Survivor

by ArasMRinga

Summary

The timeline is royally screwed. Now, someone who had died didn't. This changes everything. Sometimes surviving is all it takes to change the world.

Notes

This story is based around an original character that I imagine died sometime during the Red vs. Blue narrative. The timeline verges after season 10. I realize I wrote Dr. Grey with the New Republic, but I don't believe it's too unbelievable for an alternate timeline and it was necessary. Hope you enjoy.
Chapter 1

The alarms were a bright blood red with a blare sounding that split through the ears. Then there was the screaming and the confused scramblings of the crew. After that there was nothing.

I woke up in rubble at the break of day. The dull sunlight leaked through the cracks of the boulders. My head spiked around the temples and as I peeked out of my eyelids the light hurt my eyes. The visor of my helmet was shattered around the edges and I could feel the air chilling my skin where the metal was cracked open. The sting of sliced flesh complimented the burning ache across my torso as I attempted to shift. My muscles were screaming from the mangled position I’d fallen into. Breathing harshly through the nose my lungs burned at the rise and fall of my chest. That steady burn certainly meant ribs were broken and that movement was going to be worse than agony. That would be an issue for another time since the inky black spots at the edges of my vision were growing larger with every stab of pain. No, I have to stay awake, I have to…

The next time I come to, the rays of light that hurt are more of a warm orange glow than a piercing yellow. It was intense how much pain every inch of me is in. The air was sour with it, and the bitterness surrounded the nerves all the way from my knees to the pulse beating in my ears. Groaning, I force the rocks off my buried arms. It’s awful how the pain fires up through the shoulders and travels down to my empty stomach to rile the bile stewing there. The fight is long and slow and wretched, blacking out only to come back to the same position all alone. It was likely I was going to die before anything I was fighting to do could be helpful, but at least I could leave this life in a position of rest instead of twisted beneath a pile of stones. I hadn’t been able to feel my toes for some time now but when I finally managed to lift my left leg the shifting caused a new path of pain to connect to the bottom of my suit. Tears stung the cuts on my face and the shallow breaths of my cries hurt more than average. Horrendously, my right leg was crushed. I could feel the heavy ruthless lump of metal that trapped it to the ground. It was hopeless, beyond any doubt I wouldn’t make it out of there alone. Despite the pain, I scream and let out the last shreds of anger and sorrow into the surrounding earth.

“What was that?” Words rang out, sweet and loud, clear and strong. Close enough to touch.

If I could get them to hear me, I try again. The gravelly grate of my voice falls out again. After so many years my voice feels foreign on my tongue, maybe the dehydration made it worse.

“It’s coming from over here!” The shouts were just around the corner, right there. I just needed to… get… their… attention.

The world was a dark pit, full of pain. ‘Your job is to obey orders. Obey me. Obey.’

“Ahhhh!” The world burst open into blinding fluorescent white light. It is tilting on its axis and swaying on its hilt. The edges of my vision are fuzzed and there’s a floaty sense of weightlessness to the air. Breathing grounds me as the punch of each breath to my broken ribs pushes back the blurred lines.

“Ah, you’re awake! How wonderful!” A women’s cheerful voice sounds into the thick air. “You’re going to feel a bit disoriented, you went for almost a week stranded out at that wreck. It’s remarkable that you’re even still alive. Although you were not doing well and would have probably have died shortly if you weren’t brought directly to me, not that I’m bragging mind you.”

I interrupted her rambling when I shift and cry at the flash behind my eyes.
“Although it looks as though you are still suffering from your injuries, we can talk more after you’ve had time to recover.” A rush fills my ears as the lines of the room are overshadowed by the light until it all melds together.

The next time I wake up the world’s much more real. The room now had four walls, a ceiling, a floor. It was lined with medical equipment that was all in disarray. While clean enough, it was obviously not a hospital room. An I.V was connected to my forearm that steadily dripped a clear liquid into my system. The sight of the pale beige skin around the needle shocks me alive. The burst rips through all my sore muscles but for a moment it doesn’t matter. Where’s my armor? Going to sit up draws my attention to something else even more horrific.

The metal is a light silver grey and wraps around my knee. The skin off my thigh above it is blotchy and swollen. The other leg isn’t much better, but all of it’s there. The ache in my chest isn’t just the result of my broken ribs anymore. The atmosphere in the room fills with static, supercharged to explode. Why was I still here?

“Hello there.” The words matched the delighted pitch of the one from last time. Looking up, the form of a person in full armor fills the doorway. I glare at the white helmet that sat upon the suit. The movement irritated the bandages on my face. The glare turns into a wince as I move and the pain of my neck travels like a spear straight up and down my spine.

“I can’t believe you’re up so quickly. Tell me, do you know who you are?”

For a moment I reflectively don’t answer. Then I realize that this person is staring back into my eyes.

“Raz.” The name scrapes against my throat and I lap at my dry mouth.

“Nice to meet you Raz, I’m Doctor Grey.” I try to stay as level as I can with her but the throbbing of my neck and abs and chest are so ravenous that I slide back against the pillows with a hiss.

“What’s the damage?” The words come out thick and slow like syrup.

“Oh, your injuries are not nearly as severe as one would expect. The crash you were in was quite nasty. My analysis of your condition shows ‘damage’ on three broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, whiplash, along with bad bruising and lacerations of various degrees across your body. Your armor appears to have protected you from the fall but I’m afraid that it couldn’t prevent what happened.”

Staring down the bed at where my leg used to be I can imagine what happened. It explains why I couldn’t feel anything but pain from it. Letting the ache roll over me I gaze down at the floor, the hard tile mirroring the material that now replaced my flesh.

“Thanks.”

“It’s no trouble. Let me refill your painkillers and then-” The white metal was cool under my grip after the doctor’s hand moved beside me. The purple of her visor turned to meet my eyes.

“Let’s get one thing clear,” I growled. “The moment I can, I’m back in my armor and no one will see me. You are going to help me keep my secret, is that clear?” The pressure I applied to her wrist flared pain through my shoulders but I ignored it.

“Oh honey, you aren’t in a position to be making demands of anyone. Although I find your hostility in your condition quite intriguing.” As she said it the edges became more and more blurry. As the world began to spin I pushed past the spike of her laughing voice and gripped harder.

“Ju-uh-st donut le-et an knee won knoh ab-out meeh.” The words slurred around my dry tongue as cotton balls filled my mouth. The white lines of her suit began to turn black and once again I slipped
away. Silently I curse myself as my head falls back against the pillow.

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As the wounded soldier from the crash site succumbed to the medication, Doctor Grey considered what they’d said. They obviously wanted to keep their identity a secret and it was awfully cute how hard they were worried about it. A psychoanalysis was definitely in order.

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Weeks later I was finally more or less back to normal. Residual aches lingered from the whiplash and ribs, but the focus of getting back on my feet helped me ignore it. It was quite literal since the robotic leg took a crap ton of practice to get used to. No one noticed it however now that I was safe back in my armor. Doctor Grey was a character and a half, crazy really, but she had agreed to keep my secret in exchange that once I was comfortable I’d tell her why. As if.

The compound of the New Republic on Chorus was bizarre. From what I’ve gathered the whole civil war was fishy. Having joined the ranks I’ve heard a lot about the Federal Army and their mercenary Locus, as well as the one called Felix. Something didn’t sit right with me about him. About any of it.

“Did you hear? Felix is going out on another mission, the Federation won’t know what hit ‘em.” A couple of soldiers chat amongst themselves in the mess hall.

Interesting, so Felix was going out again. I guess it’s time to get to the bottom of this fishy feeling.

Riding across the rocky plains I listen to the cocking of rifles. Having managed to be a part of this team I am acutely aware of the leader. When the vehicles came to a stop and everyone continued on foot I make sure the both of us are on point. The movement must catch his attention because when we take to cover he turns to me.

“Sooooo, you’re the new recruit.” I don’t acknowledge him as I never acknowledge anyone. The heft of his shoulders as he leans against the shield of the stone shows he doesn’t care much. “I was told you were the silent type. What was your name again?”

The back of my helmet must be amusing since he sighs a quiet laugh before moving closer. Scanning the surrounding terrain reveals no signs of enemies. Listening to the rush of the wind only gives away the positions of our own men. The mission's objective was just over the next high rise. Even a mere arms store seemed to be detrimental to the cause around here, so they’d entrusted the task with a strong squad led by Felix. Taking it didn’t seem that difficult at least until Felix gave an order.

“Go, we’re in position.” He said it into his com as if he were telling the others. Turning to me he repeated in a sterner voice.

“Move.” Taking off forward I took the jump on sprinting over the hill leaving Felix and the others behind me. The satisfaction of using the robotic leg to my advantage paled to the brutal trap.

Ducking behind some nearby cover I hit the dirt. The blasts followed over me.

Lying lifeless I waited among the sounds of gunfire and screams of men biting the bullets. The noise ended abruptly and left an eerie silence in its wake. Rolling over, gun clutched to my chest, I look back at where the firefight had just ceased. Several pairs of footsteps began to conjugate.

“Wow! You couldn’t leave one left standing?”
Felix.

“Would you have preferred I leave none?” The deep husk of another man’s voice was foreign. It was followed by an all-too-familiar chuckle.

“Relax Locus.”

Recorder on, I wait out their conversation. They order around their men and break to go their separate ways. Unfortunately, Felix wasn’t departing alone.

Cautiously, I rise from my position and sneak after them. They have their guards lowered, not suspecting trouble. Six shots kill and wound the collection. The four fallen hit the ground while the others are still comprehending where the fire came from. My next shot takes out the pirate that my first had missed, hitting between the helmet and back where the last had pierced the shoulder. Felix was all that was left, my shot had hit him in the side as I’d intended. In the three seconds since the first rounds had flown he’d managed to curse under the shot and turn to return fire. Commendable, but pointless. Aiming at his firing arm I disarm him and send him sprawling. The semi-close range of my attack gives him the opportunity to appeal to me.

“Ceasefire! What the hell private!” He retained the lighthearted feeling to his chipper tone, even though the seething anger bubbled in the undertones. “Bitch you’re going to regret this.”

The shattering glass rang out the splash of blood from his skull. The throwing knife in his hand clattering through his dead fingers.

No, I don’t think I will.

Searching the bodies of both pirates and Rebels I collect pieces of equipment and pile them in the empty seats of the jeep we’d used to arrive. The comlinks I found with the pirates had much better connections than those used by the Rebels. They also could contact the Federal Army. Time to go to work.
“Look, there he is.” The whispers in the halls were less than subtle. Not that the talk of the ex-foot soldiers mattered any.

Entering the cool conference room where the new committee of Chorus was now gathered, I send a silent prayer that they thought I couldn’t speak. Their faces fell to mine, many even spreading into smiles.

“Raz. So glad you could make it.” That was Doyle for you.

I fall into my space in the room and stand to wait for them to exhaust themselves.

“Right, let’s get started. We gathered here today to officially state for the records the recent events of Chorus for the UNSC and the collective voice of the galactic courts.” Men there for just that task nodded and confirmed that they were ready. Kimball picked up the documents that were left neatly stacked on the table.

