All or Nothing

by ShadeOps21, SpitfireUSN

Summary

Rebecca “Dash” Myers is one member of the Task Force that has truly earned her place on the team. Tom “Shade” Williams is the new ‘recruit’ that has some reservations of having a female shooter in such a high risk job. Both of them have strong feelings on the matter. With tensions rising between the two stubborn operators, will their disagreements mean the end of their careers or will a newfound respect be forged from the flames?
First Encounters

Holsworthy Barracks, New South Wales, Australia

“So, you’re heading stateside for some exchange, right?” Corporal Jamie Lynch, better known as ‘Hangman’ to his squad mates, asked his friend as he watched him finish packing his things.

“Yeah, though it’s more of a transfer than an exchange. No end date, and you aren’t picking up a Yank to fill my slot either.” Sergeant Tom Williams, ‘Shade’ to his team, responded. He closed up his pack and set it down on the ground against his bunk. The Commando took one last cursory glance around his old room, making sure that he had collected everything that was his and returned everything else back to the base’s quartermaster. His spare uniforms and some of his civilian clothing were packed away in his field pack, whilst his weapon and gear were packed away back in the armory. Whilst he wasn’t one for sentimentality, he wasn’t going to lie and say that he’d miss his M4A5.

Hangman walked up to his mate and pulled him into a quick hug, a wordless farewell to a man that had been watching his back for many years now. “You be safe out there, those Americans play by different rules over there. Last thing I want is to tell your gang that you’re coming home in a box.”

Shade hugged him back tightly. “Course I will, mate. It’ll take more than a few different SOPs to take me out. Now let me go you prick, I’ve got a plane to catch. Last thing I want is to reinforce the ‘Aussies are lazy’ cliche.”

The pair released and Hangman stepped back to let Shade past. “In that case then, good sir, your chariot awaits!” Shade rolled his eyes with a muttering of ‘bastard’, to which Hangman just laughed.

Denver International Airport, Colorado, United States

With earplugs in and pack over his shoulder, Shade stepped out of the skybridge and into the terminal of Denver International. Subconsciously, his eyes flickered across the crowd of civilians that were milling about: some waiting for their flights, others reuniting with family, some having difficulty with their bags as a wheel got jammed up on them. Within moments, he’d also identified the exits and areas of note that a regular civi might miss: CCTV cameras, airport police and security personnel, the man wearing a military uniform with a whiteboard bearing his name.

"Wait, what?"

Shade tugged out one of his earphones as he approached, the soldier lowering the sign and closing the distance. “Sergeant Williams, Australian Army?"

“That’s me, mate. And you are?” Shade asked, shuffling the weight of his pack around as they started walking towards baggage claim.

“Corporal Anthony White, I’ve been sent here to collect you on behalf of both General Sheppard and Captain Mactavish.”

“Right, seems about fair. Don’t expect the bosses to take time out of their busy day to pick up little ol’ me.” Shade said with a chuckle as he checked his watch, noting that the flight had taken a bit longer than he had wanted. “No chance of getting something to munch on around these parts, right?”

“The Captain did say that the sooner you got to the base, the better… but I don’t see the harm in a
“little detour.” He said with a small smile. Shade grinned in response.

“Tony, mate, I have the feeling that this is the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Dash set a hard pace, on her second lap around the perimeter of the infirmary, since it had the largest square-footage of the buildings, she used it for her distance training. The ground behind the building was chewed up and uneven, good for footwork, bad for running at night. But it wasn’t night, it was midday, and Dash skipped easily around the potholes. She checked her step to the beat of the music in her ears as the song changed and let out a long breath and took a controlled breath in as she pressed further.

This was a daily exercise for Dash. Part of her namesake, in fact. She slowed down as she reached the front of the building again and took one earbud out as she checked her time. It wasn’t bad, but she could do better. Unfortunately, she didn’t have time for that. There would be a new shooter coming in some time and that meant things around base would pick up. She preferred them slow, so she wanted to get things done before the newbie got there. She walked off toward the barracks to shower and change before heading to the administration building to collect the paperwork she needed for replacement parts for her shotgun. The grip was getting worn down and she needed a new one, lest the current one slip and lead to a very unfortunate scene.

She got the papers she needed and sat down at the table in the rec room to fill them out. Of course, she was easily distracted as members of the Task Force and other teams that called the base home were in and out of the room. They talked and yelled and laughed. But it was this or anxiety-inducing quiet, so Dash dealt with it, and kept her music in her ears as she did the paperwork. She ended up tapping her foot to the music as it switched to a more upbeat, fast paced song. If anyone was annoyed by it, they didn’t say anything or Dash didn’t notice. That was until her entire leg started bouncing and she forced herself to stop and change positions.

The base came into view as they drove down the dusty road in a nondescript sedan, Shade finishing off the dregs of his drink before stuffing it into the paper bag from the drive-through they had stopped at on the way. He brushed some of the burger crumbs off of his shirt, glad that he had opted to wear something a little cooler on the flight over. The air conditioning in the sedan was poor, despite being cranked to the lowest temperature setting available, and he had rolled down the window for most of the drive until they hit the roughly paved and dust covered road.

“Lotta room to run around over here…” He said to himself as he surveyed his surroundings. As they got closer, Shade could begin to identify different structures and buildings along the perimeter and behind it. He could even see a small air traffic control tower off to the left side nearby a series of tall hangars. The envelope detailing his transfer didn’t provide much in the way of information regarding his host unit, just that they were of a considerable size with a decent support and logistics network to back it up.

But his assumptions on the unit’s size were busted as they drove through the gates and into the base proper. Shade had lost count of the amount of personnel he saw as they made their way to what he presumed was the administration and command section of the base. The interesting thing was the mixture of appearance: a vast majority of people he had seen were wearing uniforms with no specific markings besides a flag patch, but quite a few were also seen wearing civilian clothing, or a mixture of civilian and military gear. He also swore that he saw someone wearing a ghost-face balaclava.

“Okay, we’re here Sergeant. The Captain’s office is up on the second floor, just follow the signs. Your bag will be at your room waiting for you.” Corporal White said as she shut off the sedan’s engine.
“Great, guess I’ll get going.” Shade said, reaching across and shaking the corporal’s hand. “I’ll see you around.”

“Will do Sergeant.” White answered, returning the handshake before Shade climbed out of the car and made his way to the building’s entrance. The cool embrace of the building’s air conditioning felt like absolute heaven to the Australian, and he took his time walking through one of the hallways in order to maximise the cooling effect. He studied the walls, covered in portraits and illustrations of conflicts long-past: World War II, Korea and Vietnam to name a few.

Just before the stairwell, a section of one of the walls was covered in portraits of different soldiers and servicemen and women, the plaque above denoting that it was a wall of honour to those that had made the greatest sacrifice. Shade stood there for a minute, looking over all of the faces and names of those before him, reading over their accomplishments and the actions that led to their demise. The 2nd Commando Regiment had a similar wall back at Holsworthy, but it was nowhere near as full as this wall. The fact both unnerved and strangely excited the man; either they had a higher operating tempo compared to regular SF teams, or their missions were *that* much more dangerous.

It didn’t take long for Shade to find the office of the Captain, one Captain John MacTavish if he read the silver name plaque on the door correctly. He knocked and waited for the gruff sounding ‘come in’ before entering and closing the door behind him.

Shade wouldn’t be the first to admit that when he had imagined the Captain, he was picturing a well groomed hairstyle, maybe the occasional scratch that hadn’t healed properly, a clean and pressed dress uniform, and a proper way of speaking. To say that the Captain’s real appearance caught him off guard wouldn’t be far from the truth.

Closely shaven mohawk, a face marred with scars, stubble that covered most of the man’s jaw, a black tee shirt tucked into MTP trousers, and a general air of ‘badassery’ that seemed to just emanate from the man. Clearly the Captain had seen a fair share of action, and continues to do so.

“Sir, Sergeant Tom Williams as requested.” Shade said, coming to a loose stance of attention in front of the desk. MacTavish looked up from his laptop and gestured for Shade to sit down on one of the chairs in front of him.

“Relax, Tom, we aren’t much for formalities here. I’m glad you could be here, we’ve been looking for another assaulter like yourself.” He closed the lid of his laptop and leant back in his office chair, looking at Shade with a neutral expression. The rich-yet-understandable Scottish accent caught Shade by surprise, who was expecting him to be an American. “I apologise for the lack of information or detail in your letter, but we try to keep the cards close to our chest here in the One-Four-One.”

“Understandable, I assume this is the part where you tell me that this is actually a public affairs posting?” Shade said with a light chuckle, which MacTavish mirrored.

“If only it were that easy. No, the Task Force is a multinational unit comprised of the best of operators and special forces personnel of the US military and her allies, namely the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and a few European countries. We take on missions that are higher risk or higher priority than what groups like DEVGRU or the SAS might take on. Despite this, our success rate is extremely high and our casualty rate inversely low.”

Shade sat there for the next half an hour as he and the Captain discussed his place in the unit, what the expectations were, and what kinds of missions that he could be deployed on. After the meeting was said and done, Shade left the building and stepped out into the warm Colorado sun.
“So, he said that my room was in Accommodation Block C, on the third floor... wish he gave me a map.”

As he started walking along the path, he spotted a woman leaving another building adjacent to him. She was wearing a plain green tee and uniform pants with her short-ish red hair pulled up into a loose bun. Shade stepped off the path and crossed the small patch of grass to approach her for direction.

“G’day, mind if I ask you a quick question?”

Dash had just gotten done filling out the paperwork for a weapon mod she needed, and was headed out to watch the guys finish up with their training when an unfamiliar Australian voice caught her attention.

“You must be the new guy,” she commented, crossing her arms, “Lost? Lemme guess, Cap turned you out to figure it out for yourself.”

“Honestly, now that you’ve said that, it sounds like he’s done just that. My stuff’s with my room at Accom’ Block Charlie. You mind showing me where exactly that is in this place?” He said with an easy smile, looking a little bit flustered from the change of environment.

Dash nodded, “Barracks are over that way,” she pointed over her shoulder at the sprawling buildings behind her, “Buildings are labeled so it should be pretty easy to find.”

The man looked over towards where she had pointed, and nodded in acknowledgement. “Sweet. Cheers, love. I’d have been heading the wrong way entirely. See ya’ around.” He said with a wink as he started making his away from her and towards his destination.

Dash watched him leave with a raised eyebrow, on a team full of non-Americans, she was used to words like ‘love’ and ‘mate’ being thrown around and not really meaning anything, but it felt weird with someone she didn’t know. She shook her head at herself and continued on her way to the PT field to yell at anyone slacking.

She walked up and stood next to Roach, also observing the ongoing PT, “Did you know the newbie was comin’ in today?” she asked curiously, “‘Cause I sure didn’t. Thought we’d be waitin’ another day or two...”

Roach shrugged, “Plans change?” he suggested, “Whatever, sooner he’s in sooner we can get him versed in the Task Force way of life,” he laughed.

“Oh he’s already here,” Dash looked over at him, “Saw him comin’ out of the offices, lookin’ for the barracks.”

Roach chuckled, “What, did the boss leave him stranded? He did the same with me, y’know.”

Dash scoffed, “He did the same with all of us!” she thumped him on the chest, “It’s what he does.”

“And that’s why he’s the boss. He can get away with shit like that.” Roach said with a grin, looking back towards the PT exercise. “Anyway, what’s he like, the FNG?”

“Australian,” Dash answered simply and shrugged, “I don’t know! We didn’t stick around to chat, we got things to do.”

“Huh, Rook’ll be happy,” Roach said more to himself than anyone else, “he was starting to whine
about being the lone Australian on the team,” he then turned to look at Dash, “but what’s your first impression of him, professionally speaking?”

Dash shrugged, “Laid back, for the most part… he called me love…” she chuckled, “Doesn’t matter how long I spend around you people, that is always weird to an American.”

“Yeah, Rook did the same thing when he first met you too… must be an Aussie thing…” Roach said thoughtfully, “I give him six weeks.”

Dash laughed, “I give him one.”

“And I thought you were the generous one…” Roach rolled his eyes and shook his head with a laugh.

Dash nodded absently, now focused more on the people running laps than the conversation.

“… to Dash, come in Dash.” Roach said with a quirked eyebrow, waving a hand in front of her face.


“I was saying, maybe we should drag the team together in the rec room and then hold a meet-n-greet or something for the new guy,” Roach suggested with his arms crossed over his chest, “the sooner everyone’s introduced, the sooner we can start the real fun.”

Dash grinned and put her little fingers in the corners of her mouth for a loud, piercing whistle, “Fall out to the rec room!” she called.

Roach rubbed his hands together. “I’ll get Royce to grab his stereo, Meat and his seemingly endless supply of snack food. You mind playing ‘fetch’ and grab the FNG?” He didn’t give her a chance to respond as he ducked away and joined the rest of the men on their way to the rec room, already conversion with the two Canadian men in question.

Dash rolled her eyes as Roach ran off, and turned and made her way to Charlie building. She stood out front of it for a moment, wondering what room he’d been put in before shrugging and entering the building.

She knew the first floor was full, so she started on the second floor, able to hear music faintly. Dash knew some members of the Task Force liked it, she did herself in fact, but she didn’t recognize this music from any of her teammates’ playlists, so she followed it. She ended up outside a door on the third floor and knocked hard.

There was a loud clang, followed by a muffled “Ah, shit” before the door opened to reveal the Australian from earlier, rubbing the back of his head with a grimace. The grimace disappeared when he saw the woman from earlier standing in front of him. “Oh, hey there. I made it to my home!” He said as he gestured back into his room with his free hand.

Dash nodded, “Team’s gathering in the rec room, come on down so you can meet everyone,” she gestured for him to follow her as she turned and left.

He was quick to follow, closing the door behind him.

“Awesome, been looking forward to meeting the boys.” He said with a smile, falling into step beside her. “Oh, forgive me. Name’s Tom, Tom Williams. Sergeant from the 2nd Commando Regiment, Australian Army.” He said, extending a hand towards her.
“Master Sergeant Rebecca Myers, Marine Corps,” Dash introduced herself, taking his hand in a firm hold, “Call me Dash. Rec room’s in the building I was coming out of earlier. Let’s get there before they start the party without us, yeah?”

“Sounds like a plan…and if we’re going by nicknames, mine’s Shade. Don’t ask, it’s a long story,” Shade said with a chuckle, “so, you must be close with the teams, yeah?” He asked as they made their way to the rec room.

Dash looked over at him with a raised eyebrow, but rolled her eyes, this song and dance again, “You could say that,” she answered, she’d just wait and let him see for himself.

Shade nodded in understanding. “Fair enough, we had a few chicks working in both admin, command and supply back with the 1st Commando. In addition to being SF, they’re also a reserve unit. They fit in well with the guys though, which was great. A few of them could out-swear us, actually, which is saying something,” he chuckled. He stepped ahead of her and opened the door for her, nodding as she walked past and entered the building.

Dash rolled her eyes to herself, again, and led the way to the rec room, she could already hear the thumping electro music on the other side of the door. She opened it and left it open for Shade to follow her in.

“A-thank you,” he said with a smirk as he stepped in and surveyed the scene in front of him. About a dozen or so men were spread around the room, hanging out as they listened to the music, tried to talk over it, or tried to dance to it. He looked over to Dash with a raised eyebrow and mouthed ‘party house’ to her before shrugging.

She shrugged back and whistled to grab people’s attention over the music, “Introduce yourselves, ya rude sons a,” at that moment Meat turned the speaker up to drown her out and everyone laughed before he turned it back down to a level where everyone could be heard.

“I’ll go first, shall I?” Shade said to her before stepping further into the room. “Well, g’day all of you lot. Name’s Sergeant Tom Williams, but I go by Shade. And no, don’t ask me how I got it. That’s a story from another day. Anyway, I hail from the land down under’s 2nd Commando Regiment, where I was an Assaulter for four years. Lookin’ forward to kicking ass, taking names, and chewing bubblegum with all of you!”

Roach stood up first and approached Shade, “Sergeant Gary Sanderson, but everyone calls me Roach. Welcome to the 141 Shade.”

