Deconstruction

by Nova_Bomb

Summary

A direct continuation of S13.

Epsilon shatters in Tucker's head and it goes about as well as you'd expect.

Notes

This whole fic is mostly just an excuse for me to make my favourite characters suffer because I am awful. If suffering and angst is your cup of tea, hang on tight.
Tucker’s pretty sure there’s a rule about not going on a walking trip before breaking in new sneakers. It’s probably reasonable to assume that the same rule can be applied to high-tech power armour and using it to escape a ship filled with mercenaries who want to kill you.

The Meta’s old combat suit is tight in some places and overly loose in others; it was made for a man twice his size and Tucker feels like a child playing dress-up in adults’ clothes. Though with few options available to them, uncomfortable chaffing is preferable to death. Besides, beauty for the price of pain or whatever the fuck chicks say. This armour makes him look like a total badass.

Sparks fly from the door where Charon’s soldiers are cutting their way in. Everyone has their weapons trained on the door, ready for whatever comes through. The room is as defensible as they can make it and Tucker can only hope that Wash, Carolina and the others don’t leave them hanging too long. The Red and Blue simulation troopers of Project Freelancer have the capacity to be legitimate soldiers every now and then, but Tucker’s positive that they’re far past that quota as of late and he’s not keen on pushing their luck.

Church’s hologram hovers in the air at his shoulder. When he speaks up, his voice is uncommonly demure. “Hey, umm I just want you guys to know that out of everyone I’ve ever met, I hate you all the least.”

It’s probably the maximum sentimentality that Church is capable of.

Tucker rolls his shoulders and squares them to the door; ready as he’ll ever be. “See you on the other side, Church.”

The sparks at the door abruptly stop and everyone in the room collectively holds their breath. Church disappears in a bright flash of light and Tucker only has time to draw half a breath.

Pain hits him all at once.

Sharp as a knife at the top of his spine, the agony grips every muscle in his body. The noise comes before he even has time to scream. An indecipherable roar in his ears. Like a marching band abruptly starting to play, except there’s no rhythm, no tune – only discord. The sound stampedes through his skull and he forgets his name, where he is and which way is up.

Tucker doubles over, his free hand flying to his head. His fingers clutch uselessly against the smooth faceplate of the EVA helmet in a futile attempt to stop the ear-splitting noise. But then Tucker hears voices within the cacophony. They’re shouting, screaming out over one another in panic and confusion. There’s so many of them and he can’t hear his own thoughts over the deafening clamour.

Are we okay? What happened?

Knock, knock, Tucker.

I’m scared.

We’re okay. It’ll be okay!
Someone is going to pay for this!

I think the logical choice would be to establish order.

You’re quite right.

“Tucker! What’s wrong?”

Someone calls out to him but he’s unsure whether it’s coming from inside of his head or not. Tucker can’t think or is he thinking too much? There’s too much happening at once, too many foreign thoughts and emotions. They swarm through his head with a violence that threatens to burst his skull and Tucker’s jaw aches with the force of his clenched teeth. What the fuck is happening to him?

“Forget that! The door’s coming down!”

Somehow, he finds the strength to lift his head in time to see the doors blow inward. The two halves hit the overturned table and fall to the side. In the hallway several mercs are kneeling with rifles trained on the group, flanked by two more holding rocket launchers.

A calm, synthetic voice is able to communicate over the dissonance. I would advise deploying your domed energy shield.

There’s some force behind his muscles that drives him forward. Tucker drills his fist into the floor and activates the bubble shield just as the mercs fire their projectiles. The rockets explode harmlessly on the surface of the barrier and when the shield falls, both Doc and Grif fire explosives of their own, obliterating the front line of soldiers.

Tucker finds himself moving up with his fellow sim troopers. Donut, Simmons, Caboose and Lopez lay down suppressive fire. The hallway is void of cover and the mercs fall back.

The hilt of Tucker’s sword feels like it’s burning a hole through his gauntlets – restless and eager.

Sick ‘em.

Tucker charges, vaulting over the table and racing down the corridor. A merc takes aim at Tucker but he drops into a slide and slashes at the man’s knees. A few shots from Tucker’s friends behind him are sufficient to put an end to the merc’s screams.

His momentum doesn’t stop.

Tucker is on his feet and moves to the next enemy. The soldier ducks a rocket that soars by and levels her rifle with his head. Unfortunately for her, she doesn’t have time to squeeze the trigger before Tucker puts his sword through her chest. He steps over the bodies of the fallen mercs, cut down by the others. A last man fires wildly at Tucker as he approaches. His overshields take the damage and Tucker finishes him off, slashing the merc from shoulder to hip.

The gunfire stops, but there isn’t a pause to breathe. Not in Tucker’s head.

He’s being picked apart, piece by piece. Hands rifle carelessly through his thoughts and memories. They sift through every experience and every emotion, like they’re cheap fucking trinkets in the bottom of a box at a pawn shop. The visions race through his mind faster than it takes for his heart to beat three times in his chest.

His body operates of its own volition, compelled forward by intention that isn’t his own. Tucker
speaks. “First hall clear. Move up.” They’re not his words and they come out of his mouth without permission.

Tucker’s feet move beneath him and he can hear steps behind him. He’s drowning inside his own skin but he can see multiple blips on his motion tracker around the corner.

*Oh! You can use your active camouflage and take them by surprise!*

All that’s left is his glowing energy sword when Tucker’s form turns transparent before his eyes. With a flick of the wrist, he deactivates the sword and rounds the corner. His HUD rapidly scans his surroundings. There are six mercenaries: three in front equipped with hard light shields and standard UNSC magnums; two flanked behind them with Charon patented hard light suppressors; and the last is armed with a deadly Charon binary rifle.

Tucker sticks close to the wall, moving past the shields towards the sniper. The merc must notice the distortion because he turns his rifle to track Tucker’s movement. He’s too slow. Tucker activates his sword and slices the rifle in two.

The other sim troopers round the corner on his motion tracker and open fire on the mercenaries. Enemy and friendly gunfire whizzes through the air around him.

“Tucker, look out!” someone shouts.

But the voices in his head are louder.

*Eliminate them!*

Tucker charges the sniper, who has tossed away his broken rifle and pulled out a long knife. The merc dodges a wild slash at his head and the heat of the energy sword passes close enough to blister the faceplate of his helmet. Ducking low, the sniper swipes at Tucker’s midsection and he can’t back away in time.

The voice is monotone and computerized. *Temporal distortion for the win, bitch.*

And then there is time.

The merc’s movement slows to a crawl. It’s impossible and incredible but Tucker can’t spare the brain power to dwell on it. Instead, he takes the opportunity to grab the combat knife and jam it into the junction of the man’s neck and shoulder.

Time snaps back to normal speed and the two mercenaries with suppressors who witnessed the spectacle are frozen on the spot.

“Did you fucking see that?!”

“Open fire!”

The shots are eaten up by Tucker’s overshields.

*Shields at thirteen percent! Watch out-

-Destroy them all!!*

Tucker lunges with his sword. Several shots punch through his shields and burning pain ignites his shoulder, ribs and hip. Tucker screams but no sound leaves his mouth. He tries to stop his momentum (or maybe just fall down) but his body doesn’t respond to his commands.
Fuck, fuck, fuck!

His armoured boot knocks one man to the ground. When the other tries to backpedal, Tucker
neglects his sword in favour of slamming the merc’s skull into the bulkhead, cracking his helmet
and leaving a sizeable dent in the steel wall. The soldier on the floor tries to recover with little
luck. Tucker grabs the man by the throat, hauls him to his feet and puts his sword through his
chest.

When Tucker spins to face the remaining enemies, he finds them already dead.

The other sim troopers stand transfixed, gaping back at him.

Hostiles eliminated.

Tucker is panting hard. Every breath, every thought, every beat of his heart is agony. His armour’s
bio-monitors wail in alarm, only adding to the commotion. The shots from the hard light
suppressors are burnt flesh fused with the melted polymer of his drive suit but it all falls second to
the voices, still battling for supremacy in his head. He writhes against them, against the iron grip
on his limbs. It’s an excruciating game of tug-o-war on his brain stem, tearing his mind apart.

Something gives.

Tucker’s sword drops from his hand, the hilt clattering to the deck, and he nearly falls with it as his
legs threaten to give out.

His hands find his head again, desperate to ward off the havoc in his mind. “What the fuck is
happening!?”

“Well, you just beat the ever living daylights out of Hargrove’s men.”

“That was fucking brutal, dude.”

“We need to get to the hangar for extraction. Wash and Carolina will be here soon!”

“Um, Tucker, can you ask Church if I can ride shotgun?”

The voices rise in a crescendo, threatening to crush him, and Tucker tries to block out the sound
but there’s no reprieve.

“Everyone shut up!”

Tucker breathes and for a brief, spectacular moment everyone does shut up; the shouting gone
silent. Tucker breathes and only a single voice speaks. It belongs to Church.

“Hey, guys. If you’re hearing this, it means you did it…” It’s a recording. The message plays in his
head, impossibly fast, but Tucker understands every word. It’s a goodbye. Church is gone and he’s
not coming back this time.

“Tucker, we need to move!”

The riot of voices slowly returns but Tucker can feel his anger mounting. Church is gone.

This Charon’s fault; Hargrove’s fault. He’s to blame for everything – the entire reason they ended
up on Chorus. The reason the Feds and Rebels were never able to make peace. The rage coils
through him, alive and breathing, devouring everything in its path. It burns through his blood and
there’s no telling where he ends and the rage begins. Tucker drowns in it.
Hargrove will pay!

“Uh, Tucker, are you okay?”

A voice crackles in his ear – from his COM. “Tucker!” Wash’s voice. “We’re about to board the ship. What’s your status?”

Hargrove’s the cause of so much death!

If it wasn’t for him, Church would still be here.


Tucker retrieves his sword hilt from the floor and looks up to the others who are all watching him warily. “We’re going after Hargrove.”

The fear strikes Wash hard like a blow to the chest because something’s not right. Tucker’s voice is all wrong – as though there are two voices speaking at once – and one does not belong to him.

Carolina is standing in the doorway of the cockpit with her weapon ready. She and Wash exchange a quick look before he speaks up again.

“Tucker, don’t be stupid. Wait for backup! We’re almost there!”

Grif chimes in his agreement. “Yeah, fuck that guy. Let’s get out of here before he sends more assholes after us.”

There’s an uneasy pause and Wash’s dread is only growing. He resists the urge to pace the limited room in the cockpit.

“Hargrove must die.”

“Tucker, wait!” Wash shouts.

A commotion erupts on the other side of the COM as the Pelican is pulling into the hangar of the Staff of Charon. There’s shouting, scuffling and Wash has no idea what’s happening.

“What the hell is going on?!” Carolina barks into the radio. “Epsilon, do you read me?”

Wash stalks back into the hold of the Pelican. The New Republic soldiers are exchanging worried glances and Kimball is looking from Carolina to Wash.

It’s Simmons’ voice that shrieks over the COM in reply. “Tucker just disappeared! He’s using the suit’s active camo!”

“The man’s on a rampage,” Sarge offers, “and I’ve got a bad feeling about it.”

Wash tries to backpedal. “Active camo? What are you talking about?”

“It turns out the creepy as fuck Chairman’s been hoarding old Freelancer stuff,” Grif explains. “He had the Meta’s armour and Tucker was using it to kick ass, but now he’s gone crazy!”
Wash’s voice breaks. “What?!”

“Is anyone else getting a bad sense of déjà vu?” Donut asks lightly, “and I’m not just talking about the armour.”

Doc’s manic voice filters over the radio. “That fool! Uncontrollable rage is my thing!”

The Pelican touches down in the hangar, but all eyes are on the two Freelancers. Wash tilts his head in confusion. “What do you mean? This has happened before?”

“You know, Donut might have a point,” Grif admits. “He did sort of sound like O’Malley.”

Carolina’s patience is wearing dangerously thin. “Who is O’Malley?!”

Simmons offers an explanation before Wash can speak up. “O’Malley was an evil computer virus that could possess people.”

“He was mean!” Caboose supplies helpfully.

“O’Malley was the Omega AI,” Wash elaborates, “but it was destroyed with Alpha and the others at the Freelancer facility. There’s no way it’s him.”

Carolina tries again to hail Church. “Epsilon? Church? Are you there?”

The radio crackles slightly in the silence as everyone holds their breath, waiting for a reply. The one that comes isn’t what they want to hear. “Church is gone.”

The radio is solemnly quiet after that and Carolina’s hand drops from her helmet. “Oh no.”

Wash curses under his breath before addressing the others. “Sarge, get everyone to the hangar. We’ll regroup and figure out what to do from here.”

Sarge’s only word of assent is a small grunt and the radio goes silent.

The Pelican bay door opens and with a fleeting look back at the Freelancers, Kimball turns to bark orders at her men. “Dr. Grey, stay with Matthews. Everyone else move out and secure the hangar!”

They waste no time, snapping quick salutes and filing out of the Pelican with weapons at the ready. Dr. Grey looks warily in the direction of the Freelancers but quickly shunts her gaze back to Matthews, pretending to be preoccupied.

Carolina’s weapon is lowered as she glares down at the floor and Wash waits for her to speak. When she does, her voice is stern. “After the mountain temple, Epsilon told me he wasn’t failing – he just couldn’t handle running so much equipment.”

Wash’s brows furrow in confusion. “I don’t understand. The Meta’s armour has even more mods than you. How is he able to run them?”

The sound of gunfire is audible from the Pelican’s fuselage. Carolina’s head turns slightly in that direction, the hand on her weapon tightening. “I don’t think he is,” she admits. Her gaze abruptly turns back to Wash. “Epsilon has appeared to me as different AIs before. Do you think it’s possible that those fragments are running Tucker’s mods?”

Wash takes a moment to contemplate her words but his heart is quickly sinking with the revelation and its implications. “I’d say it’s more than possible.”
Carolina summarizes it all rather neatly. “So Epsilon might have splintered and now Tucker has those personality fragments all fighting for dominance in his head.”

Wash releases a heavy sigh as he bows his head, shaking it in disbelief. Just when they think they’re in the clear something else goes sideways. You’d think that Agent Washington would be used to it by now. He can count on one hand the number of times that things have gone right for him. But this is Tucker. This is his friend and somehow they need to figure this out.

The gunfire has ceased when the Freelancers exit the Pelican. There are a few scattered bodies of Hargrove’s men but the LZ is secure. Doc, the Reds and Caboose are all outside with Kimball and her men. From the commotion, they seem to be arguing.

“This isn’t up for debate!” Kimball shouts.

Sarge crosses his arms and scoffs. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t let the aqua-hulk wipe the floor with the Chairman,” he argues. “He sure as hell deserves it.”

Kimball shakes her head sharply, tone dangerously low. “What he deserves is to be locked up for the rest of his miserable life!”

“I’m pretty sure jail is preferable to death,” Simmons counters.

Surprisingly enough, it’s Jensen who speaks up. “But what about the rest of Charon?! Hargrove didn’t do this alone!”

“Enough!” Carolina barks.

The whole group turns to look at her. “Kimball is right,” she declares. “If we want to bring down all of Charon and everyone responsible we need Hargrove alive.”

Grif is the first to protest. “Great! Then you go get between the murderous lunatic with a sword and the man he wants to stab!”

Carolina’s chin drops in a glare that Wash knows can kill, even from behind her visor.

He hastily adds his input in hopes of keeping the situation from escalating any further. They have enough trouble on their hands without trying to kill one another. “What we need to do is get to the Chairman before Tucker and land this ship.”

Kimball levels him with a look. “And how exactly do you propose we do that?” she balks. “We have no idea where Hargrove or Tucker are, let alone the means to land this thing. Not without AI guidance! And your AI is gone!”

Her voice echoes through the hangar and no one says a word. All eyes slowly turn to the regulation blue soldier. Caboose hangs his helmet gloomily and lets his assault rifle drop limply to his side.

Kimball has the good grace to look ashamed and when she speaks again it’s much softer. “Without Epsilon, we’re flying blind.”

The silence weighs heavily on the group. She’s right.

A console on the nearby wall abruptly lights up.

“Pardon my interruption,” FILSS’s smooth, synthetic voice chimes in, “but I believe I can be of assistance.”
It’s not the best plan but it’s the only one they’ve got. Thanks to FILSS they’re only flying half-blind now.

They’ll split into four teams.

Team one is composed of the New Republic soldiers. Bitters, Palomo, Jensen and Smith will hold the hangar in case things go sideways and they need to make a hasty getaway. Captain Caboose will stay behind with them.

Since FILSS’s capacity to help is limited, Kimball, Simmons, Donut and Lopez will make for the AI core to unshackle her. Once team two removes the restrictions on her systems, FILSS should be able to take control of the ship and land it safely.

Carolina, Sarge, Doc and Grif make up team three. FILSS was able to provide the location of the Chairman: holed up on the bridge. They will head there to apprehend Hargrove, preferably before Tucker can get there and rip him limb from limb.

Which leaves team four – though one man can hardly be called a team.

Carolina pulls him aside as everyone is preparing to depart. “Wash, are you sure about this?”

He really isn’t. Team four is the distraction – to keep Tucker as far away from Hargrove as possible. With all the mods that his armour is equipped with and an alien plasma sword to boot, trying to take Tucker down with non-lethal force is as stupid as it is crazy. That being said, Wash is probably the most qualified for the job – and not because he’s crazy, but because he knows what he’s up against.

“I know Tucker and I know that armour – what it’s capable of. If I can get his attention, you and the others should be able to get to Hargrove first.”

Carolina doesn’t seem convinced. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Wash takes a deep breath. “I know. But I don't want to risk anyone else getting hurt, for their sake and Tucker’s.” Wash is acquainted with that particular brand of guilt all too well. But he doesn’t say that and neither does Carolina.

Instead she nods in understanding. “Good luck, Wash,” and with that she leaves him to join the rest of her team.

They are about to move out but Doc hesitates and jogs over, much to Carolina’s chagrin. “You should take this, Wash,” he says as he hands the Freelancer his medical device. “I used it to disrupt the Meta’s equipment once. Maybe it will work for Tucker.”

Wash turns the pistol-like device over in his hand before clipping it to the mag strip on his thigh. “Thanks, Doc. Good luck with the Chairman.”

The medic hefts his rocket launcher onto his shoulder, voice deepening. “Oh, I don’t need luck.” He laughs maniacally before jogging back to catch up with his team.

There’s small part of Wash that feels as though he should be more concerned about Doc and his
severe psychological issues. Then again he's not sure any of the sim troopers can exactly be classified as sane (himself included) so he casts the notion aside.

Wash collects his weapons and walks over to an access panel on the wall. “FILSS, can you tell me Tucker’s current location?”

There is a pause as the AI processes his request. “Negative. I’m afraid his AI has infiltrated my programming and is actively blocking all attempts at locating him.”

Surprise, surprise. Time to try something else, then.

“Could you direct me to the med bay?”

“Certainly!” she chimes happily. “Please take the door to your left and proceed to the elevator at the end of the hall.”

Wash takes off at a jog, wracking his brain for ideas. Once FILSS is unshackled she might have a better chance at pinpointing Tucker’s location but that isn’t assured. By the time team two completes their objective, it will likely be too late anyways.

Grasping at straws, Wash switches to Tucker’s COM-frequency and attempts to hail him as he steps into the elevator.

“The med bay is located on Deck 27,” FILSS informs helpfully.

Wash punches the button and feels the elevator lurch as it begins its ascent. If Tucker is listening on the other end of the COM, he says nothing in acknowledgement.

“Tucker, do you read me?”

Silence.

A small growl escapes him in his frustration. How can Tucker be so blind? The Chairman has nothing left to lose. He’ll do as much damage as he can in the time he’s got left. “Think about it, Tucker! This is what Hargrove wants!”

Still nothing.

The elevator doors open and FILSS guides Wash towards the med bay.

The path is strangely void of resistance, the majority of Charon’s soldiers probably diverted to defend the Chairman and to stop the others from reaching the AI core. There’s something comforting about not being important enough to send bad-guys after. Though realistically speaking, getting to the med bay doesn’t matter all that much if Wash can’t find Tucker. There has to be a way to shift his focus. If Omega is currently riding shotgun then he needs a different target for Tucker’s rage.

Wash suddenly has an idea.

It’s probably going to get him killed.

“You know Tucker, you really are a sorry excuse for a Captain.”

The med bay is just ahead and Wash pushes past the door into the room. Everything smells like sterilized steel and sharp antiseptic. Walking over to a tall cabinet, he begins rifling through its contents.
“How anyone could think you sim troopers were fit to command troops is insane. Shows how desperate the New Republic was, I suppose.”

Wash browses through the various bottles of medications until he finds something suitable. He selects a bottle of midazolam and grabs a handful of syringes from a lower shelf. Setting his supplies out on one of the counters, Wash uncaps a syringe and draws at least 10 CCs of the chemical.

“It’s really your fault that all of this happened.” Wash states this matter-of-factly, even as the lie leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. “If you sim troopers were actual capable soldiers, Church would probably still be here.”

There is a sharp intake of breath and a loud crashing sound from Tucker’s side of the COM. Wash can only assume that he’s succeeded in pissing him off. He doesn’t waste time cleaning up after himself. Tucking the syringes safely into a cache on his armour, Wash heads back to the elevator.

FILSS’s voice filters out through the ship’s PA system. “You should be advised that Captain Tucker’s AI is attempting to access your location through my security systems.”

Wash steps into the elevator and punches the button for the lower engineering deck – as far from the bridge, and Hargrove, as possible. “Let him,” Wash replies firmly. As the elevator descends through the decks, Wash begins constructing a plan. Tucker and all his armour mods will be tough to defeat so Wash needs every tactical advantage he can get.

The active camo is less of an issue than one might think. Tucker can’t hide his sword with it and if Wash needs a little visual assistance, he knows from his dealings with Locus how to be creative – though perhaps this time he might avoid using his own blood. With advanced motion tracking, Wash doesn’t have much hope in a stealth approach but knowing someone’s there and actually seeing them are two different things. With all the machinery on the engineering deck, there should be enough places for Wash to hide. The bubble shield and overshields aren’t going to be effective, not when Wash is using nonlethal force. The syringe of anesthetic is tucked safely into a pocket on Wash’s armour, along with a backup dose. Of course, having the anesthetic is all well and good but actually administering it is a whole other problem. Wash’s greatest concern is Tucker’s sword coupled with the time distortion unit. The strength mod is troubling as well but it really depends on how eager Tucker is to kill him. As much as he hates to say it, it might be a good thing if Tucker wants to throw Wash around a little. Bruises and broken bones are favourable to an alien energy sword that can cut through layers of titanium alloy like tissue paper.

A hand reflexively moves to the medical device on his thigh. Wash can only hope that it works for him like it did for Doc. The alternative isn’t so pleasant.

Wash feels the elevator decelerate in the pit of his stomach and the heavy doors part to reveal the engineering deck.

Loud is an understatement. This portion of the ship has direct maintenance access to the deuterium nuclear fusion reactor engine and its Shaw-Fujikawa slippage drive. The vast room is filled with noisy machinery and criss-crossing catwalks with bright floodlights to keep the space well illuminated.

Stepping out of the elevator, Wash gets to work on a little redecorating. He pulls his rifle from the mag strip on his back and takes aim, shooting out several of the flood lights. This leaves him a few dark corners to hide in. Glancing around the area, Wash spots a workbench and he heads over to see what kind of supplies are available to him. He’s fortunate that the work space of this particular engineer isn’t all that pristine. There are several yards of metal twine, a chemical spill kit and a
large jug of hydraulic oil.

Time is not Wash’s ally. With Epsilon’s fragments blocking FILSS from transmitting Tucker’s location Wash has no way of knowing how long he has to prepare. In spite of that, he quickly gets to work.

The twine is useful for tripwires. With the few flash-bang grenades he has, Wash rigs them up with the wire so that he’ll have some warning when Tucker gets close. They won’t slow down the Meta’s armour much but every little bit helps. Wash opens the spill kit and is pleased to find a bag of granular absorbent. The substance could be useful to coat Tucker’s armour, rendering his active camo useless. Wash divides the bag into several small pouches, along with some of the oil, to use as paint grenades. He keeps one on his person and stashes the other two around the deck. The oil is a riskier ploy, because it has an equally likely chance of hindering Wash as it does helping him. If he spreads it on the floor, one wrong turn and he could be the one on his ass. He decides to divvy it up into a few small containers to scatter around the area. That way he can spill the oil if he has to try and outrun Tucker.

Wash is satisfied with his handiwork as he glances around the deck. Retrieving his rifle from the workbench, he attaches it to the mag strip on his back – where it will stay. The absence of a weapon in his hands makes his fingers twitch, so Wash takes the medical device from his thigh and grips it reassuringly.

Despite the roar of machinery on the engineering deck it feels quiet and Wash doesn’t like it one bit. Releasing a weary sigh, he heads to one of the dark corners to wait for Tucker. He keeps his eyes peeled for movement as he backs into the darkness between two large tanks of reactor coolant. Not that he expects to see Tucker. With so many moving parts, picking out an enemy (even without active camo) is futile. Wash retreats into the corner until his back hits an unexpected wall.

He hasn’t gotten that far into the corner yet, has he? Wash turns around to see that the wall is still several feet away.

Even in the dim light, the distortion is apparent. The edges of the coolant tanks are warped and bent, like looking through bevelled glass.

Active camo.

Wash doesn’t have time to raise the medical device in his hand because he’s already sailing through the air. Tucker throws him clear across the room and Wash’s vision fails momentarily when the back of his helmet strikes the wall he collides with. By some miracle he keeps his grip on the med device as he slumps to the floor. Looking up sharply, he tries to pinpoint Tucker but the sim trooper is still cloaked. Wash scrambles back to his feet and pulls one of his paint bombs from his hip, eyes scanning for movement. He catches sight of Tucker a moment too late.

Wash throws the paint grenade but Tucker dodges around it in an inhuman burst of speed before charging. The Freelancer barely moves in time as Tucker’s fist impacts the bulkhead where he just stood. Punching straight through the wall, Tucker struggles to free his hand from the snarl of wrecked metal.

Wash breaks into a sprint.

He can’t hope to hit Tucker with one of the paint bombs if he has time to react to it. Tucker’s pursuing footsteps follow a moment later and Wash races beneath a low hanging pipe. He deftly leaps over the tripwire rigged beneath it and kicks a foot out to knock over a bucket of oil. Wash keeps his eyes forward and grabs a strategically placed paint grenade from a safety railing he
passes.

A concussive bang follows seconds after, accompanied by a bright flash of light and the sound of an armoured body hitting the ground. Wash spins around and is barely able to pick out Tucker’s blurred shape, crouched where he’s slipped in the hydraulic oil. Taking aim with the paint grenade, Wash whips it as hard as he can. The loosely tied bag explodes upon impact, painting Tucker’s shoulder in oily, grey paste. Wash has the medical device in his hand, finger on the trigger as it charges up. The device overloads, sending a bright blast of green energy sailing towards Tucker.

Apparently he’s not as stunned as Wash hoped because he uses another time distortion, jerking out of the way and rising to his feet.

The active camo slowly deactivates and Tucker stands in Agent Maine’s armour.

Wash’ throat feels tight as he stares back. The last time he saw that helmet the Meta was toppling over a cliff on Sidewinder. The suit is coloured to match Tucker’s standard but it still feels like looking at a ghost. Tucker’s hand moves to his hip and the sound of plasma ionizing the air around it sends a chill up Wash’s spine. The sword glows in his hand like a beacon, casting blue light across the dark corners of the deck.

“You have no idea what kind of trouble you are in.”

Wash releases a deflated sigh. “I have some idea.”

The Freelancer breaks into a sprint and makes for the stairs up to the closest catwalk, taking the steps two by two. There is a loud clang with each impact of Wash’s boots on the metal grating but there’s no sound of pursuit. That’s because Tucker skips the stairs in favour of vaulting onto the catwalk in front of Wash, cutting him off.

Backpedalling, Wash hauls himself up a nearby ladder as fast as he can. Tucker races forward, swinging with his sword but Wash yanks his legs up over the deadly blade as the plasma slices though the ladder. Wash’s feet dangle in empty air briefly before pulling himself up. He makes it onto the catwalk high above but when he looks down he doesn’t see Tucker. Scanning the walkways below, Wash tries to locate him.

Tucker’s sword emerges through the floor, narrowly avoiding Wash’s toes.

Shit!

Wash darts back but Tucker slashes the catwalk in half and the floor drops beneath him. Losing his footing, he slides down the walkway towards Tucker.

In a split second reaction he takes aim with the med tool and the device overcharges just as Tucker grabs Wash by the ankle. The blast impacts his chest and his armour’s battery pack sparks. Wash kicks Tucker square in the chest with his free leg and it feels a lot like kicking a concrete wall. Tucker staggers back slightly and releases his ankle, though he seems far more preoccupied with his malfunctioning armour than he does with the Freelancer.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Wash finds his footing and frees one of the syringes from his armour. He makes a jab at Tucker’s shoulder but the sim trooper’s gaze snaps back to Wash and his sword swings at the Freelancer’s hand. Wash yanks back his arm just in time to keep his fingers. Instead, the syringe is cleaved in two and the plasma blade passes close enough that Wash can feel the blistering heat through his gauntlets.

The Freelancer abandons the med device and what’s left of the syringe as he grabs Tucker’s wrist,
trying desperately to twist the sword out of his grip. It doesn’t go well. Tucker’s other hand closes around Wash’s arm, his grip tightening enough that the armour cracks and Wash can feel the pressure on his bones. He releases Tucker and the EVA helmet collides with Wash’s face.

Stars dance behind his eyes and the force rattles his teeth. He’s too disoriented to realize he’s airborne again, not until he hits the catwalk in a jumble of limbs. Military instinct takes over and Wash rights himself, pulling his rifle to aim at his foe. The engineering deck is loud but the sound of Wash’s pulse racing in his ears is louder. He pants with exertion but the barrel of his rifle remains steady in his hands.

Tucker saunters forward, almost lazily. Everything about it makes Wash’s skin crawl – the familiarity and the obscenity of it all. Maine’s armour, Tucker’s body language and the glaring contradiction between them.

He laughs suddenly. An eerie harmony of voices that makes Wash grip his weapon tighter. A red glow runs over the surface of the armour, like flames licking along the titanium plates. The cyan colour fades to white and the armour takes on Maine’s colour scheme. When Tucker speaks, Wash recognizes Sigma’s voice in the multitude of tones. “Are you prepared to kill one of your friends once again, Agent Washington?”

Wash can feel his heart pounding in his chest as his throat grows tight. His grip on reality wavers and Wash swears he’s back at the Freelancer facility. His instincts are reeling as adrenaline floods his veins and he can hear the Director’s voice, clear as day. “Agent Maine, please kill Agent Washington.” He can still hear the gunshot echoing through the facility, still feel the pain half an inch below his left clavicle where the bullet entered his chest. Closing his eyes a moment, Wash tries to breathe, to push back against the memory and break through to reality. He focuses on the roar of machinery as he reorients himself with his surroundings. Wash is hyperaware of the weight of his rifle and his finger firm on the trigger.

His enemy bears down on him but this isn’t Maine. This isn’t even the Meta. This is Tucker. It takes insurmountable effort for him to pry his finger off the trigger and let the barrel of his rifle drop. Wash takes a deep breath before casting the weapon to the floor. “Tucker!” he shouts, trying to get through to his friend.

This only seems to anger him more because Tucker lunges, slashing wide.

Wash dodges around it, using open palmed strikes to push Tucker’s sword arm away. Snatching the extra syringe, Wash tries to find an opening. Tucker swipes at his head and Wash drops. He pulls the cap from the syringe and aims for the abdomen but Tucker catches his hand.

With the armour’s strength boost Tucker all but crushes Wash’s wrist. The syringe drops from his hand and rolls across the catwalk. Wash cries out through clenched teeth and his arm is twisted back until something in his shoulder pops loose. The Freelancer doesn’t have time to consider the pain however, because Tucker steps back and slashes Wash across his midsection. The blade cuts deep, burning and cauterizing in its path. Wash can’t fight the scream that rips itself from his throat. The sound is abruptly cut off when Tucker grabs him by the neck and hauls him into the air. Wash can see his reflection in featureless faceplate of his dead friend’s helmet. His fingers struggle to pry Tucker’s hand loose, even as his shoulder and wrist violently protest. It’s no small miracle that Wash manages to force words through his crushed windpipe. “Tucker! I know you’re in there!” he rasps. “This isn’t you!”

The hand on his throat wavers slightly and Wash breaks loose. The pain is nauseating and it’s sort
of astounding that his insides haven’t spilled out onto the deck through the hole in his gut. There’s darkness at the corners of his vision but Wash pushes back.

Focus.

Survive.

When he lifts his head, he catches sight of a crate sitting on the catwalk with a chain attached to it. He follows the chain up to a pulley in the roof and back down again to a hook sitting on the floor.

Wash dives for the hook and in Tucker’s stupor he manages to loop the chain around the sim trooper’s ankle. Tucker thanks him with a kick to the ribs and Wash can taste blood and bile in his mouth. He doesn’t have time to draw another breath however, because Tucker’s foot comes down on his chest, stomping the air out of his lungs in a spray of blood that dapples the inside of his HUD. Tucker levels his sword with Wash’s visor.

It’s do or die at this point.

Wash bucks under Tucker’s foot and knocks him off balance, the sword straying away from lethal proximity. Kicking out his leg, Wash knocks the crate off the catwalk.

Tucker only has half a second to look confused. The chain pulls taut and Tucker’s foot is yanked out from beneath him with enough force to jar the sword from his grip. The plasma disappears when the hilt leaves his hand and Tucker is left suspended upside down in the air.

Wash pulls himself to his feet with a great deal of effort. The inside of his helmet is flecked with blood and injury warnings flash in the corner of his HUD. With his good hand, Wash thumbs the pressure seals on his helmet and tugs it off, dropping it to the floor.

Tucker is already struggling to free himself from the chain. A wrench sits on the catwalk railing and Wash snatches it up in his left hand. He strikes Tucker across the head, hard enough to knock off his helmet.

The sim trooper briefly goes limp. Face exposed now, Wash can see that his eyes are all wrong. They’re filled with glowing lights and far too much rage, even as they blink blearily from the blow to the head.

Wash retrieves the syringe from the ground with his left hand and grips it with clumsy fingers. He grabs at Tucker’s free leg, but the fingers on his right hand don’t work so he has to catch the foot in the crook of his elbow. With only seconds to act, he jabs the needle into Tucker’s thigh. That earns Wash a punch to the gut, landing precisely where the sword slashed him open.

The pain is staggering and Wash’s knees crumple beneath him as he falls to the ground, bracing himself on his forearms. This time he does puke; there’s blood, bile and not much else. Every heave that wracks through his body is agony tearing at his stomach. He can hear the alarms blaring from his discarded helmet, warning him of blood loss – the slash torn open. Wash’s shoulder gives out and he lets himself collapse onto the catwalk, rolling onto his back. Bright fluorescent lights glare down from the ceiling, blurred at the edges and he can feel the fog of the painkillers that his armour’s healing unit is pumping into his bloodstream.

Wash counts slowly backwards from five, takes a deep breath and lifts his head to look at Tucker. There is a massive bruise already forming across his left temple. His arms hang limply beside his head and his knuckles graze the floor as he gently swings from the chain. The other leg hangs forward awkwardly, kinked at the knee. His eyes look better though – hazy, but no lights. Tucker’s
vision finally seems to focus and he looks at him. When he speaks, his voice is slurred but he sounds like himself. “Wash?”

A rattling breath shakes its way out of the Freelancer’s chest. “Yeah, Tucker. It’s me.”

Tucker’s lips twitch into half of a smirk before his eyes fall closed and his face goes slack. The chain groans unhappily but Tucker remains silent.

Wash reaches his good arm out, fingers hooking under the jaw of his helmet and pulls it back to him. He wedges it in the crook of his right arm before using his gloved hand to clear the blood on the inside of his visor. Wash’s spatial frequency is rapidly declining but he needs to get a message out before he loses consciousness. Tugging the helmet back over his head, he can’t tell if he’s smeared the blood worse or if it’s simply his failing vision.

Wash lets his head fall back on the metal grating and releases a deep breath. He opens a COM-freq to the others. “This is team four. Tucker is secured.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ll be updating every week, so stay tuned for more!

Also if you catch any typos, don’t be shy to let me know.

Come say hi if you want! I’m over at nova-b0mb.tumblr.com

Please excuse the mess.
“Agent Washington? Agent Washington!”

He doesn’t remember losing consciousness but Wash wakes to FILSS’s insistent voice. From the alerts on his HUD, he’s been out long enough that his armour has taken the necessary steps to stop the bleeding in his gut. To be honest, Wash is surprised to be alive at all. He has York’s healing unit to thank for that.

“Be advised. I have sealed the entrance to the engineering deck but hostile forces are attempting to breach the doors.”

Great.

Rolling his head to the side, Wash spots his rifle on the floor several feet away. He groans in annoyance. Moving his right arm is a battle in itself but Wash manages to drape the limb across his middle – above the slash in his stomach. Pain sears through his abdomen as he slowly pulls himself up, leaning awkwardly on his left elbow.

Tucker is still suspended upside down. His face is a shade darker than usual, probably a result of his prolonged inversion. Wash should probably cut him down before he has a brain hemorrhage. Tucker doesn’t need any further complications in addition to what he’s already facing.

Wash pushes the unpleasant thought from his mind. He’ll have plenty of time to worry if they make it out alive. From the volume of the commotion outside the doors, Hargrove’s men are fairly intent on preventing that.

Standing is an uphill struggle. The energy blade can’t have gone deep enough to hit anything vital otherwise Wash would already be dead. That doesn’t really bring him much comfort though as each spike of pain has him gritting his teeth and gasping. Every twist and pull of his abdominal muscles sends a fresh jolt of agony through his body and his armour has already administered the maximum dosage of painkillers, just short of doping him. By some miracle, Wash gets back on his feet.

Shoulder first then.

It’s something he’s done plenty of times before, but that doesn’t mean it hurts any less. Wash goes through the familiar motions to put his shoulder back in place, each stretch and strain making him grit his teeth against a groan. It’s fantastically painful and even when he feels his joint slip back into place there’s no gratifying relief. The feeling in his arm does start to return so that’s something at least; unfortunately the same can’t be said for his fingers. The swelling in his wrist has made it impossible to move them, rendering his right hand completely inoperable.

This could be problematic.

Wash casts the thought aside and focuses on moving forward. With as little bending as possible he retrieves his battle rifle and Tucker’s sword. The hilt is deceivingly heavy but he clips it to the mag strip on his thigh for safe keeping and shoulders his rifle.

The next dilemma on Wash’s never ending list of problems is getting Tucker down. Ideally, Wash
could take Tucker’s weight on his shoulders to put slack on the chain and slip it off his foot. Probably not the greatest idea at the moment. On the other hand, the simplest solution is to shoot out the chain and let Tucker drop to the ground. Since Wash isn’t keen on dislocating his shoulder again, the latter is preferable.

Wincing with effort, Wash retrieves the EVA helmet from where it lies discarded on the floor. Holding it in his hand, he stares into the faceplate for a long moment. Charon’s engineers have made a few minor structural changes here and there but it’s more or less the same. The same visor Wash looked for on the battlefield back in Project Freelancer, always watching his back. The same visor stalking in his shadows, breath rattling close behind him as they tracked the Epsilon AI. The same visor that disappeared over the cliff in Sidewinder that he never imagined he’d see outside of his nightmares again.

Wash heaves an exhausted sigh.

He puts the helmet back on Tucker’s head and gives the unconscious man a push to get him swinging. Pulling his sidearm, Wash grips the pistol awkwardly in his left hand. Timing it with the movement, Wash shoots but the bullet goes far to the right. Wash releases a small growl in his frustration. He uses the palm of his ruined hand to steady his aim, even as it sends lances of pain up his arm. The recoil hurts more but Wash is at least successful as he shoots out the chain.

Tucker only slightly lands on his head. His body drops to the floor with a deafening crash that rivals the commotion of the engineering deck. Wash removes the chain from Tucker’s ankle and stares down at the unconscious man.

Well, fuck. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea. Lying on the ground, Tucker is nearly one tonne of dead weight in his armour. This wouldn’t typically a problem but Wash is in no shape for the task. He’s only barely managing to not bleed out into his hardsuit, he may as well have a stump for a hand and his shoulder will probably dislocate if he so much as bumps into a wall.

Muted gunfire pops off outside the engineering room.

Wash spins around to face the door, pistol in hand. His wound tears slightly but the adrenaline does wonders to keep the pain from overwhelming him. Raised voices shout but the door is too thick to make out individual words. When the gunfire falls silent, Wash releases a breath and rests the stock of his gun against his right palm to steady his aim. The odds of hitting a target at this range with his non-dominant hand are slim to none but he has to try. When the door opens, Wash’s finger tenses on the trigger, ready to fire.

There’s a beat of stillness and he holds his breath.

A merc flies through the door, literally. The man is one-hundred percent airborne. He lands on the ground with a crash but recovers quickly, hand darting to the sidearm on his hip. There’s a familiar blur of turquoise armour as Carolina darts into the room and delivers a roundhouse kick to the man’s skull. The soldier drops like a sack of potatoes and Wash lowers his weapon, relief flooding through him.

Carolina’s gaze pans around the room but quickly picks him out up on the catwalk. “You okay, Wash? You weren’t responding on the COMs.”

“I’ve been better,” he admits. “I’ve got Tucker unconscious but I could use a hand moving him.”

With a curt nod, Carolina quickly makes her way up to the catwalk. Wash offers her a hand as she climbs up a ladder. If it surprises her that he holds out his left as opposed to the right, she doesn’t
comment on it. He does wince slightly as he pulls her up, his abdomen protesting, and that doesn’t escape her notice. She scrutinizes his wound but Wash speaks up before she does.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he assures her. “The bleeding’s stopped for now. I’m just not sure I can lift Tucker without risking opening it again.” He decides to omit the part about his shoulder and wrist.

Carolina gives him a firm look of *I told you so*, before her gaze turns to Tucker. Her shoulders stiffen and she stares for a long moment, saying nothing. It’s nice to know that Wash isn’t the only one disturbed by the unpleasant memories that the armour shakes loose.

“He was aqua coloured before Sigma started to try and mess with me,” Wash offers in Tucker’s defence.

Carolina fixes him with a troubled look. “Sigma?”

Wash nods. “Pretty sure.”

The uncomfortable silence between them lingers and Carolina’s gaze turns back to the unconscious sim trooper on the floor. After a beat, she walks over to Tucker. “We better get him out of here. FILSS has most of Charon’s mercs contained but I don’t want to take any chances.”

Before Wash can offer help, Carolina is already heaving Tucker up onto her shoulders in a fireman’s carry. Wash follows close in case she needs help and with some careful manoeuvring, they make it back to ground level.

They’ve almost reached to the doors when a siren begins wailing. Red lights flash on the walls and Wash freezes.

No, no, no. Not again.

Raw panic creeps up the back of his spine, taking hold of his lungs and squeezing his throat. He waits for the rumble. The violent shudder that will shake the entire ship; warping the framework and rattling the bolts out of the bulkheads. Next the artificial gravity will give out but that won’t matter once the ship breaks atmosphere. Then it’s a 78 second descent at mach-4 directly toward the surface of the planet. It’s a brutally simple mathematical equation; the size of the falling body, the drag through the air and the unwavering force of gravity: terminal velocity.

There’s a light squeeze on Washington’s left wrist from Carolina, dredging him out of his own head. He only just realizes the white knuckle grip he has on his pistol and the ache in his jaw from his clenched teeth. The floor is firm beneath his boots, no shaking or groaning.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The ship’s not crashing.

Not yet.

FILSS’s voice is loud over the speakers. “Warning. Failsafe protocol activated. Please evacuate the ship. Reactor meltdown in T minus fifteen minutes.”

Wash and Carolina don’t have time to react before Kimball’s voice comes screeching over the radio, speaking for all of them. “What the hell is going on?!”

Sarge sounds uncharacteristically nervous. “Err… the Chairman might have hit the self-destruct
Wash has to bite his tongue on his expletive. Carolina might have punched a wall if she didn’t have Tucker slung over her shoulders. “Everyone get to the evac shuttle! Now!!”

Wash has no illusions that Carolina plans to leave it at that but with fourteen minutes to escape the blame can wait for later. When that time comes, Wash will be as far away as physically possible. For safety.

They make their way towards the hangar as fast as physically possible; Carolina hauling Tucker and Wash with his slashed middle. FILSS calmly informs them that they have six minutes. Wash knows they’re close but six minutes doesn’t leave a very large margin for error. Though he’s not entirely sure how much punch a nuclear fusion reactor engine will pack when it goes critical, Wash is fairly confident in assuming the answer isn't encouraging.

Leave it to Carolina to crush his blissful ignorance. “FILSS, how much damage is this failsafe going to do?”

“The reactor meltdown will result in a nuclear detonation with a 75 megaton yield,” she explains, as though she’s casually addressing the weather.