“This report is on behalf of the independent soldier, Raz.” Clearing her throat she continued. “I arrived on Chorus nearly a year ago, having crash-landed after flying past the planet on our way to a neighboring system. After recovery from my injuries in the company of the New Republic, I took up duty with Vanessa Kimball’s ranks. My background lead me to distrust the mercenary named Felix, who had aligned himself with the Republic. I investigated and found my suspicions to be sound. Felix, along with his ally Locus, were serving an alternate agenda than either cause being fought by the residents of Chorus. I learned this when a recon mission with Felix was ambushed by an isolated band of gunmen. These space pirates had been running one of their usual operations of drawing out numbers from both sides and slaughtering them to weaken their forces. Detecting the foul play, I evaded and was able to kill the members surrounding and including the mercenary Felix. After that, I took off alone to gather intelligence on the mysterious pirates. The missions resulted in the realization that these pirates had been manipulating the civil war on Chorus.” Kimball took a moment to breathe and let the memories settle. It had after all been a long war.

“I took the collected data that criminalized not only Locus, Felix and others hired, but also the presence of another unknown man called, Control, with me to the leaders of the New Republic and Federal Army. Secretly, I arranged a ceasefire that would aid my search into the actions of the pirates. I was successfully able to keep word of this from the remaining mercenary Locus until I intercepted a call between him and Control. The findings of this call revealed that Control was actually Chairman Malcolm Hargrove. And although it would take some time, we eventually were able to gather evidence that proves his involvement here. The full field report of the missions that resulted in this victory was been disclosed to all present and necessary to ensure all parties know the truth. Now that Chorus has been purged of this corruption, I step down to allow peace and rebuilding to take my place. Signed Raz.”

The weight of the report sat on each of their shoulders. The words heavy despite how little they conveyed of the battles they described. I felt the crinkle of the skin around my eyes as the semisweet feelings tugged at my lips. All at once the solemn atmosphere shattered as one idiot started speaking.

“Wait, you single-handedly did all of that?” His disbelief was palpable and his face matched.

I shrug.

“That seems hard to believe, especially from someone who never speaks, or is seen without their helmet.” Another official accused.
If that’s how they wanted it. I turn to leave the room for the ungrateful bastards. Kimball steps in to stop me.

“Raz deserves your utmost respect. He has risked a tremendous amount for all of us. He doesn’t speak, Captain Helm, because of an old injury acquired in the Great War. And his decisions have served us just fine, what he sees fit to do with his identity is his business.” The small speech shut up the whole room and served to grow my own respect for Kimball.

A timid reporter there peeped out from the corner, “I have a question. How did you know it was the pirates that shot at you the day you determined Felix and Locus weren’t who they said they were?”

In response, I straighten my index finger toward them and raise my thumb. Pointing a symbolic gun at their head. The paling face it receives is almost comical.

“He means, that it was the type of gunshots he heard. They didn’t match the ones our armies used. That along with the suspicious absence of enemy soldiers at the compound, Raz was able to take cover and overhear the two talking. Not talking really clears one up to notice the little things.” The room settled and they all began to talk over trivial details that would follow.

Later, as everyone was wrapping up the conversations an officer of the UNSC commented lightly. “Goodness, first Project Freelancer, now Hargrove, it’s been one busy time for us at the UNSC.”

Leaning in I incline my head forward. The movement snatches the rooms attention immediately. I wave my hand in a circular motion as though he should continue.

“Well, I mean, for two of the biggest bastards around to be taken down in roughly the same timeframe, is awesome but overwhelming. That’s all.” He grasped onto the skin of his teeth, acting as though I was going to hit him. Maybe I wanted to now that he stopped talking before actually offering anything useful. With a deep breath, I march out of the conference to figure it out on my own.

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Emily came by my bunk as I packed. Locking the door behind herself, she blocked the doorway.

“You are not leaving until you tell me. I realize you’ve been very busy, saving my planet and all, but now you’re about to fly off without upholding your side of our bargain.” Grey was so flustered her voice was a level higher than normal.

Zipping up my bag I sigh, I’d drank some extra water in preparation for this.

“There’s not much to say.”

“I highly doubt that. The way you parade around pretending that you can’t speak at all to keep this ridiculous secret, there has to be a reason for it.” I cross my arms. “At least tell me something.” She whined.

“This injury, at one point it was real. And when it was, I realized I had been fighting a battle I didn’t need to. So when my voice finally healed I decided not to use it. Waiting to listen then take action just worked out better for me.” Looking around the bunk I pick up my bag. I step closer and rest my hand on her shoulder. “I hope this secret dies with you.”

Unlocking the door and walking away I faintly make out the squabblings of the good-old crazy doctor. I go on to the shuttle pad and am met reverently.
“Mighty Raz.” One soldier greets with a stiff salute. He’s shaking in his boots. “Welcome. We-we’re here to escort you to the ship.”

Of course, Doyle would put together this flowery display to send me off. They scurry after me as I head into the Pelican.

“Seriously dude? ‘Mighty Raz’?”

“Well, what would you have called him?”

“Not mighty that’s for sure.”

This may be a long flight. Making my way up to the cockpit I find the pilot’s a lot quieter and shut the door. At least my last moments on Chorus won’t be as torturous as the first ones.
Chapter 3

The voyager was massive, yet somehow I was able to find the people I was searching for five minutes after arriving. That being said, the fact that they were responsible for the fire didn’t bode well.

“For god’s sake, someone put that fire out we’re ready to take off.”

“Not my fault! Tucker did it!”

“Caboose, if you don’t quit with that bullshit, one of these days I’m going to stab you. That way it will be true when you say it.”

One of the troopers has a fire extinguisher and the flames soon die.

“Alright, boys, no more fires for the rest of the journey.” The crisp sound of the ladies voice cuts through the dispersing crowd. Catching a glimpse of all the colors of the group’s armor a stab lights in my stomach. Disappearing among the crew and others milling around I watch as the tall women’s helmet scans around. Slipping through the halls I can’t help but wonder if she saw me.

For the next couple of days, I avoided the Reds and Blues purposely. Wanting to learn secondhand before meeting them in person, knowing that way is easier to filter out the bias. The sentiments all seemed equal across the ship. They had all been told to be incredible warriors who’d done amazing things, but in real life, they weren’t. They were stupid, lazy, clumsy, nothing like heroes. It all added to the wonder of them, the thought that such failures could be responsible for just great victories. They’d taken down Project Freelancer, exposed what really happened there. Out of all of them, it was the Freelancers that concerned me. Carolina and Washington were what they were called. Each seemed capable from the stories, however, everything seemed to be blown out of proportions. No use pondering over it, it’s not as though I plan on fighting them anytime soon.

I make my way to the training rooms in the civilian wing and low and behold, who do I meet. Members of the blue team are working out together, Carolina and Washington among them. It’s too late to retreat, they’ve spotted me. Instead, I stride straight for the punching bag hanging on the back wall as if I hadn’t seen them. I can feel their eyes on me and after a moment the bluest of them speaks.

“Hello! Who are you?” That must be Caboose, the childish one. My fists connect with the hard leather in reply.

“You are shy. That’s okay. My name is Caboose. This is Agent Washington, and Agent Carolina, and Church and Tucker.” I stop punching. There was only four of them. Looking over my shoulder I spy the outline of a person over their shoulders. Right, Freelancer dealt with A.I. I resume my set.

“Not very friendly, are they.” The bitter voice was clearly ticked.

“That’s alright Church, we just need to give them time to open up. Then we can become their friend and we can all be friends together.”

“How naive are you?”

“I do not know what that means.”

“Of course you don’t.”
[Hey, Carolina.]

[Yes, Church?]

[I think that guy over there may be Raz.]

[Raz?]

[Yeah. He’s the one they stopped to pick up at that planet Chorus. He took down the Chairman right as we stopped the Director. Solo.]

[That’s interesting.]

[That’s not even the best part. When I heard he was onboard I did some investigating, you know because I was bored. Anyways, Raz popped up in my database. Apparently, he was on one of the first draft lists for the Project. He was almost a Freelancer even before you.]

[What happened?]

[He refused. He’d gone through all the testing for it, then just before he could be recruited he walked away.]

[Why’d he do that?]

[No idea. Maybe you should ask him. After all, he seems so itchy for a chat.]

Finishing off my set with a roundhouse kick I send the bag flying. Internally wincing as it crashes against some other equipment behind it. Looking back at the small group they all seem to be gaping at me. Dashing out I hope the display isn’t seen as intentionally hostile, cause I’d gotten lost in myself.

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“Well, that was interesting,” Washington said as he inspected the punching bag.

“It gets better.” He turned back to Carolina where she stands smugly with her arms crossed.

“That was Raz. He was almost a Freelancer.”

“What?!” Tucker and Wash exclaimed together.

“That’s the guy I’ve been hearing so much about?” Tucker asked rhetorically. “The crew won’t shut up about this Raz dude. They say he’s some sort of war hero.”

Church appeared over Carolina’s shoulder from where he’d been searching up more on the character in question.

“Yeah, you could say that. Not like he single-handedly saved an entire planet or anything. The official documents don’t seem to believe how badass that dude is.”

“But what’s he doing here?”

“Too bad you didn’t get the chance to ask, ‘cause we’re arriving at our drop point tomorrow.” Church’s sincerity was questionable. His next statement though was quite clear. “I’m just glad he
fixed all that mess on Chorus cause it sounds like something we’d normally have to deal with.”

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They all gathered around the Pelican, loudly. The ship was ready to see them gone, once they were it would be a lot quieter. They loaded after much bickering and delay and I slipped in behind them. Compared to them I was a ghost but the Freelancers still noticed. The hatch sealed and the pilot called back, “Finally, that’s everybody. We’re leaving.”

Taking off, the staring of the Freelancers drew the attention of all the troopers.

“Who the blazes is that?” The raspy voice was grating and made my teeth grind. Luckily the man dawning the blue and yellow armor had a more pleasant one.

“That’s Raz.”

He and the others sized me up, when I didn’t move Carolina stepped closer.

“What are you doing here Raz?” She asked coolly.

I wonder how long the silence could last before she lost that cool. I hear she has a short temper and doesn’t appreciate attitude much. Before it gets to that the little blue guy lights up on her shoulder.

“I hate Carolina, did I forget to mention Raz can’t talk?” She turns on him.

Yeah Church, you did.” The coolness has a hint of a growl as she huffs.

“My bad.” The hologram shrugs and Carolina stretches out her hand.

“Agent Carolina. Sorry about the misunderstanding.” I take her hand and give back a stern shake. I take my seat and make a show of ignoring them. Even though they have all of my attention.

“Strong, silent, and rude. Good recipe for a melodramatic entrance.” The maroon one devised.

“It doesn’t matter. We’re almost home. No more traveling around working our butts off. We’ll finally be home and I’m taking a vacation.” Must be Grif.

They kept up talking about what they planned to do once we arrived though I missed the details because Caboose skipped over beside me.