Meat and Royce followed Roach up, “Sergeants Brian Tanner and Mark Roycewitz, Meat and Royce.” They too shook his hand. The process continued with Matt “Scarecrow” Graves, Michael “Ozone” DuFrene, Nick “Chemo” Brent, and Jayson “Rook” Cooper. The second Shade had met and realised that he wasn’t the only Aussie on the team was the moment a shiver ran down the backs of everyone else in the room.

Shade turned to Dash and smiled, “Anyone else we’re missing? I know the Captain, but he told me this is team of twelve, and I count nine, ten including me.”

Dash was leaning against the wall next to the door, “LT is out taking care of business,” she shrugged, “And that brings us to eleven.”

“Right, eleven. Where’s the twelfth man?” He asked, looking around the room for an answer. The reaction he received to the question confused him, with some of the men frowning at him, some averting their eyes, and a few looking past him and towards Dash. He looked at them once more,
then turned around and looked at her with a critical expression. “I call bullshit.”

Dash chuckled, “I can kick just as much ass as you can greenie.”

Shade shook his head. “No, no way,” he spun around and pointed an accusing finger at everyone else, “this is just a joke on the new guy, right? Just to fuck with him?”

“Let’s not ruffle our feathers now, just ‘cause a girl’s in spec ops doesn’t mean nothin’,” Dash admonished, “I earned my place here, same as you, and everyone else on this team.”

He shook his head and made his way to the exit. “No… it doesn’t sit right with me, not in the slightest. I’ll be back in a few…” Shade all but stormed out, a determined expression set on his face as he nearly slammed the door closed.

Dash sighed when the door closed, just shy of a slam and set to keep to her spot at the edge of the room while the others slowly came down from the shock of rejection of their teammate.

Rook cleared his throat from his position on the couch nearby. “Well… I don’t blame him, to be honest.”

Dash shrugged, “You came around, so will he. Doesn’t make it any less frustrating,” she left the room quietly and headed for the gym to work off the steam she was building up.

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

So there we are! The start of a wonderful *cough cough* relationship between our OCs. Only time will tell how they will grow and if they’ll ever get along with each other. I can’t wait to see it, that’s for sure.

(Spitfire)

Well then. Uh. That was fun. I enjoyed the collabs I did with RedDawnShadow, so, here I am with a different person and the source of one epic oc Tom “Shade” Williams. And also a second try at Dash, without the character that’ll steal the spotlight lol. So… This has been fun, and I look forward to doing more.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Shade walked through the hallways of the administration building with a purpose, the Captain’s office. He brushed past many of the staff who stopped to greet him or ask him what he was doing, and he nearly stormed into the office itself before stopping and knocking. A brusk “come in” sounded out a minute later, and Shade did all he could to restrain himself from speaking too abruptly.

“Ah, Sergeant Williams. I trust you found your room well?” MacTavish greeted, closing a file that he and another man, who was that same man with the ghost balaclava Shade had spotted on the drive in earlier, were conferring about.

“Yes sir. I’ve got to ask you about a member of your team though.” Shade said evenly, trying not to let his emotions betray him.

MacTavish sat back, looking at the Sergeant evenly, “There a problem?” Ghost was ever silent and simply crossed his arms.

“Sir, about Master Sergeant Myers, I feel-”

“Master Sergeant Myers,” Ghost spoke bruskly, “is an outstanding member of our finely selected team,” he cut Shade off in a warning tone.

Shade looked at the masked man cautiously, before turning his attention back to the Captain.

“Regardless, do you think it’s wise that we have a women working in a team that takes on such high risk missions that we do?” He said with a small sigh, glancing at the other man once more. “I mean all due respect, but I don’t feel comfortable working with a woman on the basis that I feel that they are at a higher risk of fatigue and have less physical strength than a male. Not to mention what an opposing force might do to her in the event that she is taken prisoner…”

“Myers can take care of herself,” MacTavish responded quickly, before Ghost could, “She consistently out performs half our men.”

“Not to mention what she could do to you if she heard you talkin’ like that,” Ghost muttered.

MacTavish let the comment slide, “She may be the only woman on the team but she is no less valuable than any of us. She’s been a match for even Ghost in the ring,” he assured, gesturing at his Lieutenant, who nodded proudly.

“I take your word for it, sir, but I still don’t feel that it’s the right thing to do.” Shade said resolutely, instinctively falling into a loose ‘at ease’ stance. “I have nothing against her personally, she seems like a delightful person to know and work with, but that’s just how I feel about this kind of thing.”

“If you’re that uncomfortable with it, you’re free to go home,” Ghost responded, voice low, “Myers has been here longer than you. Maybe show some bloody respect for your fellow soldiers.”

“The Lieutenant has a point, Sergeant. Myers has been here a lot longer than you have, and has proven her worth in both training and on missions. And if you ask any of the others around here, they would all say that her gender does not matter in the slightest,” MacTavish said evenly, folding his arms across his chest, “as Ghost said; if you don’t like it, you’re welcome to return back to your home unit.”

Shade stiffened at the comment. “I’m sure I’ll manage, sirs,” he said evenly, trying to hide the fact that he did not like losing this little disagreement.
“Was there anything else then, Sergeant?” Ghost said evenly, though there was no mistaking the trace of venom in his tone.

“No sir.”

“Good, Ghost, if you’ll escort the Sergeant back to his room, maybe show him around the base a bit while you’re at it.” MacTavish said as he turned to look at another file on his desk.

“The scenic route? Will do sir.”

Dash stepped back from the punching bag, sweat dripping down from her hairline. She wiped it away from her eyes absently as she studied the bag and planned what her next sequence would be. She decided that it was time to take a breather and stepped back to the bench, unwrapping her knuckles as she picked up her water bottle. She was small, slim, and female, she’d been dealing with people assuming she was weak her entire life. She’d enlisted to prove she wasn’t, so she could get away from all the judgment and skepticism. But, no, it was everywhere.

It seemed prejudice was simply the human way. She rolled her shoulders as she sat down, she’d been at it at least two hours by now. Dash frowned and stepped up to the bag again, forgetting to re-wrap her hands, and let loose a volley of punches that sent the bag swinging violently. She exhaled heavily, putting out one hand to steady the bag before she pivoted and hit the bag with a round kick before stepping into a follow-up punch.

Footsteps came up behind her and caught her attention, turning around she saw Rook taking a seat on the bench beside her stuff. “Hey Dash, how ya’ feeling?”

“I’m alright,” Dash responded with a grunt as she continued pummeling the punching bag.

Rook shook his head, leaning back a bit. “Yeah, I’m gonna go ahead and call BS on that… wink once for yes and two for no, but was it to do with Shade’s comments earlier today?”

Dash sighed as she steadied the bag again and looked at Rook, “I should be used to it by now. Been hearing it every day for twenty-four years.”

“That doesn’t make it right. You shouldn’t be used to it because it shouldn’t happen in the first place,” he said, reaching up to offer her the water bottle by his side, “Don’t shoot me down or anything, but I can see where he’s coming from. Remember how long it took me to adjust?”

“Yeah, took me savin’ your Aussie ass,” Dash teased and shook her head, “He’ll come around, might have to kick his ass in PT, but,” she shrugged.

Rook chuckled, setting the bottle back down. “Exactly, he’ll come around. Besides, you’ve also got nine over-protective brothers and two over-protective Dads that’ll knock him down a peg or four if he starts talking shit about you. I guarantee it.”

She nodded, “Yeah, thanks for the pep talk,” she turned back to the bench and sat down again.

“What else am I here for?” Rook joked, holding his arms out wide. “Certainly not to work out, no sir, not at all.”

Dash laughed and rolled her eyes at him, picking up her back, “I’m gonna hit the showers.”

“Have fun, and don’t use all the hot water. You know how Royce gets if it’s cold for him!”
Shade sat at one of the few tables in the armoury, a rifle and a myriad of different parts set out in front of him. The rifle, a HK416D with a fourteen and a half inch barrel, was something he could only have dreamed of using back with the Commandos, who were stuck with M4A5s with few modifications. When he’d spoke to the armourer about what he could and couldn’t do, his response was essentially ‘if you can build it, you can use it’.

Which is what Shade was currently doing. He’d already swapped out the standard iron sights for some flip-up sights, changed the flash hider to one that was threaded to accept a suppressor, fitted both an AN/PEQ-15 IR laser illuminator and a MX300 flashlight to the top and right side rails respectively, and fitted an ergonomic angled grip to the bottom rail. The main issue that Shade was facing was which optics to choose.

He was so engrossed with his internal dilemma that he didn’t notice the two other operators sit down across from him and watch him silently. It was only when Shade set down the magnifier for a holographic sight did he see them, and almost shot out of his chair in surprise.

“Christ almighty, you sneak up on a guy like that and he might pop you one.” He said as he collected himself.

“Well, that’s kinda what we’re trained to do buddy,” the first one, Meat if Shade recalled correctly, said, “otherwise we wouldn’t be here.”

“Exactly. So you better improve your situational awareness, lest you fall victim to a fate worse than death,” Royce said in an ominous tone of voice, “the curse of the never-ending PT test.”

“... never-ending PT test?” Shade asked dubiously, looking at the pair of them with a quirked eyebrow. “This isn’t another FNG fuck-around, is it?”

Meat chuckled softly. “Oh I wish, but you speak to anyone on this base and they’ll tell you how horrific it is.”

Shade shook his head at the comment, but glanced around the room and saw another man with a serious-looking sniper rifle approach the armory counter. He turned in his chair and called out to him. “Oi, mate! These two over here were telling me about this bullcrap ‘never ending PT test’. It is legit or what?”

The sniper stopped and looked at the three of them with a stern expression. “You mean the Crucible?” He said in a soft Irish accent, almost as if he didn’t want to dare speak of it. Any doubt that Shade had was washed away by that simple statement, and he turned back towards the two Canadian men with a hesitant and slightly fearful expression.

“Do I want to know?” He asked quietly, leaning forward slightly.

“No, not really, but I feel it is our duty, our mission, our purpose in life to warn you of the trial you might face.” Royce said just as quietly. “Thing is, it’s personalised to the person that has to suffer it. Archer over there? He had to run a full PT test as fast as he could, in full ghillie, with his full extended patrol gear as well. And once he finished, he had to go back and do it in reverse.”

“Scarecrow, our gunner. He had to carry a fully disassembled M2HB in its carry pack, along with his usual Mark 48 and ammo load, and he had to run laps until he passed out, his legs seized, or he dropped his gun.” Meat said, looking off to the side.

“He was lucky to last an hour and a half…” Royce murmured.

Shade was in disbelief.Whilst he understood that the training for teams such as this task force was
very intense, he couldn’t believe that something like this would actually be permitted. “There’s no way that it’s legal.”

“Dude, Ghost is the guy who suggested it to the commanders and got approval, and he oversees every Crucible run.” Meat stated, glancing around to see if the lieutenant in question was around. “And he reserves the right to give it to you anytime and anywhere. You’ll never know when, or for what reason.”

“Like talking shit about a certain member of the team, for instance.” It all clicked into place with that simple comment. Shade sat back up and frowned at the two men.

“Is this about what I said about the Master Sergeant?” He said, crossing his arms.

“Maaaaybe…” Meat trailed off, as Royce stood up and moved to stand to the side of Shade, “you see… yes, you might have issues with her and might doubt her capability, but I can tell you that with no shadow of a doubt, she is one of the best _fucking_ soldiers I’ve seen in a long time.”

“And we get where you’re coming from, we all do. I’ll gladly admit that I had a few concerns for her when she joined the team a while back, but she quickly showed that she more than earned her place,” Royce added, leaning down to hover over Shade slightly, “you, on the other hand, have done nothing but alienate yourself from the team that is meant to watch your back.”

“All the best start if you ask me,” Meat remarked, picking up an ACOG that Shade had picked out for his rifle, “I mean I’ve seen worse, but you, you’re up there.”

“What we’re saying, Shadey-boy, is this: sort your shit out, deal with the fact that we have a chick on our team, and learn to work as a fucking team member. Don’t let your petty male-dominance thing get in the way of your job,” Royce said lowly and menacingly, “we good?”

Shade looked Royce in the face with a plain face, trying his best not to reach up and throttle the man. “As good as we can be.”

“Good!” Meat said cheerily, standing up from the table, “glad we had this little chat, buddy. I have a feeling that this’ll be a great friendship.”

Both him and Royce turned to leave, but Royce quickly stopped himself. “Oh, Shade? Being an assaulter, you’ll likely want either an ACOG with a back-up reflex, or a low-profile red dot with a magnifier.”

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Dash stood at the track, stretching comfortably in her full work-out gear, hair up in a pony-tail. She watched Shade step onto the track and dropped her arms, getting down to stretch her legs. She was going for max speed at max distance today, and with someone to prove against, she would be pushing hard for it, rather than casually training to stay fit.

Shade barely acknowledged her presence as he got himself prepared for a run, wearing a pair of compression training shorts and a camouflaged tank top, a pair of earbuds in as he listened to music. Every so often he would sneak a glance at Dash, often frowning mildly after each time. He had initially planned on going for a light jog, but now with Dash here, he could likely prove one of his concerns; her speed and endurance.

Without so much as a simple ‘hello’, Shade started off on the track at a light pace, testing the waters. Dash watched him go and finished her stretch before standing up smoothly and setting off, picking up speed slowly as she ate up the distance. Before long she was running in pace with Shade, and then passing him as she continued to build to her max.
Shade smirked, recognising a challenge when he saw one, and quickly put on a burst of speed himself. It didn’t take much for him to catch up, now barely behind her and off to her right side. Internally, he remarked at her speed and how she hadn’t yet burned out.

Dash heard the footfalls of pace with herself behind her and focused on her music to keep her in step as she continued building and hit her max speed. She could hold the speed for a good distance, but it wasn’t as far as she would’ve liked. About thirty meters, her goal today was to push it further.

Shade hung back, observing her form and quietly appreciating the pace she had set. It was all a matter of time though, neither of them were Olympians that could hold pace for eight or ninety meters, but everyone slows down sooner or later. He himself felt him reaching the end of his own soon, but he couldn’t let himself be beat. With one final push, he closed the gap and brought himself beside her.

At thirty meters, Dash was huffing, but forced herself to keep putting one foot in front of the other as quickly as possible, taking deep controlled breaths as she chanted the cadence playing in her earbuds under her breath. Five more meters and she felt her pace falter, but, with the neighsayer right next to her, she couldn’t let herself slow down to a more manageable pace, so she kept pushing.

Shade hit the end of his rope, and dropped back into what he called his recovery pace. He was legitimately impressed by her performance, and he couldn’t tell if he should be angry, annoyed, or pleased. Maybe the others in the team had a point… though, he began to rationalise: a simple race with lightweight clothing didn’t mean much when compared to sprinting in the midst of a firefight, wearing a bulky uniform, armour plating, and who-knows-what-else.

Dash grinned to herself as the Australian slowed down, but, she didn’t want to spite him by simply slowing down now that he’d given up, that would just be rude. So she keep going for a few more paces, before faltering again and slowing down as well. Dash was huffing, all thoughts of controlling her breath pressed from her mind as she focused on keeping herself moving.

Shade brought it around to complete his lap before stopping at the benches to catch a breather. He stretched a bit as he cooled down, not wanting to risk his body seizing up on him later that night. As he took a sip from his water, his gazed focused back on Dash. ‘Certainly lives up to her moniker, that’s for sure…’

Dash knelt down after finishing her lap and lifted her pant legs slightly to get at the ankle weights, that now felt like they weighed a ton, and tear them off. She took a slow walk around the starting area, kicking out her legs, shaking the exhaustion off. She dropped on the ground next to her water bottle and took large sips as she regained her breath.

Shade stepped up to stand beside her, and looked down at her panting form. “Not bad, not bad at all…” he said before turning around to collect his things and head off to take a shower.

