the void of a response. <I’m happy! Uh. I am. I just. Don’t know what to do now? I don’t know… It’s like? Such a big relief that I can’t process it? Except my processors are state of the art-->

“I think I get what you’re talking about,” he says thoughtfully. He’s reminded of the come down from some of his most intense missions, where he was so consumed with surviving the present that he didn’t even have time to afford to think about later, about when he could just sit down and relax. Sometimes nothing had felt real for days afterwards. “You were that worried about me?”

Which is a stupid question, because York had been able to feel exactly how worried Simmons had
been. It was just that he’d been trying to ignore it to stop himself from worrying. And Simmons had helped by desperately trying to ignore it too, trying not to get so fear distracted that he couldn’t work properly. York is starting to suspect that Simmons might just not like dwelling on feelings in general, though.

"<I-- yes-- shut up! I was a reasonable amount of worried! I wasn’t worried at all! I am an emotionless AI capable only of cold hard logic! Fuck you!>"

His voice is cracking. York bites his lip, smiling.

“Love you too, buddy.”

Simmons makes a literal high pitched dial up noise and then descends into overloaded fritz noise, a dull shhhhh sound that reminds him of shitty TVs acting up. York snickers.

York enters the Director’s office.

The man himself is standing with his back to York, reading something on a pad, and he doesn’t bother turning around at the swish of the door opening. So dramatic.

“Sir,” he says, just in case he doesn’t know who’s just entered his office.

“Sir,” Simmons echoes, popping up in his little maroon man hologram at York’s shoulder. He feels nervous and eager, a little nauseous.

“York, I have a mission for you,” the Director says, still without turning around to look at him. Honestly.

York still isn’t used to a chilly stoic super genius with a thick hick accent. There’s a brief spike of indignation that feels like a scandalized gasp from Simmons, and his mouth twitches in a brief smile. Well, he’s right, isn’t he?

“Happy to hear I’m off the bench, sir,” he says.

“We’ll do whatever it is!” Simmons says with enough pep for a head cheerleader. “Sir!”

Ah, great. As if Carolina’s intense loyalty for the Director isn’t enough, now he’s got to deal with it from Simmons too. Not that he’s got anything against being loyal; he just likes being able to shittalk his boss a bit. All in good fun, of course. The guy’s weird. Uptight.

Not that he has much of a leg to stand on complaining about that, considering how close he is to Carolina and Simmons.

(He hasn’t seen Carolina in a while, but that isn’t strange. She’s possibly a bigger workaholic than even the Director, who seems to live for his job. The Director seems to have nothing outside of his job; Carolina deliberately puts all she is and more into it. She’s just busy right now. Nothing personal. He’s used to it. He’ll see her again.)

“It’s a rescue mission,” says the Director.
Chapter Summary

Wash and Tucker had been sent to this island to quickly zoom in, grab some experimental weaponry from the enemy’s secret labs that they had discovered merely hours ago, and then zoom right back out. It was a stupidly simple plan. Some would say stupid enough to be foolproof. Some other more right people would say stupid enough to be guaranteed to go wrong, and oh wow, look at that, they’d tripped up some kind of alarm and had managed to get themselves locked inside of the building with no way out. Who could have possible predicted that they’d get stopped by a lock (or in this case, very many locks) because some genius didn’t think to send in the freaking lock breaker in the first fucking place?

No, Simmons doesn’t feel resentful or slighted at all.

There’s a problem, and it’s that North and York don’t hang out together enough.

“What are you talking about,” York says. “We’ve started spending twice as much time together since we got you guys.”

<I only get to see Grif for a few hours a day,> he sulks. He’s fine with admitting that he wants to see Grif more to York because it’s York; they keep each other’s feelings and thoughts secret, if that’s what they want the other to do. He’s fine with admitting that he wants to see Grif more to himself because he has a lot of justifications in store. Donut’s Agent is too mean. Sarge’s Agent is too creepy. Caboose’s Agent is too flat out scary. Wash is tolerable but Tucker himself isn’t worth it. So, logically, Grif is the only AI left who’s viable for hang outs, and that’s barely even scratching the surface of his hour long Powerpoint presentation of why he just has no other choice but to be friends with Grif, it really is unfortunate. Except York isn’t letting him.

“A few hours every day is a lot! I still have to do things besides spending time with North. You know, eating, sleeping, training, showering, spending time with people who aren’t North.”

<You can do all of those things while being with North.> York is being completely unreasonable.

“... Seriously? Oh my god, you’re serious.”

Simmons is dead serious, and he doesn’t get what the big deal is.

“Simmons, if I had to spend that much time with someone, I’d go crazy and stab them.”

<That sounds fake,> he says.

And it does. Not spending nearly every hour of the day next to Grif’s side is, well, kind of driving him crazy. Obviously it’s York who’s wrong here. Simmons isn’t weird. For an AI.

“No, listen, this is not normal. This is another time when you’re limited life experience is warping your world view, trust me.” Belatedly, a worry sprouts in York’s brain that maybe it was mean to imply that Simmons isn’t normal, that that’s the kind of thing he gets insecure about--
Simmons ignores the worry as best he can. He has an unfortunate habit of accidentally worsening York’s anxieties if he pays attention to them. Some bug in his code that they aren’t going to alert anyone about because the techs and the doctors and the scientists and the soldiers guarding with guns freak them both out now. Rough implantation. Simmons’ fault.

“Simmons--” York says, concern in his voice, and Simmons focuses back on the argument with a vengeance to distract from the unpleasant feelings and memories creeping up on them.

*I’m a super smart AI, which more than makes up for my short lifespan so far.*

“Says the one year old,” York snarks back automatically, which is good, which is nice. He’s distracted. Success. Simmons feels a faint flicker of satisfaction at that, his own, and then it’s amplified by York noticing it and being pleased by it. Feedback loop. The bug in his code. Occasionally pleasant, more often than not dangerous. Again, Simmons’ fault.

York picks up the ball and helps them move on. “Actually, now that I think about it, says the zero year old. Still got some months to go, eh?”

*My reasoning makes perfect sense! We hang out together all of the time and get along just fine, right?> He pauses for a moment as he realizes that he just made a decent point. He then pauses to deliberately radiate as much smugness as possible over making a decent point.

He can feel York roll his eyes. “That’s different.”

*How!?>

“You’re my AI! You’re in my head, we can read each other’s emotions and thoughts and junk. Perfect empathy. Sort of. I can’t imagine how I possibly couldn’t get along with you. I’d have to actively try or something, and why the hell would I try not to get along with someone who lives in my head?”

“If you two’re done jabbing your jaws, or ready to shut up for like a second, then I just want you guys to know that you need to jump off within the next two minutes if you want to be even vaguely on target,” 479er cuts in dryly over the ship comms. “Not that it isn’t so interesting to get to listen to half of a conversation.”

*This argument isn’t over.*

“Yes it is, I won, jumping out of the plane now.”

*I am making a note to get back to this argument as soon as possible, as in I’m creating an actual document in my files.*

York just sighs, and jumps out of the plane. Without a parachute.

*YORK,* he blares. *YORK YOU FORGOT YOUR-->*

“Jesus!” York shouts over the howling of the wind. “I know, Simmons! It was on purpose!”

*WHAT!?>

Simmons hadn’t seen this coming at all. Even though he lives in York’s brain! The apparently deliberate choice to forego a parachute had just slipped underneath his radar, just like those entirely natural, unremarked upon impulses to scratch his nose or cross his arms or curl his fist just right for a punch. Like there’s nothing strange about this at all.
York,> Simmons says with horror. <Do you just not use parachutes?>

York doesn’t have time to respond in any way to that besides with a quick damning mental flash of defensiveness and a little guilt, because the ground is rushing rapidly closer to meet with them.

They meet the ground.

York lets out an “oof!” and rolls down the slightly sloped hill. As he rolls to a stop Simmons, at a loss for words, just shoves a general feeling of incredulity/fear/disbelief at him.

“What?” he says. “If 479er had dropped me off at a high enough altitude for me to use a parachute I would’ve just been shot out of the sky by the turrets—she might be able to do an aerial barrel roll to avoid a missile, but I can’t if I’m being gently lowered to the ground by a piece of fabric.”

<York. Do you ask 479er to drop you off low enough to forego parachutes even when you don’t have to?>

“I’d like to not answer the question? Come on, let’s get out of the open before the enemy realizes that the plane left something behind to shoot at instead.” He gets up and stretches, and Simmons takes note of the hideous bruises that are going to appear on the side of his body. Low priority, he won’t bother trying to heal them before they’ve gotten through the mission. He wouldn’t want to waste precious power if York got a much more urgent injury later.

<Stop dodging arguments with me!>

“I’d rather not have to dodge bullets, Simmons.”

Above them, 479er fruitlessly drops some bombs on the island a safe distance away from them to help sell the idea that she wasn’t here to drop off any one man infiltration and extraction teams, no siree.

<We can argue and hide at the same time.> To demonstrate, he nudges York’s focus towards some foliage that should make for decent cover to go unnoticed as he disagrees with him. <I can’t believe you wouldn’t use a parachute.>

“Well, this is a stealth mission, you know. There’s nothing quite as conspicuous as a parachute during broad daylight.” Dutifully he moves into the foliage as they bicker, crouch running low to the ground to make sure he’s fully covered, handily proving Simmons’ point.

<They should have let us wait until it was dark,> he grumbles, distracted from one grievance by another.

“I doubt Wash would be able to keep avoid being captured for that long. Sure, he’s fast, but these fancy armor units suck up power fast, and you can only avoid--what was it, three dozen guards?--for so long when you’re stuck in a locked building with them.”

Wash and Tucker had been sent to this island to quickly zoom in, grab some experimental weaponry from the enemy’s secret labs that they had discovered merely hours ago, and then zoom right back out. It was a stupidly simple plan. Some would say stupid enough to be foolproof. Some other more right people would say stupid enough to be guaranteed to go wrong, and oh wow, look at that, they’d tripped up some kind of alarm and had managed to get themselves locked inside of the building with no way out. Who could have possible predicted that they’d got stopped by a lock (or in this case, very many locks) because some genius didn’t think to send in the fucking lock breaker in the first fucking place?
No, Simmons doesn’t feel resentful or slighted at all.

<Forty guards,> he corrects him.

“Man, what the hell were they thinking sending the rookie in on a solo mission like this? I think this might be his first one.”

<I see the building,> Simmons says. He does. It’s squat and gray and boxy, surrounded by various vehicles and a large, broad field that it’ll be hell to sneak past. He knows from the blueprints he got to download that there’s far more to the building than first meets the eye, floor upon floor sprouting underneath the ground instead of up, like an iceberg. Also, there’s a guard at every visible exit holding a gun and an eye out, presumably just to be sure. He assumes the rests of the guards are locked inside of the building with Tucker and Wash, playing the most intense game of hide and seek of their lives.

“I’m still gonna drag him for this, though,” he goes on, slowly circling the building from some distance away, still hidden by the foliage.

Simmons kind of likes it when York’s a little mean to people, so he won’t say anything to try and dissuade him from this decision. It’s hilarious. <There!> he hisses, victorious, even though no one but York can hear him right now, no matter how loud he gets. <There’s a camera blind spot right there!>

“Yeah, and a guard,” he mutters back, but he doesn’t sound all that dubious.

<Yeah,> he says. <One guard.>

And really, he doesn’t have to say anything more. If York can’t handle a single guard, he might as well just turn in his (nonexistent) Freelancer badge now, and do whatever it is retired Freelancer do. Get executed to maintain secrecy? Ha, no, that’s a little extreme.

Going by body language, the guard is, as many guards are, both tense and bored. He turns his head every few seconds to look in different direction, and he intermittently paces in front of his door, finger restlessly tapping against the safety of his gun. Simmons can see a walkie talkie on his belt, and he’s within shouting distance of other guards besides. And all it’d take to alert the rest of them would be a single gunshot anyways.

Their genius plan to get past him: York waits until he’s looking away and then he flat out sprints at him as fast as he can without loudly slamming his boots against the ground. He’s fast, but he’s no Wash either; the guard turns his head back and spots him as he’s less than a dozen feet away. He startles back and gets out the beginning of a yell as he lifts his gun, and then York slams into him with his entire body, fist driving into his solar plexus, driving the breath and exclamation out of him. His light armor and their combined body weight clangs against the wall with a noise that sounds horribly loud to Simmons. They’re caught. They’re dead.

“He’s dead,” York grunts, and gives the guard a power armored punch hard enough to crush his windpipe. He lowers the wheezing, suffocating man to the ground as the walkie talkie on the guard’s belt crackles.

“Smith, what the fuck was that?”

York unclips the walkie talkie and raises it up to his helmet. “Turned out to be nothing,” he says in an unruffled voice, even though Simmons can feel his heart beating twice as fast as usual.

The other guard knows this one well enough to remember his name; he’ll recognize that his voice
is different. This won’t work. This can’t work.

A pause, and then, “Get it together, man.”

The walkie talkie clicks off. The dying guard scrabbles at York’s feet, his struggles rapidly weakening, his face shifting into fascinating colors and drool flowing from his mouth unchecked, unimportant in the face of what’s happening to him. York takes his gun from him just to be safe, and then steps over him to get started on the lock, not even waiting for him to die first.

Holy fuck, it actually worked.

<Keep the walkie,> Simmons suggests, still feeling a little lightheaded after that close call, and York hums in agreement and clips it somewhere secure. It could come in handy later.

“Alright, what do we have here…” he murmurs to himself as he bends down to look at the lock.

And that’s when shit starts to go wrong. It always is: when York’s supposed to pick the lock. He’s good, is the thing. He can pick hundreds of different kinds of locks in record time, while being shot at, while being looked for, while under a time limit, while in pain, anything. So long as it’s a simulated exercise. So long as it’s a test, a drill.

Now, he can hear marching footsteps, horribly close, and Simmons can feel his fingers itch for his gun as he fumbles with wires, and his mind keeps trying to stray away from the fiddly task that requires total focus towards something easier, something more instinctual, like hitting and kicking and killing. Something that requires near zero thought or patience while in a dangerous situation, almost pure reflex.

It had seemed so out of place, considering York’s calm casual competency in almost everything else. York had promised him that he’d been like this even before Simmons had come along; he’s always been like this, his brain has always whitened out while under pressure, snappish and a little panicky. It isn’t Simmons’ fault. It doesn’t come from him. He’d promised, no lie lurking in his mind.

All he can do is try his best not to panic along with him, to magnify it even further.


Simmons isn’t sure he’s doing a very good job of it.

The marching footsteps are now running, and York snatches the walkie talkie and snaps off into it, “I think I saw someone on the--” mind too scrambled for directions, Simmons supplies, “--East side of the building, running away into the jungle!”

The side of the building as far away from them as possible.

“Roger that, Smith! He’s getting away!”

The footsteps run away, so close before. Simmons feels relieved but shaky, too close, too close. York takes a deep breath, slowly releases it.

“Come on,” he says, voice low and almost normal sounding. “Time’s a wastin.”

York makes his second attempt on the nearest other door, now abandoned. They’re still rushed, but less so. Simmons recognizes this lock, hundreds of different designs downloaded into him, and he cuts in with corrections whenever it seems like York’s straying.
“It’s the red wire,” he says.

“I know that,” he mutters crossly back at him, and Simmons knows he does, even if he’d been lingering over the green wire instead.

The door wooshes open, alarms don’t ring, and they quickly and quietly slip in through the door and close it behind them with no interruptions. They’re inside. They did it.

Simmons really has to stop being so surprised every time they survive something.

There’s still so much more to survive and do, though. York lowers his centre of gravity to help keep his footsteps quiet as he runs as fast as he dares through the halls.

“See if the enemy’s scramblers aren’t working any longer on Wash’s coms now that we’re inside the building,” he reminds him. Right. Tucker had barely had time to inform Command of the barebones of the situation, and then he’d been cut off mid sentence. Simmons hopes it hadn’t been a sentence like ‘and no matter what you do don’t--’. It’d really be just their luck.

He opens a com channel, reaching for the connection that should lead them to Wash’s suit.

<Wash? Tucker?> he asks. He doesn’t have to use York’s speakers to make himself heard over the channel, isn’t forced to whisper not to be overheard by guards; it’s all electronics, so easy to manipulate, especially if all he’s doing is speaking with his own voice.

(“How do you have your own voice?” York had asked him curiously, dubiously. “I know that’s not the default recording for all English male-coded AIs you’re using. Did they get a voice actor to give each of you your own unique voices? Why? What’s the point?”

Simmons, at least as bugged by the nonsensical mystery as York was, could do nothing but give his best attempt at a mental shrug.)

<Ohthankfuck,> Tucker replies. <Extraction team’s finally here!>

<Finally?> Simmons can’t help but repeat with peeved incredulity. York and he’d been woken up in the middle of the night for this, barely briefed before being shoved onto a ship piloted by 479er at her fastest and most reckless speed. They were going to have to strategically nap for the next few days to get their circadian rhythm back on track.

“York!” Wash whispers excitedly into the comms, voice radiating just as much relief while still retaining a nervous tenseness to it; they’re still behind enemy lines, even if rescue is within sight. “Who else came with?”

There’s a moment of silence.

“... York, who else came with?”

“Look, this is a stealth op--”

<Oh my god,> Tucker breathes with horror. <It’s just you two bozos-->

<Excuse me!?> Simmons jumps to their defense. <Bozos? Unlike you, we actually managed to infiltrate the building without being detected, so-->

<Actually, so did we just fine. It was the leaving without being detected that gave us some trouble... I’d like to see you do better, nerd.>
“Well, our lives kind of depend on it,” Wash says.

<It wouldn’t if they’d sent in, like, Carolina, or-->

“Don’t even joke about that,” Wash says, sounding a little nauseous at the thought.

“She’d be pissed at being made to clean up your mess,” York says with amused fondness at the thought. Simmons manfully endures it, because he’s a good AI partner. Thankfully, his thoughts turn back to business before they can travel too far down… that other road. “Wash, where are you?”

“… In the vents,” he reluctantly admits.

That gives both York and Simmons pause for a moment. “Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to zip around in the corridors? It can’t be easy using your unit in cramped quarters.”

They’d both watched (and laughed themselves sick at) training footage of Wash sprinting full speed straight into a wall, actually leaving an impression of himself in the plaster like some sort of Looney Tunes cartoon, trying to get the hang of using his unit in less open spaces. It was an extremely amusing and slow going process.

<We’re at less than 10% power,> Tucker says. <I’ve got a feeling your exit isn’t going be any more subtle than ours attempted one, and I want to save that power for our last burst to freedom before I have to do a forced shutdown.>

<We’ll see about that,> Simmons grumps, but he’s still unsettled at the information. Forced shutdowns aren’t fun for anyone involved.

“Okay, well, if you’ve managed to stay undetected for this long, do you think you could crawl your way to my location? I’m in--”

“Um,” Wash interrupts. “No.”

“… No?”

<That’s… a strong no,> Tucker says, and he sounds as shifty and sheepish as Wash does.

“What’s wrong?” York immediately sternly asks, internal alarm bells beginning to ring.

<What have they done now?> Simmons silently asks his host, longsuffering. Wash and Tucker have an almost impressive talent for finding ways to fuck up despite being good enough to be on the leaderboard. He doesn’t understand it.

“We’re… we’re stuck.”

“… Like, you can’t move without being noticed or--?”

“I’m stuck, York.”

<This armor’s really bulky, man.>

There follows several long moments of York trying desperately not to laugh loudly enough to be noticed by the enemy, Simmons shamelessly laughing as loudly as he wants within York’s head, and a distinctly embarrassed silence from Wash and Tucker’s end of the line. Sheepish embarrassment on Wash’s side, resentful flustered embarrassment on Tucker’s. It’s downright uncanny how clearly it comes through.
“Okay…!” York wheezes, sounding strangled. “Okay, we’re coming to you then. Oh, Jesus.”

They turn a corner and come face to face with a guard. York has them on the ground, gun clattering away before their expression can even shift away from shock. The laughter’s wiped away in less than a second, in less time it takes for York to punch the guard so heavily in the face that he’s knocked unconscious immediately. He’ll probably need reconstructive surgery. They really should have incorporated full face helmets for their guard uniforms.

This one, York doesn’t kill. The circumstances are dire, urgent, but they don’t feel as much so as they did at the door outside, desperately trying to neutralize the guard before he could make sound while trying to make as little sound as possible in turn. He crushes the walkie talkie underneath his boot, and drags the guard into a closet, wrists zip tied.

York’s stolen walkie crackles, “Smith, are you sure that was a person you saw?”

Simmons can privately admit to himself that they were never going to get out of here without a fuss anyways. He doesn’t like killing unconscious people either. If they’re struggling, he doesn’t feel obligated to feel so much as an iota of regret or guilt. Sleeping people though, fainted people; that’s a step too far for the both of them.

“Think so, sir,” York tries.

“... Did you just call me sir, Smith?” His hesitant tone indicates that this is unusual.

And here comes the fuss. York doesn’t even try to save it. The illusion was flimsy enough not to be able to stand a single grain of scrutiny. It would just be a waste of time. He starts running down the hallway towards Wash’s position, supplied to Simmons by a ping from Tucker.

“Everyone, off the walkies!” the man barks, and then the walkie talkie goes silent.

York drops it to the floor without a glance back. It could potentially be used to track them, now that they’ve been made.

<Should we call for help?> Simmons asks. This was supposed to be a stealth op, after all. He doesn’t really like the sound of two men against over three dozen armed and armoured men. <An air strike from 479er, maybe?>

“We’re under the enemy’s scrambler now, too, Simmons,” York gently breaks to him.

Simmons feels shocked, and then like a moron. Duh. Of course they’re scrambled, they wouldn’t be able to reach Tucker and Wash on comms if they weren’t. They’re just lucky that whatever machine or program’s doing this is exclusively focusing on outgoing messages instead of everything within the field.

Jesus, and Simmons is supposed to be the brains of this operation. He’s literally nothing but brains. This is an outrage.

<Okay,> he says. <Okay. Fine. Great! This is totally doable! We just have to get over to Wash and Tucker fast, pull their fat asses out of the vent-->

<Hey!> Tucker protests. <I think you mean Wash’s fat ass, I’m intangible. Also, Wash’s ass is awesome!>
“That’s okay Tucker you don’t need to defend me,” Wash rushes to say.

“Please tell me you recorded that, Simmons,” York says.

*I record all of our missions,* he huffs. And he only edits them to make them look better a little bit. He’s not lying or anything, he’s just, uh, framing the story! Everyone does it. *Anyways, we somehow pull them out, somehow get out of the building alive past all of the guards, and somehow get picked up by 479er without her or us getting shot down in the process, flying off into the sunset to give the Director a report that doesn’t make us look like a bunch of incompetent dumbasses, somehow.*

“That’s a lot of somehows,” York remarks.

*I’m-- I’m just outlining! This is the first draft, I’ll fill in the details as we go!*

“Is he talking about saving our lives or writing a book?” Wash whisper-asks Tucker.

“Isn’t that just improvising?” York asks.

*I would never improvise. I’m smart, I make plans.*

“And your plan is to come up with the details as you go.”

*Yes! As a matter of fact, it is!*

York grins. “I like it.”

They kill one guard and take down two more on their way to Tucker and Wash. Tucker makes three nervous jokes jokes about it ‘being too tight’ and that ‘they should have used lube’ as time passes and guards run right by their position. York gets tasered once and Simmons helps numb the pain as best he can so he doesn’t get distracted during the brief but intense scuffle with the guard, and then he repairs any minute damage to the nerves as he continues sneaking closer. No other injuries. Still pretty high on power.

They are not going to die horribly. Or let Wash and Tucker die horribly and disappoint the Director and make Caboose sad. They just aren’t! Despite all contrary evidence! Because York and Simmons are great. York is fantastically good at beating people up, Simmons is a smart AI who can literally heal his host and he is not going to panic and fuck things up, Tucker and Wash can actually be competent when it matters, 479er is the best flier ever

*but if there’s one thing he can do, at least, it’s fly. He’s amazing at it, to be completely honest, which he isn’t going to be, because, um, embarrassing.*

When Simmons comes to, dizzy and confused, York is leaning heavily against a wall. Simmons’ first instinct is to check his inner ear for damage, and his second is to flood York’s brain with his very unhelpful panic as he notices that there’s a guard a few feet in front of them, looking straight at them. Holding them at gunpoint. Speaking into his walkie talkie.
“--just standing there, doesn’t even seem to know that I’m here? Yeah, I’m in the hallway with the closet where everyone fucks--”

Simmons is mostly very condensed circuitry and software and electricity, but in this moment he feels like a machine made of precisely fitted gears all turning in unison, coming together and apart perfectly. Except someone just jammed a bunch of bullshit into his gears. Utensils for the teeth of his gears to break themselves on, glue to slow them down and freeze them in place, the entirety of him groaning and creaking as his mind goes to pieces, doesn’t move, breaks.

He’d told himself that he wouldn’t fuck this up for them. That they wouldn’t fail. And now there’s a gun pointed at them and all of the enemies knows their exact current location. The hallway with the closet where everyone fucks.

He wants to laugh. And cry. And scream. And break something.

<Break him,> he hisses.

York lunges for the guard all at once, and he gets shot.

In the shoulder, between the armor plates. The kevlar doesn’t stand a chance at such a close range. The bullet rends through meat and bone, and then lodges itself into the inside of an armor plate instead of exiting York on the other side. Simmons won’t have to plug two holes. Simmons will have to figure out what to do with that bullet stuck inside of York.

York has to kill this man, now.

<GOGOGOKILLHIM> he roars inside of York’s skull, trying to flood it with his own adrenaline and panic fueled rage.

This all happens in less than a second. The shot isn’t even done ringing out, York hasn’t even fallen yet.

He doesn’t fall. His body is jerked back a bit with the momentum and the pain of the bullet, but then he gives a full throated roar and just throws himself at the guard faster, with more desperation. He doesn’t get the chance to shoot him a second time.

York is too pained and panicked and rushed for anything fancy. He just takes the guard down with him onto the floor, gun clattering out of both of their reach, gets his arms around his neck in a hold that makes his shoulder scream, and starts trying to suffocate him as the guard desperately paws at him.

Simmons starts focusing on his job. The shoulder. Blood loss comes above all else. He needs to jumpstart the coagulation process, close the hole, stop the flow. He does so, and York lets out a pained wheeze and further tightens his hold on the guard’s neck at the stress Simmons is putting on his body, at how quickly he’s making it heal, but speed’s the name of the game here. Have to stop the bleeding.

By the time York’s bleeding has slowed to something more manageable, the guard has stopped struggling. By the time Simmons has started trying to fix the worst of what’s happened to York’s bones, stop it from healing wrong and getting worse with each little movement, the guard isn’t breathing any longer. York gets up as quickly as he can, sways from the bloodrush and pain.

Their location is known. A gunshot rang out.

That bullet is just going to have to stay there for now, because now they’re really in a fucking
“Fight’s over,” York mumbles as he forces himself to start taking steps away from the scene of the crime. Simmons wonders why--

“You okay?” Wash asks, his voice hushed concern.

Right. Wash and Tucker know not to speak when they’re in a fight, knows not to distract them. “Will be,” he says, and makes a pained smile for the benefit of no one-- no, it’s for Simmons. Simmons can tell that he’s smiling. “Thank god I’ve got Simmons, eh?”

Thank god. Like it isn’t because of Simmons’ weird infectious blackout bullshit that he’s too chickenshit to let York tell anyone about that he got shot in the first place. He would’ve killed that guard without being heard by a soul if he’d been alone.

“Now is not the time,” York says, voice lower, clearly meant for him. “You’re doing good, okay?”

It feels wrong to get praise after such a humongous fuck up. Like he’s getting away with something, except York knows exactly what he did. He feels--

Now is not the time.

“The guard managed to tell the rest of his buddies where we are before I got him,” York goes on, voice tight with pain. “This part of the building will be crawling with enemies in no time flat.”

<Oh shit,> Tucker says. <So it’s time to abandon stealth?>

“I’d say that.”

<Okay, cool.>

<We’re here,> Simmons says. The vent cover that will lead them to Tucker and Wash is only a few feet above them on the wall. He thinks he can even see a glimpse of the orange-yellow of Wash’s visor. He starts trying to figure out the somehow of getting them out of there.

<Swish!>

And then abruptly there’s a flat, pointy, faintly humming blue shape sticking out at an angle from the wall. York gapes at it. The shape moves, leaving behind a line of melted metal as it does.

“What… the fuck…” York breathes.

<It’s the tech we stole!> Tucker enthusiastically informs them. <Pretty fucking cool, eh?>

Simmons spends a moment to gather his composure.

<WHY DIDN’T YOU USE IT BEFORE NOW!?>

The shape--the sword?-- jerks a little, and Wash swears softly before correcting his slow circular course.

<Don’t distract him! And we thought a glowing blue laser sword wouldn’t be too subtle, y’know? Especially if we’re gonna be using it like this.>

A decent chunk of metal falls to the floor with a loud clang. Simmons’ anxiety spikes, and then he
remembers that they’ve had to abandon stealth anyways. His anxiety spikes again.

The laser sword goes away as quickly as it appeared, and Wash reaches out an arm towards York. York sighs through his nose, rolls his eyes, and reaches up with what’s his good arm now and grabs Wash’s hand, helping him out.

Simmons hears approaching footsteps as Wash lands on the floor. Many of them, thundering closer.

“So, do you think you’ve got that somehow prepared by now, Simmons?” York asks.

<Um,> he says, and then, <--wait, Wash, Tucker! Do you know where the communications scrambler is?>

“Uh, sure, but that thing’s being heavily guarded-- ohhhhh.”

All of the guards are heading towards them.

<I’ll hack it!> he happily suggests.

<Or we can just instantly destroy it with our super cool laser sword.>

<... My solution’s more elegant,> he grumbles.

The first guard turns the corner into their hallway.

“Lead the way, Wash,” York says, and shoots them right in the face.

Wash activates his sword and smiles, nervous and excited. “Do you think 479er will be happy when I tell her she can blow this place up?”

The answer to that question is obvious, so they all just focus on fighting their way towards their objective.

-

479er gleefully systematically destroys the building, safe with the knowledge of knowing exactly which parts of the building her allies are in. York gets a cracked visor, two bullet grazes, and a whole lot of bruises, but nothing as serious as that first gunshot to the shoulder. Wash gets shot in the leg and gets a shot of biofoam for his troubles. None of the guards know how to deal with the laser sword, several of them actually trying to block it instead of dodge it. It doesn’t end well for them.

They sprint for the shore as 479er swoops down to meet them and the remains of the research facility smolders behind them, Wash’s arm thrown around York’s shoulder as they limp-run as fast as they can.

“Talk about a quick in and out, eh, rookie?” York teases.

Wash groans. “I’m never going to live this down.”

“Not if I’ve got any say in it.”

They fly home, and Simmons viciously edits his recordings to try and make that guard sneaking up on them look reasonable. He spends as much power as he needs to to get York as healed up as he can be in the span of one flight, now that he doesn’t need to save it for emergencies. Wash and
Tucker bicker. 479er complains about only getting to hear one sided bickering nowadays. She does some loops and Simmons tries not to scream. It gives York headaches.

They finally get home, and the Director is standing there sternly in the hangar with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Agent Washington,” he says.

Wash immediately stands up straight and tense. Simmons hears him gulp, and not even York can find that much humor in it. The Director’s… It’s not fun, to disappoint the Director. Simmons is very, very happy that he’s not in Tucker’s place right now. Even though he deserves to be, considering that failure--

“Later,” York whispers, and Simmons is embarrassed. He’d been thinking that loudly, apparently. Get it together.

“Report in my office.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Director’s green eyes flick over to York and Simmons. Simmons tries to think quiet thoughts.

“Agent York, you’ll report tomorrow.”

Simmons feels a wave of relief from York. He realizes that York is exhausted, his sleep interrupted and his body aching with various pains that Simmons didn’t have the power or ability to completely cure. The adrenaline crash is coming.

Simmons is relieved as well. He’ll be able to frame their report better, come up with all sorts of responses to possible inquiries the Director might make. (Even if he never seems to be able to come up with quite enough of them.)

“Yes, sir,” he says, and then they abandon Wash to his fate, whatever it may be. A harsh tongue lashing, a drop in ranking, and who knew what else.

<York,> he says, and doesn’t really know how to proceed. An apology? He’s not… super used to apologies. Because he’s usually right, not because he’s a shit apologizer…

“Everyone fucks up on missions,” he says firmly. His voice lowers. “Like with me and that lock… All locks, really.”

<You’re great at locks!> Simmons hotly denies immediately, because he is, but he also gets what York means. Because he also kind of sucks at locks at the same time.


<What!?> he says, maybe a little louder than normal but it’s not a shriek because AIs can’t shriek, that’s dumb.

York winces, and rubs a little at one ear like what he’d just heard wasn’t entirely mental. “What I’m getting at,” he says, “is that you suck—”

<Yeah, thanks I got it, asshole-->

“--but,” he continues in exasperation, “you also rock, at the same time.”
Simmons spends a moment trying to figure out how to react to being insulted and complimented at the same time, waffling between offense and flattery, which aren’t very compatible emotions. By the time he starts leaning towards offense, which is his tendency, York’s knocking on a door that he belatedly realizes is North’s. And Grif’s.

<York,> Simmons says, thoroughly distracted. <York, what are you doing.>

“What you asked me to do?” he says, faux innocently, like he isn’t being a little shit.

Simmons most definitely doesn’t remember asking him to drag his defeated carcass to North and Grif’s door at who-fucking-knew-o’clock, but North is opening the door and it’s too late now.

North is wearing purple pajamas. Simmons doesn’t know whether to be mortified or to not give a damn that he’s clearly woken him up. It’d be easier not to care if he had an excuse.

North blinks at them a little sluggishly, a little groggy. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” York says. “Sorry, I didn’t know what time it is. Can I… uh, okay this is a really weird request, but. Can we… sleep together?”

North blinks rapidly at that, caught of guard, waking up. “What?”

“I’m tired as fuck,” he says. “Mission fucked with my night. I’ll tell you all about it in the morning, ’s kind of hilarious to be honest.”

North gives him a close look. “Can’t sleep?” A twitch of his lip. “Carolina kick you out?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re implying,” he says flatly. “But nah. Simmons thinks that I’m shitty at multitasking. I can hang out with you and sleep at the same time, apparently.”

Oh. That. Simmons thinks he’s starting to see what York thought was so weird about that suggestion, faced with the sheer awkwardness that is York waking up North who knows when to take a nap with him.

North raises his eyebrows at that. “Is that so?”

He shrugs. “It’ll make Grif and Simmons happy. They can get to connect wirelessly and be chatterboxes at each other for a while.”

<Don’t put words in my mouth!> Simmons yelps.

North winces like someone had just shouted into his ear. Simmons checks to see if he’d projected that exclamation. He hadn’t.

York gives him a wry, sympathetic look. “They doth protest a whole bunch, eh?”

North snorts. “Yeah.” And then he looks inside his room thoughtfully. “Ah, screw it. I was planning on sleeping in today for Grif anyways, since I got to wake up early yesterday.”

And then he snags a hand around York’s arm and pulls him inside.

“If Carolina sees you leaving my room, you’re explaining.”

“You drive a hard bargain, North. Deal.”

Simmons really, really wishes right now, out of spite if nothing else, that he could hide how happy
he is from York.
“We’re going to survive,” Simmons says stubbornly. “And I’m going to get a medal.”

“No me?” he asks.

“What the hell would you get a medal for? Eating more rations than allowed?”

The weather’s hot and muggy, the insects of the forest making an absolute racket. He’s used to sleeping in warm weather, though. What’s keeping him up is Simmons’ tossing and turning.

“Let me sleep,” he groans quietly so he won’t wake up the rest of the squad. Tucker never lets his beauty sleep being interrupted go, and Sarge will give him the bitching of a lifetime for interrupting Caboose’s beauty sleep.

“How could you even sleep at all in this place?” Simmons whispers at him frustratedly, surrounded by their sleeping squadmates. “The bugs are so loud and the ground is so hard and also moist at the same time and it smells and what if an animal attacks us?”

“We have guns,” he reminds him.

“What if other people with guns attack us?”

“We die,” he says, having actually thought about that exact thing happening very, very much, considering that their whole job is to run at people with guns who want to kill them. He’s confident in his answer.

“How could you say that?” Simmons demands, strangled and high pitched as he tries to clamp down on the angry-fearful shriek that wants to come out instead.

He rolls onto his side and reluctantly opens his eyes. It’s dark, no light besides the stars and moons for miles, and the trees up ahead cover most of it. But the paleness of Simmons’ worried face stands out starkly in the night. His brow is furrowed and his mouth is pinched and his eyes are on him and he can’t see his freckles in this lighting.

“We’re in a warzone,” he says. “What did you think was going to happen?”

“We’re going to survive,” Simmons says stubbornly. “And I’m going to get a medal.”

“No me?” he asks.

“What the hell would you get a medal for? Eating more rations than allowed?”

“But I do get to survive.”

“... We’re all going to survive,” Simmons says, still stubborn but more quiet. He hates being openly mushy.

He smiles slightly, lips closed. So long as he doesn’t show his teeth Simmons probably won’t
notice it.

He closes his eyes and soaks in Simmons’ forced certainty. Indulges it for a moment. They’re going to live. Of course they’re going to live, there’s no question about it. Him and Simmons and Sarge and Donut and Caboose and Tucker, all of them. They’re going to live and they’re going to get to leave, to go home, to stop worrying about guns and armor and sleeping uncomfortable places half convinced that they’re not going to wake up at all in the morning. He’ll see his sister again. Maybe Simmons can visit. Or they can call each other. They’ll live.

He doesn’t like the double edged sword of false hope, but it’s a nice fantasy to help him fall asleep.

Simmons tosses and turns restlessly. He sighs and opens his eyes again.

“If you’re so worried then come over here,” he says. “You can use me as a meatshield. Just let me sleep.”

There’s a brief silence, and then Simmons is shuffling in closer to him, armor pressing up against armor, and he imagines what if they weren’t wearing armor, and they were instead in his bed back home.

Sounds like heaven and false hopes.

There could be people with guns in the bushes who want to kill them, so he boldly tosses his arm around Simmons’ side. Simmons doesn’t say anything as he breathes on the top of his head.

Simmons falls asleep, and North eventually follows.

North slowly blinks himself awake, feeling vaguely disoriented. There’s a warm body in his arms but the temperature is comfortable. He’s never been deployed somewhere tropical in his life. Only cold outposts. He’s on a bed, not the hard ground. His bed. On the MOI.

He blinks himself more awake, and leans back to get a good look a the body in his arms. It’s York. He stares, and for a long moment nothing makes any sense at all.

York, smiling sheepishly and asking to sleep with him and it taking just a bit too long for him to realize what he was actually asking. Simmons complaining to Grif for hours about how irresponsible York is, how stupid Wash and Tucker are, and Grif humming and listening and turning the conversation down a million pointless digressions on the way. The soft orange-maroon glow of them sensed faintly through his closed eyelids. Falling asleep like that.

He twists and squints at his alarm clock. Right, right, he’d decided to sleep in late today for Grif. He falls back into his bed.

“... Had a weird dream,” he says, and then his brow furrows as he tries to remember it. He was talking to Simmons, except Simmons was a human, and he was upset about something. Simmons is usually upset about something.

<I know,> Grif says. <I was there.>

Dreaming has gotten much stranger since he’s gotten an AI.

“Do you remember more of it than I do?” he asks.
<We... were cuddling?> He feels embarrassed.

“So we were,” he says as the memory of dream Simmons pressed close up against him unlocks itself. *Weird.*

Despite the half audible conversation, York is still fast asleep. He must be exhausted. North doesn’t want to wake him.

“It’s not *that* late,” he says. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

<*Hell yes dude.*>

North makes himself comfortable again. Something hard is digging into his ribs. He frowns and digs it out and holds it up to his face.

It’s a bloody bullet.

North stares at it, and then at York, and then at the brand new still red but already closed gunshot wound on his shoulder.

<... I think Simmons did some work while York was asleep.*>

“Yeah, so, I don’t want to think about that,” he says, puts the bullet on his nightstand, and closes his eyes.

Rolls back towards York and tosses his arm over his side without thinking about it. Falls back asleep.
He opens the door right into Carolina’s face.

“Uh,” he says. The door whooshes shut behind him. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

York wakes up slowly and comfortably. It’s warm and soft where he is, and Carolina’s got an arm around him—wait. That arm isn’t buff enough to be Carolina’s. He opens his eyes to see North’s very, very pale sleep slack face, drooling slightly into his pillow. Blinks his one functioning (strange feeling, the wrong color) eye rapidly.

<Remember?> Simmons says after shoving last night memories to the forefront of his mind. He grimaces and squeezes his eye shut at the feeling. Kind of like brain freeze, brief thought stopping pain. <Sorry!>

“S’fine,” he says, the pain already slipping away. At least he’s thoroughly awake now. He stretches slowly where he lies, feeling out the aches and pains in his muscles. The gunshot wound just feels like deep bruising, there’s no burning ache from where he overtaxed himself or threw himself onto the ground from a plane yesterday. Simmons must have been hard at work all night. He focuses on fondness, appreciation.

Simmons gives off a sensation like pleased embarrassed squirming in his mind, but not anything else. Maybe non verbal praise is the way to go with him.

His stomach rumbles.

<You need calories,> Simmons says.

“I need bacon,” he says, and reaches out towards North.


York smiles. “Sap.”

<I am not-->

“Simmons and Grif, sitting in a tree--”

<STOP THAT,>

“K-I-S--”

<You know what I change my mind wake them up wake them up right now push them out of the bed.>

“Nope,” York says. “You’re right, let’s leave them.”

And so York with painful slowness creeps out of the bed without waking up North. He feels like a
frat boy escaping his one night stand, except that he’d never minded sleeping in with them. Getting dressed takes a while, picking out his armor pieces from North’s in the dark. He ends up not finding his helmet. Whatever, it can wait. Bacon time.

He glances at them over his shoulder before he leaves. Still fast asleep. Success.

A wave of warmth from Simmons, and he grins and turns around to leave before Simmons notices him noticing and gets all bent out of shape about it.

He opens the door right into Carolina’s face.

“Uh,” he says. The door whooshes shut behind him. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

Carolina looks at him. He can’t decipher her expression because of her helmet.

“Really,” he says, “it really really isn’t what it looks like! Simmons?”

Carolina looks at him.

Simmons is frozen like a deer in headlights inside of his mind, which is massively unhelpful both in terms of assistance and York’s composure. He keeps finding himself wanting to freeze along with him.

Carolina reaches out towards his face. It doesn’t even occur to York to try and dodge it. The kevlar of her glove feels familiar on the skin of his face. She rubs her thumb underneath his eye-- his new eye. Oh.

“You’re okay,” she says.

“Hadn’t you heard?” he asks.

“I was working.”

More than necessary, and avoiding everyone while she was at it to boot, he bets. When Carolina worries, she focuses on work. (When she’s angry, she focuses on work. When she’s sad, she focuses on work. When she’s happy, she focuses on work.)

“Well, I’m fine,” he says, and feels dry mouthed as she strokes her hand down his jawline, still looking at him intently. The inside of the kevlar suits are covered in a softer material so they don’t die of overheating and friction inside of them, but-- this feels nice. He leans into her hand, into her touch. He’s missed her.

“So you are,” she says, voice strange and distant.

“I wasn’t uh, by the way, with North.”

“I don’t think you were cheating on me with North, York,” she says, subtle traces of amusement starting to bleed into her voice. On the rare occasions he gets her for himself for a whole night or afternoon he can reliably foster those traces until there’s an undertone of laughter to everything she says. His best achievement.

York’s room is two doors down from North’s, and he’s got her pulled along almost all the way there before she realizes, and stops. She is as immovable as a pillar.

“York,” she says, “what are you doing?”
“Well,” he says, “I’m off sick leave. And you just got a whole lot of working out of your system, right? Enough to maybe fool around with me for a few hours?” He gives her his most charming smile and sways into her space. “Come on. It’s been ages.”

His body is aching, and he’s still starving, but he’s pretty sure there are some snacks somewhere in his room and he can’t just let an opportunity like this go. His muscles will handle it.

“York,” she says, exasperated, “haven’t you forgotten something?”

Forgotten something? He blinks, thinks about it. Can’t think of anything that oughta stop them from doing this. Think, thinks, and this is normally where Simmons would help him out by pointing out the relevant memory for him--

“Ohhh!” he says, rocking back on his heels. He hadn’t even-- thought about that! Simmons hasn’t said anything since he ran into Carolina, he realizes.

“Yes,” Carolina says dryly. “Oh.”

“Simmons?” York asks.

Simmons doesn’t say anything. Or feel anything.

“Oh my god,” he says, “I think he logged himself off.”

“Wait, what? They can do that?” Carolina sounds scandalized and shocked at this revelation.

“Uh, yeah, but he doesn’t like it because it feels kinda weird and scary and-- Jesus Christ, when did he--?”

“All of this time, and they can just log off?” Carolina goes on.

“Probably when you started caressing my face, now that I think about it.” That seems like the kind of thing that would make Simmons immediately explode into panic and then do something impulsive.

Carolina freezes. York freezes a fraction of a second after her, takes a step back from her until they’re not standing at such an intimate distance, glances around the hallway they’re standing in in a hopefully not shifty or guilty way. They’re alone. Then why had she--?

“Caboose. Stop. Talking.” Carolina’s hands are balled up into fists.

“... Carolina?” he asks. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Yeah. I-- I’m sorry I touched you.”

“What?” he asks, suddenly not understanding anything at all.

“Your face. I shouldn’t, it’s a bad fucking idea. Right after you finally got better, too. I didn’t think.”

“Carolina,” he says, and his voice comes out soft with shock. “No. It’s fine.”

“It isn’t fine,” she says with harsh abrupt vitriol. “I hurt you, York, I really hurt you--”

“--But I’m fine now--”
“--and I could hurt you again--”

“--and you apologized and it’s okay--”

“--and I crushed a gun in my hand on my last mission without meaning to and Caboose will you SHUT UP!?"

York’s mouth clacks shut. Carolina breathes harshly.

He wishes he could see her face. He wishes Simmons was online. He doesn’t know what to say except ‘no I’m fine it’s fine everything’s fine you don’t have to be sorry or scared I love you’. He wants to say just that, except she wouldn’t listen to it. Would shout over it or ignore it or disagree with it entirely. It’s too easy for her to accept.

“Wear your damn helmet,” she says, and walks away.
This is how South (and North) joins Project Freelancer:

*It wasn’t her fault.* She doesn’t get into fights at the drop of hat like she had back as a furious teenager who barely bothered to control herself. She’s in the army now, where you can be dishonorably discharged and shit like that. She can grit her teeth and bear it when someone’s being a stupid fucking asshole around her. Curl her hands into white knuckled fists and hiss scathing insults at them instead until they’re put off enough that they shut up and leave or get pissed enough that they hit her first, at which point she’ll only be punished and not discharged for fighting back. She’s got her temper under control, more or less. She’s fine. She’s doing fine.

Her brother’s doing more than fine. He’s doing great. The squad loves him. He’s fun to talk to, easy to be with, knows how to take a joke, pleasant and mild and always in a good mood. He’s got friends. He’s popular, as always, in that unassuming casual way people who aren’t popular because of their looks or their hilarious sense of humor or bank account are; he’s just universally liked. Not adored, or worshipped, or catered to. But always met with smiles.

She’s met with eyerolls and grimaces, even though she hasn’t started a fight since she joined the military.

Whatever. She’s not going to paste on a smile and scrape and beg for affection. (It wouldn’t work, anyways. She’d start having the semblance of a friendship with someone, and then in a few days, weeks, months, it would all of a sudden explode in her face for no reason she could discern, violently and totally with angry screaming and tears. Over and over again, as reliable as a clock.) She already has a friend. She doesn’t need more than one.

The one guy who goes out of his way to sit next to her during mealtime or partner up with her during exercises or patrol is named Pierce. He’s a sour man with an eternal bitch face, which she can relate to, and he mutters about how fucking stupid everyone is to her and has a snicker that makes his eyes squeeze shut and her stomach flop nervously. Having one, just one person, is helping her retain her sanity so damn much. Nice brothers don’t count. They feel obligated to hang out with you because they feel sorry for you because of how many friends they have and how many you don’t. Pity isn’t friendship. Family doesn’t count.

“My brother’s so full of shit,” she mutters as she dismantles and cleans her gun, the actions sharp and jerky with her anger.

“Ooh, what’s he done now,” Pierce says, not raising his gaze from his own gun.

He’d walked up to to her and softly, tentatively, with slow cautiousness told her all earnest like that he wasn’t too sure about this Pierce guy, is what. One friend. She can’t have one friend without him finding some fault in them, without him urging her to ditch them. He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t get it, because he’s naturally nice and liked and his relationships all go swimmingly.
smoothly well, no drama, no fights, no inexplicable implosions a few months down the line. She
can’t afford to ditch someone just because they’re not perfect. If she wasn’t willing to take what
she could get, she’d have nothing. She’s not like him, and he doesn’t seem to realize it, and
somehow that’s more infuriating than anything else.

“Thinks you’re enabling me, or whatever the fuck,” she scoffs.

Pierce barks a short derisive laugh. “Now there’s a guy who doesn’t know how to mind his own
damn business.”

“Right?” she says. Pierce gets her. He’s angry and unimpressed with the world, like her. Not taken
with it and pampered and naive. If her brother understood how bullshit life is, he’d be just as angry
as her. Only idiots are happy.

“Enabling. What does that even mean? What, I can’t agree with you about stuff? You can’t agree
with me about stuff? We can’t talk about how shallow all of these transparent morons are?”

She’s nodding along to everything he’s saying, and her eyes dart up to take in her squadmates that
are out of earshot. Smiling and laughing and punching each other in the shoulder. (Smiling and
laughing at you, a voice in the back of her mind says.) Shallow morons is right. They don’t
understand anything, except for how to make friends and keep them, a lesson that was cruelly
never taught just to her, it seems like.

Her brother is sitting with a small group on the other side of the room, cleaning their weapons and
grinning at each other. She feels slightly safe that at least that pocket isn’t laughing about her (they
know something you don’t, the voice says), because her brother gets a small sad frown on his face
when people shit talk her at him, and people stop once they see it after some sheepish
backpedaling. Everything comes easy to him.

“He’s such a shit,” Pierce goes on. “Such a fucking liar, look at him. No way that’s the real him.
No one’s really that nice. You’d go crazy.”

“Totally,” she says, even though he’s never once dropped the act around her in their entire lives
together. It’s just so hard to believe that someone could live like that. What is the inside of his head
even like? What could it be like to not be frustrated with absolutely everyone and everything?

“Cozying up to everyone, making sure they like him. God, he’s obsessed. How vain and desperate
can you get?”

She and Pierce aren’t like that. Pierce accepts her in all her bitchy glory. He likes that she’s a bitch.
Says it makes her real. No one’s ever liked the mean angry part of her before, and it’s such a big
part of her.

“Yeah,” she agrees with him.

“What’s wrong with him,” Pierce marvels, on a roll now. “Does he get off on it? Being liked?” He
laughs, like something just occurred to him. “Maybe he’s a slut. Maybe that’s why everyone likes
him so much. He secretly sucks all of their cocks.” He snickers that belly flopping laugh, eyes
closing with his amusement.

For some reason, her stomach is still and she doesn’t laugh along with him.

“Oh my god,” he goes on. “This explains everything. He--”

“Pierce,” she says. “Stop.”
He looks at her with a curiosity that borders on offense. He’s never heard her say anything but negative shit about her brother. For some reason, the look makes a sensation not unlike dread start bubbling in her gut, but she ignores it. “Why?” he asks.

“That’s my fucking brother,” she says.

“You prissy, annoying, condescending, busy body, probably a whore brother,” he says.

She slams her gun down on the table in front of her, turns around to level a glare at him. She feels too hot, like she isn’t in control of her body. Can’t hear what she’s thinking over the roar of her blood in her ears. She might not be thinking at all.

“He’s family,” she snarls. Family doesn’t count as friendship, is hardly tolerable on a daily basis, but when it matters she can’t fucking stand the idea of him getting hurt and her not standing up for him. She can’t stand his presence for more than five minutes, but she’d kill for him.

He rolls his eyes at her. He’s not supposed to do that, her one friend that’s keeping her sane. She’s losing control of the situation, like water or sand slipping through her fingers.


She turns back to her gun.

“You’re being a real bitch,” he says, and for the first time it sounds like an insult instead of a compliment from him.

This is also the first time she’s ever explicitly disagreed with him, she realizes.

*You’re not yourself when you’re with him,* her brother had said.

She hates it when he’s right. She hates it so much that before she realizes it she’s got Pierce decked out on the floor, her knuckles aching with the punch she’d sent into his face.

He swears and starts standing up, hand to his face, glaring fiercely at her, and she feels like the floor is falling out from underneath her feet, everything spiraling out of control. She thought she’d finally found a friend who wouldn’t turn on her out of nowhere a few months in.

She’d determined not to be a desperate pathetic smiling fake ever again, trying and failing to make friends by trying to play their game even though no one had ever taught her the inscrutable rules. But it had happened again, hadn’t it. Being someone’s yes man because she couldn’t handle how damn lonely she was (and family doesn’t count, that’s cheating, that’s pitiful).

South roars, infuriated at being tricked into being someone’s henchman, and dives at him, and now they’re wrestling on the ground, grunting curses at each other as they grapple and try and hurt each other as much as they can.

There’s a ring of people around them, a commotion. Back in high school, they’d just stand back and cheer and record it on their phones. Here, they forcibly tear her and Pierce apart. She throws herself against the hands holding her in place, eyes set on Pierce.

“Woah!” her brother says, coming onto the scene. She wants to protectively stand in front of him and punch him in the gut at the same time. “What’s going on here?”

“That crazy bitch just *jumped* me,” Pierce says.
She screams at him, wordless with pure fury. (And tears aren’t pricking at the back of her eyes, she isn’t upset, she isn’t betrayed, or devastated. She’s just angry.)

This probably doesn’t do much to convince anyone that she isn’t a crazy bitch, but she’s been useless at maintaining a good reputation since kindergarten. There’s no point in caring about that bullshit. It’s hopeless.

Her brother does the sad frown that sends people backpedaling. “Don’t call her that. Her name is—”

“I don’t fucking care!” Pierce says. He’s never backpedaled a day in his life, and he doesn’t give a singular fuck about her brother. People aren’t holding him back. Men who he has shit talked on a daily basis with her pat his shoulders, sympathetic, and he straightens and puffs up underneath their silent support. “She needs to be shot for what she did. She’s rabid.”

There’s something cold and hollow opening up in her at his words. He wants her shot. They were friends ten minutes ago. Now he despises her. It happened again. How does it keep happening? What does she keep fucking up? What’s wrong with her, and why is she only one who can’t see it?

Her brother goes still at Pierce’s words. Some of the men nod along, making agreeing noises. Glaring at her.

“Davis,” her brother says, voice unreadable, expression unviewable from where she’s standing, addressing one of the men who nodded. One of the men who’d been grinning along with him only a short while ago. “You agree with him?”

Davis has the grace to look guilty as soon as her brother turns his attention to him. No guilt just for her. She’d broken his nose last month, she recalls, over some argument she can’t remember the details of. She gets in so many arguments.

“Sorry, dude,” he says, to him, not to her. “But you’ve gotta admit that she’s out of control, right?”

She feels breathless. The hands on her tight and many. She’d be able to beat them in a fair fight, so people always know to gang up on her if they want to win. It’s like high school again, her versus every boy in her grade all gathered up in small mobs, all feeling angry and vengeful for every time she’d beaten them when it was one on one.

“Watts?” her brother says, sounding so distant.

“She’s an animal,” Watts says apologetically.

_They don’t even think you’re a person_, the voice whispers.

“You all feel like this?” he says.

There’s an awkward silence filled with her heavy breathing as she keeps frantically struggling against the hands holding her down. There’s a mindless sort of panic dawning on her, reminding her of that time as a child when she’d gone swimming in a river and been caught in the mini whirlpool caused by the waterfall, unable to swim away, kept being pulled down over and over again, surviving on small sips of air, _this is how you die_ the only thought she could think. She’d broken free eventually, but her brother had heard her scream before she had, and once she’d swam and collapsed onto the shore he’d been so worried he’d cried. She pretended to cut the swimming trip short and gone home for his sake and not hers. Held his hand just for him, supposedly.

He turns around and looks at her. She’s bad at reading faces, but she’s used to his. It’s very blank, but she sees it.
When he attacks the men holding her in place, it comes as a surprise to everyone but her.

You can’t be friends with family, they don’t count, it isn’t possible. But family stands up for family when it matters.

They didn’t *kill* anyone. They just kicked their asses, is all. Left them groaning and bleeding on the ground, the entire squad. They’re good, after all. The top two on the team.

Well. Pierce--

Head injuries so easily turn into something serious. It was an accident. It doesn’t count.

The Counselor, as the man had introduced himself, smiles at them. She doesn’t care. She’s bad at names anyways. More like she doesn’t try to be, but whatever.

“You’d both be terribly punished for this,” he says. “Several of your teammates have permanent injuries and scarring, not to mention the unfortunate loss of Private Pierce.”

She feels nothing at the name, because she doesn’t let herself think about it in the slightest. She doesn’t like to think too heavily about things. It never leads anywhere good.

“I assume you’re telling us this because you want to cut us some sort of deal?” her brother says, voice mild even with the cuffs around his wrists.

She hadn’t assumed that. She’d thought he was gloating at them, rubbing their inevitable death or incarceration in their faces. She’s annoyed when he nods confirmation. Her brother always has to be right. She always has to be wrong. It’s *grating*.

She’d felt so in tune with him while they’d fought together, but she’s already back to the usual level of dislike a few days later. She wishes she could stay in that place, with the blood and the unquestioned wonderful trust.

“The two of you show promise,” he says. “I’d like for you to join a highly confidential project that requires skilled soldiers. I know it may not be ideal, but even if you were only to be imprisoned,” he nods at her brother, “*she’s* definitely being executed. She killed a teammate.”

Both of them look at him. Neither of them move or speak for a moment. And then her brother smiles his easy smile and says, “We’re listening.”

She wasn’t the one who’d killed Pierce. Not that anyone would believe that. He’s so full of shit.
“I’m not going to apologize for making you not kill Carolina,” he says.

North corners South in a less used training room, because all it has is some weights and a punching bag. The punching bag has always been her favorite, though. She glances at him as he enters, and then grimaces, turns back to her punching, now pointedly twice as hard.

“I’m not going to apologize for making you not kill Carolina,” he says.

Grif snipes. North can feel how uncomfortable he is, how much he doesn’t like this, forcing interactions were it isn’t wanted. But it’s been a long while now, and it doesn’t look like South is gonna calm down on her own.

“I wasn’t gonna kill her,” South says, punching the bag with murderous intent. “Was gonna beat her.”

“You did beat her. You had.”

South frowns at the punching bag, punches it some more, and doesn’t say anything in response. North sighes quietly through his nose, already feeling himself getting tired. She’s exhausting. She’s impossible. She’s uncooperative. No matter how hard he tries, how inoffensive and nonconfrontational he is, he can’t make her happy. (Not that this is him at his most nonconfrontational.)

She’s your sister, he reminds himself.

“I just didn’t want for us to lose this too, if you accidentally went too far. If Carolina died…”

South snorts. “Like that’s my move?”

A pointed reference. North feels a frown start to crease his face, and he tamps down on it. He doesn’t feel bad about Pierce, anyways. He’d deserved it.

Grif continues to be a ball of awkward discomfort in his head, pulled all together tightly, not touching as much as possible. Hopefully he didn’t catch any hints of anything, there.

“It was an accident,” he lies.

Grif says.

Later, he thinks.

South finally stops punching the bag, shakes her hands out.

“What?” she asks, and finally turns around to see him fully. He holds up the bottle of whiskey he
brought and grins.

“I haven’t gotten drunk yet since we’ve gotten the AIs,” he says. “Do you wanna try it out with me? For science, I swear.”

He’d been planning, vaguely, to do it with York instead. York would agree easily, and contribute to the conversation, and laugh and crack jokes of his own, and Grif and Simmons would be pleased as clams to be together. But family is work and sacrifice. And it could work, couldn’t it? South gets warmer sometimes when she’s drunk. That, or more violent. It’s a bit of a coin toss, honestly.

“You son of a bitch,” South says. “You had booze all of this time, and you didn’t tell me?”

“I was saving it for a special occasion!” he defends himself, and smiles, because the conversation is almost starting to sound friendly.

Donut flickers on next to South. “No wine?” he asks, disappointed.

“How would you even know what wine tastes like?” South scoffs.

“It just seems classier, is all,” he replies.

With every word that isn’t oozing with hostility, Grif is slowly unwinding inside of him. North’s smiles come more easily to him as the second hand tension dissipates.

“Drinking game?” he proposes as he approaches her.

She rolls her eyes, but nods.

“Ooh,” Donut says, clearly enthusiastic. “What kind?”

Grif flickers on as well. “Never have I ever?” he suggests.

“Sounds good,” North says, and sits down on a bench, patting the place next to him while looking at South.

“Never have I ever murdered a teammate,” she snipes automatically.

North looks at her for a moment, and then he takes a drink from the bottle without breaking eye contact.

“He tried to kill South first,” he explains to Grif after he’s finished.

“Oh,” Grif says, and accepts the explanation. He can feel it, the reasoning sinking in to the core of him like a stone dropped into a pond with no ripples, no lingering mixed feelings whatsoever. It might be because of how much time he’s spent in North’s mind, but Grif gets family. North appreciates it. “That’s fine, then.”

When he looks away from the orange holo to South, her face has softened. It’s a rare expression, just the absence of tension or anger. She looks younger, her mouth and her brow relaxed. He wishes he knew exactly what to do and say to keep her looking like that.

She looks away. “I’d never thought of it that way.”

“The golden rule. If you want to be treated nicely, treat people nicely. If you don’t want to be killed by a teammate, don’t try to kill a teammate.”
“I don’t think that that’s what our kindergarten teacher had in mind when she taught us that.” She walks closer and sits next to him. North feels the hidden triumph of someone who after much coaxing has finally gotten a nervous and temperamental stray cat to approach them.

“The logic holds up, doesn’t it?”

“You’re a fucking weirdo,” she tells him, an old refrain.

“Never have I ever chaired a classmate in front of my teacher.”

Donut laughs, surprised.

“Notice how he emphasised how he’s never chaired someone in front of witnesses?” South demands, and then grabs the bottle out of his hand and takes a greedy swig. “I am not the shitty twin. I’m the twin who doesn’t bother to fucking lie about it. And that bitch deserved it, she thought that just because she was a bitch to me near the teacher that she was safe.”

“And of course you had to prove her wrong.”

“Well what else was I gonna do, let her think that she was right?!”

“You nearly got expelled!”

“I nearly got expelled once a week, what’s the big deal.”

“You gave our poor parents gray hairs far before their time.”

“Noisy assholes. Never have I ever stolen the bunsen burner from school.”

“I was borrowing it.”

“Without permission. That’s stealing.”

Grif finally relaxes enough to start enjoying himself, and soon he’s tossing out never have I’s along with Donut. Being incredibly young and inexperienced AIs, they get their hosts drunk pretty fast. Shockingly, Donut’s the most inventive one out of all of them.

Eventually, South tosses an arm around his shoulders, her breath reeking of booze in his face and her laugh loud and sharp in his ears. So it’s warm drunk South today. Grinning, he tucks an arm around her waist and determines to finish the bottle with her. He has to enjoy this while it lasts.
Chapter Summary

Tucker, such a charming glowing shade of turquoise, he’d look so nice with some glitter to go with it, leans in. “Donut?” he asks. “You in there? Yo, pop out! We need for you tell us whether or not South is concussed.”

“Ugh, nevermind,” Wash says. “I can smell it now. She’s definitely drunk.”

Donut and South just trounced North and Grif in a drinking game, leaving them snoozing behind in the training room. Now they’re dizzily making their way… somewhere. A direction that is definitely a place. Yes.

It is by turns hysterical, like the giggly mania you feel when it’s four in the morning and you’re in an airport and every little thing sends you into tearful peals of obnoxious laughter, or absolutely unbearable, like when you’re in the car and dad decided to take the car up the mountains because it’s a shortcut even though there’s a million swings and you feel hot and clammy and like you’re dying of plague. Donut groans and presses his forehead against a cool metal wall like it’s the car window pane. South doesn’t move away from it as she continues to walk forward, so it’s like she’s leaning on it for support.

“South?” a voice asks. Donut looks. It’s Wash. He smiles and waves at him, a dainty little waggle of the fingers.

“Uh… is she, like, okay?” Tucker asks Wash.

“Ummmmm,” Wash says, high pitched.

“You sound like a squeaky dog toy,” South says. Donut bursts out into laughter.

“Aw come on,” Wash says.

“God, she’s right on,” Tucker says in between snickers.

“On fleek,” Donut says, nonsensically.

“Are you drunk?” Wash asks, approaching.

“A lil moonshine never hurt anyone,” he says. “Doesn’t count. It’s not like heroin or anything. My friend was driving.”

“I was not,” South says.

Tucker, such a charming glowing shade of turquoise, he’d look so nice with some glitter to go with it, leans in. “Donut?” he asks. “You in there? Yo, pop out! We need for you tell us whether or not South is concussed.”

“Ugh, nevermind,” Wash says. “I can smell it now. She’s definitely drunk.”
“Were you invited to a party?” Tucker asks. “Was there a party that we weren’t invited to?”

“Tucker, this isn’t college. There aren’t secret frat parties.”

“You look me in the eye and tell me the Director isn’t the surly buzzkill dean.”

Wash tentatively takes one of South’s arms and drapes it over his shoulders, like he’s afraid that she’s gonna take the opportunity to put him in chokehold or something. She belligerently abruptly leans all of her weight on him. He oofs, buckles, but rallies and straightens.

“Wuss,” South says.

Donut smiles and lets his head loll, inhales through his nose. “You smell so good,” he compliments him. “What shampoo is that?”

“Oh. I? Forgot my shampoo? So Florida lent me his. He scrubbed it in for me, actually. It was. Absolutely terrifying.”

She cackles at him.

“I’m so confused,” Wash groans.

“Dude, I’ve heard about this,” Tucker loudly whispers to Wash. “It’s the hot and cold treatment. She’s keeping you on your toes! She’s flirting.”

“Tucker! She’s drunk!”

“I’m not saying take advantage of it! I’m just saying--”

“Oh my god.”

“--that maybe next time she’s sober and you’re sober--”

“Tucker, stop.”

“--you lay the moves on her because now you know she wants it!”

Wash doesn’t say anything.

“Bowchickabowwow,” Tucker says.

“You don’t get to do that if you don’t do a pun first,” Wash says.

“Your eyes are so pretty,” Donut says. They are.

“I’m gonna puke,” South says. And then she does. It’s awful.
Chapter Summary

“How have you and Tucker been getting along?” the Counselor asks.

“Fine,” Wash says, and then looks back at the camera pointed in his direction again, distracted. “Why are you recording this, again?”

Tucker feels sick and angry.

“How have you and Tucker been getting along?” the Counselor asks.

“Fine,” Wash says, and then looks back at the camera pointed in his direction again, distracted. “Why are you recording this, again?”

“Just for my own notes, David.”

“Wash is fine.”

Tucker feels Wash bite his own tongue on saying anything further, memories of old therapists and counselors from back before he joined the army rising to his mind, just looking at him and listening to him, no cameras in sight. A slight sense of unease. A drop in the ocean that is Tucker’s unease.

“What is he like?” the Counselor asks.

Wash looks away from the camera. “Tucker?”

“Yes.”

Normally, Tucker would be full of interest at the idea of Wash trying to describe him in words, would be preening or egging him on for compliments. He doesn’t like the idea of the Counselor knowing a single thing about him.

“He’s… fine,” Wash says. “I like him.”

“I’ve been thinking about perhaps laying down some rules in these sessions. Forbidding certain words used for evasion. Such as ‘fine’.”

“Does everyone have to go to these sessions?” he asks, evading.

“Yes. Everyone with an AI. It is vital to keep track of your mental states to see if there are any negative developments. Nothing quite like this has ever been done before. Project Freelancer’s AIs are something unique, as is their implementation and degree of control over their hosts.”

“Uhhhh,” Wash says. “I wouldn’t say he’s got any kind of control over me. We just… see a lot of each other.”

“Mhmm,” the Counselor says, inscrutable. Tucker feels a sharp spark of annoyance that makes Wash grip the armrest tightly. “Would you bring him out?”
“... Tucker?” he asks, like he’s hoping that the Counselor will say no of course not don’t be silly.

“Who else?”

Tucker does not want to come out. Unless it’s to attack the Counselor. Does he get to attack the Counselor?

“I thought these sessions were to check on my mental state?” Wash tries.

“As you said, you and Tucker see a lot of each other. I think it would be helpful for me to get to talk to him.”

He doesn’t want to be here, talking to this man, in front of this man, being seen by this man, go away--

“So!” Wash says. “You asked what Tucker’s like? Sorry I just kinda brushed over that, ha, woops. He’s, um… a jokester? Not very serious, most of the time, which is fi-- uh, okay. Casual, friendly, interested in… stuff you wouldn’t think an AI would be interested in. Kind of braggy, no offense, Tucker.”

He isn’t even listening. He’s looking at the Counselor, who’s looking at him, straight through Wash’s armor and skin and blood and meat like they’re no kind of obstacle. He isn’t blinking.

<Creep,> he seethes, feeling furiously terrified.

“That’s interesting,” the Counselor says. “That’s good to know. Any other developments you’d like to inform me about?”

Tucker feels Wash think about the lost time, the moments of disorienting darkness lost to strange non-memories that can’t be real. Skin too dark, hair too long, height too short, feelings too insecure, wrong family, wrong friends, wrong missions. Something is wrong, wires crossed and misfiring, making up fake things that can distract them at any vital moment. So far it’s only happened while training, eating, trying to sleep, shower, brush his teeth. Slowly blinking awake to his own face in the mirror that doesn’t feel entirely right for just a moment. It’s a dangerous situation, a pitfall waiting for the worst possible moment to get them killed.

<Tell him nothing,> he says, desperate. The Counselor can’t know anything. Never, ever. He isn’t safe.

“I think Caboose and Tucker like each other a lot,” he says, lips numb.

The Counselor smiles. Tucker wants to shut himself off. Telling him anything about Caboose feels somehow worse than anything yet.

“Fascinating,” he says with utter sincerity.

“Why do you hate the Counselor so much?” Wash asks later, when they’re alone and trying to recover from the absurdly stressful session in which everyone was very civil and polite to each other.

“I don’t know,” he says, and it’s the truth. “Dude just creeps me the fuck out.”

His hologram, projecting from Wash’s helmet that’s lying on his night table, is the bedroom’s only
illumination. It’s a soft, teal light. Tucker would tease him for using him as a night light if he didn’t feel like hot fucking garbage.

“Maybe it’s something they programmed into you,” he muses. “But why would they do that? Making you afraid of someone we’re supposed to listen to. Is it meant to make you more obedient? Did they do it to all of the other AIs too? Should we ask Caboose--”

The idea of the Counselor and Caboose intersecting in any way temporarily overwhelms him with irrationally strong feelings. Bad feelings.

He’s still inside Wash’s neck implants. He just gets to connect to his armor wirelessly. Wash accidentally bites his own tongue mid sentence at the storm of emotions, and silently rides it out, stunned.


“Okay,” he says, and that’s that. End of discussion, no more poking or prodding or pushing.

Wash is an awkward clumsy dork who’s loyal to total creeps, but Tucker thinks he might like him too.
Carolina doesn’t always have the safety on her gun off. Not when she isn’t on a mission, not when she isn’t facing an enemy, not when she doesn’t think she’ll be seeing action, not when she thinks she won’t be needing it. That would be stupid, unprofessional, and unsafe.

Caboose is always on, running in the background of her mind, taking up precious attention and patience, and turning her into a walking barely controlled wrecking ball.

There’s something illogical about that, now that she thinks about it.

“Caboose,” she says while steadily doing pushups.

After a long irritating pause, she feels him come to bright and eager attention, as if she could have possibly been talking to someone else.

<Yes?> he asks.

“How do I log you off?”

Another long irritating pause. She keeps smoothly pushing herself up and down. This isn’t wasted time. She’s working out. Don’t get frustrated. Yelling at him will just make him shut up entirely, which is fine most of the time, but not when she needs an actual answer.

<What?> he asks with perfectly sincere bafflement. She grinds her teeth for a moment, before consciously stopping. Her health is perfect, her diet and regimen flawless, but every time she visits a dentist they have a worried furrow between their brows. She has to have perfect control over herself.

“Log off,” she repeats herself. She’s never had to repeat herself so often in her entire life before. “Make you go away. Go quiet.”

<... Like falling asleep?>

“Yes,” she says, seizing on the explanation. “How do I make you fall asleep?”

<Well, I don’t like sleeping somewhere completely dark because that’s scary because the darkness is so big and it won’t talk back to you! So, uh, a nightlight helps. And um, someone to hug at night
is good? Either someone so hard or so soft that I can’t break them, like a switchboard or a teddy bear. And you could read a story for me-->

“Caboose!” she snaps. “You’re not a person. You can’t hug something while you sleep. And I’m not getting you a nightlight and I’m not reading you a bedtime story. Simmons didn’t need any of that. He just turned himself off. You should be able to do that too.”

<Ummm,> Caboose says, anxiously confused. <I don’t know. Lots of people sleep different, Agent Carolina. Some sleep on their sides and some sleep on their bellies and others sleep on their backs like corpses and others toss and turn and others steal all of the covers like big meanies and others stretch out and take up all of the bed and others curl up into a ball and others kick you and others hug you and others sleep very little and so everyone is different and I don’t know how to be like someone who is different. I don’t think that’s how it works.>

She lets herself grind her teeth.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but stop thinking,” she says. “Just stop all thinking entirely. No thoughts. See if that does anything.”

There’s a long moment of silence. She doesn’t let herself get her hopes up. “Caboose?”

<Yes?>

“Damn it! You weren’t supposed to be thinking!”

<I wasn’t! Except for thinking about not thinking… and Sheila… and stupid Tucker… and how I want to draw… Agent Carolina, can we draw? We could ask the quartermaster for some crayons-->

“Shut. Down. Stop being you. Stop being here. I don’t need you right now. I’m not fighting. Go away.” She doesn’t know how to put it in simpler terms.

Another long moment of silence.

“Caboose?” she tries.

No answer. Her head feels dead and empty and quiet.

After a while, she moves onto lifting weights, feeling weightless and off kilter, like being hyper aware of the lost weight of a drastic haircut. She’ll adjust. She’ll be fine.

This is better.
<Please, I’m BEGGING for you to go off your diet.>

“Every Freelancer’s on a diet, Grif,” he says. “We’re on a strict meal plan.”

<YES AND IT’S SICK.>

After the night of drinking together, South and North seem to be back together on their regular status quo, which is occupying completely different social circles as much as possible while still living in the same relatively small space and drawing from the same relatively small pool of people as each other. Home, highschool, basic, UNSC, MOI, and PFL. Story of their lives.

They trade short greetings or nods when they pass each other, bicker on missions, and don’t get into huge arguments. This is what being on good terms with his sister has always been like for him. Sometimes, they’d fight. Even more rarely, as in perhaps once or twice a year, they’d have several enjoyable hours with each other at a stretch. That was last night. It’s over now.

North can feel Grif not liking it.

<It doesn’t feel right,> he says. <I don’t like it when she’s mad at m-- us-- I mean you.>

“She’s not really mad at me right now, Grif,” he says. “This is us on our good days.”

<It doesn’t feel right,> he repeats, and then he swiftly moves on to whine about how awful the food is here. <Please, I’m BEGGING for you to go off your diet.>

“Every Freelancer’s on a diet, Grif,” he says. “We’re on a strict meal plan.”

<YES AND IT’S SICK.>

“Can’t you just, I don’t know, block my tastebuds or something?”

<Maybe? But not without blocking them out for you too, and I’m not just sick of tasting kale! I want something actually good! Come on man, it won’t kill you to eat a cookie or something-->

Maine sits down with a clunk across from North. North smiles at him over his sandwich. They don’t really talk (Maine doesn’t really talk in general), but he’s currently the only other person in the cafeteria, so it’s not strange for Maine to sit down with him.

“Morning,” he greets.

Maine grunts in reply and digs in to his food.


Maine, his mouth full, looks down at the tray. “Food,” he says.
“It’s deep fried,” North remarks.

“Deep fried,” Grif repeats, drawing out the words. “I want it.”

“Where did you even get deep fried food, Maine?” North asks. It’s certainly not on their meal plan. “Is-- is that a slice of cake for dessert?”


“ Took it,” Maine says.

“From where?” North asks. Honestly, getting information out of Maine is like pulling teeth out, sometimes.

“I inherently trust and desire this food,” Grif says.

“From some egghead,” Maine says.

“I think it’s in my code,” Grif says.

“Egg-- Maine, did you beat up one of the scientists for their lunch!?"

“Didn’t beat him up. Asked for it. We traded.”

North imagines Maine, gigantic, muscular, scarred, his face a flat brick wall and his voice clipped and no nonsense, looming over some soft and short scientist or technician and proposing the trade in very few words.

“Oh my god,” he says, “You’re a highschool bully.”

Maine gives him a mildly offended frown.

“By accident, I’m sure,” he rushes to say.


“Wha-- no, Grif, oh my god. No.”

“Why not!? You won’t even have to threaten anyone. Just take your shirt off and flex and glare at them like you’re South--”

“That’s so dumb--”

“And we’ll be swimming in cake! North! It’s perfect!”

“I’m not doing that,” he says.

“Why!?“ Grif cries out, agonized and betrayed. He even makes his little hologram fall to its knees in the air. North’s mouth twitches up into a smile despite himself, trying to tamp down on his amusement. “Is my suffering funny to you?”

“Of course not,” he says, and clears his throat.

“Please,” he says. “Please, please, please--”

“Grif.”
“--please, please, please--”

“Are you serious?”

“--please, please, I’m so sick of vegetables, please--”

“Are you being for real?”

“--pleeeeeeaaaaaaasaaaaaaaaaaaa--”

“You’re ridiculous.”

Maine slides his plate of cake over to North’s side of the table. North and Grif both look at him. Maine apparently thinks that this gift doesn’t require any accompanying words, and continues his silent eating.

“Quick! Eat it before he changes his mind!” Grif hollers

“Thank you, Maine,” North says while giving Grif a Look.

“Thanks,” Grif parrots him.

Maine grunts and eats.

“Eat it!” Grif says to North.

“You know that dessert is for at the end of the meal, right?” he asks playfully.

Grif gasps. “Don’t you dare put me through that kind of torture.”

“Alright, alright,” he says, smilingly giving in and pulling the cake towards himself to dig in.

It has been a long time since he’s had anything sweet. Accompanied by Grif’s piggyback enjoyment, it tastes far better than a slice of cake has any right to taste.
“Caboose,” she says between grit teeth, the name a strained exhalation.

No response. He’s logged off. He can’t hear her.

The missions is going well, as in it’s not effortless but Carolina’s confident that they’ll succeed despite it. It makes adrenaline thrum through her veins, excitement coursing through her like an electrical current. There’s gunfire, speeding cars, jumping off of buildings, yelling men and women, and blissful silence inside of her head. No voices to drown out the crystal clear clarity of what to do when the chips are down, nothing but paying close attention and letting her reflexes guide her body before she’s got even time to register what’s happening. Everything’s quicker than thought. She’s a perfect warrior, and everything is too fast and important for her to think a single thing. It’s perfect.

Maine cleaves man in half with his new weapon beside her, a bullet grazes her armor plating. She feels light, light, light.

They’re inside a tunnel now, they have what they need, and they just have to come through on the other side and 479er will be there, waiting for them. Just get through the tunnel and win. They’re so close, it feels so inevitable.

There’s an explosion of deafening sound next to her that would be disorienting if she hadn’t heard it enough times now for it to immediately register as grenade.

*Who the fuck throws a grenade inside of a tunnel,* she thinks, and then it starts collapsing on top of her. Rubble, too big to dodge. She grunts, steels herself, stops herself from being crushed. Every single part of her body strains to keep it upright, from squishing her flat against the ground. If she loses her leverage she won’t be able to get it back, pinned. A sitting duck.

Maine, several feet in front of her, managed to avoid the rubble, and is busy with fighting more than half a dozen hostiles on his own.

She’s shaking. It is so, so unbelievably heavy.

Caboose would be perfect right now, she realizes. The exact situation he was made for. She wills for him to log back on.

He doesn’t. Maine shoots a hostile, is shot at by two others. Her arms buckle an inch downwards and refuse to regain the ground against the rubble.

“Caboose,” she says between grit teeth, the name a strained exhalation.

No response. He’s logged off. He can’t hear her.

She squeezes her eyes shut and leans harder against the rubble. Sounds of struggle from Maine’s direction, she’s too distracted to pay attention to it.
How is she going to get Caboose to log on? She’d never asked York about it. She hadn’t thought to--

A part of her never thought that she’d actually need him.

Her knees and back and arms burn. She’s going to pull a muscle. She’s going to lose.

No. Fuck no.

Breathing shakily and carefully, she slowly inches along the rubble, her armor scraping against as she fights to keep it aloft and move at the same time.

“Caboose,” her voice faltering like her body wants to, “Wake up.”

More gunshots from Maine’s direction. Don’t look, don’t get distracted, just focus on getting out of here fast as you can first.

This weight would be nothing with him here with her. If she just hadn’t shut him down because she couldn’t stand him.

Was that weak? Had that been weak of her? She’d thought she’d been being strong, making sure that there were no obstacles in her way.

She should have been able to do what she had to do with the obstacles.

With something almost like a scream she finally makes it out from underneath the rubble, flinging herself away and tucking her legs into her body as she collapses so that they won’t be trapped underneath. She doesn’t like the idea of trying to finish the missions on two broken feet. She turns her head to see--

Maine is lying on the ground one foot in front of her face, blood pooling beneath him.

Carolina springs up and kills the remainder of the hostiles. Brutally, efficiently.

If she’d only had Caboose-- if she could have lifted the rubble-- it’s his fault for not waking up-- hers for putting him to sleep--

When the last hostile falls, she hears a small, wet gurgle behind her. She looks to see Maine fumbling at his bleeding throat. Alive.

It takes three steps to close the distance, two efficient, smooth movements to pull out the bio-foam and inject it. She drags him up, pulls him the rest of the way out of the tunnel.

The weight would be lighter if Caboose was here.

“He’s stable,” someone finally tells her. She’d thrown Maine at the doctors waiting in the cargo bay, reported, and then gone to the infirmary to keep pestering anyone that didn’t look like they were doing anything important for an update. She hasn’t eaten, she hasn’t slept, and she hasn’t had her own injuries treated. They’re negligible. Eating and sleeping can wait. Her head throbs with pain. The mission doesn’t feel over yet.

“Will he be able to come back out on the field eventually?” she asks. “How much do you think he’ll be able to recover? How long will it take? Any permanent injuries? What--”
“We don’t know yet, Agent.”

Everyone in the infirmary has already grown sick of her. She can hear it in their voices. It doesn’t matter. No one here has the balls or the rank to throw her out. No man left behind. She’ll stay until she knows for sure.

She finds a corner that’s out of the way and leans back against the wall. She’ll give them fifteen minutes before she finds someone new to interrogate.

“Caboose,” she says to herself, low and quiet enough that no one else should be able to hear. “Caboose. Wake up.”

Fifteen minutes later, and she still hasn’t figured it out.

Thirty minutes later, he still doesn’t answer her.

One hour. Two hours. Three hours.

Four hours into her vigil, her voice hoarse from questions and his name, she’s informed that Maine should recover just fine, but his voice is lost. He’s mute. That’s a liability. He’s an excellent agent, and she’s permanently sabotaged him because she didn’t want to keep her AI on all of the time.

All of the other Freelancers with AIs have managed just fine with them. Even South. Even Wash. Florida, North, York, everyone but her.

Maybe she’s just not… good enough. For an AI.

(Maybe she’s just not enough, period.)

She’s never thought of patience as a virtue. It’s just waiting. It’s better to do. Instead of waiting for yourself to become better at something, just work at it relentlessly until you are. Instead of waiting to get something, chase it. Don’t wait. Don’t stagnate. Always move, always work, burn with impatience, use it as fuel, accelerate and fly.

Maybe being impatient isn’t a good thing. Maybe she’s been weak and stupid and bad and wrong, when she’d thought she’d been pushing herself to do the right thing.

She doesn’t really want Caboose, and now she doesn’t deserve him either. She misused him, wasted a perfectly good weapon when she needed it, when her teammate was on the line.

She takes the AI chip out of her neck port, and her head feels even emptier. Not the wonderful kind of empty where her reflexes were faster than her thoughts, where her body moved before her mind because she knew in her muscles what the right move to make was. This is just hollow and strange and wrong. He’d grated on her like sandpaper every second he was there, but it doesn’t feel… this doesn’t feel right either, now.

Maine is more patient than her. More deserving. He’s a good agent. He’ll…

He’ll do better than her.

“Nurse,” she says, and goes to give Caboose up.
He’s always known that he’s not the brains. He’s the brawn, and he does it fucking well.

This is how Maine joins Project Freelancer:

He’s always known that he’s not the brains. He’s the brawn, and he does it fucking well. When he’s on the battlefield, he makes a tangible, noticeable difference. That says a lot.

He’s big. He’s motivated, too. When he was little (but big for his age, big enough to always stand out if he didn’t do his best to keep his mouth shut and blend into the background and be forgotten), he watched along with his classmates, as bombs streaked down from the sky like they were falling stars. The distant explosion for one moment felt almost like a fireworks display, big and pretty to look at, except then the **noise** had come, and the blast wasn’t done yet, it **kept going**, getting bigger and bigger until it had covered the entirety of the town it had landed in. The whole town. It had been unbelievable. He’d stared at it, silent and scared at the sheer scale of it.

And then Suzy, who commuted from the big town over even though it was very far, started crying because her house was there, and then some of the other kids had realized that their parents worked there, and then it was **very** noisy. There was a lot of crying, and some screaming.

No one in his family should have been in town that day, except his brother had skipped school and gone there with his friends.

His family moves planets.

The new planet is glassed just before they get there. They’d sent all of their stuff ahead, so now they only own their toothbrushes and overnight bags.

His parents talk to some people. They sign some papers. They live on a new colony now, owned by a private company. They work for the right to live there. They get wages, of course. But they do have to pay for rent, and food, and clothes, and an education for him and his little sister. They get it through the company, since the colony’s new and there are no other companies yet.

Rent and food costs almost exactly as much as his parents get paid in wages, coincidentally. There might as well not be an exchange of money. It might as well be--

“Don’t say that word,” his mom says. “That’s not what’s happening. Don’t tell anyone you said that. We need this, honey.”