“I knew you were just shy. Now you’re here to be our new friend. I am so excited to be your friend.” His sincerity was refreshing. I patted him on the shoulder. I could practically hear him smiling.

“No Tucker. We are not hosting a rave party at the base.”

“Ah come on Church. Imagine all the women we can pick-up.”

“I imagine the sum total of zero.” Washington chuckled.

“Not cool Wash.”

“Oh, we are going to have so much fun. We can play tag, and bake cookies, then eat the cookies…”

“Not happening Sarge.”

“What was that private?”
“Not happening Sarge, sir.”

“Who wants to help me apply sun lotion on those hard to reach places when we get back?”

“Todos ustedes son un montón de idiotas.” (You are all a bunch of idiots.)

Maybe I made a mistake joining this band of misfit soldiers. However, it did seem like it would be an interesting mistake.
Chapter 4

Arriving in Valhalla the soldiers immediately separated. Old habits of the Reds going one way and Blues going the other. The reds seemed more dysfunctional by nature and since there was more of them I joined the blues towards their side of the canyon. Perhaps the joy in Caboose's step when I did helped solidify the choice. When we reached the foot of the base I handed my data file to Agent Carolina.

“What’s this?” She takes the file. If she could see my face. Oh boy.

The little blue guy pops up, “Come on Lina just take the damn thing.”

On it was my mission statement, which reads:

‘As I assume you’re aware I have been injured in a past mission that prohibits my vocal cords. I don’t speak. It has come to my attention you, the Reds and Blues, are connected to the late Project Freelancer. I myself have a keen interest in that. And since I have finished my employment with my previous endeavors I have come to inquire about whatever the fuck you’ve been up to. I’ll stay out of your way, in fact, you may even forget I’m here. Know I’m here because I want to be and I hope you won’t have a problem with that. If there is the off chance we’re attacked I’ll help but I’m an independent contractor. I don’t take orders. Basically, I stay out of your hair and you can stay out of mine. P.S. Don’t get angry when you ask me things I can’t answer with a shake of my head.’

Carolina and the A.I, whose name I guess is Church, finish reading and summarize it to the others who stand around, waiting.

“So it’s true. You were almost a Freelancer.” I can’t say I’m overly surprised they figured that out with an A.I at their disposal, but that was a lifetime ago. Or it felt like it.

I nod yes.

“And now you’re here. Because you want to know what happened?” In a way.

I wave my shoulders.

“I think that means sure.” Agent Washington interjects

Tucker seems to be catching on. “You joining Blue team then?” He teeters between bemused and smug.

I shake my head.

“Raz works alone.” Carolina filled in.

“Wait. Scary grey man isn’t joining the team?” Caboose visibly deflates in sadness and confusion.

“No Caboose. Raz is staying he’s just not a part of a team.”

“Ohhhh. I still don’t get it.”

I shift, my robotic leg locking up standing still. The sun fades away over the cliffs casting shadows onto us below.

“It’s been a long day. We’ll discuss this in the morning. Which everyone will wake up for since we
start training at 0800 hours.” Agent Carolina addresses to the whole group. Tucker groaned.

“Seriously?”

“0700 hours.” She corrected. Tucker didn’t quit.

“Tell me you’ll at least make the Reds join in on the torture. No way am I running laps if Grif and Simmons get to sleep in.”

“Fine. Wash, go tell the Reds to meet us in the field tomorrow for training.”

“Sure thing boss.” As Wash set off toward Red base I follow him instead of joining the others who are grumbling into the base.

We walk casually together, but Washington held closely to his rifle. When he finally spoke it came out as tense as I’d expected. He didn’t trust me like I didn’t trust him.

“If you could speak, would you answer my questions.” Slowing he turns to watch me.

Probably not. I do nothing, just keep going.

“I see.”

“You know if you cause any funny business it will be easy for us to get rid of you.”

Harder than you think.

We kept walking in silence after that. Washington probably feeling like his threat would do for the time being. Red base was identical to Blue Base on the outside. Entering, the sounds of each Red going about their business was monstrous.

“Put your back into it Grif.”

“I can’t, maybe if someone bothered to help me.”

“Can’t Grif I’m calibrating this um, stuff.”

“Quit trying to shred your responsibilities dirtbag.”

“Fuck you guys. We finally get home and the only thing you can do is get straight back to work. Can’t we all just go to bed?”

“No time. Those nasty Blues have that Raz fellow now. Which means Red team is severely outnumbered.”

“No, it doesn’t it means the teams are even. And we’re not even separate teams anymore. We only separated because it would be too cramped all in one base.”

“On the contrary, those Freelancers count as two people since they can kick two people’s butts. Which makes it 7 to 4 plus Grif.”

“But Sarge sir, we aren’t fighting.”

“Simmons, that’s just what the Blues want you to think. Then when we’re unprepared they’ll attack! We have to strike first before they get the chance.”
“WE ARE NOT FIGHTING!”

“Ah-hem” Washington interrupted. The Red, Maroon, and Orange one’s stopped arguing long enough to realize we were standing there.

The pink one appeared as if out of thin air. “Oh Hey, Guys! What brings you to our neck of the woods.”

“Carolina says to meet in the field for training at 0700 tomorrow morning.” He states it flatly, not caring what they thought. “And I couldn’t help overhearing. You know these bases are huge, we don’t have to occupy both.”

I watched as the news sunk into them. The ones I’ve identified as Grif and Simmons seem torn.

“I don’t know, I think I’d be kind of awkward living in the same base.”

“More awkward than acting like we’re still enemies and us whooping your ass every time you try something.”

“I will not correspond with a Blue!”

“It was Tucker, wasn’t it. You wouldn’t even be over here if that asshole hadn’t told you to.” Grif was angry and bitter, standing off away from Sarge and Simmons.

I’d seen and heard enough. This place was oppressed by the stupidity of each of them. Their leader, Sarge, made my blood boil. I wanted to pound his nose into his teeth. Simmons followed his lead but clearly had more in him than that. Grif needed out but couldn’t bother to get out himself. The Red team had lulled themselves into a system that was broken. They just needed a shove in the right direction to break free.

I march over and grab Simmons by the seam of his pants. Hefting him over my shoulder I feel his weight flare at the movement. He yells indignantly.

“Wha- Wait! Put me down!”

I turn around swiftly and take hold of Grif by the back of the neck. Giving him a little kick to the butt I get him moving. I carry and drag them out of the room, Sarge and Washington dumbfounded behind us. In the doorway, I meet the pink and brown soldiers. Tipping my head to the side I indicate for them to follow.

Outside I drop Grif and Simmons and wait as Washington and the others show up. I point towards Blue base. When they protest and hesitate I crack my knuckles. That gets them moving in the right direction.

“Okay. Okay, we’re going.”

As Grif, Simmons, the pink one and the robot head off to Blue base I hear the cocking of a shotgun.

“You Blue bastards have gone too far. Kidnapping my men right out from under me.”

“Sarge, we’re not kidnapping them. We’re just…” Washington trails off, flustered at my actions. Sarge didn’t lower the gun.

He had three seconds.

“Never trust a Blue!”
One.

“Sarge calm down.”

Two.

“Give me back my men!”

Three.

The gun was out of his hands before they saw me move. I shoved his body back before Washington could step in. The gun was empty before Sarge hit the dirt. Smashing the gun into the earth I stomped on it. With my right leg. The strong metal leg could apply five times more force than a human one. The shotgun was crushed slowly under my heel.

“My shotgun!” Fuck off.

Washington was at a loss for words but I wasn’t waiting around for that to change. Sprinting back to Blue base I consider if I was too brash. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this kind of anger. And the fire wasn’t going out.

—

Blue base was a mess when I got back. Grif was at Tucker’s throat about the training tomorrow. Simmons was losing it because of what I’d done. Although he conveniently forgot to mention the fact that I carried him. The pink one was upset about the wallpaper and color palette. Worst of all was Carolina.

“Enough! What the hell is going on!” She yelled at the assembly to go silent.

“Ese nos salvó del imbécil Sarge y nos trajo aquí para que todos sigamos tu orden. Gracias a Cristo Tal vez este es realmente competente.” (That one saved us from the moron Sarge and brought us here to all follow your command. Thank Christ. Maybe this one is actually competent.)

“That’s right Lopez. Raz ran us out of Red base out of nowhere.” Simmons acted like he knew what the robot said, but from the way Lopez hangs his head and mumbles something more to the floor, I don’t think he does.

“What’s the meaning of this Raz?” Carolina rears on me.

No body language can say, ‘That douche Sarge made me want to kill him, so I decided that he didn’t deserve subordinates and brought the rest over here to live with us’, so I do nothing.

She growls and gets right up against my helmet. The two of us neck in neck in height so the glare of her visor reflects the outline of my helmet. I hear footsteps behind us just as the shine of the A.I. appears.

“Carolina.” Washington snaps at his fellow Freelancer easing her away. The way his hands firmly guide her away reveal how much strength that’s hidden behind those fingers.

“Explain Washington.” She tries to control the anger that grips her voice.

“I don’t know what Raz was intending but there’s no harm done.” He pauses, remembering the last half hour. “Well, not much harm was done. Think of it this way, now the Reds are all here so we can keep an eye on them and they can join us for training.”
Grif and Tucker groan in the background, which does not impress Carolina.

“‘You’re right.’ She concedes to Washington and relaxes. ‘Everyone get to bed. We have a big day tomorrow. Wash, show the Reds to their bunks.’”

The room empties as they all go off to bed. Carolina stands in my path as I go to follow. I wait since she so obviously wants to say something.

“‘I don’t know what your deal is, but these people are my people. If you’re going to stay you can’t be causing trouble. Otherwise, you’ll have me to deal with. Are we clear?’”

I nod.

After a moment of the stiff air blowing between us, she lets me leave. I head outside to where my bag still waits in the dirt. Across the valley, I hear the faint crashing of metal. I return to the base quickly. The halls echo the noises of all the occupants that are clambering around. It’s been a while since I’ve stayed in a place like this. The barracks on Chorus were crowded but I rarely slept there. Before that, the chambers of cruise ships were cramped and stuffy but isolating. Here, everyone was just around the corner or just down the hallway.

Searching all over I finally find a storage closet that’s far enough away from the bunks that I can be alone. It’s dusty and cluttered but the door locks. Forgetting the weight of my eyelids I set to work cleaning up the mess.

When it’s finally cleared away and I’ve organized my things like a makeshift bed I flop down to the ground. The press of the metal on my joints leaves little room for comfort but I have a talent for it. Turning the artificial lights off in my visor I drift off to sleep.
Chapter 5

My morning alarm sounds just like it always does. Screaming surrounding every sense, the ears, the eyes, even the feeling in the skin sent running into action. Not a sliver of sleep survives.

Turning it off I rise despite the protests of every fiber of my body. Strangely, I have the urge to breath in the air, to really feel it. For a second I imagine taking off the helmet, but it’s fleeting. There’s work to be done after all.

I softly roam the halls, although I doubt anything short of a bombing could wake these soldiers up this early in the morning. I faltor when I round the corner and see another figure awake and busy. Tensing into a fighting stance I prepare to attack until it turns around.