Refreshed, and now downright starving, Shade found himself in the large mess hall of the base. He was quite surprised at the range of food options available, and after collecting a decent sized burger with a serving of chips and a small salad, headed down to a fairly empty table down by one corner. He had only just picked up the delicious looking burger and was about to bite into it when a stranger sat down across from him. He looked up over at them and frowned mildly. It was that Gary/Roach bloke, the first person he met in the rec room. Roach opened his mouth, but Shade beat him to it.

“Look mate, if you’re here to give me the third degree about my stance on women in this unit, you’ll have to take a bloody number.” He said with a cold stare.
“Actually… I was just going to ask how your first day was today, that’s all,” Roach replied unfazed, “someone has to look out for the FNG after all.” The Brit sat down and rested his head on his hands. “Though by the sounds of things, maybe tomorrow will be better?”

Shade scoffed at this. “Right, what was your first clue?”

“Maybe the small detail that it’s a range day tomorrow, that might be a clue.” Roach said smugly, watching the Aussie’s eyes light up slightly. “Oh man, you haven’t even seen the range either, either. You are in for quite the treat, if I say so myself.”

Shade swallowed a mouthful of burger, and cleared his throat slightly. “What exactly are we looking at here, Roachy.”

“Static and dynamic target firing lines, both indoor and outdoor. Dynamic room-clearing areas for both single and multilevel structures, a three-gun course, and a long range sniper course,” He said with a chuckle at Shade’s awestruck expression, “yeah, that was my reaction when I first heard of it, let alone saw it.”

“Sounds like absolute heaven. What do you run with, by the way? I was setting up a fourteen-inch 416 earlier, kinda curious to see what everyone else rolls with.” Shade asked, going for a handful of chips.

“ACR with a carbine barrel and full rail system, with an Elcan sight and an M320 40mm grenade launcher. I also use those PMAGs that Magpul make, a little bit lighter to carry,” Roach listed off nonchalantly, “you ever use one?”

“Nah mate, we were stuck with bog-standard M4s that the ADF bought for SOCOM to use. I mean, we painted them up and got to pull all kinds of shit on them. But at the end of a day, a polished shit is still a shit, no matter how you look at it.” Shade said with a dry chuckle, “never liked how much it jammed up during bushland and desert ops, even if I was careful with it.”

“Yeah? I’ve heard a few complains about that. I know a handful of the guys use the M4 platform but with completely redesigned internals, nothing factory,” Roach stated, glancing at a few of the others around them, “meaning that they jam up a lot less, especially with the right amount of TLC.”

“Cool. I might borrow that ACR of yours off you to try out tomorrow, if you’re cool with that?” Shade asked, his food mostly all gone barring a few left over chips.

“Yeah, not a problem at all. Might even convert you over, perhaps.” Roach said with a chuckle.

Author's Notes:

(Shade)

Tensions are starting to build up, and Shade’s first impression on the rest of the team is abysmal at best. I don’t think there’s much he’ll be able to do to redeem himself, and if there is, it’ll take a lot of effort. Spits and I pushed this and the first chapter out in a solid day, after maybe ten minutes of discussion via PMs… make of that what you will.
(Spitfire)

Dash is so gonna regret that run. Especially on range day. So yep, that’s about it I believe. I got nothin’.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Shade felt like he had died and gone to heaven. Sure, the training fields that Holsworth had set up were decent enough, not to mention a few fields and mock up towns in northern Queensland near Shoalwater Bay. But this, this was so much better in his opinion.

The primary weapons range was split into two halves, the first half being static plate targets at varying ranges in and out of cover, from fifty meters all the way to three hundred. That part was pretty stock standard. The second half was like the first, but with moving and rotating targets, all at various speeds and in different directions. There were also a few pop-up civilian targets mixed in as well, which added a layer of complexity. The same range was duplicated and scaled down for use with sidearms and secondary weapons instead.

The sniper course, which didn’t greatly interest Shade but still proved impressive in its own right, was a lot narrower but a lot longer to compensate. Much like the primary range, it also had targets in and out of cover, though pushing out to four hundred meters in distance. It would’ve gone further, he recalled Roach telling him, but the government wasn’t keen to grant a kilometer long space to facilitate super-long range engagements.

Lastly, and this was were Shade very nearly squealed like a teenage fangirl, there were the dynamic combat ranges. Set up inside a pair of interlinked warehouses, the range consisted of three different close-quarters environments with a modular room layout system that could be used to set up any kind of internal structure. He could only imagine the different environments he could be facing each time he ran the courses.

“I told you, it’s amazing,” Roach said, stirring Shade from his wonderment, “I nearly had to change my pants the first time I tried it out.”

Shade grimaced at the comment, playfully shoving the Brit aside. “Dude, too much intel… guess we should give the course a try, right?”

“Sounds good, pick a course and I’ll run it through the control station.” Roach said as he gestured towards the three areas that were set up. One was made up to resemble a single-floor house, whilst the other two were set up as a garage and storage complex respectively. Shade walked over towards the single floor range and Roach quickly climbed the stairwell to man the target controls. “Okay Shadey, rules of engagement are pretty simple: shoot the bad guys, don’t shoot the civis. I’ll be timing this run and for every target missed, I’m adding five seconds. Every civi hit, I’m adding fifteen.”

“Sounds fair,” Shade said through his radio headset, his newly configured HK416D with a Aimpoint red dot mounted on the top rail, recommended by Royce a day ago. “Ready when you are!”

Roach watched as Shade kicked the first door down and quickly made short work of the two targets in the first hallway. Moving rapidly, and with a level of speed and focus that Roach had never seen, he quickly cleared the first two rooms on the right of the hallway, before checking the corner to engage a fifth target.

The sound of footsteps momentarily distracted Roach and he turned to see a grimacing Dash enter the control station and take a place beside him. “You feelin’ alright?”

“Regretting life, but yeah,” Dash groaned, rubbing at her back as she looked over at the screen and
watched with an appraising eye.

Roach quirked an eyebrow at her, looking back at the screens to watch Shade clear the fifth room in a surprisingly rapid time. He quickly keyed up the records of previous runs and saw that Shade was a good three seconds ahead of the current leader, Royce. “What exactly did you do?”

“Sprinted about forty meters with ankle weights…” Dash smiled sheepishly then frowned, “Never again. If I try, whack me.”


“Well, I was working on my sprint distance, but after thirty-five Shade dropped back and it would’ve looked rude to stop just after he did. Like I was only holding it to say I beat him,” Dash shrugged and sighed, “I should’a just dropped…."

Roach sighed at this, and watched as Shade prepared to breach the last room, still four seconds in the lead now. “I know that he said some shit that rubbed you the wrong way, but it’s not worth hurting yourself to prove a point.”

Dash shrugged, “I’m just sore, it’s not a big deal. Besides, he seems to have enough against me, not gonna spite him into having more.”

“If you say so…” Roach said as the buzzer rang out indicating the last target being dropped, “...wow, is that a new course record?” He asked, nudging Dash’s side as he pointed up to an LCD that had all the previous times and Shade’s run time beside it.

“Looks like it,” Dash nodded, “Not bad at all.”

Roach started to chuckle as he saved the time and watched Royce’s own time drop down one slot. “Heh, Royce’s not gonna be too pleased about that. Took like four attempts for him to get it down that low, and Shade’s just wiped off four seconds on his first run.”

“Fresh eyes fresh mind,” Dash commented, frowning as she watched her own score drop off the top five board, “Queue me up. See if I can’t knock Roach down some.”

Roach smirked, resetting the range. “Heh, will d-... heeeey!” He exclaimed in fake offense.

Dash smiled and laughed, “Seriously, though, queue me up, I need to try to top my best.”

“Good luck! She’s all set, ready for you.” He stated as he reset the timer and watched Shade exit the range through the cameras.

Shade walked through the front door and closed it behind him with a wide smile on his face. It was probably one of the faster runs he’s made on a course like that, and with how the rooms and hallways were set up, it all felt extremely fresh yet also very familiar.

His smile didn’t drop even after seeing Dash pass by him as she made her way to start on the course herself. He simply nodded in acknowledgement and then made to climb the stairs into the control station.

“Dude, you made that course your bitch!” Roach exclaimed as he pulled up the records on a side screen, Shade’s smile growing even wider. “And on your first go too. I hate to imagine what the bad guys will see when you storm their castle.”
“Oh I know,” Shade replied smugly, “muzzle flash.” The pair of them shared a laugh before Roach turned back towards the control panel and prepared everything for Dash’s run. He called through the desk mike into the PA system of that range. “Okay Dash, we’re gold when you are.”

Dash rolled her shoulders, working out some of the tension there as she got into ready position with her trusty SPAS-12 with it’s foregrip and a factory-standard M9 pistol. She set off into the course, pivoting as she checked corners and shot down targets, swapping to her side arm when convenient. She used her superior agility to twist and snap through the rooms, movements precise and calculated. She reached the end shy of Shade’s score by three seconds, coming in just over Royce. The result left her pleased, it was a good run, especially considering how sore she was from the run. She trudged up to the control center, intending to congratulate Shade on his excellent run.

Shade waited with a level expression on his face, his mind reeling with the fact that a woman had done almost as well as him on a clearing course, with a shotgun and sidearm of all weapons. Still, he restrained himself as Dash returned with a smile on her own face. “Gotta ask you, why the Spaz?”

Dash shrugged, “I’m admittedly not the best shot,” she confessed, “You did great on your run, Shade, especially considering it was a first attempt.”

A cocky smirk started to form on his face. “Of course, it’s one of the things I excel at. Commandos also fill the nation’s domestic counter-terror role, so fighting in someone’s house is one of the things we train heavily for,” he looked down to his rifle and then glanced to her shotgun, “what are your times like with a rifle? I mean, you get a few more shots, less risk of catching civi’s with the shot spray, don’t have to transition to a sidearm unless it jams…”

Dash shrugged, “I grew up usin’ small bore, but I dunno, just not good with ‘em. My times on assault rifles are awful.”

“Ever consider a sub-gun perhaps?” Shade said, before realising exactly what he was doing. Was he being helpful? “Smaller size, smaller calibre, less recoil, yet still effective in CQC when compared to a shotty. Probably a fair bit easier to carry and reload, too.”

Dash nodded, “I practice on the UMP 45 with a red dot and grip, but my times on it aren’t up to par, so I stick with my shotty and get some practice in with it when I can.”

“Fair enough… good work out there though…” Shade said, his brow not quite level but not quite frowning either. He left the room with one last glance at Dash, then quickly dropped out of sight as he headed down the stairs. It was a quick stop to the armoury to turn in his gear and weapon, before he made a beeline to the gym to work out a bit of stress that had been building up since the morning.

Walking in, he saw a few heavy bags and contemplated laying into those, but thought better of it and instead pulled a few padded posts from a storage rack and set them up in a random order all around him. Centering himself, he lashed out; striking some of the posts with his hands and palms, and others with his knees and feet. There wasn’t any real method or madness to his technique, which is what made it somewhat effective; the defending party or parties didn’t know what to expect next.

It didn’t take long for him to burn off the excess energy and the built up frustration that he desperately needed to vent. He was practically dead to the world by the time he finished up his ‘routine’, packed everything up, showered, fed himself and returned to his bunk, passing out fast asleep in a matter of seconds.

After putting away her gear, Dash headed for the barracks and the shower. She stood with her back under the hot spray for a while before turning it off and changing. Dash, refreshed but sore and tired,
proceeded to fall face first on her bunk.

Dash was awake bright and early the next morning, only feeling the lingering results of the run of her demise. She dressed, put her hair up, and headed to the Mess Hall for breakfast. Never really hungry in the mornings, Dash settled with some fruit and sat down to chat with the other team members. Dash chuckled as Royce bragged about his score on the course, apparently he hadn’t seen the updated board yet. She kept that bit of information to herself, sure that Shade and Roach would want to see his reaction.

A shadow cast over her, “Is this spot taken?” A familiar, but slightly unwelcome, voice asked quietly, “I can sit somewhere else if you want, but I just wanted to talk for a bit.”

“Go for it,” Dash shrugged without turning around, “Was just talkin’ to Royce here about his record score on the course,” she smiled and laughed.

Shade chuckled, and sat down beside her, casting a glance at Royce. “Oh, you mean that pissy two minutes and thirty seconds? Amateur hour, if you ask me.”

Dash cackled, “Too right. Suzy could run it faster, ‘n she’s a cow!”

“Oh really,” Royce called out, leaning forward towards the pair, “and remind the court what your times are like, Lil’ Missy?”

Dash smirked, “Two minutes twenty-nine,” she shrugged and looked at Shade, “You wanna tell ‘im or should I?”

“Two twenty-six, and change.” Shade stated simply, more focused on his bacon and egg burger he had on his tray. “Don’t believe us, you can ask Roach. He’s our witness.”

Dash nodded, crunching her apple, “N let’s also remember I was sore as all fuck as well?”

Meat took the perfect opportunity to lean in as he was walking past. “From what, pray tell?” He said in a leering tone, bouncing his eyebrows.

Dash threw the apple core at him, “A forty-meter sprint with ankle weights, ya nasty.”

“Just askin’, but you know me,” he said proudly, standing back upright and unphased by the core, “I’m all about endurance and lasting longer. More fun that way.”

“Let us take this moment to remind ourselves that I outrank you Meat, and you’re diggin’ yourself a hole,” Dash remarked casually.

“Not to mention, mate, but you’re more than likely way out of her league,” Shade added on, chuckling to himself, “why don’t you find someone your own level, you horny bastard.”

Dash turned her head and simply looked at him, “Come again?”

Shade raised his hands defensively, leaning back away from her slightly. “I’m just saying, you don’t strike me as the type to settle for a bloke him him. I’d give you four or five weeks before you either slit his neck or chopped his balls off to calm him down.”

Meat reached for his crotch protectively whilst the other men around started laughing. “Jeez, buddy, feelin’ the love and the solidarity between bros here.”

Dash turned back and nodded, “Fair enough,” she shrugged, “I’d probably murder him within the
first week.”

“Note to self,” Royce started mock-writing on an invisible notepad, “never date Dash.”

Dash chuckled, “Damn straight, you couldn’t handle this.”

“But we can always die tryin’,” Meat chimed in, before stepping away with his empty tray.

Dash was relaxing in the rec room after breakfast, before it was time to hit the sparring mats, staring at the tv, but not really paying attention to what was on it. Considering the previous grief she’d been given from Shade, his friendly behavior left her confused on where he stood.

On the range he’d seemed okay with her, he’d looked a little stormy when she first approached, but when she’d congratulated him he treated her like ‘one of the guys’, like everyone else, rather than as if she were different, like she didn’t belong. Dash sighed, now that was a wonderful thought to have. With ridicule came self-doubt and with self-doubt came underperformance. Dash shook the thoughts off as quickly as she could. She had worked hard to get here. She earned her place on the team. She had proven time and time again that she did belong. She sighed. It wasn’t enough, it was never enough.

Shade would come around eventually, but until then, it wasn’t enough to simply say she’d earned her place, or that she’d proven herself to the rest of them. She still had to prove herself to him. Dash caught herself wondering why she even cared. Her brow furrowed. Because doubting and not trusting your teammates in the field is dangerous, you ninny. She reminded herself. And Shade did not trust her. Not yet. She would prove she could be counted on. She’d done it before, she’d do it again. She would do it time and time again. She was not the weak little girl who would break at the slightest hit that everyone believed she was growing up. No. She was strong and determined and hardworking and loyal. She would not break. She’d prove it.

“Ah, there you are. Been lookin’ for you for a while now.” A harsh British voice called out from the doorway. Dash looked up to see Ghost leaning against the open door frame, mask on his face like always. “Going around and checking on the squad, your time has come.”

Dash chuckled, “Hello to you too LT. I’m good, was just about to head out to the gym.”

“Is there ever a day that you’re not in there?” Ghost joked as he entered the room and made his way to her, pulling up a nearby stool to sit in front of her. “Any more time and you’ll have to register your change of address details.”

Dash chuckled, “I got a reputation to keep. And also a form, among other things.”

“Understandable,” Ghost started, sitting up slightly before his voice dropped into his ‘serious’ register, “though on the topic of reputations…” He let the sentence hang, giving Dash the opportunity to start before having to force the topic himself.