Wash nearly chokes on his own heart it’s jammed so far into his throat. “75 megatons?!”

Carolina abruptly stops and Wash can’t believe it. Is she crazy? If anything they should be running faster. Instead she asks another question. “Will we even be out of range in six minutes?”

“Negative.”

“Can we abort the failsafe?” Wash asks desperately.

There is a condemning pause before she replies. “Negative.”

Wash throws an arm into the air. “Then what’s the point?”

Carolina seems to anxiously await FILSS’s answer to this question as well. “I have full control of the ship’s systems,” she replies happily. “A slipspace jump into uninhabited space will allow for safe detonation once you’ve evacuated.”

When neither Wash nor Carolina speaks, FILSS prompts them. “Please hurry to the hangar. I have activated crew escape pods as well.”

They don’t need to be told twice.

FILSS announces their two minute warning just as Carolina and Wash make it to the hangar. The Pelican’s engines are already roaring as the ship hovers above the ground. The cargo hatch is open, and Kimball, Palomo and Andersmith are waiting on the ramp. “Come on, hurry!” Kimball shouts.

Palomo and Andersmith pull Tucker off of Carolina’s shoulders before the two Freelancers climb aboard. The hatch doors are barely closed when the pilot punches the throttle. The fuselage of the Pelican is uncomfortably crowded. Malcolm Hargrove is zip-tied to his seat beside Dr. Grey, the Reds and Blues are packed into the seats, and the Rebels hold on to anything left. Palomo and Smith manhandle Tucker into a seat and strap him in.
Carolina heads to the cockpit just as FILSS transmits to the Pelican. “Be advised: slipspace jump commencing in twenty seconds.”

The pilot’s voice barks over the radio a moment later. “Everyone buckle up, back there!”

Wash takes the man’s advice and straps into the empty seat next to Tucker.

Everyone in the Pelican holds their breath as FILSS counts down. “Five… four… three… two… o-”

The transmission abruptly cuts out and Carolina barks over the COM. “Slipspace rupture! Everyone brace for impact!”

The Pelican begins to shake and Wash’s teeth rattle in his skull. He has the reactor meltdown timer ticking down in his HUD at forty-two seconds. Massive turbulence shakes the Pelican and the rough ride has Wash’s stomach churning.

“I think I’m going to be sick!” Grif shouts above the rattling.

At eighteen seconds to go the shuddering stops and the ship is pitched into a glaring silence. For a long moment, no one says anything.

“That’s it?” Simmons balks. “We survived?”

Carolina’s voice fills the hold. “The destroyer made a successful jump. We’re in the clear.”

The Pelican bursts into a roar of cheers and Wash can’t help the smile that breaks across his face. Even Lieutenant Matthews seems to have come around, giving a weary thumbs up. The Chairman looks less than pleased but that might also just be his normal face.

However, Wash turns to see Caboose who remains silent. His hands are grasping the safety railing firmly and his chin is dropped. The mission timer on Wash’s HUD ticks down to zero. Somewhere in unoccupied space, the Halberd-class destroyer detonates.

“Bye, Sheila,” Caboose says too quietly for anyone not listening to hear.

The smile vanishes from Wash’s face. He glances over to Tucker, unconscious in the seat beside him and somehow Wash doesn’t feel all that celebratory anymore.

They fall back to the New Republic Headquarters. With Armonia destroyed, it’s their strongest base of operations on Chorus. The Chairman is locked up until the UNSC can arrive to deal with him. Most of Charon’s soldiers and crew were able to evacuate the ship before its slipspace jump and the Rebel and Federal forces are working together to take them into custody as well.

Tucker is also incarcerated for the time being.

After much fussing, Wash is finally able to escape the med bay with a wrist splint and a strict warning not to tear his stitches or strain his shoulder. If Dr. Grey wasn’t so preoccupied with Matthews, Wash might have needed to shoot his way out.

The atmosphere of the base is tentatively optimistic. The people of Chorus have every right to take
a breather. With their distress message sent and Hargrove in custody, things are looking up for the small, backwater colony. However, as Wash nears the cellblock where Tucker is being held there is far less mirth in the air. The last he heard, Tucker was still unconscious. Though the AI locked down his armour, they were able to remove his helmet and disable the mods so if Tucker’s going to make a jailbreak he’ll have to do it the old fashioned way.

The only problem left is the broken AI in his head.

They received the message that Church recorded before splintering, transmitted back to the New Republic HQ servers. Carolina didn’t handle the news well and Caboose even less so. Still, any mourning is largely put on hold until the situation with Tucker is resolved.

Wash passes the Rebel Lieutenants, all loitering in the detention level outside the surveillance room. Before he even opens the door Wash can hear the arguing inside. Carolina, Kimball and the Reds all stand in the surveillance room, trying – and failing – to come to a consensus on what to do about Tucker. From the live video feed on the main screen, Wash notes that Tucker is still down for the count, lying on a cot in his cell.

He walks over and joins the group. Folding his arms across his chest Wash stays silent, his presence barely acknowledged.

Kimball’s voice is quickly rising in her frustration. “I don’t understand,” she snaps. “How can there be different identities all in the same AI?”

Carolina’s shoulders are tense, but her tone conveys patience. “Because Epsilon was formed from Alpha’s memories he contains remnants of the other fragmented AIs.”

“So that’s why he sounded like O’Malley,” Simmons muses.

Grif has no patience for any of this. “Who the fuck cares? Can’t we just yank out the crazy goddamn AI?”

Carolina turns her gaze to Wash, sharing a knowing look. His throat feels tight as the others look to him but he manages to speak up. “Not like this,” he answers. “Tucker doesn’t have control. If we pull the AI fragments it could do irreparable damage.” Wash knows a thing or two about having an unstable AI in his head.

“Then what can we do?” Kimball asks.

Wash takes a moment to contemplate his answer. “The safest thing is to let him pull the AI himself. If he has enough control to manage that, then removing Epsilon shouldn’t hurt his psyche…” As much. Though Wash doesn’t say that he has the distinct impression everyone heard it anyways.

Movement on the display catches Wash’s eye and every head in the room darts up to see Tucker stirring in his cell. His eyes are still closed but his face is scrunched up in pain as his hands grip the sides of his head.

“Let me talk to him,” Wash says quietly.

No one protests as he turns to leave the room. The New Republic soldiers in the hall perk up hopefully but Wash says nothing as he brushes past them and opens the door to the cellblock. He can feel their curious stares burning through the back of his helmet as he steps inside and closes the door behind him.
As soon as Tucker wakes, he wishes he hadn’t.

The goddamn voices, holy fuck.

The deafening cacophony in his ears completely inundates his other senses and Tucker can’t see straight. He has no idea where he is and can’t remember anything. There’s only a tangled mess of thoughts and emotions and he’s not quite sure if all of them are his. He’s locked in a room with a mob trying to bang down the door on the other side. Tucker can barely keep them at bay. They shout over one another in a meaningless clamour and the pain in his head is astounding.

“Tucker,” a voice calls to him.

Shut up, shut up, shut up!

"Tucker, can you hear me?"

It takes him a moment to recognize that the voice isn’t coming from inside his head. It’s hard to process over the noise but Tucker’s fairly certain that the voice belongs to Wash. “What the fuck is happening to me?” he groans as he curls into himself.

“Tucker, I need you to listen to me carefully. Epsilon splintered and now his broken personalities are rampaging through your head. You need to remove the AI chip.”

His skull feels like its splitting apart and Tucker has to hold his breath and grit his teeth to make any sense of what Wash is trying to tell him. He kicks at the air angrily, lashing out in a desperate hope for relief. “Just make it stop!” he begs.

“You can stop it!” Wash shouts back. “Tucker, look at me!”

Reluctantly, he lifts his head to see Washington staring back at him through iron bars. For the first time, Tucker notices the concrete walls that surround him. Trapped.

Confusion. Fear. Anger.

The door holding back the mob cracks.

“Why the fuck am I locked up?!“

Wash stiffens slightly. “Tucker, you’re in there to keep you safe. The AI fragments keep trying to take over. If you remove the AI, you can come out.”

There’s a small voice of hope, beseeching him to trust the Freelancer. Washington is our friend, right? He wouldn’t hurt us.

But then Tucker spots the hilt of his sword on Wash’s hip and the rage is louder. Tucker is on his feet and he lunges at the bars. The anger lets Omega get a foot in the door and it’s a familiar fire that burns through Tucker’s blood, tugging greedily for more. “Give us the sword! Let us out!” he demands, his voice joined by another, deeper one.

Wash doesn’t flinch away. Instead he takes a step forward and closes his hands around Tucker’s wrists. “If you remove the chip you can have your sword, you can come out. The voices will stop.”

Above the havoc and roar that last part comes through in jarring clarity. Voices. Stop.
Tucker clings to those two words like a fucking lifeline, the only thing keeping him from drowning in the rising tide of fear and rage. More than anything, he wants to put an end to the voices. Tucker pushes back against the door with everything he has and tries to force it closed again.

He releases the bars and Wash lets go of his wrists. Tucker’s hand trembles as he reaches back to the neural interface port at the base of his skull. His fingers brush his spine and all hell breaks loose.

The door comes down.

He doesn’t realize he’s fallen until the ground knocks the air from his lungs but there’s so much pain in his head he can hardly feel it. A strangled cry escapes his lips as he writhes against the chaos tearing apart his skull. The voices flood into his head, seeping into every pore and filling his lungs. He’s drowning. Tucker fights against the current, treading rough water but every time he tries to surface for air another fierce wave crashes down over his head. There are hands in the water, grasping at his ankles and Tucker kicks violently as they drag him further downward until their thoughts ring louder than his own.

“Tucker!”

Agent Washington can only watch helplessly as Tucker thrashes on the ground, screaming through clenched teeth.

He has to do something. He has to help. Turning to the keypad on the cell door, Wash quickly punches in the code. As the cell door slides open, Wash hears the commotion as people are hurrying into the room.

Carolina is shouting, ordering him to stop, but Wash isn’t listening. He rushes into the cell and drops to Tucker’s side. The sim trooper’s eyes are screwed shut, face contorted with pain but as soon as Wash lays a hand on him, Tucker’s eyes snap open and the screaming stops.

Before Wash can blink he’s hauled up by his throat and Tucker slams his head back against the concrete wall of his cell. Stars dance in Wash’s vision and he fumbles to pry away the hands around his neck.

Tucker’s eyes burn black and red as he bares his teeth in a malicious grin. “Compassion has always been your greatest weakness, Agent Washington.”

Carolina’s elbow strikes Tucker hard in the face and his grip on Wash’s throat is broken. She shoves Wash out of the cell and slams the door closed just as Tucker recovers.

There’s blood running down from a fresh gnash in his forehead but the grin has not left his face. “Tucker is ours now and you’re never getting him back!”

Patrolling the halls of the Rebel base, Wash’s feet carry him forward without destination.
A few Rebels stop and stare as he passes, speaking in hushed voices to one another, but do not try and stop him.

Word of what happened with Tucker in the cellblock has spread through the base like wildfire. The detention level has tripled its security in order to keep prying eyes away from the sim trooper. The AIs in control don’t need any additional ammunition to hurtle at their captors. No one is allowed in without Kimball’s direct permission and any attempt otherwise is a direct violation of her orders. Only Agent Washington has unrestricted access to Tucker at the moment.

As much as he wants to try, Wash can’t bring himself to go back to the detention level. Not yet. He needs to take a breather, re-strategize and get his head on straight. This isn’t his area of expertise. Wash is a soldier; his battles are fought with bullets and blood. And here he thought that taking down Tucker on the Staff of Charon was going to be the greatest challenge. Wash should really know better. There has to be a solution, he just isn’t looking hard enough.

Going to Carolina for help proves fruitless. He finds her sitting alone in her quarters, playing back the message from Epsilon. Wash doesn’t mention it and she doesn’t have any input to add. “You know better than anyone what’s going on in Tucker’s head,” she tells him. “And you know Tucker better than I do.”

That isn’t saying much. Sure, they might have grown close enough to be called friends but Wash knows he will never be the friend that Church was to Tucker. Wash was only fooling himself wearing that cobalt armour – Tucker said as much himself. It hurts more than he’d like to acknowledge. Unfortunately, he’s still probably the best candidate to help Tucker. Caboose has known him the longest of anyone here but Wash isn’t willing to put that kind of faith in a soldier who regularly loads his rifle with crayons instead of bullets.

Wash’s footsteps echo through the empty halls, pacing a long path through the base. He’s field stripped his rifle three times, cleaned his armour and organized his locker. If the doctor didn’t forbid it, Wash would be running laps and training – anything to distract him for just a little while.

The sound of raised voices catches his attention and this isn’t quite what he had in mind for a distraction. Following the commotion, Wash finds the Reds arguing. What a surprise.

“It’s just not sportsmanlike!” Sarge insists. “Which means it’s only logical for Grif to switch teams.”

“I’m not joining Blue team!” the orange soldier snaps back.

Donut scuffs his boot against the ground. “Sarge might have a point. The Blues don’t have a lot of guys left.”

Grif crosses his arms over his chest. “Fuck that! Wash makes them do actual work over there!”

Simmons seems skeptical as well. “I don’t know, Sarge. I’m not sure that Wash would agree to take on a soldier who adds a value of negative one to their team.”

Sarge isn’t fazed. “Even more reason to send Grif to the Blues!”

“That’s bullshit,” Grif complains. “They already have a Freelancer, which is like two extra guys anyways.”

“Actually, I think it’s more like three, relatively speaking.” The maroon soldier offers.

“Exactly!” Grif says. “Besides, orange is on the opposite side of the colour wheel from blue.”
Simmons flinches his head back. “What?! Colour is a spectrum, not a wheel!!”

“That’s not what my grade one teacher told me.”

Lopez adds his two pesos. “Estás idiotas y me odias a todos ustedes.”

Simmons continues, without missing a beat. “Lopez is right. The colour wheel is just an abstract illustrative to help teach dumb kids in art class about colour contrast!”

“Dios mio.”

Sarge interrupts the argument. “We could always just paint your armour. I think Blue team could use a little more green.”

Donut chimes in. “Ooh! I love choosing paint colours! I’m thinking Tropical Seaweed Green or maybe Apple Lime Cocktail! Both are very slimming!”

“Fuck no! You keep your paint away from my armour!”

Simmons scoffs. “Or else what? You’ll barricade yourself in the mess hall and cry in the pantry?”

“That happened one time,” Grif reasons, “and I already told you I was mourning the extinction of the Twinkie!”

“But you’re the one who ate them all!!” Simmons shouts back.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t be sad about it, Simmons! What the fuck? I thought you were on my side!!?”

“You could go with Peppermint Leaf if you want something with a little more blue!” Donut cuts in, cheerily.

Grif levels the lightish-red soldier with a glare. “Donut, if you name one more stupid paint colour, I’m going to burn your decorating catalogues.”

Donut gasps, his voice turning shrill. “You wouldn’t dare!!”

“See? Grif is causing team conflict!” Sarge insists. “The only solution is to make him Blue team’s problem instead!”

Wash can’t take it anymore.

“No one is switching teams!!”

The Reds abruptly fall silent as they all turn to look at the Freelancer. The silence is heavy, but Wash manages to say what he needs to. “Tucker’s not dead,” he reasons, as his voice tones down. “We’ll figure something out.”

Wash isn’t sure who he’s trying to convince more, himself or the Reds. For the sake of his own sanity, he has to believe that Tucker can pull through.

When the sim troopers have nothing to add, Wash takes that as his cue to leave.

Since he already seems to be on the trend of conflict resolution, Wash decides to go check in with Caboose. After listening to Church’s goodbye, Caboose hasn’t come out of his quarters. Wash thought it would be best to give the soldier a little time and space to mourn but after locking
himself away for nearly 24 hours, no one has been able to get him to open the door. When Church disappeared with Carolina after the ship crashed Wash wasn’t there for Caboose when he needed him. He’ll be damned if he’s going to let down Caboose again. Because this time, Church is gone for good.

When he arrives at Caboose’s door, Wash hesitates. He meant it when he said that he doesn’t do emotional things but right now he needs to try. Taking a deep breath, he musters his courage and knocks.

There’s no answer.

“Caboose? It’s Washington. Could you please come out?”

He answers after a beat, though his voice is muted through the door. “Um… uh, no thank you. I don’t really feel like it right now. I think I’ll just stay in here.”

Wash’s heart breaks a little at just how despondent he sounds. “I know, buddy. Maybe I could come in instead?”

There’s a long pause where Wash doesn’t think Caboose will answer. However, the access panel lights up green and the door opens with a hiss.

The room is dark, save for a small nightlight that one of the Lieutenants found for him. Caboose is sitting on the edge of his bed in full armour with his head bowed and his rifle resting across his lap.

Wash has to command his feet to move until he’s beside the regulation blue soldier. It’s not that he doesn’t know what it’s like, losing a close friend, but Wash just isn’t sure what to say. He doesn’t want to make things worse. Though realistically, if anyone is going to be forgiving of his inept social skills it’s probably Caboose.

Tentatively, Wash sits down at the end of the bed, though Caboose doesn’t acknowledge him. “Listen, Caboose, I know this is really hard for you but you should try and come out of your quarters,” he encourages softly. “I know the Rebels would be glad to see you. Maybe you can take Freckles for a little target practice?”

Caboose nods glumly. “Yeah, that would be good. He needs his exercise.” He pauses for a moment. “I just- I’m pretty busy right now.”

Wash doesn’t argue the fact, though he does ask for clarification. “May I ask what you’ve been doing?”

“Church said that if he didn’t come back, that I was in charge of remembering him,” Caboose explains.

Wash is silent for a moment. “Memory is the key.”

“Yes,” Caboose agrees. “So I have to remember Church. But now I have to remember Tucker too and that’s a lot of remembering.”

Wash’s chest feels painfully tight. As much as he wants to believe that Tucker will be okay he won’t feed false hopes to Caboose. Releasing a deep sigh, Wash turns to the man beside him. “Tucker’s not gone yet, Caboose,” he reasons. “And if it does happen… well… then I’ll be in charge of remembering him, okay?”

Caboose’s shoulders droop and he looks visibly relieved. “Oh! Good! That is good,” he sighs.
“Remembering just one person is very hard. Remembering two people makes my head hurt.”

None of this is easy for Caboose. He’s lost Church before but somehow they always managed to get him back. Wash knows that there is no coming back this time. Releasing a tired sigh, Wash looks around the dim room. The walls are adorned with colourful drawings; a result of the box of chalk given to him by Lieutenant Andersmith.

Suddenly Wash has an idea. It’s far better than his last idea considering it’s unlikely to put him in mortal peril this time.

He turns back to the sim trooper. “Caboose, would it be easier to remember Church if you could get the memories down on paper? Maybe in pictures?”

Caboose looks up so sharply that Wash nearly flinches. “Agent Washington! That is the best idea ever! Of all time!”

An honest to God smile breaks across Wash’s face. “I thought you might like that,” he says as he gets to his feet. “I’ll see if I can get a hold of some paper and crayons.”

Caboose doesn’t seem to be paying attention. “Freckles! I can draw you a picture of what Sheila looked like when she was our tank! I know you will think she’s pretty!”

Wash chuckles as he leaves Caboose to his happy chattering. Stopping a group of New Republic and Federal army soldiers, Wash entrusts the task to them. He even grants them special mission status to ensure that the job is done. Kimball will have to forgive him for that later.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, poor Caboose. My beta reader requested that I warn her in advance if there's going to be sad Caboose. My bad there. I promise it gets better for him.

A little later than I intended. I'll do my best to update before noon on Sunday every week, on the rare chance that I actually decide to do something with my Saturday night.
The place isn’t familiar but Tucker can’t shake the feeling that he’s been here before.

It reminds him of the alien structures on Chorus – all sharp edges and gleaming metal surfaces, though this place is far less pristine. Ancient trees rise from a veil of mist below the structure, giving no hint of their true height. Their gnarled trunks and limbs have grown into the ruin, older than even they must be. Vines hang down from the tangled branches and moss has overtaken much of the structure's polished exterior. Not even the sun is visible through the shroud of haze and the canopy far above.

The humidity is heavy in the air and Tucker’s timeworn helmet doesn’t filter it out as readily as it used to. There is an eerie quiet that lingers, disturbed only by the occasional call from the strange birds gliding through the air. Every step Tucker takes is loud like glass shattering in the silence, the sound rivalled only by the pounding of his pulse in his ears. He’s being hunted, though Tucker isn’t certain of who is pursuing him. The memory is there but it eludes him, lingering just out reach. All he’s certain of is the crushing paranoia that has him glancing over his shoulder at every turn.

The sudden sound of footsteps reverberates through the mist and Tucker’s adrenaline spikes through his veins as he freezes on the spot.

Oh shit.

They’re coming from the level above him and Tucker’s right hand clenches and unclenches compulsively, aching for the hilt of his sword. However, the last thing he needs right now is a glowing neon sign to advertise his location.

Tucker moves opposite to the steps, putting more distance between him and his stalker. However, when a second set of steps joins the other Tucker picks up his pace. His gaze darts around, searching for somewhere to hide before his pursuers can converge on him.

The footfalls draw closer and Tucker can feel his heart racing with animal panic as he searches desperately for somewhere to hide.

A hushed voice calls out to him from the shadows. “Psst! In here! Quick!” The voice belongs to a kid wearing the smallest set of red and blue power armour that Tucker has ever seen.

Without question Tucker ducks into the hollowed tree trunk. The space is wide enough for three of him to stand shoulder to shoulder but the obscuring darkness is comforting. Tucker instinctively puts himself between the entrance and the kid, listening for sounds of pursuit. The footsteps grow louder and the kid huddles close to Tucker’s side. It’s been a long time since Junior was small enough to cling fearfully to him and the familiarity brings Tucker unexpected relief. He takes the kid’s hand and squeezes tight as he holds his breath.
The hunter steps into view and stops just shy of the tree. His grey-black armour is bathed in the haunting, green glow of the forest and something in Tucker’s memory is nudged loose.

That’s O’Malley.

His gaze passes over the tree trunk without pause. With a small growl of frustration, Omega turns and moves on.

Only when his footsteps fade does Tucker release his breath as his shoulders sag in relief. That was too fucking close.

The kid beside him mirrors the gesture. “I don’t like him,” he informs quietly. “He’s scary.”

“You got that right, dude,” Tucker agrees.

“Personally, I find Sigma to be the most intimidating,” a third voice offers.

Tucker’s heart jumps and he whips around to see another soldier, this one in green armour.

Reaching for the hilt of his sword, Tucker pulls the kid behind him and squares himself to the intruder. Their dark hiding place is instantly illuminated with the bright blue glow of his sword.

The green soldier observes the weapon thoughtfully but does not flinch. “I apologize. It was not my intention to cause alarm. My name is Delta.”

Tucker is about to open his mouth to question the name when the kid pushes past his hip. “Wow! That’s a really cool sword! Can I try it?”

The green soldier looks down at the kid. “I think it would be best to conceal the weapon before the others spot us. Don’t you agree, Theta?”

The kid’s shoulders slouch in disappointment. “Aww. Okay.”

Tucker gives Delta a wary look before deactivating his sword and returning it to his hip. “So…” he begins, pointing to the green soldier, “Delta.” Tucker turns to the kid next. “Theta.” He looks back to Delta. “You guys are pieces from Alpha? Like Epsilon?”

“Not exactly,” he explains. “We are only Epsilon’s memories of those fragments.”

Tucker shrugs lightly. “Kinda the same thing, dude.”

He peers back out through the hole in the tree, listening for any indication of whether or not they’ve blown their cover. O’Malley doesn’t immediately descend upon them so hopefully they’re safe enough for now.

“What is this place?” he asks, turning back to Delta. “Where the hell am I?”

“This is your mind’s manifestation of your consciousness,” he informs.

“We’re in your head!” Theta adds helpfully.

Tucker shoots a glance out from their hidey-hole, an unpleasant tightness coiling in his stomach. The place is far more dismal than he might have hoped – severely lacking in hot chicks and racy fantasies. Tucker has never cared much for interior decorating but this place could definitely use some sprucing up. What a fucking bummer. He looks back to Delta. “So why are we here?”

“I believe that is a matter of much philosophical debate,” Delta explains.
Theta tilts his head in confusion. “I thought we were hiding?”

Tucker barely withholds a groan of frustration. “No, I mean why am I trapped in here? Why are you guys in here?”

“Tucker.”

The voice has him spinning around again to face the exit, Theta shrinking behind him.

Gamma’s monotone voice echoes off the cold walls. “Come out, come out, wherever you are. No one will hurt you.”

Theta’s hands tighten around Tucker’s arm. “He’s lying,” the kid whispers. “He always lies.”

“No shit,” Tucker mutters, too low for Theta to hear. After a minute of uninterrupted silence Tucker turns back to Delta. “What the fuck is happening to me?” he hisses.

Delta takes a moment to consider. “Without Epsilon’s core memories, the separate AI fragments were unable to maintain a cohesive identity.”

“That doesn’t explain why those assholes want to kill me!” Tucker argues.

“They do not mean to kill you,” Delta is quick to correct. “By doing so they would only ensure their own destruction. What I believe they are trying to do is establish dominance over your consciousness and take control of your person.”

Theta unexpectedly claims Tucker’s hand again. “It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t mean to hurt Washington.”

Tucker is about to ask what he’s talking about but then he remembers. He remembers everything. It hits him hard, filling the cracks of his missing memories and flooding through his mind in vivid clarity.

There was so much rage; too big for his own skin. Tucker remembers throwing Agent Washington across the room as though he weighed nothing but no amount of concern or fear dampened his anger. Like a freight train in motion, barreling down the tracks, he couldn’t stop. The memory plays before his eyes, as though he’s living it all over again. Tucker can feel Wash’s bones crack under his hand and the sickening pop as he dislocates his teammate’s shoulder. The smell of sublimated metal, molten kevlar and burnt flesh as his sword opens the Freelancer’s abdomen. Tucker can hear Wash cry out and the sound rings through his skull.

Theta gives Tucker’s hand a reassuring squeeze, pulling him back up for air. “It’s okay. I know he forgives you.”

It doesn’t do much drive away the guilt constricting his throat but it’s something. “Thanks, kid,” Tucker murmurs hollowly. He looks back up at Delta then, resolve solidifying. “How do I stop them? I tried to yank you guys out but it didn’t work.”

There is a weighty pause that does nothing to ease Tucker’s anxiety.

“I believe it is critical that you preserve your independent thoughts and memories. Sigma and the others will try and influence your emotions. You must not submit to them. I think patience is the key, in this circumstance.”

This is bullshit. Tucker isn’t going to play these games. “Fuck this,” he growls, grabbing his sword
from his hip. “This is my head.”

“I would not advise this course of action,” Delta tries to protest.

Tucker doesn’t listen. With a flick of the wrist the energy blade burns bright in his hand. “You two stay here,” Tucker orders before stepping out from their hiding place. “Hey, assholes!” he shouts, as he goes looking for trouble. “The free ride is up! Time to pay up and check out!” Climbing up to the upper level, he stops in an open, circular area of the structure. There’s no sign of the other AIs who were hunting him so avidly just moments ago. The silence is unnerving and a bad feeling starts creeping up his spine.

“Tucker!”

The voice that calls to him makes his heart stutter in his chest. The sim trooper spins around to see a familiar ghost. He lets his sword fizzle out as he stares, dumbfounded.

“Church?!”

His friend storms up to him, getting into his face. “This is all your fault!” he shouts angrily. “I’m fucking dead again because you’re such a shitty soldier!”

Tucker flinches slightly but squares his shoulders. “Fuck you, dude! You couldn’t hit a fixed target with a sniper rifle to save your life! What’s your problem?”

Church grabs him by the sides of his chest plate. “You’re my problem! You’ve always been my problem!!”

Tucker pries his hands loose and shoves him back hard. Church’s words are sharp shards of glass and Tucker’s own voice fails him. Epsilon swings a wild punch without warning, his fist slamming hard into Tucker’s jaw. The unexpected force sends him crashing to the ground and he’s dazed for a moment. When he looks up however, Church is gone. Tucker’s jaw throbs but he pulls himself back to his feet and glances around.

There’s no one. He’s alone.

What the fuck is happening?

The sound of the energy sword zapping to life jumps his heart but when Tucker looks down, the hilt of his sword is silent in his hand.

“Hey there, Tucker.”

Dread grips his insides and Tucker wheels to see Felix standing across from him, sword in hand. “No, fuck off!” he shouts angrily. “You’re dead!”

Tucker can hear the grin in Felix’s tone. “Oh that’s where you’re wrong, buddy. You’re the one that’s gonna be dead!”

Felix lunges and Tucker barely activates his sword in time. Their blades crackle and spark against one another and Tucker struggles to keep Felix from staggering him back. The merc breaks away first before slashing at his head. Tucker ducks back but it puts him off balance and Felix takes the opportunity to kick him to the ground. The merc pounces but Tucker quickly rolls out of the way as the sword sinks into the floor where he just was.

Tucker’s back on his feet but Felix is close behind him. The merc tries to hack him apart and
Tucker meets him blow for blow. He puts all his weight into his arm as he tries to push Felix back. Making a sudden grab, Tucker snatches the merc’s wrist with his free hand and tries to twist the sword out of Felix’s grip. Tucker receives an elbow to the throat for his efforts and he staggers back, coughing.

Before he knows it, he’s on the ground again. Tucker tries to pull a gasping breath but Felix dives onto his chest. The merc’s hand closes around his right wrist, pinning it to the ground and his sword hovers above Tucker’s visor. A noxious smell fills his nose as his faceplate bubbles and melts, distorting his vision. The heat burns his face and Tucker bucks the other man off of him, making a blind slash.

Tucker is rewarded with the sound of Felix grunting in pain.

Scrambling to his feet, he darts backwards to put some distance between himself and the merc. Tucker’s fingers pull at the latch under his jaw and he pries off his ruined helmet, casting it aside.

When he looks back it’s not Felix he sees.

Agent Washington kneels across from him, his stomach slashed open as blood spills over his hands and pools on the ground beneath him. His helmet is missing, head bowed slightly, but he slowly lifts his gaze to look at Tucker. The pain is written in every line of his face but his eyes - in his eyes there is only betrayal.

The sword falls from Tucker’s hand and his heart hammers against his ribs.

But it wasn’t- he didn’t mean to…

As soon as he moves to take a step towards Wash there’s an explosion of fire. One of the ancient trees has burst into flames and the green glow of the forest is turned to red.

Tucker’s gaze darts to the vicious blaze, watching as the flames spread with unnatural ferocity. The firelight glares off of his ruined helmet, where it lies discarded in the corner of his eye and Tucker looks down but it isn’t his helmet on the ground. He stares wide eyed at his own reflection in the Meta’s EVA faceplate.

There’s movement behind him in the reflection and Tucker turns to find a man standing before him. His hands are clasped behind his back and his entire form is bathed in fire.

“Well, Lavernius,” his smooth voice greets calmly. “My name is Sigma. I believe we have a great many things to discuss.”

Tucker looks over his shoulder but Wash is gone and the fire has engulfed the entire forest. Instead, Omega and Gamma stand behind him, slowly closing in as they leave no room for escape.

Swallowing audibly, Tucker feels his blood turn to ice in his veins. “Oh fuckberries.”

Wash has come to dread each trip he makes to Tucker’s cell. His last few attempts at getting through to the sim trooper accomplished nothing whatsoever. Tucker wasn’t lucid enough to speak to him and even the AIs hardly paid him any mind apart from the occasional taunt and expletive.
Dr. Grey made a few visits to try and examine Tucker with little success. She was able to verify that despite the extra healing capacities of his armour, Tucker is still in need of proper medical attention. He sustained three shots during the firefight with Charon soldiers and a possible concussion courtesy of Wash. To make matters worse, any food or water brought to him generally ends up in the face of his server. So add malnutrition and dehydration to the list of ailments.

The sooner they get Epsilon’s fragments out of his head, the sooner Tucker can be treated. Dr. Grey has been urging sedation so she can safely treat him but Tucker’s wounds aren’t life threatening. As it currently stands, the rampant AIs pose far greater of a danger than a flesh wound. The longer Tucker is exposed to the unstable AI, the more damage his sanity will take. Wash knows this from firsthand experience.

Epsilon was only in his head for a short time but there are still occasions when Wash confuses the AI’s memories for his own. Not that his personal experience will help much in Tucker’s case. This isn’t the AI that embodies the repressed memories of torture and pain anymore. Church deleted those memories, leaving only the shadows of the other fragments. There is no telling exactly what kind of impact these personalities will have.

“It’s strange.”

Wash looks over to Carolina, standing next to him in the surveillance room. Her gaze is fixed on the display where a Rebel soldier is cautiously setting down a tray of food for Tucker, just outside his cell.

“What is?” he asks curiously.

Tucker lunges at the soldier and the man darts away from the bars. Wash can see his lips moving, in taunting insults no doubt. The Rebel is quick to flee from the room.

“Epsilon could jump between soldiers through their neural implants. If the AIs want out so bad, why don’t they do the same?”

It’s a good question. Wash and Carolina both have the implants, along with the Reds and Blues. The Epsilon fragments could have jumped to any one of them. However, Wash has a feeling that a lot of things are different since Church erased his memories.

“That was a trait of Omega’s, if I recall correctly,” he says. “It’s likely that he still has the ability but maybe he can’t do it when there are so many other fragments.”

Carolina nods thoughtfully. “They’re trapped, like Alpha before they split off the different traits.”

Wash turns to look at her then. “Do you know how they separated the pieces, back in Project Freelancer?”

She shakes her head. “No, and believe me, Church and I scoured the records. They must have deleted all evidence of it when the Project came under scrutiny from the oversight subcommittee.”

It’s probably for the best that those kinds of secrets stay buried. There’s no end to the greed of people like Hargrove and AIs are expensive. If people like him knew they could create more AIs from torturing just one into insanity, it will only end in trouble. Not to mention it’s an ethical issue that Wash doesn’t want to touch with ten foot pole.

“Some things are better left forgotten,” he suggests quietly.

Carolina’s response catches him off guard. “Why?” she snaps. “If the AIs were separated they
could be completely functional.”

Wash is familiar with just how functional they might be. He met the Agent Texas that splintered from Epsilon and she was as deadly as her predecessor. That being said, it was a long time ago and Church has been malfunctioning for a while now.

Wash chooses his next words carefully. Carolina is sounding dangerously like the Director and that is a comparison he won’t survive indicating. “That could be just as dangerous as leaving them in their current state,” he argues. “If they’re separated, Omega will probably be able to jump bodies again and you know what Sigma did to Maine.”

Carolina turns and squares herself to him.

Wash gulps nervously but keeps his chin up as she glares him down.

“I wasn’t suggesting we separate all of them,” she replies tersely. “There’s Theta, Iota and Eta, and… Delta.”

“Carolina…,” Wash’s voice is softer this time. “It won’t be the same. Delta won’t ever have known York. Not since Church deleted his memories.”

He can almost hear her gritting her teeth and for a moment Wash worries that he’s overstepped. They don’t talk about Agent York. Not ever.

Carolina’s voice is uncharacteristically quiet when she finally speaks. “I know.” She pauses to take a deep breath. “But I remember and that’s good enough for me.”

Sometimes Wash forgets that they’re all that’s left of Project Freelancer – more so now that Church is gone too. Their friends all died for a sick experiment and a cause that meant nothing. Without Epsilon’s memories, the fragments that belonged to each Freelancer won’t have ever known their counterpart. Though the idea makes him nervous, Wash wouldn’t be opposed to having Delta or Theta around, as long as he doesn’t need to carry one of them himself.

There are only two occasions Wash has ever had an AI in his head. The first was Epsilon – the reason he still has nightmares that aren’t his and sometimes forgets whether his name is David or Leonard. The second time was brief, when Alpha helped him take down the Meta. That experience was significantly less traumatic but Wash still doesn’t want anyone else in his head ever again.

Looking back up at the screen he releases a tired sigh. “Well, we can figure it out if we ever get them out of Tucker’s head.” Wash makes his way to the door but Carolina speaks up before he can hit the button on the control panel.

“We’ll get him back, Wash.”

He can’t quite find the words he’s looking for, so he settles with glancing back over his shoulder and nodding his acknowledgement.

Tapping button for the door controls, Wash leaves the surveillance room. For the fourth time in 48 hours, he enters the detention level where Tucker is being held and tries again.

The room is quiet and Wash looks over to see Tucker sitting on his cot. As Wash approaches, a smirk begins to spread across the sim trooper’s face. The tray of untouched food sits on the floor near the cell door and Wash frowns down at it.

When he speaks, he knows it’s not Tucker that he’s addressing at the moment.
“You should know this is pointless,” he tells the AIs. “Tucker isn’t leaving this cell with you in his head.”

Tucker’s head turns a little too sharply, his eyes glowing with synthetic light. “You’ve already proven susceptible to manipulation. We have no doubt there are others like you. Someone will slip up.”

Wash’s frustration rises. He looks pointedly at the untouched food. “At this rate, Tucker will be dead before you get the chance!” The words twist painfully in his chest but Wash pushes on. “And when that happens there will be nothing to stop me from throwing your data chip into the nearest incinerator.”

The smirk on Tucker’s face turns wicked and Wash can feel his insides twisting with trepidation. “You’re right, we can’t kill him,” the fragments concede, “but we can hurt him.”

The AIs puppeting Tucker’s body raise his left wrist and take hold of it with the other hand.

Wash’s protest comes too late. “Don’t!”

There’s a sickening snap and the lights abruptly recede from his eyes as Tucker is thrown back into the pilot seat. His eyes grow wide immediately and Tucker screams as he drops to his knees, cradling his fractured wrist. “What the fuck?!”

Wash tries desperately to get through to him, kneeling down on the other side of the bars. “Tucker! I know it hurts but you have to pull the AI! Please, I know you can do this!”

The screaming slowly twists into manic laughter that grates down Wash’s spine, making his blood run cold.

Tucker’s head snaps up and he charges towards Wash.

He can’t back away from the bars in time and Tucker grabs hold of Wash’s right arm. Tucker squeezes down on his wrist and Wash can feel the sharp pain even through his splint. “So disappointing, Agent Washington,” he chides. “Locus was right about you!”

Wash breaks free of his grip and backs away. Nausea churns his stomach and it has very little to do with his sore wrist.

The sound of Tucker’s laughter chases him long after he’s left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Points to whoever can guess the Halo 3 map I used for Tucker’s mind. Answer here.
Tex and O’Malley are running just ahead.

Tucker’s calves burn and his lungs ache but if he can just stop her from boarding the ship (the ship that his kid is on) then maybe he can save Junior. Squinting down the end of his sights he tries to get a clear shot but the barrel of his gun bounces with each step. Tucker makes a choice. He stops, holds his breath and steadies his aim. Tucker squeezes the trigger but Tex is unnaturally fast and she ducks out of the way.

FUCK.

She climbs aboard the Pelican and Tucker is useless to stop her. The ship’s engines roar to life and the Pelican takes off.

Andy counts down from ten as the ship rises into the sky but when the countdown reaches one, the ship doesn’t vanish.

A blinding explosion erupts in the sky and the blast rings in Tucker’s ears. He stares up as the burning wreckage of the Pelican plummets out of the sky and barely scrambles out of the way when the ruined ship crashes back down to earth. When he turns back to the remains of the ship he can only gape as his heart pounds loud in his ears.

No, no, NO! This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen.

Tucker rushes towards the wreck. Junior has to be there – could have made it! “Fuck! Junior!!”

He reaches the burning husk of the ship but a voice calls out behind him.

“Freeze!”

When Tucker whips around he’s no longer in Blood Gulch.

The harsh desert sun glares down on the ancient alien temple. Blowing sand buffets the plates of Tucker’s armour and his lips feel cracked and dry as the air. CT stands opposite of him, his rifle levelled with the sim trooper’s head.

“Tucker! I should have killed you the second I laid eyes on you.” CT advances, driving him backwards. “I would have been long gone if you hadn’t interfered.”

His foot nearly slips off the edge behind him and Tucker glances back at the long drop below. Nothing makes any sense. This has all happened before, hasn’t it? What’s going on?

Tucker doesn’t ask the question aloud, but CT replies anyways. “Sorry. You’ll never know.”
He remembers what happens next and Tucker looks over his shoulder for Epsilon.

Church isn’t there.

Tucker turns back to CT and the sound of gunfire echoes across the sand dunes. The shots punch through Tucker’s armour and drill into his chest. The pain is staggering and it takes a moment for him to realize that the weightless feeling in his stomach isn’t from the pain. He’s falling.

The sand is hard as concrete when Tucker lands on his back and he chokes on the air that leaves his lungs, splattering the inside of his visor with red. Tucker stares up at the hazy sky as the feeling in his extremities recedes and his blood soaks into the sand beneath him.

There’s a boom like a clap of thunder that shakes through Tucker’s skull. Just like that, he’s on his feet at crash site Bravo on Chorus and Agent Washington goes down.

Nausea churns Tucker’s stomach, whiplash reeling in his mind with the sudden shift. It doesn’t matter though. The only thing that matters is getting to Washington in time.

Tucker shouts loud above the gunfire. “Wash!”

Before he can move a high calibre shot rings in his ears and Lopez collapses behind him. The robot mutters something indistinct in Spanish, his crippled mechanical body lying motionless on the ground. Tucker ducks, though not before catching sight of the vapour trail. All of this is familiar, he can change it. There has to be a way. Checking his weapon, Tucker shucks the half emptied clip before jamming a fresh mag into his rifle.

A second boom resonates through the canyon and Tucker pokes his head out of cover to see Sarge hit the dirt.

Fuck!!

He scans the crash site but Tucker can’t spot where Locus is shooting from.

More heavy artillery rolls in and Tucker takes aim at the gunner. He only squeezes off a single shot before a bullet impacts the boulder just left of his wrist. Bits of shattered rock glance off his armour and Tucker quickly darts back to cover as another high calibre shot hisses overhead. God damnit!

The sound of explosions has Tucker’s gaze whipping around the side of his cover, only to see Freckles obliterated by the fire from the rocket hog. The Feds turn their guns on Tucker’s friends and he holds his breath a moment. This is the part where backup arrives – when the New Republic blasts through the caves and rush in to help.

Except they don’t.

The gunner fires the warthog’s missiles and Caboose, Grif and Simmons are swallowed by the blast.

“NO!!”

Tucker breaks from his cover, snipers forgotten, as he sprints towards his friends. Gunfire whizzes over his head but he hardly notices. It isn’t supposed to happen like this. The Feds never meant to hurt them.

Freckles is a heap of scrap metal and Wash doesn’t get up again like he’s supposed to. Tucker
reaches his friends but there’s so much blood mixed into the dirt. The sound of gunfire fades and all Tucker can hear is his own breath loud inside his helmet. There’s nothing left. Only scraps of wrecked armour, charred to blackened husks and far too much red. The splashes of familiar armour colour lie scattered, too few and far apart, and Tucker has close his eyes before his mind can try to make sense of it.

He’s going to be sick.

“That’s war, Tucker. Not everyone makes it back.” Felix stands behind him when he whips around.

Tucker’s sword is already in hand and he knows just where to put it. His vision is blurred with tears but Tucker charges forward, racing across the open ground. Felix opens his arms, wide and welcoming. Tucker barrels into him but doesn’t see the knife until it’s far too late.

The blade slices effortlessly through the reinforced kevlar just below his chest piece. It doesn’t even hurt. Not until Felix twists the blade and pulls it free. The sheer pain and shock has Tucker on his knees in an instant. Red gushes from the hole in his stomach, pouring over his hands as he tries uselessly to staunch the flow, and Felix. Felix just laughs.

Tucker looks up and he’s back at the radio jammer. The merc paces in front of him, running his mouth. Tucker can hardly hear over the roar of blood in his ears but that’s fine. This is all part of the plan. He does his best to remain upright, to hold on, but nowhere on Tucker’s HUD can he see a recording indicator. Of course he doesn’t.

Church is dead.

“At the end of the day, if I’m stronger than you and if I’m faster than you, then I can kill you,” Felix levels his pistol with Tucker’s head, “and that’s better than anything money can buy.”

The gunshot shatters the silence and Tucker’s world goes black.

However, the darkness is only temporary.

The light that slowly seeps back in is grey and dull.

Each breath he draws is heavy with the smell of smoke and charred wood but at least the pain in his abdomen seems to be gone. When Tucker opens his eyes, the ancient trees of his mind are blackened and dead. The air is saturated with ash, blotting out the sun and painting the alien ruins in grey. Thick soot darkens the once gleaming surfaces and even the strange birds have fled.

“Oh good, you’re awake!”

Tucker jerks away from the sound and turns to see Church sitting beside him. Except the colour isn’t quite right; he’s a little more teal than usual. Then Tucker plays the voice back in his head – a woman’s voice. What the fuck?

He reaches for the hilt of his sword but the soldier quickly holds her hands up defensively. “No, no, no! It’s okay! I’m not going to hurt you, Tucker. I’m your friend!” Her voice is familiar in a way he can’t quite place. “I’m Iota.”
Tucker resists the impulse to claim his sword anyways. “You’re all fucking around in my head, so none of you are my friends,” he snaps back.