“¡Mierda!” The Spanish speaking robot exclaims as it sees me standing there fists prepared to strike.

I stand at ease and we regard each other. I assume his lack of speech is due to the realization I won’t speak to him and I don't understand anything he says. Retreating rapidly to the hole I’ve claimed as my quarters I retrieve my things. When I return to Lopez I present it to him. On the notepad written in my messy pencil handwriting it reads:

‘Can you write English?’

He takes the pad and scribbles on it. Handing it back I read:

‘Yes. Of course, I can. I’m a robot.’

A sassy one too it seems. We continue to write back and forth.

‘Good, this will be our means of communication. I need something from you. I need you to analysis all your memory banks and give me a report on the humans that are in this base. Histories, behaviors, preferences, weaknesses, everything that is critical to understand them.’

‘Why do you need that? They’re all idiots. For years I’ve been stuck with this Spanish vocalizer and not once have they thought to work around it like you. Why would you want to get to know them?’

‘Just do it and keep out personal bias’. I’ll be back to collect after I’ve finished training with the others. You will keep this notepad a secret from them. They aren’t to know what we’re doing, not that I worry about you telling them.’

I turn away from Lopez after handing over the last message. Time to scope out the place.

---

When the sun finally rose enough for the dead to rise it sounded like zombies had been woken.

“Come on everyone! Training starts in 20 minutes.” Carolina shouted through the base.

Washington sounded mostly awake when he asked, “What’s that smell?”

“Who wants pancakes?”

“Where’d he get the ingredients for pancakes at this abandoned base?” Washington asked Carolina as they entered the kitchen and dining division. Simmons entered behind them.

“Never question Donut in the kitchen. Because you’ll never like the outcome.”
Already sitting down at the tables was Caboose munching away at his plate of breakfast.

“Captain Cornbread makes the best pancakes.” He said delighted shoveling more in his mouth once he did so.

Tucker and Grif stumbled in grumbling about morning people.

Church popped out to reply. “Morning dirtbags.”

“Stuff it, Sarge.” Grif retorted as he collapsed onto a stool.

“Sarge? I’m Church bitch.”

“What?” Grif asked turning around.

“You called Church, Sarge, Grif,” Simmons informed his teammate.

“I did? Well, I forgot that that psycho left Sarge at the other base. Good riddance.” He huffed as he bit into the food Donut placed in front of him.

“Where is Grey man? He’s missing breakfast.” Caboose pouted through his mouthful of pancakes.


“My name is Church, Carolina.” He scanned the area for heat signatures. “Raz is in the basement.”

“Go down and get him.”

With the command, Church jumped from Carolina’s unit temporarily and entered the base’s com system. Once he traveled through the systems he watched through a surveillance camera, but he didn’t see the grey armor of Raz. He saw standard issue red and a bomb. Returning to Carolina Church was already cranky.

“It wasn’t Raz. It was Sarge, and he’s rigging a bomb downstairs.” Grif spit out his orange juice, Washington recoiled from being spit on, and Donut dropped the pancake he was flipping.

“That moron! I told him that the Reds would be back in the morning.” Washington, Carolina and the others abandoned their breakfast to stop the explosion of Blue base.

---

They hadn’t shown up for training as they’d said. It was kind of irritating but it meant nothing to me. I had already spent several hours running and working out and had spare time to take inventory of every item in both bases. Returning to Lopez he had a hard drive for my helmet with the information I requested. He seemed a high functioning robot and I wrote to him that he should join me. We hiked up the cliffs a ways and when I was sure we were alone I sat down. My metal leg clanged against the rock. Lopez stood beside me and I scratched out a message to him.

‘I’m going to go through the records you gave me. Keep an eye out and notify me if anyone is coming.’

The files on each of them were interesting. The ones on Simmons, Grif, and Donut (apparently that’s the pink one’s name) are much larger. I notice there’s also a file on Sarge even though I didn’t ask for it. Unfortunately, the smallest files are those on the Freelancers. I can’t blame that on Lopez it’s not his fault he’s known them for less time. Skimming through the data I realize that Lopez actually has very limited insights to these people. When I’m done I feel like I know them a little better.
Simmons has issues with his father that keep him down. Grif has a sister who he misses and cares about even if he won’t admit it. Donut just craves attention and affirmation and works hard in his own ways to get it. Tucker seems to be compensating for some bigger problems in his soul with sexuality. Caboose seems to be straightforward and simple, if not in a difficult way. The rest are more mysterious though. Washington, Carolina, and Church all have deep-cutting ties with Freelancer that make them complicated. However, now that I know all that they’ve been through, from Blood Gulch to now, I’m not sure what I think.

Taking a deep breath I exit the data files. The UNSC officer was right, it was all overwhelming. It seems I dodged a bullet leaving Project Freelancer when I did. Who knows what would’ve happened if I stayed. I might be dead, or in prison, or missing, or worse. I shiver. The haunting sounds of bullets filling my ears.

‘Obey me.’

Snapping up to my feet, I head down the mountain. No, don’t let yourself drift into the past. I’m here now. With these people, people who I can manage. I can live here for now. It will be fine. Everything will be fine as long as you keep moving.

Cresting the hill I spot all of them running laps in the field. Three hours later than planned but Carolina is making them train as she said. Quietly, I slip into the course alongside Tucker.

“Where the hell did you come from?” He pants as he jogs. I just keep step with him. As we round the curve in the track they’ve set up Carolina spots me.

“Glad you could join us, Raz.” I shrug and keep going. Slowly I build up higher and higher speeds. Before long I’m running laps around all of them. Except for Caboose, who happily sprints beside me. It isn’t casual enough for conversation even if I would speak, but Caboose just radiates glee. Shortly after Grif passes out on the grass Carolina calls to us.

“Alright, that’s enough laps for today.”

I pant heavily and peer over at the giant blue idiot who gave me a run for my money. He’s also breathing heavy, but I doubt he feels like his insides are going to burst inside his chest and spill out of him.

“You are really fast.” I keel over and place my hands on my knees. Do not throw up.

“Yes, he is.” Carolina walks up and I force myself to stand erect. “But is he more than just fast?”

We stand across our new target range and I get the feeling I’m on display. I stand with a rifle in hand and notice the Reds are nowhere to be seen, Tucker and Caboose stand clear of the range and the Freelancers are at ease. If they wanted a show, I’d give them one.

I feel the bullets slide into place and take aim. They find their marks and their cheers ring out through the air. I don’t bother to reload once the gun clicks empty, the holes in the bullseyes tell me I don’t need any more practice. Besides, I wouldn’t want the competitive Carolina to feel threatened. Plus, my neck still has some lasting aches from the beating I took from that fight with Locus before I took down Hargrove.

“So you can shoot, but can you fight without your weapon?” Carolina seemed itchy for a fight. Maybe she was taking my silence personally, she wouldn’t be the first.

I shake my head. Which doesn’t help the migraine that was stabbing me behind the temples.
‘OBEY.’

No!

I retreat into the base.
“Washington, can I talk to you?” Carolina stands in the threshold of Wash’s new bunk and he puts down the gun he’d been cleaning.

“Of course Carolina. What’s up?” She came to sit beside him on his bunk.

“It’s Raz. I don’t know why, but something still feels off about him. It’s been weeks and nothing’s happened, so why do I still feel like he’s not who he says he is.”

“I know what you mean. At first, I didn’t trust him, especially after what he did with the Reds. But, it turned out to be the right call. We all share a base now and everyone more or less gets along.” Carolina snickered at that since Simmons, Tucker, Grif, and Caboose are constantly fighting like brothers and Sarge keeps trying to fight the world.

“And yeah, it’s not perfect but since we’ve arrived here I actually feel like we could start over,” Washington confessed, leaning onto his knees. Then he straightened. “But there’s Raz. He’s a good man, but something makes me uneasy about him. Like, like the fact that he’s always awake in the morning. Or how I never see him sit down to eat.”

“Exactly, he goes around cleaning and training. The perfect soldier. Yet you never catch him being anything less. I’ve never even seen him with his helmet off.”

“Maybe we’re so used to the others now that we’re no longer okay with the super soldier gig?” Wash suggested lightly, hoping that was all it was.

“I don’t think so. Cause even at Project Freelancer we were still vulnerable at times. We still ate in the mess hall, took breaks, had days off. We were still human.”

Church couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “Carolina.” He formed in front of the two of them in the air.

“That’s not really fair. I mean, you of all people should know what it’s like to want to be the best. And I’m proud of you that you’re learning to relax and actually trust others, but to think Raz isn’t acting human… It’s just not right. Have you even been paying attention?”

“What do you mean, Church?”

“I mean have you seen the way Raz interacts with everyone. I have. He’s like the coolest guy I know. He occupies Caboose so he doesn’t kill anyone. He helps Simmons with all his nerd projects and keeps an eye on him to make sure nothing’s going crazy. He even does Grif’s chores when no one’s looking so Sarge won’t yell at him. Since Raz showed up, the guys have been the happiest I’ve seen them.”

“He’s got a point. I even caught Grif humming the other day. And Lopez also seems in a good mood. Heck, I think the only ones still sour are us and Sarge.” Wash sighed. “Maybe we’re just being paranoid. And maybe it has something to do with the fact that Raz was almost a Freelancer. But maybe we should give him a chance. He’s been through just as much as we have.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. It just, I don’t have a problem with Raz, not really, it’s just something seems wrong with him.” Carolina got to her feet, confused with her own subconscious feelings.

“Maybe he’s just sending out waves of discomfort.” Church comments.
“How or why would he be doing that?”

“Well, he practically breathes it. I would too if I slept on the floor.”

“He sleeps on the floor?” Washington questioned as he stood.

“Yeah, in a small storage closet on the far edge of the base. You guys didn’t know that?”

Church may have succeeded in getting the Freelancers to give Raz a chance, but he didn’t vanquish their uncertainty. He may have stoked it.

---

I found her in the gym, aimlessly sparring against a ghost. It was blistering hot outside today, so everyone was inside in the A.C. I’d seen her with her helmet off since being here, but like me, she wore her armor everywhere. Even now.

She pauses her strikes and stills.

“Are you just going to stare all day?” She faces away from me so she isn’t expecting an answer. Her hip rotates and her helmet turns back to me. “Want to spar?”

I join her on the mat and we square off. Right cut, left jab, dodge, duck, spin kick. Carolina and I dance around looking for weaknesses in defense as we swap offensive strikes. All at once we gage each other and soon the blows become more dangerous. It’s still friendly, except if one of us miscalculates the other it could be a call to Doc. Once, my fist connects with her helmet above the jaw and she retaliates with a kick to my side. Luckily, I soften the blow by moving into her center and shoving her away, back and down. At the last second, she hooks her leg against my waist. When we fall she twists my weight and I land hard on my back. My vision flashes and Carolina isn’t the one on top of me.

“You will obey me.”

No! No! No!

I swing furiously and hit Carolina straight in the jugular. She immediately chokes for breath and I shove her roughly off me. All pretext for friendly sparring forgotten. I dash out of there, dark spots choking off my vision. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t…

---

I’m crouched in my room when I hear it.