Dash straightened up a bit, “Now don’t you go thinkin’ I got a problem with Shade. At least one I need help with,” she shrugged, “It’s no worse than Rook, at least I know why he doesn’t like me this time. He’ll come around.”

“It took three rounds of armour-piercing ammunition to his lower chest and a near miss from an RPG for Rook to come around, Dash,” Ghost stated plainly, shuffling a little closer, “not to mention that he wasn’t nearly as vocal or as… what’s the word… as much of a dickhead about it.”

Dash shrugged, “Won’t come to that with Shade… hopefully…. And honestly? I would have
prefered the vocal version first, he freaked me out with the avoidance n’ all.”

Ghost shrugged as well, “We’re all human, we all react differently to things that we don’t like or don’t agree with,” his mask shifted a bit as he grinned evilly, “besides, if all else fails, we could just beat it out of him.”

Dash chuckled and smirked cockily, “Today is sparring day after all,” she agreed, then frowned, “Of course, training and the real thing are different…” she shook her head, “Whatever. I’ll kick ‘is ass ‘n we’ll see what he’s got to say about it.”

Ghost stood up and kicked the stood off to the side. “That’s my girl,” he said with a chuckle.

“We came and we conquered, they praying to poppa. They claiming they want to, they really don’t want to. You ain’t maiming a monster so don’t bother with offers, till the day that I die, I ain’t steppin’ aside for one of you…” Shade was subconsciously hitting and striking along with the song that was blasting in his earphones as he moved around the heavy bag with a focus so sharp that he had effectively blocked out his surroundings. He went on as the song played and continued onto the next one, time effectively passing in a blur as he pummeled the bag for all its worth with a mixture of punches, slaps, elbow and knee strikes, and kicks.

It wasn’t until an earbud fell out that he returned to the world of the gym, and stepped back from the battered bag to catch a few minutes as a breather.

“I recognise the style,” a voice said from behind Shade as he gulped down water from his bottle, “that’s the ‘hit them until they drop’ method, right?”

“Developed by First Commando, and pioneered by Second Commando. You should know that, being a Sassy prick, right mate?” Shade responded, turning to face his fellow Aussie teammate Rook with a small smile.

Rook chuckled and shook his head. “Well, I’ve seen what you Commandos can do in a tight spot, but I’ll take our own hand-to-hand program over your bar brawling any day.”

“Pussy,” Shade stated simply before taking a seat on the bench to unwrap his hands and assess any possible damage. “Mate, you have no idea how good it is to be with another Aussie. How haven’t you not gone bloody berko yet?”

“The way you say that makes it sound like we’re the only two on base,” Rook sighed, shaking his head once more, “but that’s far from the truth. There’s a few guys from the Regiment scattered around, a couple of JTACs from Four Squadron as well, and I think there’s also a Clearance Diver around here somewhere.”

“Fuckin’ anchor wankers,” Shade muttered.

“Not to mention,” Rook continued, unfazed by Shade’s remark, “there’s also a number of Aussie staff from all three branches in support or logistics roles. This place is truly multinational, not just us gunfighters.”

Shade hummed in agreement, then frowned as he watched a certain someone enter the gym. Rook saw this change in expression and looked over to where Shade was, and groaned audibly when he realised who it was. “Oh come on, seriously?”

“What?” Shade started, jumping to the defensive as he sat up and frowned at Rook instead. “What is it?”
“You can’t still be hung up over that bloody nonsense!” Rook crossed his arms after pushing Shade aside a little.

“Mate, you of all fucking people should know why I feel the way I feel.”

“I do, but that’s no bloody excuse to act like a tool about it,” Rook said, standing up with Shade and getting almost in his face, “which you’re completely mastering if I may say so myself.”

Shade shoved Rook away slightly, generating a bit of distance lest he swing out or do something he might regret later. “Oh yeah? Tell me, did you not have the same concerns about it when you came here?”

“No shit! But I wasn’t a fucking whiney little bitch about it like you are!”

“Oh please, do tell me, what’s the light like down there? ‘Cause it seems like the sun shines out of her ass the way you’re defending her!” The two Aussies hadn’t noticed that their shouting match had seized the attention of mostly everyone else in the gym. Rook paused for a moment, letting Shade’s last comment sink in.

“Because I owe her my fucking life, that’s why!” Rook all but screamed at him, his arms outstretched to further exclaim his point. “About a year and a half ago, we were on an op and I got nailed by a burst of belt fed gunfire. Rounds penetrated below my carrier and I dropped like a ton of bessa bricks. She carried, carried, me and all my gear back, all whilst dodging gunfire and the occasional RPG. Hell, a rocket impacted the building beside me when she started trying to pick me up!” Rook was panting at this point, but was far from finished. “Nobody else tried to get me as they were suppressed. But she fucking risked it all,” Rook sat back down, visibly exhausted from the argument, “risked her fucking life and saved mine. If that isn’t bloody proof enough for you, go speak to one of the medics or docs who patched me up. They’ll tell you that if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here today…”

Dash shoved through the crowd gathered around the two Australians, “You know you don’t have to defend me,” she offered simply, “I’ve proved myself before, I’ll do it again. Hopefully without the near death experience?” she gave Shade a pleading look.

Shade glanced between the two, then fixed Rook with a level stare. “Yeah, let her fight her own battles mate, if she’s the big girl she claims to be.”

“Oh you say what you want about me,” Dash practically growled, “but you leave the rest of ‘em outta this petty shit you got goin’ on, mate,” she mocked, “You got no business goin’ after them.”

Shade quirked an eyebrow at her, and then bent down to pick up his strapping and started slowly re-wrapping his hands. “Y’know, I’m of the sort that believes that actions speak louder than words,” he stepped through the crowd and towards one of the sparring rings, “and I’ll let you know; whilst I don’t generally hit women, as it’s a dog thing to do back home… I’ll make an exception in your case.”

“What a coincidence, I just so happen to be a woman of action…” Dash grabbed the wrap from her bags and wrapped her knuckles closely, “That a promise, Shadey?” She asked, batting her eyelashes for the extra effect, she hopped the rope into the ring, “Bring it on Greenie…”

Shade simply laughed it off and cracked his neck, getting into his own ‘stance’ across from her. “To quote a classic, ‘as you wish’.”

Dash frowned at him and took her defensive stance, watching him carefully.
Shade gestured her forward. “Ladies first, I’m still a gentleman after all.”

Off to the side, Meat, Royce, Rook and Ghost, who had entered the gym as the two fighters climbed into the ring, exchanged looks and a handful of dollar bills. “This gon’ be good,” Royce stated quietly, trying not to chuckle.

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

Whelp! And here’s the flashpoint we all knew was coming sooner or later. Place your bets people! And as you can plainly see, us Aussies are real stubborn pricks at times. I am loving this collab more and more with every word, every paragraph, every line of dialogue, and every chapter we finish.
(And the fact that Spitty is a night owl and has complete disregard for timezone differences is a plus, I think… pst, Spitfire, go to sleep, it’s like 6am for you as we type this AN, and we’ve been at this for three hours!)

(Spitfire)

We are grinding through these chapters like nothing else. Number one way to get Dash to hold a grudge, go after her friends. Rip Shade lol. Let us know who you think is gonna win the fight? I am enjoying the hell outta this collab. (Night Owl Extraordinaire at your service. Sleep be for the week. Lol, but seriously, I’m gonna die tomorrow if I don’t sleep, byeee)

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
“You know, I’m not remotely mad at either of you, just disappointed.” Captain MacTavish stood in front of the pair of bruised and battered soldiers with his arms folded across his chest. “You both come from highly trained special units, with years of experience and training between you. Yet, I find out that the pair of you are acting like third years in the playground after one of you stole the other’s lunch money.”

Shade looked up from the bed towards the Captain. “With all du-”

“Stow it, Sergeant Williams,” MacTavish said, cutting off Shade, “it is no secret to anyone on this base now about how you feel about Master Sergeant Myers and her presence on the team and in this Task Force. But as it has been made clear to you multiple times by multiple personnel, including the Master Sergeant herself, she has more than demonstrated that she belongs here.”

“Sir,” Dash spoke up, “I’ve demons-”

“As for you, Master Sergeant, you of all people should know better than to let things like this get to you,” MacTavish turned his sights onto Dash now, “I know that it’s been tougher for you due to the whole gender stereotyping business, and that you’ve felt that you had it worse because of that, but that doesn’t mean you can start wallowing the absolute shite out of anyone that gives you grief,” he cast a glance at Shade before adding, “as much as some might deserve it.”

“Sir,” She began again, “I’ve demonstrated my worth to you and everyone else that was already here. And I did it again when newbies showed up. So Shade and I decided to take a much less… life threatening… approach to demonstrating that I am not a publicity stunt.”

“Life threatening, not so much. But career threatening…” MacTavish started lowly, letting the words sink in, “you’re lucky that I’m writing this up as a sparring match that got a little too heated, and that I’m only officially warning you and not giving you each an NJP that goes down on your records. If this happened and another officer, or heavens forbid General Sheppard and his staff, witnessed what was happening, I imagine that both of you would be on planes back to your respective units before you could say ‘bad conduct discharge’.”

“It was a sparring match, sir,” Dash stood from where a nurse was inspecting a bruise on her cheek, “We mutually agreed not to pull punches. The enemy won’t, we’re the best right? So our best isn’t good enough. We have to be ready, we can’t pull our punches and expect to be okay in a real fight, sir.”

“And if anything, sir,” Shade started, stressing that work particularly, “if anyone should be copping the heat for this shit, it should be me and me alone. I invited her to spar, I came up with the conditions, and I provoked her into the first punch. All Dash was doing was responding to my escalating threats, for want of a better term. And to play off what she said, sometimes you need to meet force with force.”

MacTavish closed his eyes and rubbed them in exasperation, shaking his head slightly as both Shade and Dash shared a glance. “Whatever… consider yourself on an unofficial notice. If this shite between you doesn’t get sorted out soon or interferes with your work or combat effectiveness, I won’t hesitate in withdrawing you and returning you back home. Am I understood?”

“Crystal, sir.” Shade said simply, stealing a glance at Dash again.
Dash looked at Shade out of the corner of her eye and gave a small smirk, then turned her attention back to the Captain and nodded.

“Good… also, tell the Lieutenant when you see him next that he owes me a third of his winnings.” With that last remark, the Captain left the ward and the two soldiers to the attention of the nurses and medics that were tending to them. Shade was quick to lean back into the bed and breathe an audible sigh of relief.

“Fuuuck, that was just as bad as my Dad dressing me down after I scratched his car and blamed my older brother on it…” He groaned, rubbing his face.

Dash hummed simply, “Lord help ya if you ever tried to avoid chores back home. My dad wasn’t too lenient about that kind of thing. Got real good at hiding real quick. If he caught ya, you got twice the work.”

“There was no hiding in my household, not with my little goodie-two-shoes sister…” Shade chuckled, “she as so much suspected someone trying to do dodge something, it was always a ‘Daaaad!’ this or a ‘Muuum!’ that. Not a surprise when she wanted to join the police…” He mused quietly.

Dash smiled, “Oh I had lots a brothers an’ sisters, some cousins, some of ‘em were like that, but we had a lot of space, grew up on a farm.”

“And here I thought you couldn’t get any more country… fuck, I’m half expecting you to run into battle chanting ‘yippi-ki-bloody-yay’ wearing cowboy boots and a stetson instead of a helmet.” Shade laughed openly, not bothering to hide his amusement.

Dash laughed as well, but didn’t comment, simply sat back and let the medics do their thing, lest she be stuck there longer than she needed to be.

“Hey.” Shade started, looking over towards Dash with an approving smile, “for what it’s worth, you practically had me at my end on the mat. Gotta give you some credit for that.”

Dash gave a teasing smile, “Practically? I was about to make you tap out!” she teased.

“Biiiitch, I ain’t tapping out for shit.” Shade threw back with a pointed glance, though fighting hard to hide a smile.

Dash chuckled, “Me neither. Getting thrown from horses and bulls during childhood is a good way to toughen up.”

“Psh, nothing compared to ducking and weaving multiple Magpie swooping runs or having to contend with snakes in the middle of summer.” Shade contested, sitting up on the bed and swinging around to face her.

She laughed, “I’ve dealt with my fair share of snakes, but the Magpies are a new one.”

Shade leant forward, his voice dropping into a warning tone, “It’s like having a bloody Warthog roll down on you for a gun run, with the speed of a damn Super Hornet and the turning speed of a Littlebird,” he slid down from the bunk and crouched low in front of Dash, spinning around to show Dash a series of dull looking scars that were along the back of his neck, “copped a good one during a daily run around home, wearing nothing much but a cap, a tank top and some shorts. Bastard took three runs and got all three on target, got me good with his claws.”

Dash’s eyes widened at the scars, “Jesus, that’s a vicious bird… Remind me not to visit Australia…”
“As an Aussie, I can say that the stories are true about everything wanting to kill you down there.” He said, standing back up and stretching a bit, careful not to tug at a few of the bandages along his arms. “Just as long as you don’t provoke the wildlife, that is…”

Dash shook her head, “Crazy bunch of bastards you Aussies…”

“We’re the world’s rodeo clowns, doing all the crazy shit everyone else won’t.” Shade said, before being interrupted by a loud grumble emanating from somewhere. “… on that note, it must be close to lunchtime…”

“… that reminds me of a piece of life advice one of my friends in team’s gave me,” Scarecrow started, taking a moment to sip from his can of soda as Roach, Meat, Royce, and Ozone ate their lunches around him, “he told me that ‘if a blind girl tells you that your cock is big, she’s likely just pulling your leg’.” He was met with a mixture of groans and chuckles as the others got the word play.

“Kinda’ like that one joke,” Royce added on, “how ‘my snoring is so loud that it scares the people in the car I’m driving’, y’know?”

Roach jumped in, “Or how ‘war doesn’t determine who is right, only who is left’?”

Meat groaned, shaking his head in dismay. “Too real buddy, too real…”

“Ey up, look who’s just walked in.” Ozone chimed in, pointing towards the entrance across the hall where a battered and bruised Shade and Dash walked in, looking worse for wear yet smiling? “The hell? For a pair of folk who wanted to kill each other, they certainly look pretty damn chummy now.”

“Maybe they banged.” Meat stated, focusing back on his sandwich before noting that the four men around him were all staring at him. “What? They’re obviously hot for each other and deeply in denial about it, which is why they’re constantly at each other’s throats.”

“I am really hoping to god that you’re just making this shit up, I really am…” Royce muttered from behind his hands, already fearing what crackpot theory that his friend had cooked up.

Meat continued on undeterred, “Think about it. If you were some regular guy and saw a girl like Dash at a club or bar, you’d wanna hit that, right? Raise your hand if you agree.” Begrudgingly, three of the four men rose their hand, baring Ozone, who shook his head when Meat gestured for an explanation. “Now, Shade’s likely come from a sausage fest unit that has little to no female interaction outside of admin and medical staff, and he comes into an environment where his masculinity is threatened by a woman. Not only that, but it’s a hot woman. Furthermore, every attempt to assert his male dominance is either met or matched by her, which frustrates him both emotionally and sexually…”

Roach leaned over to Royce and whispered loudly as Meat continued his rant, “I didn’t think they taught human sexual psychology in Joint Task Force Two…”

“… on her side, here’s this piece of fresh man meat that immediately provides a challenge to her, and continues to do so when she expects him to bow down like the rest of us. So she ups the ante; speed and endurance, weapons handling, and now hand-to-hand combat. Shade’s an Assaulter by trade, right, so she’s encroaching on areas that he would consider himself the best at. Since he isn’t backing down easily, she then deems him as an appropriate partner, and goes for the ‘kill’, so to speak. Their verbal fight? The proposition. The spar? Foreplay. And I wouldn’t put it past them to finish it off in a
treatment ward or on-call room in the infirmary.”