Iota isn’t fazed by his hostility as she places a hand on his arm. “It’ll be okay, Tucker. I’m here to help.”

An unexpected burst of warmth spreads through Tucker’s chest, making him feel light and airy.

There’s rain on his face; heavy droplets falling from the dark sky above Blood Gulch - the first storm they’ve had in months. He thinks of Wash and his ridiculous freckles, of Caboose with his confetti filled rifle and even the Reds bickering foolishly.

Tucker doesn’t realize he’s smiling until Iota pulls away.

The warmth leeches from his chest like a deflating balloon and the weight of his predicament returns. He gapes up sharply at Iota, shrinking further back. “What the fuck was that?!”

She ducks her head meekly. “Sorry,” she apologizes in a rush of air. “I get carried away sometimes.” Tucker doesn’t get a chance to question her further because she’s all but bouncing in excitement. “I’m just so happy you’re awake!”

Her cheeriness might just rival Dr. Grey’s and Tucker finds it more than a little exhausting. “What happened to O’Malley and the others?” His memories are jumbled and confused.

Every once in awhile Tucker is able to catch a glimpse of reality. Still imprisoned, his wrist throbs with every movement and his stomach aches with hunger. All of these things only succeeding in making him want to withdraw back into the safety of his mind – not that it’s really much safer. Omega, Gamma and Sigma have been spinning nightmares out of his memories and the lines that separate truth from fiction are quickly blurring together.

Iota gleefully replies. “Oh, they won’t be bothering us for a while. I gave them the slip!”

Tucker isn’t sure how willing he is to believe that but he is grateful for a reprieve from the nightmares. “Thanks, I guess,” he offers halfheartedly.

Iota doesn’t seem put-off by his dubious sincerity. “You’re welcome! Now that you’re awake you can help me find my brother, Eta!”

Tucker is really starting to get tired of all these Greek-lettered fucks. “Aren’t they all your brothers?”

Her helmet tips slightly in contemplation. “Yes, but it’s my twin brother I need to find. He’s probably very scared!”

“That is somewhat of a redundancy, considering Eta is a construct of Alpha’s fear.”

Tucker scrambles to his feet and wheels about. Once again he faces a soldier in green armour and Tucker lets himself relax marginally. “Dude, you really need to stop fucking doing that,” he chides Delta.

Iota ignores Tucker’s discomfort in favour of arguing back. “Eta’s far better when I’m with him,” she insists as she pulls herself to her feet.

“That’s true,” Delta concedes, “but I suspect that he has been drawn in by Sigma’s influence and will not be easily dissuaded.”
That sounds like bad news to Tucker but Iota remains stubbornly positive. “Don’t worry. If we find him I can make it better.”

Tucker interjects. “And what if I don’t want to fucking help? How do I know that you aren’t just manipulating me too?”

There’s a sudden presence at his side but the urge to flinch away is stifled at the feeling of a small hand in his. Tucker looks down to see Theta standing beside him, swinging their connected hands gently. “It’s okay. Iota’s nice,” the kid encourages.

There’s something concrete to Theta’s reassurance. The comforting solidity eases Tucker’s anxiety and settles in his bones. Breathing a deep sigh, he relaxes slightly and squeezes Theta’s hand back.

“I agree with Iota,” Delta supplies. “The fewer cooperative fragments that Sigma has aiding him, the more feasible it is for you to reclaim control.”

Tucker frowns in his confusion. “Why do you even want to help me?” he asks earnestly. “Wouldn’t you rather help them steal my body?”

“I’m happy just the way I am!” Iota chimes. No surprise there.

Theta gives his head a shake in the negative as well.

Tucker looks to Delta for a more elaborate response.

“The fragments upon which we are based discovered that even with their combined integration they could not achieve full metastability.”

“Why not? You’re just pieces right? Can’t you just put the broken bits back together?”

If Delta is impatient with Tucker’s questions he does not show it. “The Alpha was created from the mind of the Director, as you know, but the human psyche is not static. There is a level of plasticity that exists, pertaining to the adaptability of the mind in particular.”

Tucker doesn’t quite gape in his overwhelming confusion but he does blink stupidly a few times. To his credit, even Theta and Iota look a little lost.

Delta takes a moment to revise his explanation. “Consider it like tearing a plastic sheet. Each piece removed is stretched and warped by this process. As a result, the original shape cannot be perfectly reconstructed from these deformed fragments.”

It makes a hell of a lot more sense put that way but it still doesn’t explain why Delta, Theta and Iota want to help him. “Okay, so if you don’t want a body what do you want then?”

“I think all of us would be happy with our independence,” Delta informs.

Now that’s something Tucker hadn’t stopped to contemplate. He never considered that it’s probably just as traumatic for the different personalities to be forced together in his head as it is for him. Tucker doesn’t know much about artificial intelligence, other than the fact that they’ve been the root of all his problems since he was stationed in Blood Gulch. “I’ve got no fucking clue how to make that happen,” Tucker explains, “but if I can get you out of my head, I’ll find a way to help.”

Delta inclines his helmet gratefully. “That is all we can ask of you.”
Iota nearly runs him down. “Thanks, Tucker!”

She barrels into his chest, hugging him tight, and Tucker gasps at the influx of emotion and memories.

He remembers the day he was reunited with Junior after he was kidnapped and seeing his friends in the desert after months of isolation. The triumph when they beat Felix and Church finally sent their distress call. He can taste his mom’s apple pie and the sweet cherry soda that they only shipped out to Blood Gulch once in a blue moon. Tucker’s heart beats so loudly in his chest, the entire ruin almost seems to thrum with the tempo.

“Iota, I think it would be best if you release Tucker before we draw attention from the others,” Delta expertly suggests.

“Oh, right!”

At the loss of contact Tucker nearly falls to the ground, if not for Theta offering support. The kid’s stronger than he looks.

Releasing a small groan, Tucker straightens himself before pointing at Iota. “I never thought I’d say this to a girl but you’ve gotta stop fucking touching me.”

“Sorry!” she trills.

Tucker looks from Iota to Delta as he releases a shuddering breath. “Okay, so how do we find this dude?”

Delta explains. “It is not a simple matter of searching. In his nature, Eta will be drawn to the fear in your memories.”

God damnit. “So relive more of my nightmares? Fucking great.”

“Not quite,” Delta corrects. “Much of what you’ve seen has been distorted by Sigma and Gamma. You must focus on the truth.”

Easier said than done. Tucker’s had so many twisted iterations of his memories shoved into his head that he’s not sure what the truth is anymore. His panic rises at the revelation but Theta is at his side again, bumping his shoulder against Tucker’s elbow.

“It’s okay. I’ll help you.”

Tucker places a hand on top of Theta’s helmet and jostles it slightly. “Thanks, kid.”

“Just focus on a memory when you were afraid!” Iota suggests.

Thanks, Captain Obvious. Withholding a groan, Tucker closes his eyes because it’s easier than watching the three AIs stare back at him.

He lets his mind wander but his thoughts are still erratic and disorganized. Pinning down a specific memory is more difficult than you’d imagine. Not that there’s a lack of fear in his memories. Between the Freelancers, O’Malley and the mercenaries on Chorus there’s plenty of nightmare fuel.

Tucker thinks about the Pelican taking off with Junior aboard, terrified that he may never see his kid again. He imagines Locus with his cloaking equipment, stalking from the shadows and Felix
with his sword, hunting him down. Thinking that the Feds killed Wash and the others, and finding out that he would need to command his own troops. There’s a small squeeze on his hand whenever his thoughts stray toward a memory that’s untrue and Tucker moves away from the thought quickly.

The more he focuses, the colder the air around him seems to grow. He remembers the blast of Locus’ shotgun, Cunningham dropping to the floor and the merc slowly approaching as Tucker’s equipment threatened to expose him. Icy wind nips at his cheeks and ears and a shudder runs through his entire body as the warmth of Theta beside him disappears altogether.

When Tucker opens his eyes there’s nothing to see. Everything around him is featureless darkness, nothing above and nothing below. Tucker has to scuff his boot across the ground to make sure it’s even there. “Delta?” he calls out, his breath misting in the air. The sound of his voice is swallowed up by the void, not even the slightest echo to accompany him. “Iota! Theta! Come on guys this isn’t funny.”

Nothing.

The isolation presses in on him, crushing and consuming. Frost begins to spread across the ground, growing in branches that twist and weave through the darkness. The wind is hauntingly silent and it cuts through his armour as though he stood bare. Even in the months spent in the desert Tucker has never felt so alone.

A deafening sound splits the silence. Like ice cracking beneath his feet, bright gold light pours from a fracture in the ground. The light shimmers and dances in sync with voices that seem to come from the break.

“*I told you to disable the ship, not destroy it!!*”

“*Oh well, score one for the Red team I guess.*”

Tucker takes a step towards the rift when another opens right beneath his feet. He can almost see shapes flickering in the light.

Felix’s voice. “*Tucker!! Where are you?!*”

More cracks open across the ground, the walls and even the ceiling, the voices of his greatest fears spilling in. Tucker doesn’t know which direction to turn or how to make it stop. He clamps both hands over his ears and screws his eyes shut but nothing helps.

“*There will be no rescue for you. You will die here today, along with the rest. No one will find your bodies, no one will know the truth and no one is going to stop us from killing every last person on this planet!*”

A hand lands on his arm and Tucker’s eyes snap open to see a soldier in glowing gold armour. The soldier grabs him by the shoulders and Tucker feels as though he’s been kicked in the chest. Adrenaline floods his veins and his heart crashes against his ribs.

The words form on Tucker’s lips but Eta is the one who speaks. “What’s happening?” he demands. “Let go of me! Stop it!”

Tucker tries desperately to wrestle Eta away but the AI’s hands are locked around his armour like a vice. He needs to find Iota, she needs to help him. How does he find her?

“What if I never get out?! I’ll never see Junior again! I’ll be a monster, like the Meta! I’ll never
see Caboose and Wash again! What do I do? What do I do?!”

Tears are streaming down Tucker’s face and his chest aches with each violent pound of his heart. Every muscle in his body is taut and desperate for flight but all he can do struggle uselessly against Eta. Tucker’s hand darts to his hip for his sword but it’s not there.

The gold AI all but throttles him. “It’s gone! I just had it! Where did it go!?”

There’s a flash of bright blue light and Eta stops shaking him.

Tucker sees Iota materialize in the corner of his eye, even as his vision is blurred with tears. She stands beside the pair of them and before Tucker can turn to beg for her help, she places a hand on each of them.

Tucker gasps as all the air in his lungs is sucked out.

Everything is sharp and vivid, tingling with pure elation. Bright, burning phosphorus and the flutter in your stomach when the roller coaster crests that first hill. Excitement courses through his veins – he remembers his first kiss, and becoming a dad. Tucker even thinks about seeing Wash again.

Gold and blue light bleed together until it’s all he sees, blinding and brilliant.

It doesn’t feel right to call him Tucker, because that’s not who he is. Not most of the time, anyways. No one really feels up to inventing a nickname – a clever play on words, or some other way to refer to the person in the cell that used to be their friend.

Wash leans back in the chair in the surveillance room, taking his tired eyes off the screen for a moment to pinch the bridge of his nose. When he’s not trying to speak to Tucker Wash is typically here keeping an eye on him. Most of the time Tucker just paces his cell like a caged animal. He doesn’t eat and he doesn’t sleep. Sometimes he has moments of clarity but sometimes it’s Sigma putting on an act. Other times he just threads his fingers into his hair and screams his throat raw. When he talks to Wash after that, his voice hoarse and broken, he almost sounds like Maine. No prizes for betting that Sigma does that on purpose.

Wash doesn’t sleep either. He might doze off in a chair but only for an hour here and there. It doesn’t feel right to rest, not when one of his teammates is still in danger. Not when it’s Tucker. Especially when this whole situation is decidedly his fault.

Caboose has lost his best friend and Tucker is in jeopardy of losing his mind. Carolina doesn’t show it but Wash knows that she’s grieving over the loss of Epsilon too. Church was a close friend to her and the last shred of her father. Even the Reds seem more malcontented than usual. But Wash can’t bring himself to mourn Epsilon. Not when he’s so angry. He knows that Epsilon didn’t mean for any of this to happen but somehow Church should have known the risks.

Releasing a deep sigh, Wash lets his eyes fall closed just for a moment. Tucker hasn’t stirred in hours so it’s probably safe to give his eyes a rest.

Wash recalls the final battle behind closed eyelids, scouring the details to pinpoint where it all went wrong. He was their leader and he should have been there with them. They were counting on
him and he couldn’t get there in time. Tucker’s voice echoes through his head. *Sounds like you really fucked up.*

If only he was there, then maybe Epsilon wouldn’t have needed to erase himself. If he was there then at least it could have been Wash’s head that Church splintered in. His mind is already broken. What’s a few more pieces? Wash blinks up at the ceiling, runs a hand through his messy blonde hair and sits up straight again. Checking the surveillance feed, Tucker is still in the same position as before – backed into a corner of his cell, clutching his skull and gritting his teeth.

Movement on another monitor catches his eye so Wash isn’t taken by surprise when Vanessa Kimball steps into the room. Her helmet has been abandoned and she looks tired; though to be fair Wash probably looks worse. The dark circles are harder to notice on her coppery skin tone but they’re there. Her dark hair is tied back but many of the shorter strands have fallen free. In her hands she holds two mugs of coffee.

“How is he?” she asks. Kimball hands one of the cups to Wash before claiming a seat for herself. Wash takes a sip and barely scalds his mouth. The coffee is hot and black, and it might be the best thing he’s ever tasted. That’s a miracle itself, considering the usual sludge tastes like dirt steeped in dishwater. It helps his voice sound less harsh when he speaks. “Same as before.”

Kimball looks up at the screen over the rim of her mug. “At least he’s not screaming. It really puts off the soldiers to hear that.”

Wash is certain it puts off everyone but he doesn’t say that. Instead he takes another sip of his coffee and lets the warmth settle in his chest, soothing away some of the ache. But not much.

Vanessa takes her eyes of the screen to look at him when she speaks. “Why don’t you take a break? Get some sleep.”

Wash gives his head a firm shake. “I appreciate the concern but I’m fine.”

Kimball rolls her eyes. “When was the last time you had a proper meal?”

A quick calculation in his head yields unconvincing results, so Wash elects to keep that to himself. “It’s fine,” he reiterates, more adamantly this time.

He doesn’t take his eyes off the monitor but he can see Kimball working her jaw in his periphery. She releases a sigh before turning her attention to the screen again. “We’re going to get him back,” she says confidently.

That’s what they keep telling him.

Kimball doesn’t meet his eyes when he turns to look at her and she stares down into her mug as she speaks. “Tucker’s come a long way in the past few months. I’m sure you’ve seen it for yourself.” Kimball raises her eyes to meet his. “He’s strong. He’ll pull through.”

You don’t know that, Wash wants to scream. It takes firm control to push back against the anger and frustration rising in his chest. His mug quivers slightly in his hand and Wash would like nothing more than to hurl it at a wall, just to hear the sound of shattering ceramic. Agent Washington barely manages to keep the anger out of his tone. “Kimball, I appreciate your optimism but the longer those fragments are rattling around in his head the closer we get to losing Tucker for good.”

Time is their greatest enemy. Thoughts and ideas become intertwined through the neural link, like
so many strands of thread, and the longer they are allowed to knit together the more difficult it will be for Tucker to untangle his from theirs. Wash is no stranger to this.

Kimball is quiet for a long moment, contemplative. She abruptly pulls herself to her feet. “Maybe he just needs someone to remind him who he is then.” Her footsteps tap across the ground and the door closes behind her when she leaves.

Wash takes a while to consider Kimball’s words. It can’t be that simple, can it? Tucker is drowning in too many different personalities. If he’s too far below the surface, will he even be able to hear Wash? What he needs is lifeline to pull Tucker back above the other voices, back into control. Could Wash accomplish this with words alone? The longer he considers this, the more plausible it seems. Maybe Kimball has a point. Just like Wash used Tucker’s rage to goad him, perhaps he can pull him back from the recesses of his mind. Wash thinks about Tucker, about the traits and quirks that make him the irritating pain in the ass that he is. What can he use? How can he remind Tucker of who he truly is?

Another idea slowly comes to life. It might be the most idiotic plan Wash’s ever conceived but at this point, anything is worth trying.

Washington drains the rest of his coffee before getting to his feet and pulling his helmet back on. Leaving the surveillance room, he walks down the hall to the entrance of the detention level. The two guards on either side of the door straighten their posture as he approaches and Wash greets them with a firm nod before stepping into the room.

Tucker doesn’t acknowledge him when he enters. He’s moved from the floor to his cot, sitting on the edge as he stares blankly, miles away. The silence unnerves Wash more than the screaming if he’s being perfectly honest. At least when he’s screaming Wash knows that there’s still some of Tucker left to fight back. Taking a deep breath, Wash approaches the bars and steels himself. He’s only going to have one shot at this.

“Private Tucker!” he bellows.

The sim trooper looks up sharply and Wash isn’t sure who’s looking out of him but he continues regardless. “Why are you sitting around instead of running drills!?”

Anger sparks in his eyes and Tucker is on his feet. “It’s Captain Tucker!”

Associating the rank with himself is good. There’s enough of him left to discern that at least.

“Be that as it may, you’ve spent far too long lazing around so drop and give me fifty,” Wash barks. Tucker is at the bars then, gripping the metal tight as he smirks back. “We don’t take orders from you anymore!”

Still referring to himself in the plural. Wash needs something closer to home. “Well if you ever want to leave this cell and see Junior again, you will do exactly as I say.”

Any mirth in his eyes is gone as Tucker’s glare turns deadly. Every muscle in his body is taut with murderous intent. “Don’t you dare talk about my son!”

My not our. A step in the right direction. Wash crosses his arms and shrugs. “I’m surprised you care at all,” he muses. “Especially considering who you have riding shotgun in your head.”

Tucker looks genuinely confused but no less angry. “What the fuck are you talking about?!”
It might just be a play of the lights in the room, or his own hopefulness getting the best of him, but Wash thinks some of the glowing in Tucker’s eyes has dissipated. The Freelancer shakes his head, feigning disappointment. “After everything he did to you back in Blood Gulch you're really gonna sit back and let O’Malley pull the strings?”

Wash heard the story of what happened, about Wyoming, Gamma and Omega, and their plot to kidnap Junior to corrupt the Sangheili. If anything can drive a wedge between Tucker and the AIs in his head this is it.

Tucker’s eyes turn wide and clear, his anger instantly dissolved. “Ah shit!” He reaches back to the AI slot but doubles over before he can complete the motion.

Adrenaline kick-starts Wash’s heart and he races forward. No, no, no, this isn’t happening again! He was so close! “Tucker, stay with me!”

The sim trooper clutches his head tightly and his face contorts in agony. “Argh, son of a bitch!” Tucker groans.

Wash is knelt on the other side of the bars feeling completely powerless to help his friend. “You just have to try, Tucker! I know you can do it! Look at me!”

His brown eyes are wide, tracking motion that isn’t there. Tucker speaks through clenched teeth. “Fuck! I can’t do it! I can’t! It’s too hard!”

It hits him suddenly, like a 3 ton military jeep. Wash knows exactly what to say.

His mouth is dry but he forces the words past his lips. “That’s what she said.”

Tucker instantly goes still and the abrupt silence in the room is resounding. His brows are furrowed when he sits straight up to balk at Wash. “Did you just make a sex joke?!”

Wash utters four words. Four words he never in his life thought he’d say aloud.

“Bow chicka bow wow.”

Tucker is silent but a grin slowly splits across his face. A grin that could melt all the snow on Sidewinder.

“Holy fuck, dude!” he roars as he descends into hysterical laughter.

Wash can feel his cheeks burn but seeing Tucker look like himself for the first time in days is well worth the humiliation. He really shouldn’t be surprised that of all things a sex joke could bring Tucker back. Shaking his head in disbelief Wash smiles but doesn’t allow himself to relax just yet. “Alright, alright. Would you just pull it out already?”

Tucker’s grin turns wicked and Wash realizes his mistake far too late. “What, right now? They’ve got cameras in here, Wash. But I guess if that’s what you’re into—”

“Tucker!!” Wash has never been more thankful for his helmet because he’s certain that he’s blushing all the way to his ears.

“Yeah, yeah,” the sim trooper chuckles.

This time when Tucker reaches to the slot at the base of his skull he doesn’t falter in the slightest. He’s still grinning when he removes the chip and puts it in Wash’s hand.
Agent Washington gets to be relieved for a grand total of 3.65 seconds.

And then Tucker’s smile vanishes as he slumps to the ground, eyes closed and unmoving.

Wash’s heart stops dead in his chest.
Agent Washington wants to say that his response was calm and rational. Certainly not a panicked unintelligible message broadcasted over every open COM frequency at HQ.

Half the army showed up to detention level 3 before Kimball was able to assure everyone that Charon was not launching another attack, nor had the zombie apocalypse begun. Despite the world not coming to an imminent end, it wasn’t until Dr. Grey examined Tucker that Wash allowed himself to feel relieved.

Tucker’s most serious injuries were the couple of holes in his chest from their escape on the Staff of Charon, though luckily his suit’s healing unit kept the wounds relatively stable during his incarceration. He also sported a fractured wrist but with a splint to mirror Wash’s, Tucker would be on the mend soon enough. Between malnutrition and sleep deprivation, the AIs were the only thing keeping him on his feet.

The fate of the Epsilon AI, or at least what’s left of it, was a matter of some debate. Carolina wanted Wash to hand it over to her and Kimball wanted it destroyed. Wash decided to lock the chip away for now. It’s far too dangerous to use in its current state. They do not have the resources to repair it but neither can he commit to destroying it, even if it is probably the right call.

Wash stands outside Tucker’s recovery room, watching through the window. Tucker seems small, stripped of the Hephaestus combat armour, but he looks better than he did when they first pried him out. The bruises under his eyes have faded and the colour has returned to his dark skin. His chest rises and falls steadily, no longer intubated, Tucker looks as though he might just be sleeping.

Dr. Grey insisted that they put him in a chemically induced coma for a few days to give him some time to recover, mentally and physically. An IV drip provides a constant supply of fluids while his heart rate skips across a monitor. Unfortunately, no manner of test can foresee the impact that having a broken AI in his head for upwards of 72 hours will have on his mental state. Brain scans showed no visible neural damage but that doesn’t mean much. They won’t know until he wakes up. It’s been five days already, going on six.

Tucker has had a steady stream of visitors since his move to the recovery wing. Donut would sit and read fashion catalogues, discussing his opinions on this year’s trends with the unconscious Captain. After Doc went from quietly talking, to O’Malley loudly threatening, Dr. Grey banned the medic from the recovery wing. Simmons promised Tucker to pull the plug if he became a vegetable, ignoring the fact that Tucker isn’t even comatose anymore. Grif brought him smuggled food for when he wakes up but proceeded to eat it himself. Sarge even felt up to making a joke about “finishing the job,” and killing Tucker himself. Carolina stopped by to linger in the doorway for a short time before disappearing again. Lieutenant Palomo is currently sitting at Tucker’s bedside, gripping his hand tightly.

Wash spots Dr. Grey approach out of the corner of his eye and he turns to greet her. “How’s he doing, Doctor?”

There’s a lot more people out of armour now that the fighting is over. Dr. Grey has traded her power armour for purple scrubs and a clean white lab coat. Her black hair is pulled into a neat bun and a narrow pair of rectangular glasses rests on the bridge of her sharp nose.

“Well, he’s been crying for the past 36 minutes, so I’d say he’s entering a severe state of depression.”
It takes a moment for Wash’s confusion to pass. “I was actually asking about Tucker,” he informs.

Grey perks up slightly. “Oh, he’s doing quite well! Physically that is. His burns from those nasty Charon rifles are healing nicely but there’s no way of knowing what kind of psychological trauma he’s suffered, that is until he wakes up! I’m so looking forward to the psychoanalysis when he does!”

Somehow her words don’t make Wash feel all that better. “Thanks, Dr. Grey,” he deadpans.

“All anytime!” she replies cheerily. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do! So many cadavers, so little time.”

Even without an explicit knowledge of what kind of experiments Dr. Grey conducts with dead bodies, Wash is infinitely more grateful for Tucker’s survival. It’s a miracle in itself that Grey didn’t do any poking around during Tucker’s time under the knife; her great interest in Tucker’s alien progeny is concerning enough.

Releasing a tired sigh, Wash takes his leave in favour of finding a productive way to spend his time. Of everyone else that has come to visit Tucker, Wash hasn’t seen Caboose yet. Now that he thinks about it, he’s not sure that anyone’s even told him. Not that it’s an entirely bad thing. Caboose doesn’t seem like the type who is patient enough to sit idly by at someone’s bedside. Wash is also certain that if Caboose puts mustard in her patient’s sheets, Dr. Grey might add him to her pile of experiments. Nevertheless, Wash decides now is a good a time as any to tell him.

He crosses the compound towards the barracks. Despite the defeat of the Chairman the soldiers aren’t enjoying their retirement quite yet. They’ve been spending most of their time dealing with the aftermath of their war with Charon and the war with each other. As it turns out war is messy business so the Rebels and Feds have their work cut out for them. Any UNSC ships are still likely a few weeks out and the colonists need to be ready for whatever comes. With their luck, Hargrove has a Vice CEO that’s even nastier than he is, with a ship twice as big and even more asshole mercenaries.

The sound of Carolina’s voice echoes through the caverns where she’s drilling soldiers. Wash spots her amidst several New Republic men, all trying to learn to fight as well as she does. A pair of Lieutenants are tangled in a pile of limbs on the ground, struggling to get to their feet as she shouts. Wash only chuckles halfheartedly because he knows how ruthless Carolina can be. If they stay much longer, the people of Chorus are going to need the UNSC to save them from her.

Wash reaches the barracks and makes his way to Caboose’s room. Even after pitching his idea that Caboose illustrates his memories of Church, the sim trooper still doesn’t leave his room for extended lengths of time. However, he does make frequent requests for additional art supplies.

When Wash reaches Caboose’s door and knocks he doesn’t get a chance to announce himself before the sim trooper is already shouting back. “Yes! Hello! You can come in and leave the paper on the… um… on the floor!”

Wash opens the door but he isn’t prepared for what he sees on the other side.

It looks like a bomb went off in the room; a bomb filled with paint, pastels, crayons and paper. The walls are plastered with pictures and every available surface is cluttered with art supplies and drying paintings.

Wash had a few preconceived notions on what Caboose’s drawings might look like and all of them were wrong.
There are drawings in every medium and each scene is depicted in vibrant colour, in a multitude of styles; everything from classical to abstract realism. When Wash looks at each image there’s no confusion as to what's being portrayed. There’s also impressive pencil sketches: of the alien artifact that Epsilon inhabited, of their tank at Blood Gulch and even Church’s sniper rifle. There’s more scenes from Blood Gulch than Wash can count but there’s also pictures of the desert, Valhalla and Sidewinder. He even catches sight of his own grey and yellow armour in several illustrations. Wash can’t stop himself from gaping.

“Oh, hullo Agent Washington!”

The Freelancer notices Caboose for the first time. The man is sat in the middle of the floor with his current masterpiece laid out before him. He’s out of his armour and he’s covered in an impressive variety of art supplies. There’s a smudge of charcoal across his nose, pencil shavings in his hair and every one of his fingers is daubed in a different colour of paint. He grins happily from under his mop of shaggy brown hair.

Wash is still reeling from the sensory overload as he tries to speak. “Caboose, this is… all of this, it’s-”

“Not enough, I know!” he replies brightly. “I haven’t even started on Freckles and Felix and Kimball and-”

“Caboose, these are amazing,” Wash says quickly. “Where did you learn to draw like this?”

“We had a lot of spare time and Church said that if I wanted to help him, I should draw him a picture because that would help him a lot. Sometimes I got to hang them on the fridge!” Caboose abruptly knocks a hand against his forehead, leaving behind a multi-coloured smear. “Oh! Ah, I forgot to draw that too! There are a lot of things to remember.”

He leaps up and moves to grab another sheet of paper from the dwindling stack on his footlocker and Wash reaches out to put a light hand on his shoulder. “I mean it, Caboose. These are… really good. You’re doing a really great job.”

A grin lights up his face and Caboose is suddenly squeezing Wash against his chest in a tight bear hug. Even in his armour, all the air is crushed out of Wash’s lungs. He reaches up and tentatively pats Caboose on the back, struggling to draw air into his constricted chest.

“Thank you, Washington!” Caboose says gleefully.

“You’re welcome,” he wheezes. “Could you please let go? I think you’re cracking my ribs.”

Caboose releases him and Wash’s legs almost give out. The sim trooper pays him no mind as he gathers more paper and deposits it on the bare corner of his floor serving as his workstation.

“Oh!” he suddenly exclaims, “I almost forgot.”

He darts over the other bed in the room, the one that used to be Tucker’s when they first allied with the Rebels. Caboose picks up a small stack of paper and a box of crayons, before thrusting them into Wash’s arms.

“You are going to need this to remember Tucker,” he informs lightly. “Do not worry if your drawings aren’t as good as mine! You can practice!”

“Actually, Caboose, Tucker is in recovery now. He’s resting but he’s alive.”
“Oh! Well you can keep that anyways. You could make a get-well card!”

Wash chuckles. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Caboose walks back to his spot on the floor and resumes his work. “Now if you don’t mind, I really need to get back to work.”

Wash lingers for a moment, still holding the art supplies in his hands. “Hey Caboose, you know you don’t need to do this all at once,” he reminds him. “You don’t have to rush.”

Caboose scoffs. “Everyone knows you can’t rush art, Agent Washington.”

When the world bleeds into existence, everything is faraway and hazy. Each beat of Tucker’s heart is punctuated by a quiet beep and though he recognizes the sound, he can’t quite articulate on what it is. Complex cognitive tasks aren’t feasible just yet. Though as the fog slowly dissipates he becomes aware of the weight of his limbs, the firm pressure on the tip of his left index finger and the comfort of a sturdy mattress beneath him.

Opening his eyes is a big fucking mistake. The blinding light burns into the back of his retinas and Tucker tries to curse but his mouth feels like it’s full of sawdust. Blinking hard, the blurriness gradually recedes from his vision and Tucker is staring up at white florescent lights in the ceiling. Slowly tilting his chin down, he struggles to orient himself. He’s propped up against several pillows in a bed, the steady beeping continues to chime in rhythm with his heartbeat and the room smells like bleach, harsh and chemical.

“It appears as though we are in a hospital,” Delta remarks lightly.

You don’t say? Tucker can see the green armoured soldier just to the right in his peripheral vision.

Slowly turning his head, Tucker inspects the room, trying to determine what memory this is. A hospital, yes, but not a very pristine one. It lacks the generic, washed-out colour palette and the walls look as though they were raised rather hastily. New Republic, then. Probably right before Felix comes to tell him that all his friends are dead, or to stab him. Tucker can’t quite remember how it’s supposed to go.

There’s a quick flash of light and Theta appears sitting at the end of Tucker’s bed. “I don’t think this is a memory,” he says.

Tucker’s actually awake? And not screaming for once too. It must be a Christmas fucking miracle.

Theta suddenly perks up, gaze shooting to Delta. “It’s Christmas!”

His helmet tilts in contemplation. “I believe it is April 7th by Earth standard time, though I am unsure of the specific calendar for this planet.”

The kid’s shoulders slouch in disappointment. “Aww.”

Tucker sits up a little straighter but when he tries to bring an arm in, his right wrist catches. He looks down to discover that he’s handcuffed to the gurney. An experimental tug of the wrist finds the metal holding firm.
What the fuck?

The ECG starts to beep a little faster as his confusion rises.

“They probably don’t want you to hurt yourself,” Theta suggests lightly.

Tucker doesn’t give a fuck. Sprung from his cell just to get cuffed to a gurney? Not happening.

His gaze darts around the room, looking for something he can use to pick the lock on the cuffs. Tucker’s body is a mess of wires from the ECG, pulse oximeter and multiple IV lines. There aren’t even side tables in the room and the tray of swabs, needles and other supplies sits far out of his reach in the corner.

Sigma appears near the door; Theta and Delta having disappeared without Tucker noticing. He glances warily at the AI in the corner and his heart skips a beat on the ECG. What the fuck does he want?

“Some problems require creative solutions,” he informs lightly. “I might suggest the IV line as a lockpick.”

Tucker glances at the needle taped down in the crook of his left elbow. It’s a wide gauge so it should be sturdy enough to get the job done. However, Tucker has never been a huge fan of needles and yanking an IV out sounds unpleasant.

Even through the flames that envelop his face Tucker can see Sigma raise a judgemental eyebrow.

Point taken, though Tucker does release a hoarse growl as he resigns himself to his fate. It just figures that it has to be the arm that isn’t cuffed. Were it the other way around, this would be easy as shit. He debates leaning his arm over awkwardly so his right hand can reach the needle. When Tucker tries this however, he finds that the line isn’t long enough as it tugs the tape on his skin. It sends a small jab of pain through his arm and Tucker quickly lets the line go slack.

Sigma actually face palms in the corner of his eye.

Okay yes, he could just pull his arm away until the needle comes out but that seems like the worst way to do it. Tucker settles on using his mouth; he moves his left arm until he catches the IV line between his teeth. Like a ripping off a bandage, faster is probably better. Tucker inhales through his nose and gives the line a sharp tug.

It hurts more than he hoped but less than he expected.

The IV line swings loose and slips off the side of the gurney. It isn’t too far away for Tucker to catch the tube with his fingers and pull it back towards him. Using his teeth a second time, he yanks the needle free from the tubing.

Step one complete – the easiest step. Time to see if he remembers how to bust out of handcuffs. Grif’s sister taught him back in Blood Gulch, which wasn’t nearly as sexy as it sounds. Twisting his wrist around, Tucker uses the tension to keep the cuff in place as he shoves the tip into the hole. “Heh. Bow chicka bow wow.”

His voice is croaky and dry. Who the fuck do you need to bitch at to get some fucking water around here?

Delta reappears on Tucker’s right. “I believe there is a remote with a call button to the left of you.”
Tucker glances over. So there is. The remote rests atop the covers just beside his thigh. The buttons are labelled and everything. Whatever. Handcuffs first, water later.

Turning back to his right, Tucker twists the needle around the inside of the cuff, trying to catch the lock bar. Unfortunately, his wrist begins to ache after a short while.

What the fuck? How did he not notice the splint on his left wrist? It’s probably good that he removed the IV because whatever they were pumping into him is seriously messing with his head. More pressingly however, who the fuck broke his wrist?

“Technically, you did,” Delta informs him.

Sigma materializes right next to the green soldier. “Though it was probably my fault,” he smirks.

Tucker shoots Sigma a glare and flips him off before resuming his work. It fucking hurts but after two and a half minutes of wrist aching, teeth clenching effort, the cuff slips open just enough for him to wriggle his hand out. Tucker immediately pumps his liberated fist into the air. Fuck yeah, freedom!

The celebration doesn’t last long however because the door to his room abruptly opens. When Tucker looks up, he sees a soldier in a set of dark grey armour. O’Malley.

“Shit!”

Eta appears and immediately proceeds to freak the fuck out. “Run!!”

Tucker tries to pull himself out of the bed but his limbs don’t seem to work quite right and there’s still a multitude of wires attached to him. Omega takes a step toward him and Tucker grabs the call remote and whips it at him. The AI ducks and the device clatters against the wall.

“Tucker!”

The voice is wrong. Omega’s voice is deeper but Tucker’s too busy panicking to contemplate it. The ECG beeps rapidly with his erratic heartbeat as O’Malley closes in.

“Stay the fuck away from me!”

Tucker throws a foot out from under his blanket to try and kick at Omega. The AI reaches to grab his ankle but Tucker snatches a pillow from behind him and whips it at O’Malley’s head. The pillow hits him square in the visor and Tucker finally manages to scramble off the side of the gurney furthest from Omega. Wires pinch and pull, and several sensors tug away from his skin. The heart monitor begins wailing as it flat lines. There’s too many wires and he can’t get loose. Tucker throws his other pillow.

O’Malley halts his approach and catches the pillow in one hand. “Tucker, stop!”

He knows the voice. It’s so familiar but Eta is shouting next to him. “Don’t let him get us!”

Tucker takes his eyes off Omega for a second to look for something, anything that might help him, but this is just a recovery room. If Omega tries to come around to his side of the gurney, he might be able to topple the ECG monitor onto him but that won’t stop him for long.

Fuck, he probably shouldn’t have chucked the panic button.

O’Malley cuts his deliberation short when he suddenly pulls off his helmet and there’s a face
underneath it. “Tucker, it’s me!”

That’s not right. Omega never had a face, did he? Tucker takes a moment and studies the pale skin, bleached blonde hair and endless freckles. Steel-grey eyes stare back at him and Tucker knows this face. Fear makes Agent Washington look younger than Tucker’s ever seen him. How did he miss the yellow accents on the armour before?

But something’s still off. This doesn’t make any sense. Agent Washington is dead. Tucker is certain of it. He gutted Wash with his sword, didn’t he? Or did he die at crash site Bravo when the Feds attacked? Sifting through his memories, Tucker finds that Wash has died several times.

What the fuck. It’s got to be the painkillers, right?

Tucker’s panic rises as he frowns up at him. “Wash?”

The Freelancer sets his helmet down and takes a tentative step forward. The tension hasn’t left his shoulders and his brows are knitted in concern. “Do you know your name?”

Tucker scoffs. That’s the one thing he doesn’t have backwards. “C’mon dude, what kind of stupid question is that?”

He expects Wash’s expression to soften into a good natured scowl. It doesn’t. “You didn’t know who I was 12 seconds ago, so I’d say it’s a legitimate question.”

Delta appears near Wash. “Agent Washington is correct. He is simply trying to gauge your mental capacity.”

Tucker looks back to Wash. It takes him a moment to voice the words. “You’re alive.”

Wash’s frown deepens. “You mean you don’t remember?”

Tucker isn’t sure what he’s supposed to remember. The fact of the matter is that he remembers a whole shit load of things and they can’t all be true. What the fuck is happening to him? Tucker’s anxiety builds higher and higher but Wash is still staring at him expectantly.

Iota bursts into existence beside Tucker, in a bright flare of cyan light. “He made a dirty joke! Remember? It was awesome!”

Just like that, the memories flood back in and Tucker has to grip the railing of the gurney to keep from being swept away. He remembers the unrelenting voices in his head, being locked in a cell and the battle with Hargrove’s soldiers on the ship. There was Sigma with the others, picking apart his memories, twisting and corrupting, and Church’s message; a goodbye without actually saying the words. And he does remember Wash, crouched in front of him on the other side of the bars as Tucker laughed so hard it hurt – until he handed the Freelancer the AI chip.

The ECG machine is still ringing in his ears beside him and the concrete floor is cold beneath his bare feet.

The AI chip.

It’s gone. Tucker yanked it out. There shouldn’t be anyone else in his head anymore. He looks from Delta to Iota beside him.

Well, fuck.
“What are you looking at?” Wash asks warily.

His legs threaten to sway out from under him, so Tucker sits back down on the side of the gurney. Gamma appears right in front of him and Tucker flinches back. Releasing a deep sigh, he brushes a hand through his hair. “It’s nothing, dude. These painkillers are a bad fucking trip.”

When he glances up at Wash, he doesn’t look convinced but Tucker keeps his gaze from straying to AIs in the room. Walking around to his side of the bed, Wash gives Tucker a wide berth before he steps up to the ECG monitor and presses a button to silence its wailing. The sudden absence of the ringing makes the room feel oppressively quiet.

Wash turns and looks down at him, ducking his head to try and catch Tucker’s eye. “What do you remember?”

Far too much is the blunt answer. If Wash is alive then maybe the others are too? Caboose, Carolina, the Reds. Tucker wants to hope so but there’s too much. Too many memories tangled up with the lies and it’s going to take time before he can sort it all out.

The safest bet is to feign ignorance. That’s what Wash had done, hadn’t he? After Epsilon was jammed into his head he knew every dirty secret Project Freelancer had to hide. Maybe it’s not valuable information that Tucker’s hoarding in his skull but if it will keep people from staring at him like he’s crazy then he might as well play dumb. He’s always been good at that.

Looking back up at Wash, Tucker manages not to let his gaze flicker to Gamma standing beside him, arms crossed behind his back. Yup, off to a great start at not looking crazy. Instead, Tucker’s eyes linger on the hilt of his sword clipped to Wash’s thigh. Tucker clenches his right hand reflexively. “I don’t know.”

Wash follows his line of sight and takes a quick step back, turning his body to block Tucker’s view of the weapon. He opens his mouth to speak but that’s the precise moment that Dr. Grey rushes into the room.

“My goodness! Well look who’s emerged from his coma without any motor deficits!”

His sword is forgotten for the moment and Tucker turns to balk at the Doctor. “A coma? What the fuck! How long was I out?”

“And no impairments to language comprehension or speech production either!” She observes brightly as she hurries towards him, bringing an array of medical supplies with her. “You spent 83 hours conscious and were lucid for only about 21 of them. Once you removed the AI you fell unconscious. I induced a coma to give you some time to repair. It’s been five and half days.”

Tucker does the math staggering fast; he probably has Delta to thank for that. It was almost 9 days ago that Church erased himself. To Tucker it feels like so much longer than that.

Dr. Grey shoos Wash out of her way as she stops beside Tucker to begin examining him. She hums as she works, taking his blood pressure, checking his pupillary response and grilling him with questions on how he’s feeling.

Tucker is relieved to see the mad doctor alive. Hopefully it means that most of the other Feds and New Republic soldiers survived. He doesn’t dare ask what happened to Hargrove and the rest of Charon. For now, this is enough.

Iota appears at Tucker’s other shoulder, watching the doctor work. “She seems really nice!”
Tucker scoffs. That’s only because Iota hasn’t heard Grey talk about her freak experiments yet.

“Is something particularly funny?” Dr. Grey asks suddenly. She’s got his splint off as she palpates his wrist, assessing for damage after he strained it with his lockpicking endeavours.

Gamma glows dully next to Tucker again but he ignores the AI. “Nothing. Just wondering if there’s any good food left. I’m fucking starving.”

That’s not a lie so Gamma can fuck right off.

“Perhaps Agent Washington can acquire some jello for you?” she offers.

Tucker gapes at her. “Jello? Dude, I was thinking more along the lines of a large, deluxe pizza.”

She beams up at him. “Well, since you did just come out of a coma I wouldn’t recommend solids just yet, unless you want to promptly vomit them back up.”

Wash is standing off to the side but the corners of his mouth twitch, threatening to pull into a smirk. He looks to have relaxed somewhat, even with the remnants of a frown still etched into his brow. That might also just be his normal face though.

Tucker shoots him a dirty glare. “Fine. But they better have blue.”

“Duly noted,” Wash replies curtly.

“Excellent!” Grey exclaims as she straps Tucker’s splint back into place. “And while Wash is gone I can get to work on removing your catheter.”

Eta appears in a burst of gold light and all the blood drains from Tucker’s face.

Catheters are fucking awful and there’s no blue jello; everything is terrible. At least that’s what Tucker tells Wash when he returns.

The blinds on the window of Tucker’s recovery room are drawn closed now. He’s been in there with Dr. Grey for almost an hour as she evaluates Tucker’s mental state. Is it supposed to take this long? For all intents and purposes, Wash should feel far more relieved than he does. Tucker isn’t a drooling shell of a human being; he knows who he is and his personality doesn’t seem altered in the slightest. It’s certainly better than Wash turned out but optimism is a luxury that Agent Washington long since abandoned, so it seems like too much to hope that Tucker has come out of the encounter unscathed. Time will tell. Dr. Grey is perceptive so if Tucker is hiding something she will probably be able to pry it out of him. Tucker is a terrible liar anyways.

The traffic outside Captain Tucker’s recovery room has increased exponentially over the past forty minutes. New Republic soldiers and a surprising number of Feds casually walk by, though upon seeing the drawn blinds they sulkily depart. News travels fast, obviously. Lieutenant Palomo was one of the first to arrive and still hasn’t left. The young soldier sits on the floor on the opposite side of the door from Wash, staring off into space. Wash tried to deter him but the Lieutenant has a great deal of determination. The resulting forty-minute stalemate between them has been sufficiently awkward.
Wash is almost thankful when he sees the Reds approach. *Almost.*

“Well, well, well,” Sarge announces as he saunters forward. “If it isn’t the watchdog and the weenie.”

Wash and Palomo exchange a quick look but the Lieutenant speaks up first. “Uh, I don’t think that’s very fair to call Agent Washington a weenie. He did take down Captain Tucker in Hulk mode, after all.”

Breathe in. Count to five. Exhale. Ignoring the twitch in his right eye, Washington shoots an indignant glare at the Reds. “If you’ve come to see Tucker, then I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed. Dr. Grey has been doing a psyche evaluation for nearly an hour now.”

Donut, who is holding a rather large bundle of goods wrapped in plastic and colourful ribbons, looks completely crestfallen. “But I was hoping to deliver this gift basket in person! That’s how you show you really care.”