“Knock, knock.” Washington knocks, both physically and verbally.

“If you could talk this is the part where you’d say who’s there. And I’d say Wash. And then you’d probably say, ‘Go away Wash. I don’t want to talk to you.’ And then I’d say I heard about what happened with Carolina and that she says she doesn’t blame you. She caught you off guard and you reacted as anyone would, but you didn’t mean to hurt her and since you couldn’t explain yourself you ran away.” This is the worst ‘Knock, knock’ joke I’ve ever heard. Why was he here, I chose this place so they wouldn’t bother me.

“I just wanted to see if you’d come out and join us for dinner. Caboose is worried about you and he
gets all sulky when he’s worried about his friends. And for the record, the only reason he isn’t here is because we figured you would want your space so we never told him where you sleep.”

At least there’s that. Picturing Caboose refusing to eat or talk with them because I was locked away made my throat throb. I stand and open the door. For a second I think I’ve forgotten my helmet because Wash is staring at me.

Stepping into his space I close the door behind me. This gets him moving and we head off together toward the kitchen.

“Sooooo. If you could speak would you tell me what happened to you?” I freeze.

He does too once he sees me. “I mean, you left Project Freelancer and we never found out why. I was just curious.”

Oh. I nod. However, it may be a lie. One I’ll never have to admit.

We join everyone else and the room is alive. Caboose jumps up to meet us.

“You are here. I knew you would come. Because Washington is a good talker and he can convince anyone to do anything.” I pat Caboose on the shoulder. It’s our way of me saying ‘I understand now move on’. He seems to get the message. “You should come to sit with us.”

I do. I sit down on the edge of the table Washington beside me. Caboose takes his spot back between Donut and Tucker. Carolina sits across from us with Simmons and Grif beside her. Sarge sits on the other side of Grif and Lopez sits across from him beside Donut. The cafeteria for the base isn’t massive but there’s space enough we don’t all have to sit this close. We do anyways.

“Hey, Raz. I have this new idea for a project and I-“ Simmons is cut off by Grif.

“Oh please dude save the nerd talk until after the meal. You’ll break my concentration.”

“Cause, of course, you need your full concentration for eating,” Tucker remarks sarcastically.

“Of course I do,” Grif replies wholeheartedly.

“Who’s hungry? Because I have a real treat for tonight. One that will fill so many holes.” Donut sings as the timers of the oven bings. Down the table, I hear Lopez groan and say in Spanish. (Why do you always say things like that.) My Spanish has gotten pretty good if I do say so myself. Or maybe it’s just because I’ve come to know Lopez quite well.

Donut returns from the ovens with two large round pans and Grif’s jaw drops.

“Shotgun!” He yells and lunges for the pizza.

“You can’t call shotgun on pizza Grif. You call dibs.”

“Dbbs” he mumbles around his bites of pizza.

Washington interjects. “Quick, everyone grab some before Dexter gets it all.” Soon the first two pies are shared across the table, with Grif having three more pieces than everyone else. Carolina spies my empty plate.

“Grif, share some of your slices with Raz.” For a second Grif almost argues but then he looks at me. He goes to hand over the extra pizza on his plate and the gesture is warming. I lift my hand in a stopping motion. Pushing the plate back towards Grif I nod my head to him. As if saying: ‘it’s yours,
Wash sees this and asks, “You’re not eating?”

I shake my head. I’m here for Caboose, for them. I’ll eat back in my room. The pizza does look good though. I stand to escape the concerned looks of the table and join Donut in the kitchen. He’s busy putting together another pie for the oven. Almost knocking tomato sauce over, I catch it before it spills.

“Oh gracious, I almost soiled my freshly polished lightish red armor. Thanks, Raz.” I place the can back and watch him make the pizza. It’s fascinating, I often wonder where he learned all these cooking skills. Once he’s finished, the previous pizza in the oven dings that it’s ready. He pulls it out and I take the next pan. I signal him over to the table and he goes to sit down as I wait for the pizza to bake.

Leaning against the counter I watch the group gouge themselves on their feast. All relaxed and warm. Lopez joins me as I scan the table. He sneaks the notepad into my hand on the counter. Slowly I round to block the view of the others. On the paper, Lopez has a message written.

‘You should eat. Sleep. And I mean properly. I’m a robot and I can tell you’re not treating yourself right.’

When he wrote this message I don’t know but something sets in my chest. He keeps saying he’s just a robot but I could swear he was more than that. Ignoring his instruction I quickly write back.

‘Tell Donut the pizza was nice. He’ll appreciate it. Now hide this.’ I hand back the pad and make a show of retrieving the pizza from the oven around Lopez.

The warmth of the oven washes through the armor and for a moment I let it seep over the metal to affect the cold skin underneath. The chills from earlier still grip onto my nerves but I fight them away. The armor can only hide so much. Lopez marches over to Donut and clearly addresses everyone.

“Donut, Raz quiere decirte que tu pizza fue una buena idea y lo sé porque me dijo que usaba papel con el que hemos estado comunicándonos durante semanas.” (Donut, Raz wants to tell you your pizza was a good idea and I know because he told me using paper that we’ve been using to communicate with for weeks.)

He stands there and looks back at me with defiance. His confidence deflates when Sarge starts laughing.

“Oh, Lopez you old kidder. It’s not nice to make fun of Donut after he made such a scrumptious supper for us. Although I can understand your frustration given he didn’t bring any oil for you.”

“Lopez. If you wanted oil you should’ve just asked. I got the stuff coming out of my wazoo.” Donut pulls out a can of motor oil and Lopez snatches it. Giving up on trying to reveal me to them. A tremor runs down my spine and I real around, barely keeping the pizza upright.

“Raz, you okay?” Tucker asks drawing all their attention back to me. I straighten and nod energetically. I bring the pizza over and hand Donut several slices before putting it up for grabs. Before long the whole thing’s gone again, leaving crumbs in its place.

They finish off their meal and everyone is chatting. Just about odds and ends around the base. Things that need improving, stuff to pass the time, Tucker is getting really sick of Washington making him run laps. I go to collect everyone’s dishes, starting at Wash and Carolina.
“Thanks, Raz.” Carolina offers as I move onto Grif and Simmons.

“Hey, good for nothing, why are you letting someone else do all the work?” Sarge nagged at Grif. I was sick and tired of it, but Grif never said anything about it.

“Raz offered to do it.” Which was true.

“It’s unacceptable. Why I oughta teach you a lesson of respect with my new shotgun.” He wasn’t overly violent with his threat but the way he looked at Grif. His eyes like poisonous daggers that wanted blood. “Now get moving to clean those dishes, that’s an order!”

“Sarge, I know you’ve been itching for a fight but it’s not my job to clear off the table. Besides even if I’d offered to help Raz probably would turn me down. Because he can handle his own work.” Grif was both standing up for himself and defending me at the same time and I would be impressed if I wasn’t feeling a snake slither up my spine.

“I gave you an order Private. Now obey it or face the consequences.”

The dishes shatter on the floor.

I saw nothing but the red of his armor and the blackness of my nightmares. My hand wrapped around his throat and yanked him off the seat by his neck. Before I knew what I was doing my other hand grasped the hilt of my sword. It burst to life and glowed brightly. I didn’t see Sarge’s face, not as I grabbed him, not as I slammed him against the wall, not as I lifted my sword to chop off his head. I only saw the face that haunted me.

‘You have no choice but to obey me. Obey me private or face the consequences.’

No!
Chapter 7

Something took hold of me. Hands gripped me around the wrist and the shoulders and the waist. There’s a ringing in my ears and blood pumping in my eyes.

“RAZ!” Caboose’s voice shot through and I lurched back. Back against the bodies of Wash and Simmons and Grif. My sword is ripped out of my hand when I stop fighting them, the glow dying once it leaves my grip. I glance around unable to get my bearings. All of their faces are in shock and scared.

Simmons holds back the hand that had grabbed Sarge and his human arm is shaking. Grif who had been the one insulted backed away as though he was next. Wash and Carolina were stern, almost angry, but their disbelief undercut it. Donut stood back with his hands over his mouth. Tucker stood beside Caboose, and Caboose had the worst look. It was like his hero had just returned only to reveal they were the one who killed everyone they loved. I started fighting again. Ripping myself away from them I attempt to escape.

“Oh no, you don’t.” I hear Church’s voice before the world dissolves around me.

—

Raz’s head is cold. Frozen solid but not physically. The surroundings are the same but everything is muted. Dull in comparison to reality. Epsilon ventures through and a horrible realization dawns on him.

“Get out of my head!” There’s a shriek that fills the echoing space.

Epsilon can’t believe his ears.

“Wait are you a-“

“Get OUT!” Raz appears in front of him.

He swallows his shock to focus on the task at hand since remaining in this environment was bringing back some awful memories.

“Not yet. You can’t just attack us without cause. Heck, you can’t attack us at all!” For a second, Omega fought his way up but Church pushed him back down. The ground shook.

“You want a reason!” Omega was having a wonderful time here, feeding off her anger growing stronger inside of them. Theta started crying in the back of Epsilon’s mind. The Alpha’s memories began swirling around close enough to touch. Church realized it’s because Raz’s mind was in a similar state. He wanted to stay and figure out what was going on, talk to Raz. However, the risk of shattering again under the strain was too great.

Hopping back out Church was in a lot of pain and could only focus on restoring balance to his systems. Raz ran off and out of the base before he was even able to speak.

Carolina stood there, concern painted on her face, but when Church finally had control of himself again he was at a loss for words.

“Church, what happened in there?” He glitched a couple of times before turning away. The faint remnants of Theta crying along with Raz’s cold mind catching his tongue.
“I, uh. It−” All the emotions were too strong he couldn’t overcome it then. Delta took over talking.
“I’m sorry, Epsilon is currently under an extreme amount of distress. When we entered Raz’s mind
we were hit with a tremendous amount of traumatic emotions. Emotions that were obviously
triggered by something that Sarge did or said. Feeling such raw emotions on the mental plain has
reopened some undesirable wounds that have previously taken much care to close. We will need to
collect ourselves before any further interactions can be had. The wisest choice of action is for us to
upload into the base’s database so that no more psyches can be damaged.”

The green glow of Delta remained flowing in the air until Carolina managed to clear her throat to
speak.

“Allright Delta. Do whatever it takes to get better, Church.” The next instant Church was gone and
left the confused team to ponder over the news.

They knew Church as Epsilon sometimes talked to the old memories of the other fragments, but he
never outright used them in an interaction like that. “This has to be really bad if Church is this upset
about it.” Wash finally broke the silence.