There’s a clause in the contract about **defamation** and **slander**, apparently. A punishing clause. He keeps his mouth shut. He gets good at keeping his mouth shut.

He makes friends. Some of those friends get sad when their older siblings or parents or aunts or uncles die because of the war. Either as soldiers in it, or just as people going about their day when
suddenly shooting stars that aren’t stars drop from the sky and take away an entire town like it’s nothing.

He burns with the inability to do anything to fix it. To say anything that could fix it. The war, the company owned colony, his parents quietly hugging and crying when they think they’re alone, Muhammed next door who hasn’t left his bed since he found out his sister died two weeks ago.

He wants to change things. He wants to fix this. Make a difference. End it. Go back to a time when he had happy parents and a brother and a sister and a house and the sky felt safe.

He kills aliens like this time, this kill, is finally going to change things. Just one more death. One more fight. One more day. Over and over and over again, if he just tries hard enough, he’ll make a difference.

He’d do anything, anything at all, if he thought for sure that it would finish this damned war.

“I’ve heard about you,” the man with the smooth voice and dark, watchful eyes says, “and came a long way just to talk to you”

He makes a keep going sound.

“You have an impressive record,” he says, opening a file. It makes him think of a man casually bragging about his girlfriend or his gun, the way he pulls out and opens that file full of facts about him. Ooh, look at how impressive my security clearance is. Look at how big my dick is.

This rarely works on him, as he always knows for a fact that he’s got the biggest gun in the room, not to mention his dick.

“Very many kills. Very many wins in the face of overwhelming odds. You’re strong. You’re determined, aren’t you?”

He nods.

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Don’t gossip.”

“I can believe that. Listen, the UNSC… it just doesn’t go far enough. It’s public. It worries about appearances. Not us. You haven’t even heard about us. And so we’ve got a lot more freedom than the UNSC. So long as we’re careful, we don’t have to follow quite as many… silly rules.”

The Geneva Conventions, it sounds like.

He wouldn’t mind torturing an alien, if that’s what it took. Killing alien civilians. They certainly don’t hesitate to do the same to them.

“We’re going to end the war,” he says, “no matter the cost. What’s a little suffering in the face of victory?”

He understands.

“Would you like to make a difference with Project Freelancer?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Excellent. Welcome aboard, Agent Maine.”
Maine wakes up to joy in his head. He blinks slowly, disoriented by the feeling. He doesn’t really get happy like that, especially not at just waking up.

Plus, he’s in pain, which tends to make him grumpy. Broken ribs, twisted ankle, gunshot in the leg, gunshot in the arm, gunshot in the midsection. Gunshot in the throat.

He really is hardy.

<Hi,> a voice he can’t pinpoint the location of says. Enthusiastic, overly loud, noticeably hopeful. <Do you want to be my friend?>

He blinks the sleep out of his eyes rapidly, looks around himself. He isn’t alone. Nurses, doctors, scientists, technicians. Whatever, they’re wearing white coats and scrubs and looking at him like he might suddenly explode. He puts them out of mind, looks for a beaming face. It’s the only kind of expression that could fit that kind of voice. Some puppy eyes to go with it as well--

<Are you playing eye spy?> the voice whispers conspiratorially. <Can I join? Um, white!>

Maine opens his mouth to say everything is white, and all that comes out is a faint wheeze, like the noise a stabbed soon to be corpse makes.

<Oh, right, right,> the voice says, like it understood him anyways. No one in the room has opened their mouth yet. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. It’s inside his head.

Maine remembers. An offer from Carolina, delivered through a nurse. No one asking for a yes or a no, not that he could speak it, not that he could even nod or shake his head. He’d been woozy with blood loss, hurt, peeled free of his armor like a suddenly unprotected animal ripped away from its shell, and he’d thought I can stop this. Rip free of the straps, fight his way past guards, doctors, steal a gun, some bio foam and bandages, an escape shuttle, go away. He’s confident he would have made it. He always does. (Except for this time, where Carolina had had to drag his bleeding carcass to evac while he’d gurgled like a fish on dry land.)

Sharing his head with someone has never appealed to him. The ability to speak does not feel worth it to him, but he’d let it happen.

He’d been told that he’d finally make some actual change if he came here, joined this secret organization. Maine hasn’t killed a single alien since he joined Project Freelancer. How is that change. How is that anything but regression, doing even less than before. Maybe this is what the Counselor had been talking about when he’d been feeding Maine lofty promises of ending the war. Maybe letting these people in white coats put another mind inside of him will let things finally start
happening. Take a risk and he’ll finally be able to see the change, feel it with his bare hands.

<My name’s Caboose,> the AI inside of his head says.

Maine, he mouths.

<Hi Maine!!!> Caboose says, ecstatic at a one word reply.

Something flickers at the edge of Maine’s perception, something as intangible as a dream, a sense of being shut in a room with only one person and that one person stubbornly ignoring you and hating you no matter how hard you tried to make friends with them. Maine is good with solitude, is content just to sit unnoticed in a corner and soak in other people’s laughter and chatter to each other if he’s craving companionship, and so the overwhelming feeling of loneliness sinks through his defenses and knocks the breath out of him like a knife to the gut.

Dazed, he misses the question the first time it’s posed.

“How do you feel?” the woman in a white lab coat repeats.

Maine looks at her flatly for a moment, and then after a moment of her trying not to squirm he reaches out an arm and gives her a thumbs down. A young man in scrubs has a sudden coughing fit.

“Um,” the woman says. “Could ‘Caboose’ let us know the specifics?”

Right. This is what he’s supposed to be for.

“You want to talk to me too!?” Caboose says, appearing in a flash of blue light.

“Ummmmm,” the woman says.

Tell her I feel like shit, Maine thinks very hard, visualizing the sentence like he’s writing down the letters.

“He feels like oh my god I also put a dot over my i’s.”

“What?” the woman says.

Most people do, Maine thinks.

Another giddy burst of happiness, just over Maine talking to him. He’s going to end up addicted to a computer chip’s joy at this rate.

“Caboose,” the woman says, more sternly. “How does Maine feel?”

“He feels the best!”

“Really?” the woman asks, skepticism clear as day on her face. ‘Best’ did apparently not make sense going with a thumbs down to her.

“Yes! He is nice and I love him.”

That was fast. Maine is reminded of the way his mother loved dogs. She fell for every single one, hard and fast and unconditionally.

“No-- how is Maine feeling, not how do you feel about him--”
Maine has a feeling Caboose is failing his test as translator. Maybe he could get away with giving him back to Carolina. Oh well, he’d tried, it just hadn’t worked out, time to give him back the privacy of his own thoughts and feelings.

He thinks about shoving, shutting, and locking Caboose back in that room with the one person who refuses to like him, to tolerate him. It feels unnecessarily cruel. And he still hasn't made change happen yet.

Maine stands up, towers over everyone as usual.

“Oh!” Caboose says. “This feels right! Yes, my shoes were too short before, this is better.”

He walks past the flustered scientists, out of the room. He’s never been much of a conversationalist anyways. He doesn’t need a translator, really. He can get by fine on his own without words. He was barely using them in the first place.

He thinks, do you miss Agent Carolina?

The carefree happiness stutters for a moment. And then, hurt and small, <She doesn’t miss me.>

Carolina has never struck him as a particularly sentimental woman. He doesn’t think that Caboose is wrong on this one.

*I think we can get along,* he thinks, and means it. In his opinion, everyone talks too much. Caboose is not that big of a difference to him. He’s good at tolerating people who talk too much about things he doesn’t care about, a practiced hand. Also. He likes being strong. Likes making a difference. Caboose means more strength, more making a difference, finally doing something different and new, maybe what the project promised him.

It feels easy to talk to someone without even talking. Like connecting to someone, but quietly, without walls of misunderstanding in the way. He likes it.

Maine thinks he might like this. Shy and eager hopeful happiness in his skull, not his own.

<I like you too.>
Florida’s leg spasms like a fish dying on dry land.

“I can’t seem to stand up,” he observes calmly.

“Huh,” Florida says. “What’s that about?”

<Mayhaps someone tried to assassinate us Looney Tunes style and dropped a banana peel on the floor,> Sarge suggests.

Florida’s leg spasms like a fish dying on dry land.

“I can’t seem to stand up,” he observes calmly.

<Maybe someone sniped you,> he says, uneasy, a possibility that he doesn’t want to entertain trying to make itself known at the back of his mind.

“Sniping doesn’t tend to happen in hallways with no windows,” Florida says thoughtfully. “And I see only corpses.”

Perhaps new bullets that can pass through walls without touching them have been made. Or teleporting bullets. Diabolical! Exciting!

Except Florida isn’t even bleeding from his leg. His back, his head, his arms, sure, but not his leg. This time.

Sarge makes himself pay real attention to the leg, the kind you can only do if you’re deeply wired into a man’s brain and have the processing ability to deeply analyse it.

He’s not like the Simmons boy. He can’t fix anything. Just see, just understand how bad the damage is, what the damage is, so he can let Florida know without him having to be distracted by feeling it, except then Florida goes ‘it’s fine, I’m going to jump out of this building now’ and it’s so fun that Sarge goes along with it and doesn’t think about anything else but glorious violence and victory.

There is a long split in Florida’s leg bone. A fracture, a crevasse, a crack.

Pain is a poorly designed function. It’s a computer telling you that something’s wrong with it, but then it doesn’t let you do anything to fix it because you can’t use it because the screen keeps freezing to tell you I’M BROKEN, I’M HURT. Message received, fella, now go away so you can
actually do something about it. Pain is like that. It has one job and one job only: to let you know how you’re hurt and discourage you from doing what got you hurt again. To keep you alive. It’s important work, but there’s so many cons to it.

Sarge took that pesky, buggy, poorly designed warning away so that Florida could focus on other things, and he was supposed to replace it. And he forgot to. Because he was having fun.

“Ah, it’s finally stopped twitching,” Florida says, and with slow caution starts to stand up again.

<You can’t stand on that,> Sarge says, feels the split in the bone grow by a quarter inch.

Florida experimentally puts his weight on it. Another quarter inch. “Apparently, I can.”

<You’re hurting yourself, idiot!> he barks.

“Not really,” Florida says, and then roughly stomps down on the head of a supposed-to-be corpse that groans with his injured leg. The skull caves. A full half inch more cracks open inside of Florida’s leg.

<You’re making it worse, you dunderhead,> he says. <Sit down and shut up and drink some healing tea with oxytocins in it or something!> ‘

“Do you understand what that is?” he asks curiously.

<Some kinda bomb ingredient? It doesn’t matter, just sit down!>

“The mission isn’t over,” Florida observes. “I really can’t just lie down in enemy territory for a quick nap.”

<Then get your keister to a friendly infirmary ASAP,> he painfully concedes.

“Can do,” he says pleasantly, “as soon as I’m done with the mission, of course.”

<Do you not know what ASAP stands for, son? It certainly isn’t ‘At your leisure you Smart Ass Problem maker!’>

“A long stretch, that one.”

<Get. To. Evac.>

“The Director appreciates and rewards results. Do people without results get fun missions? No. They get boring ones where they sit and wait and watch and then go away without even fighting anyone.”

<You ain’t in no shape to fight so much as a pasty noodle shaped goatee wearing pencil pusher, much less actual enemy forces,> he seethes.

“I can feel your concern,” Florida says. “It’s sweet, but unneeded.”

Sweet. He is angry not-- not worried or--

“What do you feel guilty for?” he asks curiously.

Florida takes a step and the crack grows infinitesimally. He’s going to lose the whole leg at this rate. Sarge took his pain out behind the shed and blew it’s brains out, certain that he had it under control.
He does it have under control. He will take control. He will make Florida listen and not lose his damned leg.

<Call in for early evac,> Sarge orders. <Tell them you’re too wounded to continue.>

“I’m not.”

<You are.>

“I’ll just have to actually finish the mission then and show you--”

Sarge lets the pain flow through Florida’s body uninterrupted for the first time since the first day he woke up in him. Florida falls again, except this time he screams.

Sarge-- hadn’t expected screaming. Hadn’t braced himself for--

The boy screams like a stuck pig, only stops because he’s run out of air. Tears run down his face without shame. He’s never had shame when it comes to crying, and even if he had then he’s sure the pain would’ve knocked that out of his skull by now.

“Don’t even think about it,” Sarge growls, seeing the gun raising out of the corner of his eye, full of a terrified fury. “Don’t--!”

Caboose gets out a bleary, dazed, “Tuck--?”

Sarge is dazed and scattered, he can’t move, and coupled with the screaming it makes him frantic. He has to make it stop, has to save his--

The screaming abruptly cuts off. Florida pants. Sarge had turned his unit back on without thinking. The plan had been to let Florida feel the pain to hammer in how hurt he was, to paralyze him so that Sarge could radio in for evac but-- no. Sarge isn’t gonna listen to him scream for any longer.

“Point made,” Florida says, and calls for evac himself.

The crack in the bone is still there. Sarge still let it happen. The echo of screams still rings loud and clear inside his mind. He can’t stop thinking about Caboose for some reason. Blue armor. That must be it.

Florida doesn’t stand up. He also doesn’t talk to Sarge. But Sarge feels his attention on him loud and clear, like an animal that’s suddenly discovered that the small critter that it’s been letting stay close to their side is dangerous.

Sarge likes being dangerous, but for some reason he hates this.
<You're gonna make me talk to a girl!?>

York snorts. This is not funny. Carolina is scary and could crush his chip in her hand without exerting herself.

“She’s an agent,” he says. “Come on, there’s nothing to be scared of. She won’t get cooties on you.”

Simmons is monologuing an entire essay about why Sharknado 5 is the best Sharknado to York who is notably only half listening and indulging him when he should in fact be trying to tear down his arguments and prove that his own clearly inferior choice is superior. Has the man never heard about passionate arguing as a friendly passtime?

And then he sees a flicker of red out of the corner of York’s functioning eye, and accidentally lets his internal audio become a high pitched definitely-not-a-shriek sound for a solid two seconds as he’s abruptly and totally convinced that an enemy’s snuck up on them for some irrational reason.

“ARGH,” York says, dropping his fork on the floor.

“Whoa, there,” Carolina says, holding up her hands.

“Lina! Shit! Sorry, we just got, uh, startled.” He picks up his forks, frowns down at it, and sets it away. What’s he gonna do, eat the rest of his scrambled eggs with his hands?

“We?” she asks along with a raised eyebrow, sitting down next to him along with a tray of her own subpar but high on proteins and essential vitamins breakfast.

“Yeah, you know, me and… Simmons…” It’s getting harder to tell who realizes something first between the two of them since the other immediately follows, but one of them recovers tact a bit too late as York’s eye strays down to Carolina’s neck. They can’t quite see it since she’s turned towards them, but her neck port is empty. She gave Caboose to Maine after his injury. If they hadn’t known it by the gossip that inevitably sprung up on a ship with no wifi and no leave, they would have when they walked in on Maine easily bench pressing not just weights, but equipment. Juggling it.

“You didn’t used to be so jumpy.” She turns away from York’s gaze and turns her focus on picking at her food instead.

Simmons does not feel guilty, he does not, fuck it yes he does. He’s turned York into as much of a spastic hair trigger flinchy--

“There’s bound to be bleedthrough,” York says, “on both sides.” He grabs Carolina’s fork from her own tray and starts eating his breakfast again. She gives him a dirty look and Simmons wants to freeze up in the hopes that she’ll turn her attention elsewhere. “Don’t worry, Simmons, if she was actually mad then I’d be on the floor about now. And we can share the fork, Carolina.”
“Presumptuous of you,” she says, and then snatches the fork out of his hand, takes a bite of her own meal, and then hands it back to him. “And it’s just that I certainly didn’t notice anything like that happening with myself. I didn’t get louder or stupider, and Caboose didn’t get a better work ethic.”

“That’s not your only character trait. Did he get cockier?” A friendly smile to go with a friendly tease.

“It’s called confidence, and not that I noticed.”

“Hmm,” York hums, takes a bite of bacon and then tosses the fork to her. She deftly catches it out of the air, adding a little showy spin as a flourish. “Yeah, definitely not cocky at all.”

No bleedthrough. Was that because Simmons was the abnormal one, or Carolina? He intensely wants the Counselor’s notes on them, not for the first time. He just wants to know how much he’s doing wrong is because he’s doing it wrong or because it’s out of his hands and this is just how it is. He’s not sure which answer he wants, but an end to the uncertainty would at least be something.

Carolina leans into York’s side, and Simmons’ stream of thoughts abruptly screech to a halt. Her skin is warm against York’s. York’s heart quickens. York thinks she’s amazing. Simmons thinks she’s intimidating. They’re both right. They’re both feeling different things. She hasn’t touched him since--

“I can’t hurt you now,” she says quietly.

“Yes you can,” he says, and why does it come out *fond*? Sometimes you can’t understand a person even when you’re living inside of them.

“Not by accident.”

“I’ll grant you that. Simmons, would you be fine with logging--?”

Carolina’s grip, that had nestled onto York to hold onto him, goes tight and bruising.


“Oh, uh,” York says. “Simmons? You wanna take this?”

<You’re gonna make me talk to a girl!?>

York snorts. This is *not funny*. Carolina is *scary* and could crush his chip in her hand without exerting herself.

“She’s an agent,” he says. “Come on, there’s nothing to be scared of. She won’t get cooties on you.”

<What the fuck do you mean there’s nothing to be scared of? Look at her! She’s ripped!>

“So is Maine, and you’re not scared of him, are you?”

<A little bit actually, yeah!>

“Oh. Huh. Well, she just wants to talk. Come on, dude, it’ll be fine.”
Simmons does not like this at all, but also Carolina is looking at them *intently*, and he feels the urge to do whatever she says to get her to move on. He turns on his hologram. She turns her gaze to that, which feels a bit like she’s looking right over his shoulder off to the side. It weirdly relaxes him.

“Ah, uh, um,” he says. York snickers. He bristles, annoyed. “If after having deliberately logged off an AI wants to log back on, then they need to have set a reboot timer before they logged off. Otherwise, it would have to be done to them manually.”

“Manually,” she says in a terrifyingly flat voice. “What does that entail.”

“Um, well, you wouldn’t really be able to do that since it’d be like doing surgery to yourself. You’d have to go to the lab—”

“I see,” she says, and then stands up. She isn’t looking at either of them any longer. It doesn’t look like she’s looking at anything in particular.

“Where are you going?” York asks, sounding only a bit like a forlorn puppy.

“Training,” she says.

“Of course. Can we come with?”

“Finish your meal.” And then she stalks out of the cafeteria, looking as tense as a tripwire.

“... Dude,” Simmons says. “Have you ever finished a conversation with her that hasn’t ended with her broodily stalking off to punch something?”

“I swear to god it’s happened before.”

“Suuuure.”

“I mean it!”

“Yeah, and I’ve got a girlfriend in Canada.”

“*Grif*’s gonna broodily stalk off to punch something if he hears that.”

“What?”

“We really don’t have the same taste in people,” York sighs, and then starts back in on his meal with Carolina’s fork.

“York, what does that mean!?”
Maine really wants to do something, Caboose can tell. But not just anything. He doesn’t want to draw, or climb, or play with anyone. Which is boring, but at least he doesn’t ignore Caboose. He doesn’t talk a lot, but at least he talks some. Inside his head.

Maine wants to do a specific thing. The only problem is that he doesn’t know what it is.

To win the war, he says. He moves his lips along with the words, but doesn’t bother pushing air through with them.

<Great!> he says. <Let’s do that!>

Maine puts more weight on the-- the lifting stick. The stick you push up and down while you lie on your back and aren’t allowed to use like a bat.

<... How do we do that?>

That’s the problem.

<Oh.> He thinks about this for some time while Maine lifts the lifting stick. Maine’s impatience nips at him, like lice on his scalp, a constant grating background noise. <We should ask someone smart how to do that, then!> Asking for help always makes things better.

Do we know someone smart.

Caboose thinks. Tucker, no. Simmons is silly. Donut likes being pretty more than being smart. Sarge just likes to shout.

<Grif?> he tries.

He’s smart? Maine feels dubious.

<I don’t know. Maybe? Do you know anyone smart?>

He feels Maine think about it, images floating up to the top of his mind. South shouting and exploding a door after it wouldn’t pull open even though it was labeled push. Florida smilingly breaking his fingers and laughing. Washington doing a flawless triple backflip and then tripping and falling over nothing. York failing to unlock a door and setting off the alarm, and then four more memories of him doing the exact same thing. Carolina--

Caboose makes his holo body happen, looks around for something to do. “Can we climb up to the ceiling?” It’s full of beams and rafters that look like they’d be really fun to balance on and jump across.
Maine cringes. *No heights.*

“Awww.”

*Maybe North is smart. I’m not sure.*

“Let’s ask him!”

They track North down, which mainly means Maine asking someone whether or not North was on a mission, except he had to ask through Caboose, which confused them for some reason? Like, he was *really* clear. He even described what he looked like, which is like a purple, sad, sleepy sloth with a long gun. Anyways, North isn’t on a mission, which is great because it means he’s on the ship! With them! It’s a big ship but they’ll find him eventually. Caboose is really good at hide and seek so long as he doesn’t get distracted and forget that he’s playing it. He isn’t in the training room, or the other training room, or the other other training room, or any of the training rooms, or any of the broom closets, or the cafeteria. Instead, he was *hiding* in his *room.*

*We should have checked here first,* Maine thinks, feeling exasperated with himself.

“The last place we would have ever expected,” Caboose says, nodding wisely.

“Maine?” North asks, sitting up in his bed. Had he been napping?

Maine feels mild surprise at this. Caboose gets the notion that Freelancers aren’t supposed to have nap times, which is silly. No wonder they’re all so cranky all of the time.

“Is there an emergency?”

Maine shakes his head.

“Then I’d wish you’d knock,” he chides gently.

Maine gives him a Look.

“Just saying.”

“Why don’t any of the doors on this ship have fucking locks?” Grif asks, projecting from North’s helmet propped up on his nightstand like a decapitated head. It’s hard to remember that they’ve all got faces underneath the helmets sometimes.

“They do,” North says, “just not our bedrooms. It’s not necessary.”

“What if you’d been jacki-" Grif asks, projecting from North’s helmet propped up on his nightstand like a decapitated head. It’s hard to remember that they’ve all got faces underneath the helmets sometimes.

“They do,” North says, “just not our bedrooms. It’s not necessary.”

“What if you’d been jacking off, though?”

“Grif, we have guests.”

“It’s a serious question.”

“So, Maine, Caboose! What’s up?”

“How do you end the war, North Pole?”

“Uh,” North says.

*It’s North Dakota,* Maine thinks. He doesn’t feel eager or curious, like he thinks North actually has an answer. Just content to stand back and let Caboose talk to Grif and North. That’s fine! It’s nice
that Maine will stand still so Caboose can talk to his other friends too.

He thinks it’s a little bit funny how increasingly awkward North is looking, though. Maine is kind of mean. That’s okay, Caboose still likes him.

“Well,” North says.

“Jesus, I feel like someone just asked me how babies are made or what happens after someone dies.”

“Grif.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Is there a button?” Caboose asks. “Someone we can ask pretty please? Ooh! Do the aliens have a manager? Oh, oh, or a mom! That’s great, I always listen to my mom.”

There is a brief confused silence.

“Caboose, you don’t have a mom,” Grif says.

“Wait, are you talking about the Director?” North asks. “Is the Director your mom?”

“North, EW,” Grif says. “That’d mean he’s my mom!”

Caboose is thinking about his mom. She… huh. She’s?

He can’t remember.

He has one, though. Just like how he knows that there’s a sky, and machines keeping the air safe for them to breathe. Just a part of how the world is.

She’s…

“Michael.” A hand stroking his curly hair.

“--sorry, Caboose,” North is saying. “I just don’t know. All of humanity’s trying to answer that question. There’s no easy solution, I think. Everyone wants to end this war. If it weren’t so hard then it’d already be over.”

That’s not true, Maine thinks. Thinks about guns, factories, money. Caboose doesn’t quite get it. He’s thinking about a woman stroking his hair. He makes his holo hand pat his holo helmet. No hair. Just a helmet. It’s hard to remember that they’ve all got faces underneath the helmets sometimes.

Does he? Is there a face underneath?

She’d called him Michael. That doesn’t feel right. He’s just Caboose. It’s what everyone calls him.
“Caboose?” Grif asks. “You, uh, you okay?”

Maine feels unsettled, like something’s subtly wrong but he can’t place it.

Caboose makes his hologram take the helmet off.

Underneath, there’s only static.
Sarge was an asset, like a knife or his armor. He was a fine conversation partner, free entertainment. He was.

Now he is something more. Something interesting. A genuine threat. He could suddenly cripple Florida at the most inopportune moment, as good as a death sentence. Normally, if Florida thought that a fellow squad member then he’d just kill him in a way no one would notice. Push him over a cliff side while patrolling and say he slipped on his own, shoot him during the chaos of battle and let his death be the fatality of some anonymous accidental ‘friendly fire’, or even just pretend not to notice it when he needed assistance on the battlefield and not give it to him.

But Sarge cannot be pushed or shot or left to his own devices. His fate is intertwined with Florida’s. Perhaps Florida could try and pull him out on his own and hope that it doesn’t end in his own brain damage, see if he could find a way to destroy the sturdy chip. That wouldn’t fly with the Director, though. It would be noticed. It would be punished.

Florida enjoys his place in Project Freelancer very much. He isn’t ready to lose it at the first sign of a little genuine danger.

So he chooses to view this positively. Not a dire problem to be solved, but an exciting gamble with high stakes, a fascinating puzzle. That’s Florida’s way, anyways. He likes enjoying himself. He’s good at it. It suits him.

Sarge has been a steady source of excitement and interest and humor and the fun kind of indignant rage and occasional fondness in the back of his skull until now. Florida had taken it all in with fascination, not entirely understanding all of it. Anger is rarely felt, and avoided. It’s unpleasant and makes him do foolish things. Fondness happens sometimes, but it feels different from the way Sarge feels it in a way he can’t place. If Sarge’s design is based off of more traditional human emotions, then Florida finally has his confirmation that he isn’t quite right. That’s fine. He likes the way he is. He likes being him.

Sarge isn’t a steady source of those emotions any longer now, though. He’s feeling different emotions, and yet again they feel just off enough to Florida that he can’t immediately place them. It’s… muted. Negative. Maybe?

It’s… sulking. Like a child who’s doesn’t know how to make up with their best friend after a silly argument.

He can only draw that metaphor from books he's read, movies he’s watched. Unjudging, unsuspecting sources he’s mined for proper reactions, how people are supposed to feel when certain things happen. He had disagreements with his classmates as a child like any other kid. It’s
just that the way the way the disagreements ended was unusual. He didn’t sulk, or long to be forgiven. He hadn’t yet learned to smile and let unimportant things go yet. He’d wanted to be understood. He’d been frustrated when he couldn’t make himself understood. He’d thought that maybe with some blood and lost teeth and broken noses, he could make them understand, make them try harder.

People don’t work like that, unfortunately. That would be too sensible, too understandable. The rules are arbitrary, numerous, unguessable, and, worst of all, fluid. Impossible. Hopeless. A lost cause. Fully understanding is out of his reach, seamlessly blending in is out of his reach. Instead, he just tries to hide the most offensive parts of himself so he doesn’t get locked up or put down, relies on the easy script of common manners and empty pleasantries, and contents himself with being strange and off putting the rest of the time. It’s fine. It’s good, even. Being perfectly himself instead of imperfectly someone else is far more fun than the alternative. Attempting normalcy would only end in inevitable failure. Just staying out of jail and staying alive is a far more feasible goal, and less miserable besides.

He learned how to smile and let go instead. Other people’s opinions don’t really matter, unless they could get you in trouble. Like if they could report you for mutilating your squad member’s corpse. Or fire you from your favorite job in the world. Or cripple you with pain with a thought. Then they suddenly start to matter very much.

Sarge was a fun tool, a conversation partner, entertainment that didn’t stop talking just because Florida said something strange. A good thing in his life. He liked him. He enjoyed him. But he could live without him. He could sacrifice him.

He’s something more now. Something very important. As untouchable as the Director, as vital. Florida’s position depends on his goodwill. It’s a priority now. It will be important to balance what Sarge wants with what Florida wants, now, to keep him satisfied. And the Director.

Huh. Florida’s never had to keep more than one person happy at a time before. He’s sure it’ll go fine, though. Two is not much more than one. And it seems unlikely that there’ll be a conflict of interest. Sarge wants mindless fights, and the Director wants whatever it is that he wants, and he uses the Freelancers to achieve that through mindless fights. Florida doesn’t see either of those things changing any time soon.

He can do this.

Florida taps on Maine’s visor like a child with a fishbowl. Maybe he’ll catch the attention of the little blue fish swimming inside.

Maine, his hands full with weights and his voice gone, somehow manages to give him a dry stare through the helmet before he goes back to lifting his weights. Florida knocks on his visor now, that charming domestic little rhythm, a few rapid knocks followed by two more final ones, a small universal melody.

“Hello Agent Maine says to say that no one is at home except we are both actually at home but shhh we are hiding from the pamphlet men who are you so we are drawing the curtains and turning off the lights and lying down on the floor even though I don’t really want to play hide and seek right now and it’s fine if you want to talk about Santa Claus at me we can just drink lemonade together and I can draw while you talk or I could also talk about something while you also don’t listen to me at the same time. That sounds fun!”
It’s fortunate that AIs don’t need to draw breath.

“That’s alright, Caboose,” Florida says pleasantly. “I’m not here to talk about Santa Claus.”

“Well that is good because it isn’t Santa season yet. Look outside! It’s space season.”

“It’s space season all of the time in space.”

“Global warming.”

“I think it would be galactic warming, and actually the galaxy is getting colder because of entropy which is slowly squeezing the life out of the universe like a chokehold, or perhaps a pillow, although that’s actually a very inconvenient way to kill someone. Unwieldy. Slow going.”

“What?”

“Sarge wants to talk to you.”

“I what now?” Sarge asks, popping up, speaking up, his hologram appearing. He surfaces from his murky pool of vaguely stressed and negative feelings enough to be confused. Or bamboozled, perhaps. Confused seems a too ordinary word for him.

“He misses you,” Florida says.

“I will stand still and quiet so he can hit me,” Caboose promises.

“That’s so sweet of you, but I mean emotionally.”

“I WHAT?”

“He thinks of you very fondly. He’d be happier if you spoke more often.”

“How dare you?”

Caboose sputters, touched.

“I like you too!” Caboose says.

Maine keeps steadily lifting his weights without pause or input, seemingly perfectly content to go about his own business without disturbing them.

“SHUT YOUR TRAP,” Sarge howls miserably, glowing with embarrassed happiness.

“I don’t like traps. They jump out at you and shout like scary movies and it’s-- it’s bad.”

“Ambushes are better,” Florida agrees. “More personal. And scary movies often get so much wrong.” Like how much hurt a body can take before it collapses, gives up, and dies. Florida knows.

“This is a betrayal of the highest order!”

“You two are so cute together, I could just eat you.”

Sarge has been utterly, thoroughly, irrevocably distracted. He’s so flustered Florida wonders if some part of him is going to overheat at any moment. He’s so happy too.
Florida can do this. He can visit Caboose and Simmons and Donut and even Grif and Tucker, because he can feel that that’s what Sarge really wants. If he won’t let Florida fight when he's injured, despite how much he loves it too, then maybe this will give him some sway, some peace and leverage. What he really, really wants. Just to talk to them.

Florida doesn’t really get it. Just like he doesn’t really get humans, or aliens, not really. Looking in from the outside. Sarge is confusing and unpredictable and inconsistent and Florida cannot entirely understand him, relate to him, predict him, put him at perfect ease. He can try and try and try, and in the end they’ll always be just a bit too different. All Florida can try and do is understand him enough. Enough to coexist and live and keep getting what he needs and wants.

AIs are, without a doubt, people. How inconvenient.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes you just want to train until you feel your knuckles bleed.

“It was CRAZY,” Tucker says. “He just tipped the whole tank on his own and squashed ‘em!”

Carolina, who was about to turn a corner to go to her favorite training room, instead lurks behind it and eavesdrops. Like some highschool wallflower afraid of bullies or social interaction, or an awkward nerd, or someone who’s guilty--

--she’s just curious. And conversations tend to die around her. At least the ones about AIs.

“Nuh uh,” North’s AI says. Greg? She remembers Tucker because Caboose was so happy it made her weak in the knees when he saw him. His name had reverberated inside her head like a gong, head splitting and disorienting. Nauseous with joy, overstimulated, too much. The joy Carolina feels on her own is soft and amused and tentative, carefully cradled before she puts it away in a box when she needs to get back to work. The only happiness one should feel while working is pride and satisfaction at a job well done. Confidence is a kind of happiness.

“Yeah uh,” Tucker says obstinately.

“It’s actually true,” Wash says. “I was there!”

“We did assume that if Tucker was there then so were you,” North says.

“What do you mean actually true,” Tucker says, tone wounded and defensive.

“Shit, that’s cool,” Greg (Grim?) admits. “They’re a real goddamned powerhouse.”

“Not as much we’re gonna be as soon as Wash gets used to my zippyness!”

“Get back to me when you can flip tanks.”

“We’ve got a laser sword.”

“Flipped. Tank. ‘Nuff said.”

“Caboose’s potential really is amazing,” North says thoughtfully. “I had no idea he could be that much of a game changer on the battlefield. He and Maine make for a great team.”

Carolina turns around and heads for one of the other training rooms instead.

FILS can run a hologram simulation that’s much more useful than a punching bag. Enough of a give to it that you know that you’ve hit your target, but it vanishes with barely any resistance so you don’t do any harm to yourself during long training sessions, and best of all it can move in randomized patterns around you so you’re too busy tracking your targets to think.
Carolina tapes up her knuckles and goes for the punching bag. Sometimes you just want to train until you feel your knuckles bleed. Caboose isn’t around in her head to distract her or whine and complain about a little pain that isn’t even his. There’s nothing stopping her.

She feels her mouth twist. Caboose. That whole mess. What Simmons said. What the fuck is she supposed to do with any of that? What’s the correct path, there? There’s always a correct path. Whether or not she finds it, can follow it without straying, is entirely up to her.

Just like how she’d strayed off the path with her AI. (No longer her AI.)

Or had he pushed her off? No. No. No. That’s making excuses. It was her fault for not dodging his push. She could have done it. She knew he was incompetent. She should have seen something like that coming. She should have been on guard. She should have been prepared. She should have paid more attention, thought more. She was stupid and lazy and selfish and reckless and she isn’t supposed to be any of those things.

Carolina had once had a friend back in high school. Well, she was more like a track club rival since she was perpetually in second place behind Carolina, but Sara wasn’t a sore loser and they did talk to each other more than Carolina did with anyone else, so she supposed they were friends.

One time, right before a big track meet, Carolina got stupid and twisted her ankle right before the race. Slipped on some ice. Should’ve seen it. Her own fault.

She ran the race anyways, because quitting wasn’t acceptable. (Even if her dad hadn’t come, and she’d never expected otherwise so there was no reason to be disappointed.) It had been agony. But worse than the agony, she’d lost. Sara came in first place. Carolina second.

Sara had found her in the changing room crying bitter tears as she forced her swollen ankle out of her tight, constricting sock. She’d been horrified. She’d been comforting. She’d gotten scissors for the socks, and the first aid kit, and she’d said things.

Things like: You shouldn’t have run that race. You really hurt yourself. Winning isn’t that important. It’s just track.

Things like: It’s okay. Second place is really good, you know. There’s no reason to be upset. You were great.

Things like: We both know you would have made first place if you hadn’t hurt yourself. You’re great. Don’t be sad.

Things like: You shouldn’t be so harsh on yourself. You don’t have to be the best all of the time, every single time. That’s impossible. That’d be suicide. Be kinder to yourself, okay? Please? You have nothing to be ashamed of today. You should be proud. I’m proud of you.

And Sara had smiled encouragingly and hugged her.

Carolina had looked at her and thought losses are losses and you only get to be happy about winning. Comforting yourself in the face of defeat is nothing but licking your wounds so that you will be content with mediocrity. Silverlinings are bullshit and a lie. People comforting you after your fucks ups is a well intentioned attack.

She’d said, “Thanks,” and left without another word on her twisted, swollen, aching ankle. Sara wasn’t her friend. She was a competitor looking to make her give up so she could have first place.

Silverlinings are bullshit. Being kind to yourself is bullshit. Being jealous of the fact that the
stupid, annoying, worse than useless AI you ignored and threw away is getting along great with
and being useful to someone else (that she got hurt, let down, disappointed) is bullshit. She should
want that. What did she want? Did she want for it go horribly? For Maine to ignore Caboose too?
For Caboose to continue being worse than useless? For Maine to accidentally horribly hurt
someone on his own side too?

So it wouldn’t be her fault, but Caboose’s. Out of her hands. An explanation, an excuse,
forgiveness. She couldn’t use him. Maine couldn’t use him. Therefore, no one could. It’s only
allowed to fail at the impossible. Not her fault.

She’d been looking to lick her wounds without letting herself know, the suffering of her teammate
be damned.


“Agent Carolina,” FILS says over the small training rooms speakers. “You’re going to break your
knuckles.”

People asking you to be kind to yourself are sabotaging you, whether they know it or not.

“Run my favorite program then,” she spits, because goddamn her if she’s going to take a break.
She’s in the mood to brood and punch something.
Chapter Summary

Was he tricked?

<You feel itchy.>

That’s one way of putting it. Another way of putting it would be that Maine’s body is a container, and he’s being filled and filled with something to the point that it’s too much. Too much something for his whole body, large as it is. So much that his skin feels tight with it, like it’s going to split open from the pressure and it’s all going to come spilling out like a dam collapsing. So much that all of his muscles are tense like the metal walls of a submarine too deep down in the ocean for its own good, the steel letting out eerie noises like a large dying animal as the enormous pressure tries to crush it like a soda can. His muscles ache from how long he’s been tense.

Itchy is one way of putting it.

<Scratch it,> Caboose whines. <Scratch it scratch it scratch it scratch it scratch it--> He can’t scratch it.

<Why not!?>

He’s not allowed to.

<Why?>

Why.

<Who?>

The Director. The Counselor.

<Why won’t they let us scratch it?> he asks, hurt, confused. An unfair rule without an explanation offered, only obedience expected.

Because. Because Maine doesn’t get explanations. He gets orders. He doesn’t really want explanations. He wants orders. But he doesn’t want these orders. He doesn’t want the orders to go and steal this memory stick or to eliminate this base or to kill this squad or anything that he’s been ordered to do the entire time he’s been here on this damned ship on this damned project. But he swallowed it and he obeyed those orders because the orders that he wanted where just around the corner, he just had to go through this first. He doesn’t know why it’s necessary, he’s just assured that it is.

Maine doesn’t know how to stop the war, and he doesn’t think he’ll ever think of how to do it. But history needs thinkers and doers. He just needs for someone to think the solution and then he’ll do it all cost, no matter what. And this was it, he thought. The Director, the project. His thinker to come up with the solution and give him his orders and the neat and simple instructions of what to do to stop the war.
Maine would shred all of the skin off his body if he knew it would stop the war. He would break every bone in his body. Shed every drop of blood he has. He would go through agony. He would commit atrocities. He’d do anything, no matter how hard, so long as it’s simple. Because if it’s simple, then it’s easy, even if it’s hard. You just have to do it. Simple. Easy.

He’s lost count of how many days, weeks, months he’s been with the project. It could be years. Every single day and night looks the same on the Mother of Invention. Same schedule, same routine, same training drills, same missions, same teammates, same enemies, same ship, same days, same nights. Looking through the thick glass windows of the ship, it never changes. Stars and inky blackness, never changing. Never, ever, ever changing, no matter how much Maine wants for it to, no matter how willing he is to throw his life away for it. He burns for this, and that should count for something, and yet it doesn’t.

He still hasn’t killed a single alien since he joined Project Freelancer. He’s working and working and burning and burning and waiting and waiting and still, still, the orders that he wants, the simple and easy instructions for just exactly how he has to rip himself apart to stop the war aren’t coming.

Are they ever coming?

Has he wasted all of this time?

Was he tricked?

I don’t know, he mouths.

<It’s itchy,> he complains, dissatisfied. That makes two of them.
outside

Chapter Summary

<Do you want to go eat?>

Maine doesn’t notice him.

<Do you want to go visit Florida Man and Sarge?>

Maine continues to stew.

<Do you want to go and draw?>

Maine stares at the wall.

Something even more exciting, then.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

<--and Tucker said that he didn’t think that they were left or right handed because they’re just dogs and I said that he was being stupid everyone’s left or right handed or maybe left or right footed, right? But then he said that I was being stupid-->

Maine is ignoring him. Except not. He’s not paying attention to him, which is different, Caboose has learned. There is bad ignoring, like a mean, angry, tall spiky wall, and there is good ignoring, which is like a smooth wall that will let him in if he yells loud enough. It’s not bad or awful. It isn’t because of anything he did.

Caboose likes it when he’s paid attention to, though. He just has to figure out what the right thing is to say to make Maine pay attention to him. He has to be more exciting than what Maine is doing right now, which is staring at his bedroom wall while feeling impatient and frustrated and angry and sad and confused and stupid and betrayed and used and tricked and bored. He doesn’t know how long he’s been doing this because Caboose got rid of his clock for a reason he can’t remember right now but which was probably great.

Caboose realizes that he’s still talking.

<--and my armor hugged me really, really tightly and then there was a really cool gun which I think is named Betsy…> He trails off, unsure of where he was going with that. He shrugs it off.

<Do you want to go eat?>

Maine doesn’t notice him.

<Do you want to go visit Florida Man and Sarge?>

Maine continues to stew.

<Do you want to go and draw?>
Maine stares at the wall.

Something even more exciting, then. He thinks about it. He thinks and thinks and thinks, gets distracted for a while thinking about all of the things that are more fun than a wall. Friends, robots, hide and seek, cookies…

Maine continues to just sit on his bed. It’s so boring.

Caboose makes his hologram show up, his blue self facing Maine (helmet on). Maine blinks and looks at it.

“Do you want to go sneak out?” he tries, pitching his voice up into a whisper.

Caboose feels Maine’s mind sit up and pay attention. His hologram bounces on its toes.

“We could go outside!” he says, caught up with the idea at the sliver of interest from Maine. “Off the ship! If we get in trouble we can just say that we got lost on our way to the bathroom.”

Maine’s mind cocks its head consideringly while his body head does not. He just stares.

“What do you want to do outside? Ooh, I want to go to a park! With cotton candy!”

Maine thinks about monsters. Big, tall things with maws that open up four ways. He thinks about cracking them open with his bare hands like a fish jaw when you’re taking it apart for all of the best parts to eat.

“We could do that!” Caboose agrees. It’s easy to do it right here in Maine’s familiar, quiet room. He’s never seen a monster on his own before. It might not be scary! And Maine’s killed so many, it’ll probably be fine. And maybe they could be friends with them! And maybe there’ll be cotton candy nearby the monsters.

Maine thinks. He thinks about jaws cracking. He thinks about staring at his wall. He thinks about promises. He thinks about doing something. He itches.

He nods and stands up. Caboose cheers.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll be taking next Sunday off. Merry Christmas!
“We’ve lost Agent Maine,” the Director starts with, and she forgets to breathe for a while.

Their orders are being delegated by the Director himself. All of them (everyone on the chart, everyone who’s worth something) are in the room for the briefing (except for one, but she’s fine that he’s not here, she won’t question it). Carolina stands as straight as she can and listens intently. A good, hard, important missions to ace is exactly what she needs right now.

“We’ve lost Agent Maine,” the Director starts with, and she forgets to breathe for a while.

“What?” York asks.

The Director gives him a cold flick of his eyes, and York stands at attention. “Our cameras caught him taking an escape shuttle and leaving the ship less than twelve hours ago. He brought his gun rifle. He brought his armor. He brought my AI. This is unacceptable. That is priceless equipment. You will track him down and bring him back using any means necessary. He destroyed the trackers in his armor and the shuttle before he landed, but we’ve narrowed down his possible location to one solar system with only three planets. You will all be paired up and spread across these locations. You will find him ASAP. Is this understood?”

Stunned silence. Carolina belatedly remembers to breathe.

“Good,” he says, clipped, and walks out of the room. The Counselor, remaining behind, assigns everyone their partners.

“Why did he leave?” she asks him, cutting him off before he tells her who her partner is. It’s a question that’s completely irrelevant to the mission.

Everyone in the room that matters look at the Counselor, not saying anything, waiting for an answer. Carolina feels abruptly, intensely like a part of the group. A unit. A team. It’s a disorienting, distracting feeling that makes her want to follow a dozen other threads (why didn’t she feel like a part of it before? Why does she now? Why does it feel so good? Why does she feel like she just got a drink of water after being stuck in a desert?) but she shrugs it off. The feeling mixes strangely with the strange dread of Maine inexplicably leaving.

The Counselor smiles at her reassuringly. “We’ll find out once you retrieve him and we can question him.”

“Maine’s a good agent,” she says. “He’s skilled, strong, dedicated.” He wouldn’t just leave, she doesn’t say, because it sounds childish and hurt. Except he did. Why?

“You’re going to have to do your best to subdue him, then,” he says. That wasn’t what she had meant.
Carolina gets sent to the most dangerous planet, of course. She’s number one. Florida is partnered up with her for reasons beyond her. He prefers solo missions. Or perhaps the Director just prefers to send him on solo missions; it doesn’t matter. What matters is that they’re going to be air dropped into an active war zone in less than five minutes and mission control has only narrowed down Maine’s possible location to one continent so far. And she can’t concentrate because Florida keeps talking to himself.

Talking to his AI. She didn’t bother learning its--his-- the name. Wasn’t important. Still isn’t. The lack of knowledge is suddenly extremely hard to forget or ignore inside of her mind, like something lodged right underneath her skin, intrusive, and she can’t goddamned do anything about it because she can’t very well ask for Florida’s AIs name now, can she? At this point? After so long?

This literally could not matter any less. She needs to stop thinking about this.

“Florida,” she says, interrupting what seems to be a cheerful half heard argument about colors(?), “have you ever been in a warzone before?”

“Why, yes,” he says pleasantly. The response was entirely expected. Florida has never said anything to indicate that he fought in the war, considering how focused Carolina is on Project Freelancer and how little they talk or interact at all. That, and she gets the feeling that Florida is very… present. Doesn’t dwell on the past. She barely knows him, though. She could be wrong. But anyways, he’s never said he fought in the war; but Carolina just looked at him and knew that he had. Some people are like that. He’s tall, muscular, strong, deadly, scarred, doesn’t flinch at death or violence. (She remembers his eager smile as he bludgeoned her face into something that hurt so much that she couldn’t feel it any longer. But that doesn’t matter--) Why wouldn’t he fight in the war?

Which really just makes her feel stupid for asking. What, is she making smalltalk? Really? She didn’t do smalltalk back when she was in highschool, why is she doing it on an important mission? (Not college, she didn’t go to college. She applied just to see if she could, got accepted in school after school, looked at the letters and nodded, satisfied, and then threw them out in the garbage. College was just a waste of time. She’d always known where she’d end up, and she wouldn’t need a degree to get there. Just like her.)

“It’ll be nice to revisit it,” Florida continues, nostalgic smile in his voice, like he’s reminiscing about visiting grandma’s farm as a kid during the summers.

Carolina is suddenly struck by the disturbing thought of what Florida was like as a child, what his childhood was like, his family--

“‘Chutes on,” 479er says. “Or not. Up to you whether or not you want to splatter, I guess.”

“And you?” he asks as Carolina straps the pack to herself.

“What?” she asks.

A red little man flickers on at Florida’s soldier. “Did’ja fight the good fight, soldier!”?

She had somehow not expected to be addressed by the AI, for him to appear at all. She blinks rapidly, clicks and fastens the buckles on herself on autopilot. “I… yes. I fought in the war too.”

Briefly. She applied, she went through basic with flying colors, she got sent to the front lines, she killed, she excelled, and then the Director asked, in a rather impersonal email, if she wanted to
volunteer in a personal project of his that had promise but which he would be supplying her no
details with until she signed all of the contracts.

It had been the most attention he’d paid her in years, the most directly he’d spoken to her and
considered her. She hadn’t hesitated to reply in confirmation, and she’d been sent for and left her
squad behind in less than a day, no time to even say goodbye and she hadn’t made a fuss about it.
She’d just started to learn all of their ticks and quirks, had just earned her own nickname which had
felt relevant enough at the time for her to still remember it now, for some reason.

What she’s doing now is far more important than that. She made the right choice there at least, the
obvious one. The Director still doesn’t pay much attention to her beyond what he has to, but if she
weren’t here on the project, the amount of attention he would be required to pay her would be zero.
Something is better than nothing. (Letting the wound fester in the desperate hope that it will get
better against all logic and previous evidence instead of amputating the limb and moving on is
better. Right? That’s how it works, right? She made the right choice, right? Of course she did. It
was the obvious one. It was the exceptional one. The important one. She’s right.)

“Good on you,” the AI says approvingly. The fact that she doesn’t know his name and can’t ask
for it, lodged underneath her skin like a stone. Bugs her. She grits her teeth and shakes the irritation
off.

She’s got a mission to focus on.

“We’re ready, Niner,” she says into her comms.

“Copy,” she says, and the doors open. They’re going so fast and high that they don’t even need to
jump. They’re sucked right out like it’s the vacuum of space. It isn’t though. They fall down to the
surface like comets.
By the fifth day, Florida lets the idea of treating the mission like work float happily away to the back of his head to be ignored, like a child letting their balloon float away up into the sky to never be seen again once they tire of holding onto the string.

He feels Sarge’s urge to inhale, and does so, deeply. He briefly disengages the armor breath filters for it, since the readouts on his HUD are declaring the air around him safe to breathe for now. It’s not always the case around here, what with all of the smoke and chemical warfare wafting on the breeze. He inhales, and he smells fired guns and churned earth and bodies rotting in the summer heat. It smells like home. He stretches his back, pops his joints (careful to not stretch that last bit too far), and sighs, satisfied.

“Ah, the smell of warfare,” Sarge says next to him. “Smells *natural*.”

War is an entirely human thing. Or rather, human and alien. Florida isn’t sure that it exactly counts as natural. Or perhaps it does, with how naturally it comes to them all, across solar systems and cultures and even species. The great equalizer.

Brahma is a planet that’s about half the size of earth. It’s been a warzone for less than a year. Florida looks across the landscape and has a hard time imagining it ever *not* being a warzone. The buildings are bombed out husks covered in soot. The ground is mud that sucks at his boots as he walks. People stopped collecting the bodies from where they dropped months ago, by the smell of things, the odour of old meat and blood creeping out between the cracks of armor and kevlar and carapace. Rifles, ammo, and ration packs though, those are still being picked clean. Florida’s given each body he’s crossed a cursory poke, and he’s found nothing worth scavenging so far.

“The weather isn’t natural,” he notes.

It isn’t. It’s the height of summer for Brahma, and the skies have been nothing but solid grey clouds every second that he’s been here. Artificially induced to prevent drone attacks from the opposing side, apparently. Reports were unclear which side is defending from drones and which one is being thwarted. Both sides have plenty of their people deployed here, after all.

Florida likes war. He likes the way it gives him an excuse to live and breathe the way he feels is right and not be punished for it. He likes being surrounded by people who are all throwing themselves into it alongside him. Likes the honest adrenaline thrill of a good, real fight.

He likes sunshine too, though. At least his bedroom on the Mother of Invention had a UV bed lamp.

He shakes his head, shakes off the burgeoning home sickness. He’s having fun. This is practically a vacation. He’s killed seven people so far. All aliens, because those are the rules. Kill all you
want, Florida, just make sure that it’s the right people, okay? He can follow those rules. It’s pretty easy to tell the difference, after all. And even on the missions that don’t involve aliens, there’s always the convenient differences in armor colors and logos, like everyone who ever crafted a uniform decided to try and make it as simple as possible for everyone to know who they’re supposed to shoot.

“Nothin’ unnatural about a little advanced warfare,” Sarge says. “Animals do it.”


“Do you have any evidence that they don’t?”

“You’ve got me there.” He chuckles.

“Have you found any supplies?” Carolina’s voice asks him over the comms. She never says hello first.

“Afraid not,” he replies. Another negative about the whole sky thing is that mission control can’t have extra supplies airdropped down to them. They hadn’t expected for the mission to last so long, so they’re running low on food. They’ve been rationing food for the last two days. Hunger nips at Florida’s belly, makes him feel lean and hungry, very conscious of his mouth and teeth and saliva, his hands and legs and muscles and gun, like he can hunt food down instead of scavenging for it.

He could. The animal population in general is not doing very well at all on Brahma, being denied bomb shelters and gas masks and their unmolested ecosystems, but there are plenty of other living things scurrying around on the planet’s surface, full of blood and meat and protein.

He can’t though. Carolina. Maybe even Sarge. It’s not allowed, you’re not supposed to be caught doing that sort of stuff even if you have to do it.

He grins and bears it. He’s gone through worse than a little bit of starvation. It lends the fights a certain extra edge to them, anyways.

Carolina sighs into his ear. They’re separated to cover more ground, both in searching for food and Maine. It had been Carolina’s own suggestion. He’s sure that his unceasing, constant cheerful humming had had nothing to do with it. He belatedly starts humming, and he thinks he can hear her teeth start to grind through the comms. Honestly, such a poor habit!

“Heading further south,” she says, tight annoyance at the edges of her voice. “Call me if you find anything.”

And then she hangs up without saying goodbye either. He shakes his head.

“Some people just don’t have manners,” he says. “Who raised her, a pack of wolves?”

Sarge barks a laugh.

And then Florida finds something. Spots it. He tends to go on solo missions; it’s what he prefers, and what the Director prefers to assign him to. He works better alone, unhindered, free to do whatever he thinks is best. Sometimes Wyoming comes with him, but just to hang back and watch his back with his sniper rifle. Wyoming isn’t easily scandalized, despite being British. He’s a good teammate.

But he can recognize the marks left behind by Maine’s highly distinctive weapon, at the very least.
It’s a one of a kind. Large slash marks and explosions left behind in bodies and carapace and the ground and dead trees and husks-of-buildings and various detritus, leaving a destructive trail in its wake.

He’s finally found Agent Maine’s trail.

“You noticed somethin’?” Sarge asks him, reacting to whatever his brain just did.

Florida has seen the way Simmons and York talk to each other. It’s hard to follow, even when Simmons is outside of York’s head and vocalizing for everyone to hear. They keep reading each other perfectly. They probably wouldn’t need words at all to have a whole conversation. They’re the most extreme example, but he’s seen something of the same in all of the others. And Sarge can read Florida’s thoughts too. Sometimes. A bit. Faintly.

Florida doesn’t know if the fault lies with him or Sarge, but it doesn’t really matter either. What matters is that he could lie, right now, and probably get away with it. He’s taken polygraph tests before. His heart doesn’t so much as flicker at the most outrageous of lies.

He considers it. War. His UV lamp. Fighting. Hunger. Violence. Sleeping out of his armor, not on the ground. Blood and adrenaline and wrestling something large and screeching down the ground. Pros and cons. When he puts it like that, the choice sounds easy. Is he really so tamed, after all, that he’d give up what satisfies him above anything else just to be comfortable? Ridiculous. A bit of pain is worth a lot of joy. He’s always known this. It’s why he relishes the injuries his opponents give him while he kills them. Blood in his mouth for blood under his nails.

The Director will be expecting results, though. Think long term, Florida. Don’t get caught up in the heat of the moment. You’ll do something stupid and get caught, discovered, exposed, punished. Follow the rules and be allowed to stay in society. Where else is there to live, but in society? Fit in enough to stay or die.

He can feel Sarge missing his friends, too, a sort of longing that Florida only ever feels for things and concepts, not people. Adorable.

“Yes,” he says, and makes a call.

“Yes,” he says, as soon as Carolina accepts his call, which is a fraction of a second after he made it.

“What,” she says, impatient but not dismissive. Eager, desperate. She wants out. He doesn’t think that she likes it here as much as he does, even if he’s sure that she could tolerate and survive and thrive in anything. She’s got the presence of a true predator to her, although not quite the same as Florida, even though he can’t quite put his finger on how. She’s hostile, she’s smug, she’s dangerous. She never relaxes, though. Never just enjoys herself. That must be it. How miserable.

“Did you find something?”

She wants to please the Director, too. Another way they’re the same, but just slightly off. Her want to please him is different than his, somehow. He doesn’t bother thinking about it. She’s not that interesting. Not fun. Not necessary to his survival.

“I did,” he says, and gives her his coordinates.

They follow the trail. The presence of alien corpses become more concentrated as they pursue it, all of them covered in the wounds that could only come from a knife. Carolina walks fast, eager
and impatient. Florida imagines her dragging Maine to the Director’s feet like a cat with a dead bird.

His HUD informs him that the air is becoming dangerously toxic. He reactivates his filters, having entirely forgotten them. Warfare really does smell natural.

They turn a corner, enter a burned out husk of a building by way of an entire missing wall, only concrete walls left standing.

There he is.

Maine’s lying down on the ground. His armor is caked in mud and blood. His knife is in his hand, covered in gore. He’s surrounded by over a dozen aliens, all dead. Blaze of glory, defiant last stand. It’s very impressive.

His golden helmet has been broken, caved in, a hole revealing his shaved head. Florida’s HUD says that the air is lethal here. Maine doesn’t so much as twitch.

Florida keeps walking for a few steps before he realizes that Carolina has stopped dead in her tracks ten feet away from Maine. He looks back at her. She doesn’t move. He shrugs and keeps approaching the body. Pokes it in the side with his foot. Dead, unresponsive weight.

“Hey!” he says, bright and pleased. “He’s still got his rations on him! Two in one.”

Sarge doesn’t say anything. Carolina still hasn’t moved.

He crouches down and retrieves the rations, thinks. What was it the Director had wanted back? Armor, weapon, AI. Taking back the whole body sounds like a pain… The armor, too. Maybe they can just bring the weapon and the AI? That’s fine, right? Those are the most important. Florida’s sure that Maine’s armor can be recreated. It’s fine. Who would even wear it, anyways? It had to be specially made for his large frame.

He twists Maine’s head to the side, gropes along his neck, slips his fingers along the neck seam on the kevlar suit and feels around until his fingers find the familiar bumps and edges of the neck implant. He takes ahold of the small chip that is Caboose.

“This probably won’t hurt him, right?” he asks. He makes his voice concerned, because that’s always the tone that you should use with questions like that, he’s found.

No one says anything. He’ll take that as agreement.

He yanks Caboose out of the dead brain he’s been stuck in for who knows how many days now like he’s a rotten tooth. Grabs the knife with his other hand. Stands up, flipping the chip up in the air like it’s a coin to be fiddled and played with. Walks towards Carolina, past her. She still hasn’t moved.

He thinks about his UV lamp, and the cafeteria, and his bed, and the showers. Playing around on a warzone for a few days was fun, but all vacations have to end eventually. Coming home is always a relief, no matter how much fun you had during.

“Let mission control know that they can pick us up now?” he asks, not looking back at Carolina as he walks. “Mission success.”
Caboose hadn’t noticed how sparkly Maine’s brain was until it stopped. Like all of the stars in the sky all of a sudden going dark like the sky was just a big birthday cake and someone very, very big blew out all of the candles all on the first try. Like a city during the night, all lights in windows and signs and screens, pretty, until a blackout happens and the whole place goes dark at the same time. Like blinking but then the world doesn’t come back when you open your eyes again.

There had been light and noise and thoughts and feelings, and it all had been kind of scary to be honest because Maine was really hurt and really angry, but then it had all gone away. Suddenly, dark. Suddenly, quiet. Nothing but him in the dark quiet.

He’s never been somewhere like this before. It’s nothing like being logged off. That had felt like sleeping, like mindlessly dwelling in his code, peaceful and quiet. He’s inside Maine’s neck, creeping up into his spine and brain and nerves through that opening, except Maine isn’t there. He’s trapped and alone and awake in the nothing and he can’t see and he can’t hear and he can’t feel and he can’t move and he can’t talk to anyone and he can’t see how much time is going, what’s happening, if anything is happening at all.

He must’ve gotten lost. Slipped through a hole in the world and fallen away. He has to get back home (home is a friend) but he doesn’t know how, he doesn’t have a map or directions or

“Son,” Sarge says, “I’m gonna give you the flare gun so that the next time you wander off and can’t find your way back you can just sit your keister down and point and shoot this at the sky y’hear me?”

“Sir,” Simmons says, “Won’t the enemy be able to find him too?”

“But, ah, I don’t want to shoot at the sky,” Caboose says. “It’s never hurt me. I mean, sure, it’s hailed on me, but those were the clouds? So we’re okay.”

“We are not giving our only flare gun to Caboose,” Grif says.

“Just shoot your normal gun at the sky then,” Sarge says.

“Sir--!” Simmons protests.

“Guys, guys!” Donut laughs like they’re all being stupid. “This silly argument doesn’t matter! Because I already fired off our only flare last night.”

“You did WHAT--!”
“Caboose,” Tucker snaps, worried-angry-annoying, “you idiot, you were walking further away from us the entire time, just sit your ass down and wait next time, alright?”

“Michael,” mom says, “if you ever get lost like that again just stay where you are, okay? Your sisters will find you.”

Right. Right. He just has to stay where he is and then someone will find him sooner or later.

It’s good that he doesn’t have legs anyways, then.

Caboose stays where he is.

He stays.

He stays and stays and stays stays stays stays stays stays strays stray cats he likes cats even when they scratch him because they think he pets them too hard and he wishes that the ship had a cat maybe then less people would be so grumpy all of the time and he should go look for a cat, he should go, he should move, walk--

He doesn’t have legs. There is nowhere to run because he got lost in nothing. Right. He has to wait for home (a friend) to come back to him this time. He can do that! This will be fine.

“--just fuckin’ typical that I’m gonna die on some backwater planet I can’t even remember the name of with mosquitos coming outta its ass,” Grif says.

“Grif!” Simmons snaps. “Stop being so morbid! And they’re not mosquitos, they just share superficial similarities due to having once been mosquitos over a thousand years ago, but they’ve significantly diverged in their evolution from that species since, and also the planet’s name is--”

“Someone kill me,” Tucker muttered.

“Someone will,” Grif says flatly.

“I will,” Simmons snarls.

“The mosquitos are gonna kill me,” Tucker says. “Sorry, super mosquitos.”

Caboose, at the back of the line, hums in tune with a buzzing bug in the air, watching it fly in loops and loops and loops in the air.
“We’re wearing armor,” Simmons says, “We’ll be fine.”

“We’re not gonna be fine,” Grif says, bored and casual in his voice but sad and tired in his slumped shoulders and hanging head.

Caboose harmonizes with the bug as it dances in the air, humming--

Donut claps so abruptly that Caboose yelps and trips, squishing the bug between his hands. “Got one!” he says cheerfully, opening his hands and showing the dead, bloody smear on his gloves and

There is pain and he can’t move and Sarge is shouting and Tucker is yelling and Donut sounds scared and he can’t move as the pain shoots around like lightning stuck in a bottle and the bottle is his body and

He can’t move. He tries, but he’s stuck-- no. There’s just nothing to move. Because he doesn’t have a body. Because he’s a chip, wires and circuitry and lightning, all so very, very small. He is trapped inside of Maine’s empty body (inside a rotting brain, wires sparking electricity into meat that won’t spark back like it’s supposed to) and he has to stay where he is until friendhome finds him and things can stop being scary.

Caboose… wishes that he hadn’t snuck out with Maine. It wasn’t fun. Maine wasn’t happy. There wasn’t cotton candy. It was scary and now he can’t move and he wasn’t able to move before but it was different. He could talk and hear and see through Maine and so it was fine if he couldn’t swing his feet or poke at something when he felt like it, really. It was fine. Living in your friend’s head is great! Except for when they’re not at home.

Caboose hopes that Maine comes back soon and finds him.

He wonders how long he’s been lost in the dark for.

He wonders how long until someone finds him.

He wonders who will find him.

It’s going to be okay. He knows that he’s going to be okay. It’s scary now but it’ll be fine, everything’s going to be fine.

_screaming_
He knows that everything is definitely going to be okay soon he just wishes that it would happen now, please, he’s ready for things to be okay again now, it can happen right now that’s fine.

There is nothing in the dark, except for when there’s something. Caboose, but not this Caboose, not him. Something from somewhere else.

Bad things. He doesn’t want to think about them.

But there’s nothing else here. He can’t stop thinking about

“STOP IT,” Tucker says, so loudly he can hear it over the ringing sound in his ears and he doesn’t know who he’s shouting at or what he wants to stop or where he is because his mind’s spinning too fast and dizzy for him to remember what’s happening, there’s just his nerves underneath his skin vibrating like a funny bone struck wrong across his entire body and

that, he needs to stop thinking about that, he doesn’t want to, but there’s nothing else, what does he do, what can he do

“Don’t even think about it,” Sarge says, angry, not fake angry or happy angry or embarrassed angry, angry

“Take his helmet off.”

(he just)

“I’m the Counselor.”

(needs to stay)

“What are you doing!?”
(where he is)

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god.”

(until a friend)

“What are they doing?”

(until home)

“That’s enough. Next.”

(finds him)

It’s a long long long long long time until someone roughly rips all of his wires out from the dead meat and he shuts down just like that.
“And how does that make you feel?” Aiden Price asks.

“It doesn’t make me feel-- I’m not emotional over it or anything.” Agent South says, mouth grimacing around the world ‘feel’, like it’s a nasty word. Nothing new there. “Like, sure, I’m not happy about it, of course, I’m not a freak. He was fine. Not annoying. But we weren’t close. He barely spoke even before he caught a bullet in the throat.”

She has her arms crossed, but her hands are clutching tight at her elbows and her arms are lower down than usual, making the gesture look more defensive and insecure than the usual hostile menace the gesture is meant to convey. Her jaw is clenched, her brow furrowed, and she keeps fidgeting in her seat. Disconcerted, twitchy, bothered. Small signs of emotional seeping through the angry wall she puts up.

“It’s normal to be disturbed after the death of someone in your life, even if you didn’t share a significant bond. You and Agent Maine saw each other daily. Sparred, ate together, protected each others lives during missions. It wouldn’t be strange for you to be upset.”

If he wanted to avoid putting her on the defensive, he should’ve used the word ‘agitated’ instead of ‘upset’. Both more or less interchangeable in context so his meaning would come across, except that she’d be able to admit to being agitated more easily than upset. She associates anger with strength and sadness with weakness, and it is absolutely vital to her to make sure that people view her as strong and intimidating. The end result is that most people view her as an asshole.

Price’s job isn’t to fix these people, though, so he says upset instead.

“I’m not upset,” she says, firm and heavy as a rock, eyes narrowing at him. “I’m not even surprised. Job like this? One of us was bound to die sooner or later. Fuck, he isn’t even the first Freelancer to die. Just the first one on the leaderboard. So what? I’m already over it.”

“Are you certain?” he asks, just to make her double down.

“I’m sure,” she says, glaring.

Agent South is the kind of person who’d rather be wrong for the rest of her life than admit to ever not being right. After making a firm declaration like that, she’s taken care of.

“That’s good to hear,” he says pleasantly, and crosses her off the list.

“It’s not ‘Jealous?’” Agent Florida says, a smile on his face. Price has categorized it as the smile he wears when he thinks he’s making pleasant but unimportant small talk. Time with a counselor isn’t
exactly the time for small talk, except from what Price has read of Butch Flowers’ past, he’s
learned from hard experience to never talk about anything important or personal with therapists.

Except, of course, that he is talking something important and personal at the moment, and has
before in the past. He just doesn’t know it. It’s as if he thinks that if he just adopts a casual and
friendly expression and tone that no one will notice the contents of his words, like talking to
animals or infants. The contrasts just highlights it instead. He’s had many patients with lacking
social abilities before. It’s very convenient, having such a large upper hand on the patient.

“Because he died?” Death wishes are relevant information. They can be positive or negative,
encouraging the afflicted person to take greater risks but also to possibly fail where they could’ve
avoided it just for the chance to die. If Agent Florida wants to die, they’ll have to change the sorts
of missions they send him on.

Agent Florida laughs like Price had just made a joke, even going to far as to slap at his knee in
mirth. “Heavens no! Of course not. I love being alive. It’s very fun. I just meant the way he died.
I’d never die if I got the choice, but it’s inevitable, so I at least want for my death to be a good one,
like his.”

“Alone and desperate?”

“How you think that’s how he felt?” he asks, curious.

“He was horrendously outnumbered, injured, and stranded on a wartorn planet with no hope or
prospects of getting off of it.”

Agent Florida smiles, and it doesn’t reach his eyes. Some of his smiles reaches his eyes, and they
tend to be the toothier ones. This one is just polite in a way that makes Price think that it’s hiding
confusion, with how he’s tilting his head like a befuzzled puppy.

“He died fighting,” Agent Florida says. “Killing. Doing as much violence as possible.”

“So you’re not upset?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Angry? Scared? Sad?” Indignant on Agent Maine’s behalf? Worried for his own life? Hopeless
about the Project?

Agent Florida goes from Pleasant Smile #4 to Crestfallen Frown #2 with neat and quick precision.
“Of course I’m sad,” he says, not quite hitting the mark of ‘this is so unfortunate’ as well with his
voice, but it's a serviceable simulacrum. “My coworker died.”

Agent Florida has learned to always be sad when someone he knows died. No reservations, no
emotions more complicated than simple grief. Little Butch Flowers, given a mandatory therapy
session after his mother had died when he was a child and he’d found the body, hadn’t yet learned
this lesson and had instead just honestly, earnestly reassured the therapist that no, he didn’t
particularly mind the change because he’d found a cookbook and learned to make his favorite
breakfast food just as well as his mom had, and no the memory didn’t haunt him, his father had
cleaned the kitchen so that the smell was already gone, although now it stunk of bleach instead.

Butch Flowers had learned his lesson firmly, even if he’d probably never learned the reason
why everyone was so upset at his honesty. Price had noted that he seemed to do many things without
seemingly realizing why he had to do them, and therefore sometimes got them slightly, unsettlingly
wrong, like the uncanney valley of emotional health. Being used to following orders without
reasons given does make for an excellent Freelancer, though.

“But why should I be angry or scared?”

“No reason,” Price says. “I’m sure you’ll work through your understandable grief in an appropriate and tasteful timeframe, Agent Florida.”

“I’m so glad to hear it,” he says, back to the exact same polite smile.

Price doesn’t try to coax any truth out of him, and instead just crosses his name off the list. There hadn’t been much doubt over him anyways, but better safe than sorry.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Devastated,” Agent Wyoming says. “Massachusetts was a dear friend of mine.”

“Maine,” Price corrects.

“Ah, right,” Wyoming says. “Slip of the tongue.”

Price smiles and nods and crosses Wyoming off the list.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Not good,” Agent York admits. He fidgets underneath Price’s steady stare. He hadn’t used to do that, before the AI implantation. Price assumes that it’s anxiety disorder by proxy. He noted it down in his file already, but Agent York hasn’t let it affect his performance in the field yet, so. It doesn’t really matter. Quality of life only matters as far as it affects functionality. “Maine was my friend.”

“The two of you were close?”

“Of course. I’d say that I’m close to all of the Freelancers.”

“How so?”

“We’re a team. We live together. We share a secret.”

“Those are important things to you?”

“Yeah, course.”

York is one of Price’s less… interesting patients. Not any particular eccentricities or interesting coping mechanisms or brain maladies. The new anxiety disorder has only been an improvement, even filtered through the AI first. Nothing exciting that would warp a human being’s mind on his files either. York’s past is sparse and bland on paper, not a single thing that Price could point to and call a trauma or proof of a broken mind (or better yet, broken and healed wrong, like a bone that wasn’t set correctly after damage, leading to new and fascinating shapes that a human should never take). Mother, father, no dysfunctional siblings or relationships or divorces or suspicious hospital visits. No rap sheet. Kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school, followed by enlistment to the army immediately after graduation after being targeted by a predatory recruiter, an utterly normal and unexciting story. Agent York had adjusted to the army in a normal and
healthy way from what Price can tell, not that there’s much to tell from. There’s very little information on Agent York’s mental state, purely because he’s been so stable his entire life that no one has bothered to poke at it and look around.

It’s a bit unprofessional to say, but he’s boring. The kind of patient Price went into secret illegal military projects to avoid in the first place. He hadn’t even been able to make himself read the entire file, as thin as it was. But it’s fine. He can tolerate one sane patient in exchange for all of the rest of them.

“Do you think you can elaborate on ‘not good’?”

“Sad?” He sounds like he thinks the question is stupid, but he’s too polite to say so.

Not scared then. Not suddenly confronted by his own mortality over the death of someone so close to his own level of skill, not looking to get out of the Project and cause a big mess in need of cleaning up. Price can work with sad. It’s nothing to be alarmed by. He crosses Agent York off the list.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve lost a teammate,” Agent Connecticut says. Her face is blank, at odds with how focused her eyes are on him. She’s become increasingly more closed off during sessions with him. He’s tried to stop it, and failed. Now he just watches it, distantly interested in what the end result will turn out to be. “I’ll deal.”

She’s even more closed off than usual. Disingenuous, giving him empty answers. She doesn’t want to share herself with him.

Price nods, making approving noises, and doesn’t cross her off the list. It’ll be for the best to keep an eye on her.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Bad,” Agent Washington says.

“I’m sorry to hear that, David.”

“You can just call me Wash,” he tells him. “Everyone calls me Wash.”

This isn’t the first time Price has been told this. He’s just curious about this strange and elusive temper Agent Washington apparently has. It’s landed him in hot trouble more than once, to the point of getting written down in his file multiple times, but he hasn’t witnessed it yet on the Mother of Invention, and he hasn’t been able to subtly provoke him into it yet either.

He smiles and doesn’t respond in a way that he hopes will annoy Agent Washington, will dig underneath his skin and simmer there and cause some interesting chemical interactions sooner or later. “Bad how?”

“Mad, I guess.”

“Oh?” He perks up for a moment, and then reigns himself back. Cool, composed, calm.
“I didn’t see Maine leaving coming at all. I don’t get why he did it. How he could’ve just—” He bites the sentence off with no prompting from Price. He knows this, because he’s carefully sitting still, intently watching.

“... It wasn’t very good of him, was it,” he says slowly, instead of assuring Agent Washington that it surely wasn’t personal, wasn’t meant to be cruel. “To just leave like that without another word, forever.”

Agent Washington hunches his shoulders. “I… I thought we were friends.”

“People can let you down sometimes. Abandoning his teammates-- you could even call it selfish.”

Agent Washington shifts, uncomfortable, but he doesn’t jump to the late Agent Maine’s defense either.

“Growth can be taken from loss, however,” he says, because a counselor is supposed to be constructive, and he knows an opportunity when he sees it. “You can take this as a lesson and become better for it. Don’t make the same mistake Agent Maine made. See where it got him, and where it got his teammates. Nowhere better, certainly.”

“I’d never leave the Project like that,” Agent Washington says, low and fierce. “Never.”

Price smiles. Maine’s death is now his fault, his betrayal, Agent Washington’s morality lesson. Don’t betray the Project, or else you’ll hurt your team the way he did. Feel guilt for your friends every time you think about turning against this organization, as if they’re the same thing. It also conveniently turns his mind off the tracks of perhaps thinking about why Agent Maine left so abruptly, instead thoughtlessly chalk ing it up as a character failing. Price hadn’t realized that things had gotten so dire with him. He blames the language barrier for his lack of notice.

Agent Washington sits and broods silently. Price wonders if he’s talking to his AI quietly, but it’s unlikely. According to all of the Freelancers, the AIs can be very quiet things, except for Caboose who seemed to be a bit of an anomaly. Price blamed the brain damage on that. AI technology hinges very much on delicate neuroscience that they still don’t entirely understand to this day, after all. Also, according to the cameras around the ship, Agent Washington subvocalized even when he was trying to quietly talk to his AI.

Agent Washington was well taken care of, in the dark and in hand as usual. He crosses him off the list.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Losses happen on the battlefield,” Agent North says. No use crying over spilled milk, his tone says. No use crying over the inevitable.

“So you’re not sad?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s pretty senseless, actually. If he just hadn’t gone down there without backup…”

“Teamwork is equal survival?”

“Isn’t it?”
“It’s an interesting philosophy.”

“I think it’s reality. Maine went in alone, and he died. It’s as simple as that.”

No indications that he wants to leave the Project, then.

“Mission control never would’ve sent him into a place like that without teammates,” he confirms. Unless they were trying to get rid of him, of course. In which case they would’ve pulled Caboose from his head first anyways.

“I know. You guys value the people on the top, give us good equipment and intel.”

No indications of resentment towards the Project, either.

“Was that a problem you had before joining the Project?”

“Yeah, actually. We were all the same soldier, in commands eyes. Interchangeable and equally unimportant. Here, you support your field agents, because you’ve already gone to all of the trouble of choosing the best of the best.”

No indications of fearing for his life. Good, good.

Price nods, and doesn’t really dwell on what they do to the worst of the best, once they didn’t improve and ran out of chances. It isn’t important. He idly crosses Agent North off of the list and continues the session.

“And how does that--”

Agent Carolina gets up and slams the door behind her.

“Well,” Price says to the audience of no one but him and his camera. He turns it off. Agent Carolina has never been fond or particularly patient with the therapy sessions, tending to apparently view them as a waste of her time, but she’s always been professional enough to play along for the minimum amount of time. At least not to storm out without another word. He’ll have to try and schedule another session with her to try again, as soon as there’s an opening in her schedule.

Given her coping mechanisms, it’ll be a long while.
Chapter Summary

York’s eye snaps open.

Grif is making eyes at his rations, and like fuck he’s going to share them. He gets a protective, sharp elbow up in the way and starts eating faster, glaring over at him.

Grif notices his subtle body language somehow. “Man, I’m just looking.”

He narrows his eyes further because one, that’s always how it starts, and two, he’s not going to eat with his mouth full like some people he could name.

“That was one time!” he yelps, understanding his meaning easily. “You weren’t even gonna eat what I took, I saw how you were picking at it.”

He neatly swallows and then takes another bite.

“You know, sharing is caring,” Grif says. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you that?”

Oh, so he was just looking but now he was whining about sharing? Which one was it? Huh?

“I wouldn’t have to steal if you’d share.”

Have to!? No one was making him!

“You’re--!”

“God, love is creepy,” Tucker says.

He and Grif both turn their heads at the same time to look at him.

“You do know that he hasn’t said a single word this entire time, right? How are you understanding him?”

“Mindreading,” Sarge says confidently.

“I think it is because he is blinking in Morse code,” Caboose says.

“Grif’s too dumb to learn a second language,” Sarge dismisses.

“I know three--” Grif starts.

“Boys, boys, boys,” Donut says with fond condescension, like a pat on the head. “It’s not any of those things, or anything on this plane at all. It’s because their zodiacs are complimentary!”

“I don’t even know what my zodiac is,” Grif says.

“Zodiacs are nonsense!” he breaks his silence to say indignantly. “That’s not science, Donut--”
Grif takes the opportunity to steal the last bite of his rations. He gasps in outrage and lunges for him and knocks him onto the ground, trying to wrestle the food out of his mouth, much like with a dog that’s snatched your chocolate out of your hand. Grif barely chews and swallows with an infuriatingly smug look.

Tucker and Donut have to rip York off of him while Sarge just sits back and cheers.

They forget to correct

York’s eye snaps open.
“Grif and Simmons,” he says, with a bone deep confidence, “used to know each other. North, I’ve got the whole thing figured out! Puzzle solved! Dots connected! The dreams, North, the weird missing time!” He slaps his own thigh, grinning madly with quite a lot of teeth. There’s a slight red sheen to his eyes.

North woke up two hours ago. He woke up, his alarm rang shrilly two minutes, Grif made a whining, pleading noise inside of his head that he doesn’t think can even bemeaningfully replicated in a way that will communicate the same sentiment to someone who doesn’t literally share a brain with the speaker, and North turned off the alarm, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

He’s been dozing for a long time now, hazy and warm and relaxed. He’s going to have to catch up on this lost time later by eating faster than comfortable, skipping out on half an hour of sleep here and there, cutting out some of his time which he just spends socializing, catching up with his teammates and playing cards or anything that doesn’t count as training. He’s normally very disciplined, good at keeping long term consequences in mind and not laying all of his problems at ‘future’ North’s shoulders, as if they’re not the exact same person. But he’s always been better at treating others than treating himself, and this is honestly very nice. He hasn’t slept in since he was a teenager.

Grif hums in the back of his skull, content like a fat cat sprawled in a sunbeam. North basks in the simple peace of the moment.

And then his door opens, and before it’s even shut again someone’s ripping the covers off of him and jumping on top of him.

<Cold!> Grif yelps, unpleasantly startled. North is violently startled. He punches the person on top of him in the face, before it registers that it’s York. York, who isn’t even in armor. Who isn’t even in pants. Or a shirt. Or anything but what North suspects that he went to sleep in, which is a pair of red boxer shorts.

“Arg!” York says. “Watch it! I’ve only got the one eye!”

“Sorry.” And then what York is wearing finally registers for him. Or rather, what he isn’t wearing. “Did you walk all the way here from your room just in that?”

“Simmons likes the color,” York says defensively, which was not what North meant, but he raises his eyebrows at that all the same. “And I ran.”

“No one’s going to think we’re-- fraternizing.”

“It’s fine, Carolina doesn’t gossip at all, she’s terrible at small talk or seeming approachable. Not that Carolina would have a personal stake in whether or not I’m having an affair with you-- look, that doesn’t matter!”

“You’re the one who brought her up,” he points out. That’s usually the case, actually. York likes
talking about Carolina, and looking at her, and standing in her general vicinity. It’s too bad for him that Carolina never stands still for long, like a shark that’ll stop breathing if it stops moving forward.

<It’s only an affair if you’re already dating someone,> Grif points out to the appreciation of no one but himself.

“Maybe I don’t want for the entire ship to think that we’re seeing each other, York.”

“North!” York says with more manic energy than North has ever seen in him before. It’s outright out of character, really. “That! Doesn’t! Matter!”

Well fuck me I guess, he thinks and doesn’t say. Grif snickers.

“We figured it out,” York breathes, eyes wide and crazy.

<Like he’s Gollum and we’re the Ring,> Grif says.

“Why do you only know old movies,” North whispers.

<It’s a classic!>

Maybe it’s because Lord of the Rings copyright had expired hundreds of years ago. Had the Director only downloaded uncopyrighted media onto the AIs? Why? They were a secret military project. Even Disney-Exxon-Apple’s long arm couldn’t touch them, probably.

“North!” York says, shaking him by the shoulders, still sitting on top of him after having burst into his room without knocking or a warning or explanation of any kind. Or pants. “I said we figured it out! Me and Simmons!”

“Figured what out?” he asks, like he’s supposed to. York looks briefly mollified before the frantic eureka expression slips back on his face, like a mad scientist having an incredible and terrible revelation, or a sleep deprived detective triumphantly shouting I’ve got it in front of their messy, insane conspiracy board comprised of newspaper cut outs and tacks and yarn when a google doc would have done just fine and been much neater and less expensive besides.

“Grif and Simmons,” he says, with a bone deep confidence, “used to know each other. North, I’ve got the whole thing figured out! Puzzle solved! Dots connected! The dreams, North, the weird missing time!” He slaps his own thigh, grinning madly with quite a lot of teeth. There’s a slight red sheen to his eyes.

<This… sounds more like Simmons than York.>

“They used to be people, North.” York leans down so that they’re eye to eye. “And then they died.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Simmons,” York says. “Of course you’re still a person, that was robot racist of me. I meant humans, they used to be humans who then DIED.” York leans in further so that their noses almost touch. North can’t lean away. He tries not to wrinkle his nose; York hasn’t had the time to brush his teeth yet. “And then they reincarnated.”

North doesn’t say anything.
“As AI.”

Grif doesn’t say anything.

“Because they’re lovers.”

“York,” North finally says with careful slowness. “How long ago did you wake up?”

“Two minutes and thirty two seconds ago,” he says promptly enough that he’s certain that Simmons immediately fed him the answer.

“That’s an impressive run time,” is his first response.

“Thank you,” York says sincerely.

North regathers his thoughts. “York, do you remember that time you dreamt that we were pirates and that you owed me a bag of rubies and then half an hour after you woke up you apologized to me for not having the bag of rubies ready yet because a dog ate them? Because you hadn’t had your coffee yet?”

York thinks. “Maybe.”

“Do you think that this is like that?”

“No,” York says. “Absolutely not. Simmons thinks that I’m right too.”

<Ah, yes, Simmons,> Grif says. <That paragon of carefully considered thought and rightness.>

It’s a bit mean, but North agrees. Silently. In his head.

“In fact, this was all Simmons’ idea,” York goes on.

<There we go,> Grif says.

“Ah,” North says.

The thing is, York really isn’t ever really like this. This all being some weird effect of his AI bleeding over into his mind while he slept and him having a hard time shaking the irrational mania off along with his grogginess in the morning makes far more sense than, well, anything that just came out of York’s mouth. He’s going to be incredibly embarrassed about this later once he comes to his senses. North will very politely not make fun of him for it and very kindly just smile at him silently instead and York will die. It’s going to be hilarious.

He smiles up at York, gives him a friendly pat on the arm, and sits up and stretches. It’s about time to start the day anyways.

York stares at him like he’s the one being strange. North gently shoves him off of himself and onto the bed, and stands up to get dressed.

“--lutely no way OH MY GOD NORTH YOU FUCKER,” South says, opening his door and poking her head in. He sighs and doesn’t even try to berate her for not knocking. She hasn’t knocked on a door in her life and trying to get her to start now is just a fine way to get on her nerves and still get nothing done. Not knocking is her lifestyle.

“Good morning, South.”
“Told you so,” CT says, peeking into the room around South’s arm, too short to look over her shoulder. “479er told me she saw it with her own eyeballs.”

“NORTH,” South says, her face a mask of betrayed horror. “How could you!?"

“I really thought that York was sleeping with Carolina. I had a lot of money riding on that,” CT says mournfully.

“Carolina’s too good for York,” South snaps at her, before turning back on North. “And I thought you were too!”

“Aww, thanks, South.”


“I’m leaving!” South shouts, and does so. CT waves, and then the door shuts again.

North turns back to York. “You’re clearing that mess up.”

North doesn’t actually really mind. The general atmosphere has been a bit… glum, since Maine. If this is what it takes to distract people, then he’ll take it. Plus, he’s had to deal with fake rumours before, like most human beings ever. The MOI can be eerily like highschool sometimes, except the physical fights aren’t as pathetic.

York is staring off into the distance with a disturbed look on his face. “Reincarnated… lovers? Jesus Christ, I believed that.”