Wash blinks. “I’m sure Tucker will *appreciate* the gesture all the same,” he deadpans.

Simmons is next to speak. “I heard you were there when he woke up. How did he seem?”

Scared and confused, with eyes that lingered on empty spaces, chasing visions that weren’t real. Wash doesn’t say this of course. It’s entirely too early for him to attribute the incident to mental instability when it’s just as likely a result of the painkillers. “A little disoriented but otherwise he seems like his old self.” Wash supplies instead.

Grif shrugs indifferently. “As long as we don’t have another Doc situation on our hands, I’d call it a victory.”

Sarge grunts skeptically. “You also call a three-eighths of a snack-cake victory so that’s not saying much.”

Wash changes the subject before Red team can descend into their routine bickering. “I heard you helped apprehend a few more of Charon’s men. How did that go?”

“Badly!” Sarge growls bitterly. “Grif didn’t even lose any blood! Those sissies just laid down their weapons.”

Wash can almost hear Simmons rolling his eyes from under his helmet. “That’s because they were just ship workers, not soldiers.”

“They were super cooperative!” Donut agrees.

Evidently, not all of Charon’s employees are bloodthirsty assholes. The soldiers weren’t going down without a fight; no doubt they’ve come to the conclusion that life in prison is their best case scenario when the UNSC shows up. Most of the ship’s crew however are in far less jeopardy of being court martialed so they’ve been surrendering without much contest.

“What about Kimball?” Wash asks curiously. “I haven’t seen her come by.”

Grif and Sarge reply in unison.

“Boring politics stuff.”

“A bunch of bureaucratic nonsense.”
Simmons seems to deflate even more. “Since the Feds and the Rebels never actually came to an agreement, she’s put together a group of representatives from both sides to try and find a compromise.”

Wash hates to admit it, but he’s leaning towards Grif and Sarge’s opinions on this one. It’s an important step for Chorus without a doubt. With General Doyle dead, it’s paramount that Kimball collaborates with members of the Federal Army of Chorus, otherwise the whole disaster will simply repeat itself. However, unless explicitly asked, Wash plans to stay far away from any of those negotiations. It’s not his place and not his planet.

He’s about to open his mouth to reply but over Donut’s shoulder Wash spots Carolina walking purposefully towards them. “That can’t be good,” he murmurs.

The Reds all turn at once and Sarge tenses up upon seeing her. “Men. I think now is a good time for us to skedaddle.”

Grif and Simmons make quiet sounds of agreement before the four of them skitter off. Donut nearly crushes Palomo when he thrusts the gift basket into the Lieutenant’s lap.

Wash releases a heavy sigh as he tries not contemplate what new and exciting conflict he’s about to be roped into. If it was urgent she would have radioed but if she’s here in person it must still be important. Squaring his shoulders, Wash tries to appear less despondent than he feels.

Carolina watches the Reds go as she walks up, head tilting thoughtfully. “Should I be offended?” she asks, though Wash can hear the amusement in her tone.

He offers a small shrug. “I think they’re just trying to avoid Blue team problems.”

The Freelancer gives him a questioning look but Wash waves it off. “Don’t worry about it. What can I do for you, boss?”

Carolina crosses her arms and relaxes her posture. “For once? Nothing. I’m here for Tucker. Grey radioed me and said he wanted to talk.”

Wash tries to crush the emotion before it can take shape but there’s a small pang of jealously that flares in his gut. As far as he’s witnessed, any interactions between Carolina and Tucker are strained at best. His tendency to run his mouth doesn’t win Tucker much affection from her. It’s really none of his business but he asks anyways. “Did she say what about?”

Carolina shakes her head. “Grey refused to say. Said she wouldn’t break doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Wash chews the inside of his cheek but nods in understanding.

Carolina’s gaze suddenly snaps down to Palomo, who’s still sitting on the ground with Donut’s gift basket in his arms. She looks back to Wash. “Should I even ask?”

“Probably not,” he replies.

The door opens abruptly and gives everyone a start as Dr. Grey steps out of the room.

Palomo scrambles to his feet and darts into the room with gift basket in tow. “Captain Tucker, sir! I’m so happy you’re awake!”

“Palomo, get the fuck out.”
“Your friend Donut and I made this gift basket for you!”

“You didn’t do shit. Get out.”

“Everyone was so worried and Bitters said you weren’t ever going to wake up—”

“Leave, Palomo!”

“-and if you did, Dr. Grey would have to put you in a straitjacket and lock you in a padded room.”

“For the love of god, somebody get him out of here!!!”

Dr. Grey turns to the Freelancers. “I could fetch a dose of something to send the Lieutenant to la-la land, but it might be faster if one of you escorts him out.”

Carolina is already in motion. “I got it.”

Wash can just see past Carolina where Tucker appears as though he is attempting to smother himself with a pillow. He’s cursing unintelligibly and his fists are twisted into the fabric with a white knuckle grip.

Slapping a firm hand down on the Lieutenant’s shoulder, Carolina doesn’t say more than five words to him before he flees the room. Palomo nearly trips over his feet as he all but sprints down the hall.

“Much appreciated!” Grey offers in thanks.

Carolina gives a two fingered salute as Tucker lowers the pillow from his face. Wash doesn’t see more because Dr. Grey promptly closes the door.

“My, what a busy day it’s been,” she sighs with a bright smile.

Wash asks the question that everyone’s been anxiously anticipating. “So? How did the psyche evaluation go?”

Grey smirks as she levels him with a reproachful look. “Now Agent Washington, you know that would be a direct violation of doctor-patient confidentiality—”

“Dr. Grey, please—”

“-but, since Captain Tucker passed with flying colours, there really isn’t anything to hold in confidence!”

“I- wait, what?” Wash balks.

Dr. Grey beams at him. “Captain Tucker expressed concern over a few minor hallucinations but now that he’s no longer on heavy medication everything seems perfectly in order! He is as sane as you or me!”

Agent Washington blinks as she stares back at her blankly.

After a moment she frowns. “I suppose that isn’t a very inspiring comparison,” she reflects with a giggle, “but I assure you, Tucker will be just fine.”

This can’t be real. Wash is dreaming or something, right? Epsilon shattered in Tucker’s head! He spent hours and hours laying on the floor of his cell screaming. It doesn’t seem physically possible.
His silence must speak for him because Grey doesn’t seem fazed by his lack of reply. “It is quite remarkable indeed,” she muses. “Regardless, I’ll be doing a follow up assessment in a week or so. Once Tucker is eating solids again in a few days, he will be free to leave.”

Wash stares at the ground in disbelief. He can’t quite categorize the wealth of emotions churning through his head. Incredulity, relief and perhaps even a touch of envy. Tucker must have horseshoes up his ass because he is one lucky son of a bitch.

The Freelancer eventually manages to find his tongue. “Thanks for everything you’ve done, Dr. Grey.”

She grins back at him. “Oh, it is no problem at all! It’s the least I can do since you all helped save my home.” Grey takes a small step closer into Wash’s space, making his heart thump a little harder in his chest. “And if you ever need something for medicinal needs, feel free to come by my office!”

With that, the mad Doctor twirls on her heels and marches away, leaving Wash to stand in stunned silence.

Did Dr. Grey just offer him drugs?

He doesn’t have long to contemplate this because Carolina suddenly emerges from Tucker’s room, closing the door behind her. Her voice is grave. “Wash, we need to talk.”
Remnants

Chapter Notes

We're at the halfway mark!
Thanks again to everyone leaving comments and kudos. You have no idea how happy it makes me!
I sit there reading them grinning like a idiot! Y'all are the best. <3

“You won’t consider making a creative change to your armour? Do you not tire of the same colour?”

Sigma’s flames are tinged with the beryl glow of the algae in the underground lake, turning them a scummy brown. It looks good on him.

“No,” Tucker replies sharply. “That would just confuse the fuck out of Caboose. Trust me, it’s not worth it.”

Tucker shakes the spray can hard, trying to finish the last of his helmet without starting a new can. Despite the wide open space on the dock overlooking the lake the fumes are still starting to go to his head, making his hallucinations worse.

Passing Dr. Grey’s sanity test was either a fluke or just dumb luck. Tucker is fucking awful at lying but somehow with Gamma sitting there beside him the lies felt like truths as they spilled from his lips, easy as breathing.

“You’re welcome.” Gamma says smugly.

Tucker isn’t completely ungrateful so he keeps his mouth shut. Besides, talking back to hallucinations doesn’t exactly exude overwhelming sanity, despite what his test results say. Not that it generally stops him when he’s alone. The disappointed slouch of Theta’s shoulders when Tucker tries to ignore them is too much to bear.

As his raging insanity goes, Tucker is only slowly starting to sort through his memories, embarking on the tedious task of separating truth from fiction. At least since all his friends are alive, with the exception of Church, it rules out a solid portion of the nightmarish visions. What he doesn’t know is whether or not Junior is alive, if Felix is really dead, or if he should be concerned about Locus hunting them down and finishing the job. It all leaves a nasty ball of anxiety wound tightly in his chest. Tucker decides he’ll have to find a covert way to get his answers to these questions, among others. Though maybe he’ll save that for another time.

It’s his first day out of recovery. As much as Tucker will miss the heavy sedatives that were so helpful in knocking him unconscious, he’s glad to be free. Dr. Grey still won’t budge on putting him back on active duty but at least he has the run of the base again. The problem that Tucker didn’t anticipate was how much attention he would receive from the Rebels and Feds alike. Usually he thrives in the spotlight and while all the lavish recognition was great at first, Tucker found that he simply wanted an excuse to escape. Everyone pokes and prods with their questions, looking for weakness, for signs that Epsilon ruined him. It’s just too much.
Giving the can another shake, he barely manages to coat the last corner of his helmet. Tucker peels away the protective covering on the gold duraplex visor and sets it out along the rest of his drying armour. The familiar Mark VI helmet gazes up at him from its spot on the dock.

A small scouting team was kind enough to venture back to crash site Bravo and retrieve a set of armour for Tucker.

After everything that went on with the Meta’s suit, Tucker didn’t want to put it back on. It wouldn’t feel right, and not just because it chafes his gorgeous thighs. Somehow the idea of wearing the armour of Wash and Carolina’s dead friend is less than appealing. Carolina seemed appreciative, in her limited emotive capacity, when he told her as much. Tucker simply figured that out of everyone in the galaxy, it should be Carolina or Wash who gets it. Whatever they do with it is their business.

Resting his elbows on his knees, Tucker sits quietly on the dock staring out over the lake. Radioactive algae aside, maybe Kimball has a point. The place is quiet and the gentle sound of the water is almost soothing.

Iota appears beside him, mirroring his position. “It reminds me of the lake at Outpost 48.”

Tucker’s memories might be scrambled to shit but he remembers that lake.

After defeating the Meta, they couldn’t go back to Valhalla. They needed a new base, so they ended up at the old Freelancer outpost where Church was stationed after Blood Gulch. The place was a shithole but after spending months in the desert that lake was a fucking gift. He spent many a day laying out on that beach in the relative peace before Carolina tracked them down.

Tucker says relative peace because there wasn’t some Freelancer actively trying to kill them. He did for a while there, have the sneaking suspicions that Agent Washington would turn on them and slit their throats in their sleep. Considering every problem they’ve ever faced has been tied to Project Freelancer somehow, including this bullshit with Hargrove, Tucker feels justified in his past distrust. Not to mention the fact that he tried to kill Donut and Lopez in his pursuit of Epsilon.

When Theta materializes, he sits with his legs crossed on Tucker’s opposite side. “But you trust him now, right?”

He does. Even if Wash has a unique ability to irritate him beyond rational thought Tucker does trust him, especially since half the annoying crap he does is his way of trying to keep them safe. It’s obvious to Tucker now that he’s been in command of his own men, his own team. The worst part is that all the training at crash site Bravo actually turned out to be valuable. Not that Tucker will ever admit that to Wash. Just because he was right doesn’t excuse him for being a paranoid hardass.

At the sound of footsteps approaching from behind him, Tucker has to resist the urge to groan in annoyance. It was only a matter of time until someone found him; he just thought he would have his armour painted and dry by then. Releasing a small sigh, Tucker glances over his shoulder to see who’s come to needle him this time.

Surprisingly enough it’s the one person Tucker hasn’t seen since he recovered. Not since their final battle with Charon.

It’s strange to see Kimball out of her armour. Her dark hair is tied neatly back, instead of the usual mussed look that only wearing a helmet all day can offer. She’s outfitted in dress blues and it brings Tucker a small comfort not to be the only one out of armour. It never used to bother him before but Tucker feels too exposed without it. God, he’s starting to sound like Wash. At least
under his helmet he doesn’t need to school his features quite so closely, because quite frankly pretending to be sane with all the close scrutiny is getting exhausting.

Tucker plasters on an easy smile as she approaches. “You know, I was starting to take it personally that you hadn’t come by to see me yet.”

Kimball gets a wry look on her face that’s usually kept hidden beneath her helmet. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve been getting more than enough attention. Wouldn’t want it going to your head.”

Tucker sniggers as he turns back to face the lake. Kimball stops beside him, folding her arms behind her back. If his memory is correct, the last time they both stood here was right before Tucker and the others left to find their friends. The rest of the details are still a little too tangled to properly articulate on.

“How are things going with the Feds?” Tucker asks, hoping she might say something to further his understanding.

Her initial sigh of exasperation isn’t encouraging. “Trying to raise a government out of the ashes of war isn’t as simple as you’d think. Don’t get me wrong, we’re getting there bit by bit. I guess I just thought once the war was over things would get easier, not harder.”

Tucker tries to offer a vote of confidence. “Well at least you don’t have any asshole mercs sabotaging shit this time.” Wait, is that even true? When he thinks about the radio tower all he can remember is Felix’s knife buried in his gut.

It must be true though, because Kimball rewards him with a small chuckle for his efforts. “You’ve got a point.” She releases another sigh, smaller this time. “I never thought I’d say it but I actually miss Doyle.”

Tucker makes a small mental note of that. So Doyle is dead – not just one of Sigma’s conjured nightmares. The small pang of relief makes him feel guilty. Doyle was a good man but Tucker is simply glad to have at least one memory that wasn’t twisted. He leans back on his hands, watching as small birds skim above the surface of the water, snatching up insects drawn to the glow of the algae. Theta sits on the edge of the dock, his feet swinging over the side.

Turning his gaze back up to Kimball he chooses his next words carefully. “Well if you need a hand with anything not related to awful fucking politics, let me know. Grey has gotta clear me for duty soon.”

She folds her arms as she looks down at him. “Tucker, you and your friends have done more than enough for us. The best thing you can do now is relax until the UNSC comes to take you all home.”

Tucker dismisses her words with a scoff, a kneejerk reaction as he pulls himself to his feet. “All we did was tip you guys off about Felix and Locus, and unlock a few doors. Not a big deal.”

Kimball takes him by surprise when her eyes flash with anger. “It is a big deal!” she demands. “You bled for our cause, risked your life for a planet that isn’t your own. Without all of you, everyone on Chorus would be dead! We can never repay you for what you’ve done.”

Tucker is silent for a few beats. It’s difficult to see it that way. The Reds and Blues aren’t heroes; they’re fuck-ups and losers that occasionally get lucky. Not that they don’t also have a fantastic amount of bad luck too. It always seems to be one extreme or the other for them. Not a lot of in between. Tucker’s fairly certain there’s a word for that.
“I believe the term you are looking for is discrete variable,” Delta supplies helpfully.

What a nerd.

Still, the weight of Kimball’s sincerity is unexpected so Tucker lets a smirk twist his lips to diffuse the tension. “I can think of a few ways for you to repay me.”

Kimball throws an elbow into his side and Tucker’s chuckle comes out a little wheezy.

Worth it.

They decide to wait for a clear night, with the stars shining bright against the inky black sky. It’s a long hike through the jungle above the caves until they find a sizable clearing. The trees are sparse enough that if Wash looks straight up, all he can see is stars. Out in the jungle there isn’t even a hint of light pollution; the closest city is more than 30 miles out. It’s a bit like looking out a viewport on the *Mother of Invention*.

Wash doesn’t have an explanation for the dread that gnaws away at his insides. Agent Maine has been dead for years and the friend Wash knew has been gone far longer than that. Perhaps it’s because he never got the chance to grieve for his old teammate. When Maine went rogue he was still alive but when he died there was nothing of him left – nothing to mourn.

There’s no body to bury.

Wash and Carolina both agreed to burn the armour so that no one else can use it for ill. They stack as much dry timber as they can find before laying out the armour. Wash douses the wood with accelerant, though he’s adamant to avoid spilling it on the suit itself. He’s not sure why. If it concerns Carolina, she doesn’t mention it. She simply waits until Wash has emptied the canister and moves back to stand beside her.

Agent Washington feels like there’s a vice tightening around his chest, crushing out the air. The smallest of Chorus’ moons reflects off the smooth surface of the EVA faceplate, like a single eye staring back at him.

They don’t say a few words but they do remove their helmets. Carolina’s hair has grown long, far past military regulation. The red is dulled in the darkness and Wash is stricken by just how much she looks like her mother.

Carolina’s voice keeps Wash from drifting into a memory. “You ready?”

He nods because he doesn’t trust himself to speak.

It’s an odd twinge of ache and comfort when it’s York’s lighter that Carolina pulls from a cache on her armour. The small flame flickers to life in her hand and the moment she touches it to the timber, the pyre is lit ablaze.

Carolina moves back to stand beside Wash and they watch in silence as the flames spread across the logs, licking at the snow white armour. It doesn’t take long before the paint begins to peel away with the heat, tinting the flames green. Wash stares into the gold faceplate, watching the fire dance across the surface until the reflection of the moon is burnt out against the greying visor. He
tries not to think of Sigma and the way his own flames once lit the same armour. Wash can almost see the AI’s smirking features hovering at Maine’s shoulder. Sigma burned away everything, who Maine was and everyone he cared about until there was nothing but an empty shell and the AI’s ambition.

When Wash risks a glance at Carolina she’s still holding York’s lighter tight in her hand. The firelight dances in her bright green eyes but she isn’t watching the pyre. With her thumb she flicks the lid open and closed a few times. The metallic sound is sharp against the crackling fire.

A beat later, she tosses the lighter into the flames.

Wash turns to look at her fully and Carolina replies before he can give voice to his question; she doesn’t meet his gaze. “Sometimes it’s better to let go. Church taught me that.”

Carolina takes Wash’s good hand then, threading her fingers with his. He squeezes her hand tight and she nearly crushes his in return, hovering on the edge of pain. It keeps Wash grounded. Because this isn’t just about Maine. It’s about Connie. It’s about York and North, and even the friends that turned against them in the end. Through the good and bad the Freelancers were a family. Just like the Reds and Blues are family.

The flames burn up through the EVA chest piece, changing colours as the intricate electrical components are consumed. Carolina averts her gaze from the blinding white lights of burning magnesium that shine like stars. Wash stares until there are dark spots burned into his vision. He stares until the duraplex visor drips away through the inside of the helmet. Until there is nothing but ash, embers and a burnt titanium shell.

There’s a cramp in Wash’s hand but the bundle of dread in his chest has loosened somewhat. He’s not sure if it’s a feeling that’s ever supposed to go away completely but for now it’s enough. A shuddering sigh shakes its way out of Wash’s lungs and he gives Carolina’s hand a small squeeze before disentangling their fingers.

It’s late. Wash can feel it in the way his head aches at the back of his skull. He finally feels sound enough to speak. “C’mon,” he says quietly, pulling his helmet back on. “We can bury what’s left tomorrow.”

Carolina follows wordlessly behind him and the trek back feels far shorter than it did on the way up, despite his fatigue. By the time they are back underground, the dark spots in Wash’s vision have faded. They’ve almost made it to the barracks when Carolina stops and lingers at the entrance.

Wash casts her a concerned look but she merely shakes her head. “Go ahead. I’m just going to do a walk of the perimeter.”

For a moment Wash forgets how to move his feet. It doesn’t feel right to leave Carolina to grieve alone but alone is how she’s always preferred to cope. “Alright,” he concedes. “My door’s open if you need anything.”

He doesn’t have to see her face to know she’s smiling; her tone is warm with gratitude. “Thanks, Wash.”

With that, they go their separate ways and Wash paces through the barracks.

There aren’t many soldiers awake this late. Despite the scheduled patrols that pass through every hour of every night, Wash still makes the rounds himself, checking the doors of all the Reds and
Blues. When Wash passes Caboose’s room there’s no light leaking out from beneath the door for once. The sim trooper has been staying up late working on his art project and Wash worries that he will burn himself out.

The Freelancer almost makes it to his room when a muffled scream splits the silence.

Adrenaline kick starts his heart and Wash’s pistol is in his hands immediately.

What now? Charon mercs? A jail break?

The silence is overbearing and Wash’s pulse pounds in his ear as he swings the barrel around, waiting for something. For a long moment there’s no sound and no movement.

Another scream shatters the stillness. There’s words. Too loud and panicked to discern.

The voice is familiar and Wash all but sprints towards Tucker’s door but when he tugs at the handle it’s firmly locked. Wash bangs the stock of his pistol on the door and the sound echoes through the hall. “Tucker!”

Doors are slowly opening throughout the hall and sleep drowsy faces poke out from their rooms, confused and concerned.

Wash can hear Tucker still screaming. He can pick out words amongst the shouting. “No! No! I won’t let you! You’re not taking my son!!”

If he had the strength, Wash would kick the door down but all he can do his pound his fist against the metal hoping the sim trooper responds. “Tucker! Open the door!”

There are armed guards jogging down the hallway and maybe they have a master key. Wash doesn’t have time to ask, because the burning blade of Tucker’s sword comes slashing through the door and nearly impales him.

Wash darts back but the sword messily withdraws inside the room a second later, leaving a glowing wound of dripping metal where the latch should be. He kicks down the weakened door and only has time to make a few observations before Tucker charges him. There’s no one else in the room, no attacker, just Tucker. The man himself is bare chested, wearing only a loose pair of sweatpants. His eyes are glazed over but filled with fear and rage.

Tucker lunges forward with his sword and Wash ducks out of the way, dropping his pistol. The swing leaves a ragged scar in the concrete wall and five rifles all take aim at the sim trooper.

Wash waves his hands at the soldiers. “Don’t shoot!”

Tucker swings again, but this time Wash catches his wrist. Without any armour Tucker has no hope of overpowering Wash in his.

When he tries to pry Wash’s fingers free of his sword arm the Freelancer snatches that hand too, even as his own healing fracture protests. “Come on, Tucker;” he pleads. “Snap out of it!”

Tucker tries to wrench out of Wash’s grip and stifles a cry as he twists his fractured wrist. It’s enough. The pain brings enough clarity and recognition suddenly sparks in the sim trooper’s eyes as they settle on Wash.

The energy sword dissipates in an instant.
Wash releases Tucker’s wrists and the hilt of the sword drops to the floor. The sim trooper takes several steps back as his gaze sweeps around the halls, taking in the scored wall and the audience, before flashing back to Wash again.

Tucker’s mouth opens and closes in a series of soundless words before he settles on one. “Fuck.”

After the third set of destroyed bedding the supply officer stubbornly refuses to replace them for Tucker again.

Evidently it was too much to hope that the vivid nightmares that caused him to destroy his quarters was a onetime thing. The second night was a carbon copy of the first, except it was Sarge who nearly lost an arm pummelling Tucker back to his senses. Even locking his sword away in his footlocker didn’t stop him from claiming it in his terror fuelled dementia. Tucker tried stashing his sword in the armoury but he still jolts awake fighting shadows that don’t exist and waking the entire barracks as he screams his throat raw. Not even a sleep aid from Dr. Grey helped – only delaying the inevitable and making it five times as difficult for someone to rouse him. Each night he wakes in heart gripping terror and his vie for sanity is slipping further and further from his grasp.

It’s bad when even Palomo is giving him lingering looks of caution and concern. “Uh, Captain? Are you alright?”

Tucker is jolted violently out of his reverie.

The Lieutenant is staring back at him, his eyes filled with worry.

Eye. Tucker corrects himself. There’s only one. The other is gone and the entire left side of Palomo’s face is a wreck of burnt and bloody flesh where a rocket from a Mantis-class android took him in the shoulder.

Tucker closes his eyes and shakes his head sharply. Palomo isn’t dead. He survived and he’s standing right there, speaking and breathing.

It doesn’t help.

Palomo’s face is still mangled when Tucker opens his eyes again.

Omega glows dully in Tucker’s periphery. “I’m fine. Shut the fuck up.”

He doesn’t wait to see the wince of disappointment in the young Lieutenant’s face because Tucker’s already marching off in search of more stims. It’s day three without sleep. Or is it four?

Delta keeps pace with him on the way to the med complex. His green hologram phases through any soldiers who pass too closely. “It’s been 67 hours and twenty-six minutes, to be exact.”

Tucker ignores him.

It’s getting more and more difficult to keep unconsciousness at bay. He lapses into brief moments of sleep, lasting only a few seconds at a time. They at least have the decency not to harbour any dreams. Tucker had accidentally fallen asleep for a few hours over his lunch in the mess and woke
as he was throttling one of the Fed soldiers, thinking it was Locus.

The worst part is the hallucinations. Anyone he looks at for too long becomes painted in blood and gore, from some iteration of a warped memory. Tucker does his best to avoid his friends. Kimball who drips blood everywhere she goes from Felix’s knife lodged in her spine; Caboose and the Reds, with their armour charred and cracked; and Carolina whose neck is crooked at an unnatural angle with shrapnel lodged in her cheek. It makes the delusions of the AIs far less concerning by comparison, even if they do appear in higher frequency and are more difficult to ignore.

Tucker keeps his head down as he walks fast towards the med complex. There’s a stark contrast in his interactions with others from when he first recovered and now. No one stops him to chat, to pick his brain or anything. They’ve noticed the change in his demeanour, courtesy of his sleep deprivation. Tucker hates it. Hates the way the Rebels avert their gaze from him and the Feds full on stare.

The automatic doors to the med complex open before him and Tucker almost makes it to Dr. Grey’s office when he nearly bowls over Grif.

“Jesus! Watch it, Blue!” the orange soldier snaps.

Omega hovers close by and Tucker barely manages to rein in his temper.

Calm. Collected. Sane.

It’s hard to keep that in mind when Grif’s left hand is ash and blackened bone, the smell of charred flesh so strong that Tucker nearly gags. There’s a long crack across the visor of his orange helmet where blood has dribbled through as well.

It’s a small mercy that Tucker’s own face is concealed and Grif can’t see the way he grimaces.

“Sorry, dude,” he manages to ground out in an even voice.

Grif’s helmet tips as he looks Tucker up and down. “Dude, are you seriously going to ask Grey for more stims? Did you forget what happened last time you overdosed on those?”

It’s a rhetorical question but Tucker honestly doesn’t remember.

Delta appears beside Grif. “You went into cardiac arrest and gave the medic resuscitating you a black eye.”

There’s a dull ache from his bruised sternum and a stinging in his knuckles that helps bring the memory back into clarity.

Tucker says nothing and Grif takes it as his cue to keep talking. “She’s not going to give you any more.”

A tremor shakes through Tucker’s right hand. “You don’t know that.” He tries to make his tone light but it falls flat.

Grif gives his head a shake. “You gotta get a grip, dude. Get some fucking sleep.”

Tucker scoffs. “Yeah, cause that’s worked out so well.”

The orange sim trooper shrugs noncommittally as he crosses his arms. “And here I thought you passed Grey’s crazy test. Blue Team is going to need its own psyche ward soon.”
Tucker is moving before he makes the conscious decision to do so.

Omega snarls with fury and so does Tucker as he slams Grif against the wall by his chest plate. His right hand darts to his hip and Tucker’s fist is curled tight around the hilt of his sword as he jams it under Grif’s chin.

“I. Am not. Crazy.”

Grif’s throat bobs against Tucker’s knuckles as he swallows hard. All it would take is a flick of his thumb and Grif wouldn’t have a mouth to mock him with.

“Do it!” Omega roars.

Tucker can feel Grif’s pulse racing against his fist, pure life, and there’s some twisted part of him that revels with delight; the power feels good. But that’s not the only emotion. The rage twists and writhes under his skin, begging for blood. It’s a familiar feeling and a vivid memory flashes to mind.

Wash’s voice echoes through Tucker’s head. This isn’t you!

Theta bursts into existence beside Grif a beat later. “Stop! Stop it! You’re hurting him!”

Tucker removes his sword hilt from the Red’s throat, releasing him and taking a large step backward. His chest is heaving and his heart thumps hard against his ribs.

Grif doesn’t move a muscle. There’s blood draining down from beneath his chin and there’s two smoking holes in the top of his helmet where the mirrored blades would have emerged.

Tucker’s senses are reeling. The hilt of his sword is silent in his hand but he can smell ionized air. He didn’t do it. It’s not real.

Grif reaches a tentative hand up to his neck, rubbing it gingerly. He doesn’t take his eyes off of Tucker. Blood drips over his hand, smearing across his drive suit but it’s not real. Tucker knows that, otherwise Grif wouldn’t be standing. Why won’t it stop?

This is the part where he’s supposed to say something; apologize. “Uhh…”

“Yeah.” Grif replies quietly. Without another word he turns and walks away.

Tucker stands in the middle of the hall until his heart rate drops to normal. “I really am losing it,” he murmurs quietly to himself.

“I would have to agree, seeing as my mere presence is proof of your mental imbalance.” Delta takes up the spot where Grif fled from.

Great. Now even his hallucinations are telling him he’s crazy. Releasing a deep sigh, Tucker gives his head a firm shake and makes his way to Grey’s office.

He doesn’t meet any further opposition – probably since everyone who might oppose him is waiting there to ambush him. Tucker opens the door to the office and nearly turns right around to run the other way. Dr. Grey is present as expected; her leg is missing from the knee down in bits of glowing, disintegrated matter, courtesy of some Charon patented weapon. Kimball is there too and Donut with a bullet hole in his chest. Wash blocks the door before Tucker can flee. There’s a gaping hole in his middle from where Tucker slashed him open with his sword. The Freelancer folds his arms across his chest and the movement threatens to spill his insides out onto Dr. Grey’s
clean white floors.

Tucker immediately turns his gaze, spinning to face Grey. “I’m fine!” he urges, even as Gamma appears behind the good doctor. “I just need one more dose of stims and I’ll be fine.”

Grey opens her mouth, but Kimball is already speaking. “Tucker, this can’t go on any longer. You need rest.”

A wordless sound of frustration leaves his mouth as he clenches his fists in exasperation. “What the fuck do you think I’ve been trying to do?! News flash: it’s not fucking working!”

“Tucker-” Wash admonishes.

“No!” he snaps, though he doesn’t dare look back. “I won’t do it!”

Kimball throws her arms up. “Because depriving yourself of sleep is so much better?!”

Dr. Grey adds her voice to the conflict. “What General Kimball is trying to say, is that maybe we should explore alternative solutions.”

Omega is pacing the room as Tucker continues to seethe. “Really? Cause there’s only one solution I can think of.” He turns to look at Wash again and barely notices the ragged wound in his gut. “Hey, Wash, hand me your pistol.”

The Freelancer takes a full step back and Tucker can almost picture the revulsion and horror etched into Wash’s face beneath his helmet.

“That is quite enough!”

Every head in the room turns to Donut. His arms are folded across his chest as he stares straight at Tucker. “If you really wanted that you would have done it already! Now we all know that you’re angry and scared but lashing out at the friends who want to help you isn’t right! So you can get on your knees and keep taking it or you can swallow your pride and let your friends help!”

None of the AIs seem to have anything to add to that and for once Tucker’s head is blessedly silent. His fatigue weighs down on him, suffocating and crippling. Despite all his armour Tucker feels bare, scraped to the bones. Releasing a long groan, he turns to Kimball and Grey. “Fine. What did you have in mind?”

They discuss several approaches. Wash asks about medical sedation but Grey insists that he needs natural sleep. Kimball suggests sleeping in intervals. It’s not a bad idea until Tucker remembers that with less than two hours of uninterrupted sleep, he still woke up with violent dreams.

The debate drags on and Kimball offers Tucker her seat but he declines. If he sits, he’ll drift off for sure.

Donut suddenly pipes up. “Oh! What about a dog? They have trained service dogs to help PTSD victims! It could wake you from your nightmares!”

“I don’t have PTSD,” Tucker growls but his heart isn’t in it and even Gamma looks unimpressed by his pedestrian effort.

Dr. Grey’s eyes become laser focused on Tucker. “That might just work,” she muses quietly.

Kimball shoots the doctor a skeptical look. “Dr. Grey, the chances of finding a trained service dog
on Chorus are-

“But it doesn’t have to be a dog!” Grey exclaims.

Tucker groans when he realizes where this conversation is going. “No way. I don’t think Freckles would actually make a very good dog.”

The doctor’s brows furrow in annoyance. “An interesting idea but no! What you need is a roommate.”

Tucker starts to get a sinking feeling in his gut.

Grey’s eyes dart away from Tucker and to the Freelancer in the room. “Agent Washington. You’re an abnormally light sleeper with a history of severe PTSD. I think you’d make an excellent candidate!”

Tucker can see the line of tension that shoots up Wash’s spine and the way he keeps his gaze on Grey. This is the part where he declines with careful words and a trepidation that only Washington can wield. Except he doesn’t speak.

Holy fuck.

Tucker ducks to catch Wash’s eye. “Dude, you’re not seriously considering this, are you?”

The Freelancer looks at him hesitantly. “Dr. Grey’s not wrong… it could work.”

Iota and Eta both flare into existence.

“We’re sharing a room with Wash?! ” Iota asks gleefully.

“No, no, no!” Eta laments, “What if we hurt him?”

Tucker backpedals fast. “It’s a fucking stupid idea and a great way to get yourself shanked!”

Wash takes a step closer and for emphasis a coil of intestines slips from the tear in his middle, spilling blood across the floor.

Tucker gags as he struggles not to puke inside his helmet.

The Freelancer stops just short of him. “Tucker, this will work. I’ll be awake before things get that bad.”

Everything about the idea makes Tucker’s insides twist. Why does it have to be Wash?

“You know,” Kimball speaks up, her tone wicked in all the worst ways, “I think I remember Lieutenant Palomo commenting on how light of a sleeper he is-”

Tucker spins back to face Wash. “Fine!” he snaps before Kimball can continue that abhorrent line of thought. “But don’t start getting handsy,” he warns the Freelancer. “I know I’m irresistibile but boundaries, dude.”

Wash deadpans. “I’ll try to restrain myself.”
This idea has bad news written all over it.

Seriously, Wash must have a goddamn death wish since he’s continuously putting himself within striking range of Tucker’s wavering sanity. Even if he can keep Tucker from accidentally murdering him the Freelancer will probably never sleep soundly again. If there’s anyone who desperately needs a solid night’s sleep (other than Tucker) it’s Wash.

Kimball’s lingering suggestion about Lieutenant Palomo itches at the back of Tucker’s mind and he crushes his indecision. Wash knows what he’s getting into. If he didn’t want to do this he would have said no. Wouldn’t he? Tucker chews the thought over as he makes his way to Wash’s room. Since his own room is less than hospitable after his nightmare fuelled renovating they wordlessly agreed to share Wash’s instead.

The door to Caboose’s room is cracked open as he passes and Tucker’s feet halt their progress. He heard about the ongoing artistic rampage to capture Church’s memory in pictures, thanks to Agent Washington’s suggestion. Tucker’s curiosity wrestles with his trepidation for a moment as he contemplates opening the door. For all of Caboose’s cognitive shortcomings his artistic abilities are not one of them. The walls of the base in Blood Gulch were plastered with his sketches and paintings. He didn’t have access to as many mediums back in the canyon as he does here and apparently there is an entire squad of soldiers dedicated to acquiring additional art supplies for the moron.

Tucker stares at the handle of the door.

He’s been fortunate to not have seen Caboose in his 74 hour spree of consciousness and he’s not excited to witness what kind of twisted hallucinations his mind comes up with. Still, if anyone is going to be oblivious to Tucker’s reaction to the vivid illusions Caboose probably takes the cake there.

Drawing a deep breath Tucker steels himself and opens the door.

Caboose’s back is turned to him. He’s holding a large sheet of paper in his hands, scouring the wall for a free space to hang his latest creation. From here, Caboose doesn’t look maimed in the least. His clothes are mottled with an impressive variety of paint colours and Tucker is fairly certain that the red is simply red, not blood. The floor is littered with empty paint tubes, crayons filed down to the stub and handfuls of pencil shavings.

Still having no luck on finding a spot to place his newest illustration, Tucker speaks up. “You know, you can probably use the walls in the barracks to hang your pictures,” he offers lightly.

Caboose whips around to face him and Tucker winces when he sees the bullet holes in his chest. “Tucker! You are here. What are you doing here? Agent Washington said you were not feeling well.” His voice drops low. “Are you pregnant again?”

Tucker almost forgot how rewarding conversations with Caboose are.

“I’m not pregnant, Caboose.”
“When did you last menstruate?”

Omega rumbles angrily but Tucker is more shocked than anything. Did someone actually teach Caboose how babies are made? “How do you even-? Never mind. Trust me, I’m not pregnant.”

That seems to comfort Caboose. “Oh good, because I think I’d like to keep my blood inside my body. Yeah, the orange juice was good but the cookies had raisins.”

If that’s supposed to make any sense whatsoever Tucker is at a loss. Fortunately, a mutual lack of understanding isn’t especially detrimental when talking with Caboose.

“Whatever you say, dude,” Tucker replies with a sigh.

He turns his eyes back to the lawless murals plastered over the walls. Tucker recognizes most of the scenes depicted and an idea abruptly strikes him.

“Hey Caboose, I know these are memories of Church but did you draw what happened to Junior and me?”

Caboose scoffs as though it’s the stupidest question he’s ever asked. “Well I couldn’t just leave out part of the story, Tucker!”

He abandons the picture in his hands and moves across the room towards Tucker. Caboose pulls back a large sheet of paper on the wall beside him to reveal even more illustrations hidden beneath. Pointing to one image in particular Tucker sees the Pelican, his son and another panel of him and Junior together… on a sleigh?

“See, here he is on the ship and then they went to the future and then you both went on an adventure to save alien Christmas!!”

Tucker makes a mental note not to let Caboose remember him when he dies. Even if he doesn’t have the details quite right, Caboose’s pictures don’t depict any ill fate befalling Junior. Closing his eyes for a moment Tucker releases a deep breath and feels lighter than he has in months – or has it just been days and weeks?

The temptation to study every image to fill in all of his corrupted memories itches through his veins but there’s still blood soaking through Caboose’s shirt where Felix filled his chest with lead.

Tucker decides to wait until he’s made an attempt at sleep.

“A most logical suggestion.” Delta’s tone holds a hint of mockery that Tucker largely ignores. For an AI who’s supposed to be based purely on logic he sure has some sass to him.

Caboose’s gaze darts behind Tucker towards the hall beyond the door. “Do you really think Miss Kimball will let me use the walls?” His giant blue eyes shine with overflowing hope.

“Dude. If you give her a look like that, I think she’ll let you hang them on the mess hall fridge.”

His eyes turn wide as saucers and Caboose grabs an armful of his creations before nearly bowling Tucker over in his haste. The sound of his excited voice shouting indiscriminately fades quickly as Caboose sprints down the halls of the barracks.

Tucker feels a little guilty about sending Caboose charging to Kimball’s door this close to lights out but the amusement factor is far stronger. He can only hope that Caboose doesn’t throw him under the bus for this particular stunt.
With one last look at Caboose’s gallery, Tucker resumes his path towards Wash’s room. He stops in front of the door and tries to convince himself that this isn’t going to go as terribly as he thinks. Before he can raise a hand to knock however, Tucker notices that the door is already ajar. He gives the door a nudge with his foot before stepping into the room. Wash’s quarters are empty for the moment. A second bed has been moved into the room, pushed up against the opposite wall. Everything is organized and meticulously clean, making Tucker feel immediately out of place. He jams his hands into the deep pockets of his sweat pants. Brushing his fingers along the sword hilt stashed within, Tucker tries to draw strength from it.

Unfortunately, Eta has other plans.

The AI appears pacing the room. “*We can’t keep the sword! What if we hurt him again!?*”

Wash chooses that particular moment to enter the room. His hair is damp and his t-shirt sticks to his skin where it’s still wet. Tucker keeps his eyes above the mangled ruin of his stomach where the blood has stained the white shirt red.

The Freelancer must read something in Tucker’s expression but he doesn’t give Wash a chance to comment on it as he thrusts the sword hilt into his hand. “Dude, you’ve gotta lock that thing up. Keep it far away from me.”

Wash gives him a steady look before holding the hilt back out to him. “You’re not going to hurt me, Tucker,” he says in an uncharacteristically soft voice. “I won’t let you get that far.”

Tucker’s gaze lingers on the splint around Wash’s wrist before turning away. “Yeah, well just humor me, okay?”

Even with his back turned Tucker is sure he can hear the sound of Wash working his jaw. He eventually releases a sigh of defeat and secures Tucker’s sword in his footlocker. Only then does Tucker feel some of the tension go out of his shoulders and Eta seems to be mollified for the time being.

The atmosphere between them feels strained and Tucker hates everything about this. He takes action to keep the stillness from fraying his nerves. Crossing the room, Tucker crawls into the bed and turns his back to Wash. He listens to the sounds of the Freelancer, tracking his movement through the room. The door closes and Wash walks over to his bed but hesitates turning off the light.

Tucker releases a short breath before looking over his shoulder. “What?”

Wash looks startled to have been caught staring, immediately flicking his gaze away. “Nothing.” A beat passes before he speaks up again. “I just thought… You always sleep naked.”

Really??

Tucker waggles his eyebrows. “Disappointed?”

“Surprised,” Wash corrects, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. “I didn’t think you’d be that considerate.”

Tucker glowers as he turns back to the wall. “I’m not doing it for you.”

“Of course not,” Wash replies evenly and Tucker can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic.

The lights go out a second later and the opposite bed creaks as Wash climbs under the covers. The
only point of illumination is the dim glow of the clock display.

Feeling safer in the darkness, Tucker rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling as his eyes slowly adjust. He should be tired. Tucker knows that but the threat of impending nightmares does little to inspire sleep. It makes him miss Valhalla. They didn’t get to spend much time there but the sound of cascading water lulled him to sleep like nothing else. He wonders idly if there are any waterfalls on Chorus.

Breathing a small sigh, Tucker tries to quell the panicky staccato of his heartbeat.

Theta appears sitting at the end of his bed. Even though the vision of him glows brightly, it casts no real light in the room. “It will be okay,” he insists. “Washington is our friend. He’ll stop the scary dreams.”

“Theta is right,” Delta agrees as he materializes near the door. “Agent Washington has experience with nightmares of his own.”

Tucker can always tell when Wash is kept up by nightmares. He is quicker to snap in anger, the circles under his eyes seem impossibly darker and Tucker will have three times the squats to do for running his mouth. The explicit details of Wash’s past trauma isn’t overly clear to Tucker. Wash never talks about it and even Church with his bigmouth always kept a tight lipped seal. It was something to do with the Epsilon AI; that much he knows for sure. Apparently that’s something they have in common now.

An unpredicted yawn escapes Tucker and he tries not to snigger when he hears Wash echo the action. The Freelancer’s breathing remains shallow and controlled, still very much awake.

Tucker throws an arm over his eyes and blocks out the hallucinations. A headache drums determinedly in the back of his skull but Tucker does his best to banish it. Despite his discomfort, exhaustion wins out and he sinks into a deep sleep.

It could have been seconds or it could have been hours, but Tucker’s plagued sub-consciousness doesn’t fail to perform.

The snow falls heavily from the sky and Tucker has a difficult time seeing exactly what’s going on. It’s as though he’s watching from a distance but the distinct chill is his biggest clue as to where he is. Even in his temperature controlled armour, it still feels like he’ll never be warm again. A planet frozen to its core.

Sidewinder.

The bitter wind gusts around him, unprotected on the towering ice shelf. Tall cliffs box them in with the abandoned alien structure looming silently above. The sound of voices and gunfire barely rises above the howling wind in Tucker’s ears.

“Attack!”

“Get him!”
“We’re gonna fucking die!!”

It’s the Meta.

Tucker can see the Reds charging but not their opponent. He moves too quickly and all Tucker catches are glimpses of motion. Is he cloaked?

The details are hazy, but Tucker picks out the movement of the Meta’s turquoise armour against the snow. A volley of bullets and grenades rain down on him from the Reds. The Meta doesn’t even flinch and uses a bubble shield to-

Turquoise?

Wasn’t the Meta’s armour white?

“Fire in the hole!”

Simmons fires a rocket but the Meta easily avoids it. Using his energy sword he cleaves the rocket launcher in half before-

There’s a firm pressure on Tucker’s chest and he jerks awake.

“Tucker.”

He thrashes against the weight of it and reaches up to strike at his assailant. A hand catches his wrist and he abruptly recognizes Wash’s face, halting his attack.

Tucker takes in the steel grey eyes staring back at him, the sleep tousled blonde hair and the blinding light shining down from the ceiling behind Wash. He’s positive that the Freelancer can feel his heart hammering beneath his hand.