Carolina shook her head in frustration. “What even happened?!”
Lopez walked over and slammed something down on the table. It was a notepad with words written
in English.
‘Sarge told Grif he needed to obey his orders after he stupidly was trying to force him into a job he
didn’t need to do. That’s what set Raz off.’
They all crowded around to read it and the note set off a tidal wave of questions.
“You can write English?” Simmons was in shock.
“So it wasn’t my fault?” Grif was in relief.
“Of course it is dirtbag.” Sarge accused.
“Where did you get this paper?” Wash investigated.
“I want to know what the fuck was with that sword. Swords are my thing.” Tucker whined.
Lopez stomped his foot and wrote more down. They read again.
‘Yes, of course, I can write English, I could also speak it too if any of you bothered to change my
vocalizer. No, it is not Grif’s fault, Raz is quite fond of Grif. Although I haven’t the faintest clue as to
why. I was given this notepad the first day Raz arrived. We’ve been using it to communicate with
one another. And I assume Raz got the sword when on Chorus because it is a highly alien planet.’

Caboose didn’t read it he just stood back, tears formed in his eyes.
“Don’t understand. Why did Raz attack Sarge? Raz is our friend and Sarge is our friend.” He
babbled and the others didn’t know what to say.

Carolina and Washington exchanged looks, they had been right. Raz was full of secrets and had now
attacked one of their own.
“We have to find Raz. No telling what state he’s in. Donut you stay here with Sarge, we can’t risk
another attack. The rest of us will spread out and search the canyon. Radio in if you find him.” They
all split off and went on the hunt for the dangerous soldier who had lost his mind. Simmons went
with Grif, Carolina went with Tucker and Wash went with Caboose.

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I couldn’t breathe. My airway was blocked and I gasped for oxygen. I have been wearing the same
helmet for years and all of a sudden it was too tight. Too tight around me, so tight I can’t breathe. I
can’t focus, my sight keeps flashing back to black and images slam against my skull. His voice is
everywhere, I can’t escape. Then he’s gone for a bit, in that single moment my mother’s there.
Behind my eyes I see her, I see the women who raised me, but I can’t hear her. I want to reach out
and grab her but my hands are shaking too hard. I can’t make my feet move, can’t control the metal
attachment like normal. I’m hot all over and yet I’m shivering with a cold sweat. The world spins and
I hit the dirt the images of everything filling my head. I can’t breathe.

“Raz!” Washington’s boots enter the blurry edges of my vision. I cry. I don’t care anymore, I just
want it to stop. Make it stop.
Chapter 8

The sight of Raz in the fetal position is nothing short of horrifying. Washington snaps back to where Caboose follows behind him, grateful he took point.

“Run back to base. I’ll radio the others. Go!” Caboose doesn’t hesitate, running back faster than most of their team. Washington immediately turns on his radio.

*“Carolina! Get over here now!”* He cuts the line and quickly returns to Raz’s side.

Raz kicks and shakes violently, clawing roughly at the metal of his helmet. What scares Wash the most are the sobs. The strangled cries coming from within the confines of Raz’s helmet are appalling. He kneels beside the convulsing soldier and takes hold of his arms trying to still them.

“Raz. It’s Washington. Calm down. Breathe.” Another loud gasping scream escapes Raz. Frantic hands grip back onto him as the desperate hyperventilating continues. Wash can think of no other choice, he knew that at times of panic nothing felt more claustrophobic than being inside one’s helmet, so he unclasped the metal keeping it in place. When the helmet fell away what Washington saw paralyzed him.

Long tears streamed down a small round face. The evidence of battle scars though present did little to cut into the cute soft features of the face. Short black hair spiked out where it had attached to the helmet. A button nose crested finely over thin cracked lips. There was an angry flush to the beige pale skin and the tears escaped eyes that were squeezed tight. Washington cupped the back of the neck that spasmed in the waves of pain that washed over the body in his arms. The female body in his arms. The sound of approaching footsteps behind him finally snapped Washington out of his daze.

“Raz. Raz, listen to me. I’m going to put your helmet back on. I promise you can still breathe with it on. Just keep breathing you’ll get through this.” Her sobs continued coming and she showed no sign of acknowledging him, but he did it anyway. It was going to be bad enough calming Raz down Wash didn’t want to have to deal with explaining to the others what was going on at the same time. Especially, since he had no clue himself. All he knew is that he had to get Raz back to base.

Turning around Carolina was standing there with Caboose. They all had their helmets on again but Wash could tell Caboose was upset.

“Caboose, buddy. Raz needs to be carried back to the base. Can you do that?” Caboose sprang over.

“Sure I can.” He lifted Raz like she weighed nothing. Then he started talking to her. “It is alright sad Raz. You are going to be alright. We will read you a bedtime story and you can rest. Then we will bake you some cookies and make you sandwiches so you will feel all better.”

Raz wasn’t listening and kept crying in Caboose’s arms all the way back. It began to confuse him. “Why do you keep crying? Are you hurt? Did someone shoot you? Or stab you? Was it Tucker’s fault?” They were almost to the base.

“Caboose, hurry and get Raz to the medical room. I’ll explain everything to you later.” Carolina prompted him forward.

“Okay. And then I will know how to help Raz feel better.” He took off with Raz shaking back and forth in his arms.
Washington followed closely after. His mind was still buzzing. Raz was a girl, this whole time. Why had they thought she was a he? It’s not like anyone had told them directly, it was only the fact she wore male armor. Raz had just presented himself—ur, herself— as a man. Was that sexist? It hurt his brain, but at least now he knew what that suspicion was. Something was off about Raz, it just wasn’t what he had feared.

Caboose set Raz down on the medical table and everyone crowded in the room. Except for Sarge who was held back by Lopez.

“Should we call Doc?” Simmons asked, worried.

“I don’t think it will help.” Wash put out. “Physically, there’s nothing wrong with Raz. But…”

Agent Washington went over to one of the cupboards and pulled out a needle and bottle of medicine.

“Someone remove the plating over Raz’s elbow.” He orders as he sterilized the needle. Simmons did so and was surprised to see the skin underneath. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had forgotten that he’d never seen any part of Raz outside of armor. Which felt wrong considering how close they had become since returning to this outpost. “Move aside Simmons.”

Simmons stepped away as Wash moved in with the prepped needle. He stuck Raz and inserted the medicine. The light thrashing and whimpering died shortly after as Raz fell to sleep.

“What was that Wash?” Grif asked stepping beside him in front of Raz’s sleeping form.

“A sedative.” Tucker watched Wash.

“How’d you know where you find it so fast?” he asked behind his Freelancer friend.

“This isn’t my first panic attack.” He replied sadly. Tucker took off his helmet.

“So what do we do now?” A somber mood swept over them.

Caboose also took off his helmet and circled it around with his hands awkwardly.

“Miss Carolina, will you tell me what happened to Raz now?” he asked.

“I’m not quite sure myself Caboose. Raz just had what’s known as a panic attack. They can happen to people when they’re put under stress or have a history of trauma.” Caboose looked even more confused. “His brain told him he was under attack and he believed it.”

Wash winced. “Actually Carolina, I have some news.” As they rounded on him Church appeared.

“I’ll do the honors buddy.” He turned from Washington to the group. Looking from his newest companion to his older ones. “Raz isn’t a he. She’s a girl.”

Tucker dropped his helmet.

“I know, I know. I was shocked too. But that’s not even the biggest news. I don’t know exactly what’s going on in her head, but in that short time I was in there I felt and saw things nobody should have to deal with.”

“That’s why you broke down to Delta, so you could progress everything you experienced there.”

“Um, yeah I guess I did. Took me a bit to get everyone situated. The thing is there’s a lot of shit doing on for Raz. And I mean a fucking gigantic amount of shit. And I think it has something to do
“What do I got to do with it?” Sarge protested from the doorway. “I’m the one who got attacked.”

“Yeah sure, you were. But this actually isn’t the first time is it?” Church shot back.

Sarge avoided his gaze and cleared his throat several times. “Well, maybe.”

“No even since that first day Raz has very clearly disliked Sarge. I don’t blame her, I hate him too. But where I dislike most of you, Raz has gone out of her way to be friendly with all of us, all of us except Sarge.”

“But why? We only met Raz on the transport ship and Sarge did nothing to make him angry. I- I mean her angry.” Simmons’ voice cracked, the realization that he’d spilled most of his guts to a girl making his cheeks go red.

“I don’t know. But for the time being, I think we should keep Sarge far away from Raz.”

Carolina felt Church come back into her neural net. “Agreed. When she wakes up we’ll see if we can get to the bottom of all of this.”

Looking around everyone was upset and Agent Carolina was feeling the same way.

“Lopez, you and I will stay and get her out of her armor, get her comfortable. The rest of you go off to bed, we’ll deal with this tomorrow.”

Wash regarded the prone body on the medical cot. Even with his paranoia, Raz had been a pleasant change of companionship to him and to think it might all be over was hard to swallow. He took comfort in knowing the dose he administered would last her through the night, so at least she’d sleep well.

Carolina helped strip Raz of her armor and was still shocked by the person she found inside. The Raz that silently stood against her or beside her always seemed like the hardest type of person. Yet her face and body were soft, cute even. The sweat-soaked undergarments reeked, but Carolina just draped a blanket on top of her. The sight of her metal leg cleared up some old questions but created new ones also. What had cost her her leg? Where did all those scars come from? She knew that the mere memory of the battles fought could be more painful than the wounds suffered.

[Sorry Carolina.]

[What for Church?]

[About everything. Being in her head. It- It put things into perspective.]

{Do you think you could do it again?}

[I don’t think so.]

{Alright. Let’s get some sleep.}

Carolina left the med bay and returned to her own quarters. The night was a mix of fitful sleep and nightmares.
I stirred to the faint glow of sunlight. My head hurt but for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t woken by my alarm. My skin brushed the thin fabric of a blanket and my head rested on a lumpy pillow. It felt nice. My arms and legs ache like they always did but it was nowhere near the throb of waking up with armor plating shoved into muscle from sleeping wrong. In fact, rolling over I feel more rested than… Wait. My skin is open, I’m in a bed, it’s morning. What happened? The last thing I remember we were at the dining table. They’d been eating. I had been collecting the plates. Red. I saw red. They had all been looking at me, and I was angry, but also scared.

‘Obey’

Never.

Looking down I see the hollow of my stomach instead of the strong metal plating I’m so used to seeing. It’s sickening.

“How are you doing?” I jolt at the words.

Glancing up, the pale blue glow of Church hovers a few feet from my face. I grimace at him.

“That bad huh?” I go to stand, to search for my armor but when the blanket falls away I clutch at it. I want to yell at Church to get out, but he’s not inside my head now. Just then Donut strolls through the door holding a platter of food.

“‘Morning Raz. I brought you breakfast.” He chirps in his usual happy manner but then he sees me. “Oh my goodness.”

I want to both pummel him and flee all at the same time. I hold the blanket closer.

“I never knew that our signature badass was taking should poor care of herself. This is unacceptable.”

He marches over and brings his hands up near my head. I snarl at him, but he doesn’t back away. He runs his fingers through my greasy choppy hair. His touch is so strange, gentle and it sends a tingle down my spine.

“You need a serious makeover.” I hardly hear him because for the first time the smell of the breakfast he brought hits my nose. When was the last time I had hot food? I can’t even remember anymore. I clear my throat.

“Do-” my voice is scratchy and hoarse but I manage, “Donut, could I have some of that?”