Meat sat there with a proud smile on his face as Scarecrow shook his head with a wry smile, Royce planted his head into the tabletop, Roach held his face in his hands, and Ozone just sat there shellshocked by the conspiracy-theory-level breakdown that he had just heard. After a few moments of silence, Meat frowned.

“Seriously, I can’t be the only one who sees this, right?”

“Understood sir, we’ll get the team assembled and on standby soon.” Captain MacTavish spoke into the phone as Ghost watched from his seat across the desk. “I’ll let you know once we’re on alert.” A roll of the eyes towards the Lieutenant had him chuckle softly. “Yes sir, I’ll make sure that is the case and pass that order down. Thank you sir.” With a soft groan, John hung the phone up and leant back with an audible sigh.

“We got an op, sir?” Ghost asked, unmasked for the time being as the room was a little warmer than usual.

“Aye, a simple recon and raid down in Mexico. CIA and US SOCOM have intelligence saying that one of the cartels might be working with a South American terrorist cell to smuggle personnel and equipment through the border to be used against US civilians.” MacTavish started, pulling up an intelligence packet that General Sheppard had forwarded onto him via a secure datalink.

“And the reason why SOCOM won’t touch it?” Ghost questioned, leaning over to look at some of the satellite imagery.

“A number of reasons: lack of suitable personnel that aren’t currently deployed abroad, a conflict of interest in how they want this dealt with, and the fact that the cartel controls most, if not all, of the local government, law enforcement and even some military forces in the town and surrounding areas that they operate in. They’d know if the US tried something as they have their own eyes over the border.” The Captain said, pointing out a few key points in the satellite pictures. “Not to mention that the target area is smack in the middle of an urban centre. An approach by Blackhawks and armed US troops would be obvious.”

“What makes us different?” Ghost questioned simply, raising an eyebrow at the information and at the Captain.

“Well, the mission is a capture/kill and a search and destroy rolled into one. Word is that the cell leader and the cartel leader will be meeting at one of the cartel’s meeting points in Nogales. CIA want the terrorist, and both the US’s ATF, ICE and FBI want the cartel leader. They’ve stressed that they want them both alive, but the CIA did say that if their HVT ‘happens to be caught in a crossfire, then so be it’.”

“Typical Yanks, getting others to do the dirty work.” The lieutenant grumbled, but continued to listen.

“Sheppard wants us to deploy within a day’s notice, pending when the CIA and ISA can pinpoint when exactly the meeting is scheduled, and focus on a low-profile approach. Meaning no air support apart from an emergency evac courtesy of the US Air Force, no heavy vehicles apart from whatever we can find and build ourselves, and no uniforms or identifying materials, meaning civilian clothing. I draw the line at ditching vests and plate carriers however, it’s not worth the risk.”

“So we’re packing light, scouting out the area, and then going in hard and fast?”
“Correct. I’ll get into further details once we get there, but that’s essentially the gist of it. Until Sheppard gives the warning order, I’d prefer that you don’t let anyone know at this time.”

“Copy that sir.”

“I wonder what that lot are grumbling about,” Shade said as he jerked his head towards the group of men at a table nearby, inwardly amused by how everyone seemed dismayed at something that Meat had said, “can’t be good, whatever it is… you’ve known the bloke for a while now, is that what he’s always like?”

“More or less,” Dash shrugged and chuckled, “They were betting on me winning the fight.”

Shade looked offended at this, and shot a glare towards them. “Bastards… though, to be fair, had I known what you fight like, I’d probably have put some down against me as well…” he shrugged, guiding the pair of them towards a vacant table, “you’ve got a decent right cross, by the way.”

“Thanks, you packed quite a hit yourself,” Dash gestured to the bruise on her cheek.

“Gotta hit hard to survive down under, heh,” he remarked as he sat down and wasted no time attacking his meal, “sho, whut shunit di’ y’ com’ ‘rom?”

Dash laughed and shook her head, “Never do that again. Fourth Recon Marines.”

Shade smiled sheepishly and swallowed, clearing his throat afterwards. “Sorry ‘bout that. I didn’t think that the regular recce battalions were officially considered ‘special operations forces’, but then again, some of the shit I’ve heard you lot do is basically what we do as well… kinda the same difference between like the Rangers and the Green Berets, or our SASR and the Commandos. They do all the secret and sneaky crap, whereas we do all the heavy lifting and fun shit.”

Dash shrugged, skipping her reply in favor of digging into her own meal.

“Random question for ya’: biggest or heaviest weapon you’ve ever used in actual combat, not in training or on exercise.” Shade asked, before taking a bite from his chicken fillet burger.

Dash hummed thoughtfully, “I’m not sure actually…”

“No belt feds, or vehicle mounted ones? On my first tour abroad, we were patrolling in a few six-wheeled Land Rovers with open tops. Our truck had a Mark 19 in its gunner position, and I was on that station when we encountered a few dumb pricks who decided that they wanted to tangle with us.” Shade mimed holding the back end of the weapon in question and imitated firing it, “pop, pop, pop, pop, fired a short burst of forty-mil rounds right on top of them the second they opened up on us. If you get a chance, use one, they’re a right piece of work those things.”

Dash nodded, “Noted,” she replied with a grin.

“Second question: as far as roles and positions go, who do you think is the deadliest one on the battlefield?” Shade asked, leaning back with a curious expression on his face. “I already know my answer, but I want to hear your input.”

“That depends on who, specifically, we’re talkin’ about. Archer and Toad have quite the kill count,” she chuckled, “Would hate to be the enemy they’re after,” she shook her head, “But then there’s demolitions, who blows everything up, everything and every one. And then there’s me and my SPAS,” she shrugged, “It’s a toss up.”
Shade nodded along in agreement, “That’s a fair call. But I think, hands down, that the deadliest and most dangerous person is whomever has a laser designator and a radio link with whatever close air support aircraft we have. Anyone who can call in a few thousand pounds of high explosives from a mile away or more is one nasty motherfucker.”

Dash chuckled and nodded, “That’d be Roach for us, he’s the Cap and LT’s favorite, so he always gets the designators. Of course, I’d never tangle with a pissed off medic.”

“Lucky prick,” Shade whistled appreciatively. “And amen to that, hell hath no fury than an enraged doc. Anyone that knows how to save a life invariably knows how to end one in some impressive yet disturbing ways.”

“I once heard a guy in a bar talking to Chemo about how he couldn’t be a soldier ‘cause he was a doctor,” Dash shook her head, “Chemo said something along the lines of ‘I’m a soldier and a doctor, which means I can break every bone in your body while naming them’.”

Shade laughed, “The patrol medic that was in my Commando team on my second tour had a patch on his helmet and his pack that read ‘Do No Harm, and Do Know Harm’. I asked him what he meant by that and that he said that if he stabbed me one way, it’d be harmless but he stabbed me another way, it would kill me.”

“Docs can be some scary mother fuckers,” Dash agreed.

Shade lifted his drink and tilted towards her, “Here’s to never getting hurt enough to need a medic, and to not pissing off said medic.”

Dash lifted her own drink and tapped it to his, “Amen to that,” she took a sip and set it down again, “So, my turn for questions: how many combat operations have you been on?”

“I’ve been on three tours with the 2nd Commando Regiment to the Middle East, about six to eight months each time, plus a rotation with the Tactical Assault Group,” Shade took a moment to sip from his drink, “TAG’s our domestic counter-terror unit, for stuff that the state and federal police tactical groups can’t or won’t touch. As for actual missions, on average we’d do about ten or twelve extended patrols and major raids across a deployment, give or take depending on the region and operational tempo of course. Most of the other time spent was acting as a reaction or blocking force for other teams in the area.”

Dash nodded, “I was looking for missions, but okay,” she chuckled, “I’ve been on ten with the Task Force, things in Recon were pretty slow, though, probably ten per tour.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine Recon having much else to do except for, well, recon.... Unless you get used as motorised infantry in an invasion.” Shade chuckled softly.

“Next question…” Dash said seriously, “Do you trust me yet?”

“... that’s a loaded question…” Shade said quietly, looking down at his empty tray in thought.

Dash sighed, “So that’s a no then. Fair enough, I guess. Training and combat are different,” she stood up with her own empty tray and went to put it away.

“Dash!” Shade stood up and reached to stop her, grabbing her wrist to stop her. “I never answered that question, just said that it was a loaded question, that’s all…”

She rolled her eyes, “It shouldn’t be. The fact that you have to really think about it says that you don’t really. Trust goes both ways, so for what it’s worth, I’ll trust you to have my back in a field
setting, but that’s about it, at least ‘till you can trust me back.” Dash pulled her arm out of his grasp and walked off, leaving him standing by himself.

Shade sighed to himself and sat back down, holding his head in his hands. “Fuckin’ smooth there… really fuckin’ smooth.”

Roach and Ozone were walking through the hallway, hitting on the doors of the others in their team in the barracks. Roach swung to hit Shade’s door just as the Australian opened it, and instead of a solid wooden door his fist connected with Shade’s face.

“Ow! The fuck mate?!” He shouted, though muffled as his hands came up to cover his bruised nose.

“Sorry, but the Captain’s called a briefing in ten. Get your stuff together and head over to the Ops Building.” Roach answered, all seriousness in his voice. A switch flipped in Shade’s mind, and he reached to grab his combat shirt to put on over his tank top, and retrieved his notepad at the same time.

“Got it, see you there.”

“Hey Dash!” Rook called, trying to get the woman’s attention from pummeling the punching bag “Dash!” He tried again, before resorting to a tried and true tactic. “Rebecca!”

Dash paused and took her earbud out, glaring at Rook, “Don’t call me that. What is it?”

“Briefing in ten! We’ve got a job! Get your shit and get over to Ops.” He answered, not messing around like he did normally.

“On it,” she answered simply, trotting over to the bench to grab her bag before leaving for her room in the barracks to drop the bag, no time to change.

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

Two steps forward, one step backward for Shade, sadly. As you can probably glean, Dash was kicking his ass (and would have won if the Captain hadn’t intervened), and subsequently earned that extra bit of respect in his eyes. Meat’s an analytical horny bastard. And whatever friendship/camaraderie that Shade was just starting to build has stalled. If Shade wanted to repair that ‘fuck up’, he’s now gotta wait. First, they’ve gotta go play soldier.

(Spitfire)

Loyalty and trust are important in the eyes of one Master Sergeant Myers. Those of you who bet on Dash winning have won your bets. And then Dash was chill for a while. Give her a way to blow off the steam and she’ll be cool. Shade is responsible for that Meat Conspiracy Theory and I about died when I read it over ( but it seems legit!) . Get out of my note Shade ( never!) before I infiltrate yours. Dash won’t forget Shade trying to take full blame for their excessive roughness fight, but she also won’t forget that he doesn’t trust her after she tried to play the whole thing off as a training exercise and kicked his ass. So. This has been fun. A lot of fun.
Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
“If we’re all here, gentlemen-” Captain MacTavish started as the lights dimmed in the small briefing room, before being cut off.

“Hey!” A voice called from the back to a small round of chuckles, as was the case with most briefings.

“-and lady, then we can begin.” MacTavish clicked on a satellite image of a small city. “This is the city of Nogales, specifically the southern side of the US/Mexico border. Now, we all understand how deep the drug trade problem runs at border towns such as these, and Nogales is no different, at least until now.”

A transcript excerpt appeared on screen beside the map, with key parts of the text highlighted. “Signal analysts from both the ISA and CIA have identified an increased level of chatter between cartel personnel from high levels of the Sinaloa Cartel and their smugglers based in Nogales, with a number of conversations focusing around the construction, maintenance and security of underground tunnels that will pass below the border.”

Ghost stood forward, “I get that a lot of you are thinkin’ that we haven’t got anything to directly do with this ongoing ‘war on drugs’ bullshit that the US government is working on, but it falls into our hands for another reason.”

“Yes, those analysts have also seen calls exchanged between those same high level cartel members and high ranking personnel that belong to an Anti-American movement based out of Columbia and Venezuela. This movement, known simply as ‘Matador’, has ties with terrorist organisations in the Middle East and Africa. To summarise a two hour intel brief that myself and Ghost have gone through, the Sinaloa Cartel are going to provide Matador and a few other terrorist groups transport into the United States, in exchange for access to their drug production facilities and back-end supply chains. And the first attempt of transport will be in a few nights time.”

A new map, focusing on a small district near the border, filled the screen. “Now, unlike a lot of tunnels the US government have known the various cartels to operate, this one is unique in that both ends of the tunnel network are in dense urban spaces. This is both a blessing and a curse to all parties involved. Firstly: the entrances can be located anywhere in or around a building or structure, making them easier to conceal. This also means that there’s a potential for choke points or escape routes. Secondly: trying to surround such an entrance or exit point requires a larger force due to the large potential escape points. Anyone that slips past the net doesn’t have to travel far before being lost in the crowd. Thirdly: we can’t outright demolish the area with explosives and collapse the tunnel network. As it runs underneath an urban area, we risk collapsing homes and businesses nearby, as well as risk putting innocent people in harm's way.”

“We’re going to have to be the scalpel instead of the US’s sledgehammer options, like the FBI or their more conventional special forces teams,” Ghost cut in, walking up to the map where a large blue line joining two places on each side of the border had appeared. “Now, the CIA have given us a general idea on where each entrance of the main tunnel is. A mixed US military and law enforcement force will be watching over the US-side of the tunnel, waiting to apprehend anyone that emerges from that side while we flush out and subsequently seal the Mexican-side.”

MacTavish too back the lead, and a bulleted list of tasks appeared over the map. “Our overall objective is the seal the tunnel network permanently and remove the threat as it stands. However, we’ve also been requested to secure, detain and retrieve three key personnel as well as any physical
intelligence we can gather.” A portrait of a fairly familiar Mexican man of middle age clicked up on
the bottom left corner. “First HVT is one Ceasar Jesus Domingo, known to authorities as ‘The
Fixer’. He’s the Nogales area boss or ‘El Jefe’ in cartel parlance. FBI want him on a gold platter.”

Another portrait, this one of a much darker skinned and thinner man wearing a blue cap and a surf
shirt, appeared next to The Fixer. “Second is Soloman Bandeina, a high level ‘officer’ within
Matador's ranks. He is wanted by a few dozen agencies across both American continents for his
actions and threats against the US and their regional allies.”

One last picture of an Arabian man with a long scar across his face appeared, this one taken from a
distance by a reconnaissance team’s camera. “Lastly is Faruq Abid Aziz, a member of Khaled Al
Asad’s revolutionary party-turned-insurgency after the events of the 2011 nuclear blast. Aziz is a
known bomb-maker, with his devices wreaking havoc on coalition forces convoys in and around the
Arabian peninsula. CIA want him bad, though they have said that if he happens to be caught in the
crossfire, then so be it…”

Shade leant forward between Rook and Roach. “Gotta love the lack of sympathy from the
spooks…”

“We’ll be going across the border via vehicle, ICE and their Mexican counterparts have been notified
of our mission, though our cover is that we’re a DEA team working on a low-profile surveillance
mission, in order to reduce leaks back through the corrupt local government and back to the cartel.
Last thing we wants is for them to get spooked and have them move to another tunnel that we don’t
know about.” MacTavish finished up, glancing at his watch. “Now, are there any questions?”

Shade rose his hand. “I’m assuming by the fact that we’re low profile means that we won’t have any
backup on hand in case the shit hits the fan?”

“We will have a Border Patrol helicopter on standby for emergency extract, other than that we’ll have
to rely on our own ground transport to get out of there. But there will be no aerial fire support
as we’re working in a very tight civilian population.” Ghost clarified, pointing out the immediate
surrounds of the target on the map.

“How much resistance are we expecting to face?” Ozone asked from the back row. “Should we pack
light or load for bear?”

“What’s our general rule, Ozone?” MacTavish asked him back in a slightly condescending but
joking tone.

“Better to have it and not need it, than need it and not have it, sir.” He responded, shaking his head.

“Correct, though on the topic of gear, operational dress will be civilian attire with combat load over
the top. No full uniforms, flags, or other identifiable patches and markings. For all intents and
purposes, treat this as a ‘grey op’. But pack for bear.”