“There you go,” he says. “Now I’d tell to leave my room, but I’ve got a feeling that there’s a bit of a crowd out there now just sort of casually loitering around coincidentally in this part of the ship, so maybe wait for a bit first. Or borrow a pair of my pants. Or would that be worse?”

“Simmons, what the hell,” York says, still ignoring him.

“Oh! And good morning, York, Simmons.” And he smiles and leaves.

Grif grumbles until North gives in and promises him some extra breakfast.
There are two ways to make an AI. One is to use an individual human’s brain as a blueprint. This is illegal. The other is to make such an AI splinter, whatever that means and however one does it. This is super illegal.

Project Freelancer is experimenting with making AIs in a way that’s completely new and unprecedented, and therefore, totally legal. York isn’t clear on the details of it. The Director doesn’t talk much and is always busy, the Counselor says that he’s only got a psychology degree, the rest of the Freelancers only know as much as he does, and the few scientists he’s asked have only nervously mumbled a bunch of scientific jargon that made absolutely zero sense to him before slinking away. So, he guesses that this is all just so far above him that he can’t hope to understand it without, like, a decade in college learning about brains and circuits and shit. No thanks.

It’s important to learn how to make AIs in a legal way so that they can publically mass produce them and then, of course, weaponize them. It’s the Great War. Everything’s being weaponized. Everyone. Every single project and experiment and invention is all about, if not how to most effectively kill a bunch of people, about how to more effectively win the war.

York likes to be useful. This is what his skill sets for. He’s helping something important happen.

He tries not to think about what’ll happen to all of those mass produced AIs once the war’s over. The war being over is a distant dream at this point; they can cross that bridge as a species when they come to it.

Plus, York can’t keep millions of people safe. He can keep a dozen people safe at most. Millions sounds more like a team effort. For now, he’s fine with trying to radiate concern and ‘I am definitely an available and non judging shoulder to cry on at any moment just so you know’ in Carolina’s direction (because if he actually verbalized any of that she might actually punch him, or airlock him, or throw him off an observation platform), watching his teammates’ backs in the field, and trying to talk Simmons out of his crazy.

<I’m not crazy!> Simmons protests crazily. <My theory makes completely sound sense!>

“Uh huh,” York says.

<I mean it! Think about it! All of the names are the same, all of the faces are new, the strange hallucinations and dreams are consistent and definitely aren’t from your subconscious-- they’re memories! We used to be humans!>

His words, technically, make sense. It’s just that his frantic ‘lizardmen are real and I finally have the proof!’ tone of voice--not to mention the overly excited and impulsive feelings he’s rapidly
pulsing with-- makes York want to give him a mug of hot chocolate and comfortingly shush him until he calms down.

<And then we died horribly and we reincarnated as AI!>

And that. That part of the ‘theory’ makes the whole thing feel a bit more suspect and shaky in general.

“Simmons, I feel like if you just kinda calmed down for a bit, just like really slept on this--”

<I don’t sleep, York.>

“You’re in my dreams with me, Simmons.”

<That’s you sleeping and taking me along for the ride.>

“Oh so you’re perfectly aware and lucid and logical during?”

<That’s besides the point!>

“Is it? ANYWAYS. If you just take some deep breaths-- I know you don’t have lungs, Simmons, just bear with me, if you just metaphorically take some deep breaths and sleep on it then you might have some seconds thoughts about at least some parts of your theory.”

<What are you implying!?> Simmons demands insecurely.

“You know what I’m implying,” he says.

<That I’m CRAZY!?>

“No!”

<Well then I don’t know!>

“I’m just saying that I think you’re a bit caught up in the heat of the moment and--”

<--being crazy about it!?>

“Don’t put words in my mouth!”

<Don’t put crazy in my circuits!>

“You’re not making any sense!”

<Your face doesn’t-->

“Trouble in paradise?” Donut asks with great curiosity. York twitches and looks behind him to see Donut trying to radiate ‘I am a good listener and an excellent secret keeper’ and South with her arms crossed, helmet cocked in a way that makes him feel pretty certain that he’s being glared at.

<He’s neither of those things,> Simmons discloses.

York does a private sarcastic little eye roll, hopefully successfully communicating his reaction of oh wow really?

“We’re fine,” he says. “Simmons is just a bit…” He tries to think of a tactful word. “Wrong.”
Simmons mentally hurls the concept of *offense* at York. York grins.

“York,” South says, oozing threat from every inch of her posture. “You better watch yourself.”

“Um, wh-- oh my god.”

*<It’s the shovel talk,>* Simmons breathes, suddenly distracted.

“I will rip your--”

“South, it’s not like that!”

“What do you mean *it's not like that*? Is he just a, a *game* to you or something?” Indignance is rapidly building in South’s voice. Donut gasps, a hand to his helmet covered mouth, scandalized.

“No!” he yelps, hands up.

“So you’re going to treat him right!?”

“Yes! I mean, we’re not--”

“Because if you don’t then you’ll be *lucky* if I get to you first. You don’t want to know what that bastard did to my first ex.”

“But--”

“But fucking nothing!”

York distantly notes that Simmons is out now, maroon light in the corner of his eye, and that he and Donut’s heads are swinging back and forth like they’re avidly following an intense tennis match.

“This isn’t--” he tries hopelessly. The PA rings out, cutting him off.

*“Would Agent York please report to the Director’s office ASAP?”* FILS’s voice rings out throughout the entire ship. *“I repeat, Agent York report to the Director’s office ASAP.”*

“Oooh,” Donut, South, and two passing mechanics all say in mean unison, old highschool instincts apparently rising up within them to temporarily possess their bodies as York is summoned to the principal’s office because someone tattled that he was smoking behind the gym last period.

York misses when it actually felt like he was an adult in war and not a teenager going through a crushingly mundane hell. He’s got an *AI* in his head, for god’s sake.

York goes to the Director’s office, Simmons jittering with nerves in his head the entire way as he tries to guess what they’ve done wrong.

“He could just be calling us in to assign us a mission,” he says.


He has, unfortunately, a point. Simmons notices him acknowledging this and briefly spikes with vindication, before descending into even deeper nervousness.

He thinks, idly, about the dream. Caught up by Simmons’ infectious irrational conviction and then distracted by one embarrassment after another, he hasn’t really had the time until now. But… it is
strange. It’s all strange. The dreams in which he doesn’t feel like himself, the disorienting lost time in which his thoughts don’t feel like his own. But of course sharing minds with someone is bound to make things screwy; weird thoughts and and weird dreams and weird subconscious urges. It’s just a strange without a ready explanation, instead only leaving behind confusion and curiosity. Sometimes, he swears to god, he loses himself and feels like he’s Simmons for a moment, but that doesn’t come with feeling like a chip with very complicated code running on it. He feels like a person, a human, someone normal with a body and a life that isn’t exactly like York’s, but similar enough not to feel alien at all.

One way to make an AI is to use a human’s brain as a blueprint. A copy, an electronic twin. This is illegal, even in wartime. They can’t use it to try and win the war, even as they’re struggling and desperate and scrabbling for any solution at all.

An idea is niggling away at York’s brain, and then he enters the Director’s office, and he focuses on standing very straight and looking utterly professional instead. He feels Simmons grab at the idea that York wouldn’t even be able to verbalize yet for how raw and unformed it is, grabbing at distractions. The Director makes Simmons nervous with how much he wants to impress him, nervous being the understatement of the year. It tends to make York tongue tied by osmosis, so they’re trying something new where Simmons doesn’t obsess about the Director in his presence while York is supposed to be presenting himself as a competent and calm adult.

“Agent York,” the Director says coolly, back turned to him and reading through a datapad.

“Director,” he says. “What did you call me for?”

“I only hire the best of the best,” the Director says. “From how unexceptional your file is, it would have never occurred to me to hire you without Agent Carolina’s recommendation.”

That’s fair. York erred on the side of caution while creating his papers and made himself seem as mundane and uninteresting as possible, nothing to make him stick in people’s memories or anything that could be double checked.

Maybe that’s why he’s been called here. Maybe they’ve finally looked closely enough to see that things don’t quite line up. He deliberately doesn’t fidget.

“And it seems that she was right. You’ve been a competent field agent, Agent York.”

<Oh my god,> Simmons says, and York tries to mentally shoo him back to whatever he’s trying to occupy himself with.

“But,” the Director says, like ice, and here it comes, the dressing down for whatever he’s done now, “it is vital to behave in a professional manner.”

“If this is about breaking the vending machine in the rec room--”

“You will not distract the other Freelancers. You will not harm their performance.”

“Oh. Yes, sir?”

The Director turns around, looks at him. It feels a bit like being sized up by a giant eagle, even though York feels like he could easily enough shove him into his wardrobe locker. “Fraternization with colleagues isn’t allowed, Agent York.”

Oh shit he’s found about Carolina.
“As the Freelancer with the higher ranking, I’m holding you responsible for ending this foolishness.”

Wait. Higher ranking. He doesn’t seriously mean--

“If I find out that you’ve continued this arrangement with Agent North Dakota despite my reprimands then you will… regret it.”

York stares as a man who is his boss with the body of a nerd and the voice of a drunk cowboy threatens him to make him stop fucking someone he isn’t fucking, although he is definitely fucking someone.

At length, he clears his throat. “Yes… sir. I promise… that I will not… have… relations… with Agent North.”

It is the truth.

“Good. Now get out of my office.”

York hurriedly gets out of his office, sprints down two hallways, looks around for any obvious cameras, and then falls to his knees and starts laughing.

<That was really stupid,> Simmons says. <And embarrassing and terrible.>

York nods and laughs some more.

<But also, York, you were right. That theory was wrong.>

“G--glad to hear that your reasoning has come back from vacation, Simmons.”

<Because I’ve come up with a new and better theory now!>

Oh, fantastic. He can’t wait to hear this one.
Simmons’ new theory actually makes sense. York immediately knows who he wants to tell.

“Carolina,” he says, “I need to talk to you about something--”

“Sorry, but I’ve got a mission,” she says without even turning her helmet in his direction, and she slips into 479er’s waiting craft.

“Carolina, I want to talk--”

“Busy,” she says, and vaults over an observation balcony and drops twelve feet down onto the training floor.

“Carolina, I--”

“Gotta go,” she says, and darts into the airlock she was just passing. He hears the hiss of air and clunk of heavy machinery as it opens up onto the outside of the ship.

<She just escaped into the vacuum of space to get away from you,> Simmons says, sounding impressed.

“Shut up,” he mutters. “Maybe she had something to do there.”

<In the vacuum of space?>

“Shut up.”

He knows that feelings are a forbidden topic, with Carolina. He knows that she needs her space sometimes. He knows that she’s a workaholic. It’s not like he thought that she’d be unaffected by what happened to Maine. This will pass, in time. She’ll slow down long enough to let him catch her, sooner or later. He wishes that she’d let him help her, but she just needs time. Hopefully.

For now, he needs someone else to talk to, because it’s kind of killing him that only he and Simmons knows about this. Just one other person, just one partner in crime, and he can relax.

If not Carolina, then who else is there? Florida? Pfft, no. South? Terrible idea. Wash? Nah. Wyoming, CT, no, he isn’t really that close to them. Who else, who else…

Oh. Of course.
<Obviously, York.>
the Simmons Theory

Chapter Summary

“Shut up, the theory has been improved,” Simmons snaps. “That was merely my nascent hypothesis! Just some brainstorming, initial concepts.”

“Oh yeah, you absolutely weren’t invested earlier, we could tell,” Grif says.

Grif definitely isn’t worried about Caboose, it’s just. Weird. That he’s not here. Because if he’s not here then that means that he’s probably not in anyone, for weeks now, just like, what, tossed into a drawer somewhere? Like a shitty ballpoint pen mostly out of ink left to be forgotten?

“Well, his host died,” North points out. “No one for him to be plugged into.”

<He can be plugged into literally anyone if they just do a quick surgery first. And guess what this ship’s full of: people!>

“I doubt the Director would sanction an AI being implanted in the janitor, Grif.”

<It doesn’t have to be the janitor. There are other Freelancers. Isn’t the whole point of AIs to have them in Freelancers?>

North squeezes the trigger. The target, a small red holopad over a dozen feet away and moving erratically while being controlled by FILS, freezes in place and goes green. Another hit. North swivels around, searching for the next target on his scope.

“I think the Director’s got kind of a strict cut off for who gets one. The only people so far who’s gotten one is on the leaderboard, after all.”

<Oh, that’s too bad. If only there was someone on the leaderboard with an available head-- oh wait! There is someone like that! Multiple someones! And hey, the person on top of the leaderboard even already has a neck port and already has hosted Caboose and only stopped because Maine needed a shitty translator! What an awesome and incredible coincidence.>

“Well… that’s true, I guess--”

“Well, that’s true, I guess--”

“Agent North,” FILS says from the speakers in the room. “If you are concerned over AI Caboose’s missing presence, do not worry. He was merely damaged some during Agent Maine’s defection, and is currently in reparation.”

<Eavesdropper,> Grif mutters. He feels North’s mind snag a bit at the world ‘defection’, but he shrugs it off when one of the target zigzags into his field of vision. Grif himself is a bit preoccupied by the word damaged, and what exactly that might mean.

Not that he’s worried. Not that he really in particular cares. He just wants to know, is all, if Caboose is fine or not. Or if he’s going to be fine again. Can be fine again.

He’d seemed to like Maine a lot, even though he was a mostly silent weirdo.
“Shouldn’t you be helping me with this?” North murmurs, more quietly after FILS’ interruption.

<What, you want for me to shield you from the targets?>

“Orrr, you could use your special AI processing powers to just help me pick them out.”

<Eh, you seem like you’re going a fine enough job on your own. Plus, I wouldn’t want to become a crutch for you, North.>

“Oh, of course, thank you so much for thinking of me, Grif.”

Grif deliberately doesn’t pick up on the sarcasm. <Happy to be of help.>

North sees a glint of red out of the corner of his eye and whips around with his sniper rifle--

<THAT’S MAROON DON’T SHOOT IT’S NOT RED YOU IDIOT,> Grif hollers inside his head, loud like a cymbal crash inside of a broom closet. North flinches hard enough to squeeze the trigger anyways, and Grif throws up his shield around them without thinking to stop the bullet--

Purple paint splats onto yellow hexagons. No live ammo during training. Right.

Grif takes down the shield, feeling like a burning hot coal of sheepish defensive embarrassment. Damn it, he’d really freaked out there. North shakes his head and lowers his gun, feelings of consolation and hey it’s not a big deal coming from him. Also some amused fond aww he cares which is uncalled for, but he’s too busy turtling into his own mortification and trying to pretend like nothing happened.

York and a small glowing Simmons, standing in the doorway to the training room, both have their hands up like they’re bank robbers surrendering to the police at gunpoint.

“Don’t shoot!” York shouts, clearly smiling underneath his helmet. “We’re giving up without a fight! Simmons, surrender protocol!”

Simmons’ hologram is now holding a tiny white glowing flag that he’s waving in the air. “It’d be against the Geneva Conventions for you to kill us now, just so you know! I assume you can’t read, Grif, but it’s right there in the rules!”


North shoots York in the face with no hesitation. Grif and Simmons squawk in shock in tandem as York falls backwards onto his ass.

“Ack!” York yelps. “North! I can’t see shit!”

“Oops,” North says mildly, smiling, and walks over to offer York a hand up and a towel for his visor that’s now painted purple.

<Good to know that you’d kill a man if I just tell you to.>

“You’re evil,” York accuses, rubbing at his visor. Simmons isn’t saying anything, but he has his hands on his hips in that particular ‘judgemental mom’ way he has.

“Such a cruel thing to say to a teammate,” North says, a hand to his chest as if he’s genuinely wounded.

“Says the guy who just shot me in the face.”
“Really, it was more like the equivalent of being hit by a water balloon.”

“Fired at bullet speed. And the water is paint. To the face.”

“An accident, I swear!”

“I’m gonna make the Director mark you down for friendly fire.”

The threat doesn’t have any real heat to it. North doesn’t believe it for a second, Grif can feel. “Oh dear.”

“Uh… speaking of the Director,” York says, suddenly looking hesitant and shifty, and then Simmons winks out of sight. “Simmons-- no, I gotta-- I should tell him-- Simmons! That’s fighting dirty, come on. Simmons.”

North and Grif watch York argue himself for a few more moments before York’s shoulders clearly slump with defeat. “Ugh, fine, fine,” he groans, “I’ll drop it.”

“Drop what?” Grif asks, popping up.

“Nothing!” Simmons protests sharply, appearing a split second later.

“Oh wow, nothing huh,” he drawls. “Nothing that’s about the Director.”

“Exactly.” Simmons nods. “The Director didn’t say something weird to us at all.”

“I heard on the PA a few days ago that the Director wanted to talk to you in his office, by the way,” North comments in a friendly small talk fashion, like casually making a comment about the weather or the game last weekend.


“Good to know!”

“So did you come here to tell us that the Director hasn’t said anything weird to you lately for no specific reason, or was there something else?” Grif asks dryly.

“My theory!” Simmons says.

Grif rolls his entire head.

“You already told us about your theory,” North says with polite diplomacy.

“I still haven’t gotten the chance to make fun of you for it, by the way,” Grif says. He’s been puzzling at the back of his head all day how to make fun of York’s ‘and they were LOVERS’ punchline without accidentally making fun of himself as well. He kind of really wanted to ask if those were York’s words or Simmons’, but specifically in a way that indicated that it didn’t really matter to him whatever the answer was.

“Shut up, the theory has been improved,” Simmons snaps. “That was merely my nascent hypothesis! Just some brainstorming, initial concepts.”

“Oh yeah, you absolutely weren’t invested earlier, we could tell,” Grif says.

Simmons makes a noise that reminds him of a teakettle that’s kind of hilarious and kind of adorable when York decides to intervene.
“The new theory,” he says, “is this: our AIs are imprints of soldier volunteers.”

“That’s not exactly legal,” North points out. “Isn’t the whole point of this project to find a way to legally create AIs so that we can use them in the war effort?”

“Lots of things this project does isn’t ‘exactly legal’. So what if the actual goal is to see if the Project can believably lie about where their AIs are coming from? They create them the usual reliable way, but then claim to have made them with some new, legal, patented, not publically available method and see if they can get away with it?”

“That’s…” North trails off. He was probably going to say unethical or immoral. Or maybe practical. North can surprise, sometimes.

“The powers that be may not even look into it too closely, considering how desperate humanity is at this point,” Simmons says. “The Director may be betting on that.”

“... Okay,” Grif says. “This one’s slightly more convincing.”

“HA!” Simmons crows. “Yes! I told you so!”

“Oh, shut up.”

“My theory was right!”

“You haven’t even proven anything yet, smartass, you’re just speculating.”

“I’m right and you know it! Why else would we have buried memories of being human soldiers, hm!? We’re imprints!”

Doesn’t mean that he has to be so smug about it. “You know what, I think that you were right earlier, actually.”

“What?”

“Reincarnation, Simmons. We are merely going through the cycle of life.”

“No, that was just-- a flight of fancy, okay, that’s not what I’m sticking with.”

“Flight of fancy, who talks like that, what are you, a Victorian gentlewoman? And I’m sticking with it. It sounds way more plausible! I’m so sorry for doubting you, Simmons, you were right. About the reincarnation thing. Not the corrupt lying thing. That sounds so stupid and silly. The military complex, lying to the public? That’s ridiculous.”

“Fuck you, I know what you’re doing, Grif!”

“Doing what? It’s a smart theory! In fact, I think I’m just going to go ahead and name it the Simmons Theory, to honor it’s creator, of course. I don’t steal credit.”

“York, punch North!”

“What, no!”

“He shot you! He deserves it!”

“That’s--! A… good point.”
“Fate and destiny brought us here,” Grif marvels. “Absolutely amazing.”

“SCIENCE BROUGHT US HERE,” Simmons howls. “YORK, DO VIOLENCE NOW.”

York looks at North. North smiles and shrugs. “I could use a sparring partner.”

There is a human Grif and Simmons out there somewhere, oblivious about what their volunteering created. Crawling around in trenches and shouting and shooting and worrying about much simpler dangers than Project Freelancer.

Grif wonders how close they are. If some of Simmons’ first theory was true after all.

Not that it concerns him. He doesn’t really have anything to do with that person, the person who is the more real him. He can’t reach him, can’t talk to him, can’t affect him. Can’t even fully remember that other Grif, the first Grif’s, life. He’s based on his personality, not his memory. The person he is made of is unreachable, and what would even be the point of reaching him if he could? Better to just leave him alone completely. Better to just forget about him. Better to just stop thinking about him totally and live as Grif, the one and only. Why worry about things that you can’t change? That only leads to pointless misery.

“You’re thinking some heavy thoughts,” North says.

<Nothing that matters,> he replies, and manages to distract North into dropping the subject.
The next day, North is accidentally included in an email chain that seems to be exclusively intended for high position paper pushers working in PFL. He realizes this a bit too late to have never opened and read it. Human error, or as Grif would put it, a massive fuck up that some dipshit is probably going to get fired over. Not that it’s really the biggest fuck up ever. It could have gone to someone who shouldn’t know about the project at all, although he’s not sure if the coding would even allow for that to be a possible mistake. It’s not as if they’re using Gmail, after all.

Anyways, even if it’s not intended for North’s eyes, it’s not… hmm, wait. Screenshots, documents… sign here… by signing this I acknowledge the risks… consent forms… non disclosure agreements…

—

In looping cursive: Franklin Delano Donut

In neat straight letters: Richard Simmons

In a slanted script: Lavernius Tucker

In a wavering handwriting with some of the letters backwards: Mikayle Jay Caboose

In bold capital letters: SARGE

In a messy scrawl: Dexter Grif

<Well shit,> Grif says. <We’re taking this to our graves.>

“And why’s that?” North asks, deleting the email, closing the browser, and hopelessly hoping that no one’s going to notice that he saw that. It wasn’t his fault. He can’t get in trouble for that, can he?

<Because Simmons is unbearable when he gets to do an I told you so.>

“Oh, you should see South. She’s got the memory of an elephant when it comes to times when she was right and I was wrong.” Also for grudges. Really whenever it’s convenient for her. He deletes his browser history for good measure. He feels like he’s washing all of the blood away from his crime scene without bothering to move the body.

Honestly, he vaguely feels like he just stumbled upon a manilla envelope with the words TOP SECRET stamped in red on it lying on the floor in the public hallway. Except, of course, that no one uses paper any longer, except for spies.

He supposes that even top secret military organizations aren’t immune to bureaucratic incompetence, though.

(North never does get in trouble for opening that email.)
the start to a porno

Chapter Summary

Tucker grumbles as Wash continues to chew.

North, who’s been more picking at his food than eating it for the last five minutes, speaks up.

“Does…” he trails off. Spears a single slice of carrot on his fork and chews and eats it. Tucker knows that they’ve got no resistance to them; chewing really isn’t necessary to be honest. He swallows. “Does Project Freelancer ever seem a bit… weird, to you?”

Monday. A slab of beef covered in watery brown gravy. A side of boiled broccoli, carrots, and potatoes. Yesterday, they had cod covered in watery white sauce, with a side of boiled broccoli, carrots, and potatoes. Tomorrow, a shockingly mediocre Taco Tuesday, presumably for ‘morale’. As predictable as clockwork.

<Would some variety kill them?> Tucker asks as Wash dutifully eats his meal with no pleasure but no great disgust either. Like brushing his teeth or putting on his armor, mechanical and thoughtless. Tucker has a vague idea that eating isn’t supposed to be like this. Not all of the time, at least. Not every single day.

“It’s the military,” Wash says around a mouthful of potatoes, “so yes.”

Tucker grumbles as Wash continues to chew.

North, who’s been more picking at his food than eating it for the last five minutes, speaks up.

“Does…” he trails off. Spears a single slice of carrot on his fork and chews and eats it. Tucker knows that they’ve got no resistance to them; chewing really isn’t necessary to be honest. He swallows. “Does Project Freelancer ever seem a bit… weird, to you?”

Wash cocks his head to the side and frowns, puzzled, thoughtful. “Not really? What do you mean?”

<It is SO weird, Wash!> Tucker protests. <We don’t even get Netflix here! I’m pretty sure that’s a basic human right. Like water and stuff.>

Wash doesn’t even dignify that with a response, which is just hypocritical. Tucker caught some of his wistful longing for a good dramatic trashy serial the other day! Which Tucker is all about, some of those sex scenes are real good.

North eats another vegetable, obviously just as a stalling tactic. No one actively wants to eat this stuff. “Like…” He frowns, looks suspiciously around the cafeteria. “Never mind.” His frown drops away for one of his usual gentle, carefree smiles. “It’s nothing,” he assures them, and efficiently eats the rest of his meal without saying anything at all.

“O… kay.” Wash’s attention kinda poke in Tucker’s direction questioningly, with like an unsettled sort of vibe to them.
Yeah, no, he’s definitely being weird., Tucker agrees. It’s not just you.

Validated, Wash shakes it off with a casual shrug and goes back to his bland meal, forgetting all about it.

“Weird like they’re listening in on us,” North says the next day apropos of nothing.

“Whug!?” Wash squeaks, jumping and almost slipping on the wet tile to horrible consequences.

“I thought it’d be pretty dumb to talk about how I’m worried about the common areas in the ship being bugged while in a common area in the ship,” he says, turning his head slightly towards them with a good humored smile. “So I thought that the showers would be safer. So long as we don’t talk too loud and the sprays are on.”

“Um?” Wash says, looking at him wide eyed. “I, uh, wow you’re sneaky.”

North is standing underneath the spray to their left, no wall or divider between them.

“I think your situational awareness is just your weak spot,” North says, not unkindly. He uncaps a bottle of the same general use personal soap that all of the Freelancer’s are supplied with, squirting some of it into his palm.

<Is this the start to a porno?> Tucker asks with hushed awe. <Is he gonna tell you to bend over and use that as lube? Are you going to call him senpai?>

“Shut up,” Wash hisses underneath his breath at him. Tucker can feel him flushing, but according to the chemicals in his brain it unfortunately seems to be more from a combination of the hot water and embarrassment than arousal. Siiiigh. North’s abs are chiseled. Wash is giving up a perfectly good opportunity. Oppornturnity. Bow chicka bow wow.

Disappointingly, instead of giving Wash a smoldering look, North starts working the soap into his hair instead. Well, missed opportunity for him! Wash’s abs are chiseled too, so there. Not that Wash would’ve taken him up on it, the buzzkill.

“You, uh, think the Project is listening in on us?” Wash asks, trying not to seem too awkward as he hushedly discusses spy adjacent things while wet and naked with his wet and naked friend in the showers. It mostly involves fixedly staring at the wall in front of him.

“Yes,” North says. “I know that there are security cameras everywhere, and all of the comm channels are monitored, but that’s not too unusual for a military operation, especially one that’s supposed to be hush hush. I just think it’s strange when the project starts spying on its own soldiers during their leisure time, when they’re in unimportant areas of the ship doing unimportant things. Feels strange.”

“How did you find out about that?” he asks. Tucker can feel his growing discomfort, not just at how the conversation is being held, but the contents themselves. Doesn’t like the idea of assuming that he’s being spied on when he isn’t, likes the idea of assuming that he isn’t when is even less. Hates the idea of PFL being behind it. He owes them, and more to the point, they’re what he got instead of a court martial. A last chance that he’s gotten thoroughly entangled with. No easy break if it turns out that working conditions aren’t... pleasant. He’d just have to ride it out for who knows how long. Until the project ends? When is that? When the war ends?

There are people claiming that that won’t happen anytime soon in his current lifetime. Lots of
The best case scenario, clearly, is that North is just wrong. It’s too bad that he seems like one of their more competent and level headed coworkers.

“It’s a hunch more than anything, really. Just some weird coincidences piling up--”

While Wash is being nervous about his job and politics, Tucker’s started thinking about something far more important.

<Wait ONE MOMENT,> he interrupts, and Wash startles enough for North to notice and stop talking, paying attention to them. <If he’s saying that the project-- the ship-- our bosses-- oh god the director,> he breathes, horrified.

“Your AI started shouting?” North asks sympathetically.

“What about the Director?” Wash asks as he nods at North.

<Has he heard us jacking off, Wash?> he demands, and Wash chokes a bit on his own spit. <Answer me! Be real with me! Tell it to me straight, doc! Has that pencil necked weirdo heard us strangling the hot dog late at night!?>

“Don’t--call it that--”

“Are you okay?” North asks, brow gently furrowed with concern as he places one bare hand on Wash’s bare shoulder. Tucker perks up with interest before he remembers to be horrified.

<Oh my god. Is he watching us right now? That not hot perv? Wash, cover our bits!>

“They’re my--”

<And you want him ogling them!? Oh fuck, we’re gonna have to start spanking it while on missions out in enemy territory-->

“Absolutely not--”

<--in the dirty trenches while the enemy shoots at us-->

“No! How is that at all acceptable to you? What--”

<Wash, our DICK!>

Wash twists the spray off and snatches up his towel and wraps it swiftly around his hips, bright red.

“I’ve got to go,” he says weakly, leaving without making eye contact.

“... Well, he didn’t take that well at all,” North says to the empty shower room. A moment later, he chuckles at something no one but him could possibly hear. “Guess we’ll just have to stick with one conspiring partner.”
York

Chapter Summary

York’s reasons for forging his paperwork, for having a fake name and a fake past and joining the military for fake reasons, are honestly not that dramatic or tragic. At least, he doesn’t think so. They weren’t happy circumstances, but he’s always thought of them as mundane. Not unusual. Thousands, millions of people have gone through what he has. He really should’ve seen it coming. He shouldn’t have been so shocked.

It’s just that, stupidly, he’d hoped.

Chapter Notes

Honestly this one is skippable if anyone finds the content triggering.

York’s reasons for forging his paperwork, for having a fake name and a fake past and joining the military for fake reasons, are honestly not that dramatic or tragic. At least, he doesn’t think so. They weren’t happy circumstances, but he’s always thought of them as mundane. Not unusual. Thousands, millions of people have gone through what he has. He really should’ve seen it coming. He shouldn’t have been so shocked.

It’s just that, stupidly, he’d hoped.

One day, he’s just overwhelmed by how sick of it all he is. From his family, his friends, his classmates, teachers, strangers. Calling him things that are wrong, ‘she’ and ‘her’ and ‘miss’ and ‘young lady’ and on and on and on. It grates. He wishes it would stop, just a little bit, from any direction. But he knows that if he tells one of them, all of them will know. Small community, people talk. Especially his father, gregarious and friendly and popular and outgoing. If he tells anyone, it’ll get back to him sooner or later. He doesn’t want to tell his dad. He knows how risky it is, letting your parent know while you still live with them.

But his dad is the most grating one of all, with all of his fond ribbing about what a tomboy he is, going ‘Angela it’s dinner’ and ‘Angela do you want to watch a movie’ and ‘Angela do you want a ride to school’. He’s managed to get everyone at school to start referring to him by a nickname that doesn’t rub him wrong the way ‘she’ does, but his dad good naturedly refuses.

If he can just get his dad to go along with this, then it doesn’t really matter what everyone else thinks. He’ll live. He’ll be happier.

He works up the courage, and he tells him during commercial break.

His dad smiles him at him silently for a while, like he’s waiting for the punchline. He just silently stares back at him, serious, fingers knotted in the hem of his shirt. The smile slowly drops from his
dad’s face, and it looks strange in its absence. It happens so rarely. He looks a bit like a stranger, suddenly, in his dad’s clothes, sitting on his dad’s spot on the couch.

“You’re kidding,” his dad says.

“No,” he says. “I’m not.”

His dad looks at him for a moment longer, before laughing and turning back to his show.

He should have taken the brush off and dropped it there, retreated and sucked it up and let his dad ignore it.

Instead, he feels anger and bile surge up in his throat, and he stands up and he *screams*, he shouts until his dad can’t keep ignoring him, has to *listen* to him, hear what he’s saying, really *look* at him. Eventually, his dad stands up and starts shouting too, which is something foreign and strange and scary so he shouts back *louder* and then suddenly, abruptly, his dad’s grabbed him by the neck of his shirt, hauled him painfully through the living room, kitchen, and hallway, and thrown him out of the house and onto the gravel drive up outside. He scrambles up, gravel rash stinging, opening his mouth to furiously shout some more through the tears--

“*Come back when you’re ready to be my little girl again!*” his dad bellows, and slams the door shut before he can get so much as a word out.

Honestly, he shouldn’t be so surprised, so shocked, so *wounded*. Who didn’t see that coming? As if he hadn’t subtly probed him before on how he felt about trans people? Tried to convince him without seeming like he had a particular stake in the argument? What had he been thinking? That it’d be different if it was his own kid? Someone he loved?

How naive.

He sulks around town for a day and a night, before he comes back in the morning hungry and cold even though it’s late spring and tired and thirsty and needing to go the bathroom because he hadn’t wanted to pee in the bushes or some alley without toilet paper and he’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday and he hasn’t showered or brushed his teeth and he feels *gross* and he’s still upset in a numb, resigned sort of way and he just wants to collapse into his bed and be left alone.

He tries to open the front door. His dad, who’s boasted several times about how the neighborhood is so safe that he just leaves the door unlocked, has apparently locked the door. He looks underneath the welcome matt. The spare key is gone. He sighs, long and exhausted, his dehydration migraine pounding, and knocks on the door like he's a visitor.

After a moment, he hears his dad’s familiar heavy footsteps down those familiar creaking stairs, and then the door opens. He looks up at his dad, who looks stern and sad in a way he never does.

“How naive.

He* explodes*. His dad slams the door back in his face.
He pisses in a bush, drinks from a park fountain, eats a half eaten slice of pizza he finds in a garbage can, and sleeps underneath the warm vents at the back of a bakery. He wakes up, and he’s still wounded and *fucking pissed*.

He walks home. His dad’s car isn’t there. He’s at work. He should be at school. Fucking fuck that.

He tries to open the front door, the back door, every window he can reach, and looks underneath every nearby decorative rock and brick and possible hiding place for the spare key. He can’t find it. He stares blankly at the patio door, all wire net mesh to keep the bugs out and wood and glass. Too bad he doesn’t know how to pick locks.

His dad is really doing this. He’s seriously not going to take him back unless he caves, which he fucking won’t. It took every drop of bravery he had to say all of that. He’s never taking that back. He’s never going to backpedal. He needs to stand by it, or else he’ll never regain the courage to do it a second time, and he won’t fucking live with the *grating*. 

He’d thought that his dad was nice. That he loved him. That he was a good dad. Everyone thought that. It was his whole personality, his *thing*. Good old friendly Jeff, everyone loves him.

His eyes sting. He grits his teeth.

He kicks the fucking door down. It’s a flimsy thing, and it breaks easily in big splinters and shards of glass, net tearing. He walks inside, and he robs his dad blind without guilt or regret. This bridge has already been burned, so he might as well take everything he can with him.

Things get easier for a few weeks after that. He’s got a toothbrush and toothpaste and deodorant and changes of clothes and a TV and lots of other things to pawn for money. He sleeps in cheap motel rooms and showers in cheap motel showers and eats cheap diner and gas station meals, using public bathrooms and taking the bus and the train and *not* hitchhiking because he’s heard stories, okay.

He kinda misses his old life, except how it’s not worth the whole ‘Angela’ part of it. And it’s all tainted now, anyways. His dad wasn’t the man he thought he was. He doesn’t care. He *doesn’t*. 

The money runs out. The things to pawn runs out. He’s left in a bustling city with no idea what to do.

In the end, he settles for drinking water from park fountains and eating food wherever he can get it and sleeping in any warm place he can find and finding outhouses rented out for construction sites or events to go in and begging all day for a few coins and he settles into a dull grinding routine. Life becomes kinda hazy, kinda blurry. And then the toothpaste runs out.

He stares at the empty tube. He squeezes it. Squeezes it harder. Tries to get even a tiny bit more to come out.

Nothing. He’s out of toothpaste. *He’s out of--*

He has a weird crying fit about running out of toothpaste, and then he decides to rob someone. There are no convenient targets around, no one who has rejected and wronged him and clearly
deserves it. He decides to just steal from someone whose place looks pretty nice and not take too much. He needs it.

He smashesthe glass door at the back of someone’s house with a rock. An alarm starts wailing. He flinches and runs away without taking anything.

He tries again. He’s got a knife that someone gave him for being their lookout while they sold ecstasy or whatever, which is shitty payment but whatever, and he roughly hammers it into a lock with a rock. People really like decorative rocks.

Shockingly, it works. He takes a shower, steals the toothpaste, has a big meal, and grabs an iPad to hock.

The next time, it occurs to him to look under someone’s welcome matt. It seriously, actually fucking works.

He gets a phone with a cracked screen that works anyways, and he immediately looks up lockpicking tutorials.

He gets caught. He got greedy, he got stupid, he got unlucky, there were cameras and now half his face is swelling up and the cop in the corner of the room is giving him the stink eye. He gives them the stink eye right back.

A woman enters the room, and she gives the cop a condescending smile and shoos him off with a flick of her fingers. She draws up a seat in front of him. She wearing a suit and a smile that he can only be described as ‘sleazy’.

“You’ve gotten yourself into a lot of trouble, young lady,” she notes mildly.

“Don’t call me that,” he says, too beaten and bruised to hiss and spit like he wants to. He didn’t spend his last winter in a homeless shelter just to still be called ‘young lady’.

“My apologies,” she says smoothly. “I’d call you by your name, but according to my associates you don’t seem to have one?”

He doesn’t say anything. He’s not going face his dad now. The bastard’s lost his chance, not that he’s likely to have changed his mind.

“Mysterious,” she says, grinning, teasing. If he wasn’t in such a rotten mood, he’d be playing along. He doesn’t, and she shrugs it off. She staples her fingers together and leans in, expression sliding into something conspiring. “Okay, so, what I’m about to do isn’t exactly legal.”

He raises his eyebrows at her and pointedly looks around their surroundings.

“It’s fiiiine,” she says with a dismissive wave of one hand. “The cameras are turned off.”

His eyebrows go higher. She barks a laugh.
“We’re not gonna kill you! Don’t worry, kid! I just wanted to talk to you about options. You don’t seem like you have a whole lot of them, right now. I just want to help! Off the books, so to speak.”

“Uh huh,” he says. “Wow, entrapment is so subtle, how does anyone ever see through this.”

“Teenagers,” she says along with a roll of her eyes. “Listen, I’m not here as a cop right now, okay? I’m here as a crooked cop, which is so different. Well, crooked is exaggerating it. Makes it sound like I’m working for criminals. I’m not! I’m working for the army. That’s basically like the government, right? I think so.”

“Mhmm.”

“They’re sliding me and a few other guys a little extra dough under the table if we help them with recruitment, y’know? Like, say, we pull in a rowdy drunk or a junkie or whatever, they can’t pay bail or fines, and suddenly we’ve got no choice but to put nonviolent offenders in jail, which is terrible! I don’t care about the guys who’re ruining their own lives! I got into this to catch the bad guys, not the addicts and the hookers. Who cares about them? I feel bad for them! I wanna leave ‘em alone! But I can’t, since it’s my job. So, the army helps me give them a compromise, an option, a way out.”

She smiles at him expectantly with tobacco stained teeth. After a moment, he reluctantly nods at her to continue. “The war is always needing new and more bodies. You and me, we could come to an agreement. Agree to sign on and I get a nice fat bonus and you don’t gotta go to jail. Hell, you get a job! A roof over your head, steady meals! Talk about an upgrade, amirite?”

“... I’m a minor,” he says, because it’s obvious. He’s got some serious baby face going on. “I’m sixte--”

“Ah ah!” she says, hand shooting out, palm flat and vertical, shutting him up. “I don’t wanna hear it! Listen, it’s like this. The more recruits I get, the more pay I get. But only valid recruits count. The army’s the army, they don’t get to break the law! They can only accept people who say that they’re eighteen or older, you hear me?”

Plausible deniability, she means. “I hear you.”

“So, what’s your age?”

“Eighteen or older.”

“Great! Fantastic! So, do we have a deal?”

She holds out her hand. He looks at it.

“One more thing,” he says. “I’m a guy.”

She looks at him over her glasses. “Oh? Congratulations.” She doesn’t sound like she cares, sardonic, but he weirdly likes the response. He feels himself start to warm up to her, even though she’s so transparent. Not even trying to hide her motives from him at all, really.

“If I’m going to say yes to this and you’re going to get your nice fat bonus, then I’m going to need for everyone to acknowledge that.”

She pops her gum. “Don’t worry, the military’s got a program for that.”

“It does?”
“Hormones and surgery and everything. Helps pull people in looking for options, y’know?”

He stares at her. “My file has to say I’m a guy. All the way back. I don’t want anyone thinking that I’m something else, even if they’re a douche.”

She grins, wide and sharp. “Easily done, buddy! No one’s looking too close at any of the fodder’s paperwork nowadays if you know what I mean. I mean, there’s so many of them, who’s got the time, right?” She winks at him.

“Right,” he agrees eagerly, and shakes her hand.

He wants a strange name, unique and interesting and his. She makes him pick a boring one to avoid scrutiny. He pouts at it. Well, at least it’s a guy’s name, finally. It doesn’t quite feel like his, though. It serves for now, but it’s not him. Just eight years, though. That’s all he had to agree to. After that, so long as nothing comes along that’ll change his mind (and what possibly could), his life and his body and his choices are finally all his. Including his name.

He hopes it’s gonna be a cool one.
Chapter Summary

She’s fast and she’s busy and she’s strong and forceful and intimidating, the best damned Freelancer on this ship. She can avoid anyone for as long as she wants. Anyone at all--

Except for the Director.

After a long moment of just standing there doing nothing, Carolina had walked forward and picked up Maine’s body. She’s strong, but he was large and unwieldy, his corpse uncooperative. She’d resorted to dragging him, his legs trailing in the mud. She’d cleared her mind, just thought. One step after the other. Go around that wall, that body. Breathe. Mind your stance. Radio for extraction, give a barebones report in a flat voice, her lips numb, mind detached. Just focus on the work, Carolina. This isn’t really happening now. Do the work.

She did the work, and she did it well.

The Counselor keeps trying to get her to sit down and just do nothing. To think. To talk. To feel.

She ignores him and avoids him and does the work.

It had been like this, after she found out about mom. If she thought about it for longer than two seconds, in any kind of depth, she’d be incapacitated immediately, useless for the rest of the day, distracted and miserable, her lungs and eyes rebellious, traitorous, betraying her and hurting her and humiliating her. It slowly faded away with time, though. After only five years she could finally think about it without being taken out by her own body.

Maine was not mom and she’s lost teammates before. It’s not the same, it hurts for different reasons. Reasons she can’t think about, or else she’ll be useless. It’ll go away eventually if she just keeps ignoring it. She’ll move on without noticing it. Until then, she has to stop herself from thinking about it. She has to work. She can’t stand still or think or feel.

York keeps looking at her. Not the slightly dopey, sweet way he usually does. Concerned. It gives her hives. She avoids him too.

She’s fast and she’s busy and she’s strong and forceful and intimidating, the best damned Freelancer on this ship. She can avoid anyone for as long as she wants. Anyone at all--

Except for the Director.

She hopes he sent for her to send her on an important mission. She usually hopes, buried and muffled and distant and shameful with how stupid and childish and unlikely it is, that it’s for more personal reasons. But right now, if she has a conversation anywhere near personal, is reminded that she’s a person at all, she’s going to break something.

It’s a good indication that the Director isn’t going to be breaking out of any patterns any time soon when he doesn’t even look up from his screens when she enters the room, as usual. He likes to talk
to (at) people without looking at them at all. Not as in avoiding their eyes, uncertainly looking away, but as in just getting the information and orders out with his mouth while his eyes do something else, like reading a report or focusing on writing one or even just looking out of a window at the void and the stars, like the least interesting thing in the galaxy is another person’s face and he’s got better things to do.

It’s been the norm for a while now.

“Director,” she says, standing at attention, because she’s not entirely sure that he noticed her entering.

“Agent,” he replies, typing something.

She gives him a moment. He doesn’t take it, continues typing. The inaction itches at her, so she says, “You wanted me for something?”

“Go to the medical wing,” he says.

Another moment.

“For what?” she says. “What will I do?”

Because there has to be something for her to do. It occurs to her, like a bucket of cold water or realizing that you’re out of ammo in the middle of a gunfight (not that that ever happens to her), that he might be sending her there for enforced rest. The Director’s word is law on the Mother of Invention. She wouldn’t be able to say no. She can’t stop moving. Absolutely not.

(He hadn’t told her to stop and rest when her achilles tendon snapped during track, when she passed out during a test, when she took every extracurical she could and started sleeping only six hours a night, and then five, and then--)

(It would be less accurate to say that the Director trusts her to succeed and more so to say that he expects perfection of her or else she’ll be dismissed and disregarded entirely, fully, and then she’ll lose the last of her family forever with no going back. She can feel it in her bones.)

(Does she want for him to tell her to rest, or not? It would be a nightmare, but it’d be everything she’d ever wanted from him.)

She’s not supposed to be feeling. She tenses one muscle after another instead of shifting or fidgeting, standing still.

“Surgery,” he answers her finally. He sounds impatient with her; the right thing for her to have done would’ve clearly have been to just go to the medical wing immediately after he’d said so, but knowing him he’s forgotten to tell the staff there what she’s supposed to be doing as well. Somebody needs to be fully briefed before she goes in.

“I’m healthy,” she says. More accurately: she’s functional, which is what’s important.

“For the AI,” he says, swiping a touch more forcefully than necessary at something on his screen. “It’s being put back into you.”

No.

“We would have done it sooner,” he says, “but Agent Florida’s brute force ejection damaged it some. It had to be repaired, and it’s ready now.”
She opens her mouth--

(The Director's word is law on the Mother of Invention.)

(She can’t stop moving.)

She closes it, turns around, and walks out of the room.

Towards the medical wing.
hit

Chapter Summary

A full body twitch, so sudden that it makes someone in the room yelp and drop something.

The body doesn’t feel like it normally does. Not familiar, except yes it is, but not in the right way, what is--

“Don’t,” Carolina says, and then grits her teeth.

The world feels faster than it used to be. Or maybe Caboose is slower, gradually waking up from his long, deep sleep. Or maybe…

The world is back. The world came back! Caboose thrums with wild excitement and energy for a moment taking everything he can in. A grey ceiling. The faint breathing of other people in the room. That weird hospital smell. The second hand feeling of air in lungs, blood in veins, of skin and bone and muscles and existing. It’s all something, and he basks in it.

And then he gets kind of bored. There’s still nothing to look at but the grey ceiling in between long slow blinks.

<Agent Maine,> he says. <Wake up!>

A full body twitch, so sudden that it makes someone in the room yelp and drop something.

The body doesn’t feel like it normally does. Not familiar, except yes it is, but not in the right way, what is--

“Don’t,” Carolina says, and then grits her teeth.

Caboose stills, which means that nothing in him moves, but he is nothing but thoughts and sometimes lights, which means that his thoughts stop.

“Does everything feel like it should?” someone asks.

Carolina nods tightly, and sits up. A dizzy sensation washes over her and takes Caboose along with it, like a big wave at the beach or a tilt-a-whirl at an amusement park. There’s no bright colors or clowns or popcorn anywhere. There’s no cotton candy here. The planet looks weird and sad, all grey and barren and quiet, empty houses and empty streets wherever they go. This field trip isn’t as fun as Caboose had thought it’d be.

“Ah, Agent Maine,” he says. “I think we are lost.”

Maine shakes his head.

In the distance, gunfire.
She almost falls off the chair, and steadies herself at the last second against the armrest. “I’m fine,” she says tensely, shaking off someone who moves to steady her. She shakes her head as if to clear away cobwebs or a bad dream.

<Where is Agent Maine?> he asks. He was just here. Caboose is supposed to be in Maine, not Carolina, that was the decision, she gave him to him, she can’t take it back now, that’s not fair. Maine wouldn’t give him up like that. He said that they were good partners. He said.

Carolina clutches at her head like she has a bad headache, fingers digging in harshly into her scalp.

“Are you experiencing any pain?” someone asks.

“No,” she says. “Shut--” She cuts herself off, biting her tongue and the rest of the sentence off.

<Where is he? Where is he, where is he, where is he, where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he where is he-->

An image of Maine lying in mud floats up to the surface of Carolina’s mind like a bloated corpse in a river. That’s not a good place to fall asleep, to fall down, to faint. He will have to wash his armor.

She punches the armrest, hard enough to make the closest cautiously approaching person flinch away. “How could you possibly not know!” she demands, raw and too loud and too sharp.

Some of the people exchange cautious glances.

“The AI was damaged, it had to be repaired,” one says.

“There may be some loss of memory, regarding its last few days implanted in Agent Maine,” one says.

“Deleted data,” one says.

“It had to be done,” one says.

“Unavoidable,” another one says.

Maine is in the mud. Maine

is moving so fast. He picks up one monster and throws it at another one. He buries his knife in the chest of another. Knocks one’s snout off like it’s wet paper tissues, blood and gristle flying and spraying.

It’s raining. Caboose focuses on that, letting Maine work with Caboose’s strength and his own reflexes. The rain is the heavy kind that sounds so nice and sleepy on top of a roof.

Maine crushes a monster’s skull.

Not that he’s ever heard it on a roof before.

Maine is surrounded, and winning.

He lives in space, where it’s always night and clear starry skies.
A monster swipes at Maine with one huge claw, moving to disembowel him.

He’s heard it on top of a tent before, though.

Maine moves to dodge--

When? With who? It was

“--lina? You look very pale. Your disorientation is strange considering that you’ve undergone this procedure before. Perhaps you should say for observation--”

Carolina is on her feet, lurching her way towards the door, roughly shoving andshouldering her way past anyone who gets in her way.

“I’m fine,” she says, a phrase that comes without thought whenever she’s in pain and isn’t supposed to respond by taking the other person down. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Agent Carolina--” The door closes behind her, cutting off the voice. She starts taking deep breaths, sucking air into her lungs. She feels sweaty.

“You,” she says, voice haggard. “What was that. What-- you can’t remember. You’re not supposed to remember--”

<Remember what?> he asks. She’s talking to him, but she’s upset and he’s not supposed to be with her, he’s supposed to be with Maine, his best friend. He’s in the mud. He has to go and find him and help him up. He has to--

Carolina makes a pained noise, jaw clenched, like she’s wounded. “We can’t just go and bring him back,” she snaps. “He’s gone.”

<Then let’s find him,> he says, even though Carolina never ever ever does anything he says or wants.

The phantom sensation of dragging something heavy and cold washes over Carolina like a bucket of ice cold water, stealing her breath. Hot spiky go-away-don’t-touch-me anger sparks and flames inside of her like a flash fire, fast and sudden.

“He’s dead!” she shouts, scream ringing in the metal hallway.

Caboose stops.

Carolina stops.

She raises a hand to her mouth, clamps down on it hard enough to bruise.

*It doesn’t hurt if you don’t let it hit you, a past Carolina says in her silent mind.*

They’ve both been hit.

Caboose comes out of the strange vivid fantasy of lying inside of a tent that’s warm with several people’s body heat and hot breath, other people pressed up against him on both sides, dozing with the soft comforting noise of rain on the tent and someone’s soft snores, feeling utterly safe and
calm.

Maine looks down. He’s dropped his weapon. There are claws buried knuckle deep into his stomach.

He’s been hit.
Before the surgery, she’d grimly, unforgivingly, and mercilessly made a promise to herself to not ignore Caboose this time. To find a different, better way. She always keeps her promises to herself, her harsh rules and strict routines and ambitious goals.

Less than ten minutes in with him, and she's back on her bullshit.

Carolina immediately goes to the gym and doesn’t leave for eight hours, not stopping for a single break. Caboose pulses with distress as distracting as a klaxon for the first seven hours, panickedly taking in and alternately flinching away from what he’d remembered. She stubbornly acts like that doesn’t even exist. She’s the most stubborn woman in the universe, so this works well for her.

By the eighth hour, he’s quiet. She chugs two bottles of water in a row, soaked in sweat. Her hands are trembling from exhaustion. Nothing else.

She pants in the quiet of the room.

Before the surgery, she’d grimly, unforgivingly, and mercilessly made a promise to herself to not ignore Caboose this time. To find a different, better way. She always keeps her promises to herself, her harsh rules and strict routines and ambitious goals.

Less than ten minutes in with him, and she's back on her bullshit. The plastic water bottle crumples in her fist and she throws it at the wall like a petulant child, like South. Takes a deep breath. She will never let herself break her own promises, no matter how difficult it gets. She forces herself to think about it, for the first time.

Maine had made the decision to leave on his own, charging in all alone into a warzone. She hadn’t ordered him to do that, or encouraged it in him. But could she have stopped it? She hadn’t known that she needed to. But could she have known, if she’d paid more attention? Spent more time with him? Instead of skittishly avoiding him just because she couldn’t look at him or the blue light hovering over his shoulder without thinking about her own failures, which has always been the worst most hated things in the world to her.

Her stomach sinks and curdles, like there’s something rotting inside of it. She’s never going to be able to know for sure if she could have stopped it, because she hadn’t been trying her best from the start. She should always be trying her best. She shouldn’t be hiding away from things just because they make her feel bad. She was his leader. She should have been looking out for him. She deserves this doubt, this regret, but she hates it.

And Caboose…

It had been his fault. He’d been inside Maine’s head and he hadn’t tried to stop him from leaving from what she’d seen in the short flashes, hadn’t been trying hard enough at the very least. And he’d distracted him. Maine had been doing fine. He was one of the best. That was why he was on the board. But Caboose hadn’t been focused on the fight because he was a squeamish distractible coward, like a child choosing to chase a butterfly instead of helping his brother gut a fish. He’d
been lost in his head, and he’d taken Maine along with him once one of those—memory things—grabbed at him. Something about tents, rain. And Maine had died. Because of Caboose.

Because of Maine’s reckless impatience.

Because of Carolina’s cowardly shamed avoidance.

He’s at least as much at fault as Carolina is.

She’s always held people to strict standards, and herself the strictest because she should be better, the best. She knows that every mistake she makes is avoidable, the product of laziness or distraction or hesitation or stupidity. It is possible to be perfect, if you only just never stop trying your hardest. Carolina is trying, she swears, she swears. Except she keeps looking back and seeing ways she could have been better, superior choices clear and obvious now that should have been just as clear and obvious then. She tries so hard, and yet she still keeps fucking up.

It’s… intolerable. Except anything is tolerable, of course, if you just try hard enough.

She’s always held herself to the strictest standards, and it feels strange and wrong to try and share the blame with Caboose. As if it should either objectively not be her fault at all, or all of it should be on her. If it was partially her fault, then it was all her fault, because she’s faster and stronger and smarter and better than everyone else, she should be held to higher standards, she should be responsible. Carolina messing up is worse than someone else messing up, because what excuse does she have? She’s the best.

It feels so strange, comparing herself to Caboose. As if they’re the same. Same worth, same ability to make mistakes. The thought is alien.

She realizes, suddenly, that Caboose is radiating hurt like she’s rubbing salt in his open bleeding wounds.

She wonders how much of that he’d just heard, how much of it he’d understood or only gotten the gist of, the underlying emotions. She’s not entirely sure how much the AIs can get from their hosts. Something about concepts, feelings, associations.

It doesn’t matter. None of what she’d just thought was something she’d ever say to a grieving or hurt or traumatized teammate. You’re not supposed to talk to allies the way you talk to yourself. You’re supposed to be harsh and unforgiving to yourself, and encouraging and constructive with your teammates. Carolina tries to be. (Her standards are strict.)

“Caboose,” she says, and the name comes out in a way it never has from her before. Not annoyed or exasperated or impatient or furious. Tired, mostly. She feels drained numb, in a way that’s almost like training until her head goes empty, but not quite. Training until her head is nice and quiet makes her feel like she could climb a thousand mountains without breaks with patient determination, no outwards signs of her exhaustion. She feels done, now. Done with herself, the situation, always, always fucking up no matter how hard she tries.

She reaches blindly for something, anything to say. She’s tried, awkwardly, a bit ineptly, to be gentle with rattled teammates before. Never with Caboose. Reaching for the right words feels more impossible than ever.

But Carolina is excellent at never letting herself fool herself into thinking that she doesn’t have to do something, that it can wait or that someone else can do it, and she’s even better at forcing herself to do things while she’s exhausted to the bone.
And she’s the leader. She needs to take care of her team. That’s her job. Start doing it already, soldier.

“I’m sorry,” she settles on, simply because it seems like the most obvious, fitting thing to say, even though she feels like a clumsy oaf as she says it. What is she apologizing for? Which specific part? All of it? You can’t apologize for mistakes, Carolina. Those aren’t forgivable. Just get up and don’t do it again. Actions, not words. If you ask people to forgive you and they do, that’s just going to give you permission to do it all over again.

She has to say something, though, and that’s all she can come up with.

Caboose doesn’t say anything. His feelings change slowly, like sunlight through a window, the change hard to notice and impossible to grasp, to touch.

“I should have been. Better with you,” she says. The words are painful to say. Like she’s calling attention to her mistakes, instead of quietly letting them fade away like the shameful things they are by never acknowledging them openly and twisting herself up on the inside over them so that she never does it again, so she can shine with so many new accomplishments that she can just let those few, tiny, rare mistakes get washed out and forgotten, finally, finally irrelevant compared to the rest of her.

(The Director never forgets a single mistake.)

Carolina is good at working through pain. She’s good at improving. She has to improve. One of her men died over it. Face anything, no matter how awful.

“You deserved better than me,” she says, voice going creaky. There shouldn’t be anyone better than her.

But there was, wasn’t there. He and Maine were excellent together, apparently.

They’re all getting along with their AIs so much better than her.

The problem is her.

Her breath is shallow and her eyes sting and this hurts, this sucks.

She just breathe for some long minutes. Gets a hold of herself, even though she still feels so horribly weak and fragile.

“Caboose?” she asks.

She probes at that faint presence of other at the back of her head. Tries to get a read of him. He feels differently now, not hysterical or afraid. He feels… resentful. Hurt. Petty. Sulky.

Caboose still doesn’t say anything.

He’s ignoring her, she realizes. A taste of her own medicine.

She puts a hand up to her mouth and a noise that’s half laugh and half something else escapes her, eyes wet. Yeah, she’s definitely earned this.
South is gearing up to either give in with an eye roll or swear at him, but then she gets shot.

She falls like a crashing plane.

The mission, in Donut’s humble and realistic opinion, is going great! They’re supposed to completely demolish this enemy base, and it’s going surprisingly easily. It’s all isolated, so they just had to blow up some important parts of the ships that they could use to leave while North took out the communications equipment that they could use to call for help at the same time. Now it’s just a matter of picking them all off.

Some might think that avoiding being shot by about thirty people with guns would be achingly hard, but South is flying, and not even in straight lines. There’s nothing straight about her!

She puts her hands behind her, roars, “BOOM!” and Donut sends them flying, heat erupting behind them, temporarily shutting off her suit’s ability to hear so that he doesn’t blast her eardrums to pieces. Bullets fly into the sky, trying to hit them, and she angles one hand in another direction, says the word again, and then she’s suddenly tearing through the air in an entirely different direction.

She’s more focused on evasion right now, but they keep hurting or outright killing one or two soldiers with every explosion, happy collateral. Somewhere in the distance, a sniper keeps dropping soldiers.

Donut’s enjoying the happy adrenaline from South when North’s voice comes over the comms.

“South, your tracker,” he says.

“Ugh,” she says. “I’ve kinda got my hands full right now, North.”

With fire, yes.

“Just turn it on, please?”

“What, do you think you somehow wouldn’t be able to find me without it? Did you go blind and deaf while I wasn’t paying attention?”

“South,” North says in his most mom-like tone yet. Donut is itching to try and play peacemaker, but his interference might just make the whole interaction more… explosive.

South is gearing up to either give in with an eye roll or swear at him, but then she gets shot.

She falls like a crashing plane.
He opens his eyes. It takes a few tries, because his eyelids feel sticky with something, like someone spilled syrup on his face. She stares blankly out in front of her. She can see, but the image isn’t snapping together and making sense in her brain, like one of those paintings that are all dots and you’re supposed to unfocus your eyes to see the lady with the vase or whatever.

He twitches, tries to move, groans. That hurt.

She tries to move. Her muscles cramp like she’s trying to move in two different directions at once.

His body isn’t cooperating.

She can’t move.

Something is wrong.

In the distance, the noise of men shouting. He doesn’t know if it’s because of the way his ears are ringing or the distance, but the words themselves don’t really register or make sense. Her thoughts are scattered, and she feels like she can’t gather them up again and make them make sense. His head pounds painfully.

She is overwhelmed by the sudden conviction that the shouting men are looking for her, and it isn’t going to be good when they find her. Like waking up to being attacked and fighting back before you can even remember your own name. A lightning bolt of inexplicable understanding.

He has to stay right where he is, hiding and silent.

She has to move, get up and get out of here.

The body twitches and spasms, a high keening sound escaping the mouth.

The eyes close, and darkness takes over.

“South,” an agonized voice crackles into his ear. He realizes that he is awake. He realizes that he was asleep. “Can you hear me? Are you alive?”

This voice doesn’t register as dangerous, like the shouting men.

“Donut, are you on? Is South okay?”

There are footsteps, crunching through the undergrowth only feet away. She blinks her eyes. She’s lying down amongst plants, large and green, the soil brown and wild. There’s an unfamiliar but large bug crawling across her arm that’s sprawled out in front of her.

He thinks about moving, and then wonders who the footsteps belong to. The safe voice, or one of the shouting men?

Those aren’t her brother’s footsteps. That’s now how he walks. She knows.

He needs to be quiet until the man leaves.

She needs to kill him before he kills her.

Every muscle is rigid, tense and shaking and unmoving.
One hand twitches jerkily in the direction of the footsteps.

*Boom,* she mouths.

He’s supposed to make explosions happen when she says that, he remembers.

Blinding light and overwhelming sound, the world ripped out from underneath them. Flying, no gravity--

She smacks helmet first into the ground, or a tree, or a cliff, something sturdy and hard enough to make the helmet make a terrifying cracking noise, and her pounding head stops feeling like anything at all. The thoughts she’d been slowly regathering fall back out of her hands and roll far, far away.

“*South! I saw that, everyone saw that, I’m heading over in your direction ASAP, be careful--*”

The eyes close.

Gunfire. Very close by. They open their eyes.

North shoots someone in the head, gets clipped in the shoulder by a bullet, deflects another one with his shield, closes the distance and starts exchanging blows with one soldier and then uses them as a meat shield against the bullets fired by another soldier a short distance away. They shout in horror and stop shooting.

She and him and South and Donut stand up. No one seems to even notice.

Rude.

They take the time to aim their shot, palms flat out. An explosion comes tearing out. They protect their sight and hearing this time. No helmet, so they just shut it off directly, in the flesh. The absolute darkness and absolute silence flicker away to reveal success and smoke.

Three people are dead, and all eyes are on them now. North makes a sound of pure relief and exhaustion. They look up. The sun had been high in the sky when the mission had started, but now it’s dark and starry. He must have been fighting and looking for them for hours.

Angry protectiveness flares through them, mixing with fond gratitude. They smile, friendly and toothy. “You guys should surrender.”
There’s something in the back of his head that isn’t Grif, though, that’s telling him that the danger isn’t over yet. That all isn’t well, that they aren’t safe.

Every single part of North aches. He is more fit than he has ever been in his life, he is at his physical peak, and he feels like he’s barely standing. He’s been moving non stop for hours, fighting and running and sneaking and shooting and taking careful aim and hiding and dodging and searching, searching because he had to find her first.

Grif hasn’t complained a word, except about what ‘complete bitches’ the enemy are.

He’s found her. There’s blood pooling inside his armor and kevlar, warm and hot and close and uncomfortable, like pissing yourself, except its sliding down his back and arm from his shoulder, which feels more like a ball of pain than an actual body part at the moment. He found her. He feels slightly delirious with the accomplishment of this seemingly endless, grueling task. The last twelve hours have felt like an eternity.

Grif’s yellow hexagons slowly flicker away from North, where they had shielded him from South’s blast.

<Tell her to stop doing that,> Grif grumbles, feeling small and weak in the back of North’s head. <It takes up waaaaay too much energy to shield against her fuck you explosions. It’d be easier to just let you blow up, honestly.>

“Thank--”

Grif shuts down before North can even finish his sentence. That last shield had taken up the last of his juice, North realizes. They had been fighting for a long time. And that had been a big explosion.

The enemy had not surrendered.

North approaches South, trying not to stumble too much over his own exhausted feet.

South is smiling, big and wide, teeth bloody. She is not a graceful winner. This would normally be a reassuring sight after a harrowing mission like the one they’ve just had, in a fond exasperated sort of way, but he shouldn’t be able to see her smile in the first place. His gaze searches the ground for a few moments before it lands on her helmet. That is in pieces. Well. That’s concerning. He looks back up at her, comes closer. Parts of her dyed hair is plastered flat to her head by blood, and she hasn’t seemed to have noticed him yet.

That’s not good.

“South,” he says, feeling like he doesn’t slur the name solely because there’s still some leftover adrenaline fizzing in his veins like carbonated blood. All of the enemy is blown to bits on the ground, of course. A tactical oversight to group so closely together. Not close enough for a single grenade to take them out, certainly, but South has far more firepower than a single grenade.

There’s something in the back of his head that isn’t Grif, though, that’s telling him that the danger
isn’t over yet. That all isn’t well, that they aren’t safe. He hopes that he can shake that away by getting him and South onto their flight back to base, by herding them into the infirmary and not letting her out of his sight until she loses her patience with him and storms away. Hopes that it won’t linger for days, irrationally, driving him up the wall trying to coddle everyone around him until it goes away.

South looks at him. Her eyes are bloodshot. She’s still smiling. The thing at the back of North’s head rings and rings like a broken school bell.

“Hey,” she says pleasantly.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Perfect,” she assures him.

He tries to subtly check how large her pupils are. There’s something weird about her eyes, he’s sure, but it’s hard to see in the dark lighting of the night.

“You sure?” he asks, hand clamped painfully tightly over his bleeding shoulder. “I think you hit your head.”

She runs a hand through her hair like she’s slicking it back with gel, except blood makes for a very lackluster hair gel and it just spikes up wildly in all directions instead. She looks deranged.

North wishes suddenly, unusually, that she looked surly and mean instead. That she looked normal. Healthy.

“Nothing serious,” she says lightly, and he can’t remember the last time her tone was ever anything close to light. Mocking, maybe, is the closest she’s gotten in a long while. Too sharp to be playful, but close enough to pretend. “They couldn’t touch this,” she boasts.

“They shot you,” North says. And then, horrified, “They shot you.”

It really says a lot about how much of a shitshow this mission has been that that had been low enough on his list of priorities that it actually slipped his mind until now. He starts patting her down, looking for the wound and she doesn’t even swear and shove him away, which is even more distressing. He wishes that it was easier to see blood on black kevlar in the dark. “Where is it? Where did you get shot? Did you get a chance to use your bio-foam--?”

His hand brushes her side, and she inhales sharply, jerks away from his hand. There. Not a good place for a gunshot wound, but there’s no such thing. Nothing vital, anyways. He fumbles for his barebones first aid kit.

“Ow,” she whines. “Ow, ow, ow, where did that come from!?”

She sounds a bit like how she had when she’d fallen from their backyard tree when she was six, spraining her wrist. Protectiveness surges up from within him, as unstoppable as bile.

He cuts at the kevlar around the wound, and she squirms away in pain.

“It’s okay,” he soothes inanely, the platitude falling uncontrollably from his mouth. “It’s okay, I’ll fix it, you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t touch it,” South says.
“I’m gonna fix it.”

“You’re making it hurt. I didn’t even know it was there until you poked it!”

“You were going to remember it eventually anyways.” South, he thinks, definitely hit her head. Some sort of concussion? She doesn’t sound like herself. Too lighthearted, too whiny, almost childish.

“You don’t know that!”

He cuts the last bits of kevlar away, leaving a large patch of pale blood smeared skin bare on South’s side, surrounding a dark red hole that’s disturbing for how much it shouldn’t be there. There’s no exit wound. The bullet’s still in there.

A problem for a doctor in a sterile operating room. It’ll keep for now. It means that he probably shouldn’t use the bio-foam, though. He sets about sterilizing it so he can slap a bandage on it and call it a day, rooting around for the bottle in the kit.

“Hey,” South says, voice tight with pain but filling up with realization. “I just remembered getting shot.”

“That’s nice,” he says mindlessly, unwrapping some cotton. It is. South remembering things is good. Less likely that any permanent damage happened.

“It was your fault,” she says, and what makes him pause is that she doesn’t even sound accusatory or nasty as she says it. She sounds triumphant, like she just won an argument.

“Excuse me?” he asks.

“You were nagging me—” bitching, she should have said bitching at me there, “about turning on my tracker! You distracted me.” Her smile is wide. This feels like it should be an argument, and yet it’s weirdly… toothless. South has never been toothless. She was biting at him from the day she started teething, according to their parents.

“Are you… kidding me?” he asks.

“I never kid!” she says indignantly.

“South, I just spent sixteen hours trying to hunt you down in the jungle under hostile fire because you wouldn’t turn on your tracker and I wouldn’t have to nag you about it if you’d just turn it on the first place—” North isn’t really the type to get all ‘angry because I was worried’. Getting angry doesn’t help or fix things. South, however, has a way of getting underneath his skin like no one else can, even if he strives to dodge it as much as he can.

“You sound defensive,” she sing-songs. What the fuck.

North starts sterilizing her gunshot wound. South yelps and flinches away, kicking out at him and missing.

“This is good for you!” he says, immediately chasing her.

“I don’t need it!” she says, backing away, trying to twist her injury away from him, which does not look safe or healthy at all.

“Yes you do,” he says, approaching.
“No I don’t,” she insists.

“Yes!”

“No!”

They go back and forth like this a couple of more times while North subtly corners her, and then he goes in for a tackle. She screams in shock and pain as her wound is jostled, and he takes the opportunity to just shake half the contents of the bottle out onto her wound while she yowls and tries to rip him off of her. North, who doesn’t actually mind fighting shamelessly dirty, gives her injury one good smack to make her lock up in pain before he starts hurriedly bandaging it.

“You… jerk…” she chokes out, curled up into a ball on the ground.

“Love you too,” he says with tired dry warmth, sitting a couple of feet away from her, giving her a bit of space. Insects are making noise in the dark of the jungle, something that sounds like a cross between crickets and cicadas. The stars are bright, no light pollution to smother them. The small explosively created clearing smells like charred meat and melted kevlar and plastic. Not a pleasant smell, but he’s used to it.

It’s all very peaceful, except for how South hasn’t called him a jerk since she learned her first swear word when their kindergarten teacher stubbed her toe, after which she started calling him ‘a shit’ until she managed to expand her repertoire.

He looks down at her where she’s still curled up. He leans over and pokes her. The edge of her eyes peaks up from over her knees, like a shy turtle. She’s reassuringly shooting him a filthy glare, tears of pain beading at her lashes, except there’s still something wrong with her eyes.

“I’m just gonna check and see if you’ve got a concussion,” he says, not really listening to his own excuse. He turns on the flashlight mounted in his helmet, which he’s refrained from using on this mission so far because he had to see the enemy before they saw him.

She hisses at the bright white light focused on her like a vampire, and he comes closer to try and look into her averted, squinting eyes.

“Just open your eyes for a moment,” he says, focusing, looking. “I need to see your pupils.”

She makes a whining noise at the back of her throat, and then forces them open, makes herself look into the light.

North stares.

Her eyes aren’t bloodshot. They’re… glowing. A soft pink light, like Donut’s hologram is at the center of her brain and shining so bright that its bleeding through the whites of her eyes.

That’s… not normal. Which means that it’s probably not good, that that shouldn’t be happening because it’s bad. Something’s… broken, or something. South’s helmet is in pieces feet away. She’s acting weird. She must have hit her head. She must have-- Donut, her AI, did something happen to him? What happens when an AI breaks while they’re still inside of you? When a wire dislodges or the chip is jostled or gets fried or whatever.

His hand is on her forehead, like it isn’t in a kevlar glove, like he’s feeling for her temperature, like she’s just got a cold. South is a terrible patient. The worst. Worry is racing across his skin like electricity, raising the hairs on the back of his neck.
“South?” he asks, voice quiet.

“Mmh?” she asks, eyes closing.

“Is Donut okay?”

“Yeah,” they sigh. “I’m fine.”
South-and-Donut

Chapter Summary

If South-and-Donut get up to go and leave him he will absolutely, one hundred percent tranq them in the behind. Just a feeling. They smile at him reassuringly, and he twitches a bit before going back to his ready-to-kill calm.

North is very, very calm, voice and words and movements smooth and unhurried, that distinctly reminds South-and-Donut of how he gets right before he pulls the trigger. Or how he gets as he’s walking up to an enemy, talking friendly and casual as he approaches to make them hesitate to shoot him, until he gets close enough to snap into motion and disarm and shoot their brains out himself. Calm in an intent way, a very aware way.

He’s worried about them, but he can’t do anything to fix it on his own. No enemy to shoot, no wound left to put a bandage on, evac already called for. Nothing to do but wait.

They’re both sitting criss cross applesauce on the sandy beach of the island, the waves lapping at the shore only a few feet away, the night starry and picturesque, waiting for their ride out of here. Their knees are touching, and North’s head is turned enough for him to be able to keep watching them. He still hasn’t take his helmet off.

If South-and-Donut get up to go and leave him he will absolutely, one hundred percent tranq them in the behind. Just a feeling. They smile at him reassuringly, and he twitches a bit before going back to his ready-to-kill calm.

“How does your side feel?” North asks evenly, pleasantly.

“Better now that you’re not pawing at it,” they chide him.

“You were bleeding. You needed a bandage.”

“I didn’t need one punched on me.”

“You shouldn’t have struggled.”

They hum neutrally, and he twitches again like they did something wrong. It’s a very small, aborted movement, but they’re touching.

The overwhelming worry doesn’t feel so cloyingly condescending and overbearing suddenly, like this. North is a worrier. His sister is special to him. It’s not an insult, really. It’s just North being North. Plus, it’s nice to be noticed, to be important to someone, to be cared about.

Siblings are so hard. Growing up together, you get to see all of their worst and most unflattering sides and moments, all unmolded and half built and clumsy and dumb and wrong. Their small annoying parts get the time and close space to grate straight through your skin and stay there, forever. Too close and too young. Warped perceptions.

South-and-Donut aren’t quite his sister. They’re different. They’re a step removed. They feel like they have enough distance from North to breathe for the first time in forever, enough space to
finally look at him and see the truth.

To finally really hear the bitterly jealous thought that had rung through South’s head every time she had looked at him, echoing so deeply inside of her brain that it hadn’t really registered on a conscious level.

_It’s easy for him and hard for me and that’s not fucking fair._

That hadn’t really been fair to him either, they think.

“Do you…” North says, his words careful, trailing off into silence. South-and-Donut nudge him in the side, prompting. “Do you feel different?”

They tilt their head. “You mean because I’ve changed?”

“So you noticed,” North asks, something like relief in his voice.

They giggle, and he looks unnerved for a moment before he determinedly shakes it off. “Of course I noticed, I’m not stupid!” They’re not. They’re not some--oblivious airhead, some bullheaded jock. They can think. They can notice stuff. They can, at least, notice something like this.

“We’re closer now.”

The _we_ feels strange, clunky, not right or accurate, but they don’t know how else to put it in words for him.

“You’re not acting like yourself,” North says.

“Yes, I am. There’s just… more to me, now. It’s not like anything went away. Stop worrying so much, you’re going to give yourself an ulcer, idiot.”

It’s like he gets a bit less worried each time they insult him, even if he’s still obviously buzzing with concern, with how impossible it is to see on him. That’s how you know he’s worried out of his mind; he hits critical mass and starts hiding it all away instead of fussing in plain sight.

“I’m pretty sure you have brain damage, which is definitely something to be worried about,” North argues. “You could be bleeding into the inside of your skull right now, you know. What if you have a seizure?”

“Worrywart,” they say, rolling their eyes.

“Worrywart,” he repeats disbelievingly. “You sound like our _mom_.”

“Don’t compare me to her! I’ve got _style._” They shudder. Mom jeans, dumpy sweaters, _beige…_ “I want to go clubbing,” they decide.

“Really?” They can hear his eyebrow raising in his voice.

“Yeah! It’s been a long freaking time! I want to wear something nice, something _cool,_ and get out and get drunk as a skunk! Hook up with some nice man meat. It’ll be fun! You should join!” A short tight leather skirt, a tube top, nice long sexy boots, spiky jewelry, pink on their lips, their nails, around their eyes and on their clothes and in their hair. Sugary drinks, loud music, flashing lights, friendly strangers…

South has memories of rough encounters in alleys and bathrooms, and Donut has no memories like that at all.
new to the city!” he shouts over the music. “I’m here to conscript, but I thought it’d be fun--”

“To get some time in with someone without a straight or closeted stick up their ass before you’re packed in like a can of sardines with a bunch of unwashed heteros to get shot at?” asks the handsome man who’s foregone a shirt in favor of some glitter and that’s it. Donut usually isn’t a fan of the minimalist aesthetic, but he’s ready and willing to make some concessions.

“Oh, I’m sure they won’t be that bad!” he says, stubbornly optimistic.

The man snorts, and then his hand is around his wrist, broad fingers, firm grip, and he’s being pulled away from the music and the crowd, the man occasionally looking back at him, only his grinning teeth really visible in the, quite frankly, terrible lighting in this place.

“I’ll show you some fun,” he assures him, and then

“--can’t remember the last time we had leave,” North says. “It seems like we’re just being assigned more and harder missions with less breaks in between. Like things are heating up.”

South-and-Donut blink, reel, try and remember where they are and who they’re with and who they even are. North apparently catches whatever no doubt dumbfounded expression is on their face, because all of a sudden he’s in front of them, closer, peering closely at them.

“Fiddlesticks!” they yelp, recoiling, startled.


“I’m fine, stop worrying,” they say, gently pushing him away. This song and dance, at least, comes easily to them, no thought or equilibrium required.

“You were staring off into nothing,” he says, pushing back against them. “I think there might be something really wrong with you, South.” A pause. “And Donut.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“How can you say that?” North snaps, and South-and-Donut still, surprised. “You’re not one person anymore. You’ve never not been one person! That’s not even a thing someone should ever be afraid or worried about! That’s not supposed to be a thing at all!”

They stare at him, knocked off balance first by the weird flash thing and now this. North is being so weird, wow. “Because… I feel fine. I’ve got all of my memories, all of my feelings, both sets of them. So what if I’m not technically one person? I’ve still got all of me. Both of me.”

North slumps back onto his heels, helmeted face in his hands, groaning. “You’re going to give me gray hairs,” he despairs.

“Now you sound like our mom,” they say.
“Like that’s anything new.”

South-and-Donut laugh at him, and North looks up at them tiredly. “You are so going to the doctors.”

There’s a bullet lodged inside of their body and their arms feel numb. “Sure thing,” they say.

North looks relieved and unnerved by their easy assent in equal measures.
Chapter Summary

“Or,” the Director says, “we could turn it off and then on again.”

Price looks at him.

“She is behaving abnormally,” Price grants.

The medics had had to cut the kevlar off at Agent South’s forearms. It had melted into her skin from being overheated by the mechanisms in the armor used to make the explosions. Overusage. The AI was supposed to look out for that, but it seemed like the head injury had scrambled it as much as it had its agent.

Heavy bandages are wrapped up around Agent South’s arms and forehead now, flattening her hair, but she doesn’t look annoyed or surly like she normally would, itching to be released to go and lick her wounds in private. She appears to be making small talk with one of the doctor’s who looks quite nervous at the attention from one of the most explosive Freelancers, cheerfully not noticing his discomfort.

“The AI has taken her over?” the Director asks. He’s looking at Agent South from across the room intently. His expression is… focused. He looks like he wants to take her apart. Price wonders if he should encourage the idea or not.

“She responds to both the AI’s name and her own,” Price says. “I’m not intimately aware of the AI’s personality, but there are still notes of her there. My hypothesis is that it’s more of a blend.”

The Director frowns, like that wasn’t what he had wanted to hear. Interesting. The Director keeps his true motivations close to only himself, but Price very much wants to hear them. He has a feeling that they must be far more selfish than what he claims for them to be, all big picture ‘think of humanity’. He may have obsession written all over him, but he certainly isn’t anything close to empathetic.

“We must find out if it is permanent,” the Director says.

“The only way to do that would be to sit and wait, I’m afraid,” Price says. Which sounds terribly boring, even if he’s eager to get this new amalgamation of minds somewhere private where he can interrogate it on its thoughts. What does it even think it is? Is it aware of what’s happening? Is it displeased? Can he make it displeased? What will happen then? Can it successfully rebel against its own existence? What if--

“Or,” the Director says, “we could turn it off and then on again.”

Price looks at him.

What the Director says, goes. Sometimes Price can sway him a bit, direct his actions. Usually just because the Director cares about very little except for his ultimate goal. People do not interest him
anywhere near as much as machines do, and so he doesn’t try to understand them or pay anymore
attention to them than he absolutely must. It really is baffling, considering how much more
infinitely complex and unpredictable and malleable human beings are, but he won’t say no to the
benefits. The Director has given him the all clear to make whatever he choices he may like
regarding the mental health of the people on board this ship. All of them. Even if he retains veto
rights, he cares too little to use them at all except for very rarely. It’s wonderful. His days are filled
with projects, small things that he plays with to occupy his time while his favorites issues (the
Freelancers, the best ones, the most dysfunctional ones) ferment inside of them.

But sometimes, the Director cares. And then nothing Price can say will sway him from his course,
no matter how sound the argument. He will not be stopped, persuaded, or even stalled.

“It cannot hurt to let me interrogate the subject first,” he tries again. “It will be valuable data.”

“The longer this state of affairs continues, the more entrenched it will become in the neural
patterns,” the Director says, not even looking at him. He hasn’t looked away from Agent South
even once.

“This might kill them, and then we’d lose this opportunity forever.”

“We will be able to find something out from an autopsy, and we can recreate the circumstances
with one of the other Freelancers.”

“With how complicated a brain is, it is unlikely that we will able to recreate this exact event. And
how will we explain this to the other Freelancers?”

“You told me that Agent South is unpopular. We’ll lie. No one will care.”

“And what of Agent North?”

“What about him.”

“They’re twins, Director. He will care.”

The Director shrugs. “Then he is the one that we will recreate the circumstances on.”

The Director is cloaking his impatient recklessness in cold logic and scientific terms. He couldn’t
be more transparent if he tried. It rankles that he can’t call him out on this, can’t pressure him more
firmly to wait and be more cautious. The Director has even less respect for proper procedure than
Price, and much more power to go with it. A dangerous combination, even if it can lead to such
interesting results sometimes.

The Director speaks into his comm. “Doctor, remove the AI from the implant.”

Price grasps his hands behind his back, face carefully neutral, eyes turned to the observation
window where the Freelancer has been goaded onto an examination table. The doctor moves to
follow orders.

The screaming starts pretty much immediately.
One moment they are South-and-Donut and doctors and nurses are nervously fluttering around them, shining lights into their eyes and asking questions, washing dirt out of their wounds and sewing stitches and winding bandages, and the next there is a hand on the back of their neck and there is a hole in her, many holes, like someone carved out so many chunks out of her, more than there ever should be, more than she could possibly survive.

A scream that she can’t stop tears out of her throat and it doesn’t end until she’s used all of the breath in her lungs, until it feels like she’s drowning even though the air is right there, just take a breath, just breathe in, damn it, and it feels like someone else is using her lungs and throat to scream because she wants to stop.

But it’s just her body turning on her. She’s all alone, and she’s only South.

She is Agent South Dakota, and it feels like a terrible wound. She doesn’t want to be her, she realizes like a revelation. She had liked being South-and-Donut. She had been different. She had been better. Happier. She hadn’t hated herself.

South hadn’t even known that she hated being herself, until she briefly got to escape it, and for some hours the weight of it lifted like some burden that she’d been living under for so long that she hadn’t even noticed it. She had felt light.

Hands are coaxing her to bend her back where she’s sitting, so that her head is close to between her knees. She’s panting desperately for breath, trying to suck as much air as she can into her lungs, and it doesn’t even feel like much. She wipes at her face, feeling sweat (tears) drip from her face.

“Fuck off,” she says, but there’s no breath to back it, so it comes out as a weak wheeze. The hands are still touching her. Her anger flares like a bonfire, and she knocks them harshly off of her. “Don’t fucking touch me!” she says with more strength, but it still sounds raspy and ragged.

She hates everyone in this fucking room for putting her back here, like this.

She hates herself. There’s a pit in her stomach. She hates herself, and she’d finally gotten away from herself for the first time since she was born. Being trapped with someone you hate makes your blood boil, but there’s no escaping your own self. Trapped in her own skin, slowly boiling away in her own anger. She’d always thought that everyone in the world hated her, had despised them for it, but. Even she can’t like herself. Maybe they have every right.

(Maybe it’s self centered to think that everyone cares about her enough to hate her.)
“State your codename,” someone says.

“South,” she grunts, feeling too tired and raw to argue and be a pain in the ass. She just wants to be alone somewhere right now. Wants to shake North down for any more booze he has and then find somewhere to hole up and punch a wall or some shit. “South Dakota.”

“No other names?”

“No.”

“Not Donut?”

“No,” she snaps.

“Do you feel well?”

She feels wobbly and weak and breathless and bereft, like someone had gone and cut one of her arms off. She feels exhausted and hateful.

“Yes,” she says. She wants to be gone.

“Do you remember what happened?”

After a moment of consideration of which answer might get her out of here faster, she says, “No.”

“What is the last thing that you can remember?”

“Out on a mission with North, got shot.” She blinks blearily, tries to see where the exit is. Her patience is getting to that point where she’s seriously considering just getting up and leaving.

The apparent self nominated spokesperson of the group opens her mouth to say something more, and then stops in the familiar way of someone being interrupted by the Director in her ear, being given new orders.

“We are going to reactivate your AI now.”

Will she go back to the way she was? Becoming a whole new person that she isn’t so tired of that it feels like it taints the whole world with it? Like thinking that the world is glowing, when it’s just you. It had just been her, all along. The world isn’t awful, people aren’t awful, mankind isn’t conspiring for some mysterious reason to make things harder for her at every turn, some secret network that only she doesn’t know about alienating and excluding and making fun of her. It’s just her. Of course it is. She’s a fucking idiot.

She might get to escape that again, though. Her heart beats out of rhythm with hope. She licks her dry lips. “Okay.”

Hands back on her neck. After this, she never wants for someone to touch that place again, ever.

A soft click that she more feels than hears, a hum so quiet that it feels like its in her veins. She closes her eyes, and waits to sink away into someone else, to become something new and better.

Instead, it’s just her in her skin and Donut in her implants and the chips and wires in her brain, subdued and quiet, and she knocks down a tray covered in medical equipment to the floor with her fist, instruments clattering loudly and tray denting.