“Well sure Cupcake. I made it just for you.” Just as he’s about to hand over what looks like a bowl of piping hot oatmeal he pulls back. “Wait! You can talk?!”

I groan the food just out of reach. “Donut.”

“Oh, right.” He hands me the bowl and a spoon and I barely hold back my enthusiasm as I scoop some of it into my mouth. It burns, but the feeling of the hot goo is divine.

“I think she likes it.” Church quips as I shove more into my mouth, tears prickling at my eyes because of the heat. The next second he’s gone. I ignore Donut’s ranting about how bad I smell and
how dirty I am. The only thing I care about is the heavenly warmth that filled my mouth and stomach. Shortly after Donut leaves rambling about shampoo and perfume Washington knocks on the open entrance. I stiffen.

“Can we come in?” he asks softly.

I’m painfully aware that my face is out in the open, but I have the faintest memory of Wash talking to me yesterday. I eventually nod.

“Okay, guys. She’s-” He’s cut off by Caboose and Grif running into the room.

“Raz. I am so happy you are okay. And that it was no one’s fault you were crying. Because if someone made you, our pretty scary friend, cry then they must have been a very scary person and I do not think I could handle them.”

“And I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened, but I should’ve just followed Sarges orders. None of this would’ve happened.” Grif was on the verge of tears and the confession was so heartfelt that it punched the entire room. He only ever got this emotional over a.) food b.) sleep c.) his things or d.) all of the above.

Impulsively I lift my hand and ruffle his curls. I can’t bring myself to smile but when he looks at me I believe my face is light. Although it’s been a very long time since I’ve looked in a mirror.

Carolina approaches behind Caboose and crosses her arms. “Church informed us you can talk.”

Fuck, cat’s out of the bag. Rumpling the blanket in my lap in my fist I don’t make eye contact. I actually liked these bumbling idiots, now it was over.

“Why did you hide this from us?” Carolina’s voice was kind, bordering on hurt. I meet her gaze and her striking green eyes held no anger.

Finding words is difficult after so long ignoring them and when they surface I cough over the sore burn in my throat. Wash hands me a water bottle and I try again.

“Habit.” I croak between gulps.

“You regularly go around wearing male armor and don’t talk so people will assume you’re a man?” Carolina wasn’t accusatory just inquiring and I nod. “Why?”

They all watched me and I knew they deserved the truth. Even though forming the words hurt I started near the beginning.

“Several years ago, during the Great War, I was sent on a mission. It was a failure and I was the only survivor.” I cut out the painful details that make my eyes sting. “My armor was damaged and I was injured. Before e-vac could reach me I took up one of my fallen teammates armor. I hadn’t noticed the fact it was male armor, just that it was the least damaged. When I was rescued I couldn’t speak and when they started calling me things like ‘son’ I realized what had happened. No one knew who I was or that I was a girl. I somehow kept up the ruse until they figured out my vocal cords were hurt.” I break for more water.

“After that everyone just assumed I was a man and by the time my voice healed I didn’t want to correct them. I started just letting them continue to think I was a stoic mute man who could handle his own shit. Instead of dealing with people taking one look at me and thinking I was someone’s fragile little sister who needed protection.”
“Was this before or after you were recruited for Project Freelancer?” Church asks over my shoulder.

“Before.” I notice Wash. “And I left Freelancer because I found out their soldiers had co-ed showers and locker rooms.”

At first Washington smirks recalling their one-sided conversation where he’d asked about that, then he frowns again.

“I still don’t understand why are you so fixated on keeping people from discovering your identity? I get wanting to prove yourself I suppose, but once you have why does it matter? You’ve seen Carolina, none of us think any less of her just because she’s a woman. Fuck, her and Texas are two of the most badass people I know.” When I don’t answer he presses further. “I mean look at you. You’ve been living off packaged rations, going weeks between showers, sleeping in your armor, all to avoid the off chance we’ll catch you out of it?”

“Yes.” My voice breaks as my throat closes off. I feel so exposed, like any moment a bullet’s going to find its way into my chest. “I want you all to leave.”

“Raz we jus-” I interrupt Carolina before she can explain herself.

“I can’t be seen like this any longer. Get out.” I close my eyes and refuse to open them until I’m sure they’re gone.

The next week goes by in a blur. Donut insists I bathe and gives me a haircut. I go around mostly in armor still but I allow them the sight of my face. My helmet never returning to comfortable after the memory of suffocating in it came back. Seeing myself in the mirror startles me every time. I act like it’s back to normal, but it isn’t. Not with me and not with them. I still do Grif’s chores and help Simmons on his projects. Polish Donut’s armor with him and spar with Carolina. Wash seems to enjoy striking up a conversation. Caboose, Tucker, and Church also come around with their own adventurous activities to do. I don’t see Sarge around and I’m glad, being myself again was hard enough. It’s all just an act though. Soon everything will be ready and it’ll all be over.
Chapter Summary

Trigger warning, this chapter deals with the effects of abuse and suffering of PTSD. Read with caution. However, a happy ending.

Chapter Notes

The final chapter. Longer, but hopefully worth it. If you've made it this far, thank you. Hope you've enjoyed it.

That morning they all woke up to a surprise. As they shifted awake on their bunks they each felt the touch a box at their feet. The boxes all identical except for size, wrapped in shiny grey wrapping paper.

Lopez not actually sleeping turns on after his recharge. He finds his package on his workbench. Curious he opens it and reads the note he finds inside. He recognizes the handwriting.

‘Now maybe they’ll listen to you.’ Behind the note is a small metal component. A new vocalizer. Lopez doesn’t need to have it activated to know that it’s English.

Carolina is always up early, it’s second nature. It wasn’t really that she was a morning person, she just forced herself to be up and ready. In her bunk, there were two packages. Church came alive in her unit.

“Morning Carolina.” He greeted.

Carolina walked over to her desk with the two boxes in her hands. On one was her name and the other had Church’s.

“What are those?” He inquired beside her ear.

“No clue.” She ripped open hers and finds a note.

‘Don’t burn yourself out Carolina. The universe needs people like you.’

Lifting the metal piece of equipment out Church whistles. “That’s a superpower upgrade. Open mine.”

“Patience.” Carolina moves over to Leonard’s box and they read the note left for him.

‘Sorry. Hope the future is brighter than the past.’ Church’s gift was a high-quality data file that had superior storage and speed on anything they had. Basically, the equivalent a really nice new outfit to an A.I.

Simmons stirred due to the crash of the package being kicked off his bunk. Hazily, he got himself
suited up before noticing the wrapped box. He thought at first it might be a prank, but ignored the itch in his mind and opened it against his better judgment. Pleasantly the contents of the box didn’t explode. The words on his note made his throat throb.

‘Don’t let anyone tell you who you are. Even the best men can’t recognize what they don’t understand.’ The books inside were the same as those his father had denied him before he enlisted.

Caboose enjoyed mornings. They brought the joy of a new day. When he saw the present he beamed.

“Oh? Someone’s left me a present.” He ripped off the wrapping paper like a child on Christmas. He pulled out the metal chain and smiled wide at the shine of the sun reflecting off the dog-tag. Engraved on it was ‘RAZ 0493’

“This must be Raz’s.” That’s when he noticed the note at the bottom of the box. “Oh a note, it must be for me.”

“Dear, Caboose. That is me. Hold onto this for me, I want you to remember me. Ah, this must be from Raz, but I would always remember Raz. I wonder what she means? Also, there are cookies and sandwiches on the top shelf in the kitchen I left for you. Oh boy! Those are my two favorite things!” Caboose ran from his room, the note still clutched in his fist.

Donut got into his package and was filled to the brim with glee.

“Someone got all this for me?” He was overjoyed since there was the best tanning oil, massage lotion, and armor polish money could buy stacked together for him. His note was very simple.

‘Don’t use it all in one place.’

Wash had been awake for some time, but he’d been attempting at the belief he could be lazy and stay in bed. When he hit the object at the foot of his bed he glanced down through his fingers. The shimmer of the wrapping surprised him and he sat upright. Cautiously he brought the tiny rectangular gift into his lap. Pulling away the thin paper Wash tried to imagine what it was. His eyes widened at the sight that sat on the cushion in the box. It was a decorative throwing knife. The intricate patterning of both its Damascus and the engraving was so exquisite it made his jaw drop a tad. The hilt was mostly black with a strip of yellow running along the tang and fading into a sky blue at the bottom. Washington had never seen a blade so beautiful before and he’d seen the alien sword Tucker had.

Who had done this? There was no note, just a mystery.

Tucker had destroyed the box to get inside it immediately, because, ‘Fuck yeah.’ It didn’t blow his mind away and honestly was a mild disappointment. It was a journal. A plain leather back journal. Boring, but the note attached to it made Tucker think twice about it.

‘For all those pick-up lines. All the crazy ideas. All the plans. Fill up these pages so you can get out of your head and into something else. Bow Chicka Bow Wow.’ That was his line.

Grif had this awful feeling under his skin. Maybe it was the fact he was awake before noon, but he couldn’t shake it to go back to sleep. The grip of sleep evaded him until he felt wide awake. He regarded his package pensively, it’d been an awfully long time since Sarge had bugged him. Eventually, the color of the wrapping allowed him to unwrap it.

‘Grif. You’re alright. I hope you find whatever it is you’re searching for. Your present is in the common room, although it might be bittersweet.’ Something in those words slapped his heart, maybe
because it sounded like a goodbye. He didn’t say goodbye to people often, but when he did it hurt long after he’d done it.

Rushing out of his bunk he ran into a sniveling Simmons.

“What’s your problem?” Grif asked as Donut joined them in the corridor.

Simmons wiped away the few tears that had escaped from his eyes and held out his gift.

“This was on my bed this morning.” The books looked stupid to Grif but from the way, Simmons’ voice shook he figured they meant something to him.

“Someone gave me a big present too. It shot straight up to my heart and spread all over me.” Donut added in his normal Donut fashion.

“All good, but if you could let me by.” Grif fought through the hall and they followed him as he b-lined to the common room. Passing the kitchen they met Caboose and Carolina. Tucker and Washington entered from the other wing.

“What’s the hurry?” Carolina mused as Grif passed them.

“My gift is in the common room,” he answered.

“You got a gift too?” Washington asked pulling Grif’s attention.

“I think we all did.” Carolina inclined. “What did you get Wash?”

Washington pulled out the knife he woke up to and showed it to Carolina and the others.

“Seriously! That’s sick. Why didn’t I get a cool knife like that?” Tucker complained.

“What you get?” Wash shot back, tucking the blade away.

“Just a lame journal.” He mumbled.

Caboose skipped over with a large plate of cookies in one hand and another with sandwiches in the other. “Raz left these for me. She’s so awesome!”

Washington caught the swing of the dog-tag that fell on Caboose’s chest.

“What’s that around your neck Caboose?”

“Oh, that’s what I found in my present. It’s Raz’s. Yeah, she asked me to watch it for her, because she knows I am the best.”

“Well, that explains it. All this must be Raz’s doing.”

Church interrupts Carolina.