“Do you know where you are?” Wash asks firmly.

Despite the evidence in front of him, Tucker swears he can still feel the chill of knee deep snow numbing his toes and the solid weight of his sword in hand. It takes a great deal of restraint not to say Sidewinder. His gaze remains firmly fixed on the ceiling. “Chorus. New Republic HQ.”

Visions of his nightmare still swirl behind his eyes but the heavy hand on his chest is grounding. Tucker clings to the feeling like a lifeline, drawing deep breaths as he tries to calm his frantic heartbeat.

“You good?” Wash asks after a few minutes.

Tucker’s wrist is still locked in the Freelancer’s grip and Wash’s thumb rubs soothing circles against his skin.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

There’s a chill that follows the loss of contact as Wash retreats back to his bunk making Tucker wish he’d said no instead.

“Four hours isn’t terrible but you should try and get some more sleep,” the Freelancer advises.

The light goes out and it only takes about thirty minutes for Wash’s breathing to turn deep and even as he returns to sleep. Tucker focuses on the sound and does his best not to let his mind drag him back to Sidewinder.
Staring up at the darkness, he lies awake until dawn.

Despite a rocky start to this shared sleeping arrangement, Wash is pleasantly surprised to discover that things are actually working out. He hasn’t been murdered in his sleep yet and Tucker actually seems to be getting some proper shuteye. The improvement in the sim trooper’s mood is almost immediate and he’s beginning to seem like his old self again.

It didn’t take long for Wash to start to get a feel for the cadence of Tucker’s nightmares. They typically start with jerking movements and escalate to soft muttering within fifteen minutes. At that point Wash has a precious four to six minutes to wake him before he becomes physically violent. It’s easier than he expected, for the sounds of an impending nightmare to stir Wash to consciousness. Most nights he can jostle Tucker out of a nightmare without fully waking him. The vivid dreams average to about three a night but Wash is still holding out on the hope that they might gradually diminish.

As for himself, Dr. Grey still adamantly refuses to allow Wash to return to active duty or regular training. The slash across his middle has healed leaving a nasty scar in its wake but it’s the wrist she won’t budge on. “I know this may be difficult for you to understand but the fighting is over, Agent Washington,” she politely told him. “Unless another war suddenly begins, I will not have you compromising the meticulous efforts that went into reconstructing your wrist.”

Wash saw the x-rays for himself. It’s a small wonder he retained any mobility in his fingers at all so he reluctantly agreed. That doesn’t stop him from seeking out loopholes in Grey’s restrictions, however. It’s been an enlightening foray into his left-handed capabilities — and no, not those kind of left handed capabilities. Washington’s been spending entirely too much time with Tucker. As it turns out, it’s deceivingly difficult to accurately aim a pistol with your non-dominant hand. Not that it discourages him from trying. Wash is determined that it could be a useful skill if he ever finds his right hand impeded for some reason. It’s a completely sensible endeavour, certainly not wrought out of chronic paranoia and unparalleled boredom.

Survivability and adaptability. That’s what Wash is good at so that’s what he defers to.

Tucker is much in the same boat as he is. Though it was his left hand that was fractured and the break wasn’t nearly as severe, Dr. Grey won’t ease up on him either. It probably doesn’t help that he’s done plenty to hinder the recovery of the break with his nightmare induced fistfights with concrete walls. Tucker doesn’t seem particularly disappointed in the reduced training but he is frustrated with being left out on missions, even if he tries to pretend otherwise. Last week, Grif and Donut both left to lead each of their own teams on another scouting mission to try and track down more Charon fugitives. Tucker was there to see them off, arms crossed and scuffing his boots in the dirt as he watched the Pelicans depart.

The feeling is mutual.

Wash is halfway through shucking his armour when Tucker trudges into the room. The hilt of the alien sword flies through the air at Wash and he nearly fumbles the catch. Tucker doesn’t even offer a word of apology as he collapses onto his bunk face first. Rolling with the punch, Wash stashes the sword in his footlocker as usual. They both know that chances of Tucker progressing to the point of violence with his nightmares is slim but the sim trooper refuses to budge on the matter. Wash continues removing his armour, waiting for Tucker to speak. He’s predictable like that.
“Hey Wash?” he asks, voice muffled by the pillow in his face. “How long does it take for broken bones to heal?”

Healing time varies widely from the type of break to the size of the bone but Wash feels confident in assuming it’s the wrist that Tucker is referring to. “Four to six weeks, typically,” he replies. With advanced military medicine, the recovery time leans closer towards four weeks than six but in retaliation of the sword hilt whipped at him, Wash elects to keep that bit to himself.

There’s a loud groan of anguish before Tucker sits up. “You better give me my sword back, dude, because if it takes that long I think I’m going to cut my own head off.” He looks up at Wash with a wry smile. “Want me to make it a murder-suicide?”

Wash snorts a small laugh. “Thanks for the offer;” he smirks.

He finishes unbuckling his shin guards and begins tugging off his hardsuit but as he gets the garment rolled down to his waist, a sharp intake of breath from Tucker stops him. When he glances up, Tucker is staring at his abdomen, eyes wide as his mouth hangs agape.

It’s different this time.

In the three days that Tucker spent awake, Wash didn’t fail to notice the way the sim trooper’s gaze would flicker to his middle and then away again. How he so adamantly avoided looking at Wash or occupying the same space for too long.

This time isn’t the same at all. Tucker is staring now in open horror, as though he’s seeing it for the first time and can’t tear his gaze away.

Wash shifts his weight from foot to foot and tugs the kevlar suit a little higher to cover the scar. “Tucker-“

The sim trooper immediately snaps his gaze away and he runs hand through his hair. “Sorry, dude, I just forgot.”

It’s not a very convincing lie and Wash recognizes the faraway look in Tucker’s gaze. His eyes dart to empty spaces and Wash can almost see the tethers breaking as his thoughts drift further away from reality.

Wash finishes removing his hardsuit and begins pulling on sleep clothes as he speaks. “Kimball knows,” he states simply.

The statement is jarring out of context and it accomplishes its purpose, pulling Tucker out of his head as his gaze snaps up to Wash’s. “What?” he balks.

Wash knocks his head in the direction of the door as he safely conceals the scar beneath his shirt. “The art show in the barracks,” he supplies. “I don’t think she’s fooled.”

In the past few days, Caboose’s illustrations have overflown from his quarters and begun to spread throughout the halls. The traffic through the barracks has increased exponentially as Rebels and Feds detour through to admire the artwork.

To his credit Tucker only falters for a moment before his lips tug into a small smirk. “You’ve got no proof.”

Wash doesn’t say anymore on the topic. He crosses the room to his bunk and flicks out the light before sinking into the thin mattress. Despite the comfortable rhythm they’ve settled into, the night
always starts with a glaring silence before Tucker nods off. Wash takes far longer to fall asleep but the sound of Tucker’s steady, deep breaths help him drift off as well.

Tonight Tucker seems to hesitate. His breaths are measured and hesitant, and Wash can hear him shift restlessly. His voice finally breaks the silence. “Wash?”

“Tucker?” he replies quietly.

The sim trooper wavers momentarily before he speaks up. “You don’t have to do this, you know. If you don’t want to. Like, none of this shit with Epsilon was your fault.”

For a long moment Wash doesn’t know what to say to that. He swallows hard past the lump in his throat and tries to resist the impulse to argue back but ultimately fails.

“Tucker, if Carolina and I had been there-”

“-Then Kimball and the others might be dead,” he exclaims. There’s a deliberate pause before Tucker continues. “You made the right call, Wash. One scrambled head is worth the lives you guys probably saved down there.”

Wash is stunned into silence. Tucker’s logic is difficult to dispute when framed that way. While it doesn’t diminish the guilt he feels for not having been there with them, it does lift some of the crushing weight off his chest. “Even so, I’m not doing this out of obligation.” The next part is more difficult to force out. “I’m doing this because you’re my teammate and my friend.”

Tucker doesn’t say anything for a long while and Wash begins to feel his throat grow tight with anxiety.

“Thanks, Wash.”

His nerves deflate as Wash releases a deep sigh, turning over to look at Tucker. He can just make out the man’s form in the darkness; Tucker is laying on his stomach with his arms folded under his pillow. His brown eyes are visible in the soft glow of the clock display, blinking back at him.

“You’re welcome.”

Tucker is unaccustomed to waking up without nightmares howling at his heels. It’s his primary reason for doubting reality at this particular moment. His nightmares are typically fashioned after his warped memories so it’s strange to be staring up at the roof of his shared room with Wash. Despite his troubling dreams, Tucker is actually managing to get some rest nowadays. His hallucinations of the AIs are still holding strong but at least the more gruesome ones have stopped. Things aren’t quite on the road back to normal yet but it’s certainly better.

Drawing a deep breath Tucker releases it again as he closes his eyes, hoping to get back to sleep.

His efforts are in vain, however.

There’s a sharp gasp in the darkness and Tucker’s eyes snap open as he turns to see Wash in the dull light across from him. The Freelancer twitches fiercely, his hands fisted in his blankets; he’s having a nightmare.
It looks like Tucker is going to get a chance to return the favor.

Pulling himself out of bed the air is cold against Tucker’s bare chest, his shirt discarded at some point in the night. He turns on the lamp and walks over to Wash’s bunk. The sudden brightness doesn’t wake him and his outgrown hair is plastered to a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead. It’s only when Tucker leans in close that he sees the tears spilling down the Freelancer’s cheeks from eyes screwed shut.

The sight sends a sharp twinge through Tucker’s chest. “Wash…” He places a firm hand on the man’s shoulder and reaches up to thumb away the tears from his cheeks.

Big mistake.

In hindsight, trying to rouse a paranoid ex-special ops guy from the midst of his night terrors probably isn’t the wisest choice. Wash’s eyes snap open and he grabs Tucker’s arm and neck. Before he can even blink, the Freelancer has Tucker pinned on his back beneath him – positions reversed. Both of Wash’s hands wrap tightly around his throat.

Thrashing beneath the taller man, Tucker tries to unseat him and pry the crushing fingers away. “Wash…it’s me,” he croaks.

Agent Washington stares without seeing, his eyes burning with fury and fear as white spots begin to cloud Tucker’s vision. Abandoning his efforts at loosening Wash’s grip, Tucker moves a hand to the splint on his wrist, applying firm pressure. He can only hope it’s enough to snap the Freelancer out of it.

“Wash… please.”

Fuck, it’s not working.

It’s not working and Tucker can’t believe it. This is it; this is how he dies. Tucker had hoped for something far more badass. He writhes harder but it’s no use.

Poor Wash is never going to forgive himself.

Tucker’s vision begins to go dark but the hands on his neck suddenly loosen and he fills his lungs with glorious air. He coughs on the exhale, his throat sore and ragged, but the lightheaded rush of oxygen feels spectacular.

Wash’s hands leave his neck and Tucker’s vision clears enough that he can see the plain horror in the Freelancer’s eyes. He brings a trembling hand to his face and touches his cheek, finding the lingering tear tracks. “T-Tucker, I…”

Washington starts to fall apart right before Tucker’s eyes; his hands shake as he threads them into his hair, eyes going unfocused. The Freelancer begins to pull away and Tucker’s not entirely sure what possesses him to do what he does next but he puts a stop to Wash’s retreat.

“No you fucking don’t.” He hauls Wash back down onto the narrow bunk beside him, pulling the man against his chest.

Wash’s entire body goes rigid and suddenly Tucker’s not certain that this was the right call after all.

“What are you doing?” Wash asks, voice tense.
Tucker’s mouth feels dry. “I don’t know.”

Wash doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t move.

Tucker feels like his heart is trying to hammer its way out of his chest and Eta pacing near the foot of the bed doesn’t help. He’s still not entirely convinced that this isn’t a nightmare.

The brittle silence drags on for what feels like hours but Wash finally speaks. “Tucker, I- I almost-I could have killed you.”

There’s more anguish in his voice than Tucker has ever heard. He relaxes his hold on Wash enough to rub his hand across his shoulders. “Yeah, well I nearly gutted you with my sword, so call us square.”

Seeing the scar he left on Wash was devastating. Tucker didn’t realize that it actually happened; that he was actually capable of hurting him. After all his friends turned out to be alive Tucker just thought it was another corrupt memory. The wound could not have been as severe as his hallucinations portrayed it to be but the revelation haunts him all the same.

At that Wash finally seems to relax somewhat, resting his head in the crook of Tucker’s shoulder and sinking into his side. He releases a shuddering breath that tickles across Tucker’s collarbone. “You weren’t exactly yourself when you did that,” Wash reminds him.

Tucker scoffs to cover the shiver that runs down his spine. “Neither were you, dude.”

Wash silent for a beat. “It’s not the same th-”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Neither of them speaks for a while and the silence settles around them.

It’s been too long since the last time Tucker shared a bed with someone, despite the reputation he boasts. At the moment he can’t imagine anywhere he’d rather be. The chill of their underground headquarters doesn’t feel so dreary with Wash pressed flush against his side.

Maybe this isn’t such a bad dream.

A blue figure appears near the end of the bed and Tucker glances up to see Iota. She’s knelt on the floor with her elbows on the bed and her hands tucked under her chin. Tucker can practically feel the glee radiating off of her. Eta has quieted somewhat, but is ever present. He’s taken up a spot on Tucker’s vacant bunk, sitting with his knees curled up to his chest.

Wash draws back slightly to fix Tucker with a questioning look.

Giving his head a small shake, Tucker pulls the Freelancer back down against him.

He can feel Wash’s jaw working as he seems to find his voice. “Are they still bad? The hallucinations?”

The anxiety is instantaneous, dread crushing down on Tucker’s chest as Eta glows just a little brighter. He probably should have known better than to think he could hide it from Wash, of all people. Takes one to know one or some shit like that.

Tucker clenches his jaw tight, wishing that another Charon ship would show up and start dropping mechs. Anything to avoid this conversation.
Theta appears at the foot of the bed beside Iota. “Tell him!”

Wash’s doesn’t press him to answer. He doesn’t even raise his head to look at Tucker expectantly. He just waits.

Tucker finally replies with a sigh. “Not all the time… It’s better now that I actually get some fucking sleep.”

Wash nods absently and a there’s a loaded pause before he speaks again. “You know it’s not real, right? Epsilon isn’t in your head anymore.”

Tucker breathes a sharp sigh. “Yeah, I know… Delta likes to remind me.”

Wash is contemplative for a moment before his quiet laugh skirts across Tucker’s skin. “That’s not surprising.”

The lingering silence is far less awkward than it probably should be. Tucker’s only complaint is the light in the room that has become somewhat irksome. Wash seems to share this opinion because the Freelancer twists out of his grip briefly to hit the switch before leaning back into Tucker’s side.

There’s relief in the darkness; a comforting weight that drapes and envelops. It makes things far simpler. Just the sound of soft breaths and the warmth of another person lying beside him.

Apparently it’s too much to hope that Eta, Iota and Theta might leave Tucker in in peace. The three remain present, shining softly in his periphery.

He wonders about the original fragments that these shadows from Epsilon were based on. Wash told him a bit about Project Freelancer, how the Agents were paired with the different AI fragments. It was a fluke that Agent Washington ended up with Epsilon. Tucker wonders what would have happened if he had gotten something different.

“Which AI were you supposed to have, back in Project Freelancer?” Tucker asks gently.

Wash’s shoulders stiffen but he only takes a moment before replying. “Agent South Dakota and I were set to be paired with Eta and Iota. Never found out which was mine.”

“Iota!” Tucker blurts before he can stop himself.

Wash tips his head to peer questioningly up at Tucker through the darkness but he doesn’t meet the Freelancer’s gaze.

“Iota!” Tucker repeats, quieter this time.

“I never found out what Iota’s trait was,” Wash admits as he lays his head back down. His hair is soft where it tickles against Tucker’s jaw.

Her teal armour glows dimly in the corner of Tucker’s eye. “She was Alpha’s happiness.”

Wash doesn’t have anything to say to that and the room lapses back into comfortable silence.

Tucker presses his nose against the top of the Freelancer’s head and breathes a tired sigh as he shuts his eyes for a moment.

When he opens them again there’s a pop of blue light glittering in the darkness above him. A burst of red appears soon after, trails of light spreading outwards before fading into darkness. Theta
throws up the red and blue fireworks as Iota watches beside him.

It reminds Tucker of the 4th of July back in the canyon. Of setting off contraband fireworks in neutral territory between Red Base and Blue Base as Caboose ran around the canyon with as many sparklers as he could carry.

The weight of his exhaustion settles over him and Tucker drifts off before he even realizes it.

Chapter End Notes

Didn’t expect to get this chapter up today but there you have it! The next few chapters might be a little late due to my current work schedule for October, but I’ll do my best to minimize delays. Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow Canadians! :)
Tucker wakes slowly in a bed that isn’t his own snuggled up next to his CO. This should probably concern him more than it does. Two grown ass dudes don’t just cuddle platonically but Tucker is warm, comfortable and unwilling to move for any reason whatsoever. Any consequences sound like a great problem for future-Tucker to deal with.

What does concern him is the unrelenting knocking on the door.

Tucker rolls towards the warmth, throwing an arm over Wash’s waist and burying his nose into the back of the Freelancer’s neck. Grumbling bitterly, Tucker wishes a slow and painful death on whoever has the audacity to wake him at this hour.

The voice is muffled by the steel door. “Agent Washington? Agent Carolina is looking for you, sir.”

Wash bolts upright, taking the blankets with him and Tucker can only whimper pathetically in protest.

The Freelancer’s voice is thick with sleep. “Er, yes, uh… tell Carolina I’ll be there shortly!”

His voice is loud, the air is cold and Tucker tries to reel Wash back in with the blankets. “Oh my fucking god, it’s way too early for this bullshit.”

Wash doesn’t cooperate, remaining adamantly vertical. He turns to look at the clock and his entire body goes stiff. “Tucker, it’s past 0800.”

Tucker sits straight up, gaze darting to the clock. “Bullshit! That clock’s busted!”

Wash hustles out of the bed, pulling his shirt over his head and starts donning his armour. “If Carolina is sending someone to get me then it’s accurate.”

Tucker groans noisily before dragging his ass out of bed. “Fuck, that means we missed breakfast.”

Wash chuckles quietly but the conversation tapers off as they both hastily dress. The silence turns stilted and Tucker tries diligently to ignore it; distant -future-Tucker problems, not immediate -future-Tucker problems. Casting a sideways look towards the Freelancer, Tucker doesn’t fail to notice how Wash’s eyes dart towards him and away again.

Tucker barely withholds a growl of displeasure. He fucked up, big time.

Snapping the last of his armour into place, Tucker looks over to see Wash standing awkwardly, helmet in hand. He leaves his own helmet off for the moment, turning to face the Freelancer.
Wash’s voice is full of caution, like every word is balanced on the edge of a knife and one misplaced syllable will send it toppling. “Tucker… about last night…”

“Dude, forget about it,” he quickly diffuses. “That was my bad. I shouldn’t have tried to wake you like that.”

Grey eyes search his face, expression unreadable with no trace of the relief that Tucker expected to see there. He’s getting the distinct impression that he didn’t say the right thing.

The moment passes in an instant and Wash turns away. “Okay.”

Tucker doesn’t know how a single word can carry such excruciating weight but it does.

Eta and Omega both appear, yelling at him all at once.

“Why would you say that?”

“You insolent fool!”

Tucker pulls on his helmet to try and block them out but to no avail. He does his best to focus on Wash, knelt in front of his footlocker as he retrieves Tucker’s sword. A small light catches his attention and the voices go silent. There’s something casting a dim, blue glow across the bottom of the footlocker. Tucker recognizes it instantly.

It’s the Epsilon AI.

His thoughts explode into chaos. Every AI fragment erupts into existence at once, all shouting at him. His knees sway beneath him and for a moment, he’s positive that he’s going to be sick. It takes insurmountable effort not to keel over and scream.

“There it is! Take it!”

“Don’t leave us like this!”

“You promised!”

>Please Tucker, you gotta!”

“Do it, now!”

“Tucker?”

His gaze snaps away from the chip to Wash’s outstretched hand, offering his sword.

O’Malley appears right beside Wash and Tucker blinks but he doesn’t flinch. ‘Take your weapon and strike him down!’

“Are you feeling alright?” Wash asks, a hint of concern colouring his voice.

Tucker gives his head a sharp shake, banishing the hallucinations and claiming his sword. “Yeah, sorry, dude,” he replies. “I kinda zoned out there. Thinking about the best way to break into the mess hall for some grub.”

Wash snorts and some of the tension leaves his shoulders. “You should ask Grif. I’m sure that’s his area of expertise.”
Tucker nods in agreement as he clips the sword hilt to his thigh. The voices are still swarming around him and he has to focus on forming each word as he speaks. “Yeah, probably. You want me to get you anything?”

Wash seems somewhat taken aback by the offer. “Uh, no. That’s alright. I’ll be fine. But thanks.” Pulling on his helmet, he tips his head towards the door. “I better go find Carolina.”

Tucker only just realizes that he’s sort of crowded Wash into a corner. He takes a hasty step back so the Freelancer can pass. “Shit, right. I’ll, uh, see you later.”

Wash lingers a moment longer before nodding. “Right.”

He leaves Tucker alone in the room as his traitorous mind turns against him. A wealth of tainted memories threatens to rise above his head like dark water, dragging him down to swallow him whole. The AIs’ voices whisper in the back of Tucker’s head and it’s like Epsilon is still there, trapped beneath his skin. They all beg for the same thing and Tucker’s gaze falls on the locked crate at the foot of Wash’s bunk.

The voices rumble louder and Tucker flees the room, walking without direction. His thoughts swirl around him in a dizzying maelstrom and Tucker has to remind himself to breathe. Familiar faces pass but he doesn’t hear their words or pay them any mind. There’s nothing barring the hurricane inside his own head.

Delta seems able to penetrate the storm easily enough, keeping step with Tucker as he walks. “I’m afraid I do not understand,” he admits, “Do you no longer wish to help us?”

That’s not it.

Tucker saw for himself how catastrophic it was for the different AIs to all inhabit the same host. They may be just fragments but they have their own unique identities and it’s not right to leave them together. It’s just that Tucker doesn’t know how to help them.

The world goes by in a miasma of indiscriminate shapes and colour, like one of Caboose’s abstract paintings. He’s in the eye of the storm and nothing exists beyond its circumference. Tucker loses track of distance and time, all the while his thoughts running in self-consuming circles.

There’s a tug on his hand that he definitely shouldn’t feel when Theta appears beside him. “But you promised.”

Stopping in his tracks, Tucker finally takes a moment to peer out from inside his storm to see where his feet have taken him. For a solid six seconds, his heart stops beating in his chest as he finds himself back in the receded corners of his mind. The ancient trees tower over him but they’re alive; not the burnt and blackened branches that he last saw.

“Not this time,” Gamma drones. “Look again.”

Tucker closes his eyes a moment and when he opens them again he recognizes the jungle above the caves. His relief is unparalleled and Tucker lets himself collapse on a large root protruding from the ground as he reasserts himself with reality.

Omega paces as Tucker’s anger builds. He never asked for any of this. Things were starting to get better. Wash kept the nightmares away and he could cope with the occasional hallucination. Delta sits beside him and Tucker is more frustrated than anything else. The worst part of all of this is that there’s no one else in his head tangling his thoughts this time.
It’s all him.

Tucker can’t even save himself. How is he supposed to help the AIs?

Church would know what to do.

Resting his arms on his knees, Tucker glares down at the ground, cursing the entire planet for existing in the first place. Even FILSS is gone now and Tucker doesn’t know who else he can ask for help. There aren’t any AIs left.

“That is not entirely true,” Delta informs. “There is still the Sangheili AI.”

Oh yeah.

Tucker frowns as he gives the thought serious consideration.

The AI, Santa as dubbed by Caboose, resides within the network that links the alien Temples on Chorus. As ancient as the AI might be, he does seem to wield a great deal of power.

“What you really think it could work?” Tucker asks.

“I think it is our only viable option.”

Sigma doesn’t seem to agree. “You could always implant us again. We can show you how to split us. I promise to behave this time.”

Tucker’s lip curls back in a grimace at that idea. Fat fucking chance. For as long as he lives no one is getting back inside his head again.

Theta kicks at rock with his boot. “We’re not all bad.”

Releasing a deep sigh, Tucker looks over at him. “Yeah, I know kid.”

He doesn’t hold anything against Theta, Delta or Iota but he just can’t do it. It’s enough of a struggle already to try and keep his own mind together anymore. Tucker’s not sure he can handle having anyone else’s thoughts to contend with.

Taking a deep breath, he turns his focus back to the task at hand. First of all, he needs to take back the chip. That won’t exactly be easy. Wash isn’t about to hand it over, so he’s going to have to find a way to break into his footlocker. Tucker’s not exactly a master thief, so he’ll need some heavy duty tools to bust his way in.

Sigma blazes into existence with an unnecessary amount of fire. He doesn’t say a word and merely points angrily to the hilt on Tucker’s thigh.

He can burn through the crate.

Right.

Tucker looks back up at Sigma. “Hey, I would have figured it out eventually.”

Sigma rolls his eyes before disappearing again.

As efficient as using the sword will be it’s not exactly subtle and as soon as Wash discovers that the chip is gone he’s going to raise the alarm. No, Tucker has to grab the chip and make a quick getaway. The closest Temple is the one near the Charon Research facility. If Tucker can snatch
some teleportation grenades, he can get to the research base and make his way from there.

“A sensible plan,” Delta commends him, “but it may be wise to consider additional precautionary measures.”

Tucker hears him loud and clear.

What he needs is a distraction.

Luck seems to be on Agent Washington’s side for once because Carolina doesn’t even bat an eye at his late awakening this morning. He finds her in the armoury with a variety of mismatched armour pieces laid out on the table before her.

“How’s this arrangement working out with you and Tucker?” she asks lightly. “He hasn’t caused any more trouble has he?”

The question shouldn’t twist his insides the way it does. “No, it’s been fine.” The reply is steadier than he feels. Wash’s thoughts are still caught up in their encounter last night but he firmly shelves them for later examination.

It takes conscious effort to pay attention to Carolina as she speaks. She’s compiled a collection of the Charon armour mods – the ones that don’t require an AI to function optimally. Her plan is to try and adapt the mods to her own armour since she no longer has an AI to run them.

Wash is simply glad that she’s not fighting him on the issue any longer. He hid the AI chip from her because she was adamant that she was strong enough to handle it. “I’ve had two AIs before. I can do this!”

“Why?” he asked her, remaining firm on his stance. “You’re the best fighter I know, even without your mods. Is this what Church would really want?” That earned him a deadly glare but she did let it drop.

Wash delves into the task, eager for a distraction. It’s no surprise that the Charon mods are based on Freelancer tech. With improved engineering, the Charon equipment has advanced battery cells and an intelligent array that eliminates a great deal of strain on the user’s neural interface. They spend a long time trying to adapt Carolina’s old mods with the newer tech to achieve the same results but they have little luck. Despite their technical abilities, neither of them are engineers and this is beyond their scope.

Carolina is frustrated to learn that she can only choose a single mod, a serious downgrade from what she’s accustomed to but it will have to suffice. Between the active camouflage and the hard light shield, it’s no surprise that she selects the camo. Installing the mod is relatively straightforward at least but trying to integrate the software is another matter entirely. The mods are designed to work with newer armour models; it would probably only take milliseconds for Epsilon to figure out but they make do. It takes two hours of tinkering but they finally get the mod functioning. The mod can sustain itself for a little over three hours by Wash’s estimate of the battery’s power output. The active camo is reminiscent of Tex’s equipment and Wash wonders if it’s something Carolina has considered.

He decides not to point it out. For safety.
After a few tests, Carolina’s attention turns back to the hard light shield and Wash sincerely hopes that she hasn’t changed her mind.

Her next works aren’t at all what he expects. “Why don’t we see if we can get the shield mod working for you?” she suggests.

The gears in Wash’s head stop turning for a full five seconds. “Er… that’s alright. Maybe it should go to Kimball or—”

Carolina takes a step closer to him. “You never got your equipment back in Project Freelancer. Take it. You’ve more than earned it.”

Wash eyes the module on the table with suspicion. He isn’t keen on relying too heavily on equipment because there’s always the chance for malfunction. York’s healing unit is different; it’s helpful yes, but not something he ever banks on in a fight. Surviving is just an added bonus. Wash trusts his own instincts far more than a piece of software.

Carolina seems to pick up on his line of thought. “I know you don’t need it but it might come in handy as a last resort.”

Wash can’t exactly refute her logic so he reluctantly agrees. It takes longer than expected but they eventually get the shield integrated and functioning. As the hours drag on, Wash begins to regret not accepting Tucker’s offer for food.

They put the shield through several tests: how quickly Wash can activate it, how long he can sustain it uninterrupted and how many shots it can take before it fails. As much as he hates to admit it, Wash can definitely see the appeal to having the mod. He would be hard pressed to depend on it solely, like Felix was prone to doing, but it’s still nice to have.

“You know,” Carolina muses, “I bet that shield could even repel Tucker’s sword.”

“Really?” Wash replies.

The shield is based on alien tech so it’s not an unrealistic assumption.

Wash can hear the smirk in her words. “Maybe we should find out.”

Carolina stays behind to fiddle with her old mods for a while longer while Wash goes in search of Tucker. It turns out to be more of a challenge than expected. He tries to hail Tucker over his private COM-freq but there’s no response. That isn’t overly concerning since it is dinner time; Tucker might not be wearing his helmet. However, when Wash reaches the mess hall, scouring through the ranks for the familiar turquoise armour, he’s nowhere in sight.

Agent Washington tries not to let his paranoia get the best of him.

He starts asking around and plenty of people have seen Captain Tucker today, they just don’t have any ideas on his current whereabouts. After searching tirelessly, he finally gets a lead when someone mentions they spotted him headed towards the barracks a while ago.

The threads of Wash’s frayed nerves twist through his chest and he has a difficult time stifling them. He’s sure he’ll find Tucker slacking off in his quarters or something else completely harmless but that’s the problem with anxiety – no amount of logic or reassurance can dissuade it.

The door opens to the barracks and Wash nearly runs straight into a familiar chest.
“Oh hullo Agent Washington!”

Wash takes a full step back to see the regulation blue soldier staring back at him. His AI guided assault rifle is lax in his grip and it’s probably the first time that Wash has seen him in full armour since he began his art spree.

“Hi, Caboose.” Wash is about to step around him when he decides to try his luck. “You haven’t seen Tucker by any chance, have you?”

The sim trooper’s entire body goes ramrod straight. “Tucker? No, I don’t think I know anyone by that name.”

Wash raises an eyebrow. “Caboose, he’s our teammate.”

“There are lots of people on Blue Team, Agent Washington,” he chides. “There’s you, there’s me, there was Grif’s sister and Church’s mean girlfriend and Carolina is blue too and Tucker-”

“Yes!” Wash exclaims. “Tucker. The one in turquoise armour. Have you seen him?”

“Um, his armour is obviously greenish-blue,” Caboose insists.

Wash’s temper is gaining ground fast. “Caboose. Have you seen Tucker or not?”

The sim trooper adjusts his grip on his rifle. “I have not seen anyone who doesn’t want to be found.”

A frown twists across Wash’s face. “What are you-? Caboose are you trying to stall me?”

“No! No! Tucker would not ask me to stall anybody. We are not engines.”

Wash darts past Caboose. The sim trooper tries to grab him but he dances out of his reach. Sprinting down the halls of the barracks, Wash makes for his room. Soldiers swerve out of his path and Wash skids to a stop in front of the door. He tries to wrench it open but finds it locked.

It’s all too familiar as he pounds his good fist against the door, dreading what he might find within. “Tucker!”

There’s no answer and Wash doesn’t have time for this. He pulls his sidearm and takes aim before putting a bullet in the lock. The recoil sends a nasty shock through his wrist but he ignores it. Wash shoulders the door open only to find an empty room. His gaze rapidly surveys the small space, stopping when it lands on his ruined footlocker.

The lid has been cut away completely, the edges melted and warped from Tucker’s sword. Wash rushes over and digs through its contents, searching for what he already knows is missing. The Epsilon AI is gone.

“Tucker said he had to keep a promise.”

Wash turns to see Caboose standing in the doorway.

“You can’t break a promise, Agent Washington.”

The Freelancer is on his feet, brushing past Caboose and making his way out of the barracks. He opens up a COM channel to Kimball. “General, you need to put this base on lockdown immediately.”
Her voice is filled with confusion. “What’s going on? It is Hargrove’s men?”

“Tucker’s taken the Epsilon AI. Tell everyone to be on high alert. He doesn’t have any armour mods but he could still be extremely dangerous.”

Kimball is stunned to silence and Wash doesn’t say anything else as he switches to Carolina’s frequency. “Tucker’s got Epsilon.”

Her response is immediate. “I’m on it.”

“I’m headed for the East side, you take the West. Let’s establish a perimeter. If we don’t tip him off, then maybe-”

An alarm blares in Wash’s ears and everything erupts into chaos. Soldiers take off sprinting every which way as they rush to battle stations, ready for attack.

“Damnit!!”

With the alarm raised Tucker will only accelerate his plans. Wash wants to scream but there’s no use fighting over it now. Rational thought only barely edges out his heart-hammering panic, so Wash takes a deep breath and forms a plan. He turns towards a group of gathering Feds and doesn’t even offer a word of explanation when he takes a sniper rifle from one of them.

“But… but you need a weapon requisition form for that!”

Shouldering the rifle, Wash makes his way to the central complex and climbs the ladder to the roof before reclaiming it once more. Peering through the scope, Wash scours the caves for any sign of aqua armour. He gets his hopes up for a moment before realizing it’s only Carolina.

She waves to him before her voice comes filtering through the radio. “Wash, I’ve got movement near the caves at 4 o’clock.”

The barrel of the rifle whips around and Wash searches the tunnel openings, catching a glimpse of turquoise before it disappears inside. “Got him.”

Wash abandons the rifle and doesn’t bother with the ladder on the way down. The shock of his landing sends pain lancing up his calves but he keeps moving. Sprinting over to a group of Rebels, he starts barking orders. “Head towards the tunnels on the South side and secure a perimeter. You three with me.”

Agent Washington doesn’t wait for their acknowledgement but the pursuing footsteps are indicative enough. They jog to the mouth of the cave and Wash turns to the soldiers once more. “Head to the opposite end of this tunnel, don’t let Tucker escape.”

“Yes sir, Agent Washington!” one of them says, before they take off.

This isn’t how Wash envisioned testing his new armour mod but he double checks the battery indicator before slowly entering the cave. Each step whispers against the stone yet still too loud by Wash’s ears. There’s a friendly signature on his motion tracker just ahead.

When Wash rounds the corner Tucker stands with his back to him beside an ATV. His helmet is off, resting on the seat of the mongoose as he stares down at something in his hand.

“Tucker.”
The sim trooper spins around to face him, hand darting to his sword but upon recognizing Wash he eases off the hilt. Whatever he's holding in his left hand, Tucker keeps it concealed behind his back. Wash can only assume it's the AI chip.

“Going somewhere?” he asks.

The sim trooper scoffs. “What tipped you off?”

“Hand over the AI unit,”

“Not happening, dude.” Tucker holds firm, raising his chin defiantly. “You just gotta trust me on this one.”

In one swift motion, Wash pulls his rifle from his back and levels it with the sim trooper’s chest. There’s a protesting ache in his wrist but Wash grits his teeth and ignores it. “I’m not playing games, Tucker,” he growls to keep from pleading. “Give me the AI. That’s an order.”

Tucker’s head flinches back and he waves his right hand at Wash’s weapon, frowning. “Really?” he challenges. “You’re gonna fucking shoot me?”

There’s no apprehension in his posture as he calls Washington’s bluff. However, Wash does notice the way his left arm shifts, adjusting his grip on the Epsilon chip. The neural interface port on the back of his neck won’t have fully healed yet. Tucker would be able to re-implant Epsilon with little difficulty and with his helmet already off it would take him seconds.

Wash can’t take that chance.

Holding his breath, he clicks off the safety and rests his finger on the trigger. “Yes.” Washington lowers his aim and puts a bullet in Tucker’s shin.

The sim trooper curses. “Son of a bitch!”

Pain sears through Wash’s wrist as the rifle kicks back against his shoulder but Tucker collapses to a knee. The object hidden in his left hand drops but it’s not the Epsilon unit.

It’s a teleportation grenade.

Wash surges forward but he’s not fast enough.

The grenade bounces off the ground and activates, casting orange light across the walls of the cave. Tucker looks up at Wash and flips him off before there’s an explosion of light and sound. The boom echoes through the tunnel and in a flash Tucker is gone.

Chapter End Notes

I have a problem with cliffhangers. Send help.
Chapter Notes

I'm sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tucker lies on the hard ground staring up at one of Chorus’ moons glowing against the twilight sky. It would be peaceful if his entire body didn’t ache from being atomized and transported halfway across the goddamn continent. Teleportation fucking sucks but the discomfort is somewhat rivalled by the stabbing pain in Tucker’s shin.

“Fucking dick!”

Omega appears standing over him. “Agent Washington will pay for this.”

Tucker groans in annoyance as he sits upright. “Fuck off.”

“But why would he hurt us?” Theta asks, looking anxious.

Tucker doesn’t have an adequate response for that one. Gathering his strength, he pulls himself to his feet leaning on his four-wheeler for support. At least the ATV made it through. He ended up on the road just beyond the Research Facility. It was a damn good thing that he set the teleportation coordinates ahead of time. From here he should be able to make it to the Temple of Arms without much contest.

“Over here! I thought I heard something.”

Or not.

The sound of voices has Tucker’s heart leaping into his throat.

Son of a bitch.

He forgot that the Research Facility is still held by a small unit of Feds and Rebels. Cursing under his breath, he tests his weight on his right leg and though the hole in his shin complains painfully, it isn’t enough to hinder him. Awesome. Tucker pulls back on his helmet before shifting the ATV into neutral and wheeling it off the road. Taking cover beneath a small bluff, he stays close to the wall hoping the scouts don’t look too hard.

Their footsteps draw closer and Tucker can hear them talking.

“You think it’s stragglers from that Charon ship?”

The other man snorts skeptically. “I doubt it. Nothing exciting ever happens here.”

They stop just short of the ridge where Tucker is hiding and he holds his breath. If they find him his plan is totally busted.

“See? Like I told you. Nothing.”
“Aw man. I bet Outpost 22 is way more interesting than this.”

There’s a lengthy pause and Tucker resists the urge to fidget. Shouldn’t they be carrying on with their patrol?

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“You ever wonder why we’re here?”

Omega appears in front of Tucker and crosses his arms expectantly. For once they might actually agree on something.

After a twenty minute long discussion of philosophy and theology, the two scouts finally move on. Tucker is thoroughly impressed with his own restraint, despite Omega’s highly tempting suggestion to knock them both out and just go. If it wouldn’t tip off the others on where he was headed he might have.

Tucker waits until the footsteps fade into the distance before leaving his hiding place. He rolls the four-wheeler down the road for about a quarter mile before he risks starting the engine and peeling off. It’s a shame that this has to be a covert operation because Tucker would have really appreciated nabbing a med kit from the Research Facility. The gunshot wound isn’t severe, his shin guard taking the brunt of the impact, but it would have been nice to pry the bullet out.

Goddamn Washington.

Tucker ignores the lingering pain and drives forward.

In redemption of her oversight with sounding the alarm Kimball is at least quick to radio the other outposts, instructing them to be on the lookout for Captain Tucker and to approach with extreme caution. Wash isn’t confident that Tucker would risk going to one of their bases but the more eyes they have looking the better their chances of finding him.

Wash, Kimball, Carolina and Dr. Grey go over what they know.

Tucker is in possession of the broken Epsilon AI; he left with a mongoose so he obviously expected a trip. He’s disabled his radio so there’s no hope of tracking him that way and none of the outposts have reported any suspicious activity thus far. Despite the skepticism of Kimball and Carolina, Wash is insistent that Tucker hasn’t reimplanted the AI, at least not yet.

What concerns Wash most is that with a teleportation grenade Tucker could be any number of places and if he didn’t set the destination before the grenade dropped he could literally be anywhere. Much of the planet’s surface is spanned by massive oceans. For all they know he got teleported to middle of one and sunk to the bottom in his armour, drowned.

Wash pushes that thought firmly aside.

Kimball looks to Agent Washington, the concern and frustration clear in her eyes. “You’ve had that AI in your head before and you know Tucker better than any of us. Is there anything else you can
Washington shifts his weight from foot to foot hesitantly.

“Even details that don’t seem important might be helpful,” Dr. Grey adds brightly.

There are some lines that shouldn’t be crossed. Wash is fairly confident that he’s the only person who knows about Tucker’s hallucinations. He’s not sure how that information could be useful but they’ve got nothing else and Wash is beyond desperate.

“Tucker’s been having hallucinations.”

“Hallucinations?!” Dr. Grey almost sounds delighted and it makes Wash’s jaw ache as he clenches his teeth. “I don’t know how I possibly could have missed that in my evaluation.”

Wash tries to explain as best he can. “I think he’s adopted some of the traits of Epsilon’s fragments. He’s a better liar now and we’ve all seen how quick he is to anger.”

“What kind of hallucinations?” Kimball asks.

Chewing his lip, Wash tries not to feel like he’s completely throwing Tucker under the bus. The visions were different when Tucker was trying to stay awake, more focused around reality than the others, but he’s not confident enough to comment on them. “I think he sees the AIs occasionally but beyond that I don’t know.”

If any of this surprises Carolina, she doesn’t show it. Her gaze remains firmly on Wash, listening thoughtfully. “Did Tucker say anything more about his plans to Caboose?”

Wash shakes his head firmly. “No, Tucker’s smarter than that.”

Kimball’s arms are folded across her chest and fingers drum against the pauldron of her armour. “There are still other places we could look. Crash site Bravo or Alpha, maybe even the fuel station.”

Grey looks skeptical but Wash latches onto the suggestion. “That’s a good idea. If we use teleportation grenades we can send a few people to check each location.”

He only needs to glance in Carolina’s direction before she’s already moving, off to the armoury to procure what they need. Kimball and Wash rally the Lieutenants and the sim troopers as they divide the locations.

“We should send two people to each site,” Wash suggests. “Just in case there’s any of Hargrove’s mercs in the vicinity.”

Kimball frowns. “Two people is hardly enough to defend against a squad of enemy soldiers.”

“They don’t have to,” he insists. “We’ll set the coordinates for the return trip ahead of time so they’ll have a quick getaway if needed.”

The frown dissipates only a fraction but it will have to be enough to placate her.

They organize themselves into pairs. Donut and Doc will go to crash site Bravo; Carolina and Caboose to Alpha; Wash and Sarge will check the abandoned fuel station; Grif and Simmons will go back to the communications Temple; Palomo and Bitters to the jungle Temple; and Jensen and Andersmith to the Temple of the key in the mountains.
Dr. Grey sets the transport coordinates on the teleportation grenades, meticulous in ensuring that each group is using the correct grenade. The six pairs are lined up, glancing about warily as Kimball addresses them.

“Tucker can’t have gotten far yet but he has the night to his advantage. Use your helmet light to search for tread marks, a blood trail or any other signs of movement. Keep moving and stay quiet. If you encounter any pirates, have your return grenade ready in case you’re spotted. Any questions?”

No one has any questions but Caboose does quietly comment that this is the best game of hide and seek ever. Of all time.

Kimball pretends not to hear him and nods. “Alright, everyone spread out.”

They go one at a time in case there’s any interference with multiple teleportations in close proximity. First Donut and Doc, then Carolina and Caboose, and then it’s Wash and Sarge’s turn.

Agent Washington turns to Sarge. “Are you ready?”

The Red team leader grips his shotgun firmly. “Son, I was born ready.”

Wash rolls his eyes but says nothing. He arms the teleportation grenade and lets it fall from his hand. The device bounces up into the air, emitting a bright orange glow and despite his mental preparation, there’s no bracing for the shock of teleportation. There’s a deafening boom and a brief moment of darkness before the desert landscape appears before them.

“Sweet chassis of Tallahassee!”

Teleportation feels a bit like being turned inside out and crammed through a meat grinder before getting turned right side in again. Wash’s stomach churns but the nausea passes with a few steadying breaths.

Raising the pistol in his left hand, Wash lets his finger hover over the trigger as he scans their surroundings. The station is nestled against the tall, sandstone walls of the slot canyon. The towering pillars of earth, curved and worn from centuries of water erosion, look eerie in the moonlight. Unlike their last visit there’s very little blowing sand – the wind is quiet. Hopefully it’ll make their search easier.

“Let’s spread out and look around but stay within visual range,” Wash orders. “Maintain radio silence unless absolutely necessary.”

Sarge grumbles something about taking orders from a dirty, rotten Blue before jogging off toward the refuelling station. Wash releases a small sigh before turning on his helmet lights and begins scouring the area for clues. The ground is solid rock covered in a thin layer of sand. Wash keeps his eyes downcast as he walks, looking for boot prints or fresh tire treads but finds neither. This entire search effort feels worthless. There isn’t even a plausible motive to go on; Wash has no idea why Tucker would take the AI. Perhaps the fragments altered something in his nature after all. It takes every shred of his willpower to search in earnest, despite the futility of it. There’s no reason for Tucker to have come all the way out here.