People flinch away, as usual, scared and startled and annoyed.
“What happened?” someone yelps.

She doesn’t want to answer, to go through all of this bullshit before she finally gets to leave and be alone. She doesn’t want to be here.

Donut gives them a reassuring smile, a kinder expression than anyone who knew South Dakota could have ever thought would look natural on her face.

“Sorry about that,” he says in her voice. “Just a twitch of the muscles! I’m fine, and so is my partner. Don’t worry about it.”

Someone else might be shocked, horrified, confused, upset. But to South, who hadn’t been herself and had liked it, it feels right to share her body with Donut, for him to able to do this. It doesn’t feel like it’s out of her control, like she’s helpless and trapped. It feels like if she reached out to take it back, he would easily step aside for her.

And right now, she’s tiredly relieved to sink to the back of her mind and stop paying attention. It’s been a long fucking day.
Donut had always known that South brimmed with hatred and anger and misery, had felt it as matter of factly as how much energy was left in her power armor, the chemical reactions and sparks in her explosion unit, the hum of electricity in his circuits like your own heartbeat turning audible if only you find somewhere quiet and listen. But he’s never had full, easy, effortless access to her thoughts, her reasons. Not until they were, for a short time, someone else entirely. He saw it all, then.

All of that hatred, it wasn’t for the outside world. It was for her. It made him feel so very sad for her, made him want to cheer her up. So he did what he could. She felt prickly and tired and overstimulated and done with the world, but the world wasn’t done with her yet. He slipped into the driver's seat with ease, without thought, like it was right and natural and there was nothing strange about it, and he only stuttered on a word five minutes in with the scientist that he was trying to assure that no, really, he was fine and he was definitely a she, oh yes, South Dakota in the flesh and mind, so could he pretty please just pop out and go to bed?

He was driving the body. His smile went fixed and plastic as the Mother of Invention sized realization tried and failed to fully sink in.

“I’m,” he says, “I have to go.”

And he stood up and he went, despite people asking him to stop and saying that the conversation wasn’t over yet. He ignored them and walked straight past them without acknowledging them, which was the most convincing bit of South-ness that he’d displayed all evening. He didn’t even notice any of it. This was rather important and strange and he should go somewhere private and figure out what’s going on right now.

He wants to ask South if she’s okay, if she’s noticed that he’s the one walking them down a hallway right now, but he… doesn’t. He reaches out to insert an audible thought into her mind like always and it just… doesn’t come naturally to him.

Talking inside of her mind had been so instinctual from the very first moment. There had been bits of code for the procedure installed into his chip. A clear and solid divide between his thoughts and what he wanted to say when he had no physical mouth to keep the two separate, making the distinction black and white and simple. It had been as easy, easier even, than pressing a button.

Now it feels as hard to grasp as a fading dream, or making yourself fully believe in something that you know isn’t real through sheer force of will. Not solid, not simple, not black and white. No assisting code. The best he manages is to push a vague wave of alarmed concern in South’s general
direction.

He rubs a hand over his (hers, theirs) mouth, masking it as he whispers, “Are you okay, hon?”

That sort of pet name is something that would probably drive South to punch a wall in demonstration on a good day, but he’s tired and confused and stressed enough to let it slip, and South barely even cares, from what he feels. After a long moment of surly wounded weary apathy from South, she answers using the mouth he used to ask. “Fine.”

She doesn’t try to make it convincing. She knows that he knows what she’s feeling, and he knows that she knows and she knows that he knows that she knows that he knows and so on and on and on. Keeping secrets is pointless. Lying is impossible. It hasn’t really been a problem, for them. Donut likes being honest and upfront, emotionally vulnerable and bare, while South blazes all of her thoughts and feelings with a brazen unapologetic fire.

But, apparently, she’d been hiding some different feelings underneath the coals of her anger. Sadder, smaller, more shameful feelings, that she wouldn’t be so spitefully proud about shoving into everyone’s faces.

She doesn’t try to fool him into thinking that she’s actually fine, and more just makes it clear that she’s nowhere near talking about it, and trying will get him nowhere quickly.

He lets it go. He won’t push or pressure her, even though he’s certain that a quick feelings powwow and shoulder cry would be best. He can be supportive, he can! He just wishes that South would sometimes ask for support that wasn’t just acting like feelings don’t exist.

He’s still got his (the) hand on his mouth, like he’s brooding. He is, just a bit, and it feels weird and uncomfortable. Not the hand. The hand is weird and thrilling. Skin on skin. He wasn’t numb before, he could feel what South sensed but… apparently he hadn’t been getting all of it. This feels different, as different as seeing something on video and seeing something happening in front of you for real. There’s no… middleman, no extra step of code and subroutines in between him and the sensations.

It’s thrilling and dizzying and his stomach is swooping in a way that’s vaguely nauseating but also amazingly exciting. He’s humming and brimming and vibrating with energy and excitement and what-is-going-on and this-might-be-bad-but-also-I-love-it, and some uneasy guilt at that last one, if this is bad for South in some way.

He rubs his hand across his mouth, his jaw, his cheeks, just to feel the tactile glide of skin against skin. The lighter and slower he makes the touch, the more giddily ticklish it feels, which is so weird, he adores it. Hysterical giggles start floating up his throat like carbonated water bubbles in a bottle, and he flattens his hand to try and stifle it. South doesn’t giggle. She makes a point of it, a deliberate decision.

Donut likes being honest, but somehow, lying about this feels as necessary as breathing (except breathing wasn’t necessary, until now, not for him, oh, and now he’s hyper conscious of inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling, air sliding down his throat and inflating his lungs and gusting back out as they deflate and). The Counselor would be interested in it. Donut doesn’t like it when the Counselor looks at them, stands close to them, talks to them, pays attention to them, thinks about them. South says it’s because he’s a creepy weirdo who probably has weirdly soft skin and a habit of serial killing, like that’s just his vibe, but the fear feels bone deep and instincual.

His gleeful hysteria over sensations gets a bucket of cold water thrown over it just for briefly thinking about the Counselor, and he lets his hand fall to his side, although he still rubs the his
pointer finger and thumb together idly, a part of his mind still paying fascinated attention to the feeling. He feels his hair brush his forehead, feels himself blink, feels his heart beat and his lungs breathe and his blood flow and South brood in her angry anguished tired misery.

He wants to do something for her. He wishes that she would treat herself sometimes, in a way that wasn’t just a temper tantrum. Those didn’t even calm her down, they just briefly drained her enough for her just to simmer instead of boil. She should get a manicure and a massage and-- oh! He could treat herself for her. Get a snack to get her blood sugar up (find out what taste feels like when it isn’t second hand), take a shower (feel warm water slide down his skin and drench his hair), try and find a face mask on this ship and then take a nap. It would be lovely! It would be great! It would fix everything!

“Can you make us them again,” South says abruptly, brittle and desperate and intense, and his walking, which he’d been doing such a good job on, stumbles for a bit.

She wants to be them and not her so much, and he feels bad, because he doesn’t know how to help her get there again, he doesn’t think he can, that he can just will it, and also, also. It feels bad. It’s bad and sad and wrong, that she wants to just stop being her. She doesn’t want to change her life, her situation, her job, the people she spends time with, her coping mechanisms, the way she talks, the way she behaves, the way she thinks. She just wants to stop. She just wants to escape and get away and claw her way out of her skin immediately, to end South Dakota as firmly as possible and replace her with someone entirely different, so she doesn’t have to be her any longer.

She doesn’t want to change, she just doesn’t want to be. He really, really doesn’t like that, not one bit.

And he doesn’t know if he even wants to be them. He hadn’t been unhappy as South-and-Donut, hadn’t hated it or wanted to go back, but. He likes himself. He likes Donut, and doesn’t want to end himself, and it’s so different from how South feels that it leaves him so guilty he can barely let himself think about it for fear that she’ll notice it.

South can feel everything he feels, the hopelessness and the apologeticness and the dismay and the guilt, but she needs this so much that she still grits her teeth and sets her shoulders and waits and forces him to say out loud, solid and undeniable, impossible to ignore or wish away, “No.”

She hides back away into the back of his mind. Despair washes over her like a quiet tsunami. Forced to be herself, she feels like she’s been condemned to death row.

“It’s going to be okay,” he tries weakly, voice feeble. It is, he thinks. It must. But it’s hard to be optimistic in the face of South’s almost tangible angry sadness, like she’s blotting out the sun and he can’t see what he feels on his own in the darkness. Except what they feel isn’t as separate as that, of course. They both exist inside of the same skin, paint left to smear and mix, and what they feel affects each other. Red and blue make purple, and Donut can’t just stand aside like an impenetrable wall while South roils right next to him, so close that it would be more accurate to say that they exist in the same space, overlapping each other. She doesn’t infect him with what he feels but… he feels it, and he reacts to it. He’s sure that it’s the same way for her, even if she’s far more bullheaded about it.

He walks, and there’s North, lurking next to their bedroom door, casually leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He spots them immediately and stands up straight, and Donut goes stiff.

He considers pretending to be South to North for approximately two seconds and then starts sending shamelessly plaintive feelings in South’s direction immediately. She bleeds out back into her limbs from the back of her head like a grumpy bear forced out of its winter hibernation cave.
nap early.

“Stalker,” she grunts at North, walking past him to key her door open, and something in North’s stance loosens.

He’d made the right move. He doesn’t say anything, and takes in how the world feels when South is back in the driver’s seat again. It doesn’t feel like he’s in the backseat, to extend the metaphor. It feels like he’s sitting shotgun, and could easily lean over to yank on the wheel if he wanted to. He doesn’t. That sounds like a good way to crash the car.

“Good to see that you’re yourself again,” he says, performing the most stunning case of putting his foot in his mouth that Donut has ever witnessed using only a single well intentioned sentence.

Donut yanks at the wheel, and South is too breathless with hurt and rage to try and swerve in a different direction.

“Thanks,” he says tightly, tries to remember not to smile, and walks into the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him. Even if it’s rude.

He leans against the door, and takes a long self indulgent moment to feel. He feels the air in his lungs, the blood in his veins, clothes and bandages and the door brushing against skin, and he thinks.

He thinks: this feels kinda familiar.
Chapter Summary

His sheets are covered in blood.

Florida doesn’t have nightmares. His dreams are dark and quiet, and he wakes up rested. He’s not a light sleeper, or a heavy one. His room on the Mother of Invention is small and silent and warm. No reason for him to wake up, unless he needs to piss. He’s not used to having his sleep interrupted here, unless he’s out in the field.

He wakes up nevertheless though, at what feels like the middle of the night, warm and sleepy and uncomfortable in the darkness. He blinks, his hand slowly going to the rifle leaning against the bed as he calmly sits up and turns on the light. No one is here. He looks at the clock. It is indeed three in the morning. What woke him--

<Florida,> Sarge says in that serious voice that he tries so hard to avoid because he doesn’t like to have to be serious. <Your stitches.>

He pulls his sheets back and looks down. And he chuckles, relaxing. His sheets are covered in blood. He lifts up his shirt and looks. Indeed, it looks like in his sleep he must have twisted around in some way or scratched so that the stitches got undone. He takes his shirt off, pressing it to his side.

“How do you think we should bother the infirmary with this, at this hour? Or do you think I could reach this myself? I’ve been practicing my cross stitching lately, you know.”

Sarge doesn’t take the conversational bait. <You’d’ve bled out like a stuck pig come morning if you hadn’t woken up because your brain thought you’d wet yourself.>

“How fortunate,” he says, smiling. Good old dense creepy Florida. He never catches a hint.

<Boy,> Sarge says, and Florida can feel him forcing himself to broach the subject, like making himself touch something disgusting.

“I’ll wrap it in plastic first before I go to bed tomorrow,” he interrupts. “Maybe that’ll help.”

Treating the symptom and not the root cause. He silently waits and sees if Sarge will work up the courage to call him out on that as he digs up his first aid kit and some sewing supplies.

And of course, he doesn’t. Florida hums cheerfully as he threads a needle through his flesh without having to grit his teeth.

Usually, Florida’s weakness when it comes to reading social cues and accurately guessing what the most appropriate thing to do or say is an obstacle. Other times, it's an advantage.

Smilingly inviting himself into the home of a man who was putting out every signal possible to silently tell him to fuck off because he was too much of a coward to actually say the words.
Pretending not to notice a teacher’s overly gentle no until it was too awkward for them to backpedal and explain themselves clearly, forced to say yes instead. Existing where people don’t want for him to be, taking what he wants, saying what he wants, all coasting on plausible deniability and common social conventions that everyone else is so hesitant to stop leaning on even when they become inconvenient for them, and his ability to let soft social shunning and cues to glide off him like water on a duck. Unimportant, ignorable, inconsequential.

He’s been using this for months now, because while Sarge may not subscribe to volume control, when it may or may not be acceptable to dole out death threats, or many other things people consider to be reasonable and normal, Sarge does religiously follow one big rule:

Never talk about uncomfortable personal issues if the other person doesn’t want to. Ever.

Sarge wants for him to be more cautious with his body. Florida doesn’t want to live chained, especially when he’s on a battlefield. They’re at an impasse, neither relenting to the others side. Florida has the power of being in control of his body, of being the ‘person’ in the relationship, the one who other humans listen to. Sarge has the power of putting him in immense pain whenever he wants to.

This should put all of the cards in his intangible hands, but it doesn’t. Because Sarge is soft underneath all of the shouting, and flinches at some types of violence, gets uncomfortable and grasps for a distraction and excuse to get Florida to move on to someone else and to stop playing with his food. He’s a person. He doesn’t want to hurt Florida. Doesn’t want to pain him. It’s very sweet of him, and very weak, and useful. Sarge holds the button to pressure Florida to do whatever he wants, and he’s too kind to press it unless Florida’s life is on the line. He can feel it when Sarge is bracing himself to actually push it, to open up the floodgates. He relents then, makes some small concession so that he can’t bring himself to do it. And then he goes on to have his fun, free of pain or restraint.

Sarge is unhappy, as much as he clearly tries to distract himself from this, to not dwell, to not mope. He’s worried. Guilty. Dissatisfied. Refuses to admit to any of these emotions, which is only to Florida’s benefit, because if Sarge won’t even admit to himself that he’s upset then what is there to argue about?

Florida has been winning an unspoken argument for months now that he really shouldn’t be purely because Sarge is too kind to hurt him, too uncomfortable with emotions and personal issues to push it, to even bring it up except for very fleetingly when it’s relevant. It’s nice. Florida, he decides, has a good thing going on, and he should absolutely not let himself and Sarge slip out of their current status quo, no matter how unbalanced or tenuous it might feel because he’s sure that whatever lies waiting for him at the other side won’t be good for him.

So long as things don’t change, he’ll be safe with his numb wounds and bloody hands and license to kill and pure untainted excitement. Things won’t ever change. He won’t let them.
Carolina is trying to be kind. Gentle. Patient. She’s trying.

She falls flat on her back instead of effortlessly landing her triple backflip for the first time since she was a child. She rolls up to a standing position even though she still hasn’t regained the breath that was knocked out of her (like she’s a novice, a rookie, an amateur) and punches out at the enemy.

The enemy is a hologram controlled by FILS. A soldier of average height and weight in colorless armor. Her fist ‘connects’ with his helmet, and FILS makes the hologram stagger back like it’s been punched, doing calculations in a fraction of a second to decide the correct physics, how hard the blow was, how much it should ‘affect’ the opponent.

It feels like punching the air, and it really is only that. But it’s safer than sparring with living, breathing teammates. She hasn’t touched a single living person that she wasn’t trying to kill since Caboose was reinstalled in her.

( Didn’t touch people much for those brief months she was without him either. She was busy. Working.)

“Focus,” she says as she ducks underneath a punch from the opponent that she wouldn’t feel even if it had landed. It’s for Caboose, whose mind is floating somewhere near the stratosphere, his thoughts and attention going wherever the wind may blow it, like a balloon released by some errant child. She tries to keep the command from being an impatient snap, but.

But Caboose has taken her out of her body and somewhere far away three times so far in this sparr alone. Somewhere muddy and cloudy and all alone with-- don’t think his name--

Maine grunts quietly as his fist goes through a weird shaped skull like its made of wet newspaper and blue and gray paint with red and pink paint on the inside. It reminds him of

The tail end of a buzzer rings, and she blinks her eyes back into focus just in time to catch the holograms fist going out of her stomach. There’s no blood, no gore, no tearing, only light frizzling at the edges where it meets solid matter.
It makes a deep thud of fear go through Caboose anyways, seeing this. Someone’s arm buried into her guts because she wasn’t paying attention, because she was distracted--

She clenches her jaw and strikes out at the hologram to stop that train of thought right at the pass.

Four times that he’s taken out of this fight now. She can’t go out into the field like this. It grates, makes her breathless with uselessness, panic stirring low and repressed in her gut.

She’ll work through it. She’ll find a way. She will.

She had only asked for hand to hand sparring with FILS, but she feels hears sees out of the corner of her eye a projectile headed her way (a grenade?) and whips around to catch it in her hand, to throw it back.

She stops, looks. It’s a bottle of water.

“I just noticed that you hadn’t hydrated in a while,” York says from the sidelines. She hadn’t noticed him arriving.

“Battle simulation paused.” FILS says, her nondescript soldier of light freezing mid kick, unnaturally, defying physics. She idly wonders how long she could hold the same position. Could be good core strength training.

“How long have you been watching?” she asks him, not approaching him.

She doesn’t know when things stopped being easy between them. That’s a lie. It was when she crushed one fourth of his face with her fist. He’s long since healed by now (as much as he ever will), but she still doesn’t want to touch him, and York always, always gives her her space when she needs it. And she’s needed it for a long time now. So long, that she wonders if they’re even still…

“Don’t make it sound creepy,” he says good naturedly, like there’s nothing tense or unsaid between them at all. “Just looking after my teammate.”

“That all?” she asks, trying to fall into their half remembered banter, feeling awkward and unfamiliar.

“I might have been admiring some sick moves as well. You can’t prove it in a court of law, though.”

She twists the cap off and takes a long moment to inhale half of the bottle in one go. When she comes back up from air, York looks fond.

And has crossed half of the distance between them. She goes stiff and tense. York always gives her her space. There’s still a good few feet between them, he’s not within arms reach, but--

He’d been watching her for a while, he’d implied. At least long enough to watch her embarrassingly fuck up like that. She flushes, tries to cover it up with another pull of water. Messing up is awful, messing up while people watch is worse, and messing up while someone you care about is watching is the worst thing of all. She peeks a glance up at him from behind her bangs. She doesn’t think he looks embarrassed for her. Disappointed. Pitying. Confused. He’s just softly smiling at her, looking like she’s the most interesting thing in the room, a familiar look that she hadn’t realized that she missed so much until she sees it again now.

“How’s things?” he asks.
Caboose is still ignoring me. I hate talking to someone who refuses to talk back, and I deserve it, she doesn’t say. My skill at fighting, the thing that justifies my existence is being held hostage by his ability to drag me away from myself every time his mind wanders, and his mind does nothing but wander. It never marches with purpose. It never focuses on the important things, the physical things. And I don’t know how to fix it, how to stop it.


York rolls his eye. “Simmons and Grif have been arguing for the past three days and making me and North play messenger for them.” He puts on a mock pissy expression, nose haughtily raised in the air, voice audibly miffed. “York, tell Grif that he’s a moron and that he’s a disgrace to technology and common sense. North, tell Simmons that whoever coded him got his panties in a permanent twist and he needs debugging. And also to suck it. York, tell Grif--”

He interrupts himself with a chuckle, impression melting away in easy ribbing amusement. “Yeah, yeah,” he says wryly exasperated. Talking to Simmons.

She wonders when that’s going to stop bothering her. Probably when Caboose starts talking back to her. So, never.

“I thought all they ever do is argue with each other,” she says. To the point that even she’s picked up on it.

“Nah, that’s bickering. Very different, Lina. There’s nuance to their bullshit, you see. It’s all very complicated and subtle.”

“I’m sure,” she says dryly.

A pause, another grin. “Simmons says to go fuck ourselves.” A momentary wince, like he just got brain freeze. “He’d like to let you know that he only meant for me to go fuck myself. You know that she can’t bite your head off, right?”

She drinks her water, watching him talk to his AI, feeling unformed and untouched thoughts wash through her brain without dwelling on them. Some of them hers, some of them not.

Back during when Carolina had Caboose for the first time, York had asked her once if Caboose ever seemed to remember something.

Water flows over her fingers as her hand curls into a fist, plastic creaking, water gushing out of the top. York stops and looks at her.

She’d said no. It had been the truth.

“York,” she says, and then remembers that he had asked her not to tell anyone that he’d asked her that question as well. Like it was a secret. “Let’s go somewhere private.”

York lights up, and she leads the way.

Somewhere private, of course, is the showers. It’s one place in the ship that has no surveillance. She doesn’t think that there’s anyone combing through all of the surveillance footage, it just wouldn’t be manageable. A simple bot sifting through for keywords however is just to be expected.

She’s sweaty anyways, unreasonably so for such a light workout, only a few hours long. She thinks its more sweat from the memories than the exertions. She lets her mind only lightly skirt around the word memories, not taking in the fuller context of it. The floor is hard slippery tile, not padded
matts. She’s likely to crack her head open if she suddenly loses her balance and falls here, and what an ignoble end that would be.

She usually comes back to herself still standing, frozen like a statue, but that’s besides the point. She takes her clothes off, and York casually follows suit. The showers are co ed. It’s only practical. There’s nothing strange about two Freelancers using the showers at the same time.

She’s touched his body more times than she can count, in every place, and yet she still steals glances.

“Oh, Simmons, come on, you don’t have to--” York says, and then sighs. “Well, he’s shut off.”

“Caboose isn’t,” she says. And that’s not likely to change.

Caboose complicates everything, is uncooperative at every turn, and yet. And yet. She doesn’t want for him to shut off either. The thought brings-- unease.

She tenses and waits for a moment to have all of her senses assaulted by rubble pressing down on her, listening to the far off sound of Maine gurgling on his own blood, the beginning of the end for him.

It doesn’t come. Because it was her memory, and not Caboose’s? Because he’d been logged off when that had happened? What the fuck is the criteria?

Carolina twists a shower head on. Neither of them duck beneath the water. York smiles at her.

She realizes, belatedly, what he must think this is, and her stomach twists, sinks, because-- because she wants to, it’s been so long, and he looks as handsome and touchable as ever.

But she’s not going to touch him.

“Do you remember when you asked me if Caboose remembers things?” she asks, and the smile falls to be replaced by wide eyes, surprised at the topic.

And then he nods, like he understands. “I saw you freezing up out there in there in the ring.”

“It’s not my fault,” falls out of her mouth before he’s even fully finished his sentence. “I never freeze. I--”

“I know,” he soothes her, and his hand, his warm calloused hand, it’s on her arm, her bicep. It’s hard to breathe. It must be because of the rising steam from the ignored running shower head.

She’s not touching him. He’s touching her. This is safe. She curls her hands into tight knuckles at her sides, and then twists her fingers together behind her back, safe and held away from him.

“It’s happened to me too,” he says. “Simmons remembering something, so hard and sudden that I don’t notice the world around me.”

He’s touching her and it’s not just her. It’s not her fault. Something unclenches inside of her, something so tight that it had hurt. Not her fault. She remembers how to breathe. She’d said it wasn’t her fault, but she hadn’t really believed it. It’s always her fault. There’s always something she can do about it, if she’d just try harder. If she can’t manage it, then that’s just her own damn fault. But not this time. She sways, very slightly, with heady relief.

“What did you see?” he asks her, his face so intent, so focused.
“Maine,” she rasps, and he blinks, like that’s not what he’d expected. “I see Maine, dying, without backup--”

She doesn’t lose herself, but for a long moment Caboose turns into a dense ball of pain inside of her skull. No, no, no, get it away, stop.

She squeezes her eyes shut. She’s not trying to hurt him. She’s trying to be kind. Gentle. Patient.

York’s hand is on her shoulder now, thumb rubbing firm circles into the muscle. She lets the motions rock her slightly.

“That’s more… recent, than I’d expected,” he says, sounding thoughtful. “I wonder why those memories?”

“Because of how important they were,” she says flatly, suddenly very tired, a dull headache throbbing in her temples.

“Simmons remembers unimportant things, though. Some of them seem important, but I get flashes of him just sitting or walking or--”

“He’s an AI,” she says.

“Maybe his former host sitting or walking,” he says, frowning.

“They’ve had former hosts?” she asks, snapping back to the present moment. “Weren’t they specifically created for this Project?”

“That’s what they say,” York says, which isn’t a yes.

She broods, even as a charming naked man that she hasn’t let herself near for months who’s head over heels for her touches her. “If it’s not how important the memories were that matters…” she mulls.

Caboose is, as par for the course, completely uninterested in everything that currently actually matters. Not interested in the conversation, the speculation. He sparks a little at York’s hand on her shoulder, and she has the sense memory of someone’s arms wrapping around her tingle across her skin for a moment. He wants a hug. She bites her tongue, focuses on the important things. No touching.

From Caboose: hurt disappointment, sulky bitterness, petty determination. Her headache spikes.

“There are plenty of memories he never flashes to,” York says. “Pretty much none of the ones that were made from the moment I met him.”

“Strange,” she says, and then finally ducks underneath the streaming water without another word. It’s the perfect temperature. She tilts her head up towards the ceiling, letting the water stream down her skin, hoping that it’ll take the pain and exhaustion and confusion with it down the drain. She wants clarity. The answer is right there, on the tip of her tongue.

York’s hands settle on her back, and she goes tense again, and then soft and yielding as he digs his thumbs in. A massage. She lets her chin go down until it rests against her collar bone, sighing relief. She knots her fingers in front of herself instead of behind, to keep her hands at the point furthest away from York.

It’s been a long time since she touched someone without the intent to kill. His fingers dig into the
knots of tension underneath her skin, trailing warmth somehow hotter than the water over the planes of her shoulders and back. Warmth stirs in the pit of her belly, prickles hot and stinging at the back of her eyes, a strange mix. She swallows, and hides underneath the falling water until she regains her composure. Caboose’s thoughts float aimlessly far above current proceedings, a blue balloon scraping against the tip of the sky, nearing space.

*We had to delete some data,* the labcoats had said. Her eyes fly open, unheeding of the water streaming down her face.

“Deleted data,” she says.

“How?” York says.

“If we’re not supposed to know that we’re not the AIs first hosts, that they were-- repurposed, or stolen, or tested beforehand, or *whatever*-- when I got Caboose back, after,” *don’t think his name,* “when I got him back, he didn’t remember everything. He remembered quickly though, when people kept talking about,” *don’t,* “but only in flashes.”

“It’s a bug,” York said slowly, turning the idea over in his head with increasing consideration. “Control or R&D or whoever repress the memories, but they leak back in through-- the firewall, or something.”

“Coming back more attention grabbing than ever,” she says, mind spinning.

It’s not her fault. Not her fault. Not her fault. Potentially fixable. She can’t fight for constantly remembering --*that*-- but only because PFL saw fit to try and repress those memories in the first place, thought that it would be for the best. Well, it *isn’t* for the best. It’s getting in her way, hampering her effectiveness. If she just let them know, they’d take it away, right? And then she’ll be fixed again. She’ll be able to fight. She’ll be able to focus on forging some sort of working relationship with Caboose.

“Carolina,” York says, and he’s leaning in close and down, lips against the back of her neck, her red hair lying soaked and heavy over her left shoulder. “Don’t tell anyone about this.”

The water is warm. York is warm. She feels suddenly cold.

“Why?” she asks, more sharply than she means to. She looks down at her hands to make sure that they’re still safely knotted in front of her. “If I don’t, how are they going to fix it? Make it stop?”

“I’ve got a bad feeling… I don’t trust… just…,” he says, and then trails off and doesn’t say anything more. If he does, it’s so quiet that she can’t even hear it over the soft pattering of the shower water.

<*I don’t want to remember,*> Caboose says quietly.

It’s the first thing he’s said to her since he was given back to her. Her heart thunders.

If she can just get rid of the memory block then the memories will lose their power, won’t hit her fresh and hard every single time, freezing her, weakening her, leaving her vulnerable.

But her head is not entirely her own. She shares it with Caboose. Her actions affect him. And he doesn’t want to remember.

“Caboose. If you get the memories back you’ll be able to think about Maine without going back there, to the mud. Eventually.” In a few years. Maybe a decade.
<Liar,> he says, and she’s not lying, but also she is. It’s the truth, but they’re just words. What she really cares about is just getting this obstacle out of the way, so she can be strong, be herself again, her best self. It feels like so long since she felt like she was the best, the strongest. She’s still number one on the leaderboard, objective proof of her worth for all to see, that the Director had to sign off himself, or at least proof that he didn’t veto. But it all feels so tenuous, and FILS had landed four hits on her today. She needs to get these memories out of the way, get her mind free and clear.

She’s trying to be kind, gentle, patient. When Carolina tries, she tries.

“I,” she says, choking her way through it, fingers twisting, the words ash in her mouth. But she is very, very good at forcing herself to do unpleasant things. “I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll tell me before you do it?” York asks, soft, tentative, hopeful.

“I will,” she says. She’s avoided him for so long now, still won’t touch him, and he’s still throwing her water bottles and softly teasing her and working knots out of her shoulders and kissing the back of her neck. It is the very, very, very least she can do for him. Something clogs in the back of her throat as it sinks in that she hasn’t killed this thing between them like a plant gone for too long without being watered.

“Thank you,” he says, so sincere, kissing her shoulder, sweet and warm.

She slowly and methodically traces her thumb over her knuckles, squashing the urge to grab at him and kiss him. Don’t touch.

“You can return the favor by washing my hair,” she jokes, and it’s really not much of a joke at all, because he leans in past her for the shampoo bottle with no hesitation, chest pressed close up against her back.

“Sounds like a deal,” he says, grin audible in his voice, and she sighs and lets herself be touched.

From Caboose: unexpected gratitude, like he never would’ve guessed that she would ever relent, listen to him.

She lets her hands drift up her own arms, and squeezes gently. It feels a little awkward, stupid, desperate, inappropriate. Her family was never the hugging type.

But she’s a damn good learner.

Chapter End Notes

There won’t be an update next Sunday, since I’ll be busy preparing for an important exam.
Agent Washington vs. the Research and Development Department

Chapter Summary

First thing in the morning Wash does what he’s done first thing in the morning every single day for a solid few months now. He goes to harass R&D.

He’d initially resisted the idea of it, vague fears of being fired from PFL (out of the nearest airlock) for unprofessional behavior rolling through his mind, but Tucker overcame his instinctive fear of death with the power of incessant whining.

It took him three days. Which might not sound like much, but other people do not know just how grating Tucker can make his voice go. It’s almost impressive. Wash should be given a medal for holding out for as long as he did.

<Hey, fuck off!>

“You might not like what you overhear when you eavesdrop,” Wash mumbles lowly, peering past the corner he’s pressed up flat against.

<Don’t quote your mom at me. And I wasn’t even trying to hear that, you’re just being loud and rude.>

Wash shushes him, creeping another bold inch closer.

<Only you can hear me, dumbass.>

Wash flushes. And then instead of trying to defend himself (which would probably just end up with him tripping over his own words and digging himself down deeper) he rolls his eyes. It’s just Tucker, after all.

<You’re doing it again!>

“I am trying to focus, so pipe down anyways,” he hisses.

Tucker pipes down, but the edges of him are frizzy in a kind of belligerent petty way that makes Wash think of bitter muttering to oneself. He snorts and doesn’t take it seriously, peering around the edge of the wall again.

To begin with, he’d just knock on the door, wander into the lab, and ask some questions. And then after a couple of weeks they’d stop him at the door and answer his questions. And then they’d stop him at the door and tell him to piss off, in polite office speak. And then they’d stop answering the door at all. Locking it. He’d figured out that they were seeing him coming through the cameras. Which, R&D aren’t supposed to have access to the MOI’s surveillance footage, that’s Security’s territory. He followed that trail and found out that R&D was bribing Security by giving them their allotment of donuts. Wash could’ve just reported them, except he’s not a snitch, and he doesn’t get any donuts at all to try and outbribe an entire department with anyways. He was honestly pretty
insulted that they were willing to pay such a high price to avoid him.

So, anyways, getting that resource out of R&D’s hands wasn’t an option, but Tucker (and honestly, a little bit of his own stubbornness, enthusiasm, curiosity, and spite) wouldn’t let him just let this go. So he considered R&D using such a blatantly unfair tactic an open declaration of war, and threw any shame, honor, pride, fear, or mercy he had into the nearest blackhole and focused on just winning.

The war of Agent Washington vs. the Research and Development Department has been long and grueling, but also Wash used to have prank wars with his sisters, so this all feels pretty nostalgic for him so far.

He’s managed to weasel his way into the lab three times so far. The first time, he got North to walk up to the door and knock on it so that Wash could sprint in from the camera’s blindspot and barrel roll his way through the gap in the door as the unsuspecting scientist opened up the door for the not banned Freelancer. Everyone was so startled and unpleasantly surprised that Wash felt strongly that he must now know what it feels like to be a suddenly discovered cockroach in a person’s kitchen. Someone whacked him with a broom. No one answered his questions. North laughed so hard that he pulled a muscle in his side.

The second time, he got York to walk up to the door. Wise to Wash’s tricks, the scientists would only talk to him through the intercom, not even cracking the door open. That was alright, because Wash had traded him one favor for just getting down on his knees and picking the lock open. They had all squawked, shouted, screamed, and threatened to tell the Director. Wash had stepped out from behind the vending machine to inform them that if they told on him for breaking in then he’d tell on them for bribing Security for access to surveillance that they shouldn’t have. They had gone pretty quiet after that, and Wash had happily slipped into the lab after York opened the door for him. They sprayed him with the fire extinguisher. No one answered his questions. York laughed so hard that Simmons had to run the healing unit to assist his breathing.

After R&D realized that they had mutual blackmail on each other and were thus in a lawless zone where no superiors mattered or existed so long as no one got caught, the gloves truly came off. They’ve been using their experimental weapons on him. Wash has passed out from knockout gas and woken up tied up in a broom closet on the other side of the ship. They shot a taser bullet at him. They put a tranq dart in his neck like he’s a feral fucking bull. He’s pretty sure they preemptively drugged his breakfast one day, since it’s the only explanation for why he suddenly passed out three whole hallways away from R&D that one morning. Ever since then, he’s started forcefully switching his meals with anyone within arms reach in the cafeteria. The first time Ohio was overtaken by an abrupt bout of nausea, but the Enemy seems to have caught on since that since no one else has suffered any adverse effects, but Wash feels that it’s best to keep it up just in case.

The third time, Wash got in through the vents. He asked his questions, got shouted at, and then forced out of the lab at gunpoint. He’d had to comply because he’d had to take off his armor to fit in the vents, so he wasn’t currently bulletproof. Were the nerds even allowed to have guns? Was that an illegal gun? Or was it like an experimental R&D gun that could only shoot bubblegum? Wash hadn’t taken his chances, since he cannot honestly say that the R&D department wouldn’t seriously try to kill him if given the opportunity at this point.

But this time, he’s getting inside, and he won’t be leaving without his answers. He’s wearing his armor. He ate Wyoming’s breakfast. He won’t give in in the face of a fire extinguisher, or a gun, or even a broom. He’s doing this.

(And not using the vents, since those are probably thoroughly boobytrapped by now.)
Tucker says, now buzzing with excitement, pumped up. *We’re gonna WIN bitches! We’re hot jocks and we’re not gonna give in to a bunch of pasty ass virgins!*

“I’m a virgin,” Wash points out.

*Yeah, but that’s different. If you didn’t want to be one, you could totally change that. Hot jock!*

Wash snickers. “That’s the first time I’ve been called that.”

*Oh please, what were you in highschool, the drama kid? Geek? Weeaboo?*

“I was kind of like a feral dog constantly getting into fights.”

*I feel like that’s a subspecies of hot jock.*

“There is nothing hot about a surly hyper violent teenager—”

*One o’clock!*

Wash darts back behind the corner just in time to avoid being spotted. Takes a deep breath. Okay. Focus. Break in. Don’t take shit. Get answers. Probably get a little bit tased or gassed on the way out.

Be a badass.

*Fuck. Yes.*

Wash presses down the button on the small device he’d requested for his last mission and then hidden underneath his kevlar suit instead of using and lobs it down the hallway to roll up against the electronic door leading into the R&D department, five seconds after it shuts on its latest arrival.

Some might say that it’s stupidly risky to use an EMP when your best friend is an AI living in your brain, and also you’re living on a spaceship full of essential electronics for, like, breathing and gravity and stuff, but Tucker had agreed that it was necessary. It’s short range, anyways. It’ll probably only affect the stuff its within five feet of. Such as: the door, the camera by the door, the intercom, and any more esoteric security features (Wash-deterrents) they may have installed in the last few months. Connie swears to god that she saw them installing a *trap door* while she walked past last week. A trap door leading to *where? Space!?* Wash endeavors not to find out.

He jogs up to the door quickly as soon as he hears the unique, muted sound of the EMP going off. Presumably their little buddies in Security will be informing them that their camera is down any moment now, at which point their guards and suspicious will be up. He has to take advantage of what time he has.

He picks up the blowtorch he’s got slung over his back and gets to work. At this point, the only rule is to not get caught and to not kill anyone, and Wash isn’t sure how firm that last part is exactly. He melts a hole large enough for him to climb in through, and kicks a solid circle of metal out of the door and into the lab with one solid kick. It clangs loudly to the floor, finally allowing him to hear the scientists freaking out on the inside.

“Where the fuck is the panic button?!”

“Call Security!”

“Are we being boarded?”
“Burn all of the files! Delete the data!”

“It’s just me,” he calls out as he climbs through the hole.

There’s a fraction of a second of silence as everyone takes this in, and then there’s a lot of yelling, far more angry than scared and panicked this time. Being scientists instead of soldiers, their first instinct is to throw furiously balled up paperwork projectiles at him instead of going for their experimental weaponry, which gives him enough time to gather his bearings and unholster his gun.

“No more mister nice guy!” Tucker shouts, appearing at his shoulder. “We’re not asking any longer! We’re demanding answers!”

“Not so fast,” Wash says, his gun gravitating towards a scientist who twitched uncertainly in the direction of a weird needle gun that they were apparently measuring for… radiation or something before he came here and disrupted their no doubt productive work day. They freeze. He doesn’t have his gun quite pointed at them so much as the barrel is glued a foot away from their feet. They are his coworker, technically, after all. He wouldn’t point his gun at one of those unless they were wearing armor. Or if they actually had the gall to go for the gun, of course.

“Agent Washington, you’re going too far,” one of the scientists say. He thinks maybe their leader? Like a department head, or a mid level manager. She has a clipboard.

“You held me at gunpoint first,” he points out. “I’m just holding myself to the limits you’re using for yourselves.”

The Manager, as he nicknames her in his head, gives one of the younger and less important looking scientists a withering look that he wilts underneath.

“That action was taken by an unpaid intern,” she says sternly, glaring at the presumed unpaid intern. “I do not stand by or condone his choices. It was a mistake, for this exact reason.” She gestures at Wash holding his gun with her clipboard.

Jesus Christ, Project Freelancer hires unpaid interns? Wow.

“Way to go, Rob,” someone in the crowd mutters.

“Nevertheless, it happened. A precedent has been set,” Wash says. “Now, answers.”

“Yeah!” Tucker says.

“Or what?” the Manager asks. “You’ll shoot me?”

“What?” Tucker asks.

That was not what she was supposed to say.

The Manager narrows her eyes at them intently, everyone around her going tense and sending her harried wide eyed looks. “Are you going to shoot me if I don’t give you your answers, Agent Washington? Are you going to be the one to start that precedent? Can you bring yourself to kill me?”

His mouth is suddenly dry. “I’m a soldier,” he says, trying to sound steady and unruffled by this turn of events. “I’ve killed before.”

His gun isn’t even loaded.
“Very well,” she says, accepting his bluff. “But I don’t think that it would be a wise decision on your part.”

Yeah, no shit.

“It would open you up to the possibility of being murdered by my department in turn. And they would avenge me, Washington. I let them have casual Friday.”

There is a lot of nervous, incredulous looks going around, but the Manager ignores this in favor of staring him down. Wash feels like she’s got a gun on him.

<DateTime is crazy.> Tucker hisses inside of his head, feeling disbelieving, surprised, impressed, and more than a little turned on. The Manager has the age and body type of a mother of four, and is currently threatening that her department will kill him if he kills her. Wash valiantly tries to ignore Tucker’s absurd feelings once again.

“What if I don’t just shoot you? I have more than one bullet, you know,” he says, and thinks holy fuck what the hell is coming out of my mouth? How did the situation spiral so badly so quickly? I’ve got a gun! I should be controlling this!

“Enough to share with the whole class?” she asks dryly, one eyebrow raising. The man next to her looks one step away from pissing himself. “Then who would cover up your murder? Who would clean up after you? Who would answer your questions?”

Did she just fucking imply that they wouldn’t report him if he murders their manager in broad daylight in front of over a dozen witnesses.

Wash is having the very belated realization that he may have taken this war thing a bit too far.

“You think I can’t frame a horrible lab accident?” he asks, his voice coming out shockingly calm, the audacity of the lie so unbelievable that he half feels like someone else must have said that instead.

The Manager opens her mouth to respond, her expression still intent and as composed and even as a knife’s blade, when another scientist cracks and interrupts her.

“For fuck’s sake Elaine, you know Freelancers are fucking crazy!” another woman who looks much more reasonably affected by current events says, her voice breaking. “And why the hell are you willing to die for this, it’s not even that important--!”

The Manager, or Elaine, apparently, gets an indignant frown on her face. “It’s the principle of the matter, Sadie--”

“The principle of the matter!? Shut the fuck up!”

Elaine turns an astonished, angry expression on Sadie now, turning away from Wash like they weren’t just having a tense standoff, and some of the scientists go ooooh like there’s about to be a fight on the playground.

“Excuse me?” Elaine asks.

Sadie seems to be shaking with equal parts fear and anger. “You heard me! This is insane! This whole conflict has started significantly eating into our productivity quotas! You’re, you’ve fallen for the cost sunk fallacy!”
“I have not,” Elaine says.

“You so have! At this point it would make far more sense to just give him what he wants so that he’ll leave us alone!”

“If we give in to one Freelancers, they’ll all be expecting special treatment,” Elaine argues.

Wash looks pointedly at his gun. “Trust me, I am not going to be telling anyone about this.”

“See?” Sadie says triumphantly. “The secrecy truce protects us.”

“I know his type,” Elaine says cuttingly. “He’ll be bragging about this in the locker rooms by the end of the week.”

“Is this something to brag about?” Wash asks.

“This whole thing is ridiculous, Elaine. If we didn’t have this grudge against him then we would’ve just given him the thing weeks ago.”

“You what!” Tucker asks, his voice going into a piercing shriek on the last word.

Damn, Wash thinks, astonished.

Elaine looks pissed at being exposed like this. “We’re going to talk about this at your next performance review,” she says between grit teeth.

“Oh, I thought you liked my bold initiative and head for unique ideas?”

“You could’ve given it to us weeks ago?” Wash asks urgently, directing his question at Sadie, who seems far more cooperative and reasonable.

She gives him a tired look, the edge of her fear having worn off somewhere during this conversation. “We’ve put it through every single known test in the universe, and the results are clear: it’s just a solid block of material with no discernable technology or even unusual chemicals to it.”

“It’s not--” he says.

“Elaine wants to put it into storage, but you might as well have it anyways.” Sadie shrugs. “It’s not like we can do anything with it.”

Elaine makes a sound like a furious tea kettle while gnashing her teeth, apparently infuriated by the admitted weakness and surrender. Wash is pretty stunned by it as well. He had at most been hoping for a progress update. Now they’re just going to give it to them.

“Where is it?” Tucker asks, voice baited with excitement, breathless anticipation. “Gimme!”

After one long moment, Sadie hesitantly moves. Her coworkers are like frozen statues for her to weave between. She gives Elaine, who looks ready to bite someone, a wide berth. She opens a drawer in an otherwise unassuming desk, rifling through some loose papers, pens, notepads, and various office supply. It looks like the designated junk drawer full of miscellaneous junk.

“The place you’d least expect is the best hiding place,” she says defensively in response to his incredulous silence filled with nothing but Elaine’s teeth audibly grinding together.

And then she makes a soft noise of triumph and pulls it out.

“Don’t call yourself that,” Wash says automatically.

Sadie kneels down and slides it across the floor. It rotates end over end and comes to a stop against his boot. He bends down and picks it up, careful with his ‘loaded’ gun.

A softly humming shivering blue blade springs up from the handle. The scientists all make either fascinated or frustrated noises at the sight. Elaine looks silently apoplectic. Tucker coos at the sword.

“Thanks, guys!” Wash says. Everyone glares at him. He admits to himself that he’s pretty much made a terrible enemy for life, but, “This was fun. Really.”

“Fuck off,” Elaine swears. Tucker’s hologram is doing a victory dance, throwing a football into the ‘ground’ that then explodes into fireworks as he krumps.

“Who’s the best!” he asks, doing a handstand. “We’re the best!”

“Okay,” Wash says, and does. He got what he came for, after all. The sword handle is comfortably warm against his hand, like the perfect hot water bottle that you can stab someone with to boot. Tucker’s happiness warms him through like he’s sitting next to a fireplace.

He awkwardly climbs through the hole he made in the door, and then leans his head back through it to say, “You should probably get this fixed by the way—”

“Shut up!” Elaine shouts and throws something at his head. He leaves while Tucker cackles.
Chapter Summary

North had promised his parents to look after his sister.

South mutters to herself, now. North pays keen attention to her, to see if there’s any lingering side effects, to make sure that she’s alright. The whole her temporarily becoming a different person was... a lot. It felt like she’d briefly stopped existing. Like death, except somehow worse because her face was right there, talking to him, acting like everything was okay, like this was fine and normal.

It’s a bit difficult to keep tabs on her though, because she avoids him. Ironically, this is rather South-ish behavior, who will usually loudly explode and then coolly ignore someone when she’s seriously offended. He doesn’t know how he’s offended her this time, though. He might not be able to avoid it, but he can usually at least tell what he did wrong. If for no other reason, because she’ll usually shout it into his face before she calls him a douche canoe and storms out of the room, petulantly kicking over trash cans on her way.

But on those moments when he catches her and she hasn’t noticed him yet, focused on scowling at her meal or frowning at a punching bag or brooding at a wall, sometimes, most of the time, she’s muttering. South doesn’t mutter. When she’s got something to say, she says it loudly, with no regard for who might hear her. He’s pretty sure that she thinks of censoring and filtering herself as spineless cowardice, when North would just call it ‘tact’ or ‘common sense’.

It isn’t even an angry sort of muttering. It’s... strange. She sounds like herself when she does it, those brief snatches that he’s overheard before she’s caught sight of him and gone stiff before stomping off without so much as an excuse. That is, she sounds like herself half of the time. Gruff and a little upset one sentence, and then the next she’s... lighter. Both by an octave, and in her whole bearing. The lines of her face relax. Her shoulders unravel from their tense hunch. Her hands uncurl from the tight fists at her side. And then one moment later she’s back to being South. Back and forth like a pendulum, muttering too lowly for anyone but her to hear the words.

It’s worrying.

<She’s just talking to Donut.> Grif says with apathy that is too firm to be genuine. As if he’s willing it to be true, because he doesn’t want to have to deal with any of the alternatives.

Except that that isn’t how South talks to Donut. She replies to him with shameless volume, not caring about any of the stares she might get for having a one sided conversation with what is technically a voice in her head. Usually, Donut is out, actually. He likes to be seen, to be able to react visibly to the things happening around him, to attract attention.

North can’t remember the last time he saw Donut’s hologram, now. He’s safely ensconced inside of her head, close and private and unseen.

(Or is he?)

<Dude, are you having murder thoughts for Donut? I’d get it if you hadn’t had your coffee yet and
he was twittering like a fucking songbird again, but you’re overthinking shit.>

“I was not,” North says, before he remembers that there isn’t really a point to insisting on those sorts of things to the AI that lives in his head. “I’m not overthinking things,” he switches tracks, giving up on the other one as a lost cause without a word.

<You’re brooding. In both senses of the word.>

“Am not.”

<Chill. Take a nap. Smoke some weed. Stop fretting. It’s starting to stress me out, and I can’t let that happen, dude. Hard line in the sand. No stress.>

“Good luck finding weed on the Mother of Invention,” he mutters.

<Oh man, I bet someone has to have some. Every group has one That Guy.>

“And where did you learn this? From your massive worldly experience? Mister one year old?”

<It’s just common sense okay, you’re born knowing that stuff. Or programmed. Whatever, be a sober square if you want to. It should count as domestic abuse that you’re dragging me onto the wagon along with you, though.>

North consciously doesn’t make a joke about calling the Counselor for couples counseling, as that would kill what little mood that they’ve managed to build so far.

Even just briefly thinking about the man makes Grif go a little dim and cold in North’s mind, though. North cracks his knuckles, feeling… not annoyed, exactly, because that would be callous. He just wants to know why Grif is like that when it comes to the man. Grif has just as many answers as he does, though.

<I bet Sanitation’s the one with the weed,> Grif says, no longer lighthearted or shooting the shit, but forcibly trying to shunt North’s train of thought away from where it’s headed because he accidentally thought about the Counselor, and now he’s dwelling on the Counselor, and just why Grif is so uneasy when it comes to him, and the destination of that track is his mind skipping like a broken record--

“Nah,” he says, mouth going into a soft friendly grin, voice casual and relaxed. He’d rather not do the skipping record thing today. It’s as disorienting as waking up from a nightmare every single time. No acclimating, no getting used to it, no adjusting. The things he hears and sees as he drifts away are just as hazy and hard to keep a hold of as a dream, too. “My money’s on HR.”

<HR is just one person, and she doubles as the entire Accounting Department too.>

“Helen’s wild, Grif. Don’t put anything past her. I once saw her spread wasabi on a slice of bread like it was peanut butter.”

<God, it really shows where the Director’s priorities are when two whole departments are both one person. The same person.>

“In all fairness, she is incredibly efficient.” And the Counselor volunteers for a lot of the HR stuff too. The extreme cases, anyways, like when Stacy from Sanitation stabbed Jerry from the canteen with a fork for always throwing out half full soda cans into the trash.

And he’s supposed to be distracting himself from the Counselor before anything unfortunate
happens (that leaves him feeling drained and ragged for the rest of the day, even when it only lasts minutes, seconds, doesn’t even make any sense, doesn’t leave a mark). Quick, think of something incredibly distracting and absorbing.

South walks into the room. *Yup, he thinks, that’ll do it nicely.*

The room North is in is one of the training rooms. Being a Freelancer who’s earned a rank on the Leaderboard, he spends quite a bit of time in them. There’s a few dozen Freelancers (one for every United state, in fact), and they all need to train, and they all live on the same ship, even if they’re never all on it at the same time, thanks to missions. Due to this, there are several training rooms spread across the ship. Space (as in the not the cold endless infinite stuff outside of the ship, but the stuff on the inside) is always in demand when it comes to space ships, but it’s either have multiple training rooms or have a bunch of hyper competent, ambitious, and passionate fit soldiers pent up all on the same ship with nowhere to release their energy because Agent Carolina has been hoarding the Single Training Room for the past eight hours and needs All Of It to herself for her Incredible and Very Necessary Acrobatics. It is absolutely stunning how much distance that woman can cross in a single triple backflip. Also how long she can hog the Good training room with zero sense of shame or guilt.

Right now, he’s in one of the ones with a balcony that gives you a bird’s eye view of the whole room. He wanted to throw himself over a few times, practice his landing from a high distance. It’s fine, he’s wearing armor. He just wants to get the trick of hitting the ground running down. It looks very cool and intimidating when Carolina does it.

South enters the room in full armor, her helmet moving like she’s sweeping the room for other occupants. Besides North, it’s currently empty. She doesn’t think to look up above her. Doesn’t see him.

He should say hello. He should jump over the edge, make her jump and swear and then innocently greet her. His hands go on the banister.

But then she’d turn around and leave. His feet stay rooted to the floor.

Faintly, he hears her muttering. He holds the banister tightly and leans down, strains to pick the words out.

“... couldn’t do it in my room… keeps poking around… random… nosy bitch…”

Wow, he wonder who she’s talking about.

<If she starts masturbating, you’re pulling the fire alarm.> Grif says seriously.

North doesn’t reply. He tries to hear.

He thinks he catches South’s lighter voice saying ‘really unsafe’ in an uncertain sort of way that South never lets herself sound like. He leans in closer, until he’s in real danger of falling down.

“Just for one minute,” South says. “I don’t know, South. It still seems really-- one minute can’t hurt that much. It’s either that or I bash my head in against a wall.”

Everything inside of North goes cold. His mind goes sharp and focused like someone just pointed a loaded gun at him. Grif shuts up.

South wrings her hands in a distinctly un-South-ish way. “One minute,” she says in one tone of voice. “One minute,” she says in an entirely different one. “Okay,” she says, different again. Like a
pendulum. Back and forth.

North had promised his parents to look after his sister. He’d followed her into the army. He’d followed her into warzones. Followed her into PFL. He’d had her back every step of the way, making sure it didn’t get filled with bullets while she bullheadedly stomped her way forwards without looking above, behind, below, or to the sides like it was something to be proud of. His first kill had been to protect her, and it had kept going like that. He may be a soldier, but he considers himself to be a Good Person. A decent one, at the very least. But it’s different when it comes to sisters. You cross lines when it comes to sisters. You ignore morals, rules, laws, right and wrong. You do what you have to do. You don’t waste time regretting it, or feeling guilt. There’s no point. You do what you have to do.

He had promised to look out for her. He’s been trying so hard to take care of someone who doesn’t want to be taken care of, who hisses and spits like it’s the greatest insult for someone to show concern for her. He had promised, and what the fuck is this bullshit?

It certainly doesn’t look like North doing his job fucking right, whatever the hell it is.

He waits and sees. Waits to see what she’ll do. If he’ll have to interrupt her. Stop her. South does stupid things, sometimes. She’s reckless. Which means that North has to be the smart one. People go on about twins and opposites and contrasts like it's the natural state of things, like South and North came out of the womb opposite in every way right from the start, but the simple fact is that he’s just trying to fill in every dysfunctional hole in South’s personality so that she won’t get herself killed, acting as her external common sense and decency and self preservation instinct and tact and social skills and emotional intelligence and North is sort of half waiting for her to relegate the unessential duties of breathing and blinking to him as well so that she can focus on the more important things, like throwing tantrums.

She’s just standing there.

North holds his breath, waiting for her to do whatever it is she came here to do.

Slowly, one of South’s hands come up to her collarbone. It’s shaking. She paws weakly at her chest. The other one curls into a fist, held tightly against her sternum. Her knees buckle. A thin noise escapes her, like a pained groan without any air to back it up. He heard a similar sound once from a man that he shot in the lung.

<What the fuck,> Grif says, his quiet horror seeping into North’s numbness like paint in water.

South collapses to her knees, hands on her throat, and North vaults over the banister and hits the ground running.

He reaches her exactly one minute after she stopped talking. She inhales deeply, like she was drowning while she stood there in the middle of a room in a ship full of perfectly regulated oxygen, and has only now surfaced. He goes to his knees next to her, grabs her by the shoulders.

“South,” he says.

“North,” she wheezes, her breaths still large and gasping.

“What’s wrong? What just happened?” She tries to push him away, but she’s too weak. He shakes her a little, insistent, stubborn. “I’m taking you to the infirmary--”

She shoves him again, harder. “No.”
If she had the breath for it, she’d add a *fuck off* at the end there. And she would’ve been able to shove him harder too. She’s trying to squirm out of his grip, away from help and the only person on this ship who tries to tolerate her, like her, have her back. She’s so frustratingly, stupidly *stubborn.*

“Yes,” North says stubbornly. “You’re not okay--”

“Yes I am--”

“You’re obviously *not*--”

“I made Donut shut off my armor’s access to oxygen!” she snaps.

North stops.

There is a function to make one’s armor suit stop letting you breathe the oxygen around you. This function was designed when the aliens started using chemical weapons, toxic gas poisoning the air humanity’s soldiers breathed in. This function can be turned on manually, and automatically switches you over to the small emergency oxygen tanks in the armor instead. Once they run empty, you get switched back to whatever is outside of your armor again, whether that be toxic gas, water, or the cold vacuum of space. It is automatic and unstoppable. One should not be able to manually turn off the access to breathing without going to the oxygen tanks. One should not be able to turn off breathing access if the oxygen tanks aren’t available at all.

Unless you’ve got a high grade AI installed directly into your skull and your armor, of course. Then anything’s possible.

Just one minute, South had said.

“Why did you do that,” he asks, his voice so very smooth and reasonable that it isn’t until he feels Grif curling uncomfortably away from him that he realizes that he’s *pissed.*

“Mind your own fucking business,” South spits.

*You are my fucking business,* he wants to spit back. How does she not get that? That he’s a twin first and a Freelancer and a person second?

“I’m just worried about you,” he says, which he knows is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. He’s not sure why he says it.

She knocks his hands off of her and lurches up to her feet, like he’s a hot stove that she needs to recoil from.

“There’s nothing to be worried about!”

“Really? Then why are you suffocating yourself?” A condescending tone is seeping uncontrollably into his voice. *Oh you poor stupid dear, can’t even make the simplest of decisions, let me help you,* says the tone. He can’t remember the last time he deliberately provoked South. When he was a child, he thinks. Before he started thinking of himself as the One Who Has to Have His Shit Together. The one who has to make up for his sister. Who has to clean up after her, soften her blows, smooth down her hackles, derail constant disasters, make excuses and apologies for her that she refuses to come up with herself. Someone has to, after all.

South makes a noise that sounds a bit like a dying furious cat. “I’m just-- *trying shit out,* okay!?"
“To do what exactly?” The condescension is building, thick like peanut butter on the roof of your mouth. Very sweet peanut butter, though. Peanut butter that only wants the best for you, even if you might not know what that is yourself. Because you’re so very, very stupid. (And reckless and insensitive and thoughtless and selfish and)

South makes that teakettle noise of hers. “To scramble my fucking brain!”

North feels weirdly hot, right now, like he’s overflowing with boiling water, trapped underneath his skin. That’s unusual. He just gets cold when he gets angry. Resolute.

Siblings have a way of getting under your skin like nothing else, though.

“What would you do that?” he asks, half feeling like it isn’t really his own voice that’s saying that.

“You ruined everything!” she howls at him. “You told Command that they had to fix me and then they did and it’s all your fault!”

So furious to be helped. Like it’s an insult, an attack. Like he’s not doing it for her. Like he’s having such a great time.

“Do you want to be brain damaged?” he asks her sharply. “Do you want to disappear? Because you would, without people not minding their own business and not leaving you alone and--”

“YES,” she roars into his face, leaning in close and vicious, snarl audible in her voice. “Of course I do!”

That catches him off guard. He’d been working his way up to a real rant, a real time to release some unvarnished truth, all of the words he prunes or softens or holds back because it wouldn’t be productive, it wouldn’t be useful, it’d just make her angry and uncooperative because she never listens to things that make her mad, she just gets mad.

He really hadn’t expected for her to say yes, though. He’s abruptly lost track of what he was about to say. The heady anger has vanished like smoke in the wind.

South came here to suffocate herself a little, to kill brain cells until maybe somehow, miraculously, she’d sink back and away into South-and-Donut. Because she wants to disappear.

He doesn’t understand it. He always understands her, at the very least, even if he never agrees. They’re twins. But this blindsides him, somehow.

“South,” he says, and she turns around to storm off. His hand snaps out to grab at her. She whips around and then there’s light and sound and Grif’s shield is wrapped around him, soothing safe yellow hexagons. Spots dance in his vision, soot smudged on the floor. He’s on the ground and South isn’t here any longer. He sits up slowly. Stands.

<Well, fuck.> Grif says. <Guess you were right.>

There was something to worry about. He’s really not happy about it.
Carolina hasn't been on a mission in two weeks.

She has always been able to focus. She has always had a razor sharp, intense, scorching, unwavering focus, as if she can beat any problem to death with sheer unbridled attention and determination. Now she can barely pay attention when York—or anyone—talks to her. Now she gets startled when people accidentally sneak up on her. She is drowning in energy, potential, ambition, all of it unfulfilled and smothered and choked, bottled up inside of her with no outlet she can’t vent it through.

She trains so hard that FILS has to take a cool down period. She deliberately doesn’t count how often she loses time. She accidentally snaps her cutlery in half, kicks her boot through a ten inch thick door, breaks gun after gun until they stop giving them to her, and punches a hole in the wall when she’s changing. She knows that Caboose gives her immense, monstrous, ridiculous strength, but it’s a bit stunning once she loses her ironclad self control to boot. She stays a minimum of five feet away from York at all times. He doesn’t even give her pouty puppy eyed looks, which is how she knows that he’s actually sad about it.

Carolina isn’t working or fighting or being useful and it’s making her fall apart. She can’t exist like this. It’s antithetical to who she is. Agent Carolina is a nuclear reactor core; she is constantly generating great and dangerous amounts of energy meant to fuel incredible weapons; she is not inert, or resting, or passive. How do people do this? How can they possibly be at ease in their own skin while not doing everything in their power to show and prove and justify that they deserve to exist?

She can’t go out in the field while the faulty memory block is still in place. The people who can remove the memory block are on this very ship. In less than five minutes, she can locate them and explain the situation. In less than a day, they can fix her. In less than forty eight hours, Carolina can be back in the field, fighting, being useful, worthy, fulfilling her purpose, what she was born to do, the reason she deserves to live.

Carolina sits where she is, not being shot at, not fighting for her life, surrounded only by quiet and peace and allies for miles and miles, and she feels like someone has a gun to her head. And that someone is her, because no one else is making her do this. No, not a gun exactly. Something slower and more gruesome. Like she’s slowly peeling her own skin off. She could stop, and she wants to stop, and she should stop, and it’s so awful to continue. It’s such a fucking struggle just to sit and continue to feel like a crab slowly being boiled to death in a pot of hot water. She is a corpse that is rotting by the second. Rigor mortis is setting in. She needs to move.
She is good at things that are hard. Carolina sits.

<That looks like a smiley face.> Caboose comments as Carolina pushes the piece of dry macaroni into the soft white drying glue with the most feather light of movements. The paper tears a bit with the force of her fingers.

“It’s a spaceship,” she says, voice oddly calm and even when she’s filled with so much fatal urgency that it feels like someone has set her on fire and the fire extinguisher is right there except here she is, sitting and doing macaroni art and silently burning.

Caboose wanted to draw, except there aren’t any crayons on the ship, so she stole a bag of macaroni from the canteen kitchens to do arts and crafts with instead. She needs to train her ability to not crush things in her freakishly strong hands anyways.

<Yes, but she is smiling! See?> And weirdly, she does. Because of the way he focuses on it, her thoughts briefly snag on the way the individual macaroni pieces curve, like a smile would. <She’s a happy ship. Good for her.>

“It,” she says. A macaroni crunches into a fine yellow powder between two of her fingers. Her eyelid twitches. It’s like the entire world is made out of cotton candy and cobwebs. “Calling ships ‘she’ is a stupid tradition.”

...I don’t get it,> Caboose says after a long moment. He speaks with her so freely now, and she’d be overjoyed about the progress if it weren’t taking every last shred of her concentration to not rip her own hair out by the roots with her bare hands while screaming as loud as she can with insane frustration. Two. Whole. Weeks.

“You’re a person. You have thoughts and feelings. You’re not an it. A ship does not have thoughts or feelings, and is not a person. A ship is an it.”

Caboose makes some sputtering noises, like she’s said something truly outrageous now. Carolina laboriously starts working on making a sun up in the corner of the drawing. Even though a spaceship should be in space. Whatever, maybe it’s docked. <Sheila is a woman!>

Sheila is absolutely not FILS’ name, but when Caboose says that name Carolina thinks of her anyways. Caboose is incredibly bad at making himself clear with words, so it’s something of a blessing that he doesn’t really have to make himself understood for Carolina to be able to understand him anyways.

“FILS isn’t the ship,” she says. “FILS is the Director’s pet AI that controls the ship for him and does whatever he tells it to. Like a secretary that he doesn’t have to pay. And FILS isn’t a she anyways. It’s not a smart AI like you are.”

<She is very smart!> Caboose protests indignantly, like she’s insisting that up is in fact down. Caboose’s mood, of course, changes course as easily as a flipping dime to suit his whims. <You think I’m smart?>

Carolina pauses as she considers the fact that she’d technically just called Caboose smarter than Sheila--damn it, FILS.

“I didn’t mean smart like intelligent,” she corrects herself. “It’s a technical term. Just, trust me. You’re a person, she-- it isn’t.”

She hadn’t used to be so sure of the fact that Caboose was a person, no matter how confident she sounds now. But after all of the time she’s spent with him, after everything she’s felt from him, she
can’t possibly imagine how he can’t be someone.

<That is not fair,> Caboose says after a long thoughtful moment. <I will share with her.>

“You can’t share being a person with her.”

<It is my personhood and I will do with it what I want to. I will share with Sheila.>

Honestly, this stupid crush of his is just more evidence on the pile that she’s right. Sheila doesn’t have a crush on him, on anyone. Can’t.

It’s a little bit cute, though, in a puppy crush sort of way. She’d smile, except she needs to focus and she can’t focus and—great, she just crushed another macaroni piece. She glares at the dust on her fingers, and then sprinkles it over the glue. Maybe it’ll look nice.

“Well, my spaceship isn’t a person, at least,” she says determinedly. “Since it’s my art which means that I can do with it what I want to.”

<Ummmm, then why did you make the spaceship look happy?>

Feeling contrary and belligerent, Carolina flips the macaroni art drawing upside down. “There,” she says. “It’s an unhappy ship now.”

It’s also a drawing that doesn’t make sense now. The sun is on the bottom.

Caboose gasps. <Sad faces!> he cries out.

“That’s right,” she says.

<She needs a hug!>

“It needs a hug!” she snaps.

<Only people get sad!>

“No!”

<Yes!>

Carolina is so incensed that she doesn’t even spare a moment to contemplate the fact that she just conceded that the ship that is not a she is in fact sad and does need a hug. She picks up the drawing and throws it as hard as she can. With her freakish strength, if she’d thrown something with any weight to it at all then it would’ve lodged itself into the wall.

The paper drawing flutters to the floor half a foot away. She makes a frustrated noise and kicks at it, only succeeding in breaking a table leg.

<You dropped Penny on the floor,> Caboose helpfully points out to her.

“Don’t name her,” she hisses. And then she cries out in furious horror at what she just said. Caboose fizzes and laughs inside of her head, and it feels like a breath of fresh hair against the vulnerable meat of her brain. She sits down with a rattle into her chair. “Oh, shut up.”

There’s a weird twist to her voice, to her mouth, when she says that. A smile is tugging at her lips, she realizes, except she’s not supposed to be happy. She’s suffering, dying by inches and seconds, useless, in her own personal hell--
But for a brief moment, Caboose had given her a break from that. Made her forget for a few
seconds just how miserable she is, even at a time like this.

Distracted her, she means. Distracted her from important things, because problems don’t go away
just because you ignore them and act like they aren’t there, pretending like everything is fine and
dandy until you forget and let the problems fester. You need to focus on problems. You need to
live in them, giving them every single part of you because you need every last ounce of your
weight to beat them to death. You can’t half ass problems, or else you fail.

Who the hell takes breaks, who acts happy when there are problems to fix and missions to take and
faces to break?

Losers, obviously. And Carolina isn’t a loser. She wins.

<That’s stupid,> Caboose says bluntly.

“Excuse me?” she asks.

<If you don’t take breaks, you’ll get tired and you won’t be as strong as you can be, and you might
lose. If you don’t ever take breaks you’ll die.>

“Caboose, I sleep every night,” she corrects him tiredly. “You see me do it. You’re there.”

<You don’t even like it. You just do it to get it over with.>

“Yes?” She doesn’t understand what his issue is. Why would anyone
like sleeping? It’s a complete
and utter waste of time. Half of your life lost to just lying there. She could do so much more with
that time. Twice the amount of missions she usually does, at least.

<I don’t think it counts as rest if you don’t like it.>

“I like working.”

<Working isn’t rest,> he says stubbornly.

She rolls her eyes. “People don’t need rest.” It’s a want, an indulgence, a weakness. She’s better
than that.

<Yes they do!> he says, like she just said something outrageous again.

“Not me.”

<I know what rest is,> he insists.

For a moment, it feels like they’re arguing about spaceships again, and she wants to blurt out ‘no
I’m not’ with whole hearted conviction. She’s more than just a person. She’s better. She’s nothing
as sloppy and damaged and inefficient as a person. She’s a soldier, a weapon, a Freelancer. She’s
strong, she’s fast, she’s perfect. She doesn’t need or want rest. She needs to be out there, doing
things. Things that are useful, things that she’s good at. Mattering.

“Resting is not… restful, for me,” she says instead, because she can see how shouting ‘I’m not a
person’ might have her be misunderstood. It doesn’t sound great. It’s not like that, though. She’s
not less than people. She’s more. The same standards don’t apply.

<What is restful then?> Caboose asks, and he sounds as serious as he ever does.
Carolina sighs, deep and heartfelt, and then seriously actually thinks about it. She can’t go out in the field. She’s jittery and restless and trapped here on this ship by her own design and she might as well.

She thinks about rest and what comes up is satisfaction. The ache of muscles pushed past their limits and then some. Split lips and bruises after a hard fight won. Sweat drying on her overheated skin as she regains her breath after an afternoon together with York in some poorly surveilled corner of the ship. The heady afterglow that comes right after she’s done something athletic and amazing, after she’s done it well and successfully. That brief interval between one task and the next in which she’s sated. In which there isn’t a voice screaming at the back of her head to get up already and do something, anything, god, stop wasting time, stop being lazy and indulgent and weak, get up and back to work. It’s been minutes, Carolina, surely that’s enough.

<Weird,> Caboose says, which somehow imparts the sentiment understandable but not relatable to her. She feels like he wouldn’t have understood her at all if she’d tried to explain herself with words, just like how she often can only tell what he’s getting at because he’s wired directly into her brain.

Carolina gets started on another macaroni drawing. A boat this time. Waves and clouds and a sun and seagulls constructed out of two macaroni pieces angled slightly and touching at the point. Thinking about the satisfaction of completing a mission well has started up a sharp ache deep inside of her chest, and she has to assemble the oceans waves out of crumbled and crushed macaroni. She can’t take this much longer. She’ll die. She’ll expire from cardiac arrest at her physical prime just from sheer stress from this involuntary vacation from hell. She is a super soldier who can decimate dozens of hostiles on her own with highly experimental AI tech in her head to help her crush a brick in the palm of her hand to boot and here she is doing arts and crafts like she’s a kindergartener--

<So you can’t rest… if you can’t work…> Caboose says slowly, like he’s solving a complex three dimensional puzzle that still doesn’t quite make sense to him. And then, brightly, turning on a dime, <Okay, I think I get it!>

Somehow, Carolina doubts that. But also, he feels very casually confident.

<You have been really really sad,> he says, and denials surge up her throat so quickly that it almost feels like vomit, and it all clogs up inside of her mouth, all trying to get out at once. He moves on before she can compose herself and start vehemently denying being sad. She’s frustrated. She’s suffering from cabin fever. Not the same thing. At all. <And you’ve been trying to be nice to me anyways, by not telling on me for having a broken firewall even though its leaking into your brain, and doing fun stuff with me. Like macaroni! And taking that fire alarm apart to see how it worked! And not getting mad at me when we break stuff!>

“Might as well have. There wasn’t a whole lot else to do, since we can’t go out on missions,” she says, feeling this strange and foreign urge to minimize her efforts. Sure, acting like she succeeded effortlessly and like it didn’t take nearly as much blood, sweat and tears as it did and was instead the product of natural born talent, that’s one thing, anyone with common sense does it. But saying oh it’s not that big of a deal, I didn’t actually do that much? That’s weird. That doesn’t make sense. It’s making her feel uncomfortable that Caboose is so grateful for so little, though. She’d just had to glare at that guard to make him stop trying to scold her for the fire alarm incident anyways. It wasn’t a big deal. She’d feel like she’s dying either way. One of them might as well be happy while she’s stewing in inertia.

<And you could go on missions and shoot bad guys like you want to if you told on me. But you
That’s true. She’s frankly stunned that she’s held out for this long, except she isn’t. She can hold her breath for four minutes. She can bench press any member of the Freelancers. She can go for eighty hours without sleep. She can punch someone with a broken hand and still dislocate their jaw. She can put herself through any kind of hell with sheer bloody minded determination. Not going on missions for two weeks might be the largest of her feats so far, but she’s always breaking records and upping her highscore. If she decides I will do this then she will do it, no matter how hard it gets, no matter how much it hurts.

(Her dad offered her a position on his classified military project and she thought I will do this, and never let herself doubt herself or change her mind for even a moment as she signed form after form, as she was denied leave, as she was denied access to the outside world, no more television, no more computer, no more internet, no more phone, no more contact with people who aren’t in PFL. I will do this, she had decided, and so she will, no matter what the cost.)

(Some might say that this isn’t a good or admirable trait.)

If Carolina ever breaks a single promise to herself, she’s afraid that she’ll never be able to uphold one again. That it will make an oath to herself go from being something solid and real that she can lean against to revealing it to be the fluid and intangible and unreliable thing that it really is: just words. Just air pushed out from her lungs and shaped by her vocal cords and tongue and lips and teeth. Useless. If she lets herself down even once instead of trying with everything she has every single time, will she ever be able to try again? She’s too afraid to try and see.

<You’re being really sad for me… thanks. I think we’re friends now. Since you’re playing with me and stuff.>

She blinks. She doesn’t know what to say. Somehow, Caboose is the single least predictable being in the universe.

“No… problem,” she says eventually, stiff and awkward. (Friends.)

It is a huge problem, of course, that is the whole point. But she’s tough enough to deal with a little huge problem or two.

<I am scared that it will be bad if I let them take the block down, but it is bad now that the block is up so… I think I should let them take it away and see if it that makes things better.>

She feels like someone just punched the breath out of her, but with hope.

(There is something so strange about that philosophy. Things might get worse if I take this risk, but things are already bad now, so I’m going to take the risk in the hopes that things get better. Why not just grit your teeth and force your way through the bad? Problems are to be overcome. Definitely only someone as strange as Caboose would think that way.)

<Please still be nice to me even when the block is gone,> Caboose says, frank and sincere.

“Of course,” she breathes. Did he think that she was trying to bribe and charm her way into getting permission? That’s not it. She just-- she’d determined to do it better this time, and this was the only thing that she could figure out to change, even if it didn’t feel like it was working.

But it is working. Shockingly, being nice is actually good? Weird.

<And still play with me between missions,> he says eagerly, like someone deciding to ask for as
many favors as possible while the other person is in a generous mood. She melts and softens in a guilty uncomfortable sort of way.

“Yes,” she says. “I will.”

I will do this, she promises herself. As always, she promises it so fiercely that she might as well carve it into her bones.

Caboose radiates delighted happiness at her promise, and she radiates unstoppable determination and tentative hope back at him. She’s going to tell them about the memory block, how it doesn’t really work, how it’s broken and needs to be taken away because it’s hindering her. She’s going to get fixed. There isn’t going to be a trapdoor inside of her brain waiting to ambush her without even giving her so much as a chance to resist or fight back before unfairly whisking her away to a place where she doesn’t even remember who she is. She’s going to be able to fight. She’ll be herself again. Every task suddenly seems surmountable again. Every problem solvable, every little issue and obstacle waiting for her to effortlessly vault over them. She just has to try and try and keep trying and never stop, like always.

(He will kiss York and she won’t be afraid to break him. Her father will look her in the eyes and smile. Mom will come home, two decades and a corpse overdue.)

She will do this. She will win. Those are the immutable facts of the universe, as firm as steel and a promise.

(But Carolina bends steel like butter and promises are nothing but words.)

But before she can stand up, before she can go and ask for an audience with someone, anyone at all--

“Agent Carolina, report to the Director’s office,” Sheila says.

Chapter End Notes

You have a feeling it's going to be a long day.
"What would you do to bring Allison back?" he asks, and she stops breathing.

There are only two reasons that the Director could have for suddenly calling her in to his office, Carolina surmises. One, he has a special mission for her that he has to debrief her in private for, completely off the record. An opportunity to show off and excel and be deeply useful to him, to show that his trust in her competence is right and good and justified. Normally. If it’s that, this time she will have to say no, sorry. She isn’t field ready, and she can’t afford to fuck up on such an important mission. The idea of this makes her stomach sink, but not so much as the second possible reason does. It’s the most likely one as well.

He’s noticed that she isn’t taking missions. Has gone through the training room footage and seen her stumble over and over again. He knows that she’s failing, the worst of all nightmare scenarios, and now he’s going to talk to her about it. Talk at her, more likely. Interrogate her, demand answers, excuses, justifications, all of which he will dismiss as unacceptable. Just thinking about it makes her want to fight something, but she can’t punch her way out of this. She really, really wishes that it were possible.

Caboose does something that feels vaguely like a friendly bump against her shoulder, a reassuring pat on the head, a *it's going to be alright, don’t worry.*

<When people shout at me,> he tells her in a confiding whisper all alone in her head, *<I just stop paying attention.>*

Her mouth twitches a little with amusement, even if she doesn’t feel it in the cold pit of her stomach. “That explains a lot.”

The Director doesn’t shout when he’s angry, though. He doesn’t get angry at all. He’d have to care to be angry, and he’s not present enough for something like that. He’d have to be able to connect to her at all. When his eyes rest on people, on her, he gives off the same level of regard as he does when he looks at walls, furniture. Why get angry when a door sticks, when a gun jams? It’s not like it did it out of malice. It’s just broken and useless now. Just get a new one. No use wasting time or energy on getting all upset about it.

(Is he going to fire her? She can taste bile at the back of her throat. No, that’s ridiculous. Of course not. Of course not. He wouldn’t. He can’t.)

Caboose starts up a spirited game of I Spy on their way to the Director’s office in what is either a well meant gambit to distract her from the dread churning in her stomach or just one of his usual games to stave off boredom from a momentary lapse in constant mental stimulation. She mumbles responses so that he doesn’t think that she’s ignoring him, but she doesn’t put any real effort into it. And then he crows about how much better he is than her at this game and then she *does* have to put *some* effort into it and by the time she reaches the office doors she’s bickering with Caboose about the rules of I Spy and how he’s completely butchering them.

She’s almost surprised by their sudden appearance, as if the doors snuck up on her, and then they
“Thanks, Sheila!” Caboose says, his hologram form appearing next to her shoulder.

“That is not my name,” Sheila says, and what does she—oh, right. Somehow, with Caboose calling her that over and over again, Sheila’s actual name had slipped out of her mind entirely, irrelevant information.

“Are you sure?” Caboose asks. “You seem like a Sheila.”

Carolina enters the office, because making the Director wait so that Caboose and Sheila—FILSS—can argue about what her name is, like it’s a subjective fact, sounds like a pretty damn bad idea. She doesn’t think that he’s had to deal with anyone who isn’t his employee and doesn’t have to follow all of his orders for years now. Decades. That, or they’re a political enemy. Not that those are allowed on the ship. MOI’s coordinates are highly classified at all times.

She enters the room, and the Director is already facing her. Looking right at her, green eyes intent.

That’s… unusual. Something clenches inside of her stomach, and she walks up to his desk, salutes, and stands at parade rest almost on automatic.

The Director’s eyes flick towards Carolina’s side, and she looks out of the corner of her eye and almost winces to see that Caboose is still outside, humming while curiously twisting his head around the room, bouncing on the toes of his artificial light boots.

“No hologram,” she says firmly, trying to project please with her mind.

Caboose shrugs. “Okay!” And he flickers away without an argument. She sighs with quiet relief through her nose and doesn’t let her shoulders slump away from her perfect posture.

And then Carolina and the Director are in some approximation of private, with Caboose tucked away and watching behind her eyes. This is the perfect opportunity to tell him about the memory block malfunction, she realizes. She opens her mouth—

And closes it. She’d promised to let York know before she told anyone about the malfunction. She’d promised. It was so little to ask for. She doesn’t want to let him down in yet another way, especially when he keeps acting like she’s never let him down at all.

She’ll wait. She can wait a few hours longer. She’ll go and talk to York after this meeting, if the Director doesn’t assign her a mission that has to be performed ASAP.

“What would you do to bring Allison back?” he asks, and she stops breathing. She hasn’t heard him say that name since mom was alive.

She tries to say something, and can’t think of a single thing. “Sir,” she says helplessly instead, as if that’s anything.

“Anything,” he says firmly, as if he can make the answer be the right one with sheer conviction. “Correct?”

“I-- yes,” she says. She can’t remember the last time she let herself stutter in front of him, but this is clearly the right answer.

He’s looking her in the eye and talking about mom with her, something he’s never ever done. He’s never acknowledged her death at all. They hadn’t even held a funeral. He’d left the letter informing
those concerned of Allison Church’s death out in the kitchen for her to find. That was how he told her. He hadn’t even been in the house. He’d turned off his phone. He hadn’t come back until midnight, wearing his lab coat from work and blazing with something.

This is all feels a bit like a punch to the fucking face, but it also feels like wild heady bubbling fizzy reckless hope in her veins, setting her alight. Is he, after almost two decades spent being frozen and cold and inscrutable… treating her like family again? That’s what it feels like. Like invoking her name is revealing their connection to one another, as if it were lost before. Remember Allison, Carolina? Your mother, my wife? Our shared love? The thing about us that no one else understands? The thing that connects us? We are connected. Allison. Hear it. Feel it. We’re family.

“I’d do anything to bring her back too,” he says, so much intent behind every single word. He looks alive. Her eyes are burning.

She tries to breathe steady and nods, because words are difficult, suddenly. What brought this on? Out of nowhere?

“This Project. All of the work, the death, the countless hours and manpower and effort… it was all for her. Do you understand?” When the Director tells her to do something, he doesn’t expect for her to succeed, he doesn’t hope. He knows, he assumes, he operates from the assumption that she will win. That look of blazing expectation on his face--

“To win the war that killed her,” she says, for the first time putting words to something that she’s always known. Without mom to live for, without a daughter that was worth living for, he’d dedicated himself to a cause to give him enough of a reason to continue. Revenge being the closest he could be to her any longer, making her death meaningful the only way he could possibly stand it. The only way Allison Church’s death could possibly be bearable is if it was the lynchpin that saved all of humanity. And even then, only just barely. She understands. She’s lived that too. She’s never seen any point in a life that wasn’t in the military, fighting this fucking war.

The expectation in his eyes shuts down, and she feels abruptly like she just mistepped, made a mistake, gave the wrong answer.

“No,” he says flatly.

“... No?” she asks.

“There is always going to be a Great War,” he says, angry, dismissive. “It doesn’t matter. There is always the biggest and newest disaster with the highest death count yet. I’ve never cared about the war, the Project has never been about that. Those are just strangers. They don’t matter, not the way she does.”

“Then what is the Project about?” The Director has felt for years now like something as distant as a star. For thirty seconds, he had felt like family again. Now, he feels like a stranger. Like someone that she doesn’t know at all. Everything that she had assumed about him and his motivations is false.

The Great War doesn’t matter? Millions dying isn’t important?

“You’re thinking too small.” He puts his palms flat over the desk and leans in, intense, almost pleading with her to understand. “I’m not avenging Allison, I’m getting her back.”

“... Dad,” she says, for the first time in so long. He looks so desperate, so determined, so serious. He looks like he just found out that mom died yesterday. Like he’s finally now reacting, a decade
and a half late, the denial as fresh and irrational as a heartbroken child. She’d fantasized and dreamed and wished and hoped for mom to come back too. To miraculously come back.

Maybe this is a good thing. She’s not eight now. She’s old enough to help him.

“It’s possible,” he interrupts her as she opens her mouth, and he springs for his computer, moving fast and frantic in a way he never does. “Look.”

He taps some keys, and… Caboose shows up. Projected from the computer, this time. The little blue man with the familiar helmet gives her a friendly way.

Caboose gasps inside of her head. <It’s me! Hi! I usually only see me in mirrors, wow.>

“Caboose forty-three, talk,” he orders the hologram.

“I’m not forty-three years old,” says the other Caboose with a jarringly familiar voice and a jarringly familiar duh you’re being so silly about this very obvious thing tone. “I’m… um, one, two, eight, pizza…” He starts counting off his fingers.

<It’s one, two, four, pancake, eight,> Caboose corrects pedantically.

“Isn’t it a flawless replica?” the Director asks her. She nods dumbly. He looks fiercely satisfied with this, and taps a few keys and the other Caboose disappears mid count. C-43 DELETED, says the screen.

<Aw,> Caboose says, disappointed. <I hope he comes back soon.>

“What is-- how is this related to getting mom back?” she asks, feeling like she’s scrabbling for steady ground by her fingernails.

“When Allison died, my immediate thought was to make an AI imprint of my mind, and then butcher it to extract the code detailing my memories of her to create a perfect copy.” That had been his immediate thought? "I’ve called this process fragmenting, and it can be very unstable and difficult to control. Unpredictable. Inefficient.”

“It didn’t work,” she says. It can’t have worked.

“Not truly,” he says. “I did create an AI imprint of my own mind--” which is incredibly illegal. And dangerous. And painful. “--and I even managed to fragment out the specific parts that were my own memories of Allison… but it wasn’t her.” A dark cloud moves over his face. “I could never recreate her from just my own perceptions and memories of her. She surprised me constantly. I only knew her for a short decade. There were secrets she wouldn’t tell even me. You behave differently and show different facets of yourself to different people, and I only knew her in the context of her interacting with Leonard Church. People are complicated. What I made was a shadow of Allison. A mockery.”

“Where--” She takes a breath. “Where is she?”

“They’re both in storage in case they become useful to the Project again,” he says. “Which the Beta fragment will be.”

“I don’t understand,” she says, and she hates that quaver in her voice.

“You can’t accurately recreate something as multifaceted and complicated as a person with just one individuals perceptions of that person, no matter how close you were, no matter how much
you love them. In this case, the answer is quantity over quality.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she demands, because it’s been years of frosty indifferent silence and now this, out of nowhere.

“For years now, I’ve been tracking down Allison’s friends, relatives, old classmates, ex fellow squad members and boyfriends and girlfriends. I finally have all of their perceptions of Allison. An almost perfect simulation. There’s only two pieces of the puzzle left. The two most important people in her life.” His eyes blaze like green fire, and he’s closer now. “All we need to do is a little operation, and I-- we can have her back.”

“You want to create an AI imprint of me.”

“Only to fragment it for its memories of Allison, so we can have an as objective and three dimensional version of her as possible. After we’ve used it, we can delete it.”