“Anything else?” Ghost asked, eyes searching everyone for a few seconds. “Good, we’ll be wheels
up in about four hours. Gather your shit together and be at the hangars in three and a half.”

“Dismissed.”

Shade jumped around a little as he settled his coyote brown plate carrier over his navy blue shirt, the
sleeves rolled up to above his elbows and collar popped slightly to prevent his rifle sling from
rubbing against his neck. He tapped the kneepad covering his right knee to make sure it wouldn’t slip
down the leg of his cargo pants, before running a quick check over his drop-leg holster and load-
bearing panel on each of his thighs. Lastly, he hung his low-profile headset from a carabiner on his vest before donning a black cap and making his way towards the armoury to retrieve his weapons and ammunition.

He started to hum a tune as he walked, passing by Ozone and Rook as they walked past him with all of their gear and made their way towards the hangars. “Trailers for sale or rent… rooms to let: fifty cents. No phone, no pool, no pets. I ain’t got no cigarettes…” He walked into the armoury and saw most of the team there in various stages of preparation: Scarecrow was loading belt bags for his Mark 48 into his vest and pack, Meat and Royce were loading their rifle magazines, and Dash was busy fitting shells for her shotgun into the shell-holders in her own vest.

With a shake of his head to regain his focus, he retrieved his HK416 and a shorter barrel for it as well as his Glock 21, as well as enough magazines for each, before carrying them over to the table where Scarecrow was still loading. “How many urban jobs have you done? The closest we got back in the Commandos were a few small villages, that’s about it.” He asked, sitting down to start loading his sidearm magazines first.

“A few,” Scarecrow answered, grunting as one of the belts hung up on the side of the bag as he was feeding it through, “though they weren’t as built up and dense as where we’re going. It’ll be my first city op, that’s for sure.”

“Good time for firsts, then,” Shade said with a small chuckle, holding his fist out for the gunner to bump. Scarecrow returned it, then finished with his last belt before packing the belt bag into a pouch on the left side of his vest. “Never been to Mexico, either. There’s another first.”

“Never popped your cherry?” Meat chimed in as he set his M4A1 down on the table, clapping Shade on the shoulder as he sat down. “Don’t worry, Uncle Meat’s here to teach you a few things…”

“Meat, no.” Scarecrow said absentmindedly as he made a few checks to his Kimber Custom II sidearm.

“Meat, yes,” Meat replied without missing a beat, “and Shadey, Shadey, Shadey.…. No longer will you be our little boy, for soon you will become a man!”

Shade grimaced and rolled his eyes, shifting away from the Canadian as he leant towards him. “Mate, fuck off. In any case, I’ve likely gotten more action than you’ve dreamt of. And no, your hands don’t count.”

“Does Dash count?” No sooner did he finish saying that did a twelve gauge shell hit him in the side of the head. “Ow, the fuck?”

“The fuck did you say?” Shade asked, too shocked by the causal nature of the remark to be angry.

“I mean, it’s only natural after all. You’re both really competitive, both going at each other like fuel and fire. As they say, ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, fuck ‘em’,” Meat continued on as if he wasn’t aware of the stares and glares he was receiving from around the room, though non as hyper lethal as the look on Dash’s face as she slowly loaded her shotgun.

“First off, it’s ‘join ‘em’, not ‘fuck ‘em’. Second, I’m not the competitive one, he is. I do have a competitive streak, but that’s not this. Third, mind your fuckin’ business Meat. Fourth, not only no, but hell fucking no,” Dash replied, looking back at her gear as she finally stopped glaring at Meat.

He only shook his head in mock disappointment. “Tsk tsk, classic denial and broken eye contact. You’re only digging yourself deeper~”
“Hey… mate, you might wanna quit while you’re behind,” Shade warned, a little bit perturbed by the conversation and how it was going.

“Have to agree with the Aussie here, bud,” Dash warned absently, checking over her gear one last time to make sure it was all secure.

“See? The~” A hand clamped over Meat’s mouth and muffled the rest of his speech. Royce appeared beside him with his own M4 hanging by his side.

“I’m sorry about this, forgot that he gets like this if he’s left alone before a mission~” He apologised, shooting his friend a stern look. “I’m sure that he’ll be quiet, won’t you~” Meat nodded slowly under the glare he was receiving, after which Royce carefully removed his hand.

“Yeah, last thing we need is someone unloading a round in his ass~” Rook muttered out from his table, loud enough for everyone to hear and turn to him questioningly, “... no homo?” The meek manner that he finished with had everyone laughing, the tension in the room now evaporating in a much-needed manner. Shade finished loading all of his magazines, then quickly returned to the armoury to retrieve a case of hand grenades and flashbangs to distribute amongst the team.

“I’ll leave these here for everyone, see you all at the hangar!” He said, setting the cases down and stuffing a few of each grenade into the pouches on his vest before leaving the room.

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_Nogales Border Crossing Point_

“Alright everyone, we’re crossing the border now. Once we’re over, we’ll head to our staging area and begin our surveillance from there. Everyone copy?” MacTavish called out over the radio as their convoy of five vehicles made their way through the crossing checkpoint. They had flown from their base in Colorado to Nogales International Airport, where a four different vehicles were waiting for them to drive across the border and into the Mexican side of the city.

MacTavish, Ghost and Scarecrow had taken an older model SUV, with all of the longer range communication and command gear in the back. Meat and Royce commandeered one of the two sedans, with Rook riding in the back with them, whilst Ozone, Robot, Chemo and Roach took the second one. This left Dash and Shade with the last vehicle, an old open-top four-wheel drive. At first they had tried to swap with others, but everyone else refused to budge. Meat even cited it as being a perfect match for them.

‘‘You can pretend you’re a honeymooning couple,’ he said,” Shade muttered to himself as he drove the jeep and followed everyone else through, ‘‘They won’t even think twice,’ he said’. Really should have smacked him across the head for that~” He glanced over towards Dash, who was in the passenger seat beside him and looking out through the window at everyone they were passing. He considered saying something, but thought better of it, instead opting to stay silent for the time being. She was acting a lot colder towards him now, though whether that was an effect of their conversation prior to the mission coming down or just her trying to remain focused on the tasks at hand, or a combination of those, was something he was unsure about.

“... nothing much happens on a Monday, nothing much happens on a Tuesday~” Shade started to sing quietly, the jeep’s radio only tuning into the local Mexican stations and as such deemed worthless, “... I get paid on a Wednesday, and by the weekend, it’s all goone~”

Dash rolled her eyes as Shade started singing and casually turned up the music playing through her
earbuds before going back to watching their surroundings as they sped by. It didn’t take long before the small convoy pulled into a small motel complex a good ways away from the border area. Shade brought the jeep to a halt beside the Captain’s SUV and was quick to disembark, walking around to the rear tailgate to retrieve his weapon and gear.

“Okay, this place has been abandoned for a while now. Nobody should know or care that we’re here for the time being. Find a few rooms and get some rest.” The Captain said as everyone stretched out around him. “Shade, Dash, hang around, I’ve got a job for the pair of you.”

“Noooooo…” Shade whined quietly, looking towards the sky in despair after having only taken a step towards what he hoped would be sleep after the long flight and drive down. He sighed and turned back towards the Captain. “Got it boss, hanging around…”

Rook flashed him a smirk as he walked towards a motel room. “See you on the other side, mate,” he said with a chuckle as Shade flipped him off in response.

Dash hung back without a word or complaint and simply nodded at their Captain. Both him and Ghost pulled out a map and set it down on the hood of the Jeep, and gestured for Dash and Shade to get close. “Okay, we’re here,” he started, pointing at a small drawn on star on the map, then moved his finger to a red circle, “and the target zone is about fifteen minutes away in this area. I know we have satellite imagery and feeds from those cameras available, but I want to get eyes on the ground sooner rather than later. I understand that you’re both quite tired but I need you two to get over there and get a general feel for the area.”

Ghost cleared his throat. “Meat’s remark, whilst rather inappropriate, is also somewhat accurate. A couple like yourself would draw less attention than a pair of us if we drove around and tried to scout the area.” The two soldiers in question shared a look as if to say ‘why us’, then looked back towards the map. Shade spoke up first.

“How long do you want us out there for, exactly?”

“Long enough to see what kind of environment we’re working in exactly, as well as what kind of vibe you get from the locals,” MacTavish answered, “keep an eye out for things that may look out of place, like signage, vehicles…”

“… or two ‘tourists’ in a not so tourist-y town, taking pictures of things that people don’t take pictures of…” Dash grumbled quietly. Ghost shot her a warning look through his mask, then stepped back.

“Regardless, if you can give us a better idea on what we’d be walking into, then it might make this one a bit easier on everyone involved. Plus, you can consider it a team building exercise.” He sent a meaningful look to both Shade and Dash on that last part, crossing his arms in finality. “I trust the pair of you will get this done thoroughly and quietly, considering that one of you came from a recon unit.”

Dash nodded, “It’ll get done, sir. We’ll know what we’re walking into when we go in.”

MacTavish closed the map up and held it under one of his arms. “Good. Keep this as low profile as you can, but keep your side arms ready to go. I don’t want either of you targeted by a low life thug who thinks they can make some quick cash… stay careful out there.”

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*Nogales Industrial District*
“This place is an absolute shithole…” Shade grumbled as they turned down side street. They’ve been driving around the area now for a good hour, and there was nothing notable outside of the numerous storefronts, warehouses and worksites. The streets were empty save for a few ‘corporate’ vehicles parked outside a few of the businesses they passed, and whatever foot traffic was seen quickly moved along and avoided looking at them. Not to mention that the glow of the street lamps barely illuminated the post they were attached to, let alone the road surface below. Were they that intimidating? “It’s like trying to find an asshole in a box of assholes…”

Dash kept up her pretense of looking interested in their boring surroundings, “They’re suspicious, it doesn’t look like they get a lot of traffic around here... Find a place to park, we’ll do this on foot,” she reached behind her for her camera bag and pulled it into her lap before assembling it.

“Yes ma’am…” Shade said quietly as he pulled off to the side and killed the engine. He reached down and pulled his sidearm from its hiding place in the door and shoved it into his waistband of his cargo pants, then got out of the jeep.

Dash got out quickly, strap of the DSLR camera looped around her neck and camera bag slung over her shoulder as she raised it to take a picture of the mostly abandoned street, making a show of looking at the result of the photo, before moving on to take more of the shop front across the street.

Shade stepped up to her and rested a hand on the small of her back, “to sell our cover,” he muttered quietly as he pretended to ask her about her picture, whilst actually looking around to identify any spectators. Inwardly, he remarked about how she seemed to be the perfect height for him to hold, but banished the thought as he regained focus.

Dash grumbled, but muttered back, “If you have ta,” she shrugged, looking around a bit before taking a picture of the street sign. She played with a few settings, ensuring the pictures were coming out right and would be at least a little useful.

“Let’s move down a bit, there’s a work site that we drove past that seemed a bit off to me…” Shade said, offering her his hand to hold.

Dash looked at his hand with a raised eyebrow before ignoring it and simply keeping a two-handed hold on her camera as they walked, “I saw the one. As small and poor as this place seems, a work site seems out of the ordinary in of itself. A powered and brightly lit one is more so.”

He let her disregard for his gesture slide as they walked, occasionally taking a look around for any potential threats or tails. “My thoughts exactly. And normally, if a crew’s working at night there would be activity in and around it. But the lights are on and nobody seems home... oh, and good idea too; make everything think that we’re having ‘issues’.” Shade added with a quiet chuckle.

Dash rolled her eyes and detached the lens from her camera, putting the caps back on either end and tucking it away in the bag before taking out the larger lens and clipping it into place, “Best not to get too close, if they see us lingering they’ll get suspicious. I’m not one for PDA.”

“Noted… though it might be a little bit late for that... two pricks on our six, about seventy out... Came out of an alleyway near where we parked and have been eyeballin’ us since.” Shade stated quietly, using the front-facing camera on his phone to look behind them. “I can’t make out anything specific, but there’s just something about ‘em that I can’t shake…”

Dash pretended to laugh and playfully shoved Shade, giving herself an excuse to look back over her shoulder as she passed Shade. She got a good, but quick, look at the two men following them, “If they’re armed it’s small arms only, pistols and knives. Pretty big men for a town that seems to have so little.”
“Probably enforcers then… one sec.” Shade said, ducking down in front of a parked van beside them to pretend to tighten his shoelaces. “I think I can see a handle of a pistol in one of their pockets or something… hard to tell in this light, or lack of it I should say…” He stood back up and took one more look around, before leaning down towards Dash, “I think it’s time we get going, we’ve outstayed our welcome… follow my lead, alright?”

“Slow your roll buddy boy,” Dash answered, “We got recon to do and we’re sure as hell gonna do it. Problem or no problem,” she looked towards the cronies, flashing a friendly smile as they neared.

Shade shook his head but didn’t protest, opting to step away and have a closer look at a poster stuck to a window of a shop nearby, muttering to himself. “Hi, good morning and welcome to the Today Show. Our leading story: two stupid ass foreigners get mugged and raped in a Mexican border town. We’ll give you all the details on how they could’ve avoided it after the break…”

Dash heard him and elbowed him in the ribs, “Be nice,” she hissed, then smiled at the two men again, “We’re a bit lost,” she chuckled sheepishly.

“No kiddin’ eh ese’,” the first man, bald enough for the nearby light to be reflected off of his tattooed scalp, said as he looked over both Shade and Dash with a curious look on his face, “don’ look like yous from ‘round ‘ere. ‘S a pretty lil’ gringa doin’ in our neck’ve the woods, eh?”

“Seeing the world,” Dash answered pleasantly, “We must’ve made a wrong turn somewhere, and it’s getting late… you wouldn’t happen to know the way to the nearest motel would you?”

“None that take in your kind,” the second man, a lot taller and heavier set than the first, answered with a deep and clipped tone with far better English, “you must’ve taken quite the wrong turn…”

“Our kind?” Dash asked curiously, taking a cautious step back, subtly getting ready for a fight.

“My frien’ mean no disrepec’, ese, jus’ that ‘s a bit crazy seein’ a gringo and gringa out about town this late, eh?” The first man, who Shade internally dubbed as ‘G-boy’, said as he casually walked around the two soldiers before coming to lean against the nearby wall. The second man, ‘Tower’, remained where he stood, focused on them. “Especially since the classier places that you’d be stayin’ in are back that’a way.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the main business and residential district.

“What can I say,” Shade said with a lightly forced chuckle, “our GPS took us for the scenic route, then abruptly shit itself once it realised we were lost.” Both G-boy’s and Tower’s eyes narrowed when he spoke up. G-boy stepped up close to Shade until he was almost looking straight up at him.

“Where you from, ese? Don’ sound like no normal gringo to me.” He asked with squinted eyes.

Shade glanced towards Dash then shrugged. “I’m from Australia, not that it really means much to anyone.” G-boy’s eyes lit up at the revelation though.

“No way holmes! You an Aussie? Man, no wonder yo’ sounded weird. Must be all that blood in yo’ head. How it feel to be right side up?” Shade frowned at the remark, and stole a glance at Tower as he caught him rolling his eyes. ‘I think I found the Mexican Meat…” “It don’ matter, you must be doin’ somethin’ right if you managed to land a hot piece o’ ass like her!”

Dash cleared her throat, looking sharply at the man, and forced a friendly smile, “Well now, this has been fun. I take it that’s a no on the motels?” she sighed, “Come along then honey we better get the jeep and find a place to unpack the tents.”

G-boy ignored Dash and kept pressing for details. “Man, yo’ gotta share yo’ secret! Is it the accent? I
could talk like yo’, listen ‘ere,” he cleared his throat, “‘Gee’dey meyte, how’sa beut a shrimp on the beybey! Wanna rewll on mah cock-a-dile?” He opened his mouth to say more but was dragged back by the collar of his shirt.

“I do apologise, he watches too many movies and only comprehends stereotypes,” Tower said as he held G-boy in a headlock, “I don’t know which motel or venue you’re staying at, but if you turn around and head back onto the main road, follow that all the way west and you’ll end up in the middle of town. Someone who lives local to there should be able to help you…”

Dash smiled at him, “Thank you. Come on, Bill, we better go get the jeep, that’s enough sight-seeing around here,” she began walking back towards where they’d parked, “Thanks again!” she called over her shoulder.