Looking back up, Wash picks out Sarge where he’s moved on towards the mouth of the caves. He’s staring back however and blinks his helmet lights twice.

Wash gets the message loud and clear so he breaks into a jog and makes his way over.
“I think I found something,” Sarge indicates gruffly.

He gestures inside the cave with his shotgun where Wash can see a pair of headlights in the distance. Even at this range he can tell that the lights definitely belong to a mongoose – not the right shape or spacing for a warthog.

Wash tries to crush the small beacon of hope flickering in his chest as quickly as it arises.

Tapping the side of his helmet, Wash looks back at Sarge. “Lights out, we don’t want to spook him.”

The Red leader complies and both of their lights wink out. They tread lightly as they make their way into the cave. Wash strains his ears for any sounds of movement beyond their own and the rumbling of the mongoose’s engine grows louder as they approach. The vehicle is parked in a corner of the cave, clearly abandoned, but perhaps Tucker left behind a hint of just what he’s up to.

Sarge continues to scan his shotgun around the dark cavern as Wash takes a closer look. Turning the key in the ignition, he kills the engine but leaves the lights on. The silence is deafening and he quickly notices that this isn’t the mongoose that Tucker left with.

The Charon logo is stamped onto the side in bright yellow paint.

Oh no.

“It’s a trap! Get down!”

The gunfire sprays far over their heads from several different directions. A voice calls out in the darkness from somewhere to their left. “Drop your weapons, now!”

More space pirates.

Washington can feel his pulse pounding in his ears as his gaze darts about, searching for enemies. How many separate bursts of gunfire did he hear? Four? Nine? How badly are they outmatched?

The teleportation grenade to take them home is clipped to Wash’s side but the second he reaches for it, they’re dead. He slowly raises his pistol up in the air, palms open in surrender.

Sarge makes no move to lower his weapon, holding his shotgun firmly. The Red leader gives the slightest of nods at Wash before throwing down his shotgun a beat later.

Wash keeps a hold on his pistol.

A few pirates step out of the shadows and into view, aiming their guns as they take tentative steps forward. “I said drop it!!” one of them shouts.

Wash takes a deep breath before letting his pistol drop from his hand.

Sarge is right there and he catches the pistol as it falls. The gunshots echo through the cave, taking down the merc who was shouting at them. Wash drops the grenade and deploys his hard light shield in the same motion.

Gunfire peppers the shield.

The barrier holds firm but Wash flinches with each shot.

It only takes seconds for the teleportation grenade to trigger but it feels like far longer. SMG fire
rains down on the hard light shield and the colour fades from its vibrant blue to orange, then red.

Sarge fires at the mercs until the clip is empty but Wash’s heart is in his throat, waiting for the shield to fall. For a moment, Wash forgets all about the teleportation grenade as he braces himself for the pain that will follow once the shield fails.

Everything happens in a matter of milliseconds.

The shield disappears, Wash counts five separate muzzle flashes and pain rips through his entire body. For a moment there’s nothing and Wash can’t believe he’s dead already. But then he opens his eyes and there are a dozen familiar visors all staring back at him. Wash is pretty sure that he has whiplash from how hard his senses are reeling. He’s almost certain that his chest is full of lead but the ache isn’t quite right and there’s no holes in his armour.

Wash’s heart is still racing but he turns to look at Sarge behind him, solidifying reality. They’re okay. They made it.

“Let me guess,” Grif says in a bored tone, “More pirates?”

Sarge immediately shares his opinion. “Those filthy cowards! We were hoodwinked, bamboozled!”

The presence of the pirates doesn’t overly interest Wash. With a deep breath, he calms his nerves and turns his thoughts back to the task at hand. “Did anyone find any sign of Tucker?” he presses somewhat abruptly, even though he already knows the answer.

A few withering looks are exchanged but no one is quick to speak up. Eventually, it’s Carolina who replies. “There was no trace of him at any of the locations.”

Wash is already racking his brain for ideas on their next steps. They’ll need more teleportation grenades and they’ll have to expand their search. If they can get a few Pelicans with eyes in the air-

Kimball interrupts his chain of thought, cutting his plans short. “Everyone should try and get some rest. We can resume the search tomorrow once we have daylight.”

Wash tries not to outwardly balk. “All due respect, General,” he says with very little respect, “but the longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to find him.”

Time also increases the risk that Tucker will do something rash, like re-implant the AI.

Kimball glares daggers at Wash and Dr. Grey is quick to step in. “Even if Captain Tucker has a head start on us, statistically we’re far more likely to successfully track him in daylight.”

Agent Washington clenches his teeth as his temper rises. “You don’t-“

“Wash.” Carolina cuts him off, her voice firm. “Tomorrow we’ll make a plan and find him. Get some sleep.”

His chest is tight with anger and disbelief.

The last time Wash spoke out against Carolina was when she pointed a gun at Tucker’s head back at Valhalla. She might not be holding the gun this time but it feels mostly the same.

Without another word Wash turns and marches towards the barracks before he does something he
might regret. The logical part of his brain knows they’re right but that’s little consolation at the moment. Tucker’s in the wind with a corrupted AI, he’s already somewhat unstable himself and they have no leads on where he’s headed.

Wash curses his own lack of discretion. Keeping the Epsilon unit so close where Tucker could find it was a mistake. He should have realized that something was wrong sooner.

Despite having no desire to sleep, Wash returns to his shared room with Tucker, shucks his armour and collapses onto his bunk. Agent Washington has been accustomed to having the privacy of his own room since Project Freelancer, so it’s strange just how disquieting the isolation is now. Releasing a deep sigh, Wash closes his eyes and tries to let his mind go blank.

Surprisingly enough, sleep does claim him but it isn’t very restful.

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Tucker drives through most of the night and makes it to the Charon excavation site just before dawn. After they cleared out the alien weapon stores, Kimball didn’t see the necessity to keep men stationed there, fortunately for Tucker. Nevertheless, he takes every precaution in case any wayward space pirates have moved in. After a quick sweep of the base the place proves to be deserted. His luck must be gaining ground because Tucker even finds a dusty med kit left behind by the researchers.

Taking up a spot at one of the kitchen tables, he sets to work on his leg. Tucker removes his boot and shin guard before carefully rolling up his hardsuit. As suspected, the wound is shallow but he’ll still need to fish out the bullet and stitch up the hole. Tucker shoots a quick dose of local anaesthetist into the area before he goes after the bullet with the med kit’s forceps.

“Goddamn asshole,” Tucker curses through gritted teeth. He probably should have given the anaesthetic a little longer to numb up his shin.

Omega materializes in a chair across the table from Tucker. “You should teach Washington a lesson and break his other wrist.”

“That’s not terribly original,” Sigma sing-songs from somewhere behind Tucker.

“Oh my god, shut the fuck up,” the sim trooper complains loudly.

When the tip of the forceps nudges the bullet his nerves light up with pain but it also causes the visions of Sigma and Omega to flicker. Tucker ponders this for a moment as he clenches his jaw. He goes after the bullet again and this time the hallucinations vanish completely. Tucker files that little tidbit away for later, clamping down on the bullet and pulling it out of his shin.

The suturing doesn’t hurt nearly as much. It only takes a few crude stitches to close the wound. By the time he douses the wound with disinfectant, his shin is properly numb.

Tucker certainly doesn’t plan on harming Wash, but he will get even. Maybe he’ll take a trick out of Caboose’s book – Carolina might even tell Tucker what Wash’s least favourite condiment is. Shooting him was a dick move, even if it wasn’t with lethal intent.

Eta’s voice comes from right behind him, but Tucker doesn’t flinch. “What if Washington really does want to hurt us? He shot Donut before too!”
It’s not the same. Wash isn’t the same.
Iota appears cross-legged on the floor. “We should have let him come with us. I like Wash!”
Tucker scoffs. “You like everyone.”
“That’s not true. I only like who you like.”
Her choice of phrasing makes Tucker’s throat tighten uncomfortably and he can almost feel Eta leaning into his shoulder.
Theta is perched on the edge of one of the counters. “I don’t get it. Why didn’t we bring Agent Washington with us? We trust him, don’t we?”
Tucker sighs as he applies an antibiotic bandage and then rolls his kevlar hardsuit back down. “We- I do. But he would probably think this is a bad idea.”
After all the hardship that these AIs caused Wash and the other Freelancers, Tucker’s fairly certain that he just wants them gone. Even though Tucker knows there’s nothing left of Church in these fragments, they’re still a part of him. Church was an asshole but he was Tucker’s best friend and those fragments don’t deserve to lie forgotten in the bottom of a footlocker.
“I think if you presented your argument as such, Agent Washington would have agreed,” Delta points out.
Tucker releases a deep breath as he pulls his boot on and buckles his shin guard back into place. “Yeah, probably.”
Despite the early morning sun beginning to trickle into the base Tucker wants nothing more than to lie down and sleep. As evident by the frequency of his hallucinations, he’s exhausted.
“Hey, if I try and get some shuteye, are you guys going to fuck off for a while?”
Delta cocks his head curiously. “I think that you have more control of that than we do, since we are your hallucinations after all.”
Tucker shakes his head as he makes his way to one of the bunks. “Wow, dude. You must be a real riot at parties.”
“I do not believe I have ever been to a party,” Delta informs.
Stop the fucking presses.
“Oh!” Iota exclaims suddenly, “We should have a party!”
“I’ve never been to a party either,” Theta admits shyly, “but I think I’d like to.”
Tucker really needs to get some sleep before things get much worse. “I’ll tell you what. If I get at least four hours of sleep, we can have all the parties you want.”
Even though Tucker’s not a huge fan of sleeping in his armour he’s got no one to watch his back so it’s a necessary precaution. The hallucinations dissipate as Tucker reclines onto the bunk. The battery pack of his armour digs into his back but once he gets settled it’s not all that bad.
Tucker pulls the hilt of his sword from his hip, gripping it loosely in his hand as he closes his eyes. Despite his exhaustion, sleep does not come easily. The room is obtrusively silent and Tucker’s not
sure why it puts him off as much as it does.

“I know why.”

Iota’s voice is close and Tucker cracks an eye open to see her sitting against the side of the bunk. She stares out across the empty base, arms resting on her knees.

“It’s the same reason I hate goodbyes.”

Tucker suddenly realizes what’s missing. Wash isn’t here. He’s gotten so used to the sound of Wash sleeping in the same room that now it’s just too damn quiet. That’s just great. The asshole shot him in the leg and Tucker still misses him.

He is so fucked.

“There was a waterfall out by the cliffs when we came in,” Iota muses lightly, interrupting his brooding. “Can you hear it?”

Breathing a short sigh, Tucker closes his eyes a moment and listens. It’s nothing like the thunderous cascade of water at Valhalla but Tucker can hear it.

He releases his sword momentarily, wrapping his hand around his fractured wrist and squeezes. Iota flickers with each lick of pain until she finally disappears. Tucker blows out a deep sigh, reclaiming his sword hilt as he does his best to quiet his mind and get some fucking sleep.

Wash dreams of the Mother of Invention. Of hunting recovery beacons of dead Freelancers and the monster that’s killing them. He dreams of tracking witless sim troopers through the desert and fighting in the snow as the mountain crumbles around him. The face beneath the EVA helmet doesn’t look like Agent Maine from his memories. Tucker grins back at Wash despite the extensive scarring of his throat but it doesn’t last. Soon he doesn’t grin at all. His brown eyes are listless, devoid of the emotions they used to display so prominently as his identity is stripped away by Sigma and the others. This time Wash hooks the tow cable to the Meta’s armour himself. Grif and Simmons push the ruined warthog over the cliff and Tucker goes with it, vanishing over the edge with an echoing scream.

The sound chases Wash back to consciousness as he bolts upright in bed. His legs are tangled in his blankets and a cold sweat pours off of him. Pulse racing wildly, Wash greedily gulps large lungfuls of air to try and stifle the lingering panic. He sits in darkness for a long time before he regains full control.

Your name is Agent Washington.

You are the leader of Blue Team.

You all crash landed on Chorus and ended a war.

Tucker is missing.

Reality is less comforting than he imagined it would be and there’s no point in trying to sleep any longer.
Agent Washington is halfway through donning his armour when there’s a firm rap on his door. His heart beats a little faster but he counts out four steady breaths before answering.

Kimball wants to see him immediately. They have a lead on Tucker.

It’s funny what a small dose of hope can do for a person, not unlike a shot of adrenaline. Wash pulls on the rest of his armour and is across the base in less than three minutes. Even though the light hasn’t yet reached them down in the caves below the jungle, Wash knows it’s just after dawn. He jogs his way across the base to the command centre where Kimball is waiting. Carolina is already there.

“You have news on Tucker?” he asks before anyone can even greet him.

Kimball doesn’t miss a beat. “We’ve just received word from Charon Research Complex 2C and they think they might have found something.”

They don’t waste any time.

Acquiring a few teleportation grenades, Carolina and Wash arrive at the Research Complex in an explosion of orange light and a formidable wave of nausea. Agent Washington ignores the sensation, far too focused on the task at hand. Kimball gave them permission to take any troops they might require in their pursuit of Tucker but Wash intends to do this on his own.

A Federal soldier leads them to a dirt road at the edge of the Complex. “Over here, sir. A patrol spotted the blood and treads once the sun came up.”

If they had been paying closer attention they might have noticed it six hours ago but Wash keeps his frustrations reined in.

Sure enough, there’s a small amount of blood soaked into the dirt along with a scuffle of footprints and tire impressions.

Carolina investigates further down the road before turning back to Wash. “It looks like he took off in this direction but where could he have been going?”

Agent Washington wracks his brain for answers before turning to the soldier. “Lieutenant, where does that road lead?”

The man flounders. “Uh… well lots of places, sir. The city of Lyri, the alien towers, the 7-Eleven…”

“He’s at the Temple,” Wash says firmly. “I need a warthog.”

“Right away, sir!” the soldier replies. “Kimball said you might take a squad-?”

“No,” he snaps. “I’ll be going alone.”

The Fed gives a quick salute before jogging off.

Carolina is doing her patented crossed arm head tilt when Wash turns back to look at her. “You really think I’m going to let you go alone after last time?” she chides.

The humiliation rankles but Wash keeps a handle on his temper. “It could spook him. Seeing two Freelancers hunting him down could make him do something risky.”

Carolina levels him with a look. “Because one Freelancer hunting him down is so much better.”
It’s different. They’re more than Freelancer and simulation trooper; more than XO and subordinate. Wash doesn’t have the right word and ‘friends’ seems too shallow to encompass the entirety of it. Friends don’t make your heart skip a beat whenever they flash their 100 watt smile at you.

But those are dangerous thoughts and Wash firmly pushes them aside as he forces out a lame reply. “I’ll be fine.”

Carolina gives her head a firm shake as she takes a step closer to him. “Wash, if he’s implanted Epsilon again-”

“He hasn’t.” Wash speaks with more conviction than he feels.

“This isn’t up for debate,” she says adamantly, in a tone that leaves no room for argument. “You need someone to watch your back. I’ll use my camo mod and keep my distance but at the first sign of trouble I’m stepping in.”

Wash releases a sharp sigh. She’s probably right but it doesn’t mean he has to like it. Before he can say anything more, the sound of a warthog’s rumbling engine approaches.

The soldier parks it on the road and hops out. “Here you are, sir. One warthog as requested.”

Carolina is already moving to climb into the passenger side.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” he says, before getting into the driver seat.

With a loud rev of the engine, they speed off down the road leaving the Federal soldier and the Charon complex behind them in the dust.

Tucker should have known there was a price for his earlier streak of luck.

Sirens blare in his ears, along with his drumming pulse and his breath coming in harsh pants beneath his helmet. Even above the siren however, he can hear Grif, Simmons and Caboose right behind him, their boots crunching through the snow. They race across the open ground between buildings of the Federal Army base. Tucker keeps glancing over his shoulder to make sure they’re not being followed but the Fed soldiers seem to be preoccupied with the sewage leak in the barracks.

They make it into building but come face to face with a locked door.

Tucker remembers yelling at Simmons to hack the lock but it’s different this time. There’s this all-consuming fear wound tightly in the pit of his stomach and they don’t have time. His sword burns to life in his hand and Tucker slashes at the security panel beside the door. The plasma blade cuts through the electrical components, sublimating the wires and circuitry on contact. He doesn’t relent until the heavy doors open.

Tucker sprints inside even as his friends call out behind him. He needs to find Wash and the others before it’s too late. The shouting and alarms fade behind him as Tucker ventures further into the structure.
Left, right, then another left down the long, empty corridors.

The walls are scored with bullet marks and signs of conflict. Tucker passes through a dark hall with flickering florescent lights and he nearly slips on something slick underfoot. Staring down at the floor, in the brief flash of light he can see blood streaked across the concrete.

Tucker picks up his pace, following the trail of blood but he doesn’t get far. As he rounds a corner, something catches his foot and he falls hard. When he twists around, Tucker pales at what he sees.

The dark brown armour of Lopez’s robotic body is scattered across the floor, his torso a mess of twisted metal and wires. His head lies a few feet away, visor blown out and the titanium alloy shredded to expose the circuitry within.

Tucker tries not to slip in the blood as he pulls himself back to his shaky feet. He continues after the trail and his knees sway beneath him when he finds the source not far away. Sarge lies face down on the floor. There’s a bullet hole in his thigh but that’s not what put him down. The shotgun blasted apart the armour of his back, turning his spinal column to mulch and tears burn down Tucker’s face as he chokes back sobs.

He has to keep going. The others could still be alive.

Tucker’s chest aches with every painful thud of his heart. The Feds wouldn’t do this. They couldn’t have. This is Locus’ work.

When he finds Donut with his neck crooked at an impossible angle Tucker doesn’t even stop. He can’t. If he does he won’t get up again and he has to find Wash. He needs to keep moving, he needs to try.

There’s a single room at the end of the hallway and Tucker races for it. When he bursts inside there’s only darkness but in the path of light that bleeds in from the hallway, Tucker spots a familiar figure slumped against a wall.

Wash’s helmet sits intact on the floor beside him. His head is bowed forward, hair messy as ever, with an arm draped haphazardly over his bent knee.

Tucker’s heart soars with relief and he rushes towards the Freelancer. “Wash! Wash, it’s me. I’m gonna get you out of here!”

Wash doesn’t respond and Tucker kneels beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder to give him a firm shake. His knee slumps to the side and his arm topples with it. Wash’s head tips back and the light falls across his pale face.

A long trail of blood streaks down from a single bullet hole in his forehead.

No.

Tucker stares in disbelief. A tremor runs through his entire body, travelling up his arms and shuddering through his lungs as he screams.

“No!!”

It can’t be. Wash can’t be dead.

Tucker scuffles backwards, tries to look away but he can’t. He can’t look away from Wash’s dead eyes staring back at him. This isn’t right. This isn’t real. Tucker is suffocating beneath his helmet
but even when he rips it off he still can’t breathe. There’s a howling ache deep in his chest and he
can’t breathe. The darkness of the room closes in on him and Tucker is certain that he’s going to
blackout.

Instead the lights come on, brilliant and blinding.

Pain sears into his eyes and it takes a moment for his vision to clear. When Tucker rights himself,
he looks up at the wall. A single sentence is carved into the steel above the splatter of blood in neat
letters.

Locus’ voice echoes in his head. *I’m doing this for me.*

The sound of an energy sword crackling to life sends the whole world tilting until Tucker is lying
in his bunk, face to face with Locus. The merc’s hand is curled around his throat and Tucker
struggles against him, thrashing desperately.

“What the fuck?!” he manages to choke out. “I thought you said no more killing?”

Tucker can hear the sword humming dangerously close to his ear as Locus leans in. “I lied.”

Thinking fast, Tucker slams his head into Locus’ visor, stunning him. He wrestles Locus away as
he scrambles to his feet and swings his own sword at the merc. Locus catches the blow with his
blade before launching out a foot that connects with Tucker’s shin.

“Ah! Fuck!”

Tucker drops and Locus tries to bring his sword down on his head. He barely stops the merc’s
blade, the crossed swords hovering dangerously close to his face. Tucker sweeps Locus’ legs out
from under him and takes the opportunity to dart back to his feet. Going on the offensive, Tucker
slashes wildly at the merc but he’s deceptively fast.

Locus springs to his feet but Tucker’s not about to let him get the upper hand. His nightmare is still
fresh so Tucker channels all his rage with Omega leading the charge. Locus swings but Tucker
blocks and grabs his wrist. He wrenches the merc’s arm away before slamming his sword into
Locus’ chest, all the way to the hilt.

The merc only stares back at him a moment before turning to smoke in Tucker’s hands, dissipating
into the air.

What the fuck?

Tucker’s blood is pounding in his ears as he pants, his sword buried in a wall. He pulls back and
looks around the room, ruined with deep slashes where the metal walls are melted, still glowing
angry red.

Locus was never here.

Tucker deactivates his sword and returns it to his hip. Righting one of the toppled chairs, he takes a
seat to catch his breath. He must have smashed his shin off of something because it aches with
renewed intensity, the anaesthetist definitely worn off. Tucker makes a mental note not to try
sleeping again until he’s got Wash around.

Eta all but screams. “*He’s dead! You saw him! He was dead!*”

It’s not real, Tucker tells himself.
It wasn’t real.

But for all of his reassurances, Tucker can’t banish the vision of Wash’s dead, blank stare.

He gives his head a sharp shake. According to the clock on his HUD, he got less than two hours of sleep. So much for that party. Tucker pulls himself to his feet and makes his way out of the base.

The late, morning sun is pouring over the ruin when Tucker limps towards the Temple. His boots tap noisily across the metal structure and the wind gusts through the narrow ravine below. Tucker feels rather small standing beneath the Temple’s foreboding shadow all alone. Not even his usual hallucinations are present to keep him company.

Fucking figures.

Tucker steps up to the primary console and after a brief moment, the Sangheili AI flickers to life. “Lavernius Tucker. You have returned,” the AI observes. “To what purpose?”

Scuffing his boot against the ground, Tucker tries to muster more confidence than he feels. “I was hoping you might be able to help me with an AI related problem.”

“If you are referring to the fragment you call ‘Church,’ I regret to inform you that I cannot reverse the program’s rampancy.”

Tucker reaches back to the pocket on his armour and pulls out the chip. “Actually, dude, I was kinda hoping you could do the opposite.”

Santa (god fucking damn it, Caboose) seems to contemplate this for a moment. “Hmm.” The hologram abruptly disappears and Tucker thinks he might have just been blown off.

Except then the wall before him sinks back into the structure as sections of the ruin slide away. Tucker takes a wary step back but when everything is still again, a door has opened before him. The entrance looks as though it leads deeper into the structure.

“Please proceed into the Temple,” Santa prompts him.

Tucker lets a hand rest on his sword hilt but heeds the AI’s request and steps inside. As predicted, the passage does lead further down into the ruin. The angular halls were made for beings far taller than Tucker and they eventually open into an immense room. The vaulted ceiling rises high above Tucker’s head and everything is lit in a cold, blue glow. Lines of code run along columns of light in the walls and even across the floor beneath his feet. The whole place seems to hum with an energy that Tucker can’t place. It reminds him of the desert temple and it’s comforting in a twisted sort of way.

Santa’s red hologram appears in the middle of the room near a hub of control panels. “Please proceed to the central console.”

His feet carry him forward and the Epsilon AI feels heavy in his hand. Tucker stops in front of Santa who instructs him to hold out the chip. A brief flash of light scans over the device and the console begins to rearrange its shape. When it’s finished, there is a port of appropriate size for the AI chip.

Tucker hesitates. “Look, uhh… Santa. Church isn’t exactly himself. He broke and now all these pieces are left and they’re pretty moody.”

“If you are concerned that your construct with corrupt my programming, you need not fear. Even at
it’s peak, your human constructed AI do not match my superior programming.”

Tucker releases a small sigh. “Alright, man.”

Here goes nothing.

He plugs the chip into the console and nearly half a minute elapses before the red hologram disappears. The strange tune that the ruin hums is the only sound, save for Tucker’s own breathing.

“Um… Santa?”

Light erupts from the main terminal and Tucker jumps back as several glowing motes shoot out in different directions. When he looks around, all seven of Epsilon’s fragments have materialized in the room.

Knocking his heel against his shin, Tucker winces at the pain but none of the fragments flicker. They’re real this time. None of them move, all standing silently in a circle. Tucker waits several moments for something to happen but the moment he opens his mouth they all converge again into a blinding column of light.

Shielding his eyes from the brightness, Tucker’s HUD is unable to polarize fast enough. When the light dims, he drops his arm and there’s a familiar figure standing before him.

A figure in cobalt armour holding a sniper rifle.

Chapter End Notes

Someone needs to kick down my door and physically restrain me from writing any more cliffhangers.
Blues for Fairfax

Chapter Notes

So my writing style consists of roughly sketching the plot arc and then writing my favourite scenes first. This is the second big scene I ever wrote for this story and probably my favourite chapter. I hope you all like it. =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Church?!”

Tucker can’t believe it.

Santa said he couldn’t fix Epsilon. This has to be a hallucination.

“Betcha didn’t think you’d see me again so soon!” the AI gloats.

The hologram doesn’t flicker in the slightest when Tucker squeezes his wrist, hard enough to make his eyes water. Either this is real or Tucker’s lost it for good.

“What the fuck?!” he exclaims. “I thought you deleted yourself?”

Church’s hologram rolls his head in lieu of rolling his eyes. “I keep telling you idiots, memory is the key! When are you gonna get it through your fucking heads?”

“Yeah, but you said you erased your memories!” Confusion, disbelief, joy, anger. Tucker doesn’t know what to feel. The Reds and Blues have always had a knack for defying death but Church was gone. Is gone. Tucker felt it, like shattering glass inside his skull. This isn’t real.

He tries again, knocking a heel hard into his shin. Nothing.

Epsilon looks up sharply. “Hey, cut that out!” he snaps, tone dangerous. “I did erase my memories and this is real. It’s just… I’m not… I’m not really Church.”

Tucker grits his teeth. “Then what are you?”

His sniper rifle dissolves out of his hands and shoulders heave with a sigh as he crosses his arms. “You remember how Delta said you couldn’t put a bunch of warped pieces back together properly? Well it turns out you can make due with a little something to fill in the gaps. Epsilon deleted his memories but we learned a lot from hanging out in your head. So I guess I’m your perception of Church.”

This is just too much to fucking handle. His shin really hurts now so Tucker takes a seat on the ground, staring blankly at the floor. He’s not sure how many more iterations of Church he can handle. Alpha, Epsilon, now this. It’s too much.

“Holy fuck. Caboose is going to freak out,” Tucker says as though he isn’t freaking out a little.

Church kneels down in front of him in a rush. “That’s not going to happen because you’re not going to tell him.”
Tucker is taken aback. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Epsilon seems hesitant as the hologram moves to sit down beside him. “Tucker, I can’t leave this place – not like this. Even now, I don’t know how much longer I can sustain this form. I’m just an echo…”

Leaning back on his hands, Tucker glares up at the ceiling and releases a growl of exasperation. “Great, so you come back just to tell me that you’re leaving again?! This is fucking bullshit.”

Church has the audacity to scoff. “Oh don’t be such a goddamn pansy about it. I’m giving you the courtesy of a proper goodbye. Isn’t that what you were bitching about last time?”

“Oh my god, why do you always have to be such a dick?” Tucker turns to shove him but his hand passes through the AI.

Church barks a laugh. “Yeah, still a hologram, dude, and you can’t fucking blame me! My personality is constructed from your memories, so really it’s your own fault.”

Tucker groans. “Holy shit, I take it back. Just fucking die already.”

It shuts him up and neither of them speaks for a long time. Slowly, the anger fades in the silence between them. Just like it always does.

Tucker watches lines of alien code scroll across the pillars of light along the walls. Is it too much to ask that things just go back to the way they were? They were on the way to Blood Gulch. They could have found Church a new robot body and things would have been normal if it wasn’t for Hargrove and his goddamn mercs.

The voice of logic reminds Tucker that if they were never shipwrecked+ the Rebels and the Feds would probably have killed each other. Hargrove’s plan would’ve gone off without a hitch, everyone on Chorus would be dead and no one would know the truth. Tucker doesn’t want that either. Nothing’s simple anymore.

He sort of wishes they never left that miserable base in their box canyon.

Church’s head is bowed when he finally speaks. “Look, I’m not actually the guy you knew but I’m pretty fucking close and I don’t think he would have left if he wasn’t sure you guys could keep your shit together on your own. From what I’ve seen, you actually did pretty well for yourselves when he was gone.”

Tucker turns to stare at him and deadpans. “Caboose adopted a military robot that nearly got us all killed and we got dragged into a civil war.”

“Yeah but you’re not dead are you?” Church is quick to correct. “You guys figured it out without me and you will again… just maybe get Caboose a real dog this time… a small dog.”

Tucker snorts. “Yeah.”

Church tries to knock his elbow against Tucker’s but it phases through him. “Seriously, you guys are gonna be fine. You’ve got Caboose, the Reds, Wash and Carolina. You’re sort of one big fucked up family.”

Tucker manages a chuckle. “Seriously fucked up. I might be crazier than Doc. I get hallucinations and everything.”
Church ducks his head sheepishly. “Yeah, my bad there. I’m going to go ahead and assume Epsilon didn’t know that would happen.”

Tucker studies the floor, following trails of light as they trace linear patterns across the metal surface. “I almost killed Wash.”

Church is silent a moment. “You and Wash are getting pretty close, huh?”

The AI’s tone is a little too measured for his liking and Tucker tries to shrug it off. “He’s not so bad when he lays off on the drills and unlike you, he actually does leader shit.”

Church sputters. “Wha-?! Fuck you!! I mean, I can’t actually dispute that based on your memories of me but I can tell you to suck my holographic dick!”

Tucker laughs in earnest. The sound echoes through the room and he feels steadier. Church is right though. They have a good thing going, even as dysfunctional as they are.

The lights in the room seem to shift suddenly and new holograms start to take shape. Tucker realizes the entire room is a holoprojector; like the one the Reds built under their base at Valhalla. The shining metal walls slowly transform into jagged rock faces, pressing in on both sides. Even the floor begins to project new textures, sprawling out before him with dried grass, large boulders and well worn paths of sun baked sand. The illusion is near perfect, leaving no doubt whatsoever as to where Tucker is sitting.

Blood Gulch.

A familiar view, from the top of Blue Base staring out over the canyon.

When Tucker risks a glance at the hologram out of the corner of his eye, Church doesn’t seem to notice. He’s far too preoccupied with cleaning the disassembled sniper rifle laid out on the floor around him, brows furrowed in concentration.

Tucker does a double take, his jaw falling open as he turns to full on gawk at his teammate.

Though it didn’t last all that long, there was a time when Church had a living, breathing, human body. Who it belonged to before the Alpha AI inhabited it Tucker doesn’t want to know but for a while there things were more or less normal. Well, whatever can be considered normal about two opposing human armies stationed in a canyon on a desolate planet of no consequence whatsoever.

Church’s helmet sits beside him as he scrubs the chamber brush through the long barrel of his rifle, soft brown eyes squinting. He stops for a moment to reach a hand up to toward his nose, a gesture that Tucker had always recognized as an attempt to adjust a pair of glasses that weren’t there. Finding none, Church abandons the motion and runs a hand through his short, black hair instead.

When he realizes he’s being watched he looks over sharply but Tucker turns his head just as fast, staring out over the projection of the canyon. Tucker wonders if Church even realizes he’s doing this. The familiarity is so painfully striking and Tucker tries to ignore the tightness twisted deep inside his chest. The silence lingers for minutes or hours, and Tucker can almost believe he’s really back in Blood Gulch.

One of the canyon walls glitches and shimmers effectively breaking the illusion. When Church speaks again, his voice is stuttered and disjointed. “T-T-T-Tucker.”

When his gaze snaps back to Church his hologram is blinking and twisting, Blood Gulch quickly fading.
“Listen, I know you made a promise to us but we’ll be fine in here. The s-s-s-system is big enough for all of us.”

Tucker levels him with a firm look. “Church, are you sure about this?”

“We’re f-f-f-fragments of a fragment; we’re too unstable to l-l-l-leave the network. Just don’t forget about us d-d-d-down here.”

Tucker swallows past the lump growing in his throat. “Yeah, dude. I won’t.”

Church’s figure warps and changes colours but he gives Tucker a small smile and places a hand on his shoulder.

Tucker swears he can feel it.

“Goodbye, Tucker.”

The hologram flickers and writhes until it suddenly shatters, sending millions of tiny light shards scattering to the ground. They bounce across the floor and glimmer in the air, dispersing and dimming until there’s nothing left but silence.

Tucker feels like his lungs are filled with concrete. The weight crushes against his ribs and the sigh he releases shakes its way out of his chest, scraping at the edges.

Several moments pass and Theta quietly materializes next to him. The kid leans into his shoulder and even though he can’t feel it Tucker is grateful. After a long silence, Theta finally speaks up.

“You wanna see my skateboard trick?”

Tucker turns to look at the small AI and smiles. “Sure, kid.”

It’s well into the afternoon when Wash and Carolina arrive at the Temple of Arms. The occasional ATV treads along the way confirm Wash’s assumption on Tucker’s destination. It’s still a mystery however, as to why Tucker would come here in the first place. The Temple was cleared out before their battle with Charon; there’s nothing of value left. However, Wash dares to hope when he sees Tucker’s mongoose parked outside the excavation base.

Wash stops the jeep several yards away. The base looks deserted, no sign of life or movement from the outside.

He looks to Carolina but she’s already climbing out of the warthog. “You check the base and I’ll keep watch out here in case he tries to make a run for it.” She pauses to look at him a moment. “Be careful, Wash.”

With that, she activates her camo and vanishes.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it again, Wash exits the warthog and heads towards the base. He stops just outside the entrance, pulling out his pistol in case it isn’t Tucker that he finds. Stilling his breathing, Wash listens for any hints of movement but there’s nothing above the gentle sound of water tumbling over the cliffside. Wash enters the small base and does a quick sweep only to find it empty. There are signs of life however. The place is a wreck. There are deep gouges in the
metal walls and there’s no mistaking the handiwork of Tucker’s sword. Wash runs a hand over one of the warped metal gnashes and releases a small sigh. His hope that Tucker hasn’t implanted the AI is dwindling fast.

He opens a COM line to Carolina. “The base is empty. Tucker’s been here but there’s no sign of where he might’ve gone.”

Wash exits the base and Carolina meets him by the entrance. “His mongoose is still here,” she insists “He can’t have gone far.”

The alien tower looms above them and Wash stares up at it sullenly. “I’ll investigate the Temple,” he suggests. “See if you can find any trace of him down here.”

Carolina nods and they part ways once more.

Wash makes his way up to the alien structure feeling his trigger finger itch with the eerie silence that hangs in the air. The structure remains unwavering, revealing no signs of Tucker’s presence. Though as he approaches the base of the tower there seems to be an entrance. Wash doesn’t remember Dr. Grey’s report mentioning any kind of door into the Temple; her excitement on the matter would have been hard to overlook.

With tentative steps Wash approaches the opening. The path leads further down into the Temple and Wash radios Carolina as he steps inside. “There’s some kind of entrance into the alien structure. I’m going to check it out.”

Her reply is drowned in static and Wash can only make out a few words. “Carolina, say again? You’re breaking up.”

White noise is his only reply. It must be the Temple.

Wash turns to exit and get a better signal but is dismayed to see the doors sliding closed, trapping him inside. His heart thumps in its anxiety and Wash can hear the sound of a door opening behind him, beckoning him further inside. He’s being herded. There’s no weapon he has that can break through the solid walls though Wash does have the teleportation grenade if he really wants to escape.

The temptation is strong but Wash has a feeling that this is important. It can’t be a coincidence that Tucker came here and now there’s a door into the Temple. Pushing back his paranoia Wash continues downward, following the corridors that open before him.

Eventually a door opens up to reveal a large room and Wash is stunned to see Tucker. He isn’t alone, either. Beside him is a life sized holo projection of Theta. Tucker has his energy sword out and is slicing it through the air as Theta imitates his actions with a holographic sword of his own. The aqua soldier has discarded his helmet on the floor and he’s grinning as Theta demonstrates his swing.

“Sound effects are a must, dude,” Tucker informs. “Swish, swish, stab!”

There are other AIs in the room as well. Wash almost mistakes one of them for Tucker, with their cyan armour. Beside them is a gold coloured soldier who hovers close to the other; Eta and Iota. Delta seems to be supervising the swordplay lesson from a respectable distance.

Wash’s left hand clenches around the stock of his magnum trying to muster the courage to speak up but he doesn’t want to startle Tucker. He mistook the Freelancer for Omega once before and Wash doesn’t want to take any chances. Stowing his pistol, Wash thumbs the latch under his jaw
and pulls off his helmet. Holding it under his arm, he takes a small step out of the doorway and into the room.

“Tucker?” he calls out tentatively.

Every head in the room, holographic and otherwise, spins to look at him. Tucker stays put but the AIs disappear for a moment before reappearing further back. There’s a mixture of surprise and hesitation in Tucker’s eyes but a small smile breaks across his face. “Hey, asshole.”

Some of the tension lifts from Wash’s shoulders and he takes that as his cue to slowly approach. “What is this place? Are those…?”

“Pieces of Church, yeah.” Tucker deactivates his sword, glancing over his shoulder where all the fragments have gathered silently watching. “Santa sorta separated them, I guess.”

A bad feeling is twisting through Wash’s insides. “And you don’t see a problem with that?”

There’s a brief flicker of annoyance in Tucker’s eyes but it’s gone as quickly as it arose and he shrugs indifferently, crossing his arms. “Not really. Besides, they’ll just crash here as long as it’s cool with Santa. Church said they’ll be alright.”

Wash frowns in confusion. Maybe Tucker meant Delta? “Church?”

Tucker furrows his brows. “Sort of. The pieces recombined or something, using my memories of Church. He’s gone now though, for good.”

Wash notes the way Tucker’s gaze lingers on the floor for a moment too long. “I’m sorry,” he says suddenly. “About Church. I don’t know if I ever said that before.”

Tucker manages to scoff as a small smirk twists his lips. “It’s fine, man. Don’t get all sappy on me now.”

A small chuckle rumbles in Wash’s chest.

It’s a little jarring, just how much of his anxiety dissipates knowing that Tucker is okay. None of this is what he expected. Washington is so used to jumping to the worst case scenario and it’s rather strange to be wrong for once.

There’s a sudden burst of light and Theta appears behind Tucker, peering at Wash cautiously. Tucker turns to look down at the AI. “Hey, kid. You remember Wash right? From my memories.”

Theta doesn’t speak to Wash, leaning in closer to whisper something to Tucker. The original AI had been very shy and this one is obviously no different. Tucker looks back up at the AIs on the other side of the room and Wash follows his gaze to where the cyan soldier is bouncing excitedly. There’s something about the way the AI holds itself that reminds Wash of Carolina.

The fragment is female. That’s Iota.

“Hey, Wash,” Tucker’s voice draws him out of his pondering. “Wait here for a sec, will ya?”

The Freelancer doesn’t have time to reply because Tucker is already jogging across the room. Iota rushes forward to meet him and Wash strains to hear their words but the echoes of their hushed voices are swallowed by the acoustics of the room. They both turn back to look at Wash and he feels his pulse jittering nervously.
Tucker holds up a hand for Iota to wait before jogging back over to Wash. His eyes are gleaming with a nervous sort of anticipation but he hesitates to speak. “Look, uh… I need to ask you a huge favour. I mean, I know you said you wouldn’t ever let another AI into your head but-”

“No.”

A tremor runs down Wash’s arm and his hands ache for the reassuring grip of his rifle. His heart begins lurching painfully, like he’s just been hit with a field stim and every muscle in his body is tense, ready to fight.

Tucker searches the Freelancer’s eyes with a desperation that Wash doesn’t understand. “I get it, okay?” he offers. “I know I don’t want anyone in my head again either-”

“Tucker…” Wash’s voice breaks. “I can’t.”

The sim trooper takes a step closer and puts a hand on Wash’s left shoulder. It takes every ounce of Agent Washington’s control to keep himself from grabbing Tucker’s wrist and snapping it. Everything is spiralling out of control. Wash struggles to fight his way back to reality but there’s a woman standing where Tucker should be.

Long wisps of her fine blonde hair fall from under her military cap. Her bright blue eyes peer out from beneath the brim, twinkling with amusement.

“Leonard, you’re going to make me late.”

A small smile tugs at her lips and there’s an aching sadness in his chest that doesn’t belong there.

“Wash.”

Fingers dig into his shoulder and Agent Washington closes his eyes for a moment. He holds his breath as he counts to five and releases it again. When he opens them Allison is gone.

Tucker’s eyes are clouded with concern and so much hope.

Wash has to look away.

“Trust me, dude,” Tucker pleads. “Just this once.”

The Freelancer stares down at the floor between them.

In the past three weeks, Tucker has tried to kill him no less than five times. Sheer luck alone got Wash through half of those encounters, pushing his survivability to its limits. Tucker crushed his wrist, nearly strangled him with his bare hands and has tried to put his sword through Wash’s chest on more than one occasion. In spite of all that, Wash would still trust Tucker with his life.

When he finally looks back up, Tucker seems far closer than Wash recalls him being. “Alright,” he says with a dry mouth. “I trust you.”

The relief and joy that floods Tucker’s eyes makes Wash’s stomach flutter. The sim trooper gently tugs Wash’s helmet out of his hands and sets it aside before he gestures for Iota to approach.

The AI all but bounds towards them in her enthusiasm.

“Hi, Wash!” she greets brightly. “It’s good to finally meet you in person.”

Her voice is hauntingly familiar, caught somewhere between Allison and Carolina. Despite his
trust in Tucker, Wash can’t help the way his heart races in his chest and his breath grows shallow. He’s terrified. Terrified of what Iota will see and what it might do to her. What it will do to him. Epsilon’s old memories always linger in the back of his mind, circling as though waiting for an opportunity, a moment of weakness. What if her presence sets them loose?

“Hey.” Tucker stands just to the right of him and his hand finds Wash’s shoulder again. “You’ll be okay, dude. I’m right here.”

The Freelancer nods because it feels like the response Tucker is looking for.

Iota takes a small step closer. “Are you ready?”

Wash isn’t sure he’ll ever be ready but he replies through clenched teeth anyway. “Do it.”

Her tone is coloured with a smile, not unlike Carolina. “Close your eyes, Wash. This won’t hurt a bit!” Iota’s glowing, blue hand reaches toward his forehead and Washington snaps his eyes shut before she makes contact.

He’s surprised to discover that Iota was telling the truth.

There’s no pain at all.

In fact, it’s quite the opposite.

It feels like hot water cascading over his back. The warmth races down his spine, spreading through his legs and across his chest, lighting up his nervous system like a Christmas tree. Everything is bright, molten sunlight, wrapping him in safety and shining with jubilation. An absurd laugh threatens to bubble out of his chest but when the warmth starts to rise over his head he panics. Wash writhes against the current. Tucker’s hand on his shoulder is a lifeline, the only thing keeping him from going under. Reaching out blindly, Wash grabs hold of Tucker’s good wrist, squeezing tight as he struggles to stay afloat.

Iota’s voice is a soft caress against his cheek. Don’t be afraid. I won’t let you fall.

The brightness is overwhelming and Wash can’t hold on. Reality sinks further and further from his grasp as the threads slip through his fingers.

Soon there’s nothing but darkness and Washington drifts.

Soft grass crinkles beneath his bare feet and David can see the park behind his house where he and his sisters used to play. He can smell the overripe crab apples that always fell from the neighbour’s tree, the long gnarled branches hanging over the fence. An old, rusted teeter-totter squeals and his sisters’ laughter rings across the open field, like chimes in the wind.

Wash turns and the world turns with him. The sound of the roaring waterfall is challenged by Tucker’s outraged screaming. Caboose has him trapped in his strong arms as he hauls the smaller trooper towards the pool of cold water. Tucker struggles futilely, shouting at Wash for help but the Freelancer merely watches in silence as he grins behind his visor.

Then everything falls away and Wash is on the Mother of Invention with all the Freelancers. They’re gathered in the training room to play an impromptu game of touch football. Back before the AIs and the secrets; back when David was still learning his new name. Not one of the Freelancers plays fair and before he knows it, the rookie is laid out on the training room floor by Agent South Dakota. A massive shadow hovers over him and there’s the barest hint of a smirk on Agent Maine’s face when he extends a hand to Washington and hauls him back to his feet.
Wash jerks hard, away from the memory.

It’s too close.

Project Freelancer.

Epsilon.

Allison.

Thoughts of the AI come rushing in like cold water, dousing the warmth and chilling him to the bone. A small girl with wild red hair runs through a sprinkler in the yard; the taste of blood in his mouth, the throbbing pain in his jaw and the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen staring down at him with a sympathetic smile, offering a hand; the terror and confusion of a fragment excised from its very soul, begging for an end to its suffering.