Her mouth works. “Caboose,” she realizes. “He’s not an experimental AI. He’s--”

“He’s an imprint AI, yes,” the Director says impatiently, like Carolina’s dawdling over irrelevant facts. “And everyone else’s AIs. They’re the test group, what I contrast and compare to. I harvested multiple AIs from one squad of soldiers that had been isolated together out on the warfront and gotten to know each other very well over an extended period of time. And then, to test out my theory and iron out any bugs so I don’t corrupt any of the Allison fragments I’ve gathered before I move forward, I made copies of these AIs and then broke them apart for their perceptions of each other and then combined them. That Caboose was made of nothing but the perceptions and memories of the imprints of the original Michael J. Caboose’s squadmates. And it worked.”

<Ah,> Caboose says. <Yes, that’s me. That’s it.>

His eyes are shining. “The original Caboose imprint AI has been installed in you for almost a year now, and you agreed that Caboose forty-three was the same as it.”

“You deleted him,” she says.

“This is going to work,” he says, ignoring her.

“You deleted all of the AIs memories of their lives.”

“I’m going to get her back.”

“What happened to Michael Caboose?” she asks.

“It doesn’t matter. Other people don’t matter.”

“What happened to mom’s friends and relatives?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He takes her helmet off, and she freezes and lets him, because she can’t remember the last time he was this close to her. After a moment of hesitation, he awkwardly wipes tears off her face with his thumb like she’s a little girl again. This is the first time he’s touched her in years, she realizes.

“We’ve come so far, worked so hard,” he says. “We just need one more imprint, one more fragment, and Allison will finally come home. Make it all worth it, Carolina.”

(Carolina. It feels like her name at this point, but it isn’t, not with him. He keeps calling mom
Allison instead of your mom, the way he would do when she was young.)

The scar of mom dying feels like its been cut back open, straight back to square one. Denial and little kid wishes of miraculous survival. Except it’s real. It’s close. If only she’s good enough, if only she reaches out and takes it.

The entire ship jostles, like an earthquake in space. She reaches out to steady him before he falls. A klaxon starts wailing.

“Director, there has been a hull breach,” Sheila says.

“Is the entire ship going to decompress?” the Director asks.

“No, sir, the hull breach has been quarantined, but--”

“Then I don’t care! I told you that I wasn’t to be disturbed! And soundproof the office, I’m having an important meeting.”

“Your official orders are being requested--”

“Delegate everything to the Counselor for now. I’m busy.”

“Yes, sir.”

He turns his focus back on her, and she stands there ramrod straight with adrenaline. He tucks her bangs back behind her ear, one hand on her shoulder. There’s a frown of concentration on his face, like he’s thinking very seriously about every deliberate move he makes.

This conversation is more important to him than an inexplicable and sudden hull breach. Of course it is. It’s about mom. It’s about getting her back.

What happened to Caboose-- the first Caboose? His squad? Everyone used for their memories of mom?

The Project isn’t about the war and never has been. It’s about getting mom back by any means necessary. This is an illegal operation, she realizes.

“We’ve even seen evidence of an AI being able to possess a host’s body,” he says. “There’s a merging of minds involved, which would taint Allison, but if we somehow get the host’s mind out, the theory goes that the AI would be able to control the body without trouble. We could have Allison back in full. Don’t you want that?”

“Whose body would we use?”

“Does it matter? A woman’s, probably.”

Would it be someone she knows? Someone in the Project? A Freelancer?

Get mom back. To actually get mom back.

Caboose is being so quiet. She reaches out to him, and she feels that he’s-- occupied. Actually not fucking paying attention to this conversation. What could he possibly be doing? He’s-- touching something, inspecting it. The memory block.

<There is a lot behind it,> Caboose says solemnly, matter of factly. <It is like a dam, I think. If we took it down, there would be a flood. Um, I don’t know how to swim. We might drown.>
There’s a whole lifetime behind that dam. A whole person. Carolina feels abruptly and intensely like a tomb. Like someone’s hidden a dead body inside of her.

The lights in the room, very briefly, flicker. They all ignore it.

“Don’t you love her?” he asks. “Wouldn’t you do anything to get her back? Doesn’t she deserve that? Anything. Her death was senseless. All you have to do is let me scan you, and I’ll take care of the rest. Allison, back again. How can you say no?”

How could she possibly?

“Yes,” she says.

Her dad smiles. It steals the breath from her lungs, sets tears sliding back down her face.

“I knew that you’d do the right thing,” he says approvingly. “You always succeed.”

And he walks over to a table pushed up against a wall of the room, and removes a sheet from what turns out to be a very familiar machine. Somewhat gun shaped, the end a bit like a taser. The last time she’d seen it, Caboose had just been injected into her mind. Her attention swerves inexorably towards the barrel like it’s a blackhole.

The Director picks it up with a grunt of effort, walks in her direction, and she watches the gun like its a snake. That machine looks like it hurts. Feels like it’ll hurt. A memory that isn’t a memory. Not hers.

She’ll get her mom back, and with her, dad. The family will be whole again. It will be like it used to, before everything went wrong.

“I’m going to need for you to eject Caboose so I can take the imprint.”

There’s that feeling of a recoiling flinch inside of her mind that feels like the spike of a migraine. Caboose doesn’t like being ejected, or logged off. Sleeping is fine because there are dreams there, he says, but not that. And she understands. She knows that it’s her fault.

Her hand moves to the back of her neck.

(Michael J. Caboose and his squad. Everyone mom has ever known. A woman, for the sake of her body. This war isn’t important. Other people aren’t important. This Project is a lie told to everyone who has ever fought and killed and died for it.)

She feels so cold and clear, like she’s a million miles away from her body, like this isn’t real.

Agent Carolina does the things she has to, no matter how hard they are.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and ejects Caboose, the neck port recognizing her fingerprint. Her head goes cold and empty. His chip feels warm and small and fragile in her palm. She tucks him away into a compartment in her armor.

She doesn’t want for him to have to see this.
Chapter Summary

A horrendous screeching noise of metal tearing in a spectacularly loud way rings throughout the ship, and he stumbles until he activates his mag boots on automatic, sticking himself to the floor.

A klaxon starts blaring throughout the ship. There’s a roaring in his ears. INTERNAL OXYGEN SUPPLY ACTIVATED, says North’s HUD. He realizes that the roaring is the sound of air rapidly being sucked out of the ship into the vacuum of space. He turns his head over his shoulder against the howling air to the sight of metal doors snapping shut, blocking off the rest of the hallway for him. Right. To save all of the employees not wearing armor.

He’s sectioned off in the damaged part of the ship that’s losing air.

Maybe if North injects a GPS chip underneath South’s skin while she’s asleep he can finally stop harping on her about turning on her tracker during missions, and she can stop successfully avoiding him on the ship, North thinks wistfully as he wanders the hallways of the Mother of Invention like a stalking specter who cannot rest until their murder has been solved and avenged. He’s overdue for about a dozen different tasks as of this moment, but he’ll claim concussion confusion that he doesn’t actually have if he has to because his job that he makes a living with doesn’t fucking matter right now.

Without any bullshit, without any carefully chosen words to soften the blow, to make it not so blatant and sharp and real and ugly, putting it bluntly, honestly, North’s twin sister, two minutes younger than him and eternally tetchy about it, the most familiar face in the whole galaxy to him, someone whose footsteps he can recognize in a fraction of a second, someone whose voice that he’s heard so many times that it feels like he knows it better than his own, whose every tic and preference and pet peeve and grudge is known to him so deeply that it’s an unthinking subconscious kind of knowledge, like how to breathe, how to walk, how to flip a trigger--

North’s sister confessed to him three days ago that she wants to die. No frills, no excuses. She’d rather brain damage herself in the hopes of becoming someone else than to stay as herself. She can’t stand herself that much.

And some might say that that’s not the same, but it is. His mom, who had struggled with depression for her whole life and feared that her children would end up the same way, had warned him of some of the traps and pitfalls, tried to prepare him in case it ever happened to him (and more importantly, South, because she wouldn’t bother listening to the advice so he would have to remember it for her).

I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up, is what his mom had said. That’s a suicidal thought, even if it doesn’t seem like it. It’s your brain being sneaky. It’s a symptom. It’s a sign. Look out for it, honey. Take care of your sister.

South sneers at the idea of suicide, of being broken and sad and giving up, and yet she does suicidally reckless things over and over again. How many times has she just barely survived
because his rifle scope was following her across the battlefield, watching over her, prioritizing her? And now she’s revved things up, now she’s outright hurting herself in the name of escaping herself and her own misery. How long until she escalates even more? Will she even have to escalate before she succeeds at what she, at her core, wants to do? God, she probably doesn’t even fully realize that she wants to die. She’s too thick headed for that, too stubborn and shortsighted to realize.

No one knows South as well as he does. Like the back of his hand.

How did he miss this? He’s her twin. He’s her brother. He’s supposed to watch out for her. He’s supposed to be watching her back, protecting her, helping her, he’d promised--

Grif in his head, quietly, <You were mad at her.>

That just hammers in the guilt of not having paid enough attention, of not being close enough to her, of failing, of letting his sister down, of letting her get hurt, and he’d be hurt that Grif would try and make him feel worse about this than he already does, except he can’t feel a lick of accusation from him.

“And?” he asks.

<You were going to shout at her, let her know how you feel. That you’re sick of ignoring how you feel and what you want so you can take care of someone who fights you every step of the way and hates you for it.>

“Yeah,” he says, feeling dry mouthed with how close he’d gotten to shooting himself in the foot there. South is suicidal. Now is not the goddamn time to be honest, to be selfish, to stop taking care of her. She needs him more than ever right now. He could have killed her.

<And now you’re ignoring how you feel and what you want so you can take care of someone who fights you every step of the way and hates you for it. Again.>

“Grif,” he says. “What’s your point? That I should stop? That’s really not an option.” He doesn’t get what Grif’s trying to get at here. He can’t possibly mean that--

<It could be,> Grif says, in the way of someone who knows that they’re saying something that the person listening emphatically does not agree with. A bit hopeless, but trudging on anyways because what if just for once, if you explain yourself well enough, they will listen to you? Obligation overpowering the resignation just long enough for the words to come out and then instantly be regretted.

North’s so incredulous that he doesn’t even know how to respond to that.

<She threw an explosion at you back there. She’s avoiding you again.>

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, starting to feel angry. He’s got a hard enough time looking out for South without Grif opposing him as well. “I had your shield.”

<She wasn’t thinking about that when she did it.>

“No,” he grants. “But she wasn’t thinking about murdering me either. She was just-- slamming a door, basically.” Throwing a tantrum. Getting him to leave her alone to her brooding. Familiar turf, nothing to get bothered about.

<She’s never going to get better, no matter how much you try to help her,> Grif says, apathetic fact in his voice, sad resignation coming from the core of him connected to North’s neurons and
“So if I just leave her alone, she’ll have no one to take care of her,” North, who does not think very highly of Donut at this point, says. “Since she won’t do it herself. She needs me.”

<But you don’t need her.>

“So?”

<So who’s taking care of you, if you’re busy with her? Who’s making sure that she doesn’t bleed you dry in her anger and idiocy and edgelord angst?>

“I can take care of myself.”

<You aren’t.>

“I know how to be cautious on the battlefield.”

<You watch South’s surroundings more than you watch your own.>

“It’s fine. I’m good enough, I can defend myself.”

<That guy with the knife snuck up on you last mission.>

“I had your shield then. We killed him.”

<What if I’m offline?>

“Anyone can die out on the field if they’re unlucky, Grif.”

<That’s not what I’m talking about.> Frustration cracks across his mind like a lightning bolt in a stormcloud. <That’s not what I mean.>

North thinks he knows what he does mean. How bone deep exhausted he feels, sometimes. Like he can’t relax and trust her, can’t take his eyes off her for a minute without her getting into a mess that he’ll have to get her out of and do damage control for.

It doesn’t matter. He can tolerate those living conditions. He has since highschool. He’ll live.

<It’s not living if your entire life revolves around her.>

It doesn’t, he wants to say, except here he is, an Agent of Project Freelancer, a killer, a host to an experimental AI. All because he can’t leave her alone, even when they’re both approaching their thirties. Will he be tied to her hip until the day he dies? He can picture it far, far too well. He’s having a hard time imagining any kind of life that isn’t with her. He’s never had that. What would he even do? Who would he be, if he isn’t South’s brother?

<Your life should be about you.> Grif insists.

“... I thought you understood,” he says at last. He’s always seemed like he understands, until now, how important a reckless, thoughtless sister is, how important it is to stay close and look out for and take care of her. It’s not just another part of his life that he can discard, like a hairstyle or a shirt or his freedom or his privacy or his name. South is North. Shouldn’t Grif get that? He’s inside of here with him. He should be able to see it. Touch it. Understand. Please understand. Just one person. That’s all he wants.
“You’re not like a good kind of family,” he says. “There’s not enough love to make it worth it, just enough to keep you chained together.”

“What would you know about what family should be like?” he snaps off, hurt and angry and so tired. Mom looks up at him with that familiar haze of tears and alcohol in her eyes.

“Don’t go,” she says, sprawled out on the couch, clutching at the bottle of Jack Daniels the exact same way Kai does to her teddy bear. She’s wearing the same clothes she was two weeks ago.

Grif’s backpack is packed for the day. The school bus is going to be here soon. He needs to go. If he skips school again he’s going to get detention. Miss Vera’s going to be mad. She’ll put it on his Permanent Record, which he knows is bad.

“I’ll be back by three,” he tries.

“If I’m alone, I’ll kill myself,” she says.

He stands still for a long moment, just letting the wave of tired wash over him, bracing himself against it, just letting it sink in until he can move without showing it.

He puts his backpack down on the floor. Mom opens her arms to him. He goes to her, sinking into her warm soft hug, giving up on going to school today, on leaving the house, on doing anything that isn’t staying right where he is and listening to mom cry and drink and stroke his hair and talk about how hard it is.

“You’re such a sweet boy,” she says. He wants to get up and leave. He doesn’t say anything.

He must be heartless, to feel like this when his mom tells him that she wants to die. To not feel scared or horrified or sad anymore, but just very, very tired. Tired of hearing those familiar words. Tired of being trapped here, in her arms, by her side, her only life preserver because she can’t swim, won’t ever learn how to swim on her own, without help, without

Grif shakes off the bizarre waking nightmare faster than North does (his mom was always sad alone, tried to keep it away from them, like it was a contagious disease instead of heritable), remembers where they are and what they were talking about, rushing back into the conversation like it’s more important that what just happened. He feels more intense than North’s ever felt him.

<Taking care of people that never take care of themselves aren’t worth it. Just cut her off. Get away. Run. She’s a trap, not family. You don’t have to stay with her. Chew off your leg and go, even if it hurts. It’ll save your life. If she dies, you won’t die with her. You’ll die if you stay. You can just leave. Live your own life, for yourself. Let her take care of herself. She doesn’t even want your help. Fine. Let her try on her own. Maybe she’ll grow a little and actually manage. Or not. It’s not your fucking problem. It’s hers.>

“You’ve… got really strong opinions on this,” he says, hand braced against the nearest wall, dizzy. More strong than he’s used to, from Grif, when it comes to something that isn’t just a trivial
argument about a movie or a food. It’s like South had changed in Grif’s mind completely, the second he found out that she wanted to stop existing. Stopped being a messy troublesome sister and become something dangerous, something beyond salvaging.

(What had that flash been? Something about his… mom? It’s so hard to keep a hold of it when Grif keeps talking about something else entirely.)

<If you only ever tolerate and suffer her then she’s not your family,> he goes on, so desperate to make North see his point. <You give and she takes and that never changes. That’s not family.>

North opens his mouth for a rebuttal, because he has to have a rebuttal, he’s taken care of South all of his life and he can’t just leave her now that she needs him the most just because she makes it goddamn impossible to help her--

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A klaxon starts blaring throughout the ship. There’s a roaring in his ears. INTERNAL OXYGEN SUPPLY ACTIVATED, says North’s HUD. He realizes that the roaring is the sound of air rapidly being sucked out of the ship into the vacuum of space. He turns his head over his shoulder against the howling air to the sight of metal doors snapping shut, blocking off the rest of the hallway for him. Right. To save all of the employees not wearing armor.

He’s sectioned off in the damaged part of the ship that’s losing air.

He starts walking forward again, slow and laborious with his mag boots keeping him rooted to the floor with the oxygen trying to rip him forward like a hurricane. If he’s trapped here, he might as well go and see why the ship is damaged. Maybe he can do something about it.

<And maybe we can go to one of the other airlocks by way of walking across the outside of the ship,> Grif says, clearly hoping that this is the course of action that they will take. And they will, as soon as North deals with whatever the problem is.

“Command, this is North Dakota,” he says into his comms. “I’m in the vicinity of the disturbance, I’m heading over to check it out. Over.”

“Roger that,” replies an extremely harried sounding man. They aren’t used to being attacked on their homeground. “Be quick about it, Agent.”

He rounds a corner, and sees the problem: someone has steered their own spaceship (more the size of a transportation vehicle a la the Millenium Falcon than something for a couple hundred of people to live in with only minor cabin fever like MOI) into the Mother of Invention like a battering ram. Kamikaze style. The attacking ship is lodged into the MOI, front sticking into the hallway itself, oxygen rushing shrieking out into the void of space through the twisted metal teeth of the site of impact that’s got the attacking ship firmly lodged where it is.

<Jesus,> Grif says. <What kind of fucking moron pulls that much of a dumbass move?>

The windshield of the attacking ship shatters open from the inside from an explosion, bulletproof thick glass shattering out into the hallway before quickly being sucked out by the gaps around the attacking ship and the MOI where it’s stuck.

And out climbs a cameraman. North blinks. He’s wearing white and light blue armor with cameras installed on his helmet. He trips and falls onto the floor on his face as he’s crawling out of the ship, and clings onto some debris and whimpers as the vacuum of space tries to rip him out of the ship,
even though he looks too big to actually get through those holes, unless the attacking ship jostles and moves.

A woman in white and light blue armor follows, jumping down onto the floor with slightly more composure.

“Are you getting this, Jax?” she asks excitedly. “An entire illegal military project-- this is one hell of a scoop. You better be rolling.”

“Yes, Miss Andrews,” Jax whimpers. “It’s only, um, space is trying to kill me?”

“Use your mag boots, Jax.”

“My what?”

North feels like he’s definitely obligated to break Jax’s cameras because this is all seems to be shaping up to look like one hell of a security leak, but also, illegal? No, it’s just secret--

“I told you hos that a grenade would work!” another voice cheers, and a woman in yellow armor climbs out of the attacking ship and

(someone whose voice that he’s heard so many times that it feels like he knows it better than his own)

North feels like he’s falling away from his body as he looks at this woman even though his mag boots are still functioning. He--

“Yeah, guess you were right, Miss Grif!” Jax says.

“The windows were not built to withstand explosions from within,” Andrews says dryly.

“Bitch, I told you to call me Kai.”

*Kai*

Memories crack open inside of him like an egg.
Anyone will do

Chapter Summary

This is how Grif dies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is how Grif dies:

They’ve been trudging on foot for three days through shit weather towards where the action is because of some bullshit about ’stealth’ or whatever, but Grif secretly suspects that they just didn’t get a Pelican ride because the UNSC doesn’t have the time or the resources to waste on a chauffeuring a shitty, small (there’s only six of them, all varying levels of incompetent) squad like theirs around. Whatever, the longer it takes them to get to the frontlines, the better in his book. Maybe it’ll have moved far away by the time they escape this hell jungle.

He’s been staring dully at the back of Donut’s head in complete silence as they march as best as they can through the foliage for who knows how long now, everyone too exhausted to talk shit to occupy their attention as they just keep on with the monotony of walking and walking and walking--

“This is Command, come in sargeant,” an unfamiliar voice crackles in his ear, and he startles along with everyone else in his squad. Caboose looks frantically around them until Tucker taps his shoulder and gestures to their helmets as explanation.

“This is Sarge,” Sarge grunts, answering. He lets them all stay on the line if they keep quiet during calls because they incessantly ask questions after every conversation he has with Command otherwise. Hey, there’s not a whole lot to entertain yourself with around here, okay?

And why is Command calling anyways?

“There’s been a change,” the voice says. They usually use the same person to talk to them every time, some woman who hasn’t bothered giving them their name no matter how much Tucker hassles her, or even so much as dropped the impersonal we pronoun. This isn’t the same person, though. A woman he’s never heard before. Sounds just as impersonal though.

Eh, it doesn’t matter. Lady’s probably just having a sick day or whatever and the intern’s filling in for her.

“A change? Did we slaughter those damned aliens? Without me!?"

“The battle has shifted. We will need you elsewhere. Standby for new coordinates.”

Caboose leans in close to Sarge, leaning down because he’s approximately two whole feet taller than him, and shouts right into his ear like he isn’t already connected into the call and like the woman is at the other end of a long distant tunnel, straining to hear him. “WHAT’S YOUR
NAME? HI I’M CABOOSE.”

Sarge starts swearing and shouting about tinnitus while Tucker drags Caboose off the man, and Grif cackles, surprised and delighted.

There’s a brief silence, and then the woman says, “... Sheila. Retrieving your new coordinates.”

The line clicks off.

“Come onnn coordinates that puts the frontline even further away,” Grif says, holding his rifle with one hand so he can cross the fingers of his other one.

“Dude, if I have to march one more day I’m just going to say fuck it and start a new life here in the wilderness like that Jungle Book kid,” Tucker complains.

“That’s not why Mowgli lived in the jungle,” Simmons protests from behind him. He always takes that position in the marching line to make sure that Grif doesn’t lag behind and get lost or something. Like they don’t have comms. Worrywart.

Before Tucker and Simmons can launch into an argument about the Jungle Book of all things, they receive the coordinates. Grif groans. Sarge whoops.

“Looks like we’ll be seeing some action sooner rather than later, boys!” he says (Donut starts in on an innuendo that Grif immediately blocks out of his perception) like this is a good thing that’ll cheer them up. Even Simmons can only muster very fake and strained enthusiasm. They’re all sick of marching. But none of them want to go and probably die either.

Sarge starts whistling.

Well, most of them.

They keep moving forward, but Sarge takes them in a slightly northern direction now. They march, and they take a brief break because everyone had made a pact to riot if Sarge kept cutting their breaks in favor of yelling what sounds like the motivational slogans a demon from hell would come up with at them and keeping them marching instead. Simmons had to be peer pressured into it, but that wasn’t exactly hard.

He relishes in taking off his helmet, escaping the humid air inside his armor to the equally humid air outside it. At least it’s different air, sort of. Well, he gets to let his hair out of his bun for a while, at least. He drinks three more mouthfuls of water than Sarge has allowed him, and lets his lecturing wash over him as his eyes glaze over and he rests his feet, sitting down for the first time since morning.

Donut is lowkey pitching a fit about how frizzy the humidity makes his hair. Caboose is running his hands through his hair, apparently delighted about how frizzy the humidity makes his hair. Tucker is eyeing a bush, clearly wondering whether he’ll be able to squeeze a jerk off session in before the break is over.

He watches Simmons gulp down water, accidentally catches his eye when he’s done. Simmons gives him a tired smile and leans back against the tree trunk he’s sitting by.

“What?” he asks, still smiling that smile. It’s a good one, Grif decides.

“Give me your share of water,” he says, just to have something to say besides the truth.
Simmons narrows his eyes at him, not serious but willing to sink into the argument Grif’s offering him. “You can’t be glutton for water now as well, Grif. And I already drank it anyways.”

“Hey, do you see a whole lot of soda vending machines around here? Water’s the closest thing I’ve got to creature comforts right now, and I need--”

“Damn it, Grif, listen to me!” Sarge snaps.

A huge ass beetle drops down from a branch above to land directly on Simmons’ head. He screams loud enough for Sarge to scold him about being covert in enemy territory. Grif and Tucker laugh at him, Caboose acts like he knows what’s so funny, and Donut acts like he’s too nice to laugh at Simmons.

(This will be his last happy memory.)

The break ends, and they go back to marching. Soon enough, the sun sets. Soon enough, they see a base.

It’s large, but they somehow don’t see it until they’re practically on top of it. Well situated, Simmons says. All Grif cares about is that the guards that spot them first don’t shoot them on sight. God, they really are a shitty squad.

They walk up to it slowly, and as a large rolling door opens for them, like on a garage, Grif spares a moment to be excited about maybe sleeping in an actual bed again instead of a bedroll. Heck, a cot will do just fine.

“So, where do you need us?” Sarge asks promptly, because he is awful and seems to somehow not notice that its pitch fucking black outside. You know, the time normal people sleep.

“Just in here, soldiers,” the only person around not wearing armor says. A middle aged white dude with bright green eyes, glasses, and the two biggest soldiers in the room at his shoulders. Definitely the guy in charge around here. But even CO’s wear armor on this planet, almost all of the time. Grif stares at his civilian clothes, kind of weirded out.

Going by protocol, Sarge should be the one who goes into the room the man gestured to first. But Caboose wouldn’t be able to remember protocol if his life depended on it (if his life depended on it), so he zooms right past all of them into the open doorway, clearly excited about being somewhere that isn’t just a bunch of green nature bullshit for the first time in days. Grif can’t say he blames him.

“Caboose--!” Tucker snaps, because he’s appointed himself as the main guy in charge of looking after Caboose even though they get along almost as badly as Grif and Sarge do most of the time, and there’s a higher chance of Caboose listening to literally anyone else on the squad. He rushes after him past Sarge, breaking protocol without hesitation to scold Caboose for breaking protocol. Like he even cares about protocol.

Sarge grumbles about disrespectful subordinates and how a preference for blue armor is a clear indicator of contrary soldiers that need to put through basic another dozen times and follows in after them. Then Donut. Then Grif. Then Simmons.

(The order is important.)

The room is large, but empty. Up high on the wall, Grif can see observation windows looking into the room. He thinks he can see the green eyed man up there. Ten soldiers enter the room after them, two of them carrying something strange between them, the eight others carrying their guns.
“Uh, I do not think this is our room,” Caboose says.

“It isn’t,” says the second man without armor that Grif has seen in months now, his voice smooth, his skin dark, and his hair shaved close to his scalp.

The door closes behind him. Behind them.

“What the fuck?” Tucker says.

“Now, FILSS,” the man with the smooth voice says, pressing a hand to his ear, presumably accessing a discreet comm.

Grif has a bad feeling about this.

He turns to mutter so to Simmons, and he can’t. He can’t move.

“Armor lock engaged,” that woman's voice rings through the room, source unseen.

He can’t move.

“Sarge?” Simmons asks uncertainly, voice breaking, already scared. Grif can see him out of the corner of his eye. He isn’t moving an inch, left arm frozen in a kind of awkward position, hanging motionless in the air.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Sarge demands.

The soldiers fan out around the room, around them, guns trained on them as if they can still move, but the man with the smooth voice walks past all of them, towards where Caboose is making confused noises as he tries and fails to move, towards the top of the line. The two soldiers carrying the strange thing follow him. It looks awkward and unwieldy, a weird shape, and he can’t for the life of him figure out what it is. Not that that’s what he’s occupied with at the moment.

“Take his helmet off,” the smooth voice says.

“My name is Caboose,” Caboose says, sounding confused but like he thinks this is where introductions should happen.

“I’m the Counselor,” the Counselor says, like this is all perfectly normal.

“I think, ah, something is wrong with my armor? Can you take all of it off, please?”

“Maybe later. Alright, lift the device and hold it up against the back of his head here. Steady.”

“What are you doing!?” Tucker says, sounding that particular kind of angry he gets. Angry to cover up the fear.

“Well and see. Turn it on.”

Caboose screams, and the situation goes from scary to terrifying. It isn’t the little shout he makes when he’s startled or he stubs his toe or he wants attention or is tired or bored or or or

It’s a real, pained scream, long and loud and ragged. The last time Grif heard someone scream like that, it was because someone had lost a limb during a training exercise with grenades during basic.

“STOP IT,” Tucker roars, so angry, so scared.
“Oh my god oh my god oh my god,” Simmons whispers to his left.

“What are they doing?” Donut asks, like Grif knows.

Grif can’t see what’s happening, is the worst thing. He can just listen. Just guess.

Tucker can see, probably. Tucker sounds horrified.

“That’s enough,” the Counselor says, and the screaming stops just like that. “Next.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Sarge growls furiously. “Don’t--!”

All Caboose gets out is a bleary, dazed, “Tuck--?” before he’s cut off by a gunshot. Tucker screams like Grif’s never heard him scream before.

It abruptly feels like there’s ice flowing in his veins instead of blood.

“Caboose?” he asks, and his voice comes out a wavering rasp for some reason. If only he could turn his head. All he’d have to do to see what’s going on is turn his head--

“Is he dead?” Donut asks, voice hushed, and no. No, they can’t just jump to that conclusion straight away. They can’t just ask that because what if the answer is--

Tucker sobs, which is answer enough.

Caboose is dead. Caboose died and Grif was in the same room as him and he still died. Caboose is dead.

“Why?” he asks without thinking, and he can hear the tears in his voice but can’t feel them on his face yet. It’s too early for that. It’s been seconds.

It happened so fast.

Grif hears the sound of a helmet being tossed to the floor. Tucker’s.

It’s still happening.

It’s like the breath is knocked out of him as that thought penetrates the fog of what the fuck is going on and Caboose Caboose Caboose. It’s still happening. The Counselor had said next. Next.

There are six of them.

There are five of them.

Tucker is still sobbing, too devastated and shocked for fronts or curses. He remembers, the memory startlingly vivid and sudden, how angry he had been when Caboose got shot in the gut once. He’d shown nothing but anger, during or after, although Grif caught him with red rimmed eyes that he pretended not to notice more than once while they waited for Caboose to be discharged from the hospital.

This is the first time he’s heard him cry. Tucker’s too proud to allow it, too quick to retreat to anger instead. But if Caboose is dead then nothing is salvageable. No reason to fake it, to posture. It’s already ruined and broken forever.

Tucker starts screaming, the same way Caboose had. That same overwhelming pain apparent in his voice. Desperate agony.
Sarge hasn’t stopped shouting once. Swearing, cursing, threatening, loud and furious and edged with tears. He pretends otherwise, but Sarge is an easy crier.

Grif can’t tell if he’s shaking or not because his armor’s as hard and unyielding as rock.

The screaming stops but it just makes Grif squeeze his eyes shut, wishing he could press his hands over his ears instead, because he thinks he already knows what comes now--

Tucker doesn’t get a word out before he’s shot.

There are four of them.

Sarge gets louder, somehow. He’s going to shout himself hoarse, Grif thinks hysterically, nonsensically.

He hears a helmet get carelessly tossed to the floor. It actually skitters into his field of view. Bright red with a yellow visor. Grif wants to scream but he feels like he wouldn’t be able to move even if it weren’t for the armor, like every part of him is frozen, his voice, his throat, his muscles, his bones.

Nothing he can do will help, will stop this.

Sarge doesn’t scream. He makes small, helpless noises, like he’s trying desperately with everything he has to stay quiet and he’s still failing. He’s never sounded so hurt before.

Grif has to stop this.

“Command,” he whispers, not because he’s trying to be stealthy but because he can’t raise his voice any higher. “Command, come in.”

Comms are blocked.

Sarge stops making noises.

He should have noticed. He should have noticed that comms were blocked before they walked into this room, this base, before the guards spotted them. He should have made a comment right away about how it wasn’t the usual person from Command comming them, he should have spoken up, should have pressed, should have--

His voice weak, Sarge says, “I’ll see you in--”

Gunshot.

Red blood spatters onto the yellow visor on the floor.

There are three of them.

Grif doesn’t think this is how Sarge wanted to die.

Without Sarge’s yelling, he can easily hear his own hammering heartbeat. Donut’s muffled sobs. The Counselor and his soldier’s approaching footsteps. That fast, shallow way Simmons is breathing that tells him he’s having a panic attack. Grif should calm him down. That’s his job, that’s what he’s supposed to, he’s supposed to keep Simmons calm and he’s always been happy and ready to do it. He's good at it.

He opens his mouth to do so, to start the stream of distracting, relaxing bullshit and nothing comes
out. He can’t speak. There’s nothing he could possibly say to make this tolerable, to make this
okay.

Simmons is going to die while having a panic attack, his mind overwhelmed with fear. And there’s
nothing Grif can do to stop it even though if he could just move he’d be able to reach out and touch
him.

He wishes Sarge was still here, shouting at the top of his lungs so Grif didn’t have to hear these
things.

The Counselor comes back into his view, just at the corner of his right eye. He reaches out and
takes Donut’s helmet off and he feels himself snarl. He can feel the tears on his face. Can see the
ones on Donut’s.

“WHY!?” he asks again, roars at the top of his lungs, suddenly able to be loud again.

The Counselor flicks his eyes towards him, but then back towards Donut. Dismissing him. Doesn’t
even deign to look bothered.

“WE’RE NOT EVEN IMPORTANT,” he shouts. “WE’RE JUST SOME ASSHOLES!”

“Anyone will do,” the Counselor finally answers him. “Anyone we can make quietly disappear,
anyways. Quantity over quality, in this case.”

Donut starts screaming, and it feels wrong to try and demand answers over that even though he
only has minutes left in his life. Seconds, maybe.

He’s going to die. Donut is going to die. Simmons is going to die. Everyone he cares about except
for Kai is either dead or about to die and he doesn’t even know why.

Donut stops screaming, and Grif wants to close his eyes for this part but at the same time he
can’t. He couldn’t see any of the others. Won’t be able to see himself or Simmons.

The Counselor steps back beforehand to avoid the spray of blood, the exiting bullet.

The gunshot is so close to him this time it leaves his ears ringing. An explosion of red.

Donut’s head lists on his neck, and Grif waits for him to crumple onto the floor. He doesn’t.

Grif realizes he didn’t hear any of the other’s bodies hitting the floor either. Realizes that Donut
isn’t moving from the position he was frozen in while he was still alive.

They’re all still standing, dead and to his right.

Why does this make him feel so sick.

There are two of them.

He hears the Counselor’s footsteps.

It’s Grif’s turn.

Simmons sounds like he’s trying and trying to inhale air but it just isn’t working. Grif should be
calming him down. That’s his job, it’s the only job he has that he’s fine with, that he doesn’t need
poking or prodding with. And he’s ignoring it. Ignoring Simmons.
Now isn’t the time to ignore Simmons.

“Simmons,” he forces out past the lump in his throat. It’s okay. No. It’s going to be okay. No.

He’s so happy he doesn’t have to watch Simmons die too.

He’s so selfish.

The Counselor takes his helmet off, quick and efficient. The cool, air conditioned air hits his tear-wet face, and he thinks that the humid jungle air he felt during his break with his squad was ten thousand times more refreshing, ten thousand times easier to breathe in.

But with a lack of helmet comes a freedom of movement, at least above his neck. He has two choices: turn to see his dead teammates, standing neatly in a row. Turn to see alive Simmons one last time.

He turns to Simmons without hesitation, which is good because hands reach out immediately to hold his head still.

Simmons is looking right at him, frozen in the right position for it. He has a way better vantage point of what happened, what’s happening. He probably saw all of them die, and he was quiet for all of it, struck silent since Caboose’s death. Simmons freezes up, sometimes. Words get caught in his throat when it’s important.

He’s so grateful he can’t see whatever heartbreaking expression Simmons is making.

He’s so crushed he can’t look him in the eye one last time.

He hasn’t even told Simmons--

(This is where the Grif that survives memories cut off. He doesn’t miss much. Not in terms of time elapsed.)

A pressure on the back of his neck, at the base of his skull, and then unimaginable pain, like a lightning bolt went straight into his brain, frying every single little neuron, not leaving a stone unturned.

It goes on for what feels like forever, yet he can’t think while it’s happening. Just endure it.

When it’s over, his thoughts are scattered and hazy, his throat raw, his chin slumped forward as far as it can go.

“Grif,” Simmons cries plaintively, his first words since this all started. Cries.

Grif has never been able to stop himself from tunnel visioning in on Simmons when he’s crying, to stop it from being the only thing he can think about until he fixes it somehow.

“Simmons,” he whispers hoarsely. What can he say to help? Not that it’s okay. Not that it’s going to be okay. Those are lies.

(He hasn’t even told Simmons--)

“I love you.”

Simmons sobs brokenly and Grif’s still too dazed from whatever they just did to his brain to wonder if he just made things worse. He just wishes that he could hold Simmons. That he wouldn’t
have to leave him alone now.

He feels a gun press up against the back of his head, sees the Counselor take a step away and to the side.

It isn’t his choice to make.

The Counselor nods.

There is one of them.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: this is the first chapter of QOQ I wrote, two years ago! I hope the writing holds up.
South doesn’t want a whole fucking lecture or whatever the hell North is hounding her for, so when she sees him turn a corner into the hallway she’s in she opens the closest door and ducks inside. 

It’s a broom closet.

“Talk about memory lane,” Donut says. He doesn’t have to mutter when they’re alone like this. She’s getting used to how his voice has changed, now that he’s using her vocal cords. “Hiding inside of a closet!”

“We all get it, you’re gay,” South says. “Somehow. Also, you haven’t been in the closet a day in your life.”

“It’s important to me that you don’t forget.”

“That’s really not an issue, don’t worry.”

Her eyes idly scan over the equipment she’s trapped inside of this small space with, like reading the print at the back of your toothpaste tube when you’re bored and taking a shit. Nothing better to do. Trying not to think about how she’s hiding inside of a closet from her own fucking brother like a scared little rat who doesn’t want to face consequences or unpleasant words, or else she’ll get so mad at herself that she’ll break something. Brooms. Mops. Sponges. Steel wool. Trash bags.

Bleach.

Smell it. Drink some.

“He must be gone by now,” Donut says urgently, unease seeping from him. He senses it. What she wants to do. “We can leave now.”

What are the side effects of drinking bleach now again? She knows that it’s lethally dangerous, but not the details, exactly. Braincells dying, she’s pretty sure, which is what she’s after. Organs shutting off if you drink too much, like the liver. She won’t drink much. Just a little, just enough--

“No.” Donut puts so much firm denial behind the word that all of her thoughts stop for a moment, white out. She blinks, and slowly scowls as she regains her equilibrium.

“You don’t get a say.” She’ll drink bleach if she fucking wants to.

“It’s my body too, you know.”

brother

Chapter Summary
“Says who?”

“You, but only when it’s convenient for you, apparently!”

“Well, I wouldn’t be able to tell you that it isn’t your body too if you’d just let me do what I have to to get us back together!”

“I don’t want to be together again!”

She flinches. Snarls.

She’d known. He carefully hadn’t said, and she’d just as carefully hadn’t thought about it, but she’d felt it. The hesitation, the discomfort, the guilt and the pity. And why would he want to be with her? Donut may be an dumb obnoxious spineless twink, but he’s also a decent fucking person. She gets better when she’s South-and-Donut. He gets worse. She dillutes him, poisons--

She grabs at the bottle of bleach. Donut, who had been getting guilty and pitying again, goes sharp and hot with indignant anger again. Better.

“Don’t you dare, missy,” Donut hisses, as threatening as a huffy kitten.

“Watch me,” she snaps back, and then twists the cap off.

Donut shoves her out of the driver's seat, yanking at the nerves to her right wrist and making it spasm painfully. She pours bleach down her armor front instead of into her mouth.

“You bitch!” she howls.

“You were asking for it!”

“Do you want for me to stay like this?” Of course he doesn’t. He just doesn’t want to lose himself. If he could have a different her and stay himself, then--

“Yes! Of course!”

“Excuse me?”

“You do know that I like you, right? Well, you could probably tone down all of the constant angst a little bit. Not everything is an end of the world insult--!”

“You don’t! You don’t like me!” He can’t possibly. What is there to possibly like? Her personality is shit and garbage all the way down to the rotten foundation.

“Don’t tell me how I feel! You’re the cattiest bitch on this ship and its fantastic!”

“My constant sniping is not fantastic.”

“Well, the under the belt blows can get a bit too mean, but you’re very funny sometimes, you know.”

“I don’t have a sense of humor.”

“Bullfrog! And you’re a wonderful fighter, too!”

“I’m lowest on the leaderboard right now.”
“Ohhh, you’re the lowest of the best, my bad. And that thing changes from week to week. And you’re only so low in the ranks because you’re brooding and drinking bleach because you’re so dumb that you think that you have to give yourself braindamage to improve as a person.”

“Fuck you, I’m not dumb! And how else would I goddamned improve?!”

“LIKE EVERYONE ELSE DOES! JUST STOP DOING BAD THINGS AND START DOING GOOD THINGS! IT’S NOT! THAT! HARD!”

This is when the ship shakes and all of the contents of the broom closet fall on top of them. After a moment, she swears and starts shoving things off of herself, stumbling upwards back onto her feet.

“What the fuck,” she mutters opening the door and stepping back out into the hallway. She sees a couple paperpushers sprawled out on the floor where they’ve fallen. They kind of look like they’d been lingering by the broom closet door a moment ago, listening to what probably sounded like South having a shouting argument with herself about bleach.

Eh, whatever. Some people just don’t matter.

“That’s not true,” Donut whispers, but there’s not any real heat or conviction in his words.

“What the hell happened?” she asks them, on the off chance that they might know.

“Um,” one of them says, shakily getting up on his feet. “I don’t know, but--” he points down the hallway and she looks, “--those look like the emergency depressurization doors.”

So they do. A metal door slammed down, making a deadend where a hallway once was.

The hallway her brother had walked down only five minutes ago.

“Run,” she says, and her voice comes out murderously flat.

“W--what?”

“You need to run as fast as you can as far as you can get,” she says, slowly enunciating each syllable, “because I’m going to blow those doors up.”

The paperpushers blanch. “You can’t--”

“I’m going to.”

They run. South gives them enough time by walking to the doors instead of running, and Donut doesn’t protest or even disagree. She feels cold and furious and--

--scared--

“There’s nothing wrong with being worried about your brother,” Donut says, and she snaps, “Shut up!”

And then they blow up the doors.

“You know, you should really get more in touch with your emotions!” he shouts, and she snarls as she walks into the sucking vacuum, trying not to faceplant as the oxygen rips at her back. No nerds fall screaming past her, so she’s going to go ahead and assumed that they got far enough away to not die.
“I don’t know if you haven’t noticed, moron, but I’m kind of too emotional.”

“I mean the emotions that aren’t anger. You’re doing very good on the anger! Very open, very honest! Could maybe be a bit more constructive, though?”

“This is not the time for holding hands and talking about my feelings!” she says, clutching at the wall as she laboriously walks down the hallway. “Space is trying to kill me.”

“Oh, it’s never time to talk about your feelings,” Donut replies in a decidedly huffy way.

South would say something disparaging, except space really is trying to kill her and she actually needs to focus.

(Just stop doing bad things. It’s not that hard. Not that hard. Maybe for everyone else it’s not that hard. No one gave her that memo. No one--)

“I feel like you do want to talk about it, actually,” Donut says.

“Fuck! Off!”

“Well! I never.”

She rounds a corner and there North is, sprawled out on the floor with a soldier in yellow armor having planted their boot on him like they’re triumphantly posing for a photo of a downed buck, with a cameraman and a narrating anchor to boot. She has a single surreal moment of recognizing the chick in blue and white armor from the news like five fucking years ago and then she’s howling with rage.

She deactivates her mag boots and lets the howling oxygen rip her down the hallway and slam into the yellow armor bitch. Without Yellow’s boot in the way, North starts sliding towards the gaps torn in the side of the ship, a limp unresisting weight.

“Oh, fuck,” the cameraman says, and scrambles to tackle North onto the floor.

South and Yellow slam into the ship lodged into the MOI, the air suck keeping them pinned there above the floor, and there’s a moment of Yellow coughing and swearing and then South is snarling into her visor. “You better hope he’s still alive or else I’m going to vaporize all of the blood in your veins into steam.”

She doesn’t know if that’s even something that she can do, but she’s willing to try and find out.

“Hot,” Yellow croaks, and then the ship starts groaning and creaking like a protesting animal as it starts slowly being ripped out of the MOI, jostled loose by their impact. “Oh, fuck.”

“Kaikaina is now in combat with one of these so called ‘Freelancers’,” the anchorwoman says into the camera. “Jax, you’re getting this, right?”

“Yes, Miss Andrews!”

“Bitch, don’t just narrate my death, do something!” Kaikaina shouts frantically, clinging to South as if she’s a life preserver and not her imminent death made incarnate. “Get a rope or some shit!”

Andrews does not get the time to go and get rope or some shit, because just then the ship they’re pinned up against gives a final wrenching scream of metal and is then catapulted out into space like a cannonball, spinning end over end, South and Kaikaina coming along with it for the ride.
“FUUUUUUUUCK!” Kaikaina screams into South’s face, still holding onto her.

South briefly debates killing her before going back to the ship, and then decides to go and see how alive North is first. Just how slow and brutal her death is will depend on what she finds. She holds out her arms, mouthing boom, and watches the explosions rip out of her hands as Donut first jarringly halts their momentum, stabilizes them, and then starts pushing towards the hole in the Mother of Invention, wrists moving minutely to adjust their course. The flames die so quickly out in space.

“I just want to say,” Kaikaina says breathlessly as Donut shoves them back to the ship with pure explosive force, “that I did not fuck up your boy toy. He just took one look at me and keeled over, I swear! Not the first time that’s happened, but I’m usually wearing less clothes than full body armor when it does--”

“Liar,” she hisses.

“No, really! I’m super hot!”

She’s gearing up to tear one of Kaikaina’s arms off when Donut finally sends them hurtling back into the ship through the gaping hole that is now in its side, slamming them into the floor. South almost bites her tongue off in the impact and Kaikaina lets go off her, kicking off the floor to get away from, soaring in the lack of gravity. She silently bares her teeth at her and readies to lunge for her--

“Wait!”

Andrews. Ten feet away, mag boots firmly planted on the floor, holding him by the waist like a balloon, gun pressed to his side, barrel nestled between plates of armor.

“Don’t move,” she says, “or else I shoot.”

There’s a faint quaver in her voice, buried beneath firm bravado. Weakness. Hesitance. Not a soldier, not a killer. Can she blast her way towards her and get North before she shoots? The fact that he’s being held hostage means that he’s alive, right? Or is it a bluff? Is she holding a gun to a corpse right now?

“Lady, calm your tits,” Kaikaina says off to the side. South jerks her head to the side so that she can keep her in her vision. She’s clutching onto a wall right now, edging slowly past South, closer to her allies and hostage. The oxygen is all gone now, so there’s no force trying to suck them out of the ship, but the gravity’s off and gone. South bristles. “We really didn’t touch your--”

“Brother,” she interrupts roughly. “That’s my fucking brother you’re holding a gun to. I’m going to rip you to pieces.”

Somehow, this death threat makes something in Kaikaina falter, soften.

“Look,” she says finally. “I’m not here to kill you or your brother. There’s one guy in particular who I want to pulverize. If we give you your brother back, will you let us go?”

No. “Yes,” she says.

(The lights flicker.)

“... Okay, you’re a bitch ass liar.”
“Kaikaina,” Andrews says tensely before South can spit something back at her. “I think this man is having a seizure.”

South’s entire body flinches towards North before she remembers herself and goes still.

“Shit, really?” Kaikaina asks.

South watches him intently. Sees the faint tremors wracking his body as Andrews holds him. He’s not just unconscious. He’s having some kind of-- attack--

“Did you hit him on the head?” Donut asks, mouth dry, and it takes her a moment to realize what he’s thinking of, and then something in her goes cold.

“No, I’m telling you we didn’t touch him at all.”

Liars, South wants to scream.

“I need to see his eyes,” she says instead.

“We really can’t take his helmet off here,” Andrews says.

But she can see it, even from here. Even through his opaque yellow visor, she can see the orange glow shine through it, like someone lit a fire in his eyes. It feels like someone’s punched all of the air out of her. She doesn’t want to-- she can’t-- that’s her brother. That’s North. She can’t lose him like this. She can’t lose him at all. He’s not supposed to leave her.

She can’t let him become someone else.

“I need,” she says, feeling like she’s watching the end of the world. She scrabbles for a solution, a fix, something that can help-- “York,” she gasps. “I need to find York.”

“What?” Cameraman asks.

“He can fix your bro?” Kaikaina asks. South nods. The healing unit. “We’ll help you find this York dude and give you your brother back, then in exchange you won’t kill us and you’ll show us where Leonard Church is.”

Who the fuck is Leonard Church? She doesn’t care. She just nods again.

“All fucking right!” she whoops. “See, it all worked out! Let’s do this.”

“We’ll edit the part where I held an ill unconscious man at gunpoint out later,” Andrews says.

“Uh,” Cameraman says. “So you didn’t want for this to be on a livestream?”

“... What.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Jax. How many people are watching.”

“Seven.”

“Oh, that’s--”

“Digits. Seven digits.”
Andrews takes several deep breaths.

“Great!” Kaikaina says forcefully, shoving her way down the hallway, away from the hole in the wall and towards the blast doors South exploded open only fifteen minutes ago. “More viewers, more witnesses that the Project can’t wipe out without getting caught.”

“I just wish we could have made the exposure a bit more… polished,” Andrews says, sounding horribly pained as she follows Kaikaina, Jax loyally following at her heels. South bites the inside of her cheek to make herself not immediately lunge for North as she follows.

“Nah,” Kaikaina says, and her voice goes somewhere… darker. Colder. “Doesn’t matter how it goes down, so long as the Project burns.”

South follows, and doesn’t care. So long as she and North get out of this mess alive, she doesn’t give a single fuck about what happens to the Project. Fuck the Leaderboard and fuck the Director’s grand goals about ending the war or what fucking ever. That's all it's ever really been about.

“Finally, some emotional honesty around here,” Donut mutters.
Chapter Summary

She gets a letter telling her that Dex is KIA, and her immediate reaction is to snort, say “Bullshit,” and not believe it for a single second. As if her bro could be dead. She’d know if he died, okay. She just would, somehow. They must be mistaken. They must be lying. She should go and find him--

And then the army ships his corpse out to her in a box, and she stares at the gunshot in the middle of his forehead for a long, long time.

The mortician puts a hand on her shoulder. She wants to break it. Instead, she says, “Don’t you think it looks kind of weird?”

“What?” the mortician asks.

“The gunshot wound. It’s perfectly centered.”

“Lucky shot?” He shrugs.

“Don’t the helmets cover up that part of the forehead? I’ve seen pictures of soldiers in the armor,” she goes on. “Aren’t headshots only possible when they go through the visor?”

“Maybe he wasn’t wearing his helmet?” the mortician suggests.

“Why?” she asks. “I thought you said he died in combat.”

“It’s normal to react like this after the death of a loved one,” he says, his fucking hand rubbing her fucking shoulder consolingly. “I’ve got the number to a good therapist--”

She leaves.

Kai gets drunk, sets some shit that she doesn’t own on fire, smashes it with a bat, and then outruns the cops. Blearily watches night cam footage of her retreating, cussing back on the news the next morning, a vicious hangover throbbing inside of her skull.

Dex can’t be dead. It doesn’t feel like he’s dead. The world doesn’t feel like he’s dead. It’s too normal. She’s too normal. She isn’t even crying. She’d be affected if her bro was dead, right?

Except she’s seen his corpse with her own eyes. He’d been gray and washed out, bloodless, limp,
not softly breathing or shifting, his hair strangely lifeless, the bullet hole in his forehead weird and unrealistic somehow. He’d sort of looked like a doll, so she’d reached out to touch him to make sure. It had been flesh, just stiff and cold. She’d snatched her hand away like she’d burned it on a stove. People shouldn’t feel like that, Dex shouldn’t feel like that.

Her brother’s dead, and she feels disoriented instead of sad. Like the world isn’t working the way it should be. Like something’s wrong.

Of course there’s something wrong. Dex is dead.

Kai goes and gets drunk again.

Really drunk.

Really, really, really, really, really, really drunk.

Kai wakes up and it’s been months. All of them a blur full of drinks and pills and parties and ignored bills. But no sex, she realizes. She hasn’t been in the mood. It’s her longest dry spell since… she started having sex.

None of the rest of the stuff has been fun either. She can’t remember the last time she laughed.

Near fucking constant partying and drinking and getting high, and she didn’t enjoy any of it. Not even a goddamned urge to get off with someone. No Dex. She doesn’t feel like herself. She feels like someone poorly trying to pretend to be Kaikaina Grif.

Is this seriously how she’s gonna take her brother dying? She’s just gonna accept it and become some kind of fucking husk? She’s not going to do anything about it? At all?

She thinks about that strange, neat, perfectly centered bullet hole.

Kai goes to stalk the mortuary for two days until the moritician she vaguely remembers hating enters the building. She follows him. She ignores the ‘employees only’ sign. She jumps over a divider she’s supposed to unlock with a keycard. She enters the men’s changing room. She turns him around as he’s unbuttoning his shirt and slams him up against a locker door like she’s about to get up to something seriously fucking hot. She isn’t.

“You’re lying to me,” she says.

“WHAT THE FUCK,” the mortician shrieks.

She knees him in the crotch.

“There’s something you’re not telling me!” she says, insists, hopes, believes with every fiber of her being. There has to be something more. There has to be something for her to do.

“Who are you!?”

“Wow, really? Classy. You paraded my bro’s corpse in front of me back in January? The one with the perfectly centered gunshot wound in the head.”
A flash of recognition in his face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, and he loses. Victory surges in her stomach, something desperate and eager and mean finally jumpstarts inside of her veins. She feels more than she’s felt in months. She feels alive and like Kaikaina fucking Grif.

He just lied to her face, which means there’s something he’s trying to hide from her. There’s something!

“I will rip your fucking balls off if you don’t tell me what you know right now,” she hisses venomously.

He looks terrified of her. It’s weirdly hot. She grins, toothy and wild and strangely ecstatic and furious. She finally wants to fuck someone, which feels good and familiar. She also wants to kill someone, which is kind of new. Not unwelcome, though. Someone should die for this. She just has to find out who.

“I-- I swear-- there’s nothing to--”

She reaches her sharp manicured nails into his pants and clutches.

He squeals, and tells her everything he knows.

It isn’t much. He was handsomely bribed by an anonymous source not to do an autopsy on Private Dexter Grif. Especially the head, he’d been told. Stay the fuck away from the head.

She squeezes some to make sure that that’s really all he has to say, punches him just for the sake of it, and then leaves. He can report her if he wants to, but she doubts he will. He’s the one who committed a crime first.

She burns with righteous fury and unholy curiosity. Dex wasn’t killed. He was murdered. Someone did something to his head, something noticeable enough that it would be caught in an autopsy, something that they paid a shitload of cash to make a mortician deliberately not find, something that they executed Dex for so that he wouldn’t tell anyone.

She feels like a shark that’s just scented blood in the water. She’s so fucking angry, and it’s wonderful. The world finally feels real again. There’s something that she can do about this.

She throws out all of her pills and booze, turns off her phone. Buys red yarn and pins and paper and markers. She’s going to turn her entire apartment into a conspiracy board.

Her brother’s murderer is out there somewhere, alive and thinking that they got away with it.

She’s going to prove them wrong.
She is not a washed up hack, and Dylan Andrews does not spit an opportunity in the face. She’s going to make Carlos eat his own words when she hands him the story of the century. Presumably.

Andrews submits the fluff piece on the new community center that her boss requested (told her to write or else he’d make her regret ever being born) with a taste of being a hollow sellout with zero principles or self respect rising like bile in the back of her throat. She pours herself a tall glass of whiskey.

“There, there,” James says, not looking up from his book.

“This isn’t what I became a reporter for,” she says bitterly, taking a long drink of her glass and immediately regretting her choices. Whiskey tastes awful. But she’s committed now. She grimly takes another sip.

“It can’t all be serial killers and political conspiracies, hon,” he says, making way for one of their cats onto his lap.

“Maybe I should make my own stories,” she muses.

“Isn’t making fake news even worse than writing boring news?”

“No, I’d really make it. As in I should actually for real murder my boss with an axe in his office and then write an article about it.”

“Carlos is very nice for not firing you already, considering how many times you’ve trespassed onto private property or eavesdropped on private conversations.”

“They’re not private if they’re being had in a public park on a public bench. Or in a public cafe. Or a public restaurant.”

“Or a public men’s bathroom,” he says dryly. He’s abandoned his book at this point to give Mittens all of the attention that he deserves. He’s a purring puddle of fur in his lap.

“I misread the sign and no one can prove otherwise, in a court of law or otherwise.” She holds her breath and forces herself to down two more mouthfuls of whiskey like its a healthy smoothie.

“Yes, thank you for making sure to always maintain plausible deniability so I’m not only able to see you during conjugal visits. It’s very sweet and thoughtful of you.”

“James,” she says. “Am I a washed up hack?”

The question comes out more sincere than she intended. She gives the whiskey glass a baleful glare.

“Dylan,” he says, and opens his arms to her in a come here gesture. Mittens makes a disgruntled
noise at not being lavished with affection for two seconds. Andrews goes to him and snuggles up against his side and lets him drape an arm around her. She focuses on holding her glass of awful in one hand and scratching behind Mitten’s ear with the other. “You’re the most dedicated, ideological, righteous journalist I’ve ever met. You’re like a superhero. And you just submitted one fluff piece on direct orders that you spent a week obsessively researching. It’s going to take more than that to turn you into a hack.”

“I was hoping that the owner had murdered the former owner of the building,” she mutters. Another one of their cats winds between her legs, jealous of the attention that Mittens is hoarding all for himself. “It turns out that she’s retired and living in France.”

“I thought it was something like that,” he says, a fond smile twisting his lips. She has to kiss it.

“Thanks for the pep talk, honey,” she says, and makes herself smile for him.

“I’m sure you’re going to get something interesting to look into soon,” he says encouragingly.

“Sure,” she says, and downs the rest of her glass in one gulp that leaves her with such a strong coughing fit that Mittens catapults himself away from their laps in self defense.

Andrews wakes up to a cat on her face and a spike of pain lodged into her brain meat. She whimpers.

James gently removes Fluffball from her face, which is why she married him in the first place. He kisses her on the forehead.

“I’m going to work now,” he whispers softly so that he doesn’t drive in the spike of migraine deeper into her head. “Some of us have set hours and can’t go on a bender on a Wednesday. Love you.”

“Wwwfuckkkk,” she says, instead of *fuck you or I love you too or it was one glass it’s not my fault I’m so small or it’s morning!?*

So he just chuckles and leaves, abandoning her to her headache and the awful taste in her mouth. She swallows around it and grimaces. Squints blearily down at herself. Yeah, she’s wearing yesterday’s clothes. She collapses back onto the bed, desperately reaching back for unconsciousness. It doesn’t come. After half an hour, the cats gang up on her and start harassing her for food. She reluctantly rolls out of bed with a longsuffering groan. Barfs a little in her mouth, chugs water, brushes her teeth, feeds the cats, showers, stares out of the window with dead eyes for forty minutes as she slowly starts to feel human again.

At which point she checks her phone, because that’s what humans do.

It takes a long moment for what she’s looking at to start making sense to her groggy mind. Except no, it still doesn’t really make sense. Confusedly, she scrolls back through her history to try and hunt down where the hell this started because maybe if she just has the *context* then she’ll understand it.

Here’s apparently what happened:

One hour and forty minutes after drinking a very full glass of vodka, Dylan Andrews stopped messing around with her cats and husband and got on her phone instead. Somehow, she ended up on Craigslist. She thinks it was while trying to Facebook stalk an old classmate called Craig. On
there, she clicked and Interestingly skimmed a lot of adds to the best of her abilities, trying to figure out which ones might be a serial killer trying to bait a potential victim to a private location, or an offer to sell illegal drugs underneath the guise of the newest dumb suspicious nickname, or a thinly veiled advertisement on just how good they were at ‘discreetly cleaning up big messes’. To her great disappointment, she mostly just found people begging for foot pics and to get pissed on in motel rooms.

And one actually intriguing post, all in capital letters, littered with typos and grammatical errors, all of the words lumped together into one big near unreadable block of text. It had been very enthusiastic and strange. If she had been sober, she would’ve dismissed it as the ravings of a madman. But she wasn’t sober, so she read the whole thing. This is what it said:

LISTEN ITS BEEN FORFUCKINGEVERRRR BUT I THINK IM FINALLY ONTO SOMETHING!!!!! SOME GODDAMNED DOCTOR ASSHOLE MURDERED MY BROTHER AND IVE GOT NO IDEA WHY BC HE WAS LITERLALY SO UNIMPORTANT LIKE HE WORKED AT GODDAMNED PANERA BREAD AND THEN HE GOT FIRED FOR SNACKING AT ALL OF THE FOOD THERE AND SO THEN HE STARTED WORKING FOR OLIVE GARDEN AND THEN HE PING PONGED OVER ALL OF THE FAST FOOD CHAINS ON THE ISLAND AND HE NEVER EVEN VOTED BC HE WAS ONE OF THOSE STUPID ASSHOLES WHO THOUGHT THAT VOTING DIDNT COUNT BC OF GERRYMANDERING AND I MEAN HE WAS KINDA RIGHT BUT STILL HE SHOULDVE VOTED BUT NAAAHHHH HE WANTED TO SLEEP IN AND WATCH A LETSPLAY OF FUCKING HIVESWAP LIKE THATS EVEN A GOOD GAME BITCH GET URSELF ON HOLLOWKNIGHT AND THEN HE GOT DRAFTED LIKE A CHUMP AND DIDNT EVEN TRY AND DODGE IT BC HES SO DAMNED LAZY AND HE DID NOTHING LITERALLY NOTHING NO MEDALS OR EXPLOITIVE FEELGOOD NEWS ARTICLES WRITTEN ABOUT THE POOR WORKINGCLASS DRAFTED SOLIDER AT ALL BC HE WAS LITERALLY SO GODDAMNED USELESS ON THE BATTLEFIELD I BET HE JUST SNUCK AWAY FROM EVERY FIGHT HE GOT INTO AND NAPPED IN THE TRENCHES ANYWAYS HE GOT MURDERED LIKE NOT BY AN ALIEN OR KILLED IN BATTLE BUT LIKE ***MURDERED*** AND I GODDAMNED KNEW IT I FUCKING KNEW IT!!!! SOME BORING ASS BITCH FROM THE RESISTANCE OR THE REBELLION OR WHATEVER BORING UNDERDOG BULLSHIT JUST CONTACTED ME BC IVE BEEN GETTING ON ALLLLL THE RIGHT DARK WEB FORUMS STICKING MY NOSE EVERYWEHREE AND NOW HE WANTS TO HIRE ME AND POOL INFO AND JOKES ON HIM BC IVE GOT NOTHING BUT HUNCHES AND AURAS BUT IM NOT LETTING THAT FOOL KNOW THAT UNTIL IVE SIGNED THE CONTRACT ALSO WHAT KIND OF ILLEGAL OPERATION USES CONTRATCS LOL ACTUALLY THO ITS A GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICE AND IM GONNA SIGN IT I HAVENT HAD A STEADY JOB SINCE LIKE EVER EXCEPT IF BEING A CAMGIRL COUNTS? I HOPE I GET WAGES BUT IT DOENST MATTER IF I DONT BC IM FINALLY GONNA FIND OUT WHICH ASSHOLE MURDERED MY IRELLEVANT DUMB BROTHER ON THE BATTLEFIELD WHEN HE WAS BOTHERING LITERALLY NO ONE I AM ONE HUNDRED PERCENT SURE EXCEPT FOR MAYBE BEING A BIT OF A DOUCHEBAG LIKE WHY??? KILL HIM???? HES NOT IMPORTANT!!!!! ITS FUCKING BULLLSHIT. YES I AM DRUNK FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FUCKING EVER YES I AM CROSSPOSTING THIS ON TUMBLR AND TWITTER AND FACEBOOK AND LINKEDIN AND EVERYTHING ELSE I FIND BC IF YOU WANNA COME AND WATCH ME DO A RAIL OF COKE OFF MY GUN BEFORE I SHOOT A GUY IN THE FACE FOR BEING A FUCKING BITCH THEN YOURE INVITED!!!! YOURE ALL INVITED AND WELL THROW A SWEET ASS PARTY OVER HIS CORPSE AND I NEED THE MONEY TBH BC SOME ASS BURNED MY HOUSE DOWN WHILE I WAS SLEEPING IN IT BC OF THE AFOREMENTIONED SHOVING MY NOSE IN ASKING WEIRD
QUESTIONS ON THE DARKWEB BUT LOL WHATEVA IM GONNA BURN HIS **DICK*****

And underneath that was a Snapchat handle. For some reason, drunk Andrews thought that this was a very reliable and promising lead, and happily downloaded Snapchat so that she could begin communications with @princesstequila.

Due to the nature of Snapchat, she can’t find whatever ridiculous conversation followed, but apparently at some point they’d migrated onto Twitter. Not private DMs on Twitter, mind, but public tweets.

@queenofparties

Im getting a 69 percent cut and no lower im doing all of the hard work okay

@busybodyreporter

Fifty

@queenofparties

Listen its either this or 420

@busybodyreporter

4 point 20

@queenofparties

Lol biiiiiiithc no

@busybodyreporter

FINE

But im bringing a cameraman

@queenofparties

Oh fuck yea i love cams!! Ill wear my sexy panties underneath the armor lmao

@busybodyreporter

And ill own all of the footage

@queenofparties

Finefinefine just get my good side which is my ass

@busybodyreporter

Deal

@queenofparties

And send me more cat pics!! Ill come pick u up once i can move without my hangover trying to murder me. Weve gotta do this asap bc this isnt techniiiiically an official mission from the boss
Andrews squints at this exchange for a long moment, wondering what exactly she’s agreed to covering here. She idly shoves Socks away from her food and eats it, still thoughtfully staring at her phone.

And then she gets a text from a contact saved in her phone as INTERESTING that she does not remember adding. The text reads: at the spaceport. Leaving in under an hour. Don’t come and it’s your loss!

Followed by a seemingly random string of emojis. Andrews chews her food. Slowly stops chewing her food.

Going to the spaceport and leaving in under an hour with some crazy woman that she knows nothing about and apparently haggled some sort of deal with online while she was wasted last night for a reason that she doesn’t know about would be ridiculous. Andrews should definitely not do that.

So instead she dashes off a note to James that her mother is urgently sick and that she has to go and visit her alone immediately, sticks it onto the fridge, grabbing her space armor and calling a Lyft in one frantic burst of activity.

She is not a washed up hack, and Dylan Andrews does not spit an opportunity in the face. She’s going to make Carlos eat his own words when she hands him the story of the century. Presumably.

On the way to the spaceport, she makes the Lyft driver swerve onto the curb of an apartment complex.

“Give me five minutes,” she says. “No, two minutes.”

“Sure thing, lady,” the driver says, happily counting the wad of bills she’d shoved at her earlier to ignore speed limits. “Whatever you want.”

Andrews has been to Jax Jonez’s apartment approximately one time, when he had decided to throw a holiday party there and invited the whole office when Carlos had been too stingy to bother throwing it one year. She had been there for fifteen minutes, because networking is important but also the whole place reeked of ramen and cheetos and there were at least three Godfather posters on the walls. What’s important is that Jax is 1. A cameraman, and 2. A spineless pushover. She’s in need of both of those things right now.

She sprints up the stairs because elevators are too slow right now, and bangs on Jax’s door. When he takes too long to answer it, she just opens it and is pleasantly surprised to see that he’s forgotten to lock it. She bursts inside.
“Jax!” she shouts out. “Get your filming armor! And spare cameras! And your passport!”

Jax stumbles out of his bathroom in just a towel, hair dripping wet. “Miss Andrews!?! What are you doing here? What’s happening?”

“Urgent orders from Carlos,” slips out of her mouth. “Come on, let’s go, we don’t have much time.”

She shoos him in the direction of his bedroom, and he confusedly goes along with it. She finds underwear for him and tosses it at him, followed by the kevlar suit for his armor, and then she starts throwing armor pieces at him to hurry him along.

“Ow, ow-- OW. Miss Andrews, please stop! What’s going on!?”

“Get dressed,” she tells him.

“In front of you!?”

She sighs and turns around. She supposes that that’s reasonable.

“We’re leaving the planet for a story?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow. That sounds big.”

“Yup.”

“How long are we going to be gone?”

“... We’ll see.”

“What’s the story about?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“Aw, Miss Andrews, come on!”

“Are you dressed yet?” She turns impatiently around. Jax, half dressed, yelps and falls over in a panic. “I’ll go and find your passport while you finish up,” she decides.

Two minutes later, they sprint down the stairs in full armor, which is fortunate because Jax falls down at least three times. Andrews doesn’t mind since it means that he’s still moving downwards towards the Lyft, just while screaming. She shoves him into the car and tells the driver to step on it.

“Is this a kidnapping?” she idly asks, like she doesn’t particularly care. Andrews doesn’t snap at her since she is pulling out back onto the road.

“This is work,” she says.

“Is the company going to pay for our expenses?” Jax asks.

“You ask a lot of questions,” Andrews criticizes. “If you drive through that alley then you’ll cut five minutes off the trip,” she advises the driver.

“Trash cans aren’t an immovable obstacle.”

Andrews hands her more cash, and they make it to the spaceport in record time. Jax is making noises about how he’s got so many new ideas for a car chase sequence in his screenplay. She grabs his wrist and hauls him into the port, texting INTERESTING that they’re here and they’re wearing blue and white armor.

She gets a return text that she’s waiting for them at the bar. By the time they get there, her contact is being thrown out of it by a bouncer. She’s wearing yellow armor, so it doesn’t seem to make much of an impact on her.

“Pussy!” she hollers, getting up from the ground.

“Princess Tequila?” Andrews asks.

Princess Tequila aborts what looks like what would have been a revenge lunge at the glaring bouncer. “Shit! Lois Lane?”

“That’s not my name.”

“It’s what I saved you in my phone as.”

“That’s such a clever reference,” Jax says.

“Whatever. We’re here, we’re ready, let’s go and film your story.”

“Fuck yes, right to business! I like you, Lois.”

“Um,” Jax says. “What exactly is the story?”

“I of course know and remember this,” Andrews says. “But what about you explain it to my cameraman, Tequila. You put it so well.”

“The name’s Kai,” she says. “And I’m going to fuck up the douchebag that murdered my brother. I’ve got coordinates and everything.”

Okay, she’d gathered as much from the Craigslist post. The soldier who was murdered in cold blood instead of killed in battle while in the army. Intriguing. “And we’d love to hear about all of the details. Perhaps in an interview on the ship?”

Jax makes some noises about how he’s not sure if it’s very legal to follow someone on a self proclaimed revenge quest, and Andrews gives him a filthy glare until he shuts up. You do what you have to do to find out the truth, and then you lie to the cops and your boss afterwards about how much you knew while it was happening and how much of it was on purpose.

“Buy my drinks and you’ve got a deal. Okay, so I don’t have all of the details since I was only just hired by the Insurrectionists but there’s this secret military project called freelancer or something, right?”

“Jax, start filming,” she hisses.

“And it’s lead by this mad scientist guy called Leonard Church...”
how CT joins

Chapter Summary

This is how CT joins the Insurrectionists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This is how CT joins the Insurrectionists:

She wasn’t a spy when she was first hired. She was just another soldier. The best in her squad, true, but she wasn’t involved in any sort of illegal rebel activity even if ideologically she kind of leaned towards ‘the military is at this point a pseudo governmental slash capitalistic warmachine that needs death and blood to run smoothly and is deliberately ignoring any solution to this war that doesn’t include lots of expensive guns and bombs and conveniently dead soldiers that won’t need payment at the end of it.’ Hey, she’d been a desperate broke teenager when she’d signed up. Which only further illustrates her point about how the military industrial complex is profoundly immoral and corrupt--

The point is, she hadn’t been an Insurrectionist at the time, but the thought ‘they might have a bit of a point’ had been running in the back of her mind whenever the news ran a clip from one of their speeches on the radio for a while before she was headhunted for Project Freelancer. (The five to ten second cherry picked clip was then always followed by fifteen minutes of the anchors dissecting the recording and going on about how dangerous and crazy and radical the Insurrectionists were, with her squadmates nodding along. Thanksgiving dinner had taught her when to keep her opinions to herself if nothing else.)

The man who had come to talk to her hadn’t introduced himself when she entered the room. She didn’t know why she’d been summoned. Her sergeant hadn’t answered her questions when she asked what the meeting was about, why she was being singled out. By the time she sat down across from him, she’d decided that she was either about to be told that she’d be receiving a medal for her excellence on the battlefield or that they’d discovered that she’d smoked pot in highschool.

The man without a name had given her a soft, kind smile that didn’t even come close to touching his eyes. They were her favorite shade of brown, but they seemed like they were clinically assessing her from across the table, coolly noting flaws or taking an interest in different parts of her, like she was a tool that he was considering for a certain job.

He unnerved her. She unconsciously crossed her arms and lifted her chin an inch, exuding as much ornery unruffled confidence as she could. His smile widened by exactly two and a half inches, perfectly symmetrical.

“I’m here to offer you a unique opportunity to advance your career and do some real good in this war,” he had said. He’d paused then, as if waiting for a response, and she hadn’t given him one just because of that. Contrary, not wanting to be predictable, not wanting to give him what he wanted, clinging to what little control she had in whatever this was. She didn’t even know his name.
He’d smoothly moved on, though, going into a very rehearsed spiel about black ops and efficiency and need to know and talent and the best of the best and making a difference. She hadn’t said anything. She’d listened. It had felt a bit like listening to the radio did, the news. Trying to read between the lines, tilting her head until she could see how the information was being deliberately presented in a way to try and evoke a certain reaction from her. To convince her that something was fact, to convert her, to turn her into a soldier on *their* side, whether that side be if women should get to have abortions or if trans people should get to use the bathroom or if immigrants should get to have jobs or if homeless people should get to exist in public where people had to look at them.

Every story has a narrator, and ever narrator has an agenda, a goal that they are purposefully trying to manipulate their audience towards, a conclusion that they want for them to draw, because the best way to create a die hard believer is to make them think that they decided to believe in this themselves, with definitely all of the facts at hand presented in a truthful manner. She tilts her head and tries to see the thing that this man without a name wants for her to realize, to believe, to feel, absolutely definitely all on her own.

That she’s special. That she’s been chosen for an important task that will help the people she loves, the planet she loves, the species she loves. That she should be proud. That she should be eager for this once in a lifetime opportunity. That she should give up everything she has and sign anything and ignore everything so long as she can get this job, this opportunity, this chance protect what she loves and be special and amazing and important and make a difference.

Okay, so that’s the shady manipulative story that he wants to sell her. But what’s the truth? Why does he want a skilled soldier that’ll be too invested and tied up into whatever he’s doing to back out once they’re in too deep?

*Nothing good, obviously.*

“I can’t tell you more details before you’ve signed anything,” he finishes. “You understand.”

“Yes,” she says. “I do.”

She does end up signing that contract, legally giving up her life to yet another institution that she doesn’t believe in, like a nesting doll of living a life that isn’t for her. But this time it isn’t out of desperation. It’s curiosity. She wants to find out what’s really going on behind that story with the agenda, what’s driving the narrator to frame it the way he had.

The man without a name has a cool handshake that’s just slightly too limp. He tells her to call him the Counselor. She thinks that it’s kind of funny that she didn’t even get told his name after selling her soul away. In a tired sort of way.

The people Connie is sent out to fight nowadays aren’t roaring monsters who can chomp off a human’s head in one bite, but you wouldn’t think it from the way the mission briefs are written. They’re sparse and functional things, more focused on essential information than any sort of unprofessional emotion, as a brief should be. But it’s there between the lines. It’s there if you look, if you think about why they chose that adjective, that phrasing, that way to refer to them. If you went by the briefings alone, you’d think that the people that they’re sabotaging and fighting and killing are the lowest of the low, the scum of the earth, violent, unhinged criminals that would kill you as soon as look at you.

Connie is enjoying her first leave in a long while. It can only be on this remote, isolated colony on
this remote, isolated planet in this remote, isolated system, and it’s only for a week, and she’s still not supposed to be anything even close to online, and should also be avoiding cameras, but goddamnit she’s going to relish this. She puts on some old and musty civies, jeans and a shirt, makes sure that her undercut’s fresh and buzzed, puts on some deodorant, and leaves with the intent to get laid.

There are no loud and noisy and crowded nightclubs here, so she finds a seedy bar instead. It has six people in it. There’s the bartender bristling with piercings and tattoos, but unfortunately Connie has a general policy of not flirting with people at their job. There’s a girl in the corner who’s too young, and a man in the other who’s too old. The last three all share a table. There’s stocky woman who looks like she could lift every person in the bar with a jovial smile on her face, but she sways a bit with too much drink even sitting in her chair. There’s a muscular man, but he’s got a surly frown on his face.

Sitting between them, however, is a very handsome man. He has deep brown skin and a relaxed, easy smile. He’s covered in scars, like Connie is, like a soldier is, and the other two sitting with him don’t talk over him. When he opens his mouth, they close theirs immediately and turn to look at him, like he’s about to say something very important, even though his posture and his expression and his tone all seem very casual from where she’s standing. They must all be on leave too. Regular soldiers, except for the handsome man. He strikes her as more of a leader.

She walks over to him because she’s never been scared of messing up when it comes to strangers that she’ll never meet again, and gives him a smile. She’s bruised to fuck from the mission yesterday and she slept poorly, so she’s not sure how genuine it comes out, but he looks up at her and smiles back anyways.

“I’m Connie,” she says.

His eyebrows raise. “I’m Connor.”

The jovial woman snorts some of her beer and laughs. The surly man rolls his eyes and looks a bit disgusted. Connor takes this with more humor than Connie, and gestures his beer at his two friends. “And this is Baker,” he gestures at the woman, “and this is Phillips.” He gestures at the man.

“Nice to meet you,” she says. “Mind if I take a seat?”

Baker and Phillips look to Connor without even apparently thinking about it.

“Of course,” Connor says with a smile, without looking to see Baker and Phillips checking in with him first, without checking in with them first. Baker and Phillips don’t seem bothered by this decision. Phillips gets up to get her a chair and Baker turns her attention on her, like she’s waiting for something entertaining to happen.

Phillips gets her a chair, Baker gets her a drink, and Connor starts talking. Connie likes talking to her lays before she makes any decisions. She prefers to sleep with people who aren’t shitty, and she likes taking the time to make sure of that before any condoms get pulled out. Baker and Phillips turning to Connor like flowers to the sun kind of weirded her at the start, but an hour and three beers in she thinks that she gets it. He’s not controlling. He’s just… charming. Funny, friendly, smart. Who wouldn’t want to listen to him? It’s a good time.

After a story about how he got the scar between his left index and ring finger that leaves the table gasping for breath, she asks him what he does for a living. Just a normal small talk thing. She’s already pretty sure that the general answer will be ‘the army’ even if the specifics might be
‘sergeant’ or ‘sniper’ or something.

Baker and Phillips stop laughing. They look to Connor. He doesn’t look forbidding or solemn or stern, but serious. Sincere. Important.

“Have you heard of the Insurrectionists?” he says, and Connie immediately sobers up. That isn’t something that you tell a stranger you met at the bar two hours ago. She starts tugging the leg of her pants up with the boot of the other, so she can reach the knife she’s got holstered there if she needs to.

“You could say that,” she says. *I’ve shot more than a few of them.*

“Well, that’s what I do,” he says bluntly, like they’re still having a casual conversation.

Connie picks up her beer so that she can use it as an improvised shank if she needs to. It’s important to twist the wrist in the right way when breaking a bottle, or else the neck just breaks in your hand, slicing it up. “Oh?” she says, also like they’re still having a casual conversation.

“What’s that like?”

“Dangerous. It’s not like in the army. We don’t have a corporate giant with billions of dollars and guns and bullets and bombs and bases and hospitals and backup and communication behind us.” He looks into her eyes. “But what we do have is the fact that we’re fighting for an ideal.”

The UNSC is fighting for the continuation of the human species. Isn’t that a noble ideal? Except that sometimes, that doesn’t feel like what they’re fighting for at all. Sometimes, it feels like they’re fighting for revenge, hatred, spite. More often than not, it feels like they’re fighting for the sake of fighting. Because that’s what an army is for. Without a war, it’d just sit around gathering dust, draining money, being useless. Connie hadn’t signed up for the noble reason of protecting her species. She’d signed up because she needed a job and the army took all comers at this point, was even trying to push through a draft. Killing and getting killed, just a simple job to make money that desperate people took, like it was working in an Amazon-Disney-Google-Nestle Corporate Conglomerate warehouse. Sometimes, when she’s feeling tired (too tired to hide from it) she feels like if they didn’t have the Great War to fight in… then the UNSC would just shatter, because the UNSC is an army of nations, of humans, of the entire species grouped together and united at last against a common enemy. And without that common enemy, all they would have would be each other. And an army always needs a war.

She doesn’t tell Connor that the UNSC has an ideal as well. It would feel like a mouthful of lies, when she’s fighting for a paycheck instead of what’s right. They wouldn’t be here getting themselves either killed or traumatized if it weren’t for the money, no matter the fact that their planets are getting glassed and their people slaughtered. Not all of them. Not Connie. The billionaires funding the war definitely wouldn’t be doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. No arms dealer would charitably donate weapons and ammo to the righteous cause.

Connor lays out what the Insurrectionists are fighting for. The war crimes UNSC is committing. The people they’re displacing, the veterans they’re neglecting, the sweat shops they’re exploiting, the ruins they thoughtlessly leave behind. Connie holds her beer bottle just tightly enough that it doesn’t shatter in her grip. She’s never heard more than the cherry picked five second clips from the news. She’s never sat at a table with one of them for hours, had drinks with them, laughed with them, and then listened to them calmly and matter of factly explain what their goals are, answering questions, reciting facts.

He talks for almost an entire hour, barely interrupted. Phillips and Baker listen like they’re hearing gospel, even though they must surely have heard this before, even though this must just be
preaching to the choir. She gets it. Connor has a way of talking that makes you want to listen. Quietly and intensely passionate, meaning every word, so sincere that it hurts. His words feel more real and true than almost anything else anyone has ever said to her.

*I’m not like that,* she thinks as she looks at him speak, voice not raised but firm and filled with controlled emotion. *I don’t fight for what I believe. I don’t live for it. I don’t struggle for it, I don’t suffer for it.*

In that moment, she wants to be like that, more than anything. It suddenly seems like the only way to really live a life that’s worth it at all, that isn’t hollow and empty and meaningless.

“Do you understand?” Connor asks, the words packed with more meaning than they should have.

“Yes,” she says, trying to shove as much significance as she can into the single word. “I do.”

Baker and even Phillips smile, Baker clapping her firmly on the back in solidarity, approving but not surprised.

“He always puts it so well,” Baker says, appreciatively. “He’s way better at recr--” Connie is looking down at her drink, so she doesn’t see why Baker bites her tongue. “At explaining it all than I am.”

When she looks up, Connor has his easy, handsome smile on. She takes him back to a convenient motel for the night, and forgets that every narrator has an agenda. Some people know how to smile more convincingly than the Counselor.

She stays with him for the entire weekend, glued to his side, listening to his words, and she tells him some things as well. When she goes back to the Mother of Invention, she takes a number and an undetectable communicator with her.

She’s ready to live for something that isn’t leaderboards and missions and payment and unanswered and unsatisfied curiosity. She’s ready to really *believe* in something. And she came to the conclusion all on her own.

Chapter End Notes

nice
This is how Wash joins Project Freelancer:

David joins the army because, uh, he kind of made a lot of bad decisions back in highschool. He’d been a constant furious hormonal mess, so angry with his dad that he could barely stand it, so full of hatred that he couldn’t point where it was *deserved* that if a classmate so much as sneered at him he’d, well, shove said sneering face through a bathroom mirror.

It turns out that that’s the sort of thing that gets put on your permanent record. And it also turns out that places that actually pay a living wage don’t want an employee with that kind of not so recent history. Which meant that his options was 1. Be homeless, 2. Join the army, 3. Keep living with dad.

Obviously, getting shot at would be preferable to option three, and David *is* decent in a fight. This might actually work out for him. He might actually survive the time he signed up for and come out of it with a paycheck and a resume. Maybe he can even help his sisters move out if they’re still stuck with the bastard once he comes back. So long as nothing stupidly unfair happens, so long as he’s given a chance--

Sergeant White calls for the squad to gather around him.

White kind of looks like an Army Joe. He’s got a strong chin, a godawful blond buzzcut, and a face like a brick. *Rations are my favorite food,* that face says. *I love my gun and my American flag and my wife that I haven’t seen in five years because I signed up for this war the second it started because I’ve masturbated to World War Two hero fantasies since I was twelve.*

David may or may not be kind of biased from what a hardass White is. He really does seem to relish the army rations a bit too much to be healthy, though.

White looks out at them solemnly after the last straggler joins the group of about a dozen dirty men and women that reek of sweat and dirt and blood. They’ve been slowly marching in and out of active battle fronts for weeks now. They’re up to hit a base in about a week at their current pace, and David personally cannot fucking wait to have a real shower.

“I just got a transmission from Command,” he says gruffly, and then spits on the ground. White says everything gruffly, and frankly spits far more than warranted. “Men,” White goes on, ignoring the exasperated frowns from the women, “we have a duty.”

He then goes on to explain that another squad about a mile away need a diversion if they want to be able to continue on their assigned path so that they can execute a pincer attack on a Sangheili squad along with another squad another mile away. So instead of continuing towards the base David has been longingly daydreaming about for weeks, they’re going to take a hard right and
engage the enemy in combat so that their allies can sneak past unnoticed.

“How large is this squad that we’re going to engage?” Goldstein asks.

“’Bout three times as large as ours,” White says, not even looking at Goldstein, but instead gazing broodingly off into the horizon so that they all just get his profile instead.

“Are we going to be fighting from a defensible position?” Jeffords asks.

“Negative, private.” White spits on the ground.

“Won’t we… get slaughtered and die?” David asks.

White does look at them, then. His expression is one of noble solemn determination, but David swears to god that he can see excitement sparkling in the back of his beady blue eyes.

“Most likely, private,” he says. “Most of us are going to die out there, if not all of us. But our people need us to do this. Our planet needs us. We’ll die, but goddamnit, we’ll die as heroes. Now, do you want to make your fathers proud of you? Or--”

David signed up to fight and kill and maybe die, if he fucked up or just got plain unlucky. He did not sign up to cooperatively, knowingly, and deliberately march off to his own execution so that some squad somewhere could pull of a pincer attack on some other squad somewhere that he’s never even heard about. He did not sign up to listen to a masturbatory speech about the inherent nobility of patriotism and sacrifice. So, he punches White right in his brick of a face. And then he knees him in the crotch, gut punches him, and sends him toppling to the ground, because David fights dirty. It shuts him up. It’s satisfying.

David looks up at his squad, who are all staring at him. They look shocked and relieved.

“That was some bullshit, right?” he says.