“Except, where did she get all this stuff. I know for a fact that yours and my gifts are exclusive items that you can only get in specific places.”

“Yeah, not to mention how expensive all this stuff is.”

“Whatever. I just want to see what’s in.” The door connecting to the common room slid open. The sight of yellow armor peeking out of the couch made Grif lose his train of thought. “Sis?”
The figure turned and showed off the bright smile on her face.

“Dex! Took you long enough.” She stood and strolled over to the stunned faces of Red team.

“But you were dead,” Simmons observed in shock.

“It takes more than that to kill Kaikaina Grif. Well, are you going to hug me, bitch?” Kai waved her arms out to Dexter but he wasn’t in a rush so Tucker jumped in.

“How’ve you been girl?” He encased her in a hug and she giggled.


“Better now that you’re here.” Grif pulled them apart.

“That’s enough.” He turned to Kai and did give her a hug. That’s when the matter of the mystery presents returned to his mind. “Wait. How’d you get here? How’d you find us?”

They gathered in the common room as Sister started to retell her story.

“So I was busy in Blood Gulch, running all my parties and stuff. When out of nowhere this guy shows up with this crate and a message. He was kind hot but he was all business, wouldn’t even stay the night. Anyways, the message said that all of you were here at this base and that the crate needed to be delivered. It asked me to fly it over here and even had the lease to a new fighter jet. So I thought hell yeah, and as soon as I got someone to run Blood Gulch I came. When I got close this chick sent me a transmission, and boy was she a hotty. All cute looking and then badass as hell when she talked, could do things to a girl, you know?” Sister rushed through her words so fast if you weren’t paying close enough attention it might have all been gibberish.

“Wait. What?!”

“Anyway, she asked me to land a little ways away and meet her and I was like, okay. She opened the crate and wrapped the stuff up like Christmas presents. Then, she and I stayed together in the jet last night and this morning she woke me up and told me to sit in here until you showed up. And now you’re here.”

“Um, Kaikaina.” Wash caught her attention.

“Oh, hey. You’re that cop.”

“I’m not a cop.” She rolled her eyes. “Did Raz say what this was about?”

“No. She just said thanks and gave me this.” Sister raised the handle to Raz’s space sword. The Freelancer’s eyes shot open since they realized what it meant before the others.

“Why’d she give you this? It only works for her. It’s useless until…” Tucker caught on just as his mouth did. Washington ran out of the room like a bullet fired.

He went first to the bunk they’d moved Raz to after her episode, but found nothing. Then he sprinted across the base to the old storage closet. Banging through the door Wash found a note stuck to the back wall.

‘Thanks for accepting me. You all felt a little like home.’

“No. no, no, no…” Washington ran back to the others. They were no longer in the common room since Carolina had got them moved outside.
“She’s-” He panted.

“I know.” Carolina snapped, jaw tight, eyes darting around. “We have to find her.”

Just then Sarge crested over the hill. “Your soldier is up there.” He pointed to the opposite cliffside than Raz had gone to when in a panic. Washington and Carolina took off. Caboose behind them and Simmons taking up the rear. Church boosted Carolina’s speed unit so she raced up the cliff in record time. It wasn’t a second too soon because Carolina spotted Raz just as her foot left the ridge. Pulling out her grappling hook Carolina shot it out. It connected to Raz’s shoulder and she was yanked back.

Carolina grabbed Raz and pinned her against the rockface. “What are you doing?”

Raz didn’t answer. Didn’t say anything and maybe a week ago that would’ve been fine for Carolina. But she knew Raz could answer now, she just wouldn’t.

“Answer me! What do you think you were doing?” Carolina didn’t know why she was getting so emotional. However, when Raz refused to speak she ripped both of their helmets off. Raz looked distant, a million miles away in her eyes. Carolina felt her hair blow in the wind and heard Washington arrive behind them. Ever since Raz was revealed Carolina had felt closer to her than before. She’d always respected the silent soldier who could hold their own and listen, but it was on a whole other level now. Carolina related to the struggle of getting others attention. Knew that fight personally. Yet Raz was just about to throw all of it away.

“Don’t you know what you mean to us!” She shoved Raz against the rock and finally got her to look back. It wasn’t just Raz, it was all that she symbolized. All the people they’d lost.

“Caboose, no!” Simmons yelled behind them. Caboose put a hand on Carolina’s shoulder.

“Carolina, why are you holding Raz?” Carolina dropped her hands but didn’t answer Caboose.

“Raz?”

Raz looked away from Caboose. Stepped away from all of them.

“Caboose you’re supposed to be at the base enjoying your cookies.” Her voice was low and sad.

“But, sandwiches and cookies are meant to be shared. And I would not like to share my cookies with Tucker or Grif. No, I would not like that. I want to share them with you.” His voice was so light that it made the air catch in her throat. She continued on her path back to the edge.

“Raz,” Simmons called out, voice shaky.

“Go back to base Simmons.”

“Raz we’re not-”

“I said to go back to base, you little shit. You have work to do, important work, you can’t afford to be out here!” The words were harsh and mean, but they held a weight that punched Simmons right in the gut. Raz choked but continued. “And I don’t want to share cookies with you Caboose. I don’t have room in my life for that.” It cut her throat to say it but it made Caboose turn away.

“Come on Caboose.” Carolina cooed. She knew that the important thing to do was get the fragile ones away, and hope Wash and Church could handle the situation. She knew they would do a better job at this than she could.

When it was just them Washington inched toward Raz.
“Raz, come on.” He coaxed. She stepped closer to the ledge. “Please. Please just talk to me.”

She collapsed to the ground and sat there. Sighing, Wash heard the pain in her voice.

“I should’ve died. When I crashed on Chorus. When I was shot at by countless enemies in battle. I should’ve died when everyone else in my troop did.” Her voice broke and she punched the ground. “BUT, I didn’t.”

Washington came in and sat beside her, taking her hand.

“That’s a good thing. You survived. We all survived and now we can keep living.”

Ripping her hand away from his she turns away. “It’s not living. Breathing. I can’t keep fighting through each conscious moment just to survive.”

“We can help you. You just have to let us know what it is you’re fighting.”

Epsilon stayed back, watching as Washington tried to reassure their new teammate. He’s come a long way from the Project.

“I can’t.” her throat cut out. Wash pulled her into him.

Church figured it was the time to intervene.

“Raz?” Her stark, teary, broken brown eyes looked at him. “If you want I can enter your neural implant. I can see what it is that you’re facing.”

Raz looked down and took some steadying breaths. Staring back at him she nodded slowly. Church took the plunge.

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The cold rush of panic is no longer there in her mind. It was all numb, a grey haze. Soundless. Church passed through the tomb of the place. Raz stood before him suddenly. No armor, just civilian clothes. She looks younger, with fewer scars and her hair is longer.

[Pull out the memories.] She shakes her head furiously. [I can’t help unless I understand.]

A man’s there. In armor. He doesn’t speak or do anything but Church instantly hates him. The way the surroundings pulse around in pain make Omega jump to the forefront of Church’s mind. He collects himself, it’s just a memory. Words fall out that make Raz scream.

You have to obey my orders. You have no choice, you have to obey me.

The voice is eerily similar to Sarge’s and Church realizes why he was her enemy. Sarge reminds her of this figure from her nightmares. The one he witnesses push her around even in her mind.

[What did this guy do to you?] The answer horrifies him. Makes him want to vomit if that was something computer programs could do. A man’s grunts and groans fill their ears. Raz cries, both in the memory and in the present.

Obey

Church needed to leave. The atmosphere was setting off his own issues again, and he couldn’t handle another meltdown.
I felt Church leave my head. Sucking in the air the sting of it burning my lungs.


I choke. The images Church awoke scratching my eyeballs and closing my airway.

“What happened, Church?”

“We need to go kill a bastard.” Rage filled Church’s voice and it made me open my eyes. I’d never told anyone. It had just slowly burnt me alive from the inside. Yet here they were, trying to understand and help.

“No, you don’t,” I say quietly.

“Of course we do. He hurt you. Used you.” Washington just glanced from Church down at me and I sat up, calming my breathing.

“You don’t have to kill him because I already did.” The silence sat between us and they waited until I could continue. “It was after the attack. I was more or less alright, but when I searched the bodies of my team I found him. My commanding officer. He was hurt, bleeding, helpless.”

“Just like I had been. And when he asked me for help I just stared at him. I left him like that and he bled to death. But it wasn’t enough.”

Washington wrapped his arms around me properly and hugged me.

“Death isn’t the answer Raz. You’re a survivor. You can overcome this, I know you can.”

It wasn’t fair. I’d gone for years without him, he was dead. I’d grown stronger, made myself strong enough to defeat any enemy. Yet his ghost still haunts me, keeps me awake at night. I had gotten to a place where it didn’t bother me as much and all it took was one comment and all of it came crashing down. He still controlled me.

I cry into Washington. All the years of frustration flowing out, all of the bottled fear choking my heart. It’s strange. Originally, I’d thought I’d avoid Wash. He was a man in power and I always hated those. Yet, letting all of the pain out with someone else there felt different. It took the weight away. I remember the way when I cried myself to sleep the burden would just crush my chest until I couldn’t breathe. I fought back the feelings because of how awful it was to give in. But here in someone else’s arms, the torment lightened. The tears began to slow and the sobs ceased. I even did something I haven’t done since I woke up on that battlefield.

I laughed. It was a pitiful laugh, but it burst through my body like a firework. It was so absurd but I leaned away from Washington as he stiffened.

“You know, before this, I was a chatterbox. No one could get me to shut up. Ever.” Another sob choked off the words but Wash’s face relaxed a little. He didn’t say anything, just watched me. We held hands, I held his as an anchor to the present and he probably held mine to make sure I didn’t change my mind.

Wiping away the wetness around my eyes I manage to ask. “How do you know it will get better?”

“Because it already did. I’m alive. And I have these losers to help me get through today.” We peer down the cliff at where the others seem to be standing around talking. Church is gone I realize.
“I never thought I’d need people again. Especially, not people like you.”

“You can be surprised.” He took a deep breath. Pulling on my hand he gets me to look at him. “Raz, you’re one of us now.”

“But how can they forgive me for this?” I shake my head, I never thought I’d have to think about this.

“Are you kidding? Caboose shot Church with a tank. They shot Sarge in the head. I’ve shot Donut through the chest. Carolina’s constantly beating Tucker up for making a pass at her. That’s just how we are. The fact that you’re actually nice to us is the weirdest thing about you.”

I feel another laugh come up and it shakes my chest. I punch Wash in the arm.

“Hey~”

“Tell anyone about this and you’ll see how nice I can be.” Huffing in return he goes to get up.

“Come on. I think Caboose is down there driving Carolina insane.” He gives me his hand and I stand beside him. I go to collect my helmet.

“Caboose didn’t really eat those cookies, did he?”

“I think so. Why?”

“Because I haven’t baked since I was tiny. They’re probably poison.”

We head down the cliff into the boxed canyon. It was useless and stupid to stay there, but we did because it felt like a home. Being with those idiots my interesting adventure began to feel like home.

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