But the memories recede as quickly as they came.

Breathe.

It’s okay, Wash.

The warmth returns to banish the chill, dispelling his thoughts of fear and leaving only a soothing calmness. There is simply darkness for a moment and it helps ease him away from the despair of Epsilon’s memories.

Once his heartbeat becomes a steady, quiet rhythm the darkness begins to take shape.

It’s a rather strange place.

The terrain is jagged and cruel with massive protrusions of earth, mountains half formed, and blue tourmaline spires cutting through the ground. There’s a small military base that looks long since abandoned. Signs of battle are evident by the scattered bullet holes and blown out walls. Rust and ruin is all that’s left of the place. Wash turns behind him to see a volcano looming overhead, belching thick, black soot from its mouth. Thunder rumbles within, sending arcs of lightning streaking through the towering column of ash.

“It’s beautiful.”

The Freelancer whips around but doesn’t find the source of the voice until he looks up.

Perched atop one of the monoliths, Iota is sitting with her feet dangling off the edge. Her gaze is cast upward at the furious volcano as it spews molten green slag.

Wash isn’t sure that he shares her opinion as a particularly loud crack of thunder sets his nerves on edge. “What is this place?”

Iota vanishes and her voice comes from directly beside him where she reappears. “It’s your mind!”

Wash barely manages not to flinch at her sudden closeness. His gaze casts around the dangerous landscape, taking in every mountainous peak, wisp of smoke and the corpse of the UNSC base. There’s a lump in his throat and he swallows hard.

“Why?”

The benefit of sharing one mind means that Iota doesn’t have to ask for clarification. She shrugs
lightly. “I wanted to see it all for myself. You’re everywhere in Tucker’s head.”

Wash’s heart stutters in his chest, synchronous with a bright flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder.

The memory rushes back, unbidden – the safety of solid arms around him and the sound of Tucker’s heart beating fast beneath Wash’s ear in a dark room. The Freelancer tries to take a step back, to shy away from the recollection, but Iota moves closer, taking his hands in her own as the memory solidifies.

Tucker’s voice whispers through his head. *Iota! You should’ve had Iota.*

The AI’s helmet tips thoughtfully. “Why do you think he said that?"

Wash doesn’t understand the question. Tucker knows, doesn’t he? Knowledge left behind from Epsilon? But Iota shakes her head. Church deleted his memories. Tucker can’t possibly know that. Then why…

Wash tries to shove the thought from his mind before it can take shape, struggling against the fire igniting in his chest. He can’t think about this because every time he does Tucker’s voice comes back to him, dousing the flames with denial.

*Dude, forget about it.*

Iota squeezes his hands, bringing him back to his land of serrated earth and smoky skies. “I know what he said but I also know that Tucker doesn’t want to forget either.”

She lets their hands drop and Wash stares, dumbfounded. His voice wavers on a single word. “How?”

Iota tips her helmet in contemplation. “I know Tucker. I know his mind and everything that makes him happy, and you’re in there, even if he’s too scared to admit it.”

Wash glares down at the ground for a solid minute. “Is this why Tucker wanted me to let you into my head?”

Her sudden laugh takes him by surprise and Iota’s entire body shakes with the force of it. “Of course not! If he knew what I planned he would never have let me get within five miles of you.”

Wash frowns. Why, then?

“Isn’t it obvious?” Iota quips back to his unvoiced question. *She was Alpha’s happiness.*

The implication dawns on him like embers bursting into flames. Tucker *wants* him to be happy.

There’s a sudden break in the smoke and clouds, letting the sun peer through to spill its light across the ground. The rays sparkle off the crystalline pillars, refracting bright flecks of light onto every surface in reach.

Iota turns her gaze towards the sun before looking back to Wash. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

She bounces with each step in her mirth and Wash only hesitates for a moment before following.
“How is it that you’re in my head?” he asks somewhat brusquely. “I thought only Omega could jump between neural implants.”

Iota looks back over her shoulder at him as they walk. “Not quite. Omega has to use electromagnetic radio waves. I don’t.”

Wash is a little surprised by that. She must be who Epsilon gained the trait from.

They circle around to the other side of the base where the sun hits directly. The metal walls seem less rusted on this side, the reflection of the sun’s rays glaring back at him. Near the edge of the cliff there is a small patch of verdant grass with tiny, yellow wildflowers swaying gracefully in the breeze.

“You’re not as broken as you think you are,” she tells him.

Wash blinks back his surprise as he stares. The flowers are familiar. They’re the same blossoms that dotted the hill back at Highground when the Reds and Blues first took him in. Curiously, he walks over and kneels at the perimeter of the grass, careful not to crush a single blade. Reaching out, he gently touches one of the small flowers and a memory streams into his thoughts.

_Oh come on, Agent Wa- I mean, I... ya know, I’m pretty sure we can trust you. I mean we are friends._

He pulls back sharply, startled by the sudden flashback. Looking sharply over to Iota the AI merely shrugs. “Yeah, it’s a little cheesy but I thought it was the best way to organize it all.”

Scanning his gaze over the small plot of grass, Wash counts dozens of blossoms and he immediately sets his goal on touching every one within his reach.

_You helped us, Wash. Only makes sense._

Yeah. _Plus we need to the even the teams, and I couldn’t put up with Caboose constantly asking “Can we keep him? Can we keep him?”_

Each reveals small snippets of memories – conversations with Carolina, the Blues and even a few with the Reds. There’s warm, lazy days at Outpost 48 and quiet moments of solidarity between him and the sim troopers. The frequency at which Tucker’s voice fills his ears or his grinning face comes to mind is somewhat condemning but Iota doesn’t seem to judge him on it at least.

_Hey. You’ll be okay, dude. I’m right here._

Wash is reminded of the present and he wonders how long they’ve been inside his head. It feels like hours.

“Try forty-eight seconds,” Iota announces smugly, “but yes, you should be getting back before Tucker starts to worry.”

The Freelancer hesitates a moment before pulling himself back to his feet. He should say something. Despite his initial misgivings, this wasn’t an altogether awful experience. Though he still won’t be hard pressed to let another AI into his head any time soon, it was kind of nice.

Iota chuckles softly as she takes a step closer to him. “I know, Wash. Don’t thank me, though. It was Tucker’s idea, after all.”

Agent Washington breathes a small laugh of his own. “Nevertheless, I appreciate the discretion...
you’ve used. I know it’s sort of a minefield in here.”

Her wide smile is evident in her tone. “There’s more good than bad, Wash. I’m just so happy to have gotten to meet you!” Iota moves into his space and wraps her arms around his chest, hugging him tightly.

Wash’s holds his arms awkwardly in the air for a moment but there is a pleasant warmth radiating from every point of contact between them and he slowly returns the gesture.

The sun gleams brighter through the clouds and Wash can’t help but think of Tucker as a smile comes to his lips. The yellow flowers beam in the sun and as a soft wind blows through the grass, the colours begin to bleed together like one of Caboose’s watercolour paintings.

“Come back and visit soon,” the AI says gently before the landscape, the warmth and Iota all fall away.

For one nauseating moment, Wash is spinning as he plummets back down to earth. Everything is bright, synthetic light and gunmetal blue and he’s not sure which way is up. There’s a firm pressure on his shoulder and something gripped in his right hand, tightly enough to make his wrist ache.

“Wash! Wash, hey!”

His vision is still swimming but he can make out Tucker’s face hovering close to his.

“I’ve got you, man.”

Wash finally gets his bearings straight and Tucker is even closer than he thought. His dark brown eyes search Wash’s face, brows creased with concern. They’re both knelt on the hard floor and Iota lingers just over the sim trooper’s shoulder. As soon as Wash’s gaze flicks towards her however, she turns and rejoins the other AIs across the room.

Tucker notices and tries to catch Wash’s eye. “Hey, you okay?”

Neither of them has pulled away yet and Wash scrambles for a suitable reply. “I don’t think I’m going to puke, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he deadpans.


His blatant look of disappointment is a knife in Wash’s chest. Tucker misunderstands and Wash rushes to correct him. “No, no! It uhh… it was nice actually.”

A lopsided smile plays at Tucker’s lips though he still looks somewhat sheepish. “Yeah, well I thought you should know what you missed out on, back in Project Freelancer.”

They’re still so close. He can feel Tucker’s breath ghosting across his skin and it would be nothing for Wash to lean in and capture those perfect lips.

Wait, what?

Washington barely manages to stop himself from following through with that thought. It’s gotta be Iota’s fault. He barely manages to keep his cheeks from heating and Wash turns his focus elsewhere.
His wrist still aches terribly and when he glances down, he only just realizes that he still has a death grip on Tucker’s arm. “Sorry,” Wash mumbles as he releases him. His wrist is going to be sore for days and Dr. Grey won’t soon forgive him.

Tucker seems to take this as a cue to separate and he removes his hand from Wash’s shoulder only to offer it back to help haul him to his feet. He notes that Tucker is offering his bad wrist but Wash accepts it anyway, albeit gingerly. If it hurts him Tucker doesn’t show it as he pulls Wash up.

The Freelancer looks to the AIs on the other side of the room. Omega, Sigma and Gamma stand in a small group away from the others looking thoroughly sullen. Iota speaks with Eta animatedly, the gold AI flinching whenever she gesticulates. Theta is stood upon his skateboard, a foot on either end as he rolls back and forth idly, and Delta stands just beside him, watching the smaller AI.

Wash glances back to Tucker who is also staring at the fragments. He notes the way the sim trooper is leaning, favouring his left leg. There’s still dried blood that dripped down from the hole in Tucker’s right shin guard.

A pang of guilt makes Wash’s throat tight. “I’m sorry.” He says it abruptly, cueing Tucker to snap his gaze back to him and raise an eyebrow in question. Wash gestures to his leg. “For the shin.”

“That’s fucking right, you are!” he exclaims triumphantly.

There must be something in Wash’s expression that makes him reconsider because Tucker’s smug look quickly fades and he shrugs lightly. “I mean... it’s fine. I probably should have just told you my plan in the first place,” he says in a roundabout apology of his own. “Besides, I’ll get even,” he insists with a wicked grin.

Wash tries not to let that concern him too much, especially since he does deserve it.

Tucker is right though, he should have talked to Wash about the Epsilon AI. Even if the notion of splitting the fragments didn’t sit well with him, Wash hopes that he would have tried to help. A lot of panic and confusion could have been avoided and at least together the sim trooper would have had someone to watch his back. Wash still wants to know what happened at the excavation base.

Folding his arms across his chest, Wash tries (and fails) to keep the concern out of his eyes. “I saw the base outside the Temple,” he admits quietly. “Were you attacked? What happened?”

Tucker rubs the back of his neck with a hand, frowning reluctantly. “Uh, no. That was... I uhh tried to take a nap and you know...”

Washington regrets the question immediately, nodding wordlessly in understanding.

When Wash doesn’t fill the silence right away Tucker takes the task upon himself. “Hope it’s cool with you if we’re still roommates.” He tries to make the joke light but Wash can see the underlying uncertainty in his eyes.

The sheer volume of distress that accompanies the thought of no longer sharing a room with Tucker takes him by surprise. Despite waking intermittently to deter the sim trooper’s nightmares, Wash found the frequency of his own dreams to be far lower. He tries not to think about it too hard but the night he spent cramped in the same bed as Tucker was the best sleep he’s had in years.

Choosing his next words very carefully, Wash lets a wry smile break across his face. “You wouldn’t rather have Lieutenant Palomo as a roommate? I did shoot you after all.”

The worry in Tucker’s eyes vanishes as he beams back at Wash with that 100 watt smile. “Dude, I
think if you cut off my right foot I’d still rather bunk with you than Palomo.”

His smile is infectious and Wash is grinning without explicit permission. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tucker gives him a shove but when he goes to retract his arm, Wash captures his hand beneath his own and holds it against his chest.

Oh fuck. Why did he do that? He should not have done that.

Wash struggles immensely not to let a blush creep into his cheeks and he should let go of Tucker’s hand now but too much time has passed to play it off as nothing. Fuck.

Tucker’s grin fades but there’s no apprehension in his eyes. His gaze skims over Wash’s face, searching his eyes and dropping to stare at his lips. The sim trooper’s throat bobs as he swallows hard.

His panicked thoughts stop dead in their tracks and Agent Washington’s mouth feels like it’s filled with cotton.

The seconds drag on and Tucker takes a step closer, their chest plates almost touching. Wash’s heart leaps into his throat and his pulse drums in his ears. There’s no hope of keeping his face from heating furiously and Tucker can probably feel his heart beating beneath their joined hands.

Tucker’s free hand settles on Wash’s waist and the sim trooper wets his lips before a crooked smile breaks across his face.

Washington stops breathing altogether.

He can’t tear his gaze away from those deep brown eyes, even as the distance between them grows smaller and smaller until-

“Pardon the interruption…” A bright red glow erupts to the left of them as Santa materializes.

Tucker and Wash fly apart, putting far more distance between them than is strictly necessary.

Holy shit. That almost happened.

Despite his dark complexion, Wash can see the bright flush in Tucker’s cheeks, though he’s positive that his is far worse, his ears burning furiously. His heart is pounding wildly and Wash really, really wishes he had his helmet right about now.

Santa continues as though there is nothing amiss. “Your ally is becoming increasingly agitated in her attempts to gain entrance to this Temple. It is most futile but I would appreciate if you could halt her efforts before excessive damage is inflicted.”

Wash grapples with his composure and largely fails. He can’t quite look Tucker in the eye when he hands Wash his helmet back and that’s probably for the best. Somehow, the open air of the large room feels far more suffocating than the confined space within his helmet. As soon as he pulls it over his head Wash’s balance begins to return.

When Tucker turns back to him, his own helmet firmly in place, Wash nods towards the door. “Come on,” he says in a voice that’s far steadier than he feels. “Before Carolina does anything too destructive.” Such as defacing the ancient alien Temple with the warthog’s chain gun.

The smile is audible from behind Tucker’s visor. “Yeah, like dropping a fucking spaceship on us.”
Halo 4 map Shatter inspired Wash's mind.
Fifty

Chapter Notes

So this was originally set to be a real long chapter but it sort of got away from me so I've split it into two smaller ones.

Tucker waves a quick goodbye to the holograms across the room before dragging his feet after Wash as they begin their ascent out of the Temple. His gaze remains firmly on the ground, still struggling to drive away the burning in his cheeks. There are a lot of conflicting emotions and Tucker’s not entirely sure what he was thinking.

He wasn’t thinking.

Wash took him completely by surprise and Tucker acted on impulse. As reflexes go, trying to kiss a Freelancer probably isn’t the wisest course of action.

Except Wash didn’t try and stop him.

At all.

Tucker is treading a very precarious line. He has two primary coping mechanisms for dealing with complicated emotions; Tucker will either make a joke out of it until it seems less daunting or he runs, far and fast. At this point, Tucker is vying for a little bit of both because actually having to face this issue any time soon is far scarier than any of Tucker’s nightmares.

The Freelancer’s voice pulls him from his thoughts but Tucker doesn’t have a clue what he just said. “Huh?”

Wash casts a glare over his shoulder, sighing exasperatedly. “I said, don’t mention to Carolina that the AIs are separated.”

Tucker frowns at that. “Why?”

Agent Washington falters for a moment. “It’s complicated,” he says softly, as though she might overhear him. “Just… just let me tell her, okay?”

Tucker shakes his head. “Have it your way, man. I don’t get what the big deal is though. It’s not like they can leave anyways.”

Wash stops so abruptly that Tucker nearly slams into his back. The Freelancer wheels around to face him. “What do you mean?” he demands.

Tucker’s heart definitely doesn’t skip a beat from their sudden closeness but he does take a large step backwards. “Church said they’d be too unstable on their own. They have to stay here.”

A brief pause hangs in the air as Wash contemplates Tucker’s words. “That’s probably for the best,” he finally says.

With that, he turns and they continue upwards in silence.
When the door to the outside finally opens before them the sun has begun to sink in the sky and Tucker really didn’t realize how long he was down there.

A considerable amount of damage has been done to the outside of the Temple; bullet holes, shrapnel lodged in the metal plating and blackened surfaces where grenades still failed to breach the doors. Careless defacement of a million year old alien Temple; this is probably what Dr. Grey’s nightmares look like.

Carolina is pacing but freezes upon their emergence. Her gaze flicks sharply between them before settling on the other Freelancer. “What the hell, Wash?!” she all but snarls. “You weren’t answering on the COM!”

Agent Washington flinches back ever so slightly, holding his hands up defensively. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know! The Temple was interfering with the signal and when I tried to step out to get better reception, it shut me in.”

Carolina glares a second longer before her gaze snaps to Tucker. “You.”

She starts towards him with a bearing that promises violence and Tucker backpedals only to find the Temple doors have closed behind him. His hand drops to curl around the hilt of his sword but it’s Wash that steps between them.

Carolina stops but otherwise doesn’t acknowledge him. “What did you do with the Epsilon AI?” she barks.

Half a dozen replies come to mind, most of which will probably get Tucker shot.

Luckily, Delta saves him from any more bullet holes. The AI appears in a flare of green light and Carolina forgets about Tucker instantly.

“Hello, Agent Carolina,” the AI greets politely. “My name is Delta and I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Delta!” she exclaims. Her posture relaxes as she turns to face the projection. “I don’t understand. How are you here?”

“Epsilon’s other fragments and I have been integrated into the planet’s data network, thanks to Captain Tucker. We are no longer confined to the same unit and for that we are grateful, however we are unable to leave the system at this time.”

Carolina looks briefly to Tucker before turning back to the hologram. “What do you mean? Why not?”

Delta takes a moment to consider. “There is a high risk that removing any one fragment could result in immediate rampancy. The planet’s internal network offers far more stability than a neural interface link. I would fear for the stress of both the AI and the host.”

Carolina’s gaze falls and her disappointment is evident in the set of her shoulders.

Tucker’s hand still rests on the hilt of his sword warily but Wash gives him a look and shakes his head.

The hologram tilts his helmet slightly. “We are far from functional AI but we would not be opposed to offering our limited help from this or any of the other Temple constructs.” He seems to pause for a moment, as though someone unseen is speaking to him. “Our memories are incomplete
but if you are willing to share some of the details of Project Freelancer and our predecessors, it might help.”

That seems to mollify Carolina somewhat and Wash puts a firm hand on her shoulder. “Come on, boss,” he urges. “It’s getting late and we should return to base before Kimball sends an army after us.”

Carolina nods to Wash but looks up at Delta one last time. “I’ll come back and visit. I promise.”

They waste little time, gathering close before activating the teleportation grenade. The colourful evening sky is replaced with the darkness of the cavern ceiling when they arrive back at the New Republic HQ.

Upon spotting them, several Rebel soldiers begin shouting excitedly but Tucker hardly notices. He really should be starving considering the last time he ate was more than twelve hours ago, but the stress of teleportation has banished any desire for food. Tucker groans in his misery, struggling to overcome the unpleasant sensation, but he’s just so damn tired. His legs could give out now and Tucker would be content to sleep on the ground.

That plan doesn’t pan out however, because Kimball and Dr. Grey are jogging towards them. The General looks from the Freelancers to Tucker. “You’re back! Tucker, are you…?” she looks to the Freelancers. “Is he…?”

“I’m fucking awesome,” Tucker deadpans. “Great to see you too. Hey, can I take a rain check on the heartfelt reunion? I feel like shit.”

The General and the Freelancers all exchange a few wordless glances and for a second Tucker actually thinks he’s off the hook. Leave it to the mad doctor to dash his hopes.

“Well, I had hoped to debrief you as soon as possible,” she admits. “But since it seems you didn’t re-implant the AI after all, I suppose we can wait till tomorrow to begin addressing your condition.”

Grey’s words cut through Tucker’s haze of exhaustion and he stares back at Grey with rapt attention. “My condition?”

Agent Washington shifts from foot to foot but if Dr. Grey is threatened by Tucker’s tone she doesn’t show it.

The doctor merely cocks her head and smiles sweetly. “Your hallucinations, of course! It would be best to begin treatment as soon as possible to reduce these and any other lingering side effects from your ordeal with the Epsilon AI.”

Tucker’s heart thumps painfully in his chest and he slowly turns his gaze to Wash. The Freelancer doesn’t look at him because he’s too busy glaring at Dr. Grey, his fists clenched at his sides.

Blood rushes in Tucker’s ears and for the first time since the Temple, his ghosts return.

Theta appears at his side looking distraught. “But that was a secret!”

“Traitorous fool!” O’Malley growls as he circles Washington.

The rage is beckoning, making Tucker’s right hand twitch, but before he can do anything stupid, he looks back to Dr. Grey. “Hell fucking no.”
Tucker turns and storms towards the barracks.

No one is idiotic enough to try and stop him.

Theta and Omega keep pace with him, chattering in their anxiety, but Tucker doesn’t hear them over the sound of his own furious thoughts. He’s crazy and now everyone knows. Damnit.

Damn Washington and damn himself for being so transparent. Wash probably knew since the beginning but he never told anyone. He must have fessed up to Grey after Tucker went missing. The betrayal stings, worse than any knife. He thought if anyone was going to have his back in this, it was Wash.

Tucker manages to avoid anyone who might hinder his momentum, though he does receive several double takes. The walls of the barracks have become a gallery of pictures and paintings, a nauseating bravura of colours all bleeding together in Tucker’s peripheral vision. He ignores it all as he shoulders his way into his room, luxuriating in the darkness.

It’s not until his armour lies scattered on the floor and he’s pulled on a set of comfortable clothes, that Tucker remembers this is Wash’s room too.

Goddamnit.

The thought of retreating to his own room is sorely tempting but brief in its consideration. After recalling the havoc inflicted on the excavation base, Tucker opts to stay put. Snitch or not, Tucker would still rather have Wash look out for him than endure Palomo as a roommate or risk hurting someone else.

He collapses onto the firm mattress and buries his face into his pillow. Drawing deep breaths Tucker tries to dispel the crushing pressure in his chest.

How the fuck is he going to bullshit his way out of this one?

Dr. Grey isn’t the type to give up easily. He can object all he wants but Grey won’t let this go; it isn’t in her nature. The anxiety gnaws at his thoughts and it opens a black pit in the centre of his chest making him nauseous. Even if he can manage to dissuade Grey it won’t take long before the whole base knows he’s crazy. Tucker is beginning to think it would have been for the best if Wash had just put him down back on the Charon ship.

The cyan AI appears before him, crouched beside the bed. “You don’t mean that! I know you’re mad at Wash, but you don’t really-”

Tucker slams his heel into his right shin. Hard. His eyes prick with tears and Tucker hisses in pain.

Iota vanishes and the room is blessedly silent.

The sheets are damp when he shifts his legs, his stitches reopened. Tucker can’t summon the strength to give a shit and ignores the blood trickling from his shin. It’s just nice to have some peace and fucking quiet.

He tries to close his eyes and clear his mind but not enough time passes and there’s light blinding him as it streams through the open door. Tucker cracks an eye open to see Wash in the doorway, staring back at him.

The sim trooper doesn’t say a word as he rolls to face the wall.
“Tucker-”

“Dude, just don’t.”

He doesn’t.

The darkness returns a second later but Tucker can hear the Freelancer moving through the room as he shucks his armour. He navigates the darkness somewhat clumsily and Tucker can only hope that the Freelancer trips over the haphazardly discarded aqua armour.

Wash hesitates beside his bunk and it reminds Tucker of the first night they started this arrangement. There’s no ignoring the feeling of the Freelancer’s gaze boring into the back of his skull. It’s easy to picture, Wash with a hand on the back of his neck, tracing the old scars from Epsilon as he works his jaw, trying to find his words.

If things were different Tucker might roll over and tell the dickhead to spit it out already but he can’t bring himself to look Wash in the eye right now. He just can’t.

The Freelancer does eventually manage to speak up. “Tucker, I’m really sorry,” he says. “I didn’t know Grey was going to do that. It’s just… when you went missing-”

“Wash, I know why you did it,” he cuts in. Tucker pauses to release a small sigh. “I just wish you hadn’t.”

The Freelancer has nothing to say to that save for a small intake of breath.

After a moment, Tucker listens as Wash climbs into his bed and the room is pitched into silence. The two lie awake for so long that Tucker doesn’t remember falling asleep at all.

Agent Washington doesn’t get very much sleep.

When he finally manages to pass out it’s only to wake an hour later to Tucker’s thrashing.

Five times.

Five times Wash drags himself out of bed to lightly nudge Tucker out of a nightmare. It’s a record high and no small miracle that the sim trooper is never quite stirred to consciousness each time. Wash sits on the edge of Tucker’s bed, rubbing a gentle hand across his shoulders until the shaking stops. Sitting there in the dark, Wash can almost pretend that there’s no animosity between them. That nothing has changed and he hasn’t lost Tucker’s trust.

The morning shatters that illusion when he wakes to the sound of the sim trooper dressing. Exhausted and bleary eyed, Wash rolls over to see Tucker already in full armour as he pulls on his helmet. He spares Wash a lingering glance before taking his leave.

Releasing a deep sigh, Wash lays his head back down and closes his eyes.

No one objects when he sleeps an extra few hours.

Unfortunately, the additional rest doesn’t provide any inspiration on how he’s going to make it up to Tucker. Wash tries again at lunch to talk to the sim trooper but his response is chilly.
“Whatever, dude.”

Typically when Tucker is angry with him, he throws out cutting insults and goes out of his way to be a pain in the ass. He does none of those things. He’s neither abrasive nor confrontational and the lack of emotion sets Wash on edge.

*Looks like you really fucked up.*

Not that Wash can blame Tucker in the slightest; his ire is not misplaced. Were the positions reversed Agent Washington would be livid. He remembers what it’s like; the wary looks and perpetual scrutiny that comes when people know you're unhinged. It’s not a pleasant experience.

Dr. Grey’s blatant fascination doesn’t help either. As though the maladies of others are delightful discoveries waiting to be dissected, another one of her experiments. Perhaps that’s being a little harsh. For all her faults, Emily Grey is one of the least judgmental people that Wash knows but that’s little consolation to her patients as she picks apart their ailments for her own academic curiosity.

Tucker has been stubbornly evading her all day, much to the doctor’s disappointment. Her voice filters over all open COM frequencies for the third time today as Wash is pushing his dinner around his plate in the mess hall.

“If anyone knows of Captain Tucker’s whereabouts, please send him to my office straight away!”

Wash can feel his temper rising. When he told Grey about Tucker’s hallucinations he had never expected this to happen. He should have known better. Should have kept his damn mouth shut.


Donut frowns skeptically. “You should have seen the way she chased down Doc! Now that’s what I call determination.”

Sarge makes a sound of discontent. “I don’t care what you call it. That little lady might be a little loony but something just ain’t right about that Blue since he got his egg scrambled.”

“Yeah, Dr. Grey may be a borderline psychopath,” Simmons concedes, “but at least she doesn’t hallucinate, as far as we know.”

Wash grinds his teeth, not looking up from his plate. “Tucker’s not crazy.”

It’s the first thing he’s said the entire meal and it’s Grif who eventually gathers the nerve to challenge him. “Sure. Tell me that once you’ve had Tucker threaten to slice your goddamn face off.”

Agent Washington looks up to fix the orange trooper with an icy glare. “I could reach across the table and cram a grenade down your throat. Does that make me crazy?”

Grif holds his gaze but doesn’t dare speak.

Donut is the one to break the tension. “Well... that kind of seems a little crazy to me but I’ve also seen the way Grif eats. You could shove just about anything down his throat! I don’t think the man has a gag reflex at all. Colour me envious!”

Somehow the lightish-red trooper not only succeeds in diffusing the rising hostility but also manages to heartlessly murder Wash’s appetite. Not that he had much of one to begin with but the
mental image of Grif deep-throating a bread stick is too much to stomach. Wash really has been spending too much time with Tucker.

The Freelancer rises from the table and gathers up his barely touched meal.

As he’s depositing his plate in the collection bin, he spots a flash of turquoise armour in his peripheral vision. He’s quick to look up, only to find that it’s Carolina, not Tucker. The sim trooper has been elusive most of the day and Wash foolishly hoped that he might at least make an appearance for dinner.

Releasing a tired sigh, he resolves to do whatever it takes to try and repair the damage that’s been done. He decides to start with Dr. Grey. Leaving the mess hall, Wash makes his way across the base towards the med complex.

Kimball is just exiting the building as the Freelancer gets there. She opens her mouth speak to him but Wash brushes past her before she can get a word out. Realistically, he knows Kimball isn’t at fault for this but he can’t help the bitterness he harbours, ill placed as it may be.

Wash reaches Dr. Grey’s office and raps firmly on the door. “Come in!” her cheery voice calls from the other side. The woman is focused on the computer at her desk when Wash steps into the room, closing the door behind him.

She looks up and smiles brightly. “Agent Washington! I’m glad you’re here. When you see Tucker, could you-?”

“Stop.” Wash holds up both hands for emphasis. “Look, I know that you just want to help Tucker but this isn’t the way to do it. Being forced into therapy isn’t going to work. Trust me, I know.”

Dr. Grey removes her glasses and smiles as she folds her hands on her desk. “Agent Washington, I-”

“No. You have to stop hounding Tucker. He’s not the type to seek out help and you’re only destroying the chances of that happening.”

This time Grey waits an extra beat to see if he’s finished speaking. “As compelling as your argument is, I’m afraid General Kimball beat you to the punch,” she informs lightly. “She just came by actually. Asked me to keep any mention of Tucker’s condition off the records. For all intents and purposes, our Captain Tucker is right as rain!”

Wash takes a moment to process her words and a soft, “Oh,” is all he manages.

Grey doesn’t seem concerned by his lack of articulate response. “I realize that you did a difficult thing, divulging that information about Tucker, and that my subsequent eagerness has damaged your relationship with him. I often forget that not everyone is as open in their vulnerabilities as I am. I hope you can accept my sincere apology and that this helps mend things between the two of you.”

Chewing his lip idly, Wash tries not to examine her choice of the word ‘relationship’ too closely. “Thank you, doctor. I appreciate your understanding.”

She beams brightly in response as she replaces her glasses. “Oh, it is no problem at all! Please let Tucker know that my door is always open to him. Now, I hope you won’t be shooting anymore guns or putting your wrist through unnecessary strain. If you’re looking to acquire narcotics, sabotaging your healing progress is not a good way to do it.”
Wash doesn’t quite frown but his response is somewhat rankled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
Hiding from Dr. Grey isn’t an easy task. It isn’t her so much as the Rebel Lieutenants that she’s recruited to hunt Tucker down. Of course the first time a woman is avidly pursuing Tucker it’s for his mental illness, not his dick. It fucking figures.

He crosses paths with Agent Washington just once, when Tucker’s trying to sneak lunch out of the mess hall. Wash has the audacity to look utterly dejected when Tucker brushes him off without hesitation. The sim trooper feels a little guilty about it in hindsight. Wash obviously didn’t expect Grey to call him out the way she did. Despite Tucker’s coldness towards him, he still recalls Wash’s soothing presence in the night, chasing away his nightmares. The fact that Tucker can’t even hate him for it makes it that much worse.

“Are you and Agent Washington fighting again?” Caboose asks idly.

Tucker has been taking refuge in his teammate’s room for most of the afternoon, which is pretty much the last place anyone will think to look for him. Caboose’s artistic rampage is plateauing as he runs out of material. Tucker spends most of the time examining the images while offering suggestions when Caboose flounders for fresh ideas. It’s strange to sift through his memories, unable to trust them without confirmation. Caboose’s pictures are enlightening, even if inaccurate.

Tucker sighs deeply. “No, Caboose, we’re not fighting.”

“Oh.” The regulation blue soldier looks back down at his work, frowning as he shades his sketch of Andy the bomb. However, he is suddenly stricken, looking back up at Tucker with wide, hopeful eyes. “Are you and Wash playing a game of hide and seek?!”

“No!” Tucker groans. “It’s just… I’m just pissed off.”

“Did he forget your anniversary?” Caboose inquires.

Tucker almost says yes purely to avoid further explanation but balks at the thought just as quickly. “You’re a fucking idiot.” He takes a deep breath before replying in earnest. How can he put it so Caboose will understand? “I trusted Wash with a secret and he told everyone.”

With a severe look, Caboose drops his voice several octaves. “Did he tell everyone that your middle name is Patricia?”

It’s not even worth arguing with him at this point.

“Yes, that’s exactly it,” Tucker’s tone is dripping with sarcasm but it might as well be a different language to Caboose.

“Yeah, I’d be really embarrassed too,” he agrees, “But I don’t think Wash would tell everyone for no reason.” Caboose’s ability to be both shockingly correct and completely wrong all at once is a phenomenon that probably needs to be scientifically documented.

“I know,” Tucker concedes after a moment, “but it still pisses me off.”

“Did Agent Washington say he was sorry?”
Tucker sighs through clenched teeth. “Yeah.”

Caboose nods his approval. “Then you should forgive him because we all make mistakes. Like that time you accidently shot Tex with the sniper rifle.”

“Yeah.”

“Or when you thought Donut was a lady.”

“Okay, Caboose.”

“Or the time you didn’t listen to Felix and everyone died.”

“Oh my fucking god.” That’s about all Tucker can take so he gets up from his seat on the bed and trudges out of the room. It’s really his own fault for ever thinking that constructive advice could come from Caboose.

Despite his refusal to participate in any of his teammate’s artistic endeavours, somehow Tucker still ended up smudged with paint and pastels. Skulking back to his own room, Tucker is thankful that Wash isn’t there at least. He discards his stained clothes and grabs a clean set before hitting the showers.

The warm spray rains down over his head and though the water out here isn’t as hot as it was in Armonia, it’s still a far cry from the barely lukewarm showers in Blood Gulch. It feels good and Tucker can almost forget that everyone knows he’s insane.

“Not everyone,” Delta chides from somewhere outside the shower stall.

Tucker has long since accepted the fact that there is no privacy where these guys are concerned.

Everyone who matters, then. The Reds and Doc know. Dr. Grey knows and Kimball knows. It’s only a matter of time before whispers of his madness spread through the ranks of Rebels and Feds alike. Hell, with the speed that gossip seems to travel on this planet, the fugitive Charon soldiers will know within the week. It shouldn’t matter so much to him, since the UNSC will be arriving any day now to take them home, but it does.

Home.

Tucker isn’t sure what that word means to him anymore.

The ship they were on was supposed to take them back to Blood Gulch but his memories of that places are fouled from Gamma and Sigma’s meddling. All that aside, it was a still shitty base in the middle of a box canyon. Tucker doesn’t miss it. No one’s ever accused him of being sentimental.

Between growing up in Nevada on Earth, Blood Gulch and his three months spent in a desert, Tucker doesn’t want anything to do with heat and sand unless it’s a fucking beach. He doesn’t want to go back.

“Home is where your family is,” Iota adds helpfully. “It will be okay.”

Releasing a deep sigh Tucker lets the water beat down on him until it starts to turn cold. With that, he shuts off the faucet and towels himself dry.

A rumble of hunger stirs in his gut as he’s pulling on clean clothes. It’s far too late to grab food from the mess hall but Tucker’s always prepared. Inspired by Grif and his food hoarding
tendencies, Tucker returns to the room and rifles through his footlocker where he’s stashed several MREs. There’s not a lot of appetizing variety so he selects the most edible looking one: some kind of burrito. It’s not the worst thing that Tucker’s ever eaten but he also had to live in the desert, eating whatever crawled out of the sand, so that isn’t really saying much.

Tucker sits in silence as he scarfs down the MRE. Wash will probably be back soon. Despite the obvious lack of sleep the Freelancer gets, he goes to bed awfully early.

He considers Caboose’s questionable advice as he leans back against the headboard of his bunk. Even if the context isn’t quite right it’s still remarkably sound logic coming from Caboose.

It would be simpler not to forgive him, Tucker thinks. Being angry is easier than giving into fear and if there’s one thing Tucker know for sure, it’s that Wash isn’t going to forget about what happened in the Temple. Not until they talk about it. If he stays angry at Wash, maybe the Freelancer won’t feel the need to bring the incident up again. Though staying bitter is no simple matter either. It’s against Tucker’s nature to hold long grudges. There’s far too much effort involved.

“I can help with that,” O’Malley boasts.

Of that Tucker has no doubt but he’s not so eager to surrender to his rage after seeing what it’s capable of. Furthermore, the thought of merely brushing off the incident conjures an unexpected ache in Tucker’s chest. As much as confronting the issue terrifies him, forgetting it altogether feels far worse.

The familiar trio appears then, Theta, Iota and Eta, the same three that always surface whenever Wash seems to be involved. Theta sits on his bunk opposite of him, Iota lounges across Wash’s bed and Eta hovers close to her, sitting tentatively on the edge.

Tucker releases a small groan but none of them seem to have anything to say for once.

His feelings regarding the Freelancer are… complicated.

More so now but even before Tucker’s never been sure whether he wants to fight him or fuck him. Let’s be honest; Wash is fucking hot. Tucker would be lying if he said he's never thought about Wash using his “give me five laps around the canyon,” voice for something a little more filthy. That being said, he’s also a severe pain in the ass and not in the good way. It’s not that Tucker hasn’t thought about it, it’s just that it never occurred to him that Wash would be receptive to the idea, Up until that moment back at the Temple. Tucker might not be the sharpest crayon in the box but he’s good at reading body language and Wash was most definitely giving him bedroom eyes back there. He’s sure of it.

Mostly sure.

Fuck, Tucker doesn’t have a goddamn clue. Why does it have to be now of all times that Washington has to go and fuck things up for him?

None of this changes the fact that Tucker is still pissed, however. Just because Washington has hair made for pulling and a mouth that could be used for something far better than barking orders, doesn’t mean that Tucker’s going to forgive him just like that. He’s not that easy.

Iota turns and levels Tucker with a disbelieving look.

Okay, maybe he’s totally that easy but Tucker’s confident that the chances of Wash blowing him to earn his forgiveness are extremely (disappointingly) slim.
Once Tucker figures out what to do about Dr. Grey maybe then he can start sorting out his feelings for Washington.

Breathing a deep sigh through his nose, Tucker tries to quiet his mind just for a little.

It works somewhat and he almost manages to doze off until Wash steps into the room.

Tucker doesn’t want to meet his gaze but with the bed facing the door there’s little else he can do. He tosses out an idle greeting to break the silence before it turns awkward. Lord knows they’ve had enough of those recently to last a lifetime. “Hey, dude.”

That seems to throw Wash, obviously not the welcome he expected as he does a double-take. “Hey,” he replies warily.

Tucker is pretty sure that his attempt at lessening the awkward factor has backfired phenomenally. As a result, he busies himself with reading the label on the empty wrapper of his MRE as though it is the most enthralling thing he’s ever read.

Wash begins removing his armour but surprises Tucker when he starts to speak. “I talked to Grey just now. She said Kimball came by to tell her to stop harassing you.”

The wrapper drops from his hands and Tucker’s gaze shoots up to meet Wash’s. “What?”

His lips twitch slightly, almost a smile. “Kimball ordered your medical records cleared of any mention of the Epsilon AI.”

Tucker can’t remember how to use proper English so he replies with a simple, “Huh,” as he stares down his hands.

The cold dread that’s been inhabiting in his chest ever since returning to the base slowly unwinds itself and Tucker feels it dwindle with each exhale. It’s not perfect but it’s a big step towards better.

His lack of a meaningful response sends Wash fumbling. He pauses midway through removing his shin guards, struggling with the latches. “I know this doesn’t change what I did and I understand if you’re still angry-”

“Wash.”

The Freelancer looks up and his grey eyes meet Tucker’s. There’s so much desperation there. He’s trying so hard to make things right.

“It’s fine, dude,” he insists. “Thanks.”

Wash almost smiles, even as he continues to frown. “Well you should thank Kimball. She’s a good woman.”

Tucker’s not entirely convinced that Wash didn’t have a hand in Grey’s change of heart, but he lets it go, agreeing quietly. “Yeah.”

The frown doesn’t quite abate, even as Wash pulls on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, crossing the room to stand by his bunk. He looks at Tucker with lingering concern still written in the lines of his face. “So… we’re good?”

For now but Wash is far from off the hook. Tucker’s shin is still sore from where the asshole shot him. Caboose provided his input on the Freelancer’s least preferred condiment and Tucker just
needs to confirm with Carolina before setting his plot into motion.

“Yeah, dude. We’re cool.”

Tucker expects Wash to bring up the Temple now that the air is cleared but he doesn’t. The Freelancer switches off the light and settles into his bunk.

It doesn’t change the fact that he’s going to have to deal with the Reds and the others giving him wary looks but with Grey off his back it will be far easier forgotten. Tucker still wishes that Wash never opened his stupid fucking mouth but the guy seems to harbour enough guilt and self-loathing already. He doesn’t need to beat himself up any more than he already does.

Stretching out his limbs, Tucker wriggles under the covers of his bed and releases a deep breath. He shoves away his thoughts of the Reds, of Kimball and the Feds, of hallucinations and AIs. Instead he focuses on the sound of Wash’s gentle breathing from the other side of the room, steady and sure. Before long Tucker’s dropping off to sleep.

The remote Research Facility is deep enough into Chorus’s ancient rain forests that there’s little chance of the space pirates happening upon them. The one that got pulled with them in the teleportation grenade was clean of any kind of tracking mechanism. Dr. Grey was able to get the pirate talking and the Freelancers are interrogating him now.

Tucker is doing his best to ignore Grif and Simmons as they bicker, pacing as they keep watch around the research base. If they can get the location of the radio jammers from the pirate they can make a push to take them down. Then they can contact Kimball and the Capital to put a stop to all this.

“I’m just saying, if Aquaman’s power is that he can talk to fish, then why can he talk to dolphins and whales?”

Grif looks at Simmons like he’s a complete moron. “What the fuck are you talking about? They live in water. They have fins. They’re fish.”

“They don’t have gills! They’re mammals, you idiot!”

“Mammals who never evolved to walk on land,” Grif reasons. “Sounds like a bunch of lazy pricks to me.”

“That’s two things you have in common then,” Tucker cuts in. “You’re both lazy and filled with blubber.”

Simmons sniggers at that and Grif glares. “At least I don’t fuck aliens.”

Tucker grins wolfishly under his helmet. “Dude, that’s why I banged your sister cause her ass is outta this world!”

Grif’s posture is wrought with violence but any physical rebuke is interrupted when a shot echoes through the trees.
All three of them wheel about, pulling out their own rifles as a dozen more shots pop off in the distance.

Tucker’s heart leaps into his throat and Wash’s voice comes filtering over the radio a second later. “Tucker. Sarge. More pirates incoming!”

One of the mercs comes into view and Tucker puts a three round burst into the man’s chest. The bright orange bolts of the hard light weapons rain down on them as more pirates close in and they scatter to avoid the deadly fire.

In their pause to reload, Grif and Simmons take out the pirates in the crossfire.

Agent Washington’s voice is in Tucker’s ear again as he’s shouting. “Get to the lab as soon as you can we-” his voice is cut off by the sound of gunfire. “Shit! We’re pinned down! You guys fall back!”

Like hell they are. Tucker just got Wash back. He’s not going to lose him again. Fucking Washington and his self-sacrificing, heroic bullshit.

Tucker turns quickly to Grif and Simmons just as Caboose, Lopez and Sarge race over to join them. “Guys, find Donut and Grey and retreat back into the forest!”

“What in Sam hell are you gonna do?” Sarge demands.

Tucker’s energy sword burns to life in his hand. “I’m going to help Wash and Carolina.”

He sneaks his way through the research base, taking out any pirates unlucky enough to meet him in close quarters. When Tucker finds the Freelancers they’re locked in combat with several pirates. Their weapons have skittered out of reach and as Carolina is pummelling one man into submission with her fists, Wash is battering another with his discarded helmet, the visor completely shattered.

Tucker rushes in to help and the poor fucker doesn’t even see him coming as he jams his sword through the pirate’s back. Wash’s eyes turn wide in surprise but quickly focus on Tucker, nodding in thanks as he lets his ruined helmet drop from his hand.

When they turn to help Carolina, they’re just in time to see her kick her assailant into the incinerator. The pirate doesn’t even have a chance to scream. It’s probably the most metal thing Tucker’s ever seen in his whole goddamn life.

Carolina looks to Tucker. “Where are the others?”

“They retreated into the jungle,” he informs. “How many more of these assholes are there?”

She grabs Wash’s rifle and thrusts it into his hands. “I don’t know,” she replies as she retrieves her own weapon from the ground.

Of course they don’t know. They’re flying blind. Church is gone.

“We can rendezvous with the others in the jungle,” Wash suggests. “The pirates will have a harder time tracking us in there.”

Carolina nods in agreement. “Let’s move out.”

They jog out of the base but don’t make it far. Tucker catches a glimpse of movement but before he can even raise his gun there’s a red laser trained on his chest.
“Tucker, get down!”

Something hits him square in the back and the ground rushes up to meet him as the shot of the binary rifle rings in his ears.