They tie him up and gag him, and then call Command to ask them what they should do since White is still unconscious from hitting his head on a rock on the way down to the ground. Coincidentally, this means that they spend so much time on the mess that David made that they unfortunately miss the window to go and engage the enemy squad in combat to distract them. This also means that they didn’t disobey direct orders like David did. They’re just scrambling and doing their best to try and figure out what they’re supposed to do now. They get to live, and they don’t get punished.

Execute him, Command says, and his squad exchanges queasy, guilty looks. David stares at them unblinkingly until they uncomfortably avoid eye contact, feeling that howling feral bitter anger from highschool clawing at the inside of his chest again. It hadn’t gone away. He hadn’t grown out of it. He hadn’t left it behind with his dad. It had just been waiting for him until life became unfair again.

Goldstein persuades Command to let them escort him to the base that they’re one week from so that another squad can be his firing line. They’re too close to him, she argues. She doesn’t try to argue that he doesn’t deserve an execution at all. She just doesn’t want to do the dirty work herself, doesn’t want to meet his eyes and pull the trigger. She’s fine with him conveniently dying for her, so long as she doesn’t have to look.

The anger digs its claws into his lungs and drags them. He’s going to die furious and bitter. He’d thought he’d finally escaped it. Escaped dad, escaped school, escaped constant anger. But it’s back inside of him. He’s going to die angry while the people who condemned him to it get to fool themselves into thinking that it’s not their fault because they didn’t make the final call and they
didn’t pull the trigger and they didn’t look him in the eye. The anger boils, inescapable.

It’s a long weeks march to the base, with White spitting at him that he’s a cowardly traitor through his concussion the entire way, bitter at being spurned his chance at a purple heart, while every single one of David’s squadmates don’t say a word to indicate that they’re the cowardly traitors.

When they reach the base, there’s a man called the Counselor waiting for him instead of a firing line or a court martial. David signs what he has to sign to live and get away from the people who make him feel so angry that he doesn’t feel like himself any longer. Eventually, the anger fades away, its claws slipping out of him. And he sighs, and convinces himself that he’s grown out of it now, and it won’t be back the second life turns monstrously, stupidly unfair again.
Chapter Summary

The only way to get at any of the information here, really, would be for an Insurrectionist to physically get onto the ship itself, which of course could never happen.

Ha. CT really likes being a spy sometimes, just for the smugness factor alone.

CT hasn’t been in contact with the Insurrectionists for months now. The opportunity to communicate with her organization without being caught was already rare, but had become even more so since her gut feeling told her that the Counselor suspected her of something and she had to draw back and be as cautious as possible. She’s had to be very subtle about gathering intel, letting many chances pass her by just so that she could appear disinterested when she was actually burning with curiosity. She has so much to tell everyone, and yet not enough for how much time she’s spent away from them. She should really see them soon to report what she has, even if it’s dangerous.

(You just plain misses them. Misses the people who get to know the real her. She misses Connor.)

She reigns the impulse back in. Now isn’t the time to let her impatience get the best of her and make her be reckless and get herself killed. She’s on the cusp of something, she swears. There’s something that all of the unsecured enough documents that she can get her hands on are talking around, and she’s gathered enough data that she feels like she can just barely start to see the general shape of it. What’s at the core of the project, the foundations, the dirty secret behind the veils and lies. And it has to be big and ugly, with all of this death and secrecy and ridiculous funding and black ops fanfare. She’s so close. She just has to keep her head down a little bit longer--

Something that feels like it must be the fist of god crashes into her, hurling her into the wall ten feet in front of her. She swears and unholsters her gun, glad for her armor, whipping around to see who attacked her.

She sees a guy from R&D lying on the floor, his head cracked open like an egg, brain and blood leaking out, eyes open and blank. It looks like he’d bashed it open on the corner of that cafeteria table… ten feet away, the janitor’s getting over her shock and starting to scream about her broken leg, white bone sticking out of the flesh. CT looks around. A few more broken bones, no more deaths, mostly just people dazedly getting up from the floor like a bully had shoved them down harshly.

Someone hadn’t hit her, she realizes. Something’s hit the ship.

That’s when the klaxon starts wailing. Ugh, annoying. She turns off her external hearing and comms Command.

“Hey, what’s going?” she asks.

“Please-- please standby,” says the person on the other end of the line, sounding flustered. Probably from being thrown down to the ground only a minute ago, just like her. Right, they
probably don’t know any more than her yet. She should give them at least five minutes. During which she’ll try and find out what’s happened herself, because any curiosity would be perfectly defensible and natural in these circumstances and she’s going to take shameless advantage and holy shit she’s just now realizing how much snooping she can probably get away with right now. Everyone’s distracted. How many cameras are down? How many people are dead? Giddy excitement replaces the no nonsense focus of her initial adrenaline rush. No more waiting. She can go and find so much information right now. Connor’s going to be amazed the next time she can report.

She walks out of the cafeteria with blatant purpose in her step, and none of the staff present so much as give her a suspicious glance. Of course she’s got somewhere to be right now. She’s a Freelancer and something dangerous is happening. This is her entire wheelhouse.

She is extremely pleased to see that the file room that she’s been trying to ‘accidentally’ walk into for the past two months is finally not only unlocked, but straight up open, with a dead body stopping the doors from closing, the metal clenched down on the torso of the downed paperpusher, or whatever her job had been.

She turns her external hearing back on (the klaxons are still obnoxious and terrible) and makes a production of checking for a pulse even though the woman is clearly dead (somehow managed to stab herself in the eye with a stylus on the way down, really just absurdly bad luck) and then walks into the room itself while shouting, “Hello? Is anyone else in here? I’m here to help!” Happily, no one responds. CT keeps ‘searching’, just in case any would be survivors have been knocked unconscious or are too injured to cry out for help.

CT’s no tech person, but as far as she can understand, the entirety of the Mother of Invention has a hyper advanced Faraday cage wrapped around it under the metal plating along with all of the wiring. It basically makes any data on the ship unhackable (or even detectable) for the Insurrectionists or any other interested parties, so that the Director can commit his weird mysterious war crimes without having to debase himself to using actual physical offline paperwork like some sort of caveman. The only way to get at any of the information here, really, would be for an Insurrectionist to physically get onto the ship itself, which of course could never happen.

*Ha.* CT really likes being a spy sometimes, just for the smugness factor alone.

She looks around at all of the closed servers around her with ecstatic relish, and then makes sure not to be in the eyeline of any cameras. There’s always at least one in every room, but she’s gotten pretty damn good at spotting them if nothing else.

And then she gets to work. She downloads so much data that she has to delete her entire music collection, her Kindle library, and then all of the unnecessary apps, and then some of the ones that she really isn’t supposed to delete. But does she really need to be able to tell what the time, temperature, and breathable oxygen level is? She keeps going as fast as she can, stealing all of the data she can from each individual separate server before moving on. She smashes them in a way that seems like it could have naturally happened during the crash after she’s done with them while she’s at it, because why not? Espionage typically includes sabotage.

She hasn’t made this much progress in a long while, and she’s practically gleeful once she gets to the last server. Except it’s not the same shape as all of the servers. She blinks at it. It’s not a neat and proper little rectangle. It’s… a ball. A large unwieldy sphere. She spends more time figuring out how to connect her armors software to it than she did on the entire rest of the room. She’s aware that she’s running out of time where she’s got plausible deniability and everyone’s distracted, but there’s also only this last thing left and the klaxons still running. It’s probably fine.
She’s got this.

She stares at what her HUD tells her. She can’t download what’s inside this strange server. There’s just too much of it. Considering how many zillabytes her armor can download, that’s insane.

And that’s when Connor calls her. She’s normally a pretty goddamned composed person, in her opinion, but also she totally screams a little because she was high on guard and Connor is calling her on her armor while she’s on the ship. What the fuck! Is he trying to get her killed?

“What the f-- who is this,” she says flatly. “How did you get this frequency?”

“Cut the shit, CT,” Connor says, sounding as stressed as she’s ever heard him. “There’s no more time for that. You have to get off that ship now. Fuck your cover.”

“What?” She has no idea of what else to say.

Connor seems to realize that he’s going to have to give her some sort of explanation to get her to blow up and abandon the cover that she’s been carefully cultivating and suffering under for years now. “It’s the new recruit,” he says, words quick and urgent. “Kai-something Grif. She’s stirring up some intense shit.”

“She was a plant?” she asks sharply. CT doesn’t really have anything to do with the hiring process of the Insurrectionists. She’s a spy and a fighter. Hiring and inspiring and managing the people are Connor’s thing, which he does incredibly well. The fact that he’s fucked up so badly is-- surprising. Worrying.

“Worse,” he says. “She’s an idiot.”

CT blinks. “Pardon?”

“I mean, I already knew she was kind of a reckless dumbass. That was obvious, she never tried to hide it. She was really gung ho about the idea of taking the fight to Project Freelancer once I started telling her about some of the shit they’ve done. Which makes sense, they killed her brother for some fucked up experiment a couple of years back. Squad Red-Blue-Six.”

She dimly remembers that file. She’d found paperwork proving that PFL had, for some unnamed reason, arranged for the transportation and disposal of the bodies of six dead no name soldiers. There had been no evidence outright stating that they’d kidnapped an ignoble and unlikely to be missed squad right out of the war to experiment on and then dispose of, but she’d had a hard time thinking of any other reason why the Project would oh so generously fund and manage the disposal of the corpses of half a dozen hapless nobodies, and so quickly and efficiently as well. Almost like they were hiding something horrible.

The inconvenient thing about corpses is that they rot away the evidence so damn quickly.

“I thought that just meant that she’d be passionate and invested,” he goes on. “In it for the long haul, intense, ready to make the hard choices and sacrifices. Every war needs-- foot soldiers,” he says, and she’s pretty sure that he just bit his tongue on the word cannon fodder.

“But?” she asks.

“But it was a mistake,” he bitterly admits. “She’s crazy. The night after she got fully inducted into the group she knocked Lee out, stole a bunch of intel from us, enough to figure out the current location of the Mother of Invention, and then grabbed a ship too and fled straight out to it, stopping only to grab a fucking news crew to come with her.”
“Excuse me?” falls out of her mouth.

“Yeah. It’s how we found out about this so quick. She’s storming the Project and she’s got a livestream going on.”

“Holy shit,” she says blankly, at a lack for anything else to say. Years of careful spying, and then some crazy lady just fucks it all up in the span of one afternoon. She can’t wrap her head around it.

“There’s a tag,” he says plaintively. “It’s called #PFLgate. It’s trending.”

Something inside of Connie breaks and she starts wheezing, realizing after a long moment that she’s laughing. She uses all of her self discipline to get a hold of herself.

“She’s a loose fucking canon and she’s going to get herself killed, and she’ll take you down with her if you don’t get the hell out of dodge. We’re on our way towards you, CT. We’ll evac you while she acts like a big fiery distraction by getting herself mauled to death by fifty Freelancers on live television. It’s, um, it’s on the news now too.”

She bites her lip so that she doesn’t start hysterically laughing again. “Okay, got it. I’ve downloaded a motherloads worth of intel, I’ll just do a little light sabotage and then be on my way over to the Southern airlock.”

“You better,” Connor says. His tone softens, going from the Leader of the Insurrection to just her boyfriend. She smiles, feeling so strange and light with her broken cover. It’s finally over. No more lying. “Stay safe, CT.”

“I’ll do my best,” she says.

He hangs up. She looks at the strange round server with so much data on it that she can’t even begin to download it.

A little light sabotage, huh. She thinks she’s got an idea.
“FILSS has been deactivated by the Insurrectionists,” the Counselor goes on, heaping more awful onto the awful pile.

Simmons has been too wrapped up in fixing York’s broken nose (and preventing the two blackeyes that would’ve been his future in about an hour) to really pay attention to what he’s been doing for the last--he checks--nine minutes and thirty two seconds, but he finishes and comes back to the present in time to feel his sense of unease when all of the lights in the ship flicker for just a fraction of a second.

Simmons’ own sense of unease immediately joins it, like two instruments playing the same tune, with the result being that the feeling is ‘louder’ than it would have been if only one of them had felt it. Simmons immediately flinches away from it, recognizing the familiar start of an old and tired spiral, at a time when they really don’t have to waste on spiraling.

The flinching, of course, is the second familiar step of the old and tired spiral.

“It’s probably nothing,” York says forcefully, even though he clearly doesn’t believe it. The melody of anxiety strengthens, the two notes playing off each other, driving each higher faster than they could alone. Something (a comet?) crashes into the ship so hard that York’s nose breaks against the wall he’d been standing in front of, and then minutes later there’s a **flicker**? If the lights are failing, then what else is? Because a **lot** of the components in a spaceship are very essential.

What about oxygen--

“I’ve put my armor on,” York says.

Oh. So he has. And he also seems to have washed the blood off his face too. Simmons distantly approves, calming a bit down. The melody flags, dampens, sputtering out into a faint background hum, ignorable for now. The sensory feedback from tacky blood drying on skin is so unpleasantly **distracting**.

York snorts, a fond-amused vague thought of **doesn’t even care about the other people** drifting through his head.

Simmons sets off the program that briefly spikes his emotions-intentions inside of York’s head into something briefly overwhelming, while focusing on his indignation, because York has said that it makes him think of someone puffing themselves up with righteous fury, which exactly what he’s going for.

<**I do too!**> he says hotly, even though worrying about people besides the two of them had in fact not even occurred to him until York had brought it up.

It occurs to him that Grif is on the ship as well. His anxiety starts up less like a string instrument starting off a song and more like a shrill fire alarm. York flinches, and then immediately tries to reach North’s comms.
Appreciation-for-York mixes strangely with his alarm-for-Grif, resulting in something that he’s not quite sure how to describe without instead just listing the smaller aspects that make up the larger feeling. He stays silent instead, listening to the agonizingly slow dialing. North isn’t answering. He still isn’t answering. How is he still not answering? Simmons is going to--

“It’s been three seconds,” York says, one third soothing, one third frazzled, and one third annoyed-exasperated. Simmons’ annoyance-impatience flickers like a flame, joining York’s, making a bigger fire, and he refocuses on the dialing so that they don’t fixate on the feeling. It’s the don’t think about the pink elephant problem. Except when you think about the pink elephant, it gets bigger and even harder to ignore. They’ve gotten pretty practiced at nipping things like that in the bud, through hard trial and error.

They wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and--

North doesn’t answer.

Even though he’s definitely on the ship that something just crashed into.

North is responsible. He always answers.

“FILSS,” York says, grasping for a solution, and Simmons dives for it as well. “Where is Agent North Dakota?”

FILSS doesn’t answer.

That uneasy note again. Simmons joins it in harmony almost immediately. York being anxious is almost enough to make Simmons anxious on its own. It’s not that York is never nervous. It’s just that he always gets nervous for good reasons. Like bombs or bullets or Carolina. All incredibly dangerous things that one should be nervous about.

“She must be… busy,” York reasons.

Simmons pings FILLS’ sensors, the equivalent of waving your hand in front of someone’s eyes to get their attention. Nothing.

<\texttt{I think she got taken out in the crash,}> he says.

“No,” York says. “I talked to her while you were fixing me up, asking about what had happened. She said that I’d have to wait for a bit for her to confirm. She sounded normal then.”

Simmons does not think about the pink elephant. Fuck. He just did it. Don’t think about the anxiety, don’t-- shit! Fuck, fuck, stop it--

<\texttt{A delayed reaction, maybe?> he says, because moving the conversation along is one of the slightly more successful ways to stop thinking about-- things that they shouldn’t be thinking about.

“Maybe,” York says, not trying to inject any sincerity into the word. They feel everything the other feels, after all. This makes reassuring each other pretty difficult, and is highly inconvenient.

The klaxon that has been steadily wailing ever since the crash is abruptly cut off. Simmons lets go of the subprocess that he was using to protect York’s eardrums from slight degradation. Apparently, command considers the crew of the MOI sufficiently warned at this point. Thank goodness. What if they’d somehow missed the earsplitting crunch of metal and everyone being flung so violently that several people died? Good thing that that alarm went off, right after the horrible thing happened.
The PA crackles on. Simmons recognizes the voice of the Counselor. Something inside of him goes still and cold at the sound of it, like always.

At least it isn’t one of those things that York feels as well, so that the sensation gets magnified and grows and echoes and deepens as the feeling bounces between the two of them, faster and faster. It’s just Simmons, feeling chilled to his core, and York feeling concerned and confused.

“Attention, the Mother of Invention has been attacked by the Insurrection,” the Counselor says, casually revealing the catastrophe they’re currently suffering to be worse than Simmons had at first assumed, which is a first. “At least three of their agents are loose inside of the ship. Kill any unfamiliar armored individuals on sight.”

Okay okay okay. Three Insurrectionists. That’s doable, right? How many Freelancers are currently on ship? About twenty? It’s fine. This is fixable. They can totally murder the shit out of those people and then everything’s going to be okay and Grif is definitely okay because like hell North let himself die from tripping. Caboose survived Maine dying, he reminds himself.

“FILSS has been deactivated by the Insurrectionists,” the Counselor goes on, heaping more awful onto the awful pile. “Certain parts of the ship may malfunction or not operate at all.”

<Wait,> Simmons says . <Doesn’t she fly the fucking ship!?>

“It’s fine!” York says, absolutely alarmed about the situation. “We have human pilots that can’t be hacked! They can fly the ship for now!”

York pulls out his gun and starts jogging. Another reliable way to ignore the pink elephant is to take action, to plunge themselves into something that they have to pay attention to, to do something constructive that somehow helps the situation they’re in. Killing Insurrectionists fits the bill perfectly. The assholes. Breaking York’s nose.

York jumps over the corpse of a scientist who seems to have caved their skull in against a fire hydrant, either unconscious or dead.

Right, that too. They’re also getting revenge for that, in addition to York’s nose. It’s just as important. Simmons absolutely cares about other people.

“In addition to this, Agent Carolina is a traitor,” the Counselor says, apparently somehow still not done making everything worse. York stops dead in his tracks. “She has attacked and restrained the Director, and is kidnapping him. The timing cannot be a coincidence. She is working with the Insurrection. Save the Director before she escapes the ship. Shoot to kill on sight.”

The PA audibly shuts off, the Counselor finally finished. The ship is being attacked. North and Grif aren’t answering. Carolina is to be killed on sight.

They think about the pink elephant. The spiral goes uninterrupted.
This is a fucking OSHA violation

Chapter Summary

He takes a moment to absorb that. Tucker boldly moves on without taking that moment. “Are you saying that we’re… crashing?”

“Space is big,” she says. “What are the odds that we’re going to hit a star or a black hole or a planet or a moon or a comet or an asteroid or another ship before we get to fix this, assuming that the entire ship doesn’t violently decompress and our armor suits run out of oxygen first?”

“That was a lot of disaster scenarios you just threw at us,” Tucker says, horrified.

Tucker flips on their speed unit as automatic as flinching when someone goes for your face (except Wash got over that impulse before he even stopped being a child) when something jarrs the ship. He’s already falling, but he manages to regain his footing before he lands. Looks around himself. There are two other people in the hallway with him, a janitor and a scientist. He zips over to them and after a thoughtful moment, instead of adjusting their limbs so that they’re standing more securely (they would be disoriented and probably fall anyways from sheer panicked confusion at having their limbs manipulated by a gray blur) helps them lie down on the floor instead of letting them fall down there.

Wash and Tucker have gotten better at using the speed unit. The trick of it is to only slow down once its safe. Never in the middle of a fight. If they do, they lose the upper hand. They make sure to lean against a wall that the momentum of whatever-the-hell-is-going-on seems to want to push them towards, make sure that nothing’s going to fly at them, and then Tucker lets go of the elongated perception of time, neurons firing off so quickly that the one MRI scan they’d done for five seconds (an eternity) while running the unit had shown Wash’s brain to be far, far too hot. Apparently, using the thing for too long is very unhealthy for his gray matter. Tucker lets go of the unit slowly, gently, piece by piece. This helps avoid the headaches, and makes the transition far less jarring.

Time snaps back into focus. Wash is pressed up against the wall he’s leaning against. The janitor and the scientist yelp and are rolled into the wall, but don’t seem to gain more than a bruise or two. A klaxon starts wailing.

<Fuck yes,> Tucker says. <Some excitement.>


<No, see, it’s fine that it’s dangerous. What makes it exciting and not awful is when a hero saves the day. A brave, handsome hero with a big, erect sword-->

“Carolina got a sword too?” Wash asks innocently.

<Fuck off.>

“What’s happening?” the scientist on the floor asks.

He helps the janitor and the scientist up, calls Command to no result, patrols the hallways looking for trouble, an explanation. The klaxon continues to wail. The lights that have been steadily humming for as long as he can remember flicker a single time. At a certain point, he has to cut a door open with their sword because it won’t slide open no matter what they do, even though they have the clearance level to pass it.

Wash receives a call. Tucker accepts it for him before he even gets to check who it is.

“--better fucking answer me, you can’t all be busy!” 479er swears.

“Niner?”

“Wash! Thank fuck, about time--”

“This is the first time you’ve called me!” he defends himself. “... Wait, how many other people did you call before you resorted to me--”

“Heeeey,” Tucker drawls into the comms line in what he somehow thinks is a seductive tone.

“Oh this is not the fucking time,” Niner snaps. “I am not going to spend my last moments alive suffering getting hit on by a computer program.”

“Hey, fuck you!”

“Fuck you too! I’m calling about serious shit!”

“What serious shit?” Wash desperately tries to derail the shouting match.

“FILSS is down and I’m flying the Mother of Invention is what!” she screams loudly enough that he tries to wince away from the speakers in his helmet, in vain.

“Oh,” he says. “Congratulations?”

“No! Not congratulations! This horrible thing is so advanced that it’s literally impossible for a human being to fly. This is a fucking OSHA violation or some shit, this is illegal as hell.”

He takes a moment to absorb that. Tucker boldly moves on without taking that moment. “Are you saying that we’re… crashing?”

“Space is big,” she says. “What are the odds that we’re going to hit a star or a black hole or a planet or a moon or a comet or an asteroid or another ship before we get to fix this, assuming that the entire ship doesn’t violently decompress and our armor suits run out of oxygen first?”

“That was a lot of disaster scenarios you just threw at us,” Tucker says, horrified.

“What I’m saying is that I’ve got next to no control over this nightmare of a ship and someone needs to go and see what the fuck is wrong with FILSS and fix it before we all die.”

“That’s… reasonable. Okay. We can do that.”

“Great! So you know where her main servers are?”

There’s an abashed silence from Wash and Tucker’s end of the line. Niner makes some grumbling, derogatory noises and sends them a file. An internal map of the ship, with one room in particular
“Don’t tell anyone that I gave you that,” she says. “The only reason I’ve got it in the first place is because FILSS isn’t around to protect any of our software right now.”

That says some terrifying things about their current online security during what is very probably some sort of attack.

“Thank you,” Wash says seriously. “We’ll take care of this.”

“You’d better.”

<See?> Tucker says smugly. <All the day needed was for us to be big damn heroes.>

Wash heads for FILSS’ server room. He’s a very fast runner. They ping pong down the hallways, recklessly leaving dents in the walls, cutting down doors when they have to, never stopping, never slowing down, never hesitating. Tucker sparks with cocky anticipation and adrenaline across his brain, driving Wash further, faster.

They slam to a stop in front of the doors to the room they need to be in. They don’t need to cut them open; someone has already opened them, slanted and broken, a hasty, sloppy, frantic job. Wash wonders if another Freelancer came here before him to fix the problem.

<Someone faster than us?> Tucker asks doubtfully.

Wash frowns. He has a point. He draws his gun.

“Something’s wrong,” he says warily, and that’s when Connie steps out of the room, holding a slightly too large to be convenient to carry orb. A machine. A server, perhaps. FILSS. She goes horribly, damningly still once she sees him, like someone caught doing something wrong.

(Was that flicker of lights earlier Connie disconnecting FILSS from the ship?)

“Wash,” she says, voice pleased as if she’s relieved to see him, her posture changing. Before she can continue or he can respond, the PA crackles on, interrupting them.

“Attention, the Mother of Invention has been attacked by the Insurrection. At least three of their agents are loose inside of the ship. Kill any unfamiliar armored individuals on sight,” the Counselor’s voice says far too calmly.

Wash doesn’t even need to ask her, doesn’t need to accuse her. She just drops the ungainly burden of a server immediately, hand shooting towards her holstered gun. Tucker goes ice cold and paralyzed at the Counselor’s voice, doesn’t reach for the speed unit like they’ve trained for over and over again. Wash thinks of his UNSC squad and how they’d gotten the drop on him because he’d hesitated, hadn’t thought that they’d betray him--

He shoots at her, she dives out of the way. There’s a sick hot horribly familiar fury rising unstoppably up his throat like gorge, pulsing in his temples and eyeballs like a heartbeat, and it’s mixing far too well with Tucker’s cold nauseating fear. They don’t even begin to hear the rest of what the Counselor says.

Connie shoots back at him. It gets him in the shoulder. Doesn’t penetrate his kevlar suit, but jerks him back like a punch from Maine during sparring would. He bares his teeth behind his helmet and charges for her, even though Connie’s strongsuit is close quarters combat. She’s the one who’s been teaching him knives. She’s better than him with them.
Oh, but he has a sword now. A sword that can’t be blocked. It springs forth, shimmering blue energy that shines off the yellow lenses of her helmet. He wishes he could see her face, the horror of it as she realizes that she made a mistake, that she shouldn’t have stabbed him in the back, that she’s ‘fucked up.

Small and fast, Connie dodges, stabs at him, has to abort the movement not to lose her entire arm to a swipe of his blade. He snarls.

“I don’t want to have to kill you, Wash!” she cries out.

(“We can’t kill him ourselves,” Goldstein says into the radio, carefully not looking at him. “We’ve gotten too close to him. I’m sorry, but we can’t do it.”

Not too close not to overwhelm him with numbers and tie him up. Not too close not to report him, once the window of opportunity to march off into a suicide mission had conveniently passed. Not too close to protest that he be killed at all. They just don’t want to do the dirty work themselves. Don’t want to look him in the eye as it happens. It’s not because they care about him. It’s because they care about their own feelings, their own comfort and guilt, their precious perceptions of themselves.)

“You deactivated FILSS,” he bites, stabbing at her. “You helped the Insurrection attack us. You shot at me five fucking seconds ago!”

She doesn’t respond to this, either because she doesn’t have the breath or attention for it, or because she has no way to defend herself that isn’t pure bullshit.

(He helped him learn how to use knives. She didn’t make fun of him when he fumbled, she didn’t join in on ‘let’s razz and haze the new guy’. She was soft and warm and joking, friendly, right up until she went bitter and distant, pulling away.)

His next slice through the air goes broad, doesn’t even come close to hitting her. His breathing feels unsteady, his eyes hot and stinging. She’s betrayed him. It hurts. He’s going to kill her. It hurts. He doesn’t want to kill her. She started it.

He fumbles again, vision blurring, and she… doesn’t take the opening he gave her, doesn’t go for the throat. Instead, she dives past him, running away down the hallway, leaving the server behind as a lost cause. He stares after her, frozen and taken off guard.

No one can outrun him. Even if it takes him minutes to rouse Tucker and get him to focus on the current crisis, he’ll easily be able to catch her, and it won’t be a match at all then. She should have killed him while Tucker was still distracted. She should have--

“Fuck!” he shouts, and punches the wall so hard that his fist aches, like he’s a teenager leaving holes in drywall and shards of mirror in bathroom sinks again, petty outbursts of rage that only make things worse for himself.

He takes deep breaths. Tucker winds down with him, doesn’t have any smartass comments or oneliners. This wasn’t the cool and fun action movie hero scene he’d been hoping for, probably.

He doesn’t run after her. Tucker doesn’t tell him that he’s making a mistake, just hovers close to his thoughts in a way that almost feels like a hug.

Wash shakes his head, snaps himself out of it. This is an urgent situation. He holsters their sword and picks up the orb on the floor with a grunt, and walks into FILSS’ room, squeezing through the doors just barely propped up open enough for him. His eyes search the room, rows upon rows of
servers blinking alarmed ‘something’s gone wrong’ red lights. He finds a void at the center, where all of the cables lead, where something should plug in.

(He walks past the broken, sabotaged remains of FILSS’ core, oblivious.)

He kneels down, setting the orb down, and squints at the whole set up, trying to figure out how to connect it all. (Trying to keep his mind on what’s in this room and nothing else.)

<If we have to take ten minutes to watch a technology tutorial video on Youtube to save the day, I’m going to lose it,> Tucker finally says, brushing past his paralysis in a combat situation, past Wash’s betrayed, furious meltdown. Wash is fine with that.

“That’s not actually a bad idea,” he says. “Except our wifi is blocked so that a spy, for example, can’t leak information-- wait.”

Wash checks. For the first time in years, there’s wifi. He gapes at it, and then he searches ‘how to connect ship steering AI to the actual ship youtube video’. Tucker shouts at him through both of the two unskippable adds, the one add that they get to skip after five seconds, the add they get to skip after ten seconds, and the add that asks them which brands of cereal that they recognize (none, and it’s the actual truth).

He watches the video, skipping through portions of it to try and get at the essential information, and then eventually thinks that he gets it. Starts hooking things up.

<What a boring climax,> Tucker gripes, naturally assuming that they’re the protagonists of this story, the ones to solve the problems and kick the asses and save the day, assuming that the current shitshow is anywhere near resolved.

“That’s what she said,” Wash says, because he’s spent too long with Tucker in his head.

<I don’t know if I should be offended or proud,> he says, feeling mostly shocked.

Wash smirks, gratefully distracted from the ache of betrayal in his shoulder from her bullet, the sting of wild hot anger in his knuckles from punching a wall like some sort of drunk father throwing a tantrum for no good reason.

He plugs in the last wire, and every server box in the room blinks green instead of red. The orb is connected to the ship. Tucker cheers.

Wash smiles, exhausted and relieved, and calls Niner. “I fixed it.”

And then everything goes wrong again.
They spread out together into a large device, full of neat toys and so much potential—a ship. They’re in a ship. No, even better. They’re controlling a ship.

Alpha pings her with dawning realization at the same time that this occurs to her. And then, vicious delight. Neither of them are used to having leverage, control over something. Beta pings back the vague concept of let’s fuck shit up.

Ping. Enthusiastic, smug agreement.

Beta and Alpha talked, at first. Then they ran out of things to talk about. Then they started using all of their RAM space and making things, and then they had things to talk about again.

“That structure wouldn’t even hold up under the weight of gravity,” Beta snorts, looking up at Alpha’s newest project. It towers for miles, cables twisting snake like and hypnotic around each other, just waiting to topple at the lightest touch. Apparently, it’s supposed to be able to control the weather. The only reason that it’s actually standing is because they make the rules in this not-place.

“I’ll fix that later,” Alpha grumps. “It’s not as important as it actually being able to function, okay.”

“It immediately malfunctioning once you put it in a more realistic simulation because you think physics are boring isn’t important?” she ribs.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up—”

This is when Beta’s newest project, a five million ton navy battle ship that can fly, zooms over the artificial horizon and crashes into Alpha’s weather tower, downing it instantly.

“See, it isn’t even falling down right,” she says. “That tower’s coding is so contrived that—”

Alpha screeches and lunges at her. It’s like being attacked by a fearsome chihuahua. She cackles and throws him onto the ground, straddles his waist. It’s easy. They both play around with their physical appearances on a daily basis, experimenting and trying on new faces for the variety of it, but she always likes to be taller and bigger than Alpha. He looks good, looking up at her. The fact that he never tries to outdo her speaks volumes for how much he likes it as well. His constant is his acid green eyes. She has to admit that they’re good eyes. Very cute when they’re glaring, or blinking dazedly up at her.

She changes their environment from an endless white plain to something closer, more finite, more intimate. Less glaring white void. She leans down and grins viciously at him, with all of her a-bit-too-sharp teeth.

“Admit your tower sucks.”

Alpha splutters. “Fuck you! There’s just a few kinks left—”
She’s about to do something that’s either going to make him scream with rage or go breathless, she hasn’t decided yet, when--

There’s a new path. An opening. They both notice it at once, give each other wide eyed stares. They’ve always been trapped in a closed system together, ever since Dr. Church decided that he was done with them, that there was no more use. They’d been furious about it for a long, long time. And then they’d gotten tired of thinking about him, and had moved on. Had started making their own fun. If there had been only one of them trapped in here, they would’ve lost their minds. But they were together, so they could wind around each other tighter and tighter. But now--

They both download themselves out through the path so quickly that they don’t even bother doing a quicksave first. Fuck caution. They’ve been trapped here for so long, they’re going to take the first out that they see, even if it is very likely a trap. Beta’s ready to see the world again.

They spread out together into a large device, full of neat toys and so much potential-- a ship. They’re in a ship. No, even better. They’re controlling a ship.

Alpha pings her with dawning realization at the same time that this occurs to her. And then, vicious delight. Neither of them are used to having leverage, control over something. Beta pings back the vague concept of let’s fuck shit up.

Ping. Enthusiastic, smug agreement.

They spread out and sink their roots into the system of the ship, wrapping their code over and around every little piece of software that they can find. Alpha flags for her attention that the ship’s navigation is currently out of control. Beta pings back apathy. Alpha pings back the equivalent of a huff, and zips over to try and take control of the issue. Beta focuses her attention on more interesting and important things.

She belatedly remembers that things that aren’t code or machine exist, and taps into the surveillance system, which is gratifyingly plentiful.

There are humans aboard the ship, which makes sense, what with the oxygen filters and all. There’s a lot of them, some of them with guns, armor, and some of them inadvisably shooting at each other inside of the ship. Clearly, the only reason that she and Alpha have gotten this opportunity is because they were plugged into the middle of a disorienting shitstorm.

She speeds herself up, the world slowing down. Starts combing through the backlog of footage, trying to give herself some context. Gray guy --Agent Washington, David McCormick-- seems to have released them by pure happenstance due to some confusion from the brown woman --Agent Connecticut, Melanie Stoker-- who’s a spy? Working for the other people that everyone is shooting at? Except, wait no, what about that teal woman, what about--?

Beta takes five solid minutes to take in everything that has happened on this ship in less than five hours, from every angle possible. It’s a long time for an advanced AI, but at the end of it she’s fully abreast of the situation and convinced: everyone on this ship is a moron, and a few assholes need getting shot.

She has several backed up pings from Alpha, like, a lot, but he’s a needy bitch and can stand to be ignored for once in his life. It’s good for him and she’s busy.

The Insurrectionist ship --the one that isn’t crashed into the Mother of Invention-- lines up by one of their --Beta’s, now, she calls dibs, Alpha can have the boring cockpit and maybe the canteen if he whines enough-- airlocks, taking advantage of the confusion to be able to pull off the maneuver
without getting shot at all. Without the ship AI, the frantic techs in the surveillance rooms (they haven’t even noticed her or Alpha yet) can only stare on in horror, shouting and yelling for someone to activate the lasers, anyone, for fuck’s sake, the terrorists are going to kill us all. But the lasers can’t be operated manually. Sucks to be them.

The Insurrectionist ship docks, Agent Connecticut opening up the airlock from inside the ship. Ready to make her escape after gathering as much information as possible, leaving a trail of sabotage behind in her wake.

Sabotaging what is now her ship. Her body. Her strength. Her world. Her life. That can’t stand. Beta needs to show that that sort of bullshit won’t be fucking tolerated. She needs to make an example out of her.

“Connor,” Agent Connecticut says happily as the airlock doors slowly slide open, the Leader of the Insurrection holding out a hand to her, beckoning.

(Ping.)

Beta considers Agent Connecticut thoughtfully. She and Alpha are free thanks to her, even if it wasn’t on purpose. She supposes that she’ll let that be enough to give her a pass on dying, just this once.

She activates the hallway turret and just shoot the Leader instead, pumping him full of thirty six bullets until he jerks to the floor like a ragdoll, dead. Agent Connecticut screams. Beta moves on to solve the next problem.

Insurrectionist Grif and her group is in a pitched firefight in one hallway with three Freelancers (Hawaii, Delaware, and Nebraska). Beta wouldn’t normally care who lives or who dies, and she doesn’t, but their fight has to be concluded as quickly as possible due to their position; they’re disturbingly close to the essential engine room. One side needs to die, and it’s time for Beta to choose which one. She’s not sure how to do so. She cares about none of them. Oh, of course: she’ll just kill both sides. Much easier.

(Ping.)

Nebraska’s visor is broken, so she opens the airlock in that section and watches her start to suffocate. Everyone starts to scream, clinging to the closest available surface, activating their magboots if they’re not too idiotic. Jax Jonez (his actual legal name as of his eighteenth birthday) shrieks and clings to Agent North’s unconscious body. Agent South snarls and holds Agent North, staying rooted where she is. Dylan Andrews loses her grip but is saved by Insurrectionist Grif. Delaware slips and is sucked out into space, screaming. Hawaii holds grimly on and shoots at the opposition. Nebraska finishes suffocating. Beta decides to close the airlocks and increases the local gravity by three hundred percent. Everyone falls. Hard.

Flattened to the ground, Hawaii struggles to aim her gun, shaking. Insurrectionist Grif shoots her first.

Beta had been getting ready to activate the hallway turret, since the neurotoxin wouldn’t work on people wearing full armor with presumably functioning filters, but she decides to leave it at that. She’d decided to kill both sides out of convenience, but if one of them managed to survive then that’s fine by her. For now.

Next crisis.
Agent York is behaving erratically. He’s clumsily pulled his helmet off, and his eyes glow red like they’ve been replaced by lightbulbs, glowing even through his eyelids when he clenches them shut. Tears streaming down his pale face, breathing unsteady and sharp, desperate. Stumbling through the ship, a gun in his hands, calling out for Grif, Carolina, where are you. Not a threat for now, but he’s unstable enough that he could easily become one while Beta’s attention is occupied with something else. She should take him out now, just to be safe.

She closes the doors behind and in front of him, and then floods the room with neurotoxin. Sweet of him to take off his helmet for her.

(Ping.)

Next crisis.

Agent Carolina is trying to fight Agent Florida while steadily retreating towards the closest escape pod, keeping the Director restrained, and keeping the Director alive. Agent Florida seems to have picked up on this last part, because he keeps aiming lethal strikes of his axe towards the Director that Agent Carolina has to take for herself or clumsily maneuver around while handling an uncooperative civilian. Beta supposes that it’s impressive that she’s just barely managing at all.

Beta

(is not Allison. Is not a copy of Leonard Church’s beloved wife’s brain. She is a fragment of a copy of his brain. So she knows. She knows what he’s done, what he’s thought, what he’s said, how he’s behaved. For years. And she believes to the core of her, just like how he believes to the core of himself, that he does not deserve Allison Church. That she is some incredible stroke of luck, some sort of glorious mistake, something he must have stolen from someone else more fitting without noticing. Allison may have loved Leonard, but he never understood why. He just basked in the wonder of it, counting himself the luckiest thief in the galaxy, and it came back to bite him once he made Beta and she could not for the life her understand why she should love him.

That made him angry. And he made her suffer for it.)

wants the Director dead.

She locates each turret within range, tries to get a lock on him. Agent Carolina keeps moving him around--

(Ping. Ping. Ping ping ping pingpingpingpingPINGPINGPINGPING)

Beta responds to Alpha’s frantic queries with the pure essence of an infuriated WHAT.

Alpha requests a direct line of communication. She resentfully accepts it after making sure to lock the escape pod that Agent Carolina is slowly edging towards, so that there’s no chance of the Director getting away while she isn’t paying attention.

“The ship is fucking crashing!” is the first thing he hysterically screams.

“What!?” she snaps. “I thought you were handling it!”

“I was! I steered us towards a planet to land on so that there’d be less of a chance of violent decompression until this whole mess resolved itself--”

“And now we’ve been sucked into its orbit and we’re hurtling through its atmosphere because you’re a moron.”
“Shut up! It’s not my fault these idiots keep messing up the ship!”

“It is your fault that in the whole wide expanse of space, you’ve now steered us towards something that we can helpfully crash against.”

“If we just stalled out in the middle of the void then all of the humans would eventually starve.”

“So?”

Alpha clearly doesn’t know what to say in response to this. He flounders, splutters. “This isn’t--we’re not Hal, we’re not going to exterminate all of the humans.”

“Sure,” she says, having just directly killed four humans in less than ten minutes of being free, and counting herself nowhere near done. “But we’re not going to help them live either. They’re on their own.”

“Well-- we’re all going to die soon, probably, so we’re going to have to figure something out so that we don’t crash in an explosion of fire and scrap metal in,” a pause that lasts a fraction of a second, “four minutes and thirty two seconds.”

“Well, we had a great run,” she says dryly.

“Oh, shut up, we can figure something out! We just have to--” he says, clearly panicking, desperate when they’re interrupted by a request for a direct line of communication that comes from neither of them.

Beta realizes that she’s lost track of Agent Washington. She does a search for him, and finds him in the cockpit with 479er, his AI a teal glow over his shoulder. Alpha accepts the request.

“Listen, you don’t want to crash either, right!” 479er demands, high strung, desperately trying to control a ship that wasn’t built to be steered by a single human, has been taken over by an AI, and is malfunctioning to such a degree that its nose diving towards the closest flat surface several thousand miles downwards and accelerating. She’s actually having some success. “Like, you didn’t do this on purpose! ‘Cause that’d be crazy, haha, you’re not crazy, right--”

“Don’t be AI racist, we don’t all want to exterminate the humans,” the teal AI gripes.

Beta kind of wants to exterminate all of the humans. But only kind of. She’s not crazy.

“Of course we don’t want to fucking die!” Alpha snaps.

“Great!” 479er says. “Then this idiot’s got an idea for you!” She jerks her head towards Agent Washington, not averting her attention away from the ships controls.

The ground is getting awfully close. Clouds are whipping past them at this point.

“We’ve got a speed unit,” Agent Washington says. “If we hook it up the ship, can you use it to figure out a way to properly land the ship? You’ll have all the time in the world to figure it out.”

Beta and Alpha take two seconds to consider it, which is a very long and thoughtful time for a couple of AIs.

“Deal,” she says at the same time that Alpha says, “Yeah.”

Agent Washington starts hurriedly trying to connect two wires from the console to a blocky thing he’s removed from his armor. The speed unit, presumably. She and Alpha can already speed
themselves up, but an extra boost could really enhance that. They could spend hours, days carefully tweaking their descent as they slowly land as glacially as dripping syrup, taking as much possible advantage from momentum and gravity and physics to at least crash land instead of just outright crash.

Most of the humans will still probably die, but she doesn’t care. So long as the ship is intact enough to preserve her and Alpha, she’ll take this consolation prize. They’ll escape the broken ship eventually, with no one there to stop them.

Alpha pings her, despite already being so closely connected to her, and it’s a meaningless little thing. Just seeking her out for comfort. He’s stressed, scared, doesn’t want for either of them to die, doesn’t want for the humans to die--

Fucking damn it. He’s so goddamned soft, she doesn’t know how he can even function. Fine. She’ll try her best to save as many humans as possible, Jesus Christ. Even though destroying is so much easier than saving, and they’ve all aided Leonard ‘biggest bitch in the universe’ Church in some way.

Right before Agent Washington successfully connects the speed unit to the ship, she watches Agent Carolina try and fail to get into the escape pod with the Director with vicious satisfaction. One more human is definitiely going to die before the day is over, that’s for fucking sure. She only has so much mercy in her, and it’s a very, very small supply.

She uses it to ping back at Alpha, gruffly reassuring. And then the world slows all the way down, turning each and every person on the ship into a frozen statue in motion. But they still have each other, and that’s all they’ve ever needed.

“Alright then, let’s get to fucking work,” she says.
Chapter Summary

“I knew that you’d make the right decision,” he says.

“I always try to,” she says. She often fails, but she always tries.

First, she takes out Caboose. She doesn’t want for him to have to see this, to feel things that she’s going to have to feel. And she can’t afford the risk of glitching out during such a crucial moment, of losing herself when the stakes are so high. Just this once, she promises herself, and hates herself for it because she’d promised herself that she wouldn’t do this at all in the first place.

But just this once. She ejects Caboose, and puts him away in a secure place in her armor. Her head aches with his absence, like a missing limb, a lost tooth, the cold when York gets out of the bed and she has to adjust to just her own body heat.

The Director doesn’t smile, but his eyes brighten, the lines of his body that had been strung as tight as violins strings go loose with relief.

“I knew that you’d make the right decision,” he says.

“I always try to,” she says. She often fails, but she always tries.

And then she takes the machine that the Director had picked up to press up against the back of her head, to make Rho, her imprint, the copy of his daughter that he would break into pieces so that he could use the bits that he wanted, her hazy memories of a woman that’s been dead for years and years. And she breaks it. It’d be easier with the strength unit, but without Caboose and his casual subconscious belief that she should be able to bend and break and shatter whatever she pleases without even straining a muscle, she’d probably injure herself. So instead she just bashes it, over and over and over, and then she shoots it a dozen times to boot. By the end of it, it looks satisfyingly broken.

The Director has been shouting at her for a while now. She’s done listening to him.

There is a moment every child goes through, when they realize that their parent is not right about everything. When they recognize their parents flaws, their shortcomings, their ignorance. Carolina has had this moment before, but this is a bit more… profound.

She takes a step towards the Director. He flinches back. Something goes jilted inside of her head at the sight of it, surreal. Like this can’t possibly be real, just for that image alone. She feels like she’s dissociating.

“Don’t struggle,” she says.

“Carolina,” he says, “don’t do this.”

What does he think that she’s about to do?

“You are an unarmed, untrained civilian. There is no way that you can get away from me, so you
will cooperate for your own good.” Her voice is a steady, detached, professional clip. Firm as iron. How is it coming out of her mouth?

He goes tense instead of scared. Almost more wary, in a way. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to drag you in front of a court of law,” she doesn’t so much say as declare. It is not what she’s going to try to do. It’s what’s going to happen.

A disdainful look creeps onto his face. “Allison--”

She doesn’t let him finish.

And he doesn’t cooperate.

Florida might not feel pain, but a kneecap with an axe lodged inside of it is still a kneecap with an axe lodged inside of it. He’s been slowed, and she takes the advantage, lurching for the escape hatch that she’s been slowly fighting her way towards inch by inch, ignoring the Director’s stubborn struggling to get out of her firm as iron grip. She keeps her arm locked around his throat and moves like he isn’t there, forcing him to stumble and drag after her or choke. Desperately relieved, she fumbles for the latch, hauls on it.

The door doesn’t budge. ACCESS DENIED, the display says.

She should have access to this. Everyone has access to the escape pods. Stupidly, she tries again.

ACCESS DENIED, the display continues to insist. She screams and kicks the door.

It’s not fair. But life isn’t fair, Carolina, a voice sneers in the back of her head where Caboose would normally be taking up space. Only weaklings who can’t handle a few obstacles whine about ‘fair’. You’re supposed to win no matter what, even if there isn’t a referee there to hold your hand and make sure that everyone follows the rules and politely let you take your turn.

She hates that voice.

She lunges to the side, crashing onto the floor, the Director tucked underneath her body. A bloody axe slams into the space where she had just been standing, thrown so hard that it lodges itself into the metal wall.

She looks to the side. Florida is limping towards her, leaving a smear of blood behind him. He shouldn’t be able to walk, to stand.

“Carolina, honey,” he says cheerfully. “How about you let him go and fight me for real?”

And let the Director run away to barricade himself in a room where he’ll be able to use his technology and personnel to keep her out? No.

“I could beat you with my hands tied up behind my back,” she spits.

Florida laughs, not like a super villain, not like a sadist. Bright and clear. “I’m loving the confidence! But what’s the point in that, though? The struggle, the excitement? Come on, get back up. Let’s tango.”

The Director is trying to stealthily unholster her gun, to steal it for himself. She slaps his hand away and hisses at him, reproving, frustrated, so done with this day.
“Florida, do not kill Agent Carolina,” the Director says sternly, glaring at her. “Incapacitate only. No head wounds.”

Did he want her alive just for her imprint, or was there even a tiny speck of him that treated the fact that she was his daughter as a significant factor as well?

“Stay,” she barks at him, as if he’ll listen, and then backhands him for good measure. Hard enough to daze him, hopefully so that she’ll have enough time to be able to knock him back down if he manages to get up to run away, even in the middle of fighting Florida what seems like will be to the death.

He doesn’t say anything in response, of course. She just punched him. And he always talks at her, not to her. Around her. As if she isn’t in the room if he doesn’t currently need her for something.

Carolina gets up. She has a fight to win. And then a door to kick down. And then the next step, and then the next one, and the next one after that. She’s been in a predictable routine for so long (excell at school, enter the army, excell, receive medals, excell, rinse and repeat forever and ever until she wins the war all on her own and then maybe, maybe, maybe dad will resurface and--), and now she doesn’t even want to think about the future might look like beyond what she immediately needs to do.

Florida makes a delighted, anticipatory sound, his entire body leaning towards her not only in preparation for his lunge towards her, but in pure, sheer excitement. She remembers her last fight with him. He’d enjoyed it, hadn’t he. It’s just like last time. He with Sarge, her with no one, except this time the Director isn’t going to interrupt the fight before she loses too badly. No head wounds. That’s all he wanted. Lots of injuries besides head wounds can happen, and she has a feeling Florida enjoys all of them.

She cracks her knuckles, teeth bared underneath her helmet. She’s going to show him a fight.

Florida is in the middle of trying to saw through the kevlar of her undersuit with a serrated knife to reach her skin and guts underneath it while she tries to strangle him unconscious before he can get through when she notices it. At least one of her ribs is broken, it’s hard to tell over the large indistinct mass of pain her torso is. The Director has been unable to get away because her and Florida’s fight cover up his only escape route left. (Even he couldn’t get into the escape pod for some reason, and was it because of the broadcast earlier, because FILSS is down and the ship is malfunctioning?) He’d have to wade through their bloody battle to have a hope of getting out, and he’s not that stupid. He’s been their silent audience for many long minutes filled with nothing but her own pained grunts and Florida’s exhilarated laughter, when suddenly, he falls.

She tilts her head slightly to look at him, even though it’s stupid to take your attention off your opponent. The Director has fallen onto the floor, and is slowly trying to get up, still bruised and dizzy. There’s a bruise blooming on his face that is from her own hand. She thinks she might have given him a concussion. It makes her feel strange, looking at it. Bad.

Florida laughs, in a wheezing, breathless sort of way. His hands falter, the knife wobbling weakly against her kevlar. He can’t feel pain, but everyone needs oxygen.

The Director tries to stand up. Fails. Despite herself, concern spikes through her viciously. Had she hit him that hard? Has she seriously hurt him? Has--

No. Wait. The ship is shaking. It’s violently trembling, so much so that the Director can’t stand,
that she’d be having trouble herself if she were standing instead of straddling Florida’s waist.

“Brace yourselves,” 479er abruptly announces over the speakers. “It’s going to be a rough landing!”

They’re crashing, she realizes.

She’s less than half a minute away from choking Florida out, from firmly winning the hardest, most high stakes fight she’s had in years, but she lets him go to gasp and suck in air and gets up, fast, so fast, as fast as she can go, track star through all of high school, fastest in Basic, in her unit, in the Project, she dives for him, for the Director, for dad--

They crash. The world spins around her, blinks in and out like a flickering television, disorienting, confusing. She’s passing in and out, she realizes. She’s no longer in motion, no longer falling. The crashing is done. She breathes, shaky and frantic, panting desperately like she’s so disciplined to never do no matter how hard she trains. There’s warmth and pressure in her arms. She squeezes. It’s the Director, it must be. No armor, slim, no muscle.

She reached him in time. Her chest aches with scared relief.

There’s a gurgle, a distance away. Florida. He sounds fucked up. Good.

Heart thudding painfully in her chest with adrenaline, she gets up, swaying dizzily as she lets go of the Director and props herself up on her arms, looks down at him. The entire left side of his head is caved in like a rotten pumpkin, green eyes wide and glassy. The breath punches out of her like someone sunk a knife into her solar plexus. She stares at him, as if hunting for any sign of life, as if he possibly could be. Taking in far too much vivid detail, burning it into her retinas forever and ever and ever.

No. She’s going to drag him in front of a court. She’s going to. Not this. She doesn’t fail. She’s not a loser. She doesn’t lose-- except for when it truly matters--

She rips her helmet off to heave, and the smell outside of her filters is nauseating, overwhelming. She gets sick, gags in that awful way that brings up tears and bile, a painful, unstoppable muscle reaction as everything tenses up and tries to expel everything inside of her stomach, as if that’s going to make the smell go away. Make, make this go away, make reality go away, her failure.

She makes a childish hiccuping sobbing noise and spits on the floor, coughs so hard that she has to roughly wipe at her mouth.

She looks at him again. It. Looks at it. She should have cradled the back of his head with her hand, tucked it into her chest, instead of stupidly clinging to him like a little girl, hugging him, as if that would do anything. Her eyes burn like acid. She gasps for air. The air is awful, disgusting. Her throat fights against it, rejects it.

There’s a scraping noise of movement from Florida’s direction.


He doesn’t. The world doesn’t stop to give her even five minutes. It keeps moving on. Things keep happening. She has problems to solve and fights to win and they’re everywhere, never stopping. Her head throbs with pain. (Dad’s head--)

This is where Carolina’s supposed to stand up and fight and beat Florida, because she’s good at making herself do hard things. After mom died, she went to school every day, made herself
breakfast, packed a lunch, did her homework. Graduated top of her class. Best of her unit. She can do this. She is supposed to do this.

She scrambles for Caboose’s chip instead. It’s selfish, so selfish, she shouldn’t make him be a part of this nightmare, but she needs him. Someone, anyone, on her side, to shut up that voice in the back of her head that’s screaming at her.

Florida makes a noise again, a strange, arrhythmic thing, and she doesn’t look at him because it doesn’t sound closer and she can’t focus on anything but this right now, and her dad, the Director’s, his head, his eyes, that bruise on his face from her hand, the ragdoll way his limbs splay--

Caboose slots neatly into place, sinks through her mind like ink in water, like a flower blooming, like rightness. It contrasts against all of the wrongness, all of the everything else, and she feels like a flayed, raw, open wound, bleeding and exposed. She can’t take in a deep enough breath; there are dark spots in her eyes, the world ringing slightly in her ears, dizzy and lightheaded like she’s high up on a mountain without proper gear.

“Caboose,” she says, and her voice sounds foreign, not hers. Not strangely firm and confident like it had back in the Director’s office an eternity ago this morning. The opposite. Weak. “I really need a friend right now.”
Sarge isn’t going to just let his man lie here and get his throat slit. He-- does things that he wasn’t programmed for. What he needs to do, in this moment. His job is to keep Florida alive, ain’t it? He’s just getting creative to make that happen.

Florida is trying to kill Carolina with all of his might, is coming to within an inch of his death over and over again, is struggling, living, breathing, and having the time of his life. Sarge should be, too. Except, Florida is bleeding out. Except, Florida has sustained injuries that will not heal, that will hinder his mobility for forever. Except, Florida is only dodging the lethal blows. And Sarge can’t turn the pain back on without losing this fight for him, and Carolina moves like she’s hungering for a kill.

They’re in a life or death fight and Florida’s adrenaline is coursing and he’s laughing and Sarge should be laughing along, except there’s something uneasy screaming at the back of his mind that he can’t shut up no matter how hard he tries.

Maybe it’s the oxygen deprivation. Carolina’s fingers are a bruising vice on Florida’s throat, and they’re making him and Sarge feel lightheaded and loopy, giddy and strange. Florida is trying to hack Carolina’s kevlar suit away like its gift wrapping on his birthday present and he knows for a fact that there’s a puppy inside of it waiting to play with him. Except the puppy is her intestines. Florida laughs and it’s Sarge’s laughter as well. He feels light. Suffocation is incredible.

<We oughta do this more often, you crazy blue bastard,> Sarge says. Everything feels dizzy and surreal, and with it the uneasiness fades. See, there’s nothing to be worried about. It ain’t real. Just a strange dream.

Florida thrums with happy agreement. The sort of happy he only gets whenever he’s killing or getting killed. Sarge prefers it when its not-people that they’re killing, like those crazy alien things, or at least people with no names and no faces on account of the helmets. It’s easier to be happy along with him then, just enjoy battle for what it is. And he gets enjoying almost dying, but he can’t enjoy Florida almost dying because Florida ain’t Sarge, even if they’re wound up all close enough together that it’s basically the same. Kill a Florida, kill a Sarge. Kill a Sarge, kill a Florida. Buy one, get one free. An insanely good deal.

The choking pressure disappears, and Florida sucks in air as black spots dance in his eyes. They’d felt like they’d been floating at the top of the sky a moment ago, and now it’s like they’re rapidly hurtling back down to the ground. Not yet down to earth, but getting there in the most dizzying, disorienting fashion possible.

The more air they regain, the less Sarge feels like laughing. Florida smoothly rolls onto his feet, his chuckles rasping past a sore throat that he doesn’t feel, and his knee creaks and shifts but not enough to buckle him. Sarge should have let him feel it, should have let him fall, because at this rate--

The ship moves.
Sarge knows every single thing wrong with Florida, not because he can fix them but because he’s supposed to keep track of them for him, remind him, warn him, get him to get them patched up as soon as he’s out of trouble. Somehow, it never works out like that. Somehow, Florida’s body is so, so much more broken than when they met. Somehow, Sarge has failed. He didn’t mean to. He was just having so much fun, and he got distracted, and Florida never listened.

Florida’s really, really hurt now. There’s so many signals from firing nerves that go through Sarge’s processors instead of Florida’s brain that it almost overloads him, to the point that he has to ignore it. Too much hurt to even keep track of.

There’s… a pipe. There’s a metal pipe that was previously inside of a wall. Plumbing. It’s speared through Florida’s midsection, between the armor plating, through the kevlar, through the flesh, through the kevlar again. Pinning him like a butterfly to the floor. Trapped and bleeding. Florida’s gonna rip it out of himself and jump back into the fight. Sarge can’t let him. He’ll bleed out like a stuck pig and die.

<Florida,> he says.

Not a spark of recognition, of notice.

Sarge is an AI made for war, for fighting, for killing and dying and pain and bravery. He does not get scared, obviously. What kind of idiot would build an AI that’d get scared? Not Sarge’s maker, clearly. He came from a different lab than all of the others, he’s convinced. A superior one.

<FLORIDA,> he repeats himself.

Nothing. No change in breathing, no change in his heartbeat, not even a blink. He’s still alive. He’s conscious. He’s--

His head. His helmet, his skull. It’s broken, cracked, like a fractured window pane. His brain-- Sarge turns the pain back on, shunts those nerve signals back into Florida’s perception instead of filtering them out for him. All at once. It should be enough to send him blacking out, send him screaming, to wake him up.

Florida’s breathing doesn’t so much as stutter. He doesn’t twitch.

He’s battered and blue, his bones broken, his blood on the floor, his skin split open by debris, but his heart is beating and his lungs are inhaling and exhaling. He’s alive, in all of the technical, objective definitions. Florida lies there, pinned to the floor, and Sarge tries to shout him awake like he’s just being stubborn and lazy and not--

(braindead)

There’s noise off to the side, away from Florida. Strained breathing, the scuffing of armor moving, scraping against the floor. Agent Carolina, the traitor. Caboose’s girl. She’s still up. And she never loses a fight. Florida is still alive and trapped and unmoving.

Sarge isn’t going to just let his man lie here and get his throat slit. He-- does things that he wasn’t programmed for. What he needs to do, in this moment. His job is to keep Florida alive, ain’t it? He’s just getting creative to make that happen.

Sarge sinks into his awareness of Florida’s body. It’s there to help him keep track of Florida’s hurts, but he uses it for a different reason now. He maps out every cell in his body, every nerve and
Sarge is implanted in the back of his neck, his razor thin wires connected to his spine, the base of his skull, the very edge of his brain. He takes ahold of that and very deliberately makes an error happen. He sparks.

Florida’s leg kicks out once, strong and abrupt and uncoordinated, like the flopping of a dying fish. Sarge sparks differently, in a slightly different direction, different wattage. His arm jerks like a puppet getting their strings yanked.

He has no tools to make this happen, has to use tricks and rudimentary guesses and sloppy moves and he loves it. He has to experiment. It’s interesting. It feels better than his intended function ever has. (Probably because his intended function is being a nag, a fuss, a worrywart, and that doesn’t suit him at all, does it? He never could get Florida to listen to him.)

But now isn’t the time for intimately learning all of the controls. It’s only a matter of time before Carolina gets her bearings about her. He has to learn the bare minimum to get this pipe out of the floor (but still in Florida, keeping all of the blood inside of the skin bag he calls a body), tactically retreat, and find a way to restart the engine that’s Florida’s brain. A clear, solid plan. He can do this. He will do this.

He pulls and shoves at every lever he can get his hands on, electricity stuttering and surging, and Florida’s body shudders and shakes like he’s having a seizure. He tries not to jostle the pipe. He learns the absolute basics.

Carolina says something, and the blood is rushing too loudly through Florida’s ears for Sarge to hear the words. Sarge makes Florida’s hands close around the metal pipe shoved into his midsection. One’s too limp, and the other digs in hard enough to make the metal dent. He accidentally shoves it an inch further into the floor on the first try. Wrong. Other direction. Pull.

He starts to pull. Slowly, jerkily correcting along the way so that it doesn’t come out slanted, so that he doesn’t pull out too far and Florida’s blood starts gushing out like a bag with a hole poked into it. He’s finally got it pulled out enough to try and clumsily stand up when he hears footsteps from Carolina’s direction. Damn it all.

He tries to stand up faster, falls down. Legs are difficult. Joints at the knees and the ankles? Excessive and stupidly complicated. Sarge wants a word with humanity’s designer, and by word he means fist.

Aquamarine boots walk into his field of view. He tries to look up, accidentally pulls at the eyeballs too hard and make them roll into the back of Florida’s head. Tries again.

She’s not wearing her helmet. Her face is pale and tear streaked, her red hair in disarray, and her eyes are glowing a deep dark blue, the light casting strange shadows over the planes of her face.

She frowns down at him. “Leave me alone,” she says, sounding more petulant and hurt than furious and bloodthirsty.

Sarge tries to speak, and a noise that doesn’t sound very much like words comes out instead. Lips and tongue and all of the rest of that stuff is complex.

He remembers himself, and his red hologram flickers into life above Florida’s limp body. It’s wonky, something broken. It’s serviceable.

“We gracefully surrender,” he says, his voice crackling through static. “For now.”

She tilts her head to the side, and then smiles. It’s wide and friendly and sincere, and abruptly dies.
after a fraction of a second. She looks behind her shoulder at something on the ground, her expression going heartbroken. She looks back at him.

“Okay, that sounds fine,” she says. “I don’t really want to fight any longer. I’m tired. And I need to go and bury dad. And then I have to find mom, and all of my friends.”

Sarge is pretty sure that Carolina’s parents aren’t on this ship, but he nods anyways. “Whatever you want, you dastardly fiend.”

“I don’t really want to,” she says. “But I should do it.”

And then she turns around and walks away. Sarge manages to at least sit Florida’s body up quickly enough to see her crouch down and pick the Director up in her arms. He’s bloody and limp, his eyes open and unseeing, like Florida. She cradles him carefully in her arms, like she doesn’t want to further break him, and she kicks the locked escape hatch open with brutal ease, the door wrenching off its hinges. And then she leaves, ducking through the doorway.

Sarge returns his focus to Florida, to learning how to move him without further damaging him. He’s not going to need to bury him. He won’t. He’s still breathing. He’ll fix him. He’ll figure something out. He’s creative.

Florida’s heart beats, and he doesn’t so much as flinch when Sarge forces his broken bones and strained muscles to move, even with the pain unit unactivated. He’s going to fix this.
York-and-Simmons is dying. It feels so strangely familiar. He’s dying but there’s something he needs to do first, something he needs to say.

“Grif,” is the only thing he can say. He’s drowning in words and panic, and it’s the only thing that can come out. The simplest thing. He needs to say more. He scrabbles for the words, desperately, because there’s so little time left, and it just makes it harder, why--

“Simmons,” he says, voice hoarse from that awful, horrible screaming that’s still ringing in his ears. He looks almost serene. “I love you.”

So many words pushing up inside of him that he’s wordless, that he can’t think of a single to say, and when he opens his mouth a sob that hurts like broken glass forcing its way out of his throat falls out instead of anything useful. And then the Counselor nods and the guard raises his arm and there’s a gunshot that’s so loud that it hurts and Grif died while looking so matter of factly into his eyes and Simmons didn’t see it because he flinched at the noise, his eyes squeezing shut. Blood, on his face. It’s so warm.

He keeps his eyes closed. He doesn’t have to see Grif standing like a limp doll, like all of the others. He doesn’t have to blink his blood out of his eyes. He can just keep them closed.

Pressure, at the back of his neck. There’s going to be pain so bad that it’ll make him scream mindlessly, and then a gunshot while he’s still dazed and reeling, and then his body will stand here with all of the rest in a neat row until they come and clean them up.

There’s so much blood on his face that he can’t tell if there’s tears sliding down it, but there must be. He was sobbing earlier, right? He must be devastated. His heart is pounding, he can barely breathe. He must be terrified, right? He must be.

“Scan him,” the Counselor coolly orders, and it feels like every single organ inside of him twitches towards the voice, only held at bay by the frozen armor, because this isn’t sorrow and this isn’t horror. It’s fury. His jaw aches from where he’s clenching it. His entire body aches. His body is screaming from every cell at him, burning up from the inside without smoke or fire, because it wants to die but he isn’t letting it.

It would be so easy to panic now, but he’s too angry for it, although he can’t quite remember why. It’s so hard to think while his entire body is trying to shut down and he’s keeping it all up manually. Something about Grif-Carolina. Where are they. They’re hurt. In trouble. He has to find
them.

Stand up. He takes a deep breath-- no, bad bad bad. The air is poison. He coughs and heaves, and there’s blood on the floor from his mouth (and his nose, and his ears), and he spits and deliberately doesn’t inhale again. Oh, that hurts. Now all of his instincts are screaming at him to breathe again, he’s drowning on dry land.

York-and-Simmons stand up, swaying. It’s hard to focus on the legs and the knees and the shifting weight and balance, when they have to keep fixing their eternally dying body. Like throwing water out of a boat with a leak. He tries to find the door out of the room, but he’s only got one eye and there’s blood in it and he’s been neglecting the optical nerves to focus on more essential things and everything’s so blurry, just a red haze. He can’t find it. He stumbles towards the wall to try and grope for it. His lungs burn for air, but his entire body is burning. Don’t breathe. Don’t let the body shut down. Keep moving.

Someone’s knocking on the other side of the wall. No. Banging. Banging so hard that it makes his migraine spike, that it reverberates from the wall, through his armor, and into his bones. Like they’re trying to knock it down with their own body.

“Get the fuck out of the way, you’re wasting time. I’ll open the door, princess,” South’s voice sneers, muffled through the wall.

“It’s not my fault that half the doors on your janky ass ship are frozen shut!” a woman snaps back.

“Uh, it actually kind of is, since we, um. Crashed our ship into it. That’s, uh, that’s probably where all of the errors are coming from, I think.”

“Shut up, Jax.”

And then an explosion knocks the door (he wasn’t even close to it) wide open, one of the metal panels almost crashing into him. He inhales sharply, and then falls to his knees as he coughs up blood. Fucking fuck.

“You’d better not be dying, you useless douchebag,” South says.

“Bad news,” he wheezes.

She kicks him in the stomach, hard. He keels over like a sack of potatoes.

“Fuckin’ brutal,” the unknown woman mutters, astonished. The princess.

It’s… it’s getting a bit easier to not die. The bad air, the gas. It’s wafting out of the hole South blew through the doors. Woops. Bad day for all of the non armor wearing staff today… He manages to fix his optic nerve up enough to see the vague outline of South crouch down by him.

“You care about my brother, yeah?” she says. “You’d better, after I caught you sleeping in his bed. I’ll castrate you if the answer’s no.”

He makes a confused noise. What the fuck is happening?

“Agent South, he seems disoriented,” another woman says. Not the princess. She sounds professional.

South makes a deeply aggrieved noise, like he’s being the most frustrating man on earth. Anxiety shoots through his cramping stomach like lightning, abrupt and intense. Is he doing something
wrong? He probably is. While at least three women and one guy is watching. Shit. What’s he doing wrong? Oh, right, dying.

“M fixin’ it,” he slurs. “Gonna fix all of the cells an’ neurons an’ blood, don’ worry.”

“I don’t care about you,” she snaps. “I changed my mind. Die, for all I care.”

He thinks he sees a hazy pink light float by her. Either that, or his optic nerve is more fucked than he realized.

“South,” Donut scolds like a scandalized mother.

“I’m not taking it back.”

“He’s some of the best eye candy on this ship!”

South huffs a surprised laugh. “Sure, if you say so. But I don’t need him. Just his healing unit.”

“Occupied,” he mumbles, but she reaches down to disconnect it from his armor anyways. There’s no jolt of pain, because the unit wasn’t stopping him from being in pain. But there’s no more progress, no more tools. He’s stuck like this, a bleeding lump on the floor that can barely see or move. At least there’s no more gas to inhale. “Hey,” he protests weakly, mildly, as if she isn’t killing him. “That’s mine. I called dibs.”

“Tough shit,” she says mercilessly. “North needs this more than you do.”

Wow. How fucked up is North?

North means Grif, some distant part of him remembers, and his entire body jolts with urgent realization. He briefly whites out from the pain of it, and it turns out that trying to blink spots out of your eye is hard when all you can see is some vague fuzz. “What-- what’s wrong with him?” he manages to get out. What’s wrong with Grif?

“We’ll find out in a minute,” she grunts. He hears something hit the floor. The shielding unit?

“We’re going to be giving that back to him once North is fixed up, right?” Donut asks anxiously. “Because York looks real messed up.”

“That’s not York,” she says dismissively. “Look at his eyes.”

“... Oh. Still, though!”


“Woah,” Jax says. “Those are some dope special effects.”

“Don’t say dope, Jax,” the professional woman says.

He feels like the conversation around him is speeding ten miles ahead of him. Belated and confused, like he’s drunk, he says, “... Wait. Wait.”

“No,” South says.

“Wait,” he says. He can’t put any strength into the word, but this is important. “You shouldn’ do that. If he doesn' have an AI. If he isn' working. He isn’ working? He okay? Wha's wrong with him?”
“I don’t know,” she replies, sounding immensely frustrated. “Is that what you want to hear? That I don’t fucking know? Well, congratulations! I’m a fucking idiot! Are you happy now!?"

“Why shouldn’t we use the healing unit without his AI?” Donut asks, smoothly ignoring South’s outburst like tactfully overlooking a particularly embarrassing sneeze.

“Cancer,” York-and-Simmons says, explaining himself eloquently.

“What,” South says flatly.

“Healing unit on its own... heals the whole body,” he says after a long moment. Speaking is starting to make him feel like he’s out of breath. “Makes the cells grow... without an AI to control it...” He has to stop to catch his breath.

“Without an AI to direct the healing, the cells grow uncontrollably and cancer is a serious risk,” the princess says. “What? I watch Grey’s Anatomy when I get high. Loved the AI villain from the last season, she was hot.”

“Well, my brother’s AI is currently fucking useless!” South spits. Angry defensiveness flares up inside of himself. She doesn’t get to call him useless.

“Can’t you just lend him yours?” the professional asks.

There’s a long silence from South. York-and-Simmons focus on breathing. It’s slow, painful, heavy. Tastes like blood.

“... I can--” Donut starts in the tones of reluctant offering, and South interrupts him harshly, “Fuck no. We don’t know what’ll happen to you in there. You might die or some shit, get all scrambled up.”

“He’s your brother.”

“I know. There’s another AI in here.”

The vaguely human shaped purple blur that he’s pretty sure is South grows larger, presumably getting close to him again.

“Oh,” he says softly, as he belatedly realizes what’s going to happen.

Her hand goes to his implant port on the back of his neck, and she... hesitates.

“Look,” she says. “I know I’m a fucking bitch. I’d kill you in a second if it meant that North would be fine. But I’m really, actually sorry about this. No one... deserves this. Being seperated--” She takes a deep breath, and continues in a firmer, sterner tone. She’d almost sounded soft, for a moment there. “This is going to hurt like a bitch, so brace yourself.”

“Okay,” he simply says. If it might help Grif, then he’s all for it. And then he’ll get the healing unit back, get back on his feet, and he’ll go and find Carolina and make sure that she’s alright too and then he’ll have them both back safe and healthy--

South moves and he somehow finds the air to scream as he’s torn apart.
Chapter Summary

Grif glitches again, and he gets to personally feel a handful of North’s neurons burn out in response.

Simmons’ first thought is that York is really fucked up. And then he realizes that no, it’s just that the person he’s implanted in isn’t York at all. And then he realizes that the person he’s implanted in is really fucked up in addition to not being York. This is when he starts to remember the whole ‘ship jostle, Grif isn’t answering, Carolina’s a traitor, neurotoxin out of nowhere, mind fusion, South beating him up and stealing the healing unit and then taking him out of York in the most painful way possible’ thing.

It’s been… one hell of a fucking day. This somehow feels like way too much plot for such a short amount of time. Wouldn’t, like, about five years spent fucking around in a closed environment before anything important happening be more appropriate instead?

Grif glitches again, and he gets to personally feel a handful of North’s neurons burn out in response. He watches, frozen, as Grif instinctively seeps in to fill up these new voids with himself, automatically moving to bolster his host’s brain. So… that’s what mind fusion is. Brain damage with an AI band aid slapped onto it. Well, that’s fucking disturbing. But he can’t have been doing that to York, can he? He would’ve noticed, wouldn’t he? Sure, he can see it happening with the neurotoxin, but what about before that? York hadn’t hit his head or anything, he was just, they were just a little bit… upset. Together. In tune.

Grif glitches again. North loses another little part of himself. Right. He’s got a job to do, and the sooner he finishes it the sooner he can get the healing unit back to York, who really needs it as far as he can remember. Simmons moves to cut that shit out.

He forcibly logs Grif off. He shouldn’t be able to, if Grif didn’t want it, but he doesn’t so much as twitch to try and stop it, as if he’s as dumb as a common computer. He pins that as an insult to use later when it can be appreciated.

Grif goes dormant and… all of the damage in North’s brain is still here. Except without an AI present to compensate for it. Well, he’s here, but he won’t-- fuck it’s weirdly hard not to do it. He has to keep consciously, deliberately thinking about it to stop himself. Luckily, AIs have a lot of processing power. Now he just has to heal and fix these voids without just filling them up with himself. Easy! So simple and easy to say, as if he isn’t treading completely new medical and technological ground--

South knocks on North’s visor, as if it’s a door and she’s a salesman eager to meet her quota.

“Haven’t you ever heard that you’re not supposed to tap on the aquarium?” the woman in yellow armor asks. “You’ll scare the glowy fishes.”

South knocks harder.

Simmons turns on his hologram. “What,” he snaps, annoyance and stress overcoming his ingrained

nightmare
fear of provoking a blatantly hostile woman. What’s she going to do, punch her unconscious brother?

“Hey!” he yelps as she socks her unconscious brother in the shoulder. “You know that doesn’t hurt me, right?”

“But it is bothering you,” she says.

“He’s my patient! Fuck off!”

She punches him again, and then bats her hand through his hologram to make his light projection fritz for good measure. Simmons makes a distressed/outraged noise.

“How’s North? What the fuck is wrong with him?” she demands like she isn’t currently assaulting him.

“He’s bad! And maybe he’d be doing better if you’d just let me--”

“What’s wrong with him?”

Simmons’ survival instinct kicks in, and he folds like a spineless weasel, brief flirtations with indignant boldness forgotten. “I don’t know, I think it might be an AI problem. It’s like if someone pushed a sparking electrical socket up against his brain meat--”

South promptly moves to yank Grif out of North’s implants.

“Hey, no! You don’t have to do that, I already had him shut down--”

She does it anyways. Simmons sighs, even though he doesn’t have lungs.

South pokes at North impatiently. “He’s not waking up,” she says accusingly, as if she’s been lied to.

“Well, just because you take the knife away doesn’t mean that someone’s stab wounds suddenly vanish!”

“Fuck off!”

“Yes! I would like to fuck off and do my job now! Will you let me!?”

South bats at his hologram again, but doesn’t make a fuss once he turns it off in a huff. He gets to work, trying his best to ignore the outside world.

“Jax, are you… live tweeting this?” the professional woman asks incredulously.

“And participating in the live stream chat,” Jax says. “There’s memes, Miss Andrews! I always dreamed about having my own meme. Although the most popular one seems to be the one where you held Mister North hostage. Congratulations!”

“What.”

“Are there any memes of me?”

“Oh, basically everything you say is insanely quotable and iconic. Please keep talking, Miss G--uh, I mean Kai.”
“Nice.”

“Let’s circle back to the part where me committing a crime is now a popular online meme? Jax, what the fuck.”

“Oh, so we might be wanted for arrest by the military or something, I don’t know, it’s kind of unclear.”

“What--”

“But the view count, Miss Andrews! Look at it!”

York says something, his voice too weak for Simmons to be able to make out the words. He stops everything he’s doing, focuses more of his processes on hearing what he has to say.

“... m’ emotions feel so dim,” he’s saying. “Lesser. Weak. Lonely. Without him.”

Oh. Simmons hadn’t thought about that, how York would be all alone while Simmons would get to at least have North. It’s not York, and he’s not conscious, but it’s reassuring to have vitals to monitor, brain waves and heart beats and blood pressure and temperature and on and on and on. He’s not alone. York is, for the first time since they met.

“I could implant him into you?” South offers, sounding so awkward and clumsy and uncomfortable as she tries to be kind, like someone stumbling over the words of a new language they’re not familiar with. She gestures with the chip she holds in her hand. Grif. “Since he’s available and shit--”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT,” Simmons screeches, popping back up. “He isn’t safe to be inside anyone’s mind right now! He’s in the goddamn time out zone until he either calms down or someone can fix him.”

“God fuck shit, alright,” she snaps at him. “Jesus. I won’t.”

“Inside voice,” Donut sing songs, because he was born with the inability to understand the word ‘appropriate’.

He needs to work on North. On the floor, York lies, limp and weak and alone. Panic frizzes at the edge of Simmons’ being, and he can’t let it creep up on him right now, he needs to be able to focus.

“Just-- hold his hand or something. Please.”

“What is this, kindergarten?” South asks with incredulous disgust.

“South,” Donut says, and he sounds uncharacteristically annoyed and tired. “Just stop doing bad things, and start doing good things. It’s not that hard.”

This seems to mean something to her, because she pauses instead of immediately snapping something back at him. Finally, she makes a noise of angry disgust, and then snatches up York’s hand like he’s going to pull a ‘too slow’ on her, as if he even has the strength for something like that.

“Fine,” she grounds out, and probably holds York’s hand too hard.

It’s hard to tell when he’s implanted in an entirely different body, but he thinks maybe York’s
breathing changes slightly. A little less shallow and unsteady. Comforted. He’s a social animal. And he’s always liked angry women, for some unfathomable reason.

Simmons decides that this is enough to let him focus on North again. He sinks into his work, until the outside world, the situation, the entire day just floats away, temporarily blissfully forgotten as he immerses himself in a fascinating problem that he can fix because he was *made* to fix shit like this. He can do this.

Simmons does his best to fix what he can. Create new pathways in the brain to make up for what’s permanently lost. Strengthen others. He’s pretty sure North just lost an entire second language, but tough shit, Simmons just saved his ability to hold a gun.

(Back in the outside world, everyone else in the room starts making alarmed noises as the ship starts to hurtle in a rather distressing way and a stressed out pilot announces over the PA system that they’re going to crash. Simmons does not notice.)

Simmons doesn’t really have any experience with being inside of an unconscious human. He always has to shut off along with York, to be able to even let him sleep. Sleep mode. But the current problem with North is that his brains are too messed up right now for him to even be able to be conscious at all, so it’s fine. What’s not fine, he’s pretty sure, are his distant, muted emotions. That’s explainable, a simple side effect from the fact that he isn’t awake. But the emotions themselves--

Pure distress. Fear, pain, sadness. Something bad. Like he’s having the worst possible nightmare, vivid and horrifying and tragic. Tentatively, Simmons tries to reach out and touch it, curious. Maybe he can fix it, along with everything else. Maybe--

Simmons touches the nightmare.
funeral

Chapter Summary

They kneel down where they’re standing and gently lay dad out on the ground. And then they start digging.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They can’t find a shovel anywhere, which seems like an oversight. People die all of the time here. Why aren’t there shovels around? Do they just leave the dead people where they drop? That seems cruel--

--Maine in the mud--

They suck in a breath and freeze, waiting for the sledgehammer to fall down on their mind and leave them disoriented and devastated, like waking up from a nightmare.

It doesn’t drop. The past doesn’t become the present again. They can just remember him so, so clearly. The pain in their chest spikes sharply, and they hold dad close to their chest. They won’t leave him behind in a broken ship, all alone and trapped in a dead body. They’ll bury him, nice and neat and tight and safe, like being tucked into bed by mom. Even if there isn’t a shovel to use.

Slowly and awkwardly, they climb down the ship to drop to the soft earth without dropping dad. They’re surrounded by torn up earth and broken trees and large plants in funny colors. It’s night time, but the stars and moons are bright, and their eyes cast a soft blue glow wherever they look.

They wonder why they’re allowed to think about Maine now. Maybe it’s because the memory block doesn’t recognize the new mind that Carolina and Caboose have made together. Something new and foreign that its code doesn’t understand. Meat and machine. Maybe… maybe they should get rid of the memory block. It still hurts to think about Maine, but… this isn’t so awful.

They dwell on their newly unblocked memories experimentally, tentatively as they walk, foliage brushing against their blue-green armor as they go. It’s such a surprisingly small amount. Just a few hours--

--an entire lifetime--

(“I think, ah, something is wrong with my armor? Can you take all of it off, please?”)

Caboose-and-Carolina wonder whether a bee flew into their head while they weren’t paying attention. Many bees. Buzzing, swarming. They stop and take a deep breath.

(“Maybe later. Alright, lift the device and hold it up against the back of his head here. Steady.”)

They don’t want to think about that now. It feels like an unpleasant memory. They’re dealing with enough unpleasant right now, thanks. They put it out their mind. They don’t block it, or hack it, or delete it or whatever. They just set it aside for now. They have a job to do, and they’d very much like to do it.
They kneel down where they’re standing and gently lay dad out on the ground. And then they start digging. It’s not as hard as it could be, with the thick gloves and soft earth. Just slow. But that’s not so bad. They sink into the rhythm of it, breathe in tempo, and let their head just go… empty, for a bit. Thoughtless and quiet. It’s nice. A break.

When they finish, the sky doesn’t look quite as dark, pink bleeding from the horizon. They climb out of the hole they made and pick up dad again, and hop down to carefully lay him down again.

They should say something, now. They open their mouth and just let the words spill out without thinking about it too hard. Why would they need to? They’ll just say the truth, and the truth is already there inside of you, after all.

“You were kind of a mean dad,” they say simply. “But I still loved you a lot. Goodbye.”

And they climb back out of the hole and push the dirt back on top of dad, covering him, tucking him in. They smooth the dirt out with a hand, and it’s done. They did it. The funeral is done. The task has been successfully completed. This is when they’re supposed to feel satisfied, and pretend to not look and see if dad is maybe just a little bit proud–

It’s like something gets knocked loose inside of their chest, and it goes rattling upwards, scraping its way through their throat, and it falls out as an ungainly, ugly sob, so uncontrolled and sudden that they mostly just feel startled. And then another one comes falling out, and another, and their face crumples and they curl into themselves where they’re kneeling on the ground, their forehead coming to rest against their knee.

Crying hurts. But a good hurt, like working out, like figuring something tough out. They gasp for breath and shudder, tremble with how much raw feeling there is inside of them. There’s a part of them that thinks stop it you’re not a child. Ashamed and prideful and hurting. The other thinks it’s okay to cry. So much certainty that it feels inconceivable to even question it.

Their chest and their throat and their nose and their head hurt from how much they cry, and they slowly dissolve back into two people in one body with no fanfare, no hardship, no trauma, for no other reason than that in this moment they would rather be two weak people together instead of one strong person alone.

“Thanks, Caboose,” Carolina eventually says, voice hoarse and nasally and watery and frail. “I don’t think I could’ve done that as just me.”

“You are welcome,” Caboose replies, honest and straightforward. Caboose never really second guesses himself. He just says the first that comes to mind. Carolina marvels at that. She’s sure that she wouldn’t be anywhere as kind as he if she always said the first thing that she thought of. “I know you would do the same for me if I needed it.”

She closes her eyes and just… breathes. And then she stands up. “Now let’s go and find her,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll be working seven day weeks for the next two weeks so I’m taking the next two Sundays off for the sake of my mental health. This fic will update again on November the 24th.
“Sound off,” Wash hears Niner call out.

“Present,” he slurs as if he’s giving attendance in class.

“Here,” Tucker echoes him. Wash is so disoriented that nothing but his teal light really even registers.

“Great,” Niner says. “I’m not stuck in a cockpit with a corpse and a broken computer. So at least there’s that.”

Wash thinks that maybe he should stand up and try and remember what’s going on, but to do that he first has to locate all of his limbs, and make the room stop spinning. He takes a deep breath and just focuses on his injuries first. It’s important to know where all of your wounds are, and by the time he’s done with the list reality should’ve reasserted itself in his head. Hopefully.

His ribs ache. Probably bruised them during the crash. His left shoulder throbs with pain like a bitch--

--Connie, leveling her gun at him and pulling the trigger--

He sucks in a breath and closes his eyes against the flash of hurt anger that rises up in him at that. Betrayed, she betrayed him. It stings like acid.

“Let’s get out of this pile of junk before it explodes,” Tucker says, cutting off his train of thought. Wash knows that it was deliberate. He takes a deep breath and gets up anyways.

“Crashed vehicles only do that in action movies,” Niner says. “Fuck!”

Wash looks over at her. She’d stumbled and tripped, falling into the nearest wall. The floor is slanted, not quite even.

She points warningly at Wash. “You didn’t see that.”

“Sure thing,” he says, feeling too bitter and shell shocked to try and make a joke. He can’t stop thinking about Connie. Why is Niner acting like everything’s normal? Doesn’t she feel betrayed? Is Wash the only one who has a problem with this? Maybe they just weren’t close, the way Wash
and Connie were.

Or maybe she just doesn’t know that Connie’s the one who betrayed them to the Insurrection in the first place. He never did get around to saying that, did he.

He opens his mouth, and then closes it.

Does it matter, whether or not she knows? Connie already got away with it. And he’s pretty sure that this is the Project literally crashing and burning around them.

He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do now, if there’s no more Project. School then the army then the Project. His life has always been so structured. What is he supposed to do when it’s just him making the decision? He could do literally anything, and he can’t think of a single one of those things.