Shade followed behind and walked beside her, trying not to turn around and smack G-boy in the face after hearing “Farewell Captain Boomerang!” being shouted out behind him, instead focusing his anger on getting the jeep started up and turned around, hands gripping the wheel tightly. After several minutes of driving, he looked at Dash with an expression that read pure anger. “That… was the worst fake Australian accent ever. Of all time.”

Dash nodded her agreement with a grimace, “It was painful. Let us hope we never have to do that again… Circle back after a ways, we need to get some higher ground and get pictures of that construction site. I have a lens that can handle just about any distance we decide is safe,” she took the lens off of her camera before slipping it safely back in the bag and pulling out a larger one.

“As long as we don’t run into those pricks again, I’m all yours.” Shade said, pulling a u-turn in the next street.

Authors Notes:

(Shade)

Gotta love those briefings… *shudder* (you’re the one that wrote it) … no guess as to who did all the writing there. Meat’s an absolute prick here, further making the divide wider between the two stubborn soldiers, though I think he’s learned his lesson though. One would hope. And Shade’s a little overly cautious here, guess you can’t wonder why… next chapter’s gonna be interesting, that’s for sure. Oh and yes, that fake Australian accent was as hard to as it was to read…. Never again...

(Spitfire)

Well, uh… This chapter is long… 4740+ words? Heh… that’s a lot. At this rate we’ll hit 50k total before the month’s out. Dash absolutely hated playing ‘girlfriend’ to Shade (she loved it, she just won’t admit it) . Nah man, she hated it (to quote Meat… denial!~) Hush you. Dash played up the ‘Southern Hospitality’ she was raised on and she tried very hard not to punch ‘G-boy’. Or Shade. She’s a “Don’t touch me ~hiss~” person. Things get fun next chapter. See you there.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
The roof of the three story building across the street, as it turned out, happened to be the perfect place to stake out the worksite. As it happened, people never looked up and the Task Force went unnoticed on the roof of the abandoned building.

Dash reclined against the AC unit with a yawn, “It’s like we said. The street lights were hardly functioning, but that site was lit up like Time Square,” she grumbled as someone muttered a skepticism, “It’s not our problem if they’re not there during the day, they were last night and I got the pictures to prove it.”

“Didn’t stop to think that someone might’ve left the generators on overnight?” Scarecrow asked from his vantage on the ledge, a pair of binoculars in his hands as he turned to look at her. “I mean, we’ve all left shit on when we’re in a rush. Hell, Meat left the damn TV paused when we had to scramble a few months ago. Came back and some weird-ass anime was burned into the damn thing.”

Dash glared at him, “You don’t think I sat my ass up on this roof for three hours taking pictures when there was no one there do you? There were people everywhere, ‘n they were movin’ boxes in that bit shielded by the tarps. Didn’t look like building supplies to me.”

Scarecrow shrugged and focused back on the site. “Whatever… I’d ask Shade what his thoughts were but…” he grumbled the rest of the sentence.

“But what?” She asked, catching what he said. When he didn’t respond, she looked over to where Shade was and almost yelled at him right then and there. Against the small structure that covered the stairwell entrance was Shade, resting against the brickwork with his cap pulled over his eyes and head tilted to one side, fast asleep. She picked up a larger piece of gravel next to her and chucked it at him, nailing the top of his head, “Oi! If I have to stay awake so do you, you ass!”

The stone woke him up with a start. “Tucker did it!” He exclaimed, sitting up and looking around before the mild pain of being hit by the gravel started to register. “The fuck?” He rubbed his head and looked at Dash. “The bloody hell was that for?”

“If I have to stay awake so do you,” she repeated, glaring at him, “Tell them what we saw last night. And not our precious two friends with the terrible imitations.”

He grimaced, “You mean the Mexican Meat and Royce?” He groaned, crawling to his feet and walking over towards Scarecrow. “Mate, we watched a bunch of nasty assholes carry god-knows-what in and out of that place for a good two or three hours last night. No clue what it was, but it could be anything from Coke to Cubans to Coke.”

“Could always find out by goin’ in,” Dash suggested, “Not me, obviously, or Shade, we’re sleep deprived, no we’re not goin’ in there. But fuck.. There’s gotta be somethin’ we saw too much last night for there to be nothin’. They didn’t even have any tools lying around or work benches….”

Scarecrow looked between them with a horrified expression on his face. “I’m sorry, but you lost me at the ‘Mexican Meat and Royce’.”

Shade and Dash shared a look. “Mate, you don’t want to know… and Dash, as much as I agree with you on the going to find out thing and the not going because we’re tired thing, I’ve gotta raise two counterpoints,” he started, laying down beside Scarecrow and lifting a gloved hand towards her, “one: adrenaline is a hell of a drug and will wake you faster than caffeine, and two: Boss said that
we’ve gotta wait until we have positive ID on the three HVTs.”

Dash yawned and flipped him off, “Never said we had to engage anyone…”

“And how do you suppose we do that?” Shade asked, instantly regretting it the moment the words left his mouth.

“There’s no one there,” Dash pointed out, “It’s bound to be covered by surveillance cams though… We could rig an improvised small A.O.E emp device…”

Scarecrow was about to protest when the radio came to life. “This is Ozone. I’ve got eyes on three nice looking SUVs moving into the target area, headed towards the southern entrance of the site. Can’t see who’s inside, windows are tinted too dark.” Shade and Scarecrow turned around and lowered themselves as much as they could to avoid skylining themselves. Sure enough, from their point they could see the vehicles in question making their approach.

“Copy that, we’ve got eyes on from up here.” Shade responded.

“Hey, got movement in the complex. Got three guys moving from a shed on the eastern side, weapons visible.” Roach called from his vantage point on a rooftop further down the road.

“I’ve got a vic coming in from the west. Single black utility van, no visible windows. It just passed us at a pretty decent clip…” Rook reported from his position with Chemo, Royce and Meat down on the street, a little ways away from the target site.

“Everyone hold… wait until we have positive ID on the targets.” MacTavish said over the radio, in the same car with Ozone, Ghost and Robot.

“Guess that’s a no to the sneaking in plan…” Dash yawned, crawling forward on her belly to observe the scene below.

Shade just chuckled. “Gee, what gave you that idea…” He cast one look off to the back of the building, where they had set up three fast ropes for use as an escape route in case they needed to get out quickly.

The three SUVs pulled into the complex, followed by the van a few minutes later. Through their binoculars, they watched as the men that emerged from the shed greeted the newcomers in the SUVs and the van. Shade frowned a little, then pulled his notepad from his pocket. He flipped through to a picture of the three HVTs, studied them, then returned back to his binos.

“Hey hey, bingo!” He said with a small laugh. “I got The Fixer, Solomon and Aziz. Read them and weep.”

“You sure it’s them?” Dash asked curiously.

“Yeah. Hundred percent. Fixer’s had a haircut, Solomon’s dyed his, and Aziz shaved his beard, but that’s them alright.”

Dash narrowed her eyes, gears turning in her head, “Why would they change their appearance? What’s the point?”

“Well, Dashie,” Shade began with a small self-satisfied smirk, “if you were an internationally wanted criminal and/or terrorist, would you go parading around looking like you just had your mugshot taken minutes prior?”
“One of those was taken from a fair distance, he shouldn’t know that we have his picture. So why change?” Dash questioned, then glared at him, “And don’t call me Dashie…”

“No problem, and to answer that, why do special forces teams like the SEALs and MARSOC grow beards when deployed to the Middle East? Answer? To better blend in from a distance. A clean shaven dude in a place full of beards will stand out. And the inverse is true. Make sense?”

Dash simply grunted, “Still don’t know about this… Something feels off…”

Shade and Scarecrow hummed in agreement, with Scarecrow chiming in, “Yeah… what I don’t get is why they’re meeting up like this in broad daylight. That’s the unsettling thing to me. I get that the cartel likely has the local police paid off to the max, but still…”

“To the passerby it looks like a normal business meeting,” Dash suggested, “They see it out of the corner of their eye, nothing interesting, just a few guys talking business, keep walking, go about your day. A business meeting at night? Now that’s odd.”

“Fair point, from both of you,” Shade said coolly, his attention focused on the meeting through his binoculars, “but that’s not what has me unsettled… I think I can make out an earwig in one of The Fixer’s men, and I know for certain that the Sinaloa’s stick to burner cell phones…”

“You think they’re getting information or communication from an outside source?” Dash asked.

The penny dropped for Scarecrow, “Or we mightn’t be the only ones working this job…”

“Who else would be interested in the dealings of a drug cartel?” Dash questioned, “Presumably, the only people that know about the terror risk are our allies,” she watched through her own binoculars and paused, “ Fucking hell…” she muttered.

“The Mexican government and the Policia Federal…” Shade said as they all looked through their binoculars.

First Sergeant Hector Raul-Hernandez Junior, known as ‘Dez’ to his colleagues, was desperately trying his best to maintain his composure as he watched his boss, and his target, Cesar ‘The Fixer’ Domingo discuss rather concerning details to a Colombian and Arabian man that he had never seen or heard of before. He had spent the last five years of his career trying, and successfully, infiltrating the Sinaloa Cartel’s ranks in order to gain fresh intelligence for the Federal Police, and the appearance of these two men at what he thought was a trade meeting with another cartel had blindsided him.

The constant chatter in his ear from his handler, asking him in frank terms ‘what the fuck was going on’ didn’t help his stress levels either.

For the last ten minutes, he also thought he could make out a glint from a rooftop nearby, but wrote it off as his anxiety, eagerly waiting for this meeting to be finished and for him to be let go for the day so he could report back to his seniors.

“Gustavo!” Cesar called for him, referring to him as his cover ID’s name, “get your ass over here!”

“R-right away boss!” He answered, hoping to god that his stammer wasn’t picked up on.

“Yo, I got movement. Looks like they’re unpacking the van.” Scarecrow said, eyes down his binoculars. “Which guy did you think was the agent, Shade?”
“The guy that Fixer called up. He looks skittish as all hell too... “ Shade groaned, then glanced to Dash, “Hey, you mind calling that in? Don’t wanna take my eyes off this just yet.”

Dash nodded and moved back carefully before sitting up in a kneel, and keyed her comm, “Command we got eyes on who appears to be an agent, no one we recognize, could be Mexican Intelligence. He’s with Fixer, no distinguishable features.”

“ That can’t be right, Dash. Our intel has no records of any internal investigations by the Mexican Government or the Federal Police. ” MacTavish replied, confusion evident in his voice. “ How did you identify them? ”

“Shade identified an earwig,” she answered, “These guys don’t use them, they use burners. Looked pretty skittish too.”

“Copy that, maintain your position for the time being, we’ll try and assess how to act from here. I don’t want to kill a man who’s doing their job, but if he takes shots at us then he’s signed his own death warrant. Hotel Six, out. ” MacTavish finished, the last part of his message making all three soldiers on the rooftop share a glance.

“I hope our boy down there doesn’t blow his co-” Shade was cut out by a loud gunshot. “Fuck!” Shade, Dash and Scarecrow all hit the deck as the shot rang out, the radio coming to life as everyone called out for a status. Scarecrow was the first to peer up, slowly looking down onto the scene below.

“Dude, homeboy just got executed by the bomber dude.” He muttered.

The smoke was still flowing from the barrel of Aziz’s Makarov PM when Ceasar and Solomon both rounded on him with their own weapons.

“What the flying fuck, cabron! You popped one of my guys, I should blast your ass sky high right now!” The Mexican started yelling in accented English, frantically waving his nickel-plated Beretta in Aziz’s face.

“Relax, my friend. He was nothing more than a mere mole… check his right ear if you don’t believe me.” Aziz responded calmly, as if he hadn’t just ruthlessly executed someone. Solomon and Ceasar shared a glance, then Solomon bent down to the man’s body and inspected his ear. Sure enough, when he stood up, he held in his fingertips a small clear plastic radio receiver.

Ceasar swore loudly, then looked at the rest of his men in a panic. “Anyone else here a Federale pig! Speak up now, and I’ll make it quick for you!”

“All stations, we have shots fired! I repeat, shots fired!” Shade called into his radio as she shuffled back and retrieved a spare grappling hook and fast rope from their spare gear pile.

“Copy that Shade. Engage the target, but watch your fire. We want the HVTs alive.” MacTavish said as Shade buried the hook deep into the roof’s ledge. “All stations, move in and engage.”

“Scarecrow! Hit those tires and render those vic’s useless! Dash, come on!” Shade called, gripping the rope with gloved hands before jumping over the edge face first in an ‘Australian rappel’.

“I’m right on you,” Dash responded, tucking her binoculars away as she raced after him and grabbed her rope and sliding down it, slowing her descent by gripping harder with her hands. She hit the ground and brought her weapon up to ready as she followed Shade.
No sooner had Shade hit the ground did Scarecrow open up with his Mark 48 machine-gun, the loud gunfire cutting through the relative silence. Taking a knee, he waited for Dash to release from the rope before cutting across the street with rifle up and ready. “Moving!” He called out for her, eyes and weapon trained forward and towards the compound’s street entrance. Behind them, the sedan carrying Rook, Robot, Meat and Royce squealed to a halt, the four soldiers jumping out and taking up a stacked formation behind Shade and Dash.

“Ready up!” Shade called, fishing into his vest for a flashbang and held it behind him to Dash for her to throw. Dash took the flashbang and primed it, peeking where she could to target her throw before tossing it over the fence. It detonated and Shade immediately moved around the corner and hugged the fence, firing short bursts at a pair of cartel gunmen that had been caught by the blast.

Dash charged ahead, dodging fire and surprising enemies around corners with one quick shot from her SPAS before ducking and running to the next cover she could flank. The others followed in directly behind her, taking out threats in the complex as they swept deeper. Radio chatter warned that MacTavish, Ghost and the others were beginning their sweep from the other side, and warned them to check their targets.

“This sections clear! Robot, stay at the entrance and watch for leakers. Rook, secure those bodies at the van. And did anyone see where the HVTs ran to?” Shade asked on the radio as he cleared a small shed off to the side.

“I had eyes on Fixer and Solomon making a break to the southern side towards the Captain’s element. No eyes on Aziz though.” Scarecrow reported back, his heavy fire having stopped once the others entered the complex.

“I have sight on Aziz, eastern side by a heavy lifter. He’s got a phone in his hand, sounds like he’s calling for help!” Roach called out, still in his vantage point. “Dash, you’re the closest to him. See that large piece of equipment? He’s near there!”

“I’m on it!” Dash replied, breaking off from her team and sprinting for the area with her sidearm drawn, not the time for the blast of a shotgun. Shade followed behind her quickly.

“Got your back D!” He called out, reloading a fresh magazine.

“Copy that, I got yours,” Dash replied and rounded the corner, pistol up, “Drop it!” she ordered harshly.

Aziz froze and stood up slowly, turning to face the two soldiers. “It is only a mere cellphone, young lady.”

“She fucking said drop it, or I’ll drop you, you prick!” Shade said, taking a few steps off to the side and a step closer, rifle aimed right at the man’s head.

Dash rolled her eyes at her partner, but kept her eyes trained on Aziz, “Drop the damn phone or I will shoot you.”

“And why ever would I do that?” Aziz said levelly, his other hand twitching for a split second.

“Right, playtime’s over.” Shade said as he dropped his rifle to let it hang and covered the ground between Aziz and himself in a mere second. He tackled the man into the back of the earthmover, using the advantage of surprise to gain the upper hand. “Dash! Zipties! Back of my vest!” He called, using his hands and a knee to keep Aziz restrained.

Dash moved up, turning to watch their backs as she moved and looking out of the corner of her eye
to grab the pack of zipties and hand it over to Shade. She was quickly a few steps away again, watching their backs and keeping her pistol ready as she keyed her comm, “We have Aziz.”