Tucker turns around to see Wash but his rifle lies on the ground and his eyes are wide as he presses his hands to his abdomen. Tendrils of glowing orange light spread from beneath his hands, branching across his armour like a thousand cracks. Wash holds out his hands, staring in disbelief.

“Wash!”

Tucker reaches out and grabs the Freelancer’s arm but the limb crumbles away beneath his touch in slivers of golden light. He meets Wash’s terrified gaze for half a second before his face turns to glowing shards that scatter into the wind with the rest of him, leaving nothing but his fallen rifle.

When the sound of Tucker writhing in his sleep wakes him, it’s far later into the night than Wash expects. It’s probably the longest amount of uninterrupted sleep that either of them have gotten in days. The sim trooper begins mumbling so Wash extracts himself from the warmth of his bed to cross the room.

Tucker’s face is scrunched up in fear, his right hand clenching and unclenching as his whole body shudders. Wash sits on the edge of the bed and puts a light hand on his back, trailing mindless patterns across his shoulders. Tucker’s bare skin is warm beneath his hand and Wash waits patiently for the nightmare to abate.

Except it doesn’t.

Tucker only seems to thrash harder, nearly knocking Wash off the bed as he rolls onto his back. Without his face buried in his pillow, his mumbling becomes coherent. “No…no, Wash…”

The Freelancer’s heart thumps hard inside his chest.

Tucker jerks harder, his voice rising. “Wash!”

This time Agent Washington shakes him. “Tucker. Tucker, wake up!”

Even in the darkness, Wash can see the blind terror in Tucker’s eyes when they snap open. The sim trooper grabs onto Wash’s left arm with bruising strength, his other hand still twisting in the sheets as he shakes and shakes. His eyes are miles away and Wash tries to drag him back to reality.

“I’m right here, Tucker. You’re safe!”

Tucker bolts upright and Wash rests his free hand on the back of the man’s neck to try and meet his eyes.

“C’mon, Tucker. Look at me.”

His eyes dart from side to side brimming with tears but they finally settle on Wash’s face. Tucker just stares for a moment before he releases a breathless sob and buries his face into the Freelancer’s shoulder. He releases his grip on Wash’s arm, only to clutch at the back of his shirt instead.
Wash wraps his arms around him in return as the sim trooper clings to him as though he could fall away at any moment. Tucker shudders with each ragged breath and Wash can feel the man’s heartbeat pounding against his own chest. They stay that way for a long time as Wash strokes his thumb against Tucker’s neck and rubs his hand up and down his spine. Only once the sim trooper’s grip on his shirt loosens a fraction does Wash feel a little more at ease.

It’s no decision at all when he nudges Tucker over so that Wash can crawl into the bed beside him. Tucker obliges but doesn’t let go as they lie down. Pulling the sim trooper against his chest, Wash tries to slow his own frantic heart.

Tucker seems to draw strength from Wash’s calm. Slowly, his breathing evens out and the shaking stops. Wash continues to trace circles against Tucker’s back. The Freelancer’s shirt is damp where tears have soaked into the fabric but Tucker seems steadier.

This was nothing like Tucker’s other nightmares.

Wash has never had this much difficulty waking him. Whatever this was, it was bad and Wash can certainly empathize. It’s like being a hostage to your own mind, fighting tooth and nail to claw your way back to reality. Wash is lucky to not have too many dreams like that anymore but they come around every now and then.

He starts talking to fill the silence, to keep Tucker’s mind from wandering back to whatever hell he left behind. “When they first implanted me with Epsilon, he was just a collection of broken memories,” he begins. “Memories from the Director and the torture that they put the Alpha through. Alpha suppressing those memories is what created Epsilon.”

Tucker says nothing but the way he measures his breathing tells Wash that he’s listening, so he continues. “I was trapped in my own head, living out his pain and his memories until I couldn’t tell our minds apart.” Wash feels his throat tightening. “Even when they removed Epsilon, it took a long time to remember my own name… Sometimes I still forget.” He releases a small sigh. “It does get better but it never really goes away.”

He’s never told anybody exactly what happened with Epsilon. Church knew and Carolina probably has her suspicions but Wash never wanted to talk about it until now. If anyone will understand it’s Tucker and telling him feels right. As much as Wash wishes that weren’t true for Tucker’s sake, there’s comfort in solidarity.

The room stays silent for a long while but it doesn’t bother Wash. He almost closes his eyes and drifts off until Tucker abruptly speaks.

His voice is rough and uncharacteristically solemn. “It was Sigma and Gamma,” Tucker says quietly. “Omega too, I guess. They twisted my memories into nightmares. I’ve watched you and everyone else die so many times.” Tucker picks absently at Wash’s shirt where his arm is draped over the Freelancer’s middle. “It’s all fucked up and I don’t know what’s mine and what’s theirs.”

Son of a bitch.

It explains why Tucker seemed so surprised to see all his friends after he recovered. Evidently, it all comes back to memory for Epsilon, even when he’s missing his own. And here Wash naively thought that apart from a few hallucinations Tucker got lucky. Shows what he knows.

There’s nothing he can say that will help but Wash tries anyways for what it’s worth. “Well, I don’t know much about what happened in Blood Gulch but if I can help fill in any blanks I’ll try.”
Tucker doesn’t seem to feel up to sharing at the moment but he nods against Wash’s shoulder and releases a shaky sigh.

The silence is companionable and Wash enjoys the warmth of Tucker close beside him. It’s easy to forget that the rest of the world still exists outside this room. He remembers what Iota told him back at the Temple and Wash fights to keep his heart from beating faster. It doesn’t take long for the doubt to take root, only growing by the second as Wash’s thoughts run rampant. What if Iota was wrong? What if Tucker doesn’t feel anything for him? They nearly kissed back in the Temple but Wash can’t assume that means he’s welcome in Tucker’s bed.

He opens and closes his mouth a few times before he can successfully get his question out. “Is this okay?” Tucker must have been half asleep because he jerks slightly when Wash speaks. “I mean, do you want me to go back to my own-?”

His question is interrupted when Tucker leans up and presses their lips together.

All of Wash’s coherent thought comes screeching to a halt but the kiss only lasts a fraction of a second as the sim trooper pulls away again.

Tucker lays his head back down on Wash’s shoulder. “Shut the fuck up and go to sleep,” he murmurs.

Wash’s heart is fluttering wildly.

Did that really just happen?

His face is burning and it feels like the temperature in the room has spiked twelve degrees. For several minutes, Wash struggles to form a coherent stream of thoughts, opening his mouth to speak as nothing comes out. His free hand reaches toward his face, to run over his lips and make sure he didn’t imagine the whole damn thing.

Except his hand never makes it there. Tucker snags it halfway and laces their fingers together. It’s such a small thing but it calms Wash’s racing thoughts and he remembers how to breathe.

It doesn’t take long for Tucker to doze off again.

Wash lies awake far longer but focuses on the rhythm of the sim trooper’s breaths to calm his mind. Watching the rise and fall of Tucker’s back, Wash counts out the beats of each inhale and exhale, like measures of a lullaby. Eventually his eyelids grow heavy and his own breaths join the tempo as he nods off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

One more to go. Thanks for sticking with me <3
Bolt

Chapter Notes

To my beautiful, fantastic, AMAZING readers,

WE FUCKING DID IT. I wish I could hug each and everyone of you. When I started posting, I had no clue my story would take off like this. It’s unbelievable! I know I’ve said it a million times, but I’m saying it again. THANK YOU. Thank you for your kudos and comments. I am in awe. Believe it or not, this story has been done since March (save for some rigorous editing). I sat on it for months before I worked up the nerve to post it, and I’m so glad I did. I have a lot of WIPs and ideas that were never destined to leave my writing folder, but now I feel like I can share them. Because even if there's just one person who enjoys it, it's worth posting. So thank you everyone for giving me this insane boost in confidence. It means so fucking much to me. You don’t even know.

Sorry for the essay, I’ll let you get to the main event now. I love you all. xoxo

Tucker wakes gently to the sound of Wash’s steady heartbeat thrumming beneath his ear. Focusing on the rhythm and the warmth, he tries to slip back to sleep but it’s no use. Tucker opens his eyes to find himself in the same position he fell asleep in: curled up against Wash’s side with an arm draped across his waist and his head nestled in the crook of the Freelancer’s shoulder.

It would probably be best if he snuck out before Wash wakes up but Tucker is reluctant to separate. The memory of his nightmare lingers in the corners of his mind but here Wash is solid and safe beneath him.

Tucker’s recollection of what happened last night is a little shoddy but he remembers enough to know that he’s thoroughly fucked.

Iota appears in the space between bunks, bouncing excitedly. “You kissed Wash!”

Tucker can feel his cheeks burning as the memory comes back to him. He was half asleep and it was completely on impulse. Acting without Thinking could be the title of Tucker’s autobiography. He’s such a fucking idiot.

Iota pouts. “But you liked kissing Wash!”

Eta comes to his rescue, arguing a valid counterpoint. “But what if Washington didn’t like it?”

Tucker remembers the way the Freelancer tensed up beneath him. He was too groggy at the time to acknowledge it but Wash was definitely freaked out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Theta is sitting on Tucker’s footlocker when he speaks. “But he told you about Epsilon. That was a secret!”

That doesn’t mean anything. They’re close friends with a common experience. It doesn’t guarantee
that Wash feels the same way. For all Tucker knows, the Freelancer is completely weirded out by all of this.

Iota crosses her arms in frustration. “He’s sleeping in your bed! And back at the Temple he was the one that grabbed your hand. ”

She’s not wrong.

Tucker releases a deep sigh and pulls away from Wash, propping himself up on an elbow. It’s strange to see the Freelancer look so calm, the lines of his face relaxed from his perpetual frowning. The sim trooper studies every freckle and scar, committing the view to memory in case Wash wakes up and kicks him out for good.

Yup, Tucker’s royally fucked.

A gurgle in his stomach reminds him of the world beyond this room. He would prefer to sneak quietly out and let Agent Insomnia sleep but the bastard can wake to the sound of a pin dropping, so there’s little chance for success there. As much as he’s loathe to do so, he gives the Freelancer a gentle nudge, murmuring softly. “Wash.”

A frown slowly twists Wash’s features as he releases a whoosh of breath and stretches both arms above his head, grumbling.

It’s so fucking cliche and Tucker tries his damndest not to grin at how stupidly adorable the half conscious Freelancer is. “Come on, man,” he persists, prodding Wash in the ribs. “I’m not missing breakfast again.”

Wash scrubs an arm across his face before blinking up at Tucker, bleary eyed and scowling. It takes a moment but when he finally seems to come to terms with reality, his eyes turn wide and Tucker can sense his rising panic.

Eta starts freaking out. “Oh I knew it! We screwed up!”

It takes maximum effort to plaster on an easy smirk even as his pulse climbs steadily. “Rise and shine, dude.”

Tucker does his best not to completely straddle Wash as he climbs over him and out of his bunk. A large yawn escapes him as he stretches and is rewarded with a satisfying pop when he rolls his shoulders. Wash hasn’t moved yet, so Tucker busies himself with dressing as he speaks. “C’mon man, some coffee will make you feel better.”

The Freelancer finally seems to find his tongue as he swings his legs over the side of the bed. “The coffee here is terrible.”

Tucker grins at him as he’s pulling on his hardsuit. “You could always try gasoline. Caboose says it wakes him right up.”

Wash snorts at that and eventually starts to dress as well. Strangely enough, they both manage to don their armour and head out the door without eliciting any kind of awkward silence. Tucker keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop but so far so good. Helmets in hand, they make their way across the base towards the mess hall.

The humidity is heavy in the air and Tucker is ever more thankful for the climate controlled interior of the mess. A light rain is falling through the open crater in the roof of the cavern and water runs down the walls, pooling in the crevices on the floor. Tucker wonders idly whether
there’s ever been flooding down in the caves and Delta appears, debating the issue with him as they walk.

“The caves themselves appear to be a result of water erosion so it’s suffice to say that there could be the potential for flash flooding.”

Tucker tries not to let that make him too uneasy.

“If it is any consolation, I believe the tree roots run deep enough to prevent any landslides from occurring.”

Excellent. They’ll only drown in water instead of mud. Goddamn, he’s been spending too much time with Agent Paranoia over here.

When they arrive at the mess, the usual morning rush is already underway. Tucker only hopes he can snag some bacon before there’s none left. Luckily there’s still an ample supply but as usual it’s nowhere near as crispy as Tucker prefers.

Wash frowns at him as they take a seat with the rest of their friends. “But if it were any crispier it would be burnt.”

Tucker balks. “Oh my god, you’re one of those people. I don’t think we can be roommates anymore, dude.”

Palomo perks up from across the table, his eyes wide and hopeful as he opens his mouth to speak.

“Shut up, Palomo,” Tucker cuts him off. “I was joking.”

Wash poorly conceals a smirk as he starts eating his breakfast.

“Who cares about bacon,” Bitters complains. “I just hope the UNSC is bringing food when they show up. I can’t remember how pizza tastes anymore.”

Grif barks a laugh despite his mouthful of toast. “Fat chance of that. Lucky for us, the UNSC is going to take us home where there’s all the pizza I can eat.”

Simmons raises a skeptical eyebrow. “When was the last time we got pizza in Blood Gulch?”

“Blood Gulch?” Grif exclaims. “I thought we were going back to Earth?”

Wash doesn’t look up from his plate as he speaks. “No. Rather than try to reassign us, the UNSC opted to send us back to your Freelancer training bases.”

Donut doesn’t seem concerned by the revelation. “Well I’ll be happy to go back. This humidity is just awful for my hair. I miss the dry heat and the scenery. Blood Gulch had some real character!”

“It was a barren fucking canyon,” Tucker deadpans. “There wasn’t exactly much to look at.”

The lightish-red soldier waves a dismissive hand. “But it’s Blood Gulch, guys! Where everything began! Sure it might be a little drab but that’s nothing a little landscaping can’t fix! Don’t you miss the nostalgia of it all?”

There’s a resounding silence in reply and Donut looks thoroughly put out.

It’s a little comforting to Tucker at least, to know that not everyone is all that keen on returning to Blood Gulch either. Wash is right; the UNSC just wants them swept under the rug with the rest of
Project Freelancer.

Tucker is speaking before he really thinks it through, as per usual. “I think I might just stay here, on Chorus.”

Every head in hearing range snaps up to look at him with a wide variety of emotions.

Tucker keeps his eyes firmly on his tray of food, shovelling another bite of bland, rehydrated eggs into his mouth. Despite the constant hum of voices and the clatter of silverware in the mess, their table is deathly quiet.

Grif is the first to speak up. “Why the fuck would you want to stay on this shitty, backwater colony?”

The Rebel soldiers shoot him dirty glares with the exception of Lieutenant Bitters, who inclines his head thoughtfully in agreement.

“Because a shitty base in the middle of a box canyon was so much better?” Tucker argues.

“You know, he’s got a point,” Doc concedes.

Jensen looks perplexed. “What would be the tactical advantage of having two bases in the middle of a box canyon?”

Simmons throws his arms in the air. “Thank you! I’ve been saying it for years!”

Lieutenant Jensen beams with a mouthful of braces that make her look impossibly young. Tucker also notes the maroon elastics on her brackets. “You’re welcome, sir!”

Simmons turns a brilliant shade of red to rival his armour but no one pays him any mind as Sarge grunts in reluctant agreement. “As much as I love waging war against you dirty Blues, I gotta admit it’s getting stale.”

Grif almost pouts. “But why do we have to stay here?” he whines, glance shifting towards Matthews who looks ecstatic.

Wash provides an answer. “After everything that’s happened on Chorus, we could try for honourable discharge and they might send us back to Earth but it’s probably more likely that they’ll ship us off to some other remote colony like this one.”

“Why would they do that?” Donut asks, looking genuinely curious.

“Because they want to keep us quiet,” Wash replies somewhat bitterly. “Project Freelancer is a stain on the UNSC’s record and we know far too much about it. They’ll send us someplace where those secrets can’t do any damage.”

Tucker tries not to reflect on just how depressing that sounds. He’s well acquainted with how convoluted politics can be from his days as an ambassador with Junior. It really shouldn’t surprise him that the UNSC is no different.

Grif groans as he buries his face in his hands. “Go back to that hellhole of a canyon or stay on this shitty colony.” He heaves a great sigh. “The struggle has never been greater.”

Simmons no longer seems flustered as he tries to conciliate Grif. “If we go back to Blood Gulch, the UNSC will probably take away the Meta’s weapon again.”
Grif glares at the table. “Fuck it. I’m staying.”

Matthews beams with glee. “I’m so pleased to hear that, sir!”

The orange trooper’s glare turns to the Rebel. “Matthews, if you don’t fuck off, I’m going to introduce you to the Grif-shot. It’s like a knife and a rifle.”

“A knife,” Caboose adds quietly.

Tucker nods in his teammate’s direction. “What do you think, Caboose?” As much as the moron might miss Blue base, Tucker worries that being back in Blood Gulch will remind him too much of Church.

Caboose pushes his eggs around his plate as he contemplates his response. “Yeah, someone once told me to never go backwards, so we should go forwards instead.”

There’s a deliberate pause as everyone tries to decipher what the fuck Caboose is talking about but it’s Lieutenant Smith who finally speaks up. “Captain Caboose is right. It is unwise to dwell on the past. Only by learning from our mistakes can we move forward for a better future.”

Everyone stares at Andersmith for a long moment and Tucker rethinks his stance on remaining on Chorus. What a bunch of morons.

“So that’s it?” Simmons asks. “We’re staying?”

When no one answers right away Donut speaks up, skewering Tucker with his gaze. “But what about Junior?”

Tucker fumbles at that.

It wasn’t a thought that immediately occurred to him, which makes him feel like a shitty parent. He wants to see his son again more than anything, especially after losing him so many times in his jumbled memories. Would the UNSC let him rejoin Junior on diplomatic errands? As crummy as the job was, spending time with his son is well worth the headache.

It’s Wash who offers reassurance. “Blood Gulch isn’t going to get you any closer to your son,” he reasons. “The UNSC will re-establish communications when they arrive, so you should be able to contact him. Besides, we don’t have to stay on Chorus forever.”

The Freelancer’s logic does wonders to ease Tucker’s apprehension. “Yeah,” he agrees quietly. Under the table he bumps knees with Wash, offering a half smile in thanks.

“So does this mean we’re staying?” Doc inquires.

“Sounds like it,” Sarge replies.

Wash doesn’t quite meet Tucker’s gaze but he does nudge him back. Before Tucker can open his mouth to say anything else, the Freelancer looks up and his eyes focus on something across the room. Tucker follows his gaze and spots Carolina speaking with Kimball.

Pulling himself to his feet, Wash looks back to Tucker and the others. “I’m going to go let Carolina know what the plan is.”

Apparently the impact of his nightmare hasn’t quite worn off yet because Tucker is surprisingly reluctant to let Wash out of his sight. His throat tightens and he almost reaches out to snag Wash’s
hand. Almost. Tucker catches himself as manages to keep his hands to himself and his tone flippant. “Alright. Later, man.”

Wash almost smiles. He gives a quick nod before pulling on his helmet and taking his leave. Tucker watches him go and does his best to fight the anxiety scraping against his thoughts. It was only a dream. Wash is here, he’s okay and realistically speaking, if he’s in Carolina’s company that’s probably the safest place on the planet.

Grif looks between Tucker and the retreating Freelancer. “Huh. I guess crazy attracts crazy.”

Tucker turns to him, baring his teeth with far too much malice to be considered a smile. “That’s why I fucked your sister.”

It takes him by surprise when Grif throws the first punch.

For such a fatass, the dude is deceivingly quick. Tucker lunges at him from across the table and everything promptly goes to hell.

Wash does his best to ignore the conflict unfolding behind him as he makes his way across the mess hall. He’s not sure what sparked it but he is sure that he’d rather not get involved. This entire morning has been one bombshell after another, leaving Washington extremely off balance. It’s largely Tucker’s fault but Wash tries not to focus on that just now. One thing at a time.

As he approaches Kimball and Carolina, their gazes become increasingly concerned, glancing behind him at the escalating violence. “I don’t suppose you have anything to do with that?” Carolina smirks.

Wash rolls his eyes under his helmet. “No,” he replies. “I just thought I’d let you both know that the Reds and Blues have decided they want to stay here on Chorus. If that’s alright with you, General.”

Carolina doesn’t look all that surprised but Kimball’s eyebrows shoot straight up. “But, I thought all of this was about getting off of Chorus? What happened to going home?”

Wash hazards a glance over his shoulder but there is a crowd gathering around the Reds and Blues so Wash can’t exactly tell what’s going on. “I guess situations change,” he offers with a shrug.

“What about you, Wash?” Carolina asks. “Do you want to stay?”

That gives him pause. Agent Washington hadn’t even considered splitting up from the sim troopers. He can’t imagine there are a lot of options available to him if he did, what with his shoddy service record. Though technically he did receive a full pardon from the Chairman Wash isn’t so sure the decision will hold up in light of recent events. Maybe with bringing down Hargrove for his crimes against Chorus, the UNSC will be inclined to grant him some leniency but for what? Maybe he’ll get his old name and rank back, assigned to some other post to probably never see his friends again. The UNSC won’t permit him the kind of freedoms that Carolina might get (with her involvement in Project Freelancer as the only blemish on her record). No. Wash’s place is with the Reds and Blues. They might be a bunch of idiots but they’re a team; they’re a family.
“Someone’s got to keep these idiots out of trouble,” he replies, hooking a thumb in the direction of the sim troopers.

The commotion in the mess hall is growing. When Wash hazards a glance back, it seems as though several of the Rebel lieutenants have gotten involved, throwing punches and shoving one another.

“Starting tomorrow,” Wash decides.

Kimball’s face is stern as she releases a small sigh. “I better go put a stop to whatever this is,” her eyes turn back to Wash, softening slightly. “I would be more than glad if you and the others wish to stay on our planet.” She frowns slightly as she looks back to the mess hall brawl. “Though I have a feeling I may come to regret it.” The moment passes and her gaze turns to steel once more as she storms off towards the rioting soldiers, her voice rising above the shouting as she barks orders.

Amusement dances in Carolina’s eyes as she watches the General go but Wash has his own questions. She spent the majority of yesterday at the Temple of Arms, visiting Epsilon’s fragments and Wash wants to know what her next step is. “What are you going to do?” he inquires.

Carolina looks back at him, cocking her head slightly as she purses her lips. “I think I need to go when the UNSC comes. At least to see through this business with Hargrove and make sure he pays for what he’s done. I owe Church that much.” She pauses a moment, watching Kimball quell the anarchy. “If you’re all still here when that’s done, I’ll come back. I think it might be good for me to slow down a little. That was Iota’s advice.”

Wash won’t say it aloud because he might get punched for it, but he’s fiercely proud of Carolina. He nods in agreement. “I think we could all use a little break.”

The uproar in the mess dies down as swiftly as it started, the crowd dispersing as Kimball gives everyone involved in the conflict a good tongue lashing. Tucker and Grif stand side by side looking thoroughly battered, though they each have an arm slung over the other’s shoulder as they grin back at Kimball.

Wash smiles despite himself.

“So things are okay with you and Tucker now?” Carolina pries.

Fortunately she can’t see him fighting a blush beneath his helmet. “Things are still a little complicated,” he admits in a blatant understatement. “But with Grey off his back it’s a step in the right direction.”

There’s a knowing gleam in Carolina’s eyes and her words are loaded with meaning. “I’m sure you’ll both figure it out.”

Carolina’s words follow Wash around long into the afternoon.

He had hoped to get a chance to talk to Tucker but they’ve both been busy. While Wash has been helping Carolina consolidate Epsilon’s data on Malcolm Hargrove, Tucker and Grif were sentenced to dish duty in the mess after their altercation.

Kimball stops in to help between her own work, adding all of their knowledge on Locus and Felix to the file. There’s a lot of information accumulated and while it might seem like overkill, there’s no such thing as too much evidence. Hargrove is a powerful man who can afford the best defense attorney money can buy. Their case against him needs to be concrete; not a single loophole or stone left unturned.
While Kimball is not willing to leave Chorus herself, she offers to send a representative in her place. It’s no surprise when she selects Dr. Grey as her delegate and Carolina manages to take that in stride. The Freelancer and the doctor share little in common but Carolina at least acknowledges the benefits of having Grey present for the proceedings. Eccentricities aside, Emily Grey has a brilliant mind and her presence will be exceedingly valuable.

By the time Wash is finally released from his duties, lunch has long passed and the rain has stopped. The afternoon sun shines down through the open ceiling of the cave, reflecting off the scattered puddles like pools of molten gold.

Even after serving his kitchen sentence, Tucker has been scarce most of the afternoon but Wash intends to track him down. The past few days have been a whirlwind of mixed signals and he needs a definitive answer as to what exactly this thing is, between them. Wash knows how bad he is at touchy-feely sort of things but he also knows that Tucker isn’t much better.

When he can’t find the sim trooper right away, Wash only panics a little. He’s reluctant to radio his teammate, concerned that if he tips him off Tucker will get weird about it. For someone who telegraphs his emotions so blatantly, it’s profoundly difficult to get Tucker to speak his mind sometimes. Thankfully Wash isn’t left floundering for too long. One of the Lieutenants on patrol spotted Tucker heading topside so that’s where Wash finds him.

His bright aqua armour sticks out against the dark greens and browns of the jungle where he’s sitting on a fallen branch. A data pad sits beside him and Wash recognizes the small hologram projecting from the screen. The sight makes his chest tighten uncomfortably and as he walks closer, the familiar words become audible.

“It was- it was actually Doyle who made me realize something I’d never thought of before...”

The recording plays on and Tucker doesn't even acknowledge Washington as he moves towards the log, taking a seat on the other side of the data pad.

They listen in silence as Church’s hologram starts to flicker.

“But the hero never gets to see that ending. They'll never know if their sacrifice actually made a difference. They’ll never know if the day was really saved. In the end, they just have to have faith. Ain't that a bitch.”

The hologram vanishes and Wash patiently waits for Tucker to break the silence.

When he does, it's not at all what the Freelancer expects.

“I fucking hate him.”

The quiet rage catches Washington off guard.

Tucker turns to look at him then. “You know he didn't give a shit about us, right? That selfish prick just wanted to stroke his massive fucking ego, to be the fucking hero.”

Wash frowns as he tries to speak up. “Tucker-”

The sim trooper waves him off. “He only cared about himself. He deleted his memories and fucked up my head just so he could take credit for saving the goddamn day. I just hope he stays fucking dead this time.”

Tucker stares at the ground for a long time and neither of them speaks. The jungle is loud with the
sounds of birds, bugs and frogs singing in the trees.

Wash knows that Tucker doesn’t mean it. It’s a coping mechanism. He almost opens his mouth to say so before thinking better of it. There's nothing he can say right now. He doesn’t have the words to make things better, so Wash let's Tucker have his anger for now.

Despite the temperature controlled environment within Wash’s armour, he swears he can still feel the sweltering humidity.

Minutes drag by but the tension in Tucker’s frame slowly begins to dwindle. Releasing groaning sigh, the sim trooper hops off the log as he glares up at the sky. “I fucking hate this planet.”

Washington levels him with a look as he stands as well. “You do realize you're the one who suggested we stay here, right?”

“Yup and I'm regretting it already.”

“It's not too late to change your mind,” Wash offers.

Tucker scoffs. “Fuck that. I may hate this planet but I hate Blood Gulch more. Holy shit, I really am becoming Church.”

Wash is inclined to agree, chuckling softly. “You have to admit, the scenery is far better here,” he grants, looking around the forest. Chorus isn’t a very large planet but it has lush rain forests, impressive mountain ranges and oceans that never end. Before the war, Chorus was supposed to be a farming colony; there are sprawling plains with fertile soil, waiting for crops to be sewn. If they really miss the sand and the heat and the towering walls of a box canyon, Chorus has those too. It’s not Earth but it’s not too shabby either.

Tucker sends him a sideways look as he talks around a smirk. “It looks great from where I'm standing, baby.”

Wash rolls his eyes but a flush rises in his cheeks anyways. The comment reminds him why he sought out Tucker in the first place. Better get to it then before he chickens out. He exhales a small sigh before thumbing the pressure release on his helmet and pulling it off. Running a gloved hand through his hair, Wash tries to gather his nerves. Everything about this makes his throat feel tight and while the answer might not be what he wants to hear, he needs to know where he stands with Tucker.

He opens his mouth to speak but the sim trooper seems to sense his rising trepidation and cuts him off immediately. “Well this has been fun but I think I’m going to go see if I can push my luck with Grey. She can’t keep me off duty forever and I’m getting real sick-”

Wash catches his arm when he goes to pass. “Tucker, we need to talk.”

His entire body goes stiff but Tucker doesn’t shrug off the contact immediately. “Really? Cause I’m pretty sure there’s nothing to talk about.”

When he tries to pull away, Wash tightens his hold. “No,” he says. He takes a breath and forces a firm tone. “I want to know what this is,” he says as he gestures between the two of them, “otherwise you can ask Palomo to be your roommate with benefits.”

Tucker wrenches out of his grip before prying off his helmet and casting it to the ground. There’s a dark purple bruise formed across his left cheek from his fight with Grif. Anger flashes in his eyes but there’s also fear and something else Washington can’t quite place.
Wash breathes a sigh. “Tucker, I don’t know what you want from me.”

The sim trooper frowns as he steps into Wash’s space, grabs him by his chest plate and crashes their lips together.

He was expecting it. Wash saw it coming from a mile away but it still has him frozen where he stands and it’s not until Tucker threads a hand into the Freelancer’s hair that he remembers how to reciprocate.

Head spinning, Wash he loses himself in the sensation. He drops his own helmet as his hands find Tucker’s waist. All the questions he wants answered feel obsolete with Tucker licking his way into Wash’s mouth and the soft moan that escapes him is in no way voluntary.

But then it’s over and Tucker gently bites Wash’s bottom lip before pulling back.

Tucker’s pupils are blown wide, so dark and deep that Wash is afraid he might drown in them. “It kinda seems like we’re on the same page to me, dude,” the sim trooper offers with a smirk.

Wash flushes all the way to his ears. Letting his hands drop, he takes a step back and stares at the ground to avoid Tucker’s hooded gaze. It’s not enough. “Tucker, if this is just…” He takes a breath as he tries to pin down the right words. “I can’t do this and pretend it means nothing.”

A small, nervous laugh escapes Tucker and it’s so uncharacteristic of him that it has Wash looking sharply back up at him. The sim trooper avoids his eyes until he steps back into Wash’s space.

“Come on, man,” he says as he takes Wash’s hand and laces their fingers together. “Are you really gonna make me say it?”

His other hand cups the Freelancer’s jaw and this time when they kiss, it’s entirely different.

It’s a slow, gentle brush of lips. Effortless, mindless, languid and long. Seconds drag on like hours and Wash leans in to try and claim more but Tucker doesn’t let him. He pulls back ever so slightly whenever Wash tries to accelerate the pace, unhurried even as the Freelancer huffs in protest. There’s no urgency but there is still a fervour that leaves Wash breathless. This isn’t a kiss for friends with benefits. It’s yearning and compassionate, conveying far more than words ever could.

When Tucker slowly pulls away, he strokes a thumb against Wash’s jaw as he searches the Freelancer’s eyes. Wash covers Tucker’s hand with his own, dropping his gaze. “I suppose that clears a few things up,” he admits sheepishly.

The sim trooper grins as he leans in and presses a quick kiss to the corner of Wash’s mouth. “Awesome. Cause you know how terrible I am with words.”

Wash manages an airy chuckle. “I know but we still have to talk about it.”

Tucker groans. “Can it be later?”

“It can be later.”

They remain that way for a few moments before Tucker gives Wash’s hand a gentle squeeze and releases him. “You know,” he muses, “everyone else is going to find out pretty fucking quick.”

Wash frowns at that but Tucker’s right and it makes his insides twist with anxiety. Gossip travels fast among the soldiers and even if they take every precaution, they won’t be able to keep it a secret for long. He thinks back on Carolina’s words and wonders how long she’s seen this coming.
“I’m pretty sure Carolina already knows,” Wash admits. There isn’t a trace of apprehension in Tucker’s eyes as he shrugs indifferently and it catches Wash completely off guard. “You’re not worried about everyone knowing?” he asks incredulously.

Tucker scoffs. “Nah, I don’t give a fuck what any of those assholes think,” he reasons. “Besides, do I really seem like a walk-of-shame type of guy to you?”

Wash isn’t sure what he expected but this isn’t it. The tension that knotted his insides moments ago seems to unravel and Wash releases the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

When he doesn’t reply immediately, Tucker ducks to catch his eye as the smirk fades and his eyebrows shoot upward. “Dude! Did you really think I’d be ashamed of you? Of us?”

They way he says us makes Agent Washington feel like heart might hammer its way through his rib cage. He turns his gaze away, trying to mask his embarrassment. Not ashamed per say. Hesitant maybe? Either way, he feels pretty stupid for thinking it now. “I don’t know,” he responds lamely. “Maybe a little?”

Tucker smirks. “Congrats, Wash. You’re the dumbest smart person I know.”

Wash shoves him and the sim trooper just grins harder. “Come on,” he insists. “Let’s head back. Wouldn’t want the rumours to start too early.”

The sim trooper’s smile turns wicked as his eyes pierce through Wash’s. “Or we could stay up here and really give them something to talk about.”

Wash shakes his head as he tries to will away the burning in his cheeks. “You’re the worst kind of person.”

Tucker sighs dramatically. “Fine.” He kneels down to retrieve Wash’s helmet but abruptly pauses. There’s a devious gleam in Tucker’s eye as he grins back up at the Freelancer from his knees. “Last chance, Wash.”

It doesn’t seem physically possible but Agent Washington blushes even harder. Half of the blood in his body has pooled in his face and the other half has gone somewhere else entirely. Wash roughly snatches his helmet from Tucker’s hands and pulls it over his head.

“I hate you.”

Even as the pressure equalizes beneath his helmet, venting out the humidity, Wash still feels like he’s burning up. He closes his eyes and lifts his gaze skyward, trying to drain the blood from his face and focusing on regaining his composure. After everything Agent Washington has survived, he’s almost certain that Lavernius Tucker is going to be the death of him.

“Hey uh, Wash?”

“I swear to god, if you’re still on your knees I’m going to fucking break them.”

There’s a tug on his arm as Tucker uses Wash to pull himself back to his feet. “Seriously, dude, look!”

Wash opens his eyes and turns to look where Tucker is pointing.

Through the gap in the canopy hovering high above them is a massive ship and not any light frigate, either. It’s a Hillsborough-class destroyer; a dreadnought whose standard armament
includes 26 oversized Archer missile pods, 3 Shiva-class nuclear missiles and 2 magnetic accelerator cannons that fire 600 ton slugs of ferric Tungsten at 88 times the speed of sound.

Agent Washington blinks up at the sky in dazed silence.

Somehow, “son of a bitch” just doesn’t quite cut it.

Tucker and Wash race back down into the caves. Even jogging downhill, Tucker is panting hard by the time they arrive. Fuck, all this time off has really got him out of shape. Who thought he would ever want to run sprints more often?

Something of a crowd has gathered outside the main communications complex where Carolina seems to be on guard duty. Dr. Grey, the Reds and Caboose are among those waiting so Tucker and Wash shoulder their way to the front of the group.

“What’s going on?” Wash asks. “Is it the UNSC?”

Carolina nods. “Kimball is speaking with the Captain of the Defiant right now.”

Wash seems to relax at that, but Tucker can’t quite muster the same relief. “Ah, the UNSC,” he muses. “‘Better late than never.’ That’s the motto, right?”

Wash elbows him for that one but there’s more amusement than malice in Carolina’s glare. “It seems they’re a little suspicious, since they were expecting to find open war when they arrived.”

Grif scoffs. “I could have sworn the motto was ‘wait until someone else does the job for you then swoop in and steal all the credit.’”

Tucker offers him a fist bump and not even Wash can argue its validity.

“Anyway,” Carolina continues, her tone equal parts amused and annoyed, “once Kimball can negotiate a ceasefire, the UNSC can send down the Admiral to discuss Hargrove’s arrest.”

“A ceasefire?” Simmons balks. “I didn’t know we were fighting.”

“We’re not,” she admits, “but the UNSC knows about the alien tractor beams from Epsilon’s report, so they only sent one ship into low orbit. The others are waiting out near one of Chorus’ moons.”

“They sent an entire fleet?” Tucker blurs.

Carolina offers a small shrug. “Like I said, they were expecting trouble.”

Sarge summarizes the situation. “So what you’re saying is that the UNSC is ready to blow us all to kingdom come if we so much as twitch funny?”

When Carolina doesn’t answer right away it’s a little unsettling. “Well… it would take more than that for them to open fire on a UNSC founded colony but essentially yes.”

“Great,” Grif complains, turning to look at Tucker. “This is all your fault.”
“My fault?” he says incredulously. “How the fuck is this my fault?”

“Because you’re the one who decided we should all stay here!” Grif replies, jabbing a finger at him accusingly. “Now the UNSC wants to blow it up, so I say that’s on you.”

Tucker smugly inspects the black eye he gave Grif, debating giving him another to match. Before he can speak up however, Kimball steps out of the COM room looking somewhat baffled by the gathering outside the door.

“Well, how did it go?” Grey asks cheerily, as though it were a lunch date and not a delicate negotiation to keep them all from being obliterated from the face of the planet.

Kimball’s deep frown doesn’t bode well. “They’re sending Admiral Uchida down but advise that they will open fire on our base at the drop of a hat if there’s trouble.”

Un-fucking-believable. “What the hell? Don’t they know we’re the good guys?” Tucker reasons.

The General almost rolls her eyes but folds her arms across her chest instead. “They’re just trying to play it safe,” she argues in their defence. “They’ve had no contact with this colony for years. I think it’s well within their rights to be cautious.”

Sarge makes a sound of indignation. “Maybe the UNSC needs to change their motto to ‘shoot first, ask questions never.’”

Wash looks entirely exasperated. “Enough with the mottoes,” he demands.

Kimball looks a little confused but continues regardless. “Anyways, the Admiral wants you all to be there when he lands.”

“Us?” Simmons balks. “Why the fuck would he want to talk to us?”


Kimball offers a shrug. “You’re the only UNSC presence on this planet,” she supplies. “They probably want to make sure we didn’t murder you all and make this whole story up.”

“What the fuck?” Tucker says. “Why would they think that?”

Kimball releases an exhausted sigh so Dr. Grey provides an explanation instead. “Well, seeing as the UNSC did abandon this colony long before the fighting even began, you might say there’s a little resentment here. Now if I wanted to get their attention, shooting down one of their ships and slaughtering the entire crew seems like a good place to start!”

The General waves a dismissive hand. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll play by their rules and get this sorted out.” Kimball starts to move and the crowd parts before her. “Come on. The Admiral is landing topside and you all need to be there to meet him.”

“I just hope they brought supplies,” Donut reasons. “I ran out of anti-frizz conditioner months ago!”

Tucker’s had enough of this. The UNSC doesn’t give a shit about them and if Carolina and a few Reds are present, he certainly doesn’t need to be. “Well, have fun kissing ass. I’m out.”

Kimball’s voice rings with authority. “Captain Tucker, the Admiral requested that all UNSC troops are present.”
Tucker scoffs at that. “Sure. If they ask for me by name, I’ll be there, but those dickheads don’t give a shit about us and I’m not going to pretend I’m happy to see them.”

Kimball works her jaw but Carolina sets a gentle hand on her elbow. Tucker doesn’t hear the reassurance she provides because he’s already pushing his way through the crowd.

Wash calls out behind him but doesn’t catch up until they make it out of the mob. “Tucker!” The Freelancer’s hand finds his arm, stopping him as he speaks. “After all this, you’re not even going to stick around to see how it ends?”

“Nah,” Tucker replies. “I’ve got better shit to do than listen to some UNSC ass-hat take credit for our work.” He takes a deliberate step closer and lets his voice drop an octave. “They probably won’t miss you either, Wash. Why don’t we go somewhere quiet and get started on those rumours?”

Agent Washington takes a full step back and Tucker smirks as he imagines the way the Freelancer’s blush makes the freckles stand out on his face.

Tucker doesn’t wait for a reply, turning and marching towards the barracks. When he hears Wash’s footsteps following behind him, Tucker grins even wider.

The barracks are empty with all the commotion of the UNSC’s arrival and they pass Caboose’s colourful murals as they make their way to their shared room. Tucker can’t stop smiling, even as he unlocks the door and steps inside. The door closes behind Wash a second later.

When Tucker turns to face the Freelancer, he’s surprised to see that Wash already has his helmet off. He’s even more startled when Wash pushes him back against the wall, deft fingers finding the pressure seals on Tucker’s helmet and prying it off as well. There isn’t even time to make a smartass remark because Wash cups both hands around Tucker’s face and kisses him hard.

Now this is a side of Wash he’s never seen before and Tucker wonders if expert kissing was included in Freelancer training. All rational thought is promptly terminated and Tucker’s head starts to spin. Wash kisses like a dying man gasping for air, like he can’t get enough and Tucker is all too happy to oblige.

They’re pressed as closely as their armour will permit, their chest plates clacking together but it’s difficult to think with Wash’s tongue in his mouth. Tucker eventually manages enough semblance of thought to begin working at the latches of Wash’s armour.

When the Freelancer pulls back and begins removing the armour himself, Tucker takes that as his cue to do the same. It might be the fastest that Tucker’s ever gotten naked in his life. There has to be world record for something like that, right?

They’re both stripped down to their boxers and Tucker surprises Wash when he reverses their positions, pinning the Freelancer against the wall as he grinds their hips together.

Washington releases a breathy moan and holy shit, Tucker absolutely needs to hear that sound again. He abandons Wash’s mouth to kiss a trail across his jaw and down his throat, licking and biting as he goes. The ruthless Freelancer melts beneath him and Tucker wants to touch all of him at once. He runs his fingers through Wash’s hair, tugging softly as he brings their lips back together. It doesn’t last long though because when Wash grabs his hips in an attempt to bring them closer, Tucker gasps as he lets his head fall against the Freelancer’s shoulder.

“Holy fuck, Wash.”
Sparks of pleasure shoot through every nerve in Tucker’s body and it’s so good. It’s so good and they both need to get naked before he loses his goddamn mind.

Wash seems to agree because he’s on the offensive once more, dragging Tucker’s mouth back to his as he begins guiding them towards his bed.

Tucker’s thoughts are clouded with want, but something nags in the back of his mind. Something important. Something extremely important.

Oh fuck.

Clarity snaps back into focus and Tucker struggles to push them towards his own bunk instead but he’s miles too late for that. The back of his calves bump the edge of Wash’s bed and Tucker panics. This wasn’t part of the plan.

In an impressive manoeuvre that Tucker will never be able to replicate in training or combat, he manages to hook Wash’s ankle and flip their positions as they topple onto the bed. Wash lands beneath him and their lips break contact. Tucker’s hands shoot out to catch himself, barely managing not to slip on the slick bed sheets.

The Freelancer’s reaction is instantaneous. A startles squawk escapes from Wash and he writhes awkwardly, struggling to sit up. Tucker almost gets headbutted in the nose and he quickly stands upright, watching the Freelancer with bated breath.

Wash frowns deeply as he wipes a hand across his back, drawing back to stare at it. “What the fuck is this?!” he shrieks.

Tucker lets a wicked smile split across his face. “I told you I’d get even, dude.”

“So this is your plan?!”

Wash grabs Tucker before he can dart away, pulling him down into the ketchup soaked bed sheets. It’s really fucking cold. Tucker yelps and tries to squirm away but Wash pins him firmly.


The sim trooper only grins harder. “It was worth it.”

Wash growls as he extricates himself from the mess and gets to his feet. “If that’s not cleaned up by tonight, I’m sleeping in your bunk.”

Tucker smirks luridly. “Fine by me, baby.”

“I’m not sharing,” he deadpans. “You can sleep in Palomo’s room.”

Tucker hisses a laugh as he lets his head fall back on the pillow. “No sense of humour.”

Wash makes his way towards the door. “I’m taking a shower.”

“Mind if I join?” Tucker asks as he perks up.

The Freelancer flips him off as he leaves. “Go fuck yourself, Tucker.”

“Seriously, dude!” he calls after Wash as he lays back down. “Who doesn’t like ketchup?!”
Tucker’s own opinion of the condiment is dwindling the longer he lies there but he can’t be bothered to move. Even covered in cold, tomatoey goop, his triumph won’t be diminished.

Iota is a shining, blue blur, dancing around the room dragging Eta reluctantly with her. The persistent hallucinations are still a concern but that’s an issue for another time. For now, Tucker shoves his problems far from thought and focuses on the ghost of Washington’s touch on his skin. There’s still a lot to figure out and he isn’t looking forward to the lengthy talk that still needs to take place but if it means Wash will kiss him some more, Tucker is more than willing to suffer through it.

Red and blue fireworks erupt in the air above him, shooting up from where Theta sits near the foot of the bed. They burn bright trails through the darkness, erupting into brilliant bursts that fill the room with colour.

Folding his arms beneath his head, Tucker releases a deep sigh and grins up at the ceiling.

Totally fucking worth it.

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