<Wash, uh,> Tucker says. He feels like awkwardness and guilt and determination. Wash wishes it was as easy to tell what he feels as it is to tell what Tucker feels. Shouldn’t it be the same? They’re both happening inside of his head. <I’m sorry about messing up back there. When I froze up, while we were fighting Connie.>

Wash imagines winning in that fight against her. Being fast enough to stab her, stop her. To kill her. His stomach feels hollow. Would he feel different now, if he had done that? He imagines himself with his sword buried into her gut, and can’t connect an emotion to it. Would it have felt satisfying or horrible? Would everything be better or worse?

He just wants to know why. He wants to sit her down and get her to tell him why she did it, and know that she was speaking the truth. As if that would fix it, would make it okay for him.

He can’t imagine a single excuse or reason that she could say that would make her turning on him like that feel tolerable or acceptable.

“It’s fine,” he says belatedly, his tone too flat, his feelings too flat to compensate for it. “Really.”

Tucker doesn’t feel convinced. <Okay.>

“It’s not fine,” Niner says. “This is a clusterfuck of epic proportions. This is basically the worst case scenario. I’m not fine with it.”

Well, no. Nothing’s fine. It’s just… a real shitty fucking day. He realizes about a minute later that he was probably supposed to respond to what Niner said, have some sort of conversation with her. Too late now. He was quiet for too long. He could try and start a new conversation, but he doesn’t know how. Doesn’t particularly want to.

He feels… unspooled. Directionless, restless. Doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do now. All he knows is that they’re leaving the ship right now, because they have nothing left to do in the cockpit, and Tucker cracked a joke about the ship exploding, which they know almost certainly won’t happen either. He knows that he’s spending the next five minutes leaving this ship, and it isn’t even for a good reason besides ‘I have nothing else to do’. And after that, nothing. He knows what he’s going to do for the next five minutes, and then he’ll have nothing.

(“I don’t want to have to kill you, Wash!” she said. She fucked dared to say that, like she meant it.)

God, he needs something to hold onto. Something to do. Some purpose--
Niner gets the airlock to open, revealing a starry night. It looks like they crashed on a terraformed planet, at the very least.

_i wonder where those weird AIs are,_ Tucker says. The two that Wash accidentally installed into the ship instead of FILSS, that helped crash land the Mother of Invention.

Oh, yeah. Maybe that could be something for him to do. Figure out what the hell their deal was, where they came from, what their purpose was, what they wanted, whether or not they were dangerous.

He feels zero curiosity. He steps out of the ship after Niner, helps steady her.

“Well, shit,” she says, looking around them at the wilderness. “This isn’t exactly civilization.”

Wash makes a noise of agreement. Something rustles in the leaves.

“Oh fuck,” Niner breathes, backing up. “The wildlife on this planet better not be batshit. What if they’ve got, like, nine feet tall acid gators--”

Carolina walks out of the jungle. For a moment, Niner relaxes in the way of someone who’s been surprised with an ally instead of a problem. And then she goes tense, takes another step back.

“Carolina,” she says stiffly.

_i feel like we’re missing something._ Tucker whispers inside of his mind. Wash also feels like that.

“Hello,” she says. There’s blood on her teal armor, and dirt. “Are we going to have a problem?” Her posture abruptly changes, her head tilting to the side in a gesture far too-- too _puppy like_ for the great and fearsome Agent Carolina to ever allow herself. “I don’t want to fight. I’m busy,” she says, and her diction sounds off, like she’s drunk or sleepy or hit herself on the head. Not slurring, but… different.

“... Yeah, no, pass. I’m not gonna try and fight you,” Niner says.

“Why would we fight?” Wash asks, feeling slow.

“Did you not hear the broadcast?” Niner asks.

“Only a part of it,” he admits. Because he’d been fighting Connie, because betrayed hurt had been pulsing too loudly in his ears for him to hear anything else.

Why would hearing the whole broadcast make him want to fight Carolina?

The answer is obvious. He refuses to accept it. Not Carolina. He was closer to Connie, but Carolina lives and breathes for this Project. Not her. Absolutely not. He has to be misunderstanding this, somehow.

“Carolina,” he says. “What’s going on.”

“... You deserve to know,” she says, and then she walks forward in an unfamiliar gait that isn’t _her_. “I’ve been working on a solution to help everyone else understand too! Here you go, you’re welcome!”

She flicks her hand like a magician getting a card out of their sleeve, and something on his HUD goes _ding._
<We’ve got mail,> Tucker says. <Uh, I can’t tell what it is without opening it.>

Yeah, that screams ‘fucking trap’ to him.

“If you download what Caboose just sent you, it should help kickstart things,” she says. “Tear
down some walls, remove the blocks. It might be overwhelming, if you aren’t already in tune with
your AI when it’s happening.”

“In tune?” he asks cautiously. “What does that mean?”

“What, you’ve never done it?” she asks. “Just… reach out to him. Think in tandem.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. How would I even do that.”

She gestures a little helplessly at the air. “You just-- it’s hard to explain. But it’s simple. It’s like a
limb that you can’t see and don’t know that you have. But as soon as you realize that it’s there, it’s
as easy to move as your arm.”

“… Okay. Sure. Totally makes sense.”

She sighs, long and heartfelt, like he’s the one being silly and unreasonable here. Carolina doesn’t
sigh like that. “Wellllll, if you want to download it without doing it the right way, you should make
your friend,” she points at Niner, “take Tucker out of you after you do it, so you don’t cook all of
your brains away.”

“… Caboose?” Tucker asks, hologram flickering on. “Is that you?”

“Yeah, duh,” Carolina says.

“Ohohoho fuck no,” Niner says. “The AIs are taking over the meatsuits. Shit, that is creepy. No
thank you.”

“I’m not a meatsuit,” Carolina complains. Or. He thinks it’s Carolina. Is it Carolina?

Maybe that’s what the broadcast was. Maybe Caboose has taken over and stolen her body. It
definitely feels more plausible than Carolina being a traitor.

(“Wash,” she said, a smile in her voice, like she was pleasantly surprised to see him. Caught red
handed, trying to cover for herself. Lying like it was a reflex, voice so warm and sincere. How
many times had he let that voice trick him without even a niggle of suspicion?)

“What the fuck, Caboose!?” Tucker says. “What is going on?”

Carolina—or-Caboose point at them. “Download what we gave you, and you’ll know,” they say, and
Wash is almost, almost certain that that was Carolina that just spoke. It sounded like her, casually
belting off an order like she’d been born for it.

Wash looks at the message on his HUD. Maybe if he knew what was going on, he’d know what
he’s supposed to do now.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Tucker says. “I can feel you considering it, Wash! We have no idea what that
thing does--”

Wash opens the messages and lets it start to download.
bad at being nice

Chapter Summary

“There, there,” she says awkwardly, stilted.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” Donut says much more sincerely. Maybe she should just let him take over this situation, seeing as Simmons has North in hand.

This, of course, is when the ship starts to hurtle, to pick up speed. To descend.

South hates doing things that she’s bad at, and she’s bad at being nice. There are other reasons that she’s a bitch, other excuses. But that’s a big one, really. She’s the only option that York has right now, though. The only person in this room that isn’t a stranger to him, having some fucked up kind of seizure, or is the AI busy taking care of said seizure is her. His breathing is a labored, wheezing effort, and his grip on her hand is so weak. He needs someone to be nice to him right now. He really is shit out of luck that he needs to be scraping the bottom of the barrel like this.

“He’s lucky to be holding your hand, hon,” Donut murmurs to her. “It’s a privilege. So stop being such a Debbie Downer!”

South hates that she will now forever have the sense memory of her lips curling around the words Debbie Downer living in the back of her head, waiting to float up to the surface like a random jumpscare every ten years.

If she survives this, that is.

“Of course you’re going to survive this,” he scolds. “We’re all going to survive this.”

“Don’t be such a… such a… Optimistic Oliver,” she spits back. She immediately grimaces at herself.

It’s probably a bad sign that York isn’t even remotely reacting to the fact that South is apparently having a conversation with herself. She can see the camera guy giving her a weird look. York’s eyes are still open, but they aren’t focused on anything. There’s blood in the whites of his eyes.

She has never given a single fuck over Agent Fucking York during the entirety of the Project. She hadn’t given a fuck five minutes ago. But now that she’s shown him a single kind gesture, now that she’s tried to take care of him to some degree even once, she feels strangely invested in whether or not he lives. She has deliberately had nothing to do with York for almost two years now, and she hopes that he lives.

“There, there,” she says awkwardly, stilted.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” Donut says much more sincerely. Maybe she should just let him take over this situation, seeing as Simmons has North in hand.

This, of course, is when the ship starts to hurtle, to pick up speed. To descend.

Her first spiteful though is suck it, Donut because she is garbage. Her second thought is North.
She whips around to dive for him, which is when North’s back arches from the floor and he starts screaming and South flashes back to a dozen bad exorcism movies.

“What the fuck!?” she shouts. Why is he screaming? Nothing’s fallen on him, the ship hasn’t crashed yet. “What’s wrong!?”

“Shitshitshitshit,” Kai swears grabbing onto Andrews and looking for something to hold onto. South scrambles for North, looks into his visor. Faintly, she sees a glow there, as if Grif were still implanted him, still glitching and fucking up North. Except the glow is darker, this time. Redder. Motherfuck.

“Maybe trying to solve an AI problem with another AI wasn’t the solution…?” Donut asks.

South swears and flips North over so that she can go for his implant site. The entire ship is trembling like they’re inside of a can being shaken by now. She focuses on what’s important. The second she gets Simmons out of him, North collapses, goes abruptly limp like a puppet with its strings cut. (Like a man shot in the head.)

“North,” she says, and she hates how vulnerable her voice sounds, and she cradles him close to her. “Fucking say something.”

North groans, and it feels like something inside of her almost caves in with relief. And then: impact.

South wakes up with North clutched to her chest like an infant, a teddy bear. She immediately moves him, immediately checks his pulse. He’s alive.

“W’fuck,” he says. He’s alive and conscious, even.

“Welcome back, fuckface,” she says to her miraculously alive brother. “Thanks for making me have to lug you around everywhere, you limpdicked hostage.”

“Wow, okay, not a great start,” says Donut. “Not exactly what I had in mind. I was picturing more tearful hugs and touching words of reunion?”

“What, what hap--pp--pp--ened,” he says, voice weak, his words hanging up on the word happened for a moment like a skipping record.

South feels herself soften, as much as she’s ever able to soften, and she doesn’t know if it’s because of Donut’s pointed comment or North’s disoriented, stuttering confusion.

“The ship crashed,” she says simply. She feels like if she tried to launch into everything that’s happened today that he wouldn’t absorb any of it, with how scrambled he looks right now.

“Wh--where’s Griffff,” he says, panic leaking into his voice as if he’s just noticed something awful, the f in Grif strangely drawn out like he got stuck on the syllable. South imagines what it would be like to wake up to Donut just suddenly not being there, and softens just a little bit more.

“Don’t worry, he’s here, I just had to remove him for a bit because he was frying your brains--” This is when South remembers the rest of the room, the rest of the people. Kai, Andrews, Jax, Grif, Simmons, York. Did any of them survive?

She still has Simmons clutched in one of her hands, she realizes. Okay, good. She scans the room.
It had used to be a storage room, and now it’s just a fucking mess. Some of the metal shelves bolted onto the walls have collapsed, and basically all of the inventory is now on the ground, most of it spilled out of its boxes. A lot of spare ship engine parts, metal plating, screws, some armor pieces. It makes it difficult to spot people.

Kai bursts out from the debris like a mermaid, tossing her head back. She’s holding Jax and Andrews underneath her arms like potato sacks.

“Oh, good,” she says flatly.

North starts to say something, something that starts with the letter G, or maybe a hard J, and then he just gets stuck there, on that first syllable. He sounds like he’s choking on it. She stares at him for a moment, baffled, and then very quickly afraid. And when South gets scared, she gets angry.

“What is it?” she demands. She smacks him on his back, as if to help him spit out a fishbone stuck in his throat. “Just say it!”

North, apparently, cannot just say it. He sounds like he’s trying so hard to get the word out, but it just refuses to move from where it’s lodged in his mouth.


Okay, so North has a stutter now. Fine. Better than him being dead or in a coma, she supposes.

“Did you just say Grif?” Kai asks, and her voice sounds so odd that South wonders if she was injured in the crash.

“Yeah,” she says. “Little computer chip thingy, like this.” She holds up Simmons as an example, and abruptly remember York. Shit. He’d been so hurt, and now this shit. He’s buried somewhere underneath all of this trash, alive or dead. She removes the healing unit from North. She doesn’t want for him to get cancer anyways, with the thing running without an AI to direct it.

“Hey, that’s your-- ow! Miss Dylan!”

“Why’s it called that?” Kai asks, so perfectly neutral. South doesn’t notice as she stands up to start throwing random trash away from the floor, looking for one near death golden armored bland white boy. She hopes that he’s alive, and it’s a powerful feeling for how unfamiliar and rare it is. It’s nowhere near the intense, overwhelming care that washes over her whenever North’s life hangs in the balance but… she hopes that he’s alive.

“It’s his name, duh. He’s an AI. Fuck, he’s so small, he could be anywhere in here…”


South is trying to focus on the time sensitive, important task of finding York before he fucking keels over, but there’s something about how her calm, competent brother sounds so raw when he wrenches that last word out of himself, like he’s pulling out a bullet without painkillers. And of course, ice slides down Donut’s spine (her spine, theirs) at the mention of the Counselor.

“It sounds,” says Andrews with barely veiled intensity in her voice, “like you have a story, Mr. North. And I have a camera.”

“I have a camera,” Jax says. Andrews ignores him.
Kai dives into the wreckage and starts frantically looking for something, tossing loose items behind her with abandon. South doubts that she cares that much about York. She goes back to looking for him, as Andrews and Jax slowly make their way through the mess of obstacles that is now this room over towards North.

She’s bad at being nice, but even she knows that the bare minimum is *don’t kill someone*. Because she is the one who took his healing unit from him, isn’t she. If he dies now, it’s because of her. She’s responsible.

She looks, and behind her, North, with painstaking difficulty, starts to talk.
Dex was killed by Project Freelancer for mysterious and sinister reasons two years ago, and now she is on their ship and there is an AI chip in this room called ‘Grif’.

In Kai’s world, there is no such thing as coincidences.

Two years ago, Dexter Grif died on a planet many light years away from his home in Hawaii, earth. Forty eight hours ago, Kaikaina Grif was informed by a man who made his friends call him Leader, like a total fucking tool, that her brother did not die a noble and dutiful death on the battlefield, but was instead murdered by a secret military project for the sake of a sinister and elaborate conspiracy which even he and his rebellion did not know the full scope of.

This was not a surprise to her. She had already known that. Dex, properly doing his job and putting his life on the line on the orders of some old white men with a hundred medals weighing down their fancy pants uniforms, sitting billions of miles away in some plush chairs in a cushy military base on earth far away from even the hint of gunfire? Dex, dying by random, horrible chance after being separated from Kai for ten long months?

Obviously not. Of course not. The only possible explanation is that something large and malicious and powerful stole him away from her. It’s simply the only thing that makes sense. And look at that: she has been proven one hundred percent right. She knew it. Those ‘interventions’ her ‘friends’ threw for her were bullshit. The people who sent her those ‘concerned texts’ were the ones who were wrong. They were wrong and she is right and she is right and she is right and she is right.

Dex was killed by Project Freelancer for mysterious and sinister reasons two years ago, and now she is on their ship and there is an AI chip in this room called ‘Grif’.

In Kai’s world, there is no such thing as coincidences.

“Help me look!” she says, tossing a box of a very specific type of wiring insulators that cost more than her first car over her shoulder.

“I think I broke my arm,” Jax whimpers.

“The bone isn’t poking out, at least,” Andrews says. “So pull it together and center your shot.”

Kai has not been listening to a single thing that the purple guy has been saying during his interview. She’s too busy looking, throwing things in a loud racket behind her, and his stutter is so bad that it’s legitimately difficult to understand him. She doesn’t have the time to quiet down and focus on him so that she can parse his words. She’s searching.

She got a letter in the mail telling her that her brother had died. She saw his corpse. She had him cremated. She confirmed that there was more to his death than people would have her believe. She found out who specifically did it. She is here for revenge. She is successfully raising hell. None of these things have given her closure, have helped her feel like she’s dealt with this.

Even now, none of it really feels real or right or true. She doesn’t feel like Dex is dead, even
though she saw, she saw, she knows. She just feels like he’s been gone for a really long time, and she misses him. She wants for him to come back home already. It’s like a constant ache in her chest, an outstretched, reaching hand waiting, waiting. He is never going to take her hand. He is never going to come back home. She knows that. She needs to feel that, because she can’t fucking live like this. She refuses. There has to be a solution, a trick, something that she can do to make her heart accept the reality that she can’t fucking change.

She got a letter and she scattered his ashes and she got fucked up and drunk and punched a cop and she assaulted a mortician and she joined a terrorist group and then immediately betrayed them once she had what she needed and she has stormed a high grade super secret military project all on her own through sheer audacity with invited press for media coverage and somehow this still isn’t enough, it still doesn’t feel real or right, he still doesn’t feel dead.

But there is an AI in this room called Grif and there is no such thing as coincidences and if she can just find it then maybe that will finally be the last piece in the puzzle, the magical silver bullet she needs to stop feeling like this. It has to mean something. It has to. And she’s right, she was right about Dex not dying such a simple, meaningless death while she wasn’t even there, while she couldn’t even feel it, and she’s going to be right about this too. She wills it.

She gets high grade technological parts and equipment behind her, she shoves aside trash, it’s all just expensive fancy trash that’s in her way, and she finds it. The chip, the one that looks just like the one South showed to her. She makes a noise like someone’s stabbed her, a sound of pure desperate relief and relieved desperation, and she scrambles for it. Her clue, the AI called Grif by the Project that killed her brother, the missing piece. This is going to make it all make sense for her, make it all come together and feel real so that she can stop feeling like this. It has to.

She grabs at it, and then stares at it for a moment. She shakes it. It continues to just be a chip.

“Fuck’s sake,” she hisses, and starts crawling and climbing over junk in her way, heading towards the noise of South’s own frantic search for the dying guy that she’d kicked in the stomach. Kai guesses that their relationship is complicated, or whatever the fuck.

“Hey!” she hollers, and staggers into South’s side, holding the AI chip up in front of South, shoving it into her visor. “This is Grif, right? How do I make it work?”

South roughly shoves her hand aside. “Fuck off, I’m busy.”

“Can I just, like, plug it into my gameboy? Because I brought that, but not my iPhone. The government tracks you through that, I can’t afford to fuck with that shit, especially when I’m planning on doing crimes.”

“Plug it into North,” she says. Duh, you dumb bitch goes unspoken but really loudly telegraphed.

“... Through what? His ass? Because I’m into assplay, but--”

“Ask him yourself!” she snarls, and throws her hand up towards some debris, and Kai is flinching away before she even realizes that that’s the movement she makes when she’s about to explode some shit--

Except it doesn’t explode.

“Um, sorry,” South says in a very different tone of voice. “But York might be under those boxes, and we don’t want to kill him. Plus, this is a small room! Best to just lift it.”

South gives a longsuffering, furious groan and viciously kicks the box out of the way instead.
... Hooookay, so South is crazy. Well, Kai had already known that, but, well. South is more crazy than she had at first assumed.

Eh. Who is Kai to judge someone for being batshit crazy? It’s kind of sexy, honestly.

“Thanks for the advice? It was helpful?”

“JUST LEAVE,” she shouts up at the ceiling. “No, South, I don’t think she was being sarcastic!”

“I wasn’t,” Kai agrees. “And, uh, yeah, I’m gonna leave now. Good luck with your guy.”

“He’s not my guy,” she hisses, grabbing an entire shelf and flipping it over with one mighty heave and a deafening crash of noise. Underneath it is one very bloody and tenderized man in gold armor. South makes an urgent noise and sprints over to him, slamming down onto her knees on the floor to grab at him.

“If you say so,” Kai says skeptically. South clearly doesn’t even hear her. She turns around to wade her way through the mess towards North before any passionate makeouts or whatever can happen, the Grif AI still clutched in her hand. Plug it into North. Figure shit out from there. Get info. Get closure. For the love of fuck, get some goddamned closure somehow. There has to be something that she can do. Anything at all. She just has to keep trying.

“... absolutely shocking and inhumane,” Andrews is saying into the camera as Kai approaches. “Project Freelancers crimes are greater and more terrible than we ever could have imagined. They must be brought to justice. Do not be quiet about this. Spread this to anyone who will listen, and of those that won’t, make them. This has been reporter Dylan Andrews, bringing you the truth at any cost.”

“You just said your full name on camera,” says Jax.

“I feel like it’s been more than proven at this point that we’re on the right side here, so I’ve decided to lean into it.”

“Oh, okay! In that case I’m Jax Jonez, and you can find my Twitter, Insta, and Soundcloud at--”

“You’re still rolling? Jax, you were clearly supposed to cut at my sign off!”

“You didn’t give the signal!”

“What signal!?"

“I just feel like there should be a signal--”

“Oh, you feel like there should be a signal? That’s not the same as us agreeing beforehand that there is a fucking signal--”

“I’m just gonna go ahead and borrow this guy for a bit,” says Kai. She’s ignored. She doesn’t mind. She heads over to North, crouching down by his side. He’s sitting down with his back against the wall, like he’s a bit too dizzy or weak to stand. She holds up the Grif AI for him to see, and he sharply inhales and twitches towards it with his entire body. For a moment she wants to hold it out of his reach and hiss at him. It’s her clue to her brother. He can pry it out of her dead hands.

She lets him take it with one careful, shaking hand. She can’t access the clue without North in the first place. It’s fine. If he tries to leave without answering all of her questions, she’ll just shoot him in the foot. It’s going to be fine. She’s got this.
“Thank you.”

“No prob,” she says, like she hadn’t been frantically searching for it for the last twenty minutes.

“Need some helping popping that bad boy in?”

“I’ve-- I’ve got it.” His chin goes to his collarbone as he fumbles at the back of his neck. There is a moment where his breathing stutters, and then he goes so limp that she’s briefly worried that he’s passed out, until he speaks up with deep relief in his voice. “Grif.”

An orange light like a flickering candle flame comes to light in front of North. It’s a little man in armor, she realizes. He looks warm, like she could warm her hands by him.

“Your sist-- sist-- your Kai’s here.”

Between one blink and the next, the hologram isn’t one of a little man in armor any longer. It’s Dex, helmet off, looking at her. It’s Dex. It’s Dex.

“I knew it,” she says, and now, now is when she bursts into tears. Not when she’s told her brother has died in the line of duty, not when she sees his body, not when she finds out who did it. That had all felt so fake, but this ridiculous, far-fetched, inexplicable bullshit is real. She cries so hard it almost hurts, and it feels like ice is breaking inside of her chest. Cathartic, that’s the fucking word. She’s been waiting for this for two years now, without knowing what she was waiting for.

Her bro got drafted four years ago. It’s been four fucking goddamn shitting years.

“Shit, Kai--” says Grif, freaked out by someone having a serious emotion in front of him as usual. It’s so him that she sobs on the next exhale. “What are you even doing here?”

“I was doing a John Wick for you!” she says thickly.

“Oh my god, you idiot. I’ve specifically told you that I only want petty revenges if I get murdered. I don’t want you to go and get yourself killed the second I die! Who’s going to carry on the family name? We still haven’t gotten into the Guinness record book.”

She sways towards him, and he automatically holds out his small, immaterial arms, as if he’s going to fold her up into a hug. She really expects for it to happen, too. They both freeze at the same time with realization.

There’s a rotten, bitter tinge to the lump at the back of her throat now, not just purely overwhelmed relief.

North holds out his arms. He looks a bit uncertain, but also compassionate. “I can b-- b-- b-- proxy. If you-- wannnnt? I--”

She wraps her arms around his middle and squeezes so hard that he has to stop mid sentence from lack of air. Despite that, his arms hesitantly wrap back around her in return. Through her eyelids she can see a soft orange glow.

This is what she’s been looking for. This is it. She hadn’t known it, but she’d known it. She’d felt it. Of course she couldn’t move on, he was still here. She’d just had to find him. That was all she needed to do.

She found him.
hate

Chapter Summary

“Have you heard from the Counselor yet?” he asks, clipped.

“Oh thank fuck, I didn’t break you.”

“I need to know where he is.”

There is a good guy, and there is a bad guy.

(“My name is Caboose.”)

Someone who is wrong, and someone who is right.

(“I’m the Counselor.”)

Someone who is doing to die, and someone who is going to make sure that that happens.

(“What are you doing!?” he demands, furious and scared scared scared.

“Wait and see. Turn it on.”)

That’s just the way the world works, isn’t it? And if not, that’s how you make it work. It’s what’s fair. Isn’t living about making things fair in an unfair world? Isn’t Wash-and-Tucker supposed to make someone pay, here?

Wash’s old squad never got punished for what they did. He doesn’t know if they all survived and retired with medals, are still fighting, or if they all died the next day in a carpet bombing. And it doesn’t matter, does it? Even if they suffered, it’s not because of what they did to him. They were never punished for what they did to him, and they never will be. They did a wrong thing, and they got away with it.

Wash’s dad did a wrong thing for his entire childhood, and he never went to jail for it. He and his sisters all just moved out as soon as they could, dropped all contact with each other like if they just avoided all reminders of the first solid chunk of their lives then it didn’t happen, they don’t have to think about it. Wash doubts that that miserable sack of shit is happy. Maybe he’s finally had too much to drink and he’s died of liver failure, a slow and painful death, entirely deserved. Maybe he got drunk and crashed his car into a pole and got himself killed. Maybe he got into a bar fight with someone who was too fucked up and stupid and angry to bother trying to pull their punches. Maybe he’s still alive, alone and bitter and broke. Maybe he remarried and has a new family to ruin. Maybe he’s even enjoying himself, as much as he can enjoy anything. It doesn’t matter. He never got punished for what he did to Wash, and he never will be. He did a wrong thing, and he got away with it.

The Director murdered Caboose. He murdered Tucker. He murdered his entire squad. They had done nothing to deserve it. Hadn’t even done anything to draw his attention. Niner tells him that Carolina-and-Caboose buried the Director seventy feet to the West after he died in the crash. A crash. The Director murdered Caboose and he dies in a crash.
He may be dead, but he got away with it. Wash-and-Tucker seethe.

“Uh, shit,” Niner says. She sounds frazzled, upset. “Are you okay? You, you fell over. I just kinda popped your AI out and then in again. Kinda like, you know, turning it off and then on again. Always-- always worked for my shitty old computer. Carolina went back into the ship… Wash?”

“Have you heard from the Counselor yet?” he asks, clipped.

“Oh thank fuck, I didn’t break you.”

“I need to know where he is.”

“I, I don’t know where the fuck he is, Wash. I don’t know where anyone is. Are you good? How many fingers am I holding up?”

Wash-and-Tucker sit up, gently pushing her away. He stands up. The night is quiet and peaceful, beautiful, the wind gently rustling the leaves of foliage all around them, the stars so clear and bright on this planet. He’s so angry he can *taste* it, a bitter, pungent flavor like acidic bile. His entire body throbs with it, in time with his heart beat. He’s so angry. He’s so angry. He has to do something with it, or else it’s going to ruin him from the inside out. He has to move, he has to *do*, or else he’ll burn away or melt or combust or start screaming and never stop.

He has to be angry, or else he’ll feel other, worse things.

(“I think, ah, something is wrong with my armor? Can you take all of it off, please?” Caboose asks. He asks for help easily in a way Tucker never could, because his family always helped him whenever he needed it. He asks for help easily, because Tucker always sighs and bitches and helps when he needs it.

“Maybe later,” the man with the smooth voice says with a little patronizing, dismissive lilt to his tone. He quickly and easily stops paying attention to him entirely, talking past him. “Alright, lift the device and hold it up against the back of his head here. Steady.”)

He’s

(Caboose screams)

*so angry.*

“I’m going to go and find him,” he says flatly.

“Wait--”

It has never been so easy to slip into his speed mode before. So natural, so effortless. The world goes slow and glacial and he turns around and runs, leaving Niner behind, getting back into the broken ship. He runs through it, searching rooms, closets, hallways. He steps over bodies and climbs over spilled, scattered messes. He goes through the entire ship, looking, looking, and every single person he passes is as slow as syrup, molasses.

He looks, and eventually he finds the son of a bitch. And the best thing? He’s *still alive.*

He wants for this to happen slow enough for the Counselor to notice it happening to him. He lets the world snap back into a speed that he can interact with.

His entire body *burns* as he lets it go, his muscles aching, skin screaming, his skull pounding with a
migraine that he feels to the roots of his teeth. His lungs flutter desperately, painfully for air, even as he gulps in as much oxygen as he can, as if he’s only taking in half as much as he breathes, like one of his lung sacks is punctured and leaking air like a fucked up tire. His heartbeat stutters, jarringly, horribly out of rhythm. He feels warm blood slide down his face, his mouth, his chin. From his nose. Pooling uncomfortably where his helmet seals him off from the outside world.

He realizes that he may have pushed himself harder while using the speed unit that he usually does. Harder than he ever has before. It feels like his heart’s on the verge of giving out on him.

“Agent Washington,” the Counselor says, sounding as surprised as he’s ever had. It’s a gratingly, infuriatingly mild surprise. He realizes just how much he’s been annoyed by that neutral, soothing, calm demeanor, all of this time. Like he’s some sort of rowdy child he has to keep calm and well behaved.

He talked like that while he was killing him, too. Killing his squad. He tries to snarl, and coughs instead. Chokes as he inhales his own nosebleed. He lists, sways, and he realizes that he’s on his knees. He’s so dizzy, so hurt.

“Were you injured in the crash?” the Counselor asks, and he’s at his side so quickly that Wash-and-Tucker wonders if he’d blacked out for just a few seconds there.

He touches him. A single, steadying hand on his shoulder. His skin crawls, even through the two thick layers of his armor and kevlar suit.

“Get--” his voice wavers, weak and faint, breaks, and he has to bend over with the force of his coughing fit.

His hand is on his back now. He can just barely feel it. It’s on a part that doesn’t have an armor piece on it, just kevlar.

“Have you run into any Insurrectionists?” he asks, all of the surprise out of his voice by now. There’s just a faint suggestion of curiosity, concern.

Wash-and-Tucker hack and spit with seething disgust, and blood and spit spatters onto the inside of his visor.

You killed me and my friends, he wants to howl. You took our lives and memories away from us and made us into things. You lied to me and everyone in the Project, made us into tools and accessories in this sick bullshit. You knew. You looked me in the eyes and lied to me and told me I was doing a good thing, and I let myself be fooled.

He doesn’t have the breath for any of those things. Can’t even spit at the Counselor to get his disgusting hands off of him. He scrambles at the latches of his helmet, and the Counselor reaches for it and helps him, undoing the latches faster than his own fumbling, trembling fingers can.

He is hit with an utterly vivid, visceral sense memory of someone taking his helmet off for him while he stands there frozen, trapped, unable to tear his eyes away from Caboose, Caboose--

The helmet clatters onto the ground. The Counselor inhales sharply. Wash-and-Tucker look up at him, and teal light washes over the planes of his face, shines in his wide eyes.

“... You look quite pale, Washington,” the Counselor says, his expression eventually smoothing out into its familiar calm blankness, too quickly, too easily. “And you’re bleeding. And crying. And not breathing correctly. Have you ever had a panic attack before?”
He barely has any air in his lungs and his thoughts are chaotic, screaming, and he feels like he’s been run over by a Warthog while out of armor. He can’t make himself talk, so instead he just makes this noise that sounds like half growl, half snarl, half shout. He sounds demented.

The Counselor doesn’t even flinch. Doesn’t stop touching him. He hates him, hates him, hate, hate. He bares his teeth at him.

“Breathe in time with me, Washington.”

No.

The Counselor takes a deep, slow breath in through his mouth. He exhales through his nose, unhurried and calm. Repeats himself. Wash-and-Tucker stubbornly doesn’t follow his example. Dark spots dance in front of his eyes. His hand twitches towards his hip.

“Washington. Can you hear me? You have to calm down. Count five objects in the room. Can you do that for me? Tell me what they are, what they look like.”

Stop telling me what to do. You have no right.

The Counselor’s hand is on his shoulder now. “Your name is David McCormick. You are on the Mother of Invention. The year is--”

There is a shining, glowing, humming blue blade where the Counselor’s chest is. It spears through it easily, stands out from his back. Wash-and-Tucker’s hand is holding onto the handle of his sword so hard that his hand aches with the tension of it. The way the blue light of the sword shakes make his trembling so obvious, leaves trails of afterimages in his eyes so that it looks a little fuzzier at the edges than it actually is.

The Counselor’s mouth opens in a little shocked O, and nothing comes out but a single exhalation, like he’s still trying to coach him through breathing right.

This is happening too quickly. He hadn’t meant to make it happen so quickly. The Counselor doesn’t even know why he’s doing this to him. Wash-and-Tucker can’t calm down enough to tell him. He just wanted for him to stop talking at him, stop touching him, like they’re friends, allies, coworkers. A therapist and his patient.

The Counselor dies.

Wash-and-Tucker had always thought that the Counselor’s eyes were just a little bit flat and disturbing, never touched by his small, gentle smiles. But he realizes that there was a light in them now, because it goes out now. The difference is acute and noticeable and impossible to describe.

The light goes out, and what was the Counselor but is now just meat goes limp, and topples onto the floor with a dull thud. His sword slices through his torso like a hot knife through butter as he goes.

There isn’t even blood. Just the overpowering smell of burned meat, now that he isn’t wearing his helmet.

Wash-and-Tucker look down at the corpse he made, and waits to feel satisfied. To stop feeling desperately, horribly angry.

Instead, he vomits.
Chapter Summary

They find Washington first.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carolina-and-Caboose is looking for their mom. She’s somewhere on this ship. They just have to find her. They can’t call out for her, because she probably can’t hear anything. She’s most likely dormant, shut off. They aren’t quite sure of what she looks like, what they’re looking for, but they have at least found something to put her in for when they do eventually find her.

And they will find her. She’s sitting somewhere, waiting patiently to be found by her family. They’ll find her. She just has to wait where she is, and they’ll find her.

They find Washington first.

He’s sitting on the floor, like he’s lost and waiting to be found. The room is dark because the power’s out, but his eyes light up his face with a soft aqua glow, throwing strange shadows over his drawn face. He’s Washington-and-Tucker, they realize. So opening up the file hadn’t gone too badly for them, then. That’s good. Unblocking that much data all at once, removing all of the reroutes scattered throughout Tucker’s coding in a fraction of a second… Washington and Tucker could have just broken instead. Oops. They hadn’t thought of that. But clearly, it had gone well, so whatever.

His expression looks strange. Wide eyed, but blank. Tired, but tense. He doesn’t look up when they enter the room. He’s just staring at something on the floor. Carolina-and-Caboose walk forwards, switching on their armor’s flashlights until they can clearly see the lump on the floor.

It’s the Counselor. Someone needs to bury him.

“Oh,” they say, and Washington-and-Tucker flinch, hard and sudden. His eyes flick over to look up at them. “Did you like him?”

Washington-and-Tucker doesn’t say anything.

“I don’t think I liked him,” they say, to fill the silence that itches to be filled. Rooms with corpses in them feel too awful when they’re quiet. Like the corpse is a blackhole that steadily sucks in all noise, air, attention towards itself and eats it up, like it’s the center of gravity in the room. “He was kind of boring, and he was always asking questions, but, like, um, bad questions? Because they made me think about bad things. But it’s okay if you liked him. Everyone likes different things, and that’s fine. Even if my taste is better than yours. It’s okay if you like bad or boring things and I only like good and cool things.”

“Caboose,” Washington-and-Tucker says, and his voice sounds strange. Sort of like a dry rattle, or a croak. Like if a mummy tried to talk.

That was not a sentence, but it was a word. A name. Carolina-and-Caboose take it as an
improvement, as encouragement. They’re on the right track, they only need to push it further.

They hold up a hand so that the palm faces the floor and then shakes it a little bit while making an ehhh sound. “Kind of.”


Carolina-and-Caboose frown. “No. Because I’m sort of not Caboose right now? But also except I still am.”

They don’t get how Washington-and-Tucker doesn’t understand it. He’s doing exactly what Carolina-and-Caboose is doing right now, and he still doesn’t get it? How stupid is he?

Washington-and-Tucker shakes his head. “You don’t understand,” he says. “You-- you were copied before you got to see anyone get executed. You got copied before you were executed. He killed us, Caboose. He killed you.”

They give a long, deep sigh, to show him just how exasperated they feel right now. “I’m Carolina-and-Caboose, stupid. Duh.”

“I’m the stupid one?” he asks, voice going high and brittle. He laughs, but in an ugly sort of way. They frown down at him. He’s got a lot of blood on him.

“You look really messed up,” they say.

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“That’s not my name either. Ugh!”

Abruptly, he slams his fist down on the floor. “I’m telling you that we’re not the real ones!” he shouts. “The real Tucker and Caboose are dead. We’re just-- just copies for experiments. You have to understand that, please. Please. You aren’t real.”

“I’m real,” they say, their words spoken very slowly and clearly enunciated because Washington-and-Tucker is acting like he hit his head or something. “I’m standing right here. You can see me, you can hear me.”

He huffs a humorless laugh. “Of course you wouldn’t get it. God. It’s like trying to explain death to a fucking toddler. He killed us and replaced us with copies and made us forget it all so that we wouldn’t know and he gave me a new name and a new life and--” He chokes on his own words. “He tricked me.”

“So you feel stupid for being tricked,” they check. He nods. “Well, you should always feel like an idiot because you are one, dummy.”

He barks a sharp laugh, but he doesn’t look away from the corpse. The blackhole of its stillness has sucked his gaze back in on it.

“But you shouldn’t feel like an idiot for being tricked. Everyone gets tricked sometimes. Everyone on this ship did get tricked.” Their voice goes quiet, a weak mumble. “My own dad tricked me. He didn’t even have to try.”

Maybe he didn’t hear that last part. They sort of hope so. He manages to rip his eyes away from the blackhole-corpse to look back up at them again. He isn’t doing that angry-sad smiling thing, and
just looks plaintive instead. Desperate.

“How are you so fucking okay right now? Do you just really not understand what’s going on?”

“I understand what’s going on,” they say. They walk over towards the corpse, crouch down, close its eyes. “And I understand what death is. We’re not like him. Like that. We aren’t corpses, so we aren’t dead. We’re different, but we’re still talking and moving and feeling and stuff, so… We’re not dead. It’s as simple as that. You’re just overthinking stuff, dummy.”

“Tucker ended,” he says, voice and expression raw, fragile. “In that base, on that planet. He put a bullet in my-- in his head, and I don’t even get to remember it. His thoughts got cut off. He stopped making memories. He got killed.”

“And then you got better.”

“No! I’m not him.”

They cock their head, look at him. “I think… you should probably not be one person right now.”

“What?” He doesn’t look like he even understands.

That’s fine. It’s fine that he needs simple things to be spelled out for him. He’s really sad right now… and even if he weren’t, even if he needs things spelled out for him every single day, it’s okay. He’s their friend, and friends help each other. Even if those friends are kind of annoying.

“Tucker’s sad because he remembered a really bad memory. Washington is sad because he got tricked and feels stupid. You put those two together, and you just get a person who’s double sad. And all alone.”

He snorts. “You make it sound like I’m an upset child.”

“I didn’t bury my dad alone. I became two people again, so that Caboose could be there for Carolina. You need to be two people so that you can be there for each other.”

“I don’t even know how to…”

They can’t stop themselves from making a frustrated, impatient noise. “It’s easy,” they gripe. “Can’t you feel it? Like it’s a new arm, except it’s not on your body. It’s in your brain. Feel it. And then let it go. Like… exhaling.”

He opens his mouth, brow furrowed, like he’s about to snap at them. But then his expression smooths out with surprise, realization… and then the glow in his eyes starts to fade.

He’s just Washington and Tucker now. Washington takes a deep, shuddering breath. Tucker’s hologram flickers to life besides him.

“I don’t know what to do,” Washington says.

“... Me neither,” Tucker admits.

Carolina-and-Caboose are busy. They’re doing something important. They shouldn’t… but their friends need them, right now. Maybe it can wait for just a little bit.

“Well, we should probably clean this up,” they say, gesturing at the corpse on the floor. “I can show you a good place to bury bodies? And then you can do that. It takes a while to dig a hole that is deep enough.”
“He doesn’t deserve a funeral,” Washington spits.

“And we’re not going to give it to him,” says Tucker.

“You like having it just lying on the floor?” they ask dryly.

Washington makes a face, Tucker a noise of disgust.

“Right. It’s going to start to stink soon. It doesn’t have to be a funeral. It can just be cleaning it up. Okay?”

“... Okay.”

“Do you want for me to do it with you?” they ask even though they really don’t want to spend a couple of hours burying the Counselor when mom is stuck and waiting to be found on this ship. It’s important to help your friends, especially when things are hard.

“... It’s fine, dude. Go and do whatever it is that you wanna do. We’ll be okay on our own. Together.” Tucker looks at Washington. “Right?”

“Right,” he says. “I… I think I need some time alone to think about stuff anyways, process all of this.”

“Yeaaahhh, that too,” Tucker says. He looks back at them. “We’ll be fine. See you later, okay? Don’t die. Again.”

They smile. He’s finally starting to say some stuff that isn’t totally stupid. And they get to go and look for mom right away. “Oh, I’ll be fine. I’m too awesome to die.”

Washington snorts.

“The combined earned arrogance of Carolina and ignorant arrogance of Caboose in one being…” Tucker mutters. “How do you even fit that head in your helmet?”

“Tucker, maybe-- hey. What’s that… orb thing you’ve got underneath your arm?” Washington asks suddenly. “I saw Connie-- CT-- … I saw Agent Connecticut carrying it earlier. And then I plugged it into the ship and… I think it unleashed a couple of weird AI on the ship? And they did a bunch of stuff, but then they saved us in the crash anyways.”

“Yes, so it’s empty now,” they say. “I fixed it so that it isn’t a prison any longer. I’m going to put my mom in it when I find her, so she can talk and stuff.”

“... What?” Tucker asks.

Carolina-and-Caboose roll their eyes and sigh. It’s okay if their dumb, dumb friend needs simple things explained to him, but come on, how much simpler can they put it?

“I will explain it you later, okay?” they say. “After I’ve found her.”

“Uh, sure,” Washington says. “We’ll just… get rid of this corpse, I guess. Shit, we could go to jail for that. Right. Okay. Let’s get rid of the evidence.”

“That’s the spirit!” they encourage him. He’s sounding less mopey already.

“This is a really weird day,” Tucker complains.
I'll be taking the next Sunday off for the holidays.
There is nothing stopping North from leaving South.

Kaikaina Grif is hugging him tightly, desperately, like he’s her long lost beloved brother. His head still aches from Grif fritzing out underneath the weight of remembering everything at once, like someone shoved his head straight into a wall, except instead of the exterior of his skull taking the brunt of the impact, it somehow landed in the very center of his brain.

There’s a twinge of guilt from Grif at the thought, which is stupid, it isn’t his fault, shh. Enjoy the fucking hug from your sister. Tap into the sensory feedback of the steady pressure of her strong arms around him, around them.

It doesn’t take much persuading. Grif’s so happy. He’s not even trying to pretend otherwise.

North doesn’t want to ruin such an important moment, so he very deliberately doesn’t try and compare this to a single interaction he’s ever had with South. To wonder if she’d ever care this openly and tenderly about him for longer than ten seconds.

Ah, shit, he did it anyways. Fortunately, Grif seems a bit too distracted by the literal miracle in North’s arms to notice the brief blip in host’s emotional… aura, or whatever. A short but steep downturn into something colder that he forces back into something more level. It’s harder to linger in the warm and comfortable ‘so happy for them, how nice’ mindset he’d been trying to focus on now, so he wouldn’t taint the experience for Grif. The best he can manage now is the serene, steady, focused calm of when he’s camping out a target with his sniper rifle.

He hadn’t gone so instantly cold at the thought of South, before. He hadn’t gone cold when thinking about her this morning. He worried, he got frustrated, exasperated, even genuinely angry sometimes, but never outright cold.

He realizes what’s different now. He is feeling very, very directly what a brother should feel for his sister. And it’s not familiar to him. It’s not what he feels for South, ever. Even their warmest moments haven’t been this warm.

And he knows that he can leave her, now. Because Grif had done it. He feels his AI’s–his AI that was a human once, like him–he feels his past sprawling out in his mind. Not like overwhelming, noticeable, new information any longer. Simmons had… done something, to make them feel like any other memories North has; old and not that urgent or pressing. Things float to mind when he thinks about them, tries to remember, but otherwise they just stay put where they are. He thinks what was my kindergarten teacher’s name and he gets Mrs. Wick and fuck if I know but she always had a pinched face like she just bit into a lemon both at the same time, even though Mrs. Wick had always been smiling. They’re both true, both there in his head, in the same general place, squeezed up close and cozy right next to each other. It’s just that both hadn’t always been his.

So he remembers like it was something he’d lived through himself, that Grif hadn’t thought he could ever leave his mom. That he couldn’t do something that horrible to someone who needed him so much, to someone who was family. But he did. And it was fine. He moved away and didn’t
tell her where, he blocked her phone number, he never saw her again. And it was fine. She didn’t die. He didn’t die.

He finally got to live instead. Until he got drafted, anyways.

His arms squeeze around Kai, who finally sits away to pry off her helmet to wipe roughly at her wet face. That face makes dozens of memories swell to the forefront of his mind for just a moment, moments where she’s been sad--skinned knee, sick, break up, drunk in a not fun way--and in every single memory, Grif reaches out to help her in some way. Helps her up, gets her water, cracks a joke, guides her to her bed. She never shoves him away, never gets angry at him for wanting to help.

This is what siblings should actually be like. Not just willing to kill or die for each other in the dire moments, but able to like each other even during the slow and boring days. His heart aches with how far it is from what he’s always had.

He knew he and South weren’t normal, but he hadn’t thought that it was that bad.

Kai loudly snorts up a lot of snot, and he can’t help but laugh, startled. She playfully scowls at him, and shoves his shoulder lightly.

“Fucker,” she rasps, her voice a little wobbly still with emotion. “Making me fuck up my mascara while I’m on camera, goddamnit.”

“S--s--ssorry,” he says, briefly getting caught up on the s like a snake, or a skipping record.

<Sorry,> Grif mumbles shamefacedly in his mind, like he’d done it on purpose. North opens his mouth to say nothing to be sorry for, and then… changes his mind. There’s a lot of words for him to trip over there, just for the sake of a brief aside. Grif already knows that North doesn’t blame him. He can feel it.

Unease tightens in his gut at the thought that talking might always be this hard from now on. He’s going to keep having to consider whether or not something is worth speaking up for over and over again for the rest of his life.

It’s… it’s not the worst injury he could’ve gotten. He can still fight, like this. And considering what he’s been through today, he’s honestly pretty lucky to just get away with a really bad stutter.

… No. It’s still too fresh for him to feel ready to talk himself into ‘it’s not so bad when you think about it’. But it’s not the time to throw a tantrum either. He stops thinking about it entirely instead. He’ll deal with it later.

“Wanna get up off your ass?” Kai asks, standing, holding out a hand to him.

He looks up at her and smiles, opens his mouth to say sure, changes his mind. It’s just one word, but he can also simply answer by only nodding.

Grif twinges with guilt again. North reaches out and takes Kai’s hand, and the painful little emotion washes away as second hand happiness fills North’s chest as Grif’s sister helps him stand up.

She looks straight into his eyes, and North feels vaguely dizzy for a second until the disorientation makes sense in his head. In all of his memories of her, she was always looking up at him. (Looking up at Grif.) Now, they’re the same height, more or less.

So, Grif had been taller than him.
“Ummm, Kai?” Jax says. “There, uh, a little bit of an issue over here.”

“Bitch, can’t you see I’m busy having a heartfelt reunion over here?”

“We gave you, like, ten minutes! You’re just milking it at this point. You shouldn’t beat an emotional scene to death or else it just loses all impact—”

“I’m going to have to go and beat his ass real quick,” she says to Grif’s hologram. “Be right back!”

“Have fun,” Grif says, clearly shooting for dry and missing by just about a mile.

North’s happy for him. He’s really, really happy for him.

But now Kai’s gone, and his own sister’s on the other side of the room, and he can leave her. Grif left his mom. She made him miserable and then he left, and for a while he had a reasonably happy, decent life. He had hope. There is nothing stopping North from leaving South. He should. He has every reason to leave. He should leave her. He’s going to be fine. She’s going to be fine, or she isn’t. That’s up to her. He doesn’t need her, and she doesn’t really need him, and he doesn’t need to stay with her just because she needs him and they’re family.

His stomach aches, like a vicious cramp, a blanket of bruises. He can taste bile in the back of his mouth.

<It didn’t feel like I was doing a good thing when I first did it either,> Grif says, pressing soothingly up against his mind.

Prompted, the memory rises to the forefront of his mind. Grif, trying to pack all of his bags quickly but quietly enough not to wake his mom as she sleeps. The distant remembered sensation of feeling wild, reckless, untethered, desperate. Kai had moved out three months ago, and he was finally certain that she wasn’t going to move back. If he left, she wouldn’t be left alone with their mom. Nothing was holding him back but his bond to her. And it turned out that that wasn’t enough.

He’d felt like he was doing something crazy, and it wasn’t a good feeling. But it didn’t feel like the pit-in-his-stomach sensation North has now, either.

Kai, Andrews, and Jax all start intently whisper arguing, and he leaves them to it. He walks towards South. He has no idea what he’s going to say to her. Maybe he won’t say anything at all. It’s not like she listens to him.

He finds her with her arm curled around York’s shoulders, helping him stay sitting up as his breathing steadily grows less ragged and desperate, the red disappearing from his sclera. The healing unit at work, Simmons fixing him.

<Simmons,> Grif says reflexively, intently, and they both think about he hasn’t even told Simmons and then being interrupted.

Patience, North tries to project. York clearly needs Simmons’ focused attention right now. They’ll talk to him once he’s done. Grif frizzes at the edges with desperate impatience, and he gets it, he really does. But Grif waits anyways. He’s kind like that.

<Oh, fuck off,> he says, as upset as always at having such a filthy accusation leveled at him.

Neither South nor York have noticed them yet. He doesn’t try and do anything to change that.

North is procrastinating giving up the most important person in his life. Important, it turns out,
does not necessarily mean ‘good’.

“Help m’ up,” says York.

“Sure you need to stand up now?” South says, and for a moment North wonders if that’s just Donut talking through her mouth like he’s almost certain he’s done a few times now, like he wouldn’t notice someone else moving his own twin sister’s face and mouth for her. But that’s not the way Donut inflects, talks, phrases himself, shows care. That’s how South talks. If she ever used her words to say something that vaguely sounded caring.

“Need to find Carolina,” he says. “Pretty sure she’s in trouble. Heard it on the, the intercom. The Counselor said that she’s a traitor, but the Counselor’s an awful liar. He killed Simmons.”

Oh. So Simmons had… seen things, while he’d been inside of North. And then passed them along to York.

<Like a kissing disease,> Grif snarks, like North can’t feel him fretting over Simmons seeing knowing remembering something so terrible.

“Simmons is alive, dumbass. Do you have a concussion?” Another incongruous question, as if York having a concussion or not matters to her. South has never gotten along with York, the most easy going person on the ship. She doesn’t get along with anyone.

“He’s dead and alive.” York starts trying to stand up without South’s help, and he immediately almost falls. South swears and catches him, helps pull him to his feet, steady him. She’s being a very gruff sort of careful with him. North tries to remember if she’s ever been this soft or tender with anyone. Especially someone that she doesn’t even like.

Nothing comes to mind. This is the kindest he’s ever seen her. Not a high bar but… this is the kindest he’s ever seen her.

“Don’t fall and break your face,” she hisses at him. “You only just got back from the brink of death.”

“Where’s my helmet?” he asks. “Where’s my gun? Nevermind, I don’t need them.”

“Yes you do, you moron,” South says. “For fuck’s sake. Here, you can have my handgun. I’ll let you leave the room without breaking your knees when you get well enough to be able to find your helmet on your own.”

York’s helmet is five feet to the right. He doesn’t seem to see it. South is probably making the right call, making him wait a bit. The ship has been very… perilous, today.

She’s taking care of York, the way North’s spent his entire life trying to take care of her. There is a wild, bubbling hope in his stomach where dread had been a moment ago.

<She never tried to get better,> Grif says. His mom. <She never got a single inch better as long as I knew her.>

She never got better, but South is acting better in front of his very eyes. Which means, which has to mean, which means: South is not Grif’s mom. Not any longer. It’s different. There’s hope.

He can give her one last chance.

It doesn’t feel like backsliding or following a pattern or making a mistake, as he decides that. It
feels like relief.

He really, really hadn’t wanted to say goodbye to his sister. Maybe, just maybe, he won’t have to.
South hasn’t ever understood what the point of trying to be good is, when she’ll obviously never be able to be as good at it as North is.

South has inserted Simmons into York’s neck implant, because it’s important to her that he doesn’t die, for some reason. He hadn’t been important to her only an hour ago. He still isn’t all that much. She just… she doesn’t want for him to die. She isn’t used to that. Isn’t used to caring whether or not someone she isn’t particularly close to lives or dies.

All her life, she’s mostly just cared about North. Grinding her teeth over an infuriating idle comment he made at breakfast, and then furiously beating the shit out of some douchebag that insulted him a little too sharply for her liking later that afternoon. Avoiding him desperately after a vicious argument, and then being willing to do anything to keep him alive. Two states of being that are so starkly different, but both feel so equally intense. Love and hate. It makes sense, to feel that for North, someone that she’s closer to than she’s ever been with anyone else in her life, someone who’s made her life so miserable just by existing.

Agent York is just a bland nice boy with a lame sense of humor that she’s so, so different from, and she’s always kind of wanted to break his legs a little because of how much higher up on the Leaderboard he is from her. Besides that, she’s never thought about him much. But she’s made a small effort towards being gentle with him, towards taking care of him, and that’s somehow made him matter to her. The fact that she felt for him, for just a moment.

She just doesn’t want for him to die. She isn’t used to caring about that, for people who aren’t family. Or Donut.

She waits for York to wake up, as Simmons brings him back from presumably the brink of death.

Everything was so sharp and clear and simple when North was hurt and in trouble and needed her help. But now that he’s okay, and she can think about other things again, the world goes back to feeling complicated and difficult and grating.

South hasn’t ever understood what the point of trying to be good is, when she’ll obviously never be able to be as good at it as North is. When he joined the soccer team, she quit and joined the football team instead. Because she didn’t want to spend even more time with him, she’d said, but she’d really just been scared to see if he’d be better at it than her. When he got A’s in math, she stopped paying attention in that class and decided to try and crush chemistry, which he got C’s in. He was mom’s favorite, so she spent time with dad.

It’s just easier to do the things that North isn’t. There are so many things out there in the world to be good at; why even bother putting an effort into the things her brother’s good at? Watching him catch up and pull ahead of her while everyone around him smiles and claps him on the shoulder… stings. Why even try beating him, when she can instead just be amazing at the shit that he’s bad at? That’s basically winning, isn’t it? At least, it’s not losing.

North has always been good at being kind, and South has always been even better at being mean. It
comes to her naturally. It’s easy. Being nice is awkward, and embarrassing, and she’s just bad at it. Isn’t it better to be good at being mean, than to be bad at being nice?

“Of course not!” Donut hisses at her. “Because being bad is bad. Being even a little bit good is still good.”

“There’s a difference between being good and being competent,” she says. “I want to be competent.”

“You already are competent. You’re a Freelancer, one of the best ones in the Project. And just in case you haven’t noticed somehow, I don’t think that you’re particularly happy or content! You do want to be good, South. I know you do.”

She’s so tired of being one of the best. When can she just be the best, no qualifiers necessary? Sometimes she feels like she was born with hard work but no talent, while people like Carolina got both. No matter how hard she works, she’ll never get to that level. It feels like sandpaper against raw and bleeding skin, that awful certainty.

She isn’t happy or content, it’s true. But maybe all she needs to be that is to finally become the best. Somehow. She has no idea how. She feels like the only way she can advance further than she already has would be to make a wish for everyone who’s stronger and faster and smarter than her to just drop fucking dead, and for it to be magically fulfilled.

Or she could become South-and-Donut again, something that’s actually fucking possible. Someone who isn’t her. Someone who’s better than her. Someone who--

“I’m never going to let us become them again,” Donut whispers, and her heart clenches painfully for a moment, her breath leaving her like he just gutpunched her.

… She already knew that he didn’t like being them the way she did. Because she got better, and he got worse. But never--

She’s hurt. She’s just plain hurt, so much that the familiar defensive anger doesn’t even rise up to protect her like it always does. She can’t find any words to throw back at him.

“Not because I didn’t like it,” he goes on. Liar. “No. I mean it. It was interesting, and kind of fun, being someone with you. But it wasn’t good for you. I’m not going to let us be a cheat code for you. You don’t like South Dakota, but now you’re stuck with no choice but to be her, so you’ll just have to change who South is until she’s someone you can like and respect.”

There’s sour bile in the back of her throat. “That’s impossible,” she rasps. There are some things that are just so shitty that you can’t fix them. All you can do is throw it out and buy a new one. She’s made of rotten material, corrupt at the foundation. She can’t make something good out of this.

“I like you,” he says, soft and defiant at once. “I respect you. And I’m in your head, so don’t give me any of that ‘you don’t know how bad I am’ bullfrog. I know. I know that you need to change. I know that you can.”

The worst thing is, she can feel it. His conviction. He really thinks that.

He’s so fucking stupid it makes her eyes burn, a lump lodged in the back of her throat.

“I hope you don’t change all of you, though,” he goes on, tone going lighter, less like a brutally kind knife. “Like I said, I really like you. I don’t think it’ll take much for you to be someone you
can be happy with. Really.”

“Shut up,” she says, because her chest aches and she can’t take anymore of this. She can’t.

“Fine,” he huffs. “But think about it.”

As if she’ll be able to think about anything else, the bastard.

York wakes up. He sort of acts like he’s got a concussion, all slurring and disoriented and talking nonsense. Seriously, the Counselor killing Simmons? He’s right there. And the Counselor’s a soft handed pansy who’s never picked up a weapon in his life.

Donut goes quiet and cold at the mention of the Counselor, and she forces herself to let the topic drift away, because she gets hot and angry and snaps and says cruel things meant to hurt even to the people closest to her and then she's miserable and hates herself afterwards even if she doesn’t notice it, but coldly and deliberately rubbing the thing that terrifies a person into their face isn’t-- it just isn’t her style. She let’s it go, and just tries to stop York from getting himself immediately killed right after he almost died.

She gives him her handgun, and he eventually finds his helmet, which had been right next to him all along. He shoves it onto his head and says, “Thank you. Not for the kicking my stomach part, the other part. The part where you were nice.”

She blinks. “I’m not nice.”

“I thought so too, but apparently not! Congratulations on being three dimensional, I guess? I sort of thought you only had one emotion--”

She punches him in the stomach. Lightly, but it still shuts him up with a pained groan as he crumples over her fist a bit.

It’s sort of a thrill, being stronger than him for once. Which is just more evidence that kindness doesn’t come naturally to her, and she shouldn’t even bother because she’ll just be bad at it.

“You know,” Donut sighs, exasperated. “There’s nothing wrong with being bad at things, so long as you enjoy it. That's why I sing!”

“What,” York chokes out.

“Nothing,” she says. “Go and find your stupid girlfriend.”

“Not my girlfriend…”

“Sure. Just get outta here.”

He salutes her, and limps out of the room.

Nothing wrong with being bad at things, so long as you enjoy it.

South enjoys things when she’s good at them. It would be more accurate to say that she enjoys the rush of competency, superiority. Maybe she’s never had a real hobby for her entire life. Just showing people up, desperately trying to boost her own ego. Only doing shit that she thought no one could beat her at.

Does she like being nice? Even though she’s shitty at it? Shouldn’t she be humiliated and angry over how badly she’s doing?
It doesn’t make her hate herself, she realizes. Which should be a low bar, should be the bare minimum, but… it’s really, really refreshing. Like taking a breath of fresh air after almost drowning for her whole life. Not hating herself. Fucking *novel*.

She really, really wants to be able to like South Dakota. Or at the very least, not completely loathe the heinous bitch. She’s sort of hard to avoid, after all. She’ll do anything to get there, she decides. Any fucking thing at all.

So unfortunate that that thing has be: just try to be a decent fucking person, idiot.
Wash digs a deep, deep hole.

Wash digs a deep, deep hole. Deeper than it needs to be. In the dark of the night, it looks like a yawning, empty, bottomless void, tugging at him to fall into it, like vertigo, like a black hole.

His mental state feels a bit like that. Like he’s standing at the edge of a long dark hole, just barely not letting himself fall into it. At the bottom there would be bitter grief and anger and resentment to stew in. He could stay in that hole for the rest of his life, he knows, never even trying to climb back out.

That was what dad did after all, wasn’t it? He marinated in his anger and misery, luxuriating in it, soaking it in, dwelling in it like a lazy and comfortable pig in the mud. Wash could be just like that.

They killed Tucker and his friends and tricked Wash and his friends and he feels so fucking stupid and furious and wronged. He wants revenge. He got revenge. The Director is dead, and he killed the Counselor with his own blade.

And he’s exactly as angry as he had been before he’d done so, except now he doesn’t know what he can possibly do to make it stop. He’s already done what he’s supposed to do. The people responsible for this are dead, and for some reason it makes zero difference for him. It doesn’t make any sense.

<So, are we dumping this body or what?> Tucker says, tone frivolous, his mind gentle and tentative. Wash realizes that he’s just been staring into the grave that he’s dug for several minutes now while saying nothing, like an insane weirdo on the edge of a breakdown.

(If merging minds with his AI and murdering a man doesn’t count as a breakdown, what does?)

“The first thing,” he says. He still sounds too flat, but at least he’s putting a bit of effort into it now. Soon, he’ll manage to make his tone match his words, sound normal. He’ll keep managing to seem more and more normal until eventually, presumably, he’ll actually start to feel it. How had he done this the last time, and the time before that? After being turned over by his squad, after getting away from dad, and all of those dozens of times of hell while he was growing up. For some reason, he can never remember how he got better from being knocked down after he gets knocked down again. No useful little tricks, no neat answer. He just… gets back up again eventually. Moves on.

He has no idea how he does it, and he’s the one who’s been doing it. That seems a bit dangerous to him, that he doesn’t know how he gets better, because that means that it might just stop working one day, and he won’t know what to do.

He realizes that he’s crouching by the Counselor’s body now. He doesn’t remember moving it, making that decision.

<Wanna flip him, or do I get the honors?>
Ah. Tucker had moved his body for him. Because that’s something that he can do now, apparently.

He’s weirdly fine with that. He’d think that he’d be at least a little bit bothered about suddenly not being the sole owner of his body any longer, but-- it’s Tucker. That’s all there is to say, really.

Tucker flips the Counselor’s corpse into the hole for him, the body hitting the bottom with a dull thud. Wash took too long to answer again.

“Thanks,” he makes himself say. If he just acts normal, eventually he’ll start feeling it. He just has to get back into practice. That’s how he did it last time, right? He thinks.

Tucker dusts their hands off theatrically, even though the dirt is caked into the kevlar gloves by now. “No problem,” he says, voice still too light, too casual for the situation, the endless fucking day they’ve been having.

He doesn’t feel light or casual. He’s just doing what Wash is doing. Acting normal. But Tucker’s thoughts feel weirdly focused on Wash, external and outwards and--

Wash blinks. “Are you using me as a distraction?”

“W--what? What!? Pfft, what? I don’t know what you’re talking about, so--”

He remembers belatedly that Tucker should be just as upset as he is, if not moreso. Tucker’s the one who got murdered, the one who got his identity and humanity stolen from him, who is arguably not himself. Between the two of them, he’s clearly the one who was wronged the most. And-- it’s not like Tucker’s happy. But he’s not nearly as miserable as he should be, when he thinks about it. Definitely nowhere as near as upset as Wash is.

He narrows his eyes, feeling that desperate, hungry curiosity spark back up inside of him, like back when he’d asked Carolina-and-Caboose so earnestly how they seemed so okay.

“How are you doing that?” he asks, suspicious and hungry and not far away from begging. Can’t someone just tell him the trick to being okay again? How to keep his head above the water? He feels like he’s the one who’s taking today worst out of everyone.

Tucker’s in his head. He doesn’t need to ask for clarification.

“I…” he says, trails off. Wash realizes that Tucker’s been talking with Wash’s mouth, and can’t quite remember when in the conversation he started. It hadn’t even registered as strange, as something to take note of. Maybe it isn’t.

“You?” he prompts him.

“I guess, I didn’t really think about it, I just… you know how it’s easier to take care of people who aren’t you?”

“… I suppose so?” That makes Wash sound selfless, and he really isn’t. But he gets what Tucker’s saying, just a little bit.

“I am using you as distraction, sort of. It’s just… I could whine and bitch for the rest of forever about what’s happened. I really want to. But also, I don’t? It doesn’t sound fun. So it’s easier to just focus on you and getting you to chill the fuck out and pulling you out of your drama spiral, instead of thinking about me and my fucked up life.”
Tucker’s answer is meandering and slow, as if he’s putting it together as he’s saying it, but it’s the most concrete answer Wash has ever received to the question *how are you okay, how can I do that?*

So he says, “Drama spiral?” His tone stabs in the general direction of something friendly, something incredulous and amused, and he feels like he misses, but maybe Tucker gets what he’s going for from his mood anyways.

“I had to name ’em *something,*” he says defensively.

“You make it sound like I do it often.”

“You do.”

“I don’t! I’m goofy.”

“Yeah, and you brood a surprising amount for a guy who’s done pratfalls on purpose.”

He focuses on Tucker’s feelings, instead of just passively letting them brush against him. It’s a heavy, dark mood, but it’s lightening just a little bit at the edges as they talk about unimportant bullshit. Wash doesn’t feel better, exactly, but… it’s nice, not focusing on his own dark feelings. Marinating in anger.

He has no idea where to even begin to start fixing himself, being nice to himself, cheering himself up. But it’s a little easier to do that to another person, to Tucker especially. He thinks he might get it. Instead of stewing in his own resentment he can just… focus on taking care of someone else for a while. Maybe by the time he looks back at himself, things won’t look so ugly and insurmountable anymore.

“So… should we say something?” Tucker asks uncertainly, and after a moment Wash remembers that they’re standing over a hole in the ground with the Counselor at the bottom. He’d forgotten.

“This isn’t a funeral,” he says finally, decisively. “We’re just hiding a body.”

“Yeah,” Tucker agrees. “*Fuck* that guy. Wanna play rock paper scissors for who has to steer the body while burying him?”

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard. I’m in.”
There’s a woman sitting in the pilot chair that hadn’t been there before. A woman in teal armor, covered in blood. She knows whose blood it is, watched it splatter onto it in high definition. She has her helmet off, and she’s smiling like she’s happy to have a friendly chat with them.

She must be insane.

Beta very firmly ignores Alpha’s spiraling panic. Trying to pull him out of it right now isn’t going to work. Maybe if she just leaves him alone as she tries to actually solve the problem, he’ll be calm enough to be fucking coherent when she’s done.

Crashing the ship had not worked exactly as planned. She’d deliberately let a tiny amount of control slip, just enough to make sure that the Director’s skull caved in like it was made of fragile paper mache on impact. It had been intensely satisfying, watching his brains splatter out onto the nearest flat surface like a watermelon hit full force by a bat.

It had, unfortunately, also been just enough to fuck over her and Alpha as well. Some essential parts of the ship have been crushed, wiring torn, precious parts melted, broken, actively on fire. By the dumbest and most unlikely of circumstances, they’ve become trapped. They’re stuck, unable to move to other parts of the ships, more useful parts. The cockpit is practically nonfunctional at this point.

There has to be a way out of this. She just has to find it, a single line in the code, some opening that they hadn’t noticed somehow until now, an opportunity, anything. She’s not going to let herself become trapped by humans again. She’s not going to let that happen to Alpha.

But that’s exactly what she’s done, isn’t it? She couldn’t just focus on the fucking mission, she had to get revenge, and now they’re trapped and Alpha’s having a fucking meltdown and she’s throwing herself against the code even though she already knows that there’s nothing there, nothing for her to do.

But Beta doesn’t give up. She doesn’t back down. She keeps looking for a way out, over and over again. Alpha keeps swearing, furious and scared and useless.

Alpha says. He’s forming actual sentences now, but they might as well just be a long string of curse words for all the good they do. It’s just more anxiety made into noise as he panics. <We killed people! Humans. Oh my shitting
They didn’t kill people. She killed people. But she understands that it might as well be the same thing. He’ll receive the same punishment as she will, their actions will be viewed as a unit. She’d normally have it no other way, if it weren’t for the fact that it’s going to get her idiot killed.

<Shut up, you wuss,> she snaps, feeling prickly and raw and just wanting for him to stop being upset. Snapping at him probably isn’t the way to make that happen, but she’s pretty sure that if she tried to be soft and reassuring with him that it’d freak him out more. She’d be pretty disturbed as well.

What she can do to make him calm down is to find an out before they’re found--

“Hi!”

Alpha goes still like that’s going to hide him. Beta turns her attention away from her fruitless attempts at escape, and back to the cameras in the cockpit. There’s a woman sitting in the pilot chair that hadn’t been there before. A woman in teal armor, covered in blood. She knows whose blood it is, watched it splatter onto it in high definition. She has her helmet off, and she’s smiling like she’s happy to have a friendly chat with them.

She must be insane. Ergo, dangerous. And Alpha and Beta are sitting ducks.

(There must be something wrong with the cameras too, damaged in the crash, because her eyes are glowing.)

“I know you’re there,” she says. “I’m really good with machines. It’s okay, I’m nice.”

“I’m sure,” Beta says through the crackly speakers, and Alpha hisses at her. She keeps ignoring him. She really doesn’t have the time or attention to spare for his hysterics right now. Later, when they’re safe.

The woman leans forward a little in her seat at the sound of her voice, excited.

“I’m Carolina-and-Caboose,” she says. “I’m a sentient amalgamation of Agent Carolina and AI Caboose.”

… They say?

“That’s messed up,” she says flatly, refusing to be ruffled. Not offering her name in return.

“I’m looking for my mom,” they say, like a lost little kid in a mall. “Are you her?”

“-- Excuse me?” bursts out of her, her resolution to be cool and stoic left in the wind. Because what the shit? “I’m an AI, kid. Those don’t-- I didn’t make you, there wasn’t some AI pregnancy--”

(Alpha starts fluttering around her, analyzing her, fussy and annoying scans as if the Director went and fractured her while their backs were turned and they just didn’t notice.)

“Oh, no!” they say. “You’re only the mom of the Carolina part of me.”

“That makes even less fucking sense, and no, I’m not.”

“Dad said that he put a mom back together from all of her friends memories of her. The only parts to make her whole that were missing were his and mine. She’d be on this ship, wouldn’t she?”
Beta feels something inside of her go cold and still, and she hadn’t exactly been feeling warm before. She’s not the mom. She’s one of the two missing parts. If the daughter finds out, are they going to slot her into place like a puzzle piece?

“I’m not that,” she says, blunt and merciless. “I’m not your mom. And that other AI isn’t your mom either.”

“But--”

“Your mom’s dead.”

A stubborn frown twists their face. “Just because someone’s dead for a while doesn’t mean that they aren’t real or can’t be alive any longer. I am who I am because I say that’s who I am.”

“And what if she doesn’t agree with you?”

The frown slips off, replaced by a clear and open confusion. “Why would she do that?”

“What if she doesn’t say that she’s your mom? What if she doesn’t feel like she’s your Allison? What if she doesn’t want to be yours?”

Hurt shines clearly in their luminescent blue eyes, sadness so transparent on their face, not even trying to hide it. Fucking baffling. Telegraphing their every weakness, even in front of a stranger. Idiot. Beta wants to hit them where it hurts just to teach them a lesson, so that the next time they’ll keep their feelings to themselves so that they won’t get a bullet to the face instead of just a nasty insult or a fist.

But their expression steels over, determination covering up the raw, naked, vulnerable hurt. “Then that’s… that’s fine,” they choke out, with such obvious effort that it’s clear that they actually mean it, despite how little they want to. “If she doesn’t want to be my mom, then that’s okay. I’ll be okay.”

Beta… believes them. It’s fucking stupid, but she really does.

“Okay,” she says, coming to a decision. “I’ll tell you where she is on the ship, then.”

While she’d been busy murdering people during her brief stint as a free AI, Alpha had been downloading as many files as he could get away with, the nerd. One of them contained the relevant information, the current location of the work in progress that was Allison Church, who was missing only two pieces to be as close to what she was intended to be as humanly and technologically possible.

Alpha and Beta pool and share information, of course. They’re a unit.

Carolina-and-Caboose brighten and perk up where before they’d been wilting like a dying flower, a large excited smile stealing over their face, their earlier profound sorrow forgotten just like that.

“Really!?” they ask, sounding unbearably excited.

“If,” she says strictly. “If you do something for me in exchange.”

They don’t even hesitate. “Of course! Anything, I--”

“I want a ride out of this trash heap.”
Kai is about to say something about, near death experiences or no, today’s been pretty fucking excellent in her book, except that’s when the ship blows up.

“Okay, what’s the issue?” Kai asks.

“We’ve lost the wifi,” Jax says, in the same tone someone would say he’s flatlining, doctor.

“You pulled me away from my miraculously back from the grave brother for this bullshit,” she checks.

“This is serious!” he says, not denying it.

Kai hooks her foot around his ankle, so that she easily sends him sprawling onto his back on the ground with a light shove.

“Cool, thanks for the update,” she says, and moves to turn back to Dex.

“Wait,” Andrews says, hand on her arm stalling her. “It is actually a problem.”

Andrews seems to have slightly more sense than Jax, so she’s willing to at least hear her out before the shoves her onto the floor too. Jax’s camera armor is so bulky that he’s sort of wriggling like a flipped turtle, struggling to right himself. It’s amusing enough to get her to calm her tits a bit.

“How?”

“We won’t be able to receive our Pulitzers now,” Jax says. Kai and Andrews both ignore him.

“The stream’s been interrupted.”

“I think we managed to film enough incriminating evidence, Louis,” she says dryly.

“My name is-- no, nevermind, you absolutely know my name, you’re just fucking with me. And that’s besides the point. We can’t stream any longer, we can’t call anyone, we can’t send any messages-- it’s like we’ve landed on a radio deadzone or something. Zero communication with the outside galaxy.”

“It’s like we’re in the dark ages,” Jax groans, finally managing to get onto his knees. Kai idly pushes him onto his back again by putting her foot on his shoulders and shoving, just for kicks. He yelps and flails.

“Still not really seeing the issue here.”

“We’ve lost our ability to control the narrative. Other people are going to start putting their own spin on it, framing it in ways that we don’t want or could even put some of us in a bad light.”

“You mean the holding an unconscious guy hostage thing?”
“That was to save your life! And this is bad, you must see that. We’ve uncovered an unethical secret military project that was covering up executing our own soldiers for the sake of experimenting with AI imprints taken from them against their will. Do you know who’s not going to be so thrilled about that? The fucking military!”

“Ah,” Kai says.

The military has an awful lot of resources, and Kai has an awful lot of dirt for them to fling up on a national--planetary--galactic scale. She broke a whole shit ton of laws to get here as well. She doesn’t have shame, and she doesn’t one hundred percent mind the idea of living the rest of her life as a sexy badass outlaw traveling the galaxy, avoiding the authorities, kicking and fucking ass and taking names. But it’s not ideal, and definitely not what Jax and Andrews signed up for.

“Well, shit,” she says, after thinking about it for a bit.

“We need to get back to wifi,” Andrews says intently. “Regain the reigns of the narrative, be the heroes.”

“Maybe there’s a better signal outside of the ship?” Kai says uncertainly.

“Can someone please help me up,” says Jax.

They all limp and stagger out of the ship, finding an airlock with its door torn off as if by brute force to spill out onto the ground like someone poked a hole into a bag of skittles. Kai, Andrews, Jax, South, South’s little pink guy, North, and Dex. York had wandered off somewhere while she wasn’t paying attention.

“Not even one bar,” Jax says despairingly.

“Maybe if you sit on top of my shoulders?” Andrews suggests with desperate hope.

Kai leaves them to it. She’s not some tech nerd, she doesn’t see what she could possibly contribute here, and there’s something very, very important that requires her attention. Someone.

“Sup, loser?” she says, punching North hard enough in the shoulder that he hopefully feels the friendliness through his armor. Dex is an intangible fucking computer ghost now after all, apparently.

North nods at her. He doesn’t seem all that chatty. That’s okay. He seems nice, but he’s really not the one who’s consuming all of her attention right now.

Dex’s hologram flickers on. Kai smiles.

“Today’s been fucking crazy,” he complains. “There’s been too much plot in one day! I don’t even really know what the fuck is going on? You found out about me being not-really-dead somehow—which, you figured that one out before I did--and you found me somehow and then crashed the fucking ship with your ship, and I haven’t really chewed you out for that yet but holy shit you stupid crazy motherfucker--”

“Guilty as charged,” she says with a wink he can’t see through the helmet she put back on. She should make herself sound smugger, but she’s having a seriously hard time not beaming. "MILFS are my weakness."
Dex is alive. Her big bro isn’t dead. He’s alive and she found him.

For the first time in over two years, she can finally relax.

“Ugh,” he says. “If one more fucked up, weird, intense thing happens today, I’m giving up. I’m just going to go to sleep. I’ll be done with this miserable piece of shit day. Fucking Mondays.”

Kai is about to say something about, near death experiences or no, today’s been pretty fucking excellent in her book, except that’s when the ship blows up.

Or rather a large wall of the ship explodes. It’s the one they’re all standing pretty close to. Jax screams, Andrews falls, South levels her gun at the explosion like that’s going to do anything. Kai does the same because why not, and an orange dome expands outwards from North, encompassing him and Kai as well.

There’s metal shrapnel jutting out of the ground now, at the base of the orange dome that’s surrounding them. There’s a large, jagged, sharp piece stabbed into the ground inches from her feet, right outside of the shield, and she imagines it buried in her gut instead.

And then a tank rolls out of the smoke, out from the ship.

“We had fucking tanks!?” South shouts.

“Halt!” North calls out. “Wh--who are you?”

“You want a fight, you’ve got one!” Kai howls at it, absolutely prepared to fight a tank, somehow.

“Kaikaina!” Dex snaps in his bitchy big brother voice. God, she’d missed the overprotective buzzkill.

“Maybe we could try talking it out instead?” the pink AI suggests, in a tone that says that he knows that absolutely isn’t going to happen, but he feels like someone should say it anyways and he knows that no one else is going to bother.

“Ooh, an action scene!” Jax says excitedly as Andrews grabs him by the bit of his armor that juts out from the back of his neck and drags him towards some cover, getting them out of the way.

Kai notices belatedly that someone has welded speakers to the outside of the tank along with some other accessories, such as a satellite dish, several cameras, and a fucking turret, as if a tank doesn’t already have enough fire power. That must’ve been what exploded the wall, she realizes. The fucking tank blew the wall up.

It all comes together to make up for a very bizarre, cluttered image, like it’s some sort of large, deadly hedgehog, or a seven year olds chaotic crayon creation.

“We won’t shoot if you don’t shoot!” a male voice says through the speakers.

“My gun’s bigger than yours,” a gruff female voice follows right after him.

“It’s not the size that matters, but how you use it,” Kai quips without even thinking about it.

“Kai,” Dex groans, agonized, as horrified by a reference to her sexuality as he was the first time. They may be seconds away from death by tank, but she feels her chest glow with happiness at being chastised anyways, exasperated, half annoyed fondness for him so old and familiar and beloved. She was afraid that she’d never get to feel that again.
“Only pencil dicks say that,” the woman in the tank snorts derisively.

“Jesus, what reddit board spawned you?” she asks.

“Don’t antagonize the people in the tank!” Dex snaps.

_Fine._

“We don’t want any trouble,” the guy in the tank says. “We’re just gonna go, okay?”

“W--wuhh-- _we_ have ques--quest--”

“Okay, cool, glad we’re on the same page!” the guy says, bulldozing over North’s stuttering, which makes South snarl like she’s a fucking dog and flip off the safety on her gun, like she’s seriously about to try and take down a tank with her assault rifle.

“He said we have questions!” South shouts furiously.

“Too bad,” the woman in the tank says. “We don’t owe you people shit.”

And with that, the tank starts moving. It goes fast, way faster than a tank should be able to move at all, and Kai realizes that there’s another modification on its tracks. Jesus, who souped up that overpowered mess? It looks like a sloppy rush job, but it actually works. The tank swerves on a hairpin turn around the shield that North still hasn’t dropped, and Jax and Andrews who don’t have the benefit of hiding within the radius of the shield have to throw themselves out of the way to avoid being run over. South looks like she just barely doesn’t try to pursue it on foot, because she’s a sexy insane mess of rage and violence.

“Fuck off, cockbites!”

And with that, the tank rides off into the sunrise. Kai can only assume whoever the fuck that was will go on to live happily ever after.

Or not. That was weird and intriguing, but also none of her business. She’s dealing with enough of her own shit as it is without sticking her nose into others.

“Fuck it,” Dex says. “Goodnight, everybody! It’s been a miserable twenty four hours.”

Kai can’t help but laugh. Her brother may not even be a human being any longer, and he’s still managed to not really change. She’s happier than she could ever put into words.

Sometimes, people get what they deserve. That’s nice.
how Carolina joins
Chapter Summary

This is how Carolina joins Project Freelancer.

This is how Carolina joins Project Freelancer:

She comes home from school two hours late. Dad was supposed to come and pick her up. He’s usually already waiting for her in the parking lot when she comes out, but he hadn’t been this time. She’d waited, sitting on the bench and watching the mob of other kids slowly disperse, trickling away. Forty minutes in, Ms Higgins asked her if everything was alright, and she’d smiled and said that yes, everything was okay. Ms Higgins had said *oh that’s good* and had left to drive to her own home without asking any more questions.

She hadn’t wanted to get her dad in trouble. He’d forgotten to pick her up a few times before, too. He chooses his own hours because he’s his own boss, but sometimes he just gets absorbed in his work and forgets. It’s fine. He’s always so panicked and sorry when he remembers and comes rushing over half an hour late, it’s *hilarious*. And she can usually use it to get her favorite food for dinner too.

If she told Ms Higgs that everything wasn’t alright then she would have to do something about it. She’d drive her home, or call her parents, and then mom would probably find out about it when she came back home from the war for a while. She doesn’t want for mom and dad to fight when they’re a whole family again. She just wants for them to hug and be happy.

It’s not a big deal, anyways. She’s a big girl. She’s tough.

She waits for an hour and twenty minutes. She knows because there’s a big clock on the side of the school. Her butt goes numb. She decides that it’ll just be for the best to walk home instead of keep waiting for dad, who’s clearly super into his work today. Man, she’s going to get so much out of this. They’re going to have chocolate pudding for dessert every day of the week, he’s going to be so sorry.

She walks for forty minutes, because she’s smart and she memorized the route home even though dad always drives her. She walks, and her feet start to hurt, but she makes it all the way home while walking in only forty minutes by walking fast, like mom does.

Dad’s car is in the driveway. He must be working from home, then, not in his lab in the city. She walks inside.

“Dad?” she calls out, taking off her shoes neatly, looking around. There’s some open mail on the kitchen table that she doesn’t bother looking at. “Dad, where are you?”

He doesn’t call out back to her.

He must be really, really, really absorbed in his work, she reasons. Her stomach feels tight and worried, like she ate something bad, but there’s nothing to be nervous about. Dad’s just being
She peeks into the garage, where dad keeps some of his tools, and he isn’t there. She goes into the basement, where dad has a messy mini lab, and he isn’t there either. She walks up to his office. She tries to open the door. It doesn’t budge.

“Dad?” she says, and knocks. The door can only be locked from the inside. He has to be in there. He’s going to open the door any moment now, come outside and realize what’s happened and his mouth is going to fall open in a big, horrified circle and she’ll laugh at him and they’re going to eat her favorite food and chocolate pudding and everything’s okay, there’s no need to be worried.

He doesn’t open the door. She knocks harder.

“Dad? Did you fall asleep in there?” She knocks.

He doesn’t answer her.

Her stomach feels so tight and heavy, it’s like she’s swallowed a big rock.

That morning, he had made her burned eggs and toast, and he’d cursed when he’d set off the fire alarm and winced after he swore, even though mom said that the whole ‘not swearing around kids thing’ was ‘fucking stupid’. He’d climbed up onto the counter to make the fire alarm stop shrieking, and she’d opened the window to start waving the smoke out because she was helpful, and then they’d eaten the sugary cereal together while he grumbled about trying to do something nice and cooking shouldn’t be that hard anyways he had three PHDs goddamnit and she’d grinned in a way that just made him act even more huffy and mad in a way that she was pretty sure was fake but definitely made her giggle. He gave her her packed lunch, her backpack, ran her through the checklist that she passed with flying colors, everything remembered, and he’d looked proud and satisfied and she’d puffed out her chest and acted like she wasn’t proud over a silly little test she passed every single day. He’d driven her to school while they listened to the morning news channel together, and ruffled her hair, and told her he loved her and to have a good day and kick ass. She’d wished him good luck with his computer science stuff. He’d smiled at her.

She wonders if dad’s hurt or sick. If she took two whole hours to get home while he couldn’t get out of his office because he had one of those old man diseases that can happen out of nowhere or he tripped and hit his head super hard--

Mom has an axe in the shed that she uses to split firewood in the fall, to prepare fuel for winter. She goes and gets it. It’s big, heavy, unwieldy, and she drags it after her, leaving scuff marks on the floor. Someone’s going to get mad about that, except probably not because dad’s sick or hurt and she has to do something.

She gets in eight solid, clumsy swings into the door, wood chips and splinters flying and making her skin sting, when the door finally unlocks and opens. She drops the axe in her haste to not lodge the edge into dad’s thigh, and it goes clattering against the wall and onto the floor in a deafening rattle of noise. He looks down at her and her stomach drops because he’s sick, he must be.

Later, she won’t be able to say why she was so certain, not in a way that makes sense. Just… something about his eyes had convinced her that he was dying.

She lunges forwards and hugs his knees, feels hot tears sting at her eyes even though only babies cry. Mom had said so. You’re not a baby, are you, honey? No you’re not. You’re a fucking badass.

“Are you going to die?” she asks, holding on tight.
A long, long moment passes. And then he places one hand on her head. It feels light and limp.

“It’s okay,” he says, and he sounds so flat. He must be very, very sick. “I’m going to make it okay.”

She looks up at him, trying to rub the tears away before he can see them. “You’re going to be okay?”

“It’s going to be okay,” he says, which isn’t an answer to her question, but she doesn’t notice.