“Copy that Dash, Ghost has Fixer in custody, Solomon’s KIA. Everyone, we have three minutes to search for additional intelligence as well as the tunnel entrance. Roach, I want you down on the ground for this part.” MacTavish instructed over the radio.

Shade had finally finished restraining Aziz. “You have the right to remain an asshole, anything you have done will be held against you by my boot. Do not pass Allah, do not collect seventy-two virgins.” He stood up and admired his handiwork: he had tied up Aziz’s left hand to his right ankle, and his right hand to his left ankle, in a cross-pattern. Shade had also taken a small scarf and gagged him with it. “How bout that, D? Looks like modern art. I call it ‘Ode to the Counter Terrorist’.”

Dash laughed, “Remarkable, call the press, it needs to be preserved in a museum right away,” she joked, but did not lower her guard as she watched for threats, “Let’s finish the job and get outta here.”

“Amen to that… wait, how the fuck am I gonna move him like this…” Shade swore, not realising that by restraining his legs had left Aziz immobile. He looked around in frustration until his eyes landed on his solution. “One sec mate, don’t go anywhere.” He quipped to the restrained Aziz, who looked up towards Dash with a confused expression.

Dash didn’t have time to pay attention to Aziz’s looks, they were still in a combat zone, it might not be an active combat zone, but that could change any second, and she was alert looking for anyone who could trigger that change.

“I got it!” Shade called back, walking around the corner while pushing a wheelbarrow ahead of him. “Give me a hand with him, bet’cha his ass is heavy with all that pork he wolfs down on a daily basis.”

Dash quirked an eyebrow at him, “You got yourself in this mess,” she responded, “besides, the second I let my guard down is the second we get jumped.”

Shade just quirked an eyebrow and glanced down at Aziz, “See what I have to work with?” He said, before unceremoniously grabbing him by the arms and dumping him into the bucket of the barrow chest first. “Good help’s hard to find, harder to keep… then again, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you mate. How does one train a suicide bomber anyway? I mean, there’s no real ‘on the job’ training, is there…”

Rook and Roach were searching the last large warehouse structure, weapons up yet slightly relaxed. “So, did you see who got Aziz?” Rook asked his buddy.

“Yeah, I was covering them from my spot. Shade took him down by tackling him into the digger after he wouldn’t comply.” Roach replied as he lifted up a tarp covering a few boxes of sheet metal components. “Didn’t hang around to see the aftermath though.”

“Fair enough.” Rook said, checking around a parked truck with a cargo container still loaded. “Hey, if you were a drug cartel smuggler, where would you hide a tunn-” He was cut off as his foot fell through a tarp that was laying on the floor. He let out a yelp of surprise as he fell a good seven feet downwards, groaning as he came to his senses.

“Rook! You okay buddy?” Roach called out from above, pulling away the sunken tarp to reveal the tunnel entrance they were after. Rook just laid there as he gave Roach a thumbs up, thankful that he
had opted to wear his helmet today. “Hey boss, we found the tunnel… might wanna send over
Chemo though.”

Upon seeing how Shade had brought in Aziz, and after seeing the desperate, practically pleading,
look in his eyes, Ghost had to give the new guy some credit. He was quite imaginative when it came
to restraining prisoners, he almost felt sorry for the Arabian terrorist.

Almost.

“Okay people, Roach is getting the tunnel wired up with explosive charges to seal it. Once that’s set,
we’ll extract. What else did you all find?” MacTavish asked as everyone else gathered round. Ozone
was the first to speak up.

“The SUVs were packed with weapons, which I assume were going to be provided to Aziz and his
men, whilst the van had samples of opium and other narcotic materials. We’ve also collected a
number of bodies with Middle Eastern descent, not too sure of their exact nationality. But I’d say
they’re definitely with Aziz.”

Meat chimed in afterwards. “We also found a larger cache of weapons in one of the sheds close to
the tunnel entrance. Mostly small stuff like handguns and small sub-guns. Couple of rifles and
shotties. If I had to guess, they’re loaned out to the coyotes and smugglers who traverse the tunnel
and clear it of any wildlife that might’ve gotten in, that or any one that shouldn’t be in there.” He
glanced over towards the structure that Roach was now leaving. “Other than that, wasn’t much else
here to find.

“Alright, we’ve got what we’ve come for, done what we needed to do. Let’s pack up and get out of
here,” MacTavish said, “Robot and Ozone, go secure Solomon’s body and get it ready for transport.
Dash, Shade, you take Aziz with you and start making your way to the border exfil point. We’ll
catch up with you, but this guy is now the priority.”

“Roadtrip, got it sir!” Shade said enthusiastically as he pet Aziz on the head. “You and I are going to
have a great time together,” he looked up over at his teammate and chuckled. “You cool with
driving, Dash?”

“Sure, why not,” she shrugged, “Let’s get out of here,” she turned and lead the way off.

Shade smiled at her, then turned to the Captain and Ghost. “Sirs, I shall see you later,” he then
tapped Aziz on the head, hard enough to make his forehead hit the bucket with enough force to make
a sound, “Come on asshole, I got a dodgy pleather backseat and a disk full of amateur nighcored
Justin Bieber songs that you’re going to love to bits.”

Dash looked at him with a horrified expression, “Oh please no. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Shade simply smiled and pulled out a CD from under his plate carrier, with marker pen writing on it
that read ‘Shade’s Ultimate Torture Playlist #15’.

She gave him a pleading look “Shade no…” then narrowed her eyes, “ Why do you have fifteen of
those!??”

He merely laughed, waiting till they got to their jeep before pulling out a disk walkman and a pair of
headphones. “Firstly, that’s volume fifteen, the first fourteen are a mixture of all different artists and
voice clips, like Jim Carrey’s ‘most annoying sound in the world’ but on a five minute loop. And
secondly, I got these headphones for a reason…” He said as he looked back at Aziz, who was
looking at him with wide terrified eyes. “We have our own music, it’s only fair he has his own…”
Dash’s shoulders sagged in relief as he pulled out the headphones and walkman, “Oh thank god,” she breathed, and began the process of starting up the jeep and adjusting the mirrors and seat from the way Shade had set them. Before long, they were on the road heading north, towards their border pick-up.

**Author’s notes:**

*(Shade)*

Firstly, I apologise for the remarks that Shade made to Aziz. If any of our readers are of the Muslim religion, I mean no offense. Shade’s remarks and views in this do not reflect those of the authors. Shade was being a complete asshole to Aziz on purpose as he was a terrorist, and if he can’t kill them, then absolutely humiliating and dehumanizing them is the next best thing in his eyes. Though I personally wouldn’t wish nightcored Justin Bieber on my worst enemies.

And despite all their issues, when push comes to shove, both Shade and Dash shove aside their petty bullshit and work as quite the team. But the fun isn’t over yet, oh no...

*(Spitfire)*

Sooo… That was a relief for the whole ‘god awful torture music’ bit. Poor Dash was dreading not being able to drown it out. Shade and Dash seem to be on a common page for once, maybe not the same page, but a common one. Mmm… That’s all I got really… See ya next time!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Shade ran a hand through his hair, his cap sitting on his leg as he reclined a little bit in the front seat of the jeep. He looked to Dash, who was off in her own world as she drove, and then over his shoulder to their captive, Faruq Abid Aziz, who had tears streaming down his eyes as he tried to shake off the headset of the disk walkman that was taped to his head. Shade smirked, guessing that he had reached the remix of ‘Baby’ that he had practically butched for this exact purpose. Aziz’s hands were now bound together, Shade having to remove his custom hogtie to get him safely seated in the jeep’s back seat.

He was about to return to looking forward but something he saw behind them had him pause. He tapped Dash on the shoulder to get her attention. “Hey, I know we’ve gotta head north, but take the next left and head south… I think we’ve got a tail.” Slowly, he grabbed his Glock from his holster and held it in his right hand, out of sight for the time being.

“Yeah, he’s been there a while, I’ve been watching ‘em,” Dash answered, taking the left turn casually and following the road until she could turn left again, going back south, “Still there… like a feather on a chicken…”

Shade chuckled at her remark, “You can take the girl out of the south…” He turned back around to face the front, though his eyes remained fixed on the mirrors and the car that was following them. “I think I can see three, maybe four guys, no visible weapons though.” He pulled out and consulted the small folded map that was tucked between the center console and his seat, looking for a potential escape route. “Hmm… keep tracking south until we pass that gas station, then hang a right along that service road.”

“We’re in the south, ya ninny,” Dash replied absently, following the directions, they drove south a ways before passing the gas station and Dash turned onto the service road, “We losin’ them or kickin’ their asses?” she asked curiously.

Shade shook his head as he turned around in his seat again. “Neither… they’ve got backup. Looks like another one of those vans from the worksite, it’s following the car.” Reaching back, he unclipped Aziz’s seatbelt and roughly shoved him down to lay across the entire back seat. “Sorry mate, but don’t want you gettin’ pinged. They know we’ve seen ‘em.” Slowly and carefully, he moved from the front seat and over the back seat into the jeep’s trunk compartment. He was thankful that they were given an open top, as it allowed him better clearance to shoot from, though it also meant that the guys following them could see what he was getting ready to do.

“Noted. How good a shot are you?” Dash asked, focusing on the road as it twisted.

“How good a driver are you?” He shot back with a brief laugh as he readied his rifle and set it against the edge of the tailgate, using it for support as he waited for their pursuers to close in. “Take the next right as hard as you can, then halt us out of sight!”

“Better than you,” Dash reciprocated, “Aim for their tires, shoot the driver and they can just switch out, shoot the tires and they got a problem.” She did as instructed, swinging a hard right at the next opportunity then slamming the breaks and bringing them to a stop in the cover of some trees to the side of the road. A few minutes passed, then the car and van turned the corner.

They were stopped as Shade let loose a volley of quick and controlled shots at the driver and front passenger of each vehicle, finishing up with a few rounds into the front and rear tires that were visible to him. “Go go go!”
Dash brought the jeep into gear and floored the gas, swinging out of the cover and barrelling down the road. Shade reloaded a fresh magazine and kept his eyes to their rear, keying his radio once he had the chance. “Captain, this is Shade. We’re diverting for the time being as we’ve picked up a tail. So far we’ve taken out two vics, unsure if we’re still compromised at this time.”

“Copy that Shade, we’re almost at the extract point ourselves. Try and clear your six as fast as you can, the sooner we get over the border the better.” MacTavish replied, the radio starting to come across as spotty. “If you can get us your location, I can try and send Rook and a few others over to assist.”

“Negative sir, they might bring us more attention. I’ll let you know if we need a hand, Shade out.” He finished, glancing back at Dash. “Start heading north and towards the exfil, but keep an eye out for anything that’s sus!”

“As spotty as that last came through, they might be about to run into trouble themselves…” Dash commented, taking the next turn that allowed them to get back on track towards the north and exfil. She kept a good amount of speed on as well. The high pitched whine of bike engines alerted the pair of them to a new threat, when five trail bikes carrying two gang members each sped around a corner they just passed. The second they were in sight, the passengers on the lead bikes opened up with their Mac-11s, sending a spray of bullets at and around the jeep, “Damnit!” Dash cursed, weaving slightly as she avoided some of the fire, “Hold on back there!” She slammed the breaks, then sped up again, bringing them level with one bike, she swerved and hit the bike, throwing it’s riders off balance and sending the bike toppling. She sped up again, getting a strong lead on the others.

“Good one!” Shade called, firing a few rounds towards the other bikers in an effort to hit them. One of his shots hit a bike in the front tire, bursting it and causing the riders to fall and slide underneath the bike that was behind them. At the same time however, two more cars had joined the chase, with gang members hanging out of the windows bearing a mixture of pistols, submachine guns and even rifles. “Shit! We got more company!” He called, switching to automatic and letting off a burst at the hood of the sedan. The rounds penetrated but didn’t damage the engine enough to stop it, smoke starting to pour out in small amounts.

“I noticed!” Dash yelled back, “Get back here and buckle up, this is gonna be a hell of a rough ride!” She swiped another bike off it’s track and knocked it out of the game. The cars were catching up, “Sooner rather than later!”

“One sec!” Shade yelled, emptying his magazine into the closer car with little success before he tossed into the front seat. He rolled Aziz from the seats onto the floor of the jeep in an effort to keep him from catching a stray round, and was in the middle of climbing across the back seats himself when a shot fired from one of the bike riders caught him in the upper left thigh. “Fuck!” He collapsed into the back seat and reflexively drew his sidearm, dumping the magazine into the general direction of the shooter. “I’m hit!” Tossing his Glock onto the seat beside him, he fished out his combat tourniquet from his vest and quickly secured it around his leg, before feeling wound to get an idea of how bad it was. Blood wasn’t gushing or spurting rapidly, so it was safe to assume that it hadn’t hit his artery.

“I saw,” Dash winced in sympathy, “Just stay down and strap in. Not sure how long I can evade these fuckers, but.. Well… they’re not getting Aziz back.” One of the cars pulled level with them and tried ramming them the way she had done the bikes. Dash rammed back, to no effect. She dropped speed, just a little, and swiped at their rear tire, spinning them out, before speeding ahead again, “Man, fuck these guys. They are persistent as mud on a pig.”

A loud blast from the back seat preceded the car beside them veering into a lightpost, the car
wrapping around it violently. Shade grunted as he shifted around, Dash’s SPAS-12 in his hands. “I can see why you like this thing…I never liked tailgaters. We need a place to get rid of these assholes!”

Dash laughed, “Nice!” she yelled over the chaos, “We sure as sugar do…” she scanned the road, the signs, the turns, the environment, desperately, looking for anything that could give them a way to escape. They were surrounded by buildings and garages, lots full of old broken down and rusted cars. She growled in frustration, “Nothing! There’s nowhere to lay low in this damn place!” She swung into a junkyard at the first moment she could after breaking line of sight and pulled the jeep behind a pile of rusted old machinery, “Hope this works…” she muttered, glancing back at Shade, “Not lookin’ too good, bud…”

Shade felt slightly weaker than normal, the adrenaline from the fight fading and shock from the wound starting to make its effect known. “No shit… hey, stupid question, but you’re Texan right?” He said as he reached for his rifle in the front seat and reloaded another magazine, down to four remaining in his vest, then reloaded his sidearm, leaving him down to two left for that. “Time you have your own damn Alamo!” He chuckled, grunting as he set his weapons aside and started treating himself with bandages from his small first aid kit.

Dash frowned at him and sighed, “CO back in Recon always said: Longer everything goes according to plan, the bigger the impending disaster…” she unbuckled and shifted around grabbing her sidearm from under the dash and loading it before shoving it into her thigh holster and getting out of the jeep, “Pass my SPAS and lay low… I got this… I am Texan after all, and if there’s one thing you just don’t do, it’s shoot at a Texan.” Shade reached over and handed her the weapon stock first, before shuffling across to get out of the jeep himself. He had torn off the left leg of his combat pants to treat his wound.

“We need to ditch this thing and find a place to bunker down.” He said, slinging his weapon before reaching in and grabbing Aziz from the floor of the jeep. “Come on asshole, I didn’t come all this way to get shot for fucking nothing. How many full reloads have you got, D?”

Dash slung a duffle bag from the trunk over her shoulder, “Enough,” she answered, “Now you get yourself and that fucker somewhere you won’t get shot… again…” Dash pumped the shotgun, “I’m ‘bout to kick some ass.”

Shade nodded at her, “Stay frosty out there,” he drew his sidearm and grabbed Aziz by the arm, leading him with a limp towards a cluster of buildings and junked cars not far away.

MacTavish, Ghost, Roach and the rest of the team waited at the holding point not far from the border crossing point, all of them watching out for any potential threats. The second that Shade had reported that they had picked up a tail and were attempting to evade them, they had heightened their own security in case they were being followed too.

“It’s been twenty minutes now since we heard from them,” Roach said to Rook, “and there’s been no word since.” He was clearly nervous for all of them, yet was doing his best to stow his emotions.

“Part of me is hoping that they round that corner and say that the only reason they couldn’t reach us was because their comms got shot up…” Rook sighed, “but another part is thinking that they couldn’