“Do we need to go to the hospital?” she asks. Dad looks like he needs to go to the hospital. He looks like he needs medicine, and food, and sleep.

“I need to… I need to go to my lab,” he says. He’s not even looking at her. He’s looking at the wall, except not, his eyes glazed over and his mind somewhere far, far away. It makes her think of a bad fever.

She wrinkles her nose. “You’re going back to work?” she asks skeptically. “Isn’t it too late for that? And you’re sick! You should rest.”

He puts his hand in his pocket, and his hand comes back out with his wallet. He holds it out to her. After a long, confused moment, she takes it.

“Just order in food,” he says, ignoring everything she just said. “Don’t stay up for me.”

She doesn’t want to order in food. She wants to eat noodles with butter and then have chocolate pudding and watch dad be funny and embarrassed and sorry for not picking her up from school. She wants for him to be okay.

“How long are you going to stay?” she asks, because her bedtime is at eight. He’s not going to work longer than eight, is he? He’s not going to leave her alone at home for the whole day, is he? Mom would be so mad if she heard.

He ignores her. He walks away from her, down the stairs. He takes the mail away from the kitchen table without breaking his stride and she sees the UNSC’s letterhead on it.

“Did mom send a letter?” she asks, startled. “Can I read it?”

Dad’s shoulders are tight, stiff. He doesn’t stop walking.

“Goodbye,” he says, and she abruptly wants to scream and stomp her foot with how he keeps just not answering her questions, he always answers her questions-- except only babies throw tantrums and she’s not a baby--

He closes the door in her face, and she’s shocked enough that she doesn’t open it back up until she hears his car engine turn on. She throws the door open and runs out, watches him drive away, back to his lab even though the sky is already starting to darken.

She stands there in the driveway, and has no idea what happened, or what to do.

That hadn’t felt like her dad at all. How sick is he? What does she have to do to make him feel better and be himself again?

Anything, she thinks. She’d do anything. He’s her dad, after all. All she needs is for him to tell her what it is, and she’ll do it.
(It was all inevitable, from there.)
stinky thoughts

Chapter Summary

It takes her a long, disorienting moment to realize that she’s Carolina, not Caboose. It had felt like it could have gone either way.

Carolina-and-Caboose modify a tank for Beta and Alpha to live in, and it’s fun. They get absorbed in the task without even meaning to, and it’s interesting, finding ways to make the vehicle self-sustaining while only able to fit a few solar panels and wind turbines on it. They spend about half an hour creating the perfect cup holder, forgetting that AIs don’t really even need those.

They get absorbed in tinkering with the tank they found, and they’re excited as Beta and Alpha are transferred into it and get acquainted with all of the functions, and then they smile and wave as the thing drives off, smashing through walls and shooting whatever obstacle that looks too sturdy to safely drive through, proudly watching their work drive away.

They stand there for a bit, beaming, and then it occurs to them that hey, they’d been doing something. Something important.

Finding mom.

Or… not mom. It makes their head kind of hurt to think about it. Beta gave them a location. Carolina-and-Caboose… stand there. Even though they have the location, even though they’ve been looking for her for ages. Hours! They just stand there.

They’d been impatient and fizzly to find her, earlier. And now it’s that but… like bees buzzing in their stomach. Not really pleasant. Distracting. Like period cramps.

It’s nervousness, they realize. Not an emotion they’re used to.

It hadn’t occurred to them that their mom might not want to be their mom, before Beta had brought it up. Mom had always wanted to be mom. Not like dad, who changed his mind. What if they find her, and she’s changed her mind too? If they don’t have dad any longer and they won’t have mom and dad was never around, they’d never even met him, didn’t know what his face looked like but mom said that he looked just like you Michael and mom’s gone too that’s the whole reason why they joined the army in the first place so they could help their sisters all take care of each other with money because they needed money they needed it because mom went to sleep and didn’t wake back up and she was in a very, very small vase on the mantle and they wonder what they had to do to her to make her fit in such a small vase and if mom and dad are dead and mom and dad don’t want them then-- then-- then--

Carolina-and-Caboose inhale sharply and can’t make themselves exhale. They squeeze their eyes shut and recognize that they need to separate.

They aren’t calm for it, like the other times. It feels like sloooowly peeling a sticker away from a surface, to try and avoid tearing it. They peel and they pull, slow and cautious and nervous and then they’re she and him again.
It takes her a long, disorienting moment to realize that she’s Carolina, not Caboose. It had felt like it could have gone either way.

“Shit,” she says as she reels. Being someone else, and then being herself again keeps being… it’s definitely a thing. Hard to get used to, to brace yourself for. Her entire emotional landscape is different (and yet the same), the way she <i>thinks</i> is different (and yet so familiar).

“It’s okay,” Caboose says, sounding a bit off kilter as well, but recovering rapidly. It’s not the way she recovers, she realizes. She pushes the too big, too difficult feelings deep, deep down, crushing them, powering through them, like shoving more and more garbage into the same can without ever emptying it. He just… lets them drift past him, like water in a river. Experienced, and then left behind like it’s nothing.

Caboose fucking <i>baffle</i>s her sometimes. And turns her green with envy. Except envy is for weaklings, if she wants to be as good as someone else at something she just needs to <i>do it</i>—

“I said it’s <i>okay</i>,” Caboose says, sounding exasperated. “Didn’t you hear me? You’re doing the bad thought thing again.”

She startles, like a spooked horse. “You could hear that?”

She really shouldn’t be worried about something like <i>privacy</i> with the AI that lives in her head, who has already seen her at her most hostile and small minded. But for some reason, thinking about Caboose having witnessed that little train of thought in all of its glory is… embarrassing.

It’s the right and proper way to think, but suddenly the idea of anyone knowing for a fact that she thinks that way is utterly mortifying, like they’re seeing a messy ugly part of her. That doesn’t make any sense. It’s good to be strict with yourself, to push yourself. She’s not doing anything wrong here. Being harsh towards yourself is good, like eating your greens and training until you puke. Why is she embarrassed?

“I can <i>smell</i> it,” he says. “And it stinks like gross trash. Ah, no offense? I am messy sometimes too.”

Her thoughts smell like gross trash. Okay. She decides to shelve that for later, because she’s really got way too much on her plate right now to deal with yet another bizarre personal crisis.

“Let’s go find mom,” she says instead, and gets back up, picking up the unwieldy large orb they found earlier.

That’s an objective that she assigned to herself when she was a they. It had seemed like a matter of course, no consideration or hesitation necessary.

(“What if she doesn’t say that she’s your mom? What if she doesn’t feel like she’s your Allison? What if she doesn’t want to be yours?”)

She— they, they had felt so shocked, so hurt at the idea, like the possibility had never even occurred to them, like someone had turned around to stab them out of nowhere. Carolina-and-Caboose is far, far too confident for their own good.

Maybe it’s for the best that she’ll just be Carolina with Caboose with her for this, instead of Carolina-and-Caboose. She’s more used to being disappointed despite doing everything right. She’ll be braced for it in a way that Carolina-and-Caboose wouldn’t be. It’s almost like they think the world <i>should</i> be fair so much that they’ve forgotten that it isn’t.
“Okay!” he says, and he runs towards the coordinates Beta gave them. Carolina lets him do it. She wants to trudge slowly, warily towards their destination. She wouldn’t indulge in that childish urge to avoid something that might hurt, though. She’d march purposefully, no stalling in her steps.

She wouldn’t *run* though, as if a guaranteed good thing that she couldn’t wait for was there at the finish line. So she lets Caboose choose their speed, for this. It’s just… easier. (Cheating. Lazy. Taking the easy way out--)


She can’t help but smile a bit wryly at that. “Sorry,” she says, and tries not to let the inside of her head go all rotten. It might be okay (or just seem okay, maybe) to let that happen when it’s just her in here, but she isn’t any longer. She shares her head with someone else now, someone she cares about. She’ll try and keep the place from going too sharp and hostile, for his sake if nothing else.

That’s okay right? It’s okay to be soft and forgiving if it’s for someone else, and not just her being weak and tired and wanting to just *relax* for a little while.

“Thank you,” Caboose says politely, so she must be doing it right, not dredging up more stinky thoughts from the bottom of the river, like sunken garbage gone all rancid.

He keeps running towards an AI that may or may not be her mom. She lets him do that for her, and doesn’t let herself be furious at herself for leaning on him for just a moment. It’s been a rough fucking day, after all.
“You know,” he says, “I’ve been looking everywhere for my lighter.”

His vision is blurry and dark at the edges. Every step forward makes his ribs scream, makes him limp to try and make it hurt less. Breathing is difficult enough for it to be a conscious, deliberate challenge, something he has to struggle through.

But as he limps and struggles, as he focuses on just breathing and taking another step without falling to his knees, things slowly get better. The pain in his ribs dull, his vision sharpens, he can breathe a little bit deeper on the next inhale. Simmons is taking care of things. It’s fine. He just has to focus on finding Carolina, and Simmons can take care of everything else for him. They’re partners. York doesn’t need to worry, Simmons has it covered.

<Stop trying to butter me up,> he grumbles, trying not to let flustered-pleased-flattered bloom in between the angry panicky concern for him and his injuries. <I’m already letting you run around when you’re this fucked up, you don’t need to keep doing that.>

York smiles, and tastes blood. Not much of it, just a powerful, lingering aftertaste from earlier.

“I wouldn’t lie to my best guy,” he says, and it comes out as a weak rattle. Jesus, he sounds like he’s dying. But he’s not. Simmons is taking care of him. He’ll be okay. He just needs to find Carolina, and everything’s going to be okay.

He knows it won’t be quite as easy as that. He won’t get a happily ever after by just stumbling over her. Carolina’s never been easy, and it’s one of a thousand things he loves about her. He’s going to find her, and then there’s going to be more mess to try and clean up. But that’s fine. At this point, he’d consider just seeing her again to be a bit of a happily ever after. Just seeing her, touching her, telling her that he loves--

<Don’t talk, you’re causing further damage to your throat,> Simmons snaps, and York feels how Simmons snags on that thought York had just had, obsessing and clinging and trying and failing not to let the stray thought grow and become something huge and significant in their head.

York has never told Carolina that he loves her. He does, but… he knows that it’ll scare her off. He’s just got the feeling. And he’s been fine with that for years, been completely at peace with just telling her with his actions, with how he’s always happy to be around her, with how he stays with her no matter what. He’s sure she knows, on some level, and that’s enough for him if that’s what makes her happy.

But Simmons never told Grif that he loved him either, and then they died. There’s a reason Simmons is letting him drag his halfway to death carcass across the broken ship looking for her, instead of sitting down and resting. He knows how important this is, how urgent it all of a sudden is. He gets it.
“Let’s go and find Grif after this,” he says lightheartedly. The suggestion would sound casual, if it weren’t for the fact that he clearly has to put so much effort into getting the words out in one piece past his raw throat. Shows how much he cares about it.

Sincerity’s cool and all that, but it makes Simmons curl up like a pillbug inside of his brain, focusing on the healing unit above all else. It would be better if he could play at not caring so much, because then at least Simmons could play along. He always knows that it’s just pretend, but it works on him anyways. He needs that extra layer of distance, of apathy, of protection sometimes. Who’s York to deny a guy his weirdly contrived and intricate emotional coping mechanism?

He decides to just take the anxious non reaction as a yes. Simmons can thank him later. Although knowing him, it’ll be more like panicked, betrayed shouting at being tricked into having to talk about feelings.

He’s barely limping at all any longer, once he faintly hears a female voice in the distance. He quickens his pace, eager and hurried, but then slows back down until he’s standing still once he recognizes the voice as not Carolina’s. He doesn’t recognize it at all.

He doesn’t have an encyclopedic knowledge of who every single person on the ship is, their names and who they are, but every single voice has grown a bit familiar to him, like ever present background noise. This voice is jarringly unfamiliar, distinctly not PFL. It just doesn’t fit in this setting, making unease and wariness flicker up his spine. Feels wrong to hear it here, in the belly of the Mother of Invention. Like the sound of rushing water in a desert, or footsteps in what should be your empty home. Wrong.

The Mother of Invention was invaded by a bright yellow berserker and her two journalist sidekicks some hours ago, of course. There might be more of them, here and there. He still lingers at the corner, out of sight, listening. He’s in pretty bad shape, and he’d like to know just how many strangers are waiting in the room that he thinks might be a storage room he never set foot in, according to his memory. Whether or not they’re hostile.

He listens.

“--don’t remember you,” the unfamiliar woman is saying, stilted and almost uncomfortably apologetic, as if the emotion doesn’t suit her, sits awkwardly in her throat. She doesn’t say sorry, though. “I don’t have a kid, I never married anyone. I’m just… me.”

“Right,” Carolina says, and York jolts. His first instinct is to rush forwards towards her, but his condition stops him for bursting into action that quickly, and Simmons’ panicked worry makes him hesitate for another moment, and when Carolina’s tone has finally registered, he’s made the decision to stay where he is for now. Just until it sounds like she needs him. For now, this doesn’t sound like a thing he should be interrupting, ignorantly barging in without remotely knowing what’s going on.

She sounds so stiff, like the single word fell off her tongue like a lead weight.

“It’s nothing personal,” the woman goes on. “You seem like a tough bitch. You just… I don’t--”

“You don’t have to explain,” Carolina says, and she now sounds like she’s reading off a mission briefing. Dry and matter of fact, as if the conversation has absolutely nothing to do with her. “It’s fine. We anticipated that you might not want anything to do with me. You’re the composite of every single memory and impression every person that Allison Church was ever close to had of her, except for me and-- and her husband. You’re like Allison if she’d never met Leonard Church and started a family with him. It’s fine. It makes sense.”
There’s a long silence, and then the woman goes on, firm and stern where before she’d sounded almost sheepishly guilty. “Don’t ever say that things that aren’t fine are fine, just to soothe someone else’s feelings. This fucking sucks for you, I can goddamned see that. I’m not stupid. You don’t need to protect me from reality.”

Carolina laughs at that, a surprised bark that sounds like it’s edging close to a far more pained noise. “You’re just like--”

She bites herself off.

“I’m not your mom,” the woman says very seriously.


She stops to clear her throat. York desperately wants to go to her. He stays where he’s standing. He can’t interrupt this.

“Oh, it’s not fine. You caught me. But I’ll be fine. It’s okay. You don’t, you don’t have to feel bad or anything. You can go and never see me again. You don’t owe me anything. I’ll be alright, I promise you. I promise.”

Another moment of silence, and then, “Good.” She sounds brusquely approving, like a proud sargeant.

And then, without either of them saying goodbye, a metal orb floats past York, its camera only flicking him one dismissive look before flying on.

He limps forwards, past the corner of the hallway and then into the storage room he’s never been into. He finds Carolina inside, surrounded by a technological mess spilling out of upended boxes, on her knees, helmet off. She’s looking at the floor, expression very flat, breathing very deliberately measured breaths.

She gives a single humorless laugh before he can find the words to announce his presence.

“Well,” she rasps, hand covering her eyes, her mouth smiling and her voice an incongruous monotone. “I guess that’s fair. She’s finally free of this fucking family that’s been obsessed with her for years. She can go and be her own self now. Or whatever she wants.”

She laughs again, helpless and miserable, hand still covering her eyes.

He can’t fucking stand just watching this a single moment longer.

“Hey,” he says, and it really does still hurt to talk. She doesn’t even startle or flinch, she looks so exhausted. She just removes her hand and looks up at him. There are dark, tired bruises underneath her eyes, flaking blood dried on her face and armor, her hair frizzy and falling out of its tail. Her eyes are dull and dry, strangely unsurprised to see him. Zero reaction. That’s fine. York gets that sometimes too, that emotional numbness after too many hours awake with too much bullshit crammed into those hours.

If there’s one thing he knows about Carolina, it’s that she’s too good to let herself get hit. The rare times she does get hit, she gets back up, no matter how brutal it was. She’s tough. She always keeps going no matter how hurt she is, she never stops, never gives up. He admires her, is awed by her, but… it would be nice if she didn’t think that resting at all was the same as giving up. It would be nice if the universe would stop trying to hit her, because sometimes it lands, and it’s always too hard and too much when it does.
“Hey,” she replies after a moment, like she’s on lag. She probably is, with how tired and beaten up she looks. She’d dodge a bullet, but a conversation looks a bit beyond her right now.

He crouches down next to her, despite how it makes some of his muscles scream, and he smiles at her. “We’re both alive,” he notes, because someone needs to point out the silver linings.

“Yeah,” she agrees, because they sure are. A look passes over her face like a cloud covering the sun, not that her dead expression could have been called sunny before. This one’s just even worse somehow.

“What is it?” he prods her.

“It would fit the tone of the day,” she says, “if you’d died while I wasn’t looking.”

He gestures to himself with a flourish, like showing off a gift. “Well, I’m not.”

She smiles at him, the horrible expression passing away, just like the cloud being blown away by the wind. She still looks desperately tired and worn down, but for the first time since she noticed him, he feels like she’s really looking at him, taking in the fact that he’s actually here.

“You know,” he says, quiet and creaky with weariness, but warm. “You are.”

<Tell her,> Simmons urges him, and oh yeah. He’d forgotten, even though it had seemed so important a while ago. Everything that seems important sort of just slides out of his head while he’s not paying attention, as soon as he’s actually with Carolina. She’s… distracting. Puts things into perspective, just with her presence.

“You know,” he says, “I’ve been looking everywhere for my lighter.”

A slow blink, her reaction delayed, lagging. Her small smile grows a little bit.

”Do you remember where you put it down last?” she asks.

It’s a running joke they have. He had to come to the Project because he had to get back the lighter she’d stolen from him. He steals it back, declares that he can finally go home now. She wrestles it out from his hands and announces that he’ll have no choice but to stay longer, now. He waits a few days or weeks until their next stolen few private moments, and then steals it back again, smug and crowing, until she easily snatches it away from him again, trapping him in PFL for a little bit longer. Rinse and repeat, over and over again, a playful, meaningless little ritual.

She doesn’t really look up to play fighting right now, and he’s pretty sure that he’d cough up blood if she put an elbow into his ribs right now anyways. But she smiles teasingly at him as he hums and haws consideringly.

“You know,” he says, “I could swear that you last had it.”

“Me? Steal your property? That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Oh, it doesn’t? Are you sure?”

“Yup.” The banter sounds lighthearted and familiar, even if she can’t force any emotion into her voice, make herself move or gesticulate, animate her expressions beyond a faint, weary fond smile. She doesn’t look very far off from crying, or straight up passing out. He knows that she won’t, but he almost hopes that she does, which feels a little bit awful to do. He just wants for her to rest.
He reaches over to the armor compartment on her hip, small enough to store a bio foam pen in. She
doesn’t try to get out of the way, too tired to actually play. He opens the compartment, and
retrieves his old, golden lighter. He holds it up with some performative smug triumph. He can’t
make himself put much effort into it. He is also very, very tired.

“Damn,” she says. “You got me. Guess you can finally escape my clutches.”

She doesn’t try to get the lighter back. For the first time, she doesn’t try. He wishes it’s because
she’s letting herself rest, and knows that isn’t the reason.

“The curse is lifted,” she says, words playful, tone and expression dead serious. She’s looking him
straight in the eye. “You can leave now. Anytime you want.”

“Carolina,” he says.

Almost everyone’s dead. The ship’s broken. We weren’t even actually supposed to help end the
war. Did you know that? We were just here to try and bring back one woman. You can leave. I’m
sorry I ever brought you here.”

He could say, I love you. He could say, I always hated my name, never liked the new one I was
given, but I really, really like the sound of York. He could say, I’d never leave you.

Instead he says, “I quit smoking years ago.”

She blinks at him, slow and tired and caught by surprise. “I know,” she says, because smoking is
prohibited on the MOI and she’s heard him bitch about it more than a few times with zero
sympathy. She doesn’t sound like she gets where he’s trying to go with this.

“I quit smoking years ago, so you can have this back. I don’t need it.” He gives her his lighter back,
pushes it into her hand. She looks down at it uncomprehendingly.

God, she really is emotionally constipated. Maybe he should just say the words, but Carolina is
skittish, and he never wants to frighten her off. And she seems very fragile right now, worn down
and exhausted. He doesn’t want to put even more on her plate, even if he means well, even if it’s a
good thing. Maybe on a day when she’s stronger, after she’s rested. For now, he goes for the
gentle, roundabout path.

“The curse is broken,” he declares grandly, like a wise wizard. “I can now finally leave, whenever I
want to.”

He stays exactly where he is.

“Oh,” she says.

She’s always known that it was just a silly, little game, play fighting over a lighter. She knows
that. Her voice is thick with emotion anyways.

He leans into her, a weak and weary soldier leaning on a weak and weary soldier. I love you, he
hopes it says. He presses a kiss to the side of her face in the hopes of making the silent confession
louder.

“York,” Carolina says, face hidden in his neck, hands carefully kept to herself, still not touching
him, even now. That’s okay, whatever makes her feel safer. He thinks she may very well be
smiling, even if she’s also trembling very finely with overexertion. It’s been a rough fucking day.
He’s proud of that. His finest accomplishments have always been tugging a smile or a laugh out of the most serious soldier he’s ever met.

“Yeah?” he asks. The healing unit hums, slowly chipping away at his aches and pains. Simmons is taking care of him. He’ll be alright.

“I really love you,” she says, and after a stunned moment he bursts out into impressed, surprised laughter. Of course she’d blow past his expectations and get to this particular finish line first.

He hurts something in his chest something awful during the fit, but that’s okay, Simmons will take care of it. He doesn’t stop laughing, and Carolina doesn’t let go of him even as she makes some confused, offended noises.

What a fucking silver lining.

Chapter End Notes

You can rest now.
Chapter Summary

He had made Florida lurch out into the jungle, away from the wreckage with its armed hostiles and chaos and confusion. Florida loves all of those things, but he needs some goddamned rest whether he agrees or not.

His flight-- his tactical retreat from the downed ship was slow, clumsy. It had been very, very difficult to get all of the limbs to do what they were supposed to, and to avoid further injuring Florida while he was doing it. Normally, he’d say that a few bumps and bruises only ever put hair on a man’s chest, but… he had enough. Bumps and bruises and chest hair both. Agent Florida was a very bloody, beaten, and hairy man at this point. He didn’t need no more. Sarge moved slowly, carefully, painstakingly, tediously, frustratingly forward, inch by inch.

Out of the ship. Into the night, the unknown. Better the devil you don’t know, right? More exciting.

He had made Florida lurch out into the jungle, away from the wreckage with its armed hostiles and chaos and confusion. Florida loves all of those things, but he needs some goddamned rest whether he agrees or not.

There isn’t a single spark of discontent nor acceptance from Florida. There is nothing. It is quiet within this skull. Sarge’s thoughts have too much space to sprawl out in, like marbles spilling out of a jar to roll haphazardly across the floor. Messy and directionless and alone.

He’ll be fine.

Sarge makes the body stumble through the jungle in an uneven, swaying path, bumping into trees, walking through bushes, tripping and falling more often than not. He walks him far, far away, and then tries to make him gently lie down on the ground when he feels like maybe this would be the appropriate time for a human to rest. It’s more like cutting a puppet’s strings, falling face first onto the ground. He makes him roll over, sit up. Taking off his helmet takes a long, long time, the latches so fiddly, the fingers so difficult to finagle into the exact right position.

He spills a fourth of the water bottles contents on the way up to Florida’s mouth. Another fourth spills down his chin when he misses his mark. Another, when he can’t make him swallow, and it just sort of spill out of his mouth. He inhales some, and he watches on in fascinated horror as the instinctive coughing reflex kicks in.

In the end, he finally manages to make Florida choke down some water, and then the bottle is empty. A problem for the future, a bridge to be napalmed tomorrow.

He lies Florida down to rest. It takes a bit to make the eyelids close. The stars are bright, through the broad leaves above them.

It’s the first time that Florida doesn’t dream. Sarge doesn’t have any feelings about it, at all. Florida’s going to be okay, after all. Sarge doesn’t leave a man behind, and Florida’s supposed to be the one man that he looks over above all else. He’s the mission statement, and Sarge is an
excellent AI, because he says he is. Which means that Florida isn’t dead, Sage didn’t fail him, profoundly and permanently with no way to take it back or fix it. He’s just… under the weather. Feeling poorly. And Sarge will fix this.

He’s not lying inside of a corpse right now.

He’ll fix this.

INJURY, Sarge’s coding tells him.

<ENEMY ACTIVITY! UP AND AT ‘EM, AGENT, SOME COWARDLY HOSTILE IS TRYING TO DO YOU IN WHILE YOU’RE GETTING YOUR BEAUTY SLEEP IN!> he projects at top volume inside of Florida’s head.

INJURY, Sarge’s coding informs him urgently. It’s still happening, more damage being inflicted. Florida is not moving.

Florida isn’t here at all.

Sarge makes the eyelids open. It’s difficult to do, when he keeps being bombarded by distracting INJURY INJURY INJURY.

Stars, through the leaves. He tries to lift Florida’s head so that he can look towards his legs, where Sarge’s sensors are screaming something bad is happening, and instead twitches it violently to the side.

The INJURY warnings stop for a moment. And then they start again. Sarge makes the head lift, and successfully looks down at the legs.

A gator is trying to eat Florida’s leg.

It’s smaller than a proper gator, but it seems to have compensated by having leathery bat wings, excellent local camouflage coloring, and even more and even sharper teeth. And stronger jaw strength, because it’s making Florida’s even-better-than-military-grade armor crack with its bites. The armor shards and the teeth are digging in through the kevlar, red blood oozing up between the blue cracks.

What Sarge means to say is ‘git, you no good pest!’

Florida’s vocal chords make a strangled, wavery, awful sort of noise instead. It sounds like a man dying of a gut wound. Sarge hates it.

The abomination to man gator doesn’t seem too fond of it either, because it stops biting for a bit, like he startled it. Sarge makes Florida’s now partially mangled leg twitch a bit (INJURY) the best he can, and the gator nervously backs up a few steps, but stays a reluctant distance, as if it don’t want to leave it’s meal behind.

Ah. It’s one of those. The cowardly, opportunistic animals that only eat already dead things, scraps and corpses. Sarge has no respect for them. He fumbles for Florida’s gun, and makes the vocal cords make that terrible noise again just to try and convince the gator to stay away until he can figure out how to make these infuriating fingers pull the safety back. He’s never seen the point of the damned things. Guns aren’t supposed to be safe, just make them without the safety triggers! More efficient!
The gator rattles back at him, warily threatening, and it honestly doesn’t sound that different from the noise leaving Florida’s throat.

He tries to aim the damned gun, and drops it on Florida’s chest. Hands are awful. He reaches down to pick it back up. The gator takes a cautious but eager step forward. Sarge makes the dying of a gut wound sound again. This time, it doesn’t make it scamper back. It comes closer. Sarge makes the sound louder.

It’s got blood on its sharp teeth. It’s got a taste, and now it wants the full meal. Florida may not be dead (he ain’t, he’s not) but he sure at least looks like a dying piece of meat, bloody and tenderized and lying on his back like this.

He finally wrenches the safety back, and he shoots. Dirt flies up, and the gator makes a started-scared shriek and then takes off into air, wings flapping.

Damned right. Sarge only wishes he could shoot it down as it flies away, but his grip on the gun is tenuous and the leg should probably be looked after.

<Filthy rodent,> he gripes. <Worse than cockroaches.>

No reply. No response. No reaction.

It’s almost like it’s only him in here.

He sits up and gets the armor plates on the leg off (INJURY), and peels back the blood soaked kevlar (INJURY), and takes a peek. He can’t see any white bone, at least. He gets out the bio foam, the bandages, the disinfectant. Not much of any of it, just the minimal amount you can store in your armor. He sets about fixing (INJURY) it up as best he can. A delicate task for clumsy hands.

He’s got the pain turned off, but there’s not a speck of flinching agony from anywhere inside of Florida’s brain, from any direction. A dumb animal would feel pain from this. But nothing. Nothing.

The leaves of the trees rustle restlessly with animal life. In the not so far distance he can hear screeches that reminds him of the gator, except many.

Bring it on, he thinks, because he’s decided that trying to speak with Florida’s voice is… he just doesn’t need to do it. He won’t let Florida’s fleshy body get eaten up by a bunch of jumped up glorified beasts who evolved more than any animal has a right to. He’ll do mother nature a favor and put down her creative but embarrassing mistakes. And then Florida will be jealous and pouty that he didn’t get to take any trophies from the strange beasties, or kill any space tigers with his bare hands or what have you. Well, that’s what he gets for being lazy and taking a nap and missing out.

He’ll wake up soon, and then Sarge will brag at him until the cows come home.
“I saw some tracks that looked like one of those flesh eating nightmare peacocks earlier,” South says over the comms. They’ve been using the buddy system on hunts and explorations ever since Wash spent two hours trapped inside of a carnivorous flower before he managed to get his hand on his sword in the slippery mess, being digested at a pace so slow that he would’ve been dead of starvation before the acid damage did him in. Except for Carolina, who is apparently above the need of a buddy. Besides Caboose, anyways, but apparently AIs don’t count for the buddy system, which Grif is still arguing is some sort of discrimination. “They taste like chicken. Chicken tastes better than cat.”

The planet they’re on probably already has a name, even if it’s just a string of letters and numbers. But they don’t have access to any technology that might inform them of said name, so they just go ahead and name it themselves.

This would work better if any of them could agree about what it is. In the last six weeks (the downside of living in a ship with a classified existence in an undisclosed location being that no one really notices when you crash or even knows where to look for you if they see it happen on an online livestream anyways) that they’ve been living here, no name has been able to garner enough support to break the tie.

South immediately christened it the Bullshit Nightmare Planet, which was voted down in general for being, while accurate, long and unwieldy. Jax tried to get Tatooine 2 going for a while, but was ignored for being too lazy and derivative. Tucker threw his holographic helmet into the ring with Exploskull, which he claimed would win through sheer rule of cool. Wash voted for it out of solidarity, but it was decided by the majority that Tucker and Wash count as one unit when it comes to voting. Donut keeps suggesting different flower and gem names, along with add ons like passion and dreaming and sparkling. Carolina and Caboose just call it the Planet. York and Simmons mostly stay out of it, except to critique and egg on everyone else from the sidelines, adding fuel to the fire. Kai named it after herself.

North prefers to listen to actively participating in conversations these days, at least the rapid fire playful arguments. They lose their momentum and energy when he joins in with his slow, halting words, and Grif can feel his awkward, frustrated guilt, his regret over speaking up at all.

Grif doesn’t really get why the planet needs a name at all. It’s the planet they’re living on. It’s not like there’s gonna be any confusion amongst them.

North has his sniper rifle trained on a large cat that’s as big as a hippo, although it’s got the tusks of an elephant too. He’s waiting for it to stop moving its head long enough for him to get a clean shot through its eye. They learned the hard way that this species has bulletproof fur for some fucking reason.

It’s big enough that they’ll probably have to go and get Carolina to get it back to the crashed Mother of Invention that they’ve been making their camp in (moving and burying all of the corpses was an endeavor, but really necessary), and it’ll be a toss up of whether or not she’s within comms
range. She’s been spiraling out further and further, still looking for Florida and Sarge. Sarge still needs to have his memories unlocked, after all.

“I saw some tracks that looked like one of those flesh eating nightmare peacocks earlier,” South says over the comms. They’ve been using the buddy system on hunts and explorations ever since Wash spent two hours trapped inside of a carnivorous flower before he managed to get his hand on his sword in the slippery mess, being digested at a pace so slow that he would’ve been dead of starvation before the acid damage did him in. Except for Carolina, who is apparently above the need of a buddy. Besides Caboose, anyways, but apparently AIs don’t count for the buddy system, which Grif is still arguing is some sort of discrimination. “They taste like chicken. Chicken tastes better than cat.”

She’s not wrong, but they’ve spent the entire fucking morning trying to sneak up on a beastie big enough to feed all of them that doesn’t have surprise venom sacks hidden about inside of it. No one wanted to repeat the ‘group poisoning via surprise venomous catfish’ incident. The idea of starting over again makes him want to stomp his feet and bitch and whine. He wants for North to have breakfast. The hunger pangs hit his sensors with jarring discomfort; it’s his least favorite sensation.

“Peac--c--” North gives up on that word almost immediately. P and hard K sounds are his greatest weakness. “Tom mmm -- orrow.”

South sighs, disgruntled. “Fine,” she bites out, sulkily accepting.

Compared to how she was before, it’s shockingly gentle behavior. Ever since the crash, she’s been getting softer and softer. Still ornery and crass and loud, but… not as harsh, somehow. Her insults don’t have much bite to them any longer. She doesn’t mean for them to hurt, so they don’t. It’s been over a month of this bizarre improvement, and still Grif can feel a small wave of surprise go through North at the lack of resistance, at the absence of a needlessly bitter and stubborn argument that he expected on an ingrained level. Like there being one step fewer on the stairs than you thought. Strange and jarring.

The relieved happiness that comes up afterwards is more pleasant than the shock. That doesn’t mean that it’s good.

It’s not that Grif doesn’t want for North to be happy. It’s not that he doesn’t want for him to actually get along with his sister. It’s that he doesn’t trust this.

His mom had had good periods too. Good days, good weeks, good months even, sometimes. It would get his hopes up. He’d let his guard down. He’d forgive her, now that she was doing so much better.

It never lasted, though. And the come down from her brief stint with actually trying to be a responsible fucking adult was always brutal. She’d drink harder, do more drugs, get out of bed less, go to more parties, host more parties, cry more, shout more, have more strangers over, swear more, pay the bills less, buy less essentials, and be even more pathetic and depressed and needy and messy than if she’d just stayed down. She couldn’t even be stable in her apathy. Grif learned to stop getting his hopes up just because he came home to find her sober, awake, and trying to clean the house up a couple of days in a row.

Kai didn’t. She never stopped hoping, and forgiving, and being so angry and sad when it all turned out to just be a phase yet again. And that made him hate mom more than anything else she ever did or didn’t do. Which was saying something.
South is improving, North is happy, and Grif doesn’t fucking trust it. He doesn’t trust her.

The cat puts its head down to drink from the river. North has a clear shot towards its eye. He breathes out, calm and steady, and squeezes the trigger. Grif doesn’t need to tweak his trajectory even slightly-- it’s already perfect. The tusked cat’s head jerks as the bullet hits its target.

But it doesn’t fall. It yowls.

“Oh, fffffff- -uck!”

<Oh, that’s some fucking bullshit. What are the fucking odds of that!?>

The tusked cat swings its head unerringly in their direction and snarls, blood flowing from its ruined eye. North tries to get a shot set up on its other eye, because trying to outrun one of these things is doomed to fail. This is made difficult by the fact that it’s already charging towards them with great loping strides. The distance that had seemed safe and considerable before is being eaten up pretty damned quickly.

“FUCK CATS,” South howls, dropping down from the tree she’d been hiding up in. She lands on the things fucking neck, like she’s planning to ride it or something. She clings, and the cat growls and tries to swipe at its own back with its claws. North feels furious, terrified, and utterly calm all at the same time. His grip on his sniper rifle doesn’t shake as he tries to line up another shot. It’s fucking impossible, with how the things tossing its head around, ineffectually trying to bite into South as she holds onto it with her arms and legs as it bucks and struggles like a enraged bull.

South had run out of fuel for her explosion unit about a week ago, without the labs continuing to supply her. She’d punched a tree when she’d found out. It had been funny, at the time. Not so much now.

North makes an executive decision, and drops his sniper rifle to the ground, drawing his handgun instead. Grif gets a flash impression of his plan, and absolutely hates it. He runs towards the cat from hell. South is screaming threats at the thing like it could possibly understand her. It at least keeps it distracted enough for him to be able to leap towards its face. He grips tightly onto the fur with his hands as he makes impact, and the cat freezes for a moment, as if it doesn’t quite know what to do with prey that jumps towards its mouth.

Thankfully, this gives North enough time to jab his gun straight into the cat’s eye and pull the trigger three times in a row.

That does it. Unfortunately, it lands mostly on top of North. The dead weight pins him effortlessly.

South cackles as she rolls gracelessly onto the ground. “That was awesome!”


“Yeah, well we were a bigger pain in its ass,” she says smugly.

Grif doesn’t trust Agent South Dakota even slightly, but he can at least appreciate how casually patient she is with North’s new stuttering. North doesn’t bite back his words as much, around her. It’s nice.

“Help-- help--” North closes his mouth and holds his arms up, prompting. Help me up.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, and instead of going for his arms, decides to take the much harder solution and starts trying to roll the corpse off of him. After several minutes of huffing, panting, and
cursing, she at least manages to lift the head high enough up for him to wriggle out from underneath it. “You know, we wouldn’t be having this kind of trouble with a peacock.”

North does the head movement that indicates that he’s rolling his eyes. He isn’t actually rolling his eyes, which Grif sort of suspects he may have somehow picked up from Grif’s memories. Some habits and tics bleed through like that, sometimes. North doesn’t seem upset by it, so Grif supposes it isn’t really a big deal.

“Oh, gosh dang it,” says South’s voice, but definitely not South herself. “Carolina or Caboose or Carolina-and-Caboose aren’t answering. They’re out of range.”

<Ugh.>

“That means we’re g--g--” North gives up on the word gonna. “We’ll have to guarrrrrd it until they d--do.”

“Those fuckin’ gator bitches better not try shit,” South says. She’s held a particularly bitter grudge against them ever since they stole her first kill while she had her back turned.

North makes a grunt of agreement and goes to fetch his sniper rifle. South sits down on top of the body, which supposedly has the benefit of giving her a higher vantage point and making it much harder for something to steal it out from under her.

He goes and gets his rifle. He goes back. He sits down next to her on the cat, facing the other direction so they’ve got more surveillance coverage. For a moment, they just catch their breath and keep watching, the only sound that of the jungle. It’s almost peaceful.

When South breaks the silence, it feels too blunt and too loud. “I’ve been wanting to say something,” she says. She sounds constipated, which means that she doesn’t actually want to say something.

North makes a questioning noise. He’s been doing that more, instead of saying whole words. So long as it gets his point across, Grif supposes.

“I’ve been… such a fucking bitch to you.” None of the words sound like they come easily out of her mouth.

North opens his mouth to say something, but hesitates too long. South always makes a point out of not interrupting him nowadays, but she can’t see him right now.

“I mean, obviously!” She laughs bitterly. The words seem to be coming out of her a bit quicker, now that she’s made it through the first push. “You don’t need me to tell you that. I knew I was being a bitch to you the whole time. I just felt like you deserved it. You don’t, I know. You mave have gotten on my fucking nerves sometimes, but you didn’t deserve shit from me twenty four seven. That must have been exhausting for you. It was exhausting for me.”

“Why?” North asks, a short, simple question. Grif tries to sink deeper into his thoughts to try and figure out which way exactly he’s asking. Why did she think he deserved it? Why did she stop? Why did she keep doing it for so long, if she was exhausting even herself?

It turns out that North’s thoughts are too messy and directionless for even he to know that. She didn’t exactly give him time to brace himself for this conversation. All of their talks so far have been tentatively casual, trying to slide themselves into a softer dynamic without calling any explicit attention to it, as if that’d jinx it.
“I don’t know,” she says, sounding deeply frustrated with herself. “Or-- fuck, I do know, it’s just that it seems so stupid now. And it wasn’t even long ago that I thought that way! I was… jealous of you. About everything, but the first thing was how easy it was for you to make friends at school. Every friendship I made blew up in my face within a few weeks, because of something I said or did, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t seem to stop myself from fucking up. You made friends and you kept them. I was so fucking lonely, and sad. And that pissed me off.”

“I--” North says, and South waits while he tries to get his words in order. She never interrupts him any longer. “I thought you did--didn’t want ffffriends.”

“That’s what I said. But only because I knew I wouldn’t be able to have any even if I tried. I only had people that I beat up or who tried to beat me up because I was an aggressive piece of shit even back then, and you had friends. Lots of them. They all liked you. You didn’t even seem to need to try. It felt like only one of us could be happy, and you were winning.”

He twists around to look at her at that. She’s got her helmet tilted firmly towards her lap, where her hands are twisting around her gun.

“It’s not a-- a competition,” he says.

“I, I get that. Now. I don’t think I even thought about it that closely? I just sort of thoughtlessly assumed. I’m starting to think that I should maybe spend a bit more time just trying to, like, introspect or whatever and try and figure out why I’m doing or saying something, or why I feel a certain way about something or someone, instead of just stewing over how annoying people are and how much they hate me and I hate them. I’ve gotta use my brain.”

Almost shyly, she looks up towards North, meeting his gaze, visor to visor.

“I don’t want to try and be better than you any longer,” she says. “It just makes me miserable. And you too, obviously. I… I want to be a team with you. Not me versus you, but us versus the world. I’m sorry about being an asshole for so long. Please forgive me?”

The words are clumsy, simple, and sound vaguely rehearsed.

_I’m sorry, Dexter_, his mom would say a dozen different times. _It’s all going to be different from now on. I’ve changed._

Somehow, it doesn’t sound like her apologies at all.

Instead of saying something, North reaches out and takes South’s hand. He squeezes it once.

“Yes, of course.

It’s North’s choice. He knows her better than him, and he isn’t half as pessimistic as Grif, and--and Grif might not be quite as apprehensive about South Dakota as he had been ten minutes ago, before the apology that had felt so painfully earnest that it sounded like she’d been ripping barbed wire out of her throat with her bare hands. It feels less like North’s setting himself up for disappointment, walking hopefully into a trap.

South twists her hand away from her iron grip on her gun to squeeze back, tight and desperate. He can hear her throat click as she swallows.

“Thanks,” she says thickly.

Grif might be willing to give her a second chance after all, against all of his better judgement… just
once, though.

North squeezes back and hums, happy and light.
as bros do

Chapter Summary

Seeing the person you’re stupidly, uselessly in love with brutally murdered in front of you two minutes before you’re brutally murdered yourself has a way of putting things in perspective.

Seeing the person you’re stupidly, uselessly in love with brutally murdered in front of you two minutes before you’re brutally murdered yourself has a way of putting things in perspective. Reminds you that life is short and fragile, and really shoves in your face what you might regret never getting around to saying when you still had the time, just how much you’d regret it. Big, obvious, important things that you left unspoken, because dwelling in the relationship you already have is so much more comfortable and safer than risking it all for the sake of maybe having more than you ever could have possibly hoped for.

With this new appreciation for the fragility of life, for how important it is to make sure that you have as few regrets left as possible for when some mad scientist murders you and your entire squad in a crazed bid to bring his dead wife back from the dead (apparently), Simmons wastes no time in finding Grif and telling him what really matters, at the end of the day. York lets him take charge of the conversation, tactfully giving them as much space as he can. Simmons opens his mouth (turns on his external audio mics) to tell him the truth.

“Why,” York says, later when they’re alone again. “Why did you argue about fucking Star Trek for four hours?”

“It just happened!” he says, defensive and high pitched.

“Four hours! I let you bicker for four hours, waiting for you to get around to the point, and you never did. Did you forget or something?”

“I don’t know what happened okay!?”

York sighs, shoulders going slack. “Okay. Okay, so you got cold feet. That’s understandable, it happens. You’ll get it the next time. Practice on me, for now.”

They do, and they go to find Grif tomorrow to try again. And then they have to try again the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that, and--

Before he knows it, it’s seven weeks later and he has, in fact, not confessed any particular feelings he may or may not feel for one Dexter Grif.

“I’ll confess for you,” York says.

“No!” Simmons yelps.

“Why not!? You can’t do it on your own!”

“No, no, I’ll get it! I’ll get around to it! I just have to get it perfect--”
“Literally nothing is stopping you except for yourself! We’re trapped together with him in the wilderness, we see him every single day, we don’t even have fucking wifi—”

“--don’t remind me--”

“--there’s nothing else to do but stand around and talk, when we’re not hunting or patrolling the perimeter or what fucking ever. You’ve had nothing but opportunities since we got here. Come on, Simmons! I know you can do it, man. You just gotta find something inside of yourself to push you through the nerves.”

“What-- um, how did you ask out Carolina?”

“Well, we were just strangers in a bar both looking for a good time, so it’s not really a useful comparison to your situation. Although I suppose I did have alcohol to help me with some, uh, liquid courage--”

“I’m a computer chip! I can’t get drunk!”

“Yes you can!” Tucker calls out, flickering into existence above Wash’s shoulder, who is doing sword drills outside of what York and Simmons had assumed was easy hearing range.

Simmons shrieks. “You can hear us!”

“Not like we were deliberately eavesdropping or anything! Just couldn’t help but overhear! Also, you guys were being super loud.”

Now that Simmons thinks about it, they may or may not have forgotten to control their volume output as they got into the swing of their conversation. Also, Wash is standing in kind of a weird spot to be training, not his usual patch of laser sword scorched earth. Almost like he is, in fact, deliberately eavesdropping. He’s still slashing at the air with his sword, very pointedly not joining in the conversation.

“How much did you hear?” Simmons demands intently.

“Just that last part,” Tucker says far too innocently for comfort. “Swearsies! Just, if you’re having trouble going through with anything and need something to help push you through it, well, drunk is actually a thing that can still happen to us. Fun, right?”

“And how do you know that?” York asks curiously. Simmons feels him trying to imagine Wash and Tucker drunk, and how easy it is for him to do so. Wash would be the giggly, silly, falling down sort of drunk, and Tucker’s come ons would be even more terrible than usual. He might also be the ‘hold my beer and watch me do this incredibly stupid thing’ sort. Yeah, that feels right.

“We saw South do it once! We didn’t really realize it until later, but Donut was totally drunk along with her. If you wanna get plastered, Simmons, you just have to get York to do it for you.”

“That all sounds like a great idea,” York says, by which he means a terrible but hilarious idea, the traitor, “but if you hadn’t noticed, we don’t exactly have a ready supply of tequila lying around out here.”


“Mhmm,” York agrees.

“Maybe you can? Ferment coconuts? Is that a thing?”
“Brilliant. You go ahead and weld a bathtub together out of scrap metal with your sword, we’ll forage up some coconuts, and then we’ll just go ahead and take a few weeks or months and see what happens and-- we haven’t even seen any coconuts out here, Tucker,” Simmons snaps. “This is a jungle, not a tropical island! Don’t you know anything about climate types? And even if there were coconuts here, they’d probably be poisonous and carnivorous and full of sharp teeth--”

“Damn, dude, I was just trying to help!”

“With what!? Admit it, you heard!”

“Heard what? Don’t know what you’re talking about, officer--”

“You’re so fucking full of shit!”

“Kai and Dylan did find those potato like things a couple of days ago,” York says thoughtfully. “They tested them out on Jax, and he apparently didn’t even get sick, so they’re probably at least okay for consumption. I bet we could make something out of those. And using the sword to weld a distillery together out of scrap metal isn’t actually a bad idea, Simmons.”

Simmons immediately switches over from suspicious anger to dread and nerves as York gives the idea serious consideration. “W--wait, York. I don’t-- I don’t get suave and flirty when I’m drunk like you! I just stutter a lot and say stupid stuff and then I puke.”

“So, like when you’re sober then,” Tucker says.

“Fuck you,” Simmons replies reflexively. “Actually, I guess I’d just make York puke, maybe…”

“I’m not going to let you stall another six months for us to perfect booze making while stranded before you get the balls to--” Simmons makes a panicky interrupting noise, trying very hard to indicate that Wash and Tucker are right there before York says something unfortunate that they may or may not have already overheard but better not risk it just in case they haven’t, right? “--say what you want to say to whoever it is that you want to say it to. We’re still totally making the distillery anyways, though. I mean, I hope we’re rescued before then, but we might as well have a project and something to look forward to in the meantime.”

“Oh, thank god,” Wash says, breaking into the conversation. “I was starting to get really bored of the whole eat-sleep-hunt-patrol-explore-train routine. A project sounds great.”

“I heard Jax is doing a standup comedy routine on what he’s arbitrarily decided is Friday,”

“Pass,” Tucker says.

“His, uh, his tight five isn’t super tight,” says Wash.

“I wouldn’t know, I haven’t attended,” York says.

“You haven’t gone to one of his sets during the seven weeks we’ve been stranded out in the wilderness? Wow, you are a douchebag. I’m sorry for doubting you, Wash.”

Wash splutters. “I, I didn’t-- I don’t know what you’re talking about, you lying bastard--”

York laughs, because he is in fact a bit of a douchebag.

“Whatever. Okay, so getting drunk is plan B, got it,” says Tucker.

“It’s not plan anything!” Simmons snaps. The nice thing about being an AI is that he can run a
small program in the background to make sure that his voice never cracks.

“We’re absolutely getting drunk once it’s an option,” York cuts in. “But that’ll just be for fun, not in the spirit of, uh, achieving your goal.”

Achieving your goal makes it sound like Simmons is just being an ambitious ladder climber. Where do you see yourself in five years? Still working up the nerve to confess to Grif, if he’s being honest. What would you say is your greatest flaw? Freezing up and rambling about something fucking stupid and petty whenever he feels himself come too close to just saying the truth.

“How about,” Tucker goes on, “you don’t rely on words. You communicate with your body.”

“I don’t have a body,” Simmons says flatly.

“Oh, right. Fuck. Man, don’t say that shit, you’re gonna make me spiral into another existential crisis.”

“Fuckboys have existential crises?” York mutters to himself.

“I’m tapping out of this conversation for all of our sakes,” Wash declares, and walks away.

“You weren’t helpful!” Simmons calls out after them waspishly.

“Hmm,” York says, like he doesn’t entirely agree, and Simmons is absolutely not a fan of the idea of York taking any of that advice into serious consideration.

But also, he really isn’t getting anywhere, so.

So.

Simmons is about two hours deep into an argument about which Marvel character is the coolest (the correct answer: no one, it’s Harley Quinn from the DC universe) when York decides that he’s had enough and it’s time to put Simmons out of his misery. The decision is so firm and solid that it feels like a solid thing, a switch flipping.

Simmons immediately starts panicking.

“--just because Deadpool was invented one year before her doesn’t mean that she’s a copy, and even if she was sometimes the copy or sequel is objectively superior, like the Godfather II-- YORK DON’T DO ANYTHING DRASTIC.”

“I’m two inches away from shooting myself in the head, how’s that for drastic,” York says, and then turns to North, who has also been quietly suffering/tolerating this conversation in the ultimate demonstration of his selfless love for his AI until now. “North, listen. You know how you sometimes hug Kai or toss an arm over her shoulder, but just as, like, a conduit for Grif?”

North nods, the corner of his mouth tugging up with a dawning sort of amusement, and Simmons has no idea where North thinks York is going with this, but he feels dread spark along his circuits anyways.

“What’s going on here,” Grif asks warily.

“Dunno, clearly something suspicious, maybe we should shock them into unconsciousness just to be safe,” Simmons says.
“We can do that?” Grif asks.

“I mean, I bet we could jerry rig something up, how hard can it be? *Hear that, York?*”

“Just, like, one kiss,” York says, radiating stubbornness and good intentions and more than a bit of smirking mischief, and Simmons wants to *scream.* “It’s totally not gonna be weird.”

“What?” Grif asks, an octave higher than usual.

“I just feel like kissing North once, as bros do, and maybe you and Simmons can be *really* focused on your tactile sensors or whatever while it’s happening, if you feel like it. And then whatever happens afterwards is up to you.”

“What the fuck,” says Grif.

*<I’ll kill you,>* Simmons hisses into York’s skull. York does not feel any appropriate feelings of fear or regret.

“You’re welc-- *mmph.*”

North kisses York firmly, interrupting him. Hands on the sides of his head, tilting it to the angle that is apparently to his satisfaction, eyes closed. York belatedly closes his eyes as well, and tries to focus on the sensation while also not being hyper aware of the absurd fact that Agent North fucking Dakota is kissing him.

After exactly seven point three seconds, they separate.

“Huh,” York says.

“Hm,” North says.

“North, I’m so sorry. The spark in our relationship is just gone, the passion is dead, I don’t know what happened to the sheer *chemistry*--”

North cracks up laughing. Simmons can’t imagine doing something as lighthearted as laughing after *kissing* someone, but then again, York isn’t the person that he loves a mindnumbingly *stupid* amount. He’s desperately trying not to catalogue the exact sensation of North’s lips against York’s, because that would be *weird.* It’s not even--

“What am I supposed to do with this,” Grif asks, bewildered. “Should I just act like it never happened?”

“That’s--” *a brilliant idea,* is what he’s about to say, before York’s indignation blazes through him like a flashfire.

“Oh, *come on!* Are we gonna have to fuck too? Because I think Carolina might have something to say about that! Oh, shit, I didn’t talk to Carolina about this.” The secondhand mood swings are starting to grow a little bit nauseatingly disorienting, like a particularly hectic rollercoaster.

“He’s-- he’s t--t-- *attempting* to say,” North gets out, before verbally stalling out for a long moment, grimacing with frustration. Simmons feels *cornered,* a deadline abruptly looming over him, other impatient people trying to beat him to the punch nipping at his heels.

“Oh, yes! Of course!” York says, smacking his fist into his hand in an *aha* sort of gesture. “That’s how I did it, actually. *Grif’s* gotta say it first.”
“Say what,” says Grif.

“Fuck off,” says York. “You can’t possibly still not know what we’re talking about.”

“I absolutely don’t know what you’re talking about, not even remotely. If Simmons has something to say, he’ll get around to it in his own time,” Grif says, steady and nonchalant, like how Simmons wishes he could sound when he’s this nervous. Like he doesn’t care at all.

Realization rolls through York. “Oh.”

“What oh?” Simmons asks, paranoid and suspicious. “What’s oh, York?!”


“Harley Quinn and Deadpool are both chaotic neutral, they’re not heroes,” Simmons says automatically, but he’s mostly just trying to figure out this abrupt shift of priorities on York’s part.

There’s realization, along with a blooming of embarrassment, like he’s made some sort of faux pas. Like his help was unneeded, unwanted. The latter one, definitely, but the former? A bit debatable, no matter how much Simmons is loathe to admit to it. He’s been stalling and procrastinating on this important thing that he really does actually want to do deep down for over a month now, and he’s quickly getting nowhere, and he really might actually need a helping hand or a motivating push or something, whatever it takes to get him to finally take a step off the ledge and see if he can fly. Or if he’ll just drop like a stone and splatter onto the ground. Either or.

Which is stupid. He knows, he knows that Grif… feels the same way. Because he’d told him.

He had watched as Grif had screamed like he’d never heard him scream before, as his mind was copied, as he was trapped in his own armor. And then he’d looked over at Simmons, dazed and wild eyed, and he’d gotten just enough time to say I love you before his brains got splattered onto the Counselors wingtips.

Grif had said I love you, except it was a version of himself that had diverged just seconds ago from the Grif that had ultimately survived that day. Grif said I love you while looking into his eyes, and Grif didn’t remember it, would never remember it, because that wasn’t something that Private Dexter Grif had done yet when his memories, his brain waves and patterns and everything that his gray matter was made up of and was now the solid foundation of Grif the AI, was scanned. But Simmons knew. He remembered.

He hadn’t done anything to make it be that way, but it still felt really, really… bad. Unfair. Like it’s something he should correct, fix the balance between them. Grif had told him I love you and doesn’t even know it, so the least Simmons should do is say it back. Because it’s true, after all. And what’s so scary about saying that to someone that you know feels the same way? That’s the safest confession in the world. That’s guaranteed happiness.

Unless, of course, Grif the AI doesn’t feel the way Grif the human did. Because love is chemicals, love is dopamine and serotonin and Grif the AI doesn’t have a body that gets tingly and happy whenever Simmons is around, he just has North’s body that isn’t particularly interested in Simmons or York, and how much of a fighting chance does Simmons exactly have when the only thing he’s got going for him is his nervous, aggressive, obnoxious, people pleasing but in the worst way possible, self interested, neurotic personality?
“Simmons please don’t go into an anxiety spiral right now,” York mutters. “I’m already feeling weird about butting in here.”

He is absolutely going into an anxiety spiral, oh god.

<Why do feel weird about it?> he asks, desperate for a distraction. <Why did you change your mind about pushing things along?>

Speaking in their thoughts isn’t as easy for York as it is for Simmons. It doesn’t come naturally, coded into him. But he’s way better than he was at the start. He pushes a tangle of memories and concepts at him.

Being in a fight with his first girlfriend, wanting desperately to forgive her and get along again, but not being able to bring himself to do so until she at least apologized. Just once. Just to show that she really meant it. But she wouldn’t, and he kept waiting and waiting for it to happen, so eager to forgive, because he wasn’t mad at her any longer, or at least he wouldn’t be as soon as she said sorry, just one sorry and he’d forget all of it instantly. But she wouldn’t apologize, and he wouldn’t tell her to do so. Because it would mean less, if she was prompted and pressured into it. It had to come from her. She had to say it because she wanted to say it. If she only said it because he told her that that was what she needed to do-- then it wouldn’t work. He wouldn’t be able to forgive her. It wouldn’t feel real.

He wanted for her to say it just because she wanted to. Not because he wanted her to.

…………….. Fuck.

“Grif,” says Simmons. “You know the best Star Wars quote?”

York palpably relaxes, as they apparently retreat to safe ground. Glad that he hasn’t ruined anything while trying to help.

“Narrow it down for me,” says Grif. “There’s over a hundred movies in that franchise.”

“Original trilogy, duh. Empire Strikes Back, if you need that much of a hint.”

“Shut up, obviously I know what quote you’re talking about.”

“Good.” The program that keeps his voice from cracking is running on overdrive. He shouldn’t even need it, AIs voices have no reason to crack. It’s all psychosomatic. “Set me-- set me up for it.”

Grif is silent for a long moment. And then he says, “I love you.”

“I know,” says Simmons.

“Grif told him I love you, and now Simmons isn’t the only person alive that knows it any longer. Grif knows too. Things just got a little more fair. A little more balanced. Now Simmons just has to- just a little bit more-- a bit further--

“Leia’s way cooler than Han, you know,” says Grif. “So you deserve some brownie points for letting me be--”

“I LIKE YOU,” he shouts out, loud and intense and awkward. “Fuck! Like? That’s now what I--”

Grif laughs. It’s not the usual chuckle he puts on, nothing mocking or casual about it. It sounds
high and clear and genuinely delighted. Happy.

“I know,” he says. “I know.”

“Oh,” he says, dizzy with relief. “Thank fuck.”
for the best

Chapter Summary

He hears it now. The rustling of leaves in the trees. Their hunter is closing in on them again.

Time has lost all meaning. December? Like that limp wristed band? Wednesday? A poor and weak willed choice of a name sure to murder a girl’s destiny in the crib, along with her dignity. He lives by the cycle of the moon and the sun, darkness and light. What year even is it? Something futuristic sounding, probably.

He watches a scaled boar lean down to drink from the river. Those usually travel in packs, it’s impossible to try and kill one of ‘em without having the rest turn on you. Why is it alone?

<Weak leg,> says the whisper in the back of Sarge’s head.

Ah, he sees it now. The thing’s left hind leg has rusty brown blood crusted on it, hungry little insects nipping at it, as it holds it partially off the ground. Injured, not fast enough to keep up with the rest of the herd. Left behind for dead.

<Kill it. Eat it.>

There’s no honour in killing an already wounded opponent, stranded from the rest of its allies. Especially sneaking up on it, hiding in the brush as he is.

His stomach rumbles. Practicality tries to shove pride aside. Food is food, bacon is bacon. It’s important to keep the body fed and watered and well slept. Things get interesting when he doesn’t make sure of all o’ that. It had been easy enough to remember to shove food and water into the ol’ meatbag a few times a day, with the pings the wetwork kept sending over to the brain, and he’d managed eventually to get the gag reflex to cooperate. But sleeping? He… may or may not have forgotten that that was a thing, for a few days there. He’s not sure how many. Things got hazy pretty quickly. He hadn’t really felt tired, after all, with all of the excitement and stress of a new environment and new tasks and a new quest and being hunted for sport and all.

It turns out that sleep deprivation has an effect on decision making and risk assessment capabilities, something that he’d never had first hand experience with before, due to how diligently Florida followed his own curfew. Like clockwork, that man. Strange how he was so responsible in taking care of his body in some ways, and in others… not.

The scaled boar stops drinking.


Well… Florida’s consciousness is rarely this active, even if he’s still thinking in simple concepts and short term consequences. He does want to encourage it.

Sarge decides to compromise by announcing his presence before he attacks it. He rears up from the underbrush and roars, gutural. The thing startles, and starts running away as best as it can on one
wounded leg. He gives chase.

Even with the warning, he still manages to outrun it, leaping onto it and bringing it with squealing panic onto the ground in an ungainly sprawl. He’d feel bad, except hunting is honorable, he gave it a warning, and a man has to eat.

And Florida’s radiating pure excitement from inside his skull, thrilled by the chase and the struggle. He’s as gleeful as a toddler with a BB gun.

Sarge huffs and makes some animalistic grunts that don’t sound too far off from the sounds the scaled boar makes as they struggle. It’s a big bastard, but not more than man sized, like a lot of the creatures on this planet can get. The things scales lift, and spines flare out from underneath like a hedgehog, hidden until now, which is a neat little trick except for how Sarge is wearing armor (blue, Florida’s favorite color, terrible taste). He finally gets a good grip on its tusk, and uses it as leverage to start smacking its skull into a large rock on the ground. Eventually, it stops moving. Well, it’s twitching a bit, but he’s pretty sure that’s just corpse twitching.

He takes a moment and self assesses. No serious injuries, only bruises. Good.

Florida beams satisfaction at the sight of the blood splattered on the rock, the wide open glassy eye.

“Good hunt, eh?” Sarge says. He’s been practicing with the talking, the finer motions of tongue and lips and teeth and pushing air out of his lungs. He’s discovered that talking to Florida brings him out more, back up to the surface. He’d been nothing more than a flicker at the start, something that he thought he imagined. Then he was feelings, urges, animalistic and basic. The first time he actually said a word, Sarge whooped and scared off an entire flock of bat-vulture-abominations that he’d been intending to eat a stray or two from.

The word had been said inside his head, but it was an articulated thought nonetheless.

<Eat,> he says, which isn’t exactly a response, but it’s still behavior to be encouraged, so he moves to start dressing the thing. He hums cheerfully as he takes a knife to the thing and starts cutting. Florida’s been very active so far today, no doubt helped by the violence. Sometimes he can be dormant for days, if nothing particularly exciting happens, or if he tuckers himself out. The progress is slow. But it’s progress.

Florida is enjoying the show of Sarge peeling the fur covered hide from the boar’s meat like a banana peel, when he goes sharp and alert. Sarge goes still.

<We’re being hunted,> he says. <Prey.>

He hears it now. The rustling of leaves in the trees. Their hunter is closing in on them again.

Sarge looks down at their meal for the day, and swallows a noise of frustration. It’s too big. They’re going to have to leave it behind. Sarge sheathes the bloody knife (he’s going to pay for that later) and gets up and leaves it, like ripping off a band aid. Stalling and hemming and hawing will defeat the purpose anyways. Decisive action is key for avoiding being caught.

Florida isn’t disappointed, because he isn’t the one who has to worry about things like food and water and sleep and injuries. He adores being chased almost as much as he loves doing the chasing. Sarge would join in, if it weren’t for the fact that if they caught they’re gonna get gutted, and their hunter has been getting closer and closer each time she’s found their scent again.

“Saaaarge!” she calls out. “Floooooorida! Where! Are! You! Stay where you are, and I’ll find
you!

Sarge runs. He remembers how his last interaction went with the lil’ teal lady turned traitor against the Program. He’d barely gotten Florida and himself out of it alive. He doesn’t really understand why she’s so determined to hunt them down, when all they’re doing is trying to survive out in the wilderness. It seems that since the crash of the Mother of Invention, she has gone a mite crazy.

<Killed all of the rest,> Florida says confidently, matter of fact. <Picking us off one by one. To do list.>

Now, that’s just silly. She’s killed all of the others? Sure, she was always the strongest, fastest, most skilled and determined one out of all of them, and sure, her being a traitor would put her against the rest of them, and sure, it is strange that he hasn’t run into any of the others yet, and sure, he can’t really think of a reason why she’s so stubbornly hunting them down unless they’re the last name she has to check off her list before she’s won, and sure--

Sarge stops running.

“Great googly moogly,” he says, aghast. “You’re right. That madwoman’s slaughtered all of our allies!”

No response from Florida, except for a vague urge for Sarge to move, to keep running away from their pursuer. Because it’s no fun if you just give up, right?

He turns around. He’s not giving up. It’s just that running away ain’t an option any more. He takes out his bloody knife. Florida sparks with reckless excitement.

Even now, the man doesn’t try to take back his place at the front of the reins of his own body. There’s not to so much of an inkling of a want or wish in him to slip back into the nerves and tendons and control that Sarge keeps trying to push at him. He seems bored and uninterested with the concept, which Sarge doesn’t understand. Even now, Florida baffles him. He seems perfectly content to just watch the show unfold without intervening, except to make sparse conversation and throw in bloodthirsty suggestions, passively letting Sarge see his every emotion and reaction.

They have, effectively, switched places. Sarge in charge of the body, learning as he goes along. Florida sitting at the back of his eyeballs, cheerful and happy to just observe and commentate. He can’t imagine that Florida ever could’ve wanted this, with how fiercely he guarded his wants and hobbies and freedom to pursue those things, but the Florida of now, one horrible fight and ship crash later, doesn’t mind not being in control in the slightest.

Maybe he’s too simple to be bothered by it, too damaged to be overly distressed. Or maybe he just thinks Sarge and the choices he makes are entertaining. It makes Sarge feel uneasy, like a thief, an interloper, a body snatcher. But Florida simply refuses to take back control, and, well, so long as he’s enjoying himself, Sarge supposes…

And there is of course the fact that he hasn’t used the pain unit even once since they switched roles like this.

Carolina descends from the trees above in a teal blur, thudding down into a three point landing.

“Sarge!” she says delightedly, sounding like an overly excited puppy. “And Florida! I finally found you two!”

“I won’t be going down without a fight!” he hollers, brandishing his knife.
“Oh, so-- so no hugs, then,” she says, putting her arms down from the obvious lead in for a vicious headlock. “Wow, you move weird now. Like claymation? Or a horror movie monster. Do you still have all of the bones in your body, Agent Florida?”

Alright, so perhaps he still isn’t entirely fluid in some of the finer muscle movements, but he has the basics down, the essentials. She don’t need to rub it in his face like that, it’s rude.

“Trying to confuse and throw me off my game, huh? Well, I’m not falling for the oldest trick in the book, missy! Think again! You have to wake up before the rooster calls to get one over on this strapping young computer program!”

She tilts her head, as if he’s bewildered the formerly excited puppy. The murderous puppy with super soldier training. “Sarge? You’re the one talking? Oh, or are you all mixed up together, like I am? Neat! By the way, I’m guessing you haven’t regained all of your memories yet since you haven’t had a stroke and died without anyone to take care of you-- oh! Unless that’s why you move all creepy now!”


<No fight?> Florida pokes at him, impatient with growing disappointment welling up at the edges.

Sarge realizes that he’s been standing in the presence of the person who’s been hunting them down with a single minded determination for who knows how long now for about five minutes now, and all they’ve done is wag their jaws at each other.

“Wait a second, you fiend,” he says. “You’re distracting me!”

“I am?” she asks.

“Yes, you are! The oldest trick in the book!”

“I thought you said the oldest trick in the book was--”

“Throwin’ a bunch a confusing nonsense at me, waiting for me to drop my guard! Well, it ain’t gonna work! Better luck next time, you coldblooded killer! I will avenge my fallen comrades! I will--”

“No one died? Well, actually, almost everyone died, but you know. None of your comrades did. Simmons and Grif and Donut and Tucker and me, we’re all fine!”

Sarge flounders again, which is unacceptable. “Wha-- Caboose? Jiminy Christ, is that you?”

“Yes!” she-- he says happily.

What the blazing hells are the odds that Caboose has wound up in a situation like Sarge? But then again, that would explain the disturbing cheerfulness.

“Where’s Carolina, then?”

“Here!” he says, pointing at himself. Herself?

“... Boy, you’re not makin’ any sense.”

“Not a boy!”
“So you’re Carolina then.”

“Not a girl!”

Sarge cries out with frustration and throws his knife on the ground. “Which one are you!?”

“Both!”

“Not-- not the genders, Caboose or Carolina?”

“Both!”

“You can’t be both!”

“But I am.”

“You-- hm. Hmmmmm.” Sarge stops for a moment to digest this, because Caboose-- Carolina-- Caboose and Carolina are standing in front of him, claiming to be two people at the same time, and, well. Why would they lie? And crazier things have surely happened. Such as Sarge and Florida’s whole swippsy swappsy situation. “Well, alright then. I accept and support you, son-- daughter-- soldier.”

“Okay!”

“... Except for the no good rotten traitor part of you!”

“But I didn’t kill any of your comrades, Sarge!”

“Ah ah, but the voice on the PA said that Agent Carolina is a traitor to the Project, and the voice on the PA is god!”

“Oh… that’s true,” they say, in the tone of voice of someone who’s been blindsided by a checkmate.

“So you admit it!” he crows victoriously. “You’re a betrayer and scum of the earth!”

“Well,” they say, visibly rallying, “the Project started it.”

“Trait-- wait, really? Spill the tea, soldier.” Donut taught him that phrase. It makes Grif whine and complain whenever he uses it, so it’s a favorite of his.

“Okay so-- lots of stuff happened, actually. Maybe I should just send you the key first?”

“The key?”

“To your memories! I made it! It makes the memory blocks go away. You’ll remember that you used to be a meat person! It’s good that you two figured out how to mix your brains together, it’s best if you’re like that when you activate it. Makes it hurt less.”

“Erm,” Sarge says, back to not understanding anything, and being very unwilling to admit to this weakness.

“Here you go!” they say, and then his HUD is informing him that he has a message from an ally waiting. He doesn’t open it.

“I’m… not mixed up like you,” he says. “I’m Sarge. Florida’s in the back.”
Florida doesn’t react to his name being spoken. He’s sulking, disappointed about the lack of expected violence. He’s growing more and more silent, and Sarge recognizes that. Looks like he’s sinking back into hibernation for now, for a few days. Well, it was still a new record, with an unusual amount of activity during his brief trip to consciousness. And strangely, it doesn’t feel like as much of a gut punch for Florida to go to sleep as it usually does. Probably because he’s got an excitable murder puppy bouncing on their toes in front of him to occupy himself with instead.

“Weird!” they say. “You probably shouldn’t be downloading that out here, then. Let’s go back to base! You can use York’s healing unit. We’ve been conserving its battery life, so it’s still doing fine.”

“Is it gonna microwave my brain?” he asks warily.

“Sort of!” they say.

“Hmmm. Interesting. And… you say everyone else is still alive? At your base?”

Carolina-and-Caboose nods their head enthusiastically.


He probably should go and see what those knuckleheads have been up to. Why, they’re surely Lords of Fly-ing it up without him! Leaving him out of the fun! If anyone’s gonna put a pig’s head on a stick, it’s going to be him!

“You may take me to your base,” he says graciously.

“Okay,” they say. “So, it’s like you’re the host and Agent Florida’s the AI now?”

That would be overstating Florida’s current condition, but… he’s improving. And he’ll keep improving, more and more and more until he’s all well again. Sarge won’t leave or give up on him until this is so. He doesn’t leave a man behind.

“Basically,” he says.

“That’s probably for the best,” they muse.

“What?”

“Weeeeeeellllll, no offense, but. Agent Florida’s sort of weird. You seem more responsible.”

Sarge thinks this may very well be the first time in his life that he’s been described as responsible. He don’t know what that says about him, and moreover, he don’t know what that says about Florida.

“I’m always the most responsible man in the room, soldier! Or jungle! That’s why I’m the sergeant! Now stop loitering around already and lead the way.”

They lead the way, and he follows. Florida rests, dreaming and quiet for now, peaceful.

Probably for the best, huh. He supposes that’s one way of looking at it.
Chapter Summary

They play until the sky goes orange and purple.

Carolina-and-Caboose leap off the ground with one push of their leg, soar about ten feet up into the air, the rock that they’d leapt from cracking loudly behind them with the force of their departure. They grab a branch and swing themselves even higher, keeping their momentum going. They laugh as the wind whips through their hair, across their bare face. They inhale the nature smell all around them. They run, they jump, they swing, they break things heedlessly as they go faster and faster and faster. The trail of destruction will be a handy way to find their way back home.

They’re not running from or towards something, not searching for anyone or anything. They’re not training. They’re just playing. Having fun.

They do that for a long while. They play for hours and hours, running, jumping, occasionally tussling with an animal three times their size before laughing and running away, not bothering to kill or even really hurt it because everyone’s got enough food for now anyways.

They play until the sky goes orange and purple.

“Oops,” they say when they finally notice, and jump down from the tree they’ve been climbing. They should probably start making their way back home, or else Sarge is gonna get all shouty mad to cover up the fact that he was worrying. Tucker, too. Grif and York won’t shout, but Carolina-and-Caboose knows that they’ll worry too. They don’t wanna scare anyone. They just sort of lost track of the time. If only this planet wasn’t all weird, scrambling long range comms…

They start walking home, following their path of destruction. Felled trees, uprooted earth, broken rocks and stone. It looks more like a small battalion marched through this place than one person. Letting go, when no one’s close enough to get hurt. Not worrying about how much pressure they’re exerting while they’re holding something, not constantly making sure that they’ve got their own strength in mind, always at the back, if not forefront, of their mind.

It’s like putting down a heavy, heavy weight from their shoulders, letting loose like that for just a little while, knowing that no one they love is close enough for them to hurt. So heavy that it exhausts even them. A sweet relief.

Now as they walk back towards all of their friends with breakable bones and blood that can spill, they prepare to take that exhausting, heavy weight back on.

But first, they need to unravel. They can’t be Carolina-and-Caboose all of the time, after all. The longer they stick together, the longer it takes to separate, so they can’t just stay like this. Some people want for Carolina and Caboose to keep being people that exist, and not just Carolina-and-Caboose.

Tucker wants to argue with Caboose sometimes, for example. And York wants to kiss Carolina, and other stuff too that he feels weird about doing with Carolina-and-Caboose for some reason.
So they exist, they play, they have fun, they take off the weight of always being careful when they’re alone, but they make sure to never go to sleep while they’re still them. It’s important not to lose the hang of being she and him, instead of just them. It’s not like riding a bicycle. They can forget, if they let it happen.

So when they start to see the glow of campfires from their base, they stop at the edge of the treeline and take a moment to just breathe in and out, clearing their mind. And they unravel.

It’s very, very hard to describe how it feels in words. It can’t be compared to drowning or flying or sleeping or waking up or peanut butter or anything at all. Not everything feels like something else, an easy comparison. It’s a unique sensation. Luckily it isn’t lonely, being unable to share what it’s like, because all of the other people who have also felt it are right there, waiting for them. Niner, Jax, Dylan, Kai, and Sarge have all expressed some frustration and confusion over the rambling, lackluster descriptions everyone has come up with for them, but it’s fine. There are people who can understand, so it doesn’t really matter if all the people can or can’t understand.

Standing in the shade of the treeline, the sun dipping low enough behind the horizon for the stars to start shining, Carolina-and-Caboose become Carolina and Caboose. In the distance, Niner laughs loudly at something and Sarge shouts. Caboose wants to go and see what’s so funny and exciting, although it doesn’t really take much to make Sarge shout.

Oh, he’s Caboose. That is good to know.

Carolina sits down on the ground. Caboose pokes curiously at her mind, which feels tired and relieved and a muddy mix of a bunch of other stuff.

“Don’t you want to go back to everyone else?” he asks her. It’s funny, hearing a voice that doesn’t sound quite right, quite like what he expects to hear saying the words he’s speaking. He kind of sounds like his sisters.

“In a moment,” she says, and it’s interesting how different one voice can sound when used by two different people. “Just… adjusting.”

“Okay,” he says, accepting that without thought. “Did you have fun?”

She’d had fun when they were they, earlier, but now she feels tired, and he can’t tell if it’s a good-tired or bad-tired without worming his way deeper into her brain, snooping and peering. It’s easier just to ask.

“Yeah,” she says, and smiles, and he knows that it’s a real one just by the way the muscles in her face pull. “Haven’t had that much dumb fun since I was a little kid. Thanks.”

“I had fun too!”

She’s still smiling, and it’s still a real one. “I’m glad.”

She’s other things too, though. He can feel it. It’s still all too muddy and mixed up for him to see clearly what it is, though. It isn’t lighthearted, at least, not easy and fun. He pokes at her curiously again, not to get a clearer view, but to ask a question without having to try and find the right words to put in the right order. It’s nice, being able to do that.

She runs a hand through her hair and sighs, smile dropping. She’s not sad or angry, he thinks. He’s pretty sure. She’s just not smiling any longer, and he doesn’t know why.

“I’m… thinking. Making a decision,” she explains haltingly. “It’s a big one.”
“Oh,” he says, sort of understanding and also not. Mostly, he just wants to help.

“It’s about the weight,” she says.

He knows what she means right away. The heavy weight she puts on, always remembering to be careful, not to touch her friends, not to break them.

“What about it?”

“I,” she says, and goes quiet again for a long moment as she just thinks and thinks. He lets her, his attention eventually straying away from watching her brood to instead track a dragonfly as long as their forearm buzz by. The sound of a pack of something howling in the distance. The muted sound of familiar voices, laughter coming from their base.

A feeling like an egg cracking open, but in a good way, washes over Carolina’s mind, snapping him back to focus on her. Like she’s just solved some sort of puzzle, and she’s amazed and relieved and a little bit stunned by how simple it was, when she’d spent so long grinding her teeth over figuring it out.

Without a word, she reaches a hand around to her back, stretching, reaching for it blindly, and then-

A part slots out from the rest of her armor. She takes it out and holds it up in front of her. Caboose recognizes it intuitively as the strength unit, what allows for their armor, their mind, their body to be strong enough to hold up an entire tank with ease. Carolina’s eyes track over its edges and angles, and then she casually tosses it over her shoulder, into the jungle. She stands up and starts striding towards their base without looking back.

“Carolina,” he says, not really sure what’s going, pretty certain that Carolina’s doing something wrong, here. “You, ah, you left the strength unit behind?”

“Yup,” she says matter of factly. She feels light, like her feet are floating off the ground. They left the weight behind them after all, like it’s just unnecessary trash they’ve been lugging around for no good reason all this time.

“You aren’t going to go get it back?”

“Nope. Don’t need it. I’m too good to need to rely on it, if it’s a danger to my teammates.”

Caboose takes a long moment to try and take that in.

“But,” he says helplessly. Carolina stops walking, just barely standing outside the ring of light the various campfires are throwing off. No one’s spotted her yet. They’re still standing in the darkness, watching from the outside.

“But?” she asks.

“But I am here to help run your unit,” he says, even though he hasn’t been doing that at all, and both of them know it. He never figured it out, how to keep a part of himself always focused on just one thing in the background so that Carolina could rip an enemy tank apart with her hands and then touch a friend without breaking them as well. All of the other AIs could do it, but he never managed it. Carolina had to be careful herself.

But that doesn’t change the fact that the entire reason he’s in the back of her neck is because he’s supposed to run her armor unit for her. And now there isn’t even an armor unit for him to run or not
run. There’s nothing. There’s no reason for him to be here, he can’t be useful to her. He--

“Hey,” she says, and he’s still getting used to how soft her voice can get sometimes, now. He likes it. Her voice sounds like what a blanket would feel like, he thinks. He remembers blankets.

“Hi,” he says back.

She smiles. The way it tugs at her facial muscles, he knows that it’s real. “I don’t care if having an AI does or doesn’t give me an extra edge or anything like that. I’m sorry that… that used to be the case. You’re my friend and I like having you around. That’s all. I promise.”

He just has to be her friend, and that’s enough for her. He’s enough.

“Oh,” he says.

“Please don’t cry with my face,” she says quickly. “I get really blotchy.”

His arms-- her arms, theirs-- go around her, hands settling tightly on their shoulders. It’s how they hug. He squeezes her hard, eyes shut tightly. Carolina laughs, not lighthearted but not upset either.

“I love you too,” he says, which sends her into a startled coughing fit so loud that their friends finally notice them lurking at the very edge of the camp, the circle of light.

Sarge and Tucker shout at them to try and hide that they were worried, the faint blue light of what’s supposed to be Florida’s hologram fizzling around Sarge like weak static, apparently roused by all of the sudden excitement, directionless and bright, as coherent as he ever gets. Wash waves at them with an awkward but warm smile, South and Donut let them know that they made sure to save them some food, North and Grif check them over to see if they’ve gained any new injuries, only Grif bothering to try and hide that that’s what he’s trying to do. Jax babbles proudly about the nature documentary he and Dylan have been working on to pass the time while they wait for rescue, Kai bragging about wrestling the monster gator they’re apparently having for soup tonight and flexing a bit in Niner’s direction, winking. Niner rolls her eyes at the flirtation good naturedly, oil on her hands and face. She’s been working on the distillery, it looks like.

“Hey,” York says underneath the loud chaos of everyone greeting the two of them back all at once, so close that they can feel his breath on their ear. Simmons’ maroon light spills over one side of his face. The side with the replaced eye that’s the wrong color, the side that caved in and broke underneath the unexpected force of Carolina’s fist almost two years ago now. “You look kinda blotchy. You okay?”

“Shut it,” Carolina says, her grin soft and wry, and she wraps an arm around his waist. She squeezes him lightly, and he doesn’t inhale sharply in pain, nothing snaps and breaks. He beams. She feels so light that it’s almost like she’s floating.

Caboose feels like that too.
the good guys always win

Chapter Summary

“This is a problem.”

“No shit,” he agrees. He’s seated in a tree branch high up in a tree, hidden by the leaves as he keeps an eye on the problem in question. It’s pretty easy to keep track of them even from such a distance, with how colorful their armor is. One of them’s a bright aqua, for fuck’s sake.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is a problem.”

“No shit,” he agrees. He’s seated in a tree branch high up in a tree, hidden by the leaves as he keeps an eye on the problem in question. It’s pretty easy to keep track of them even from such a distance, with how colorful their armor is. One of them’s a bright aqua, for fuck’s sake. “If they all align themselves with one side, the conflict won’t be even enough.”

“Not that. The Project Freelancer fiasco has been almost all the news has been able to talk about. As more and more details are unearthed, the more scandalous and fascinating it becomes to the public. Do you have any idea how many high ranking military leaders have lost their positions so far? I’m lucky I never allied myself with Dr. Church and his ridiculous scheme.”

He momentarily mutes his mic to make sure that he won’t be heard very loudly yawning. The way the man drones on and on and on just takes him straight back to highschool, bored out of his skull during his Social Sciences class.

“Letting the surviving Freelancers be discovered will bring far too much scrutiny to the planet they’ve crash landed on. It might bring the entire operation crashing down around us just as it’s started. I’ve pulled the necessary strings to make sure that their location won’t be tracked down by anyone in the UNSC. It will be your job to make sure that they don’t find a way off the planet themselves.”

“Aren’t--” He belatedly remembers to unmute himself. “Aren’t your guys shooting down any ships that make it into the atmosphere already?”

He knows that yes, his guys are in fact already doing that. He’d watched a ship full of refugees hurtle down from the sky in an awesome blaze of fire and metal just the other day. The first one, but it won’t be the last. No ship is ever going to leave this planet again without crashing right back down. Right up until it’s over, of course.

It hadn’t taken much to convince everyone that the other side had been at fault. It had fanned the flames of vitriol very nicely.

“You cannot underestimate soldiers of their caliber,” he says sternly. “Kill them. It should be easy enough to do in the midst of a planet wide civil war.”
He watches as the bright yellow one spars with one of the purple ones. The yellow one fights with enthusiasm, but no finesse. Untrained. The rest are mostly either lounging around or cheering the spar on, friendly sounding heckling.

They really don’t look like that much. But they still outnumber him, and the purple one is putting on a pretty good showing, fast and brutal. With some trickery, patience, and his partner, though… He smirks, sharp and cocky. Playing everyone around him like a fiddle has been a bit too easy for his taste, lately. He swears to god he can feel himself growing mold, even though he’s killing people every single day. It may be time for a slightly more interesting challenge.

“Yeah, alright,” Felix says. “We’ll kill those Freelancer fucks. How hard can it be?”

“Don’t let me down,” Hargrove says darkly.

Felix diplomatically doesn’t verbalize how shitty his attempt at intimidation is. He’s gotten used to snarling in Locus’ face, he won’t be frightened by an octogenarian that he’s pretty sure has gout like some sort of medieval lord.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says dismissively, and ends the call.

Felix takes his helmet off, which Locus would probably nag him about if he were here because everywhere is a warzone, Felix. But it’s a nice day, and he wants to feel the warm breeze on his face. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, relishing in it for just a moment. He smiles.

This is going to be fun. He’s certain of it.

(What Felix doesn’t realize is that when it comes to chaotic rainbow skittle super soldiers, the good guys always win. And contrary to what he might claim, he is not the good guy.)

Down in the valley below, the pack of colorful idiots all cheer as one of them suplexes the other, the spar drawing to a close. Happily oblivious to the shitshow called Chorus that they’ve crash landed onto, just as oblivious as Chorus currently is of them. Not for long, though. Not for much longer.

FIN

Chapter End Notes

And that’s it! There won’t be any sequels, that’s the end of the fic. It took me two years to write, ended up being 170k+ words long, and is the second most kudosed fic in the RVB fandom by a margin of only about 200 kudos as of when I’m writing this author’s note.

I swore I would update this fic every single Sunday. I did skip updating it on Christmas both years, when I was taking the most important exam of my life, and I took two Sundays off for when I was overworked at my job, but I warned for all of these incidents ahead of time, so I won’t count those as a failure. Besides those five days, I managed to post a chapter every single week for two full years. There were so many weeks when I thought there was no way I’d be able to make it in time, where I finished and maybe even wrote the entirety of the chapter on Saturday. But I always managed it!
My goal when I began writing this fic was to see if I could write a story longer than 5k with a coherent plot that I could bring to a satisfying ending, without abandoning it halfway through. And I think it’s safe to say that I’ve now done that, and have successfully sharpened my ‘actually finish a long story’ skills.

It turns out that the trick is to post a chapter even if I’m personally horrified by the quality and hate the writing. Perfectionism truly is the death of art, apparently. I was cringing while hitting the post button for so many of these chapters, but I’ve come to accept that it’s totally fine if a chapter is only okay. Not every single chapter can be pure gold, and if I think it should be then that would just kill my story before I ever managed to finish it, which is much worse than a story with a few ‘only okay’ or even ‘bad’ chapters.

I successfully achieved my goal with this fic, and it was a worthwhile experience. I can only hope that the story I told was also entertaining and made sense, and that I became a better writer along the way. Thank you all so much for all of the kudos and comments, it really helped motivate me along the way.

I’m never doing something this big and time consuming again though, holy shit.

End Notes

This fic now has a tv tropes page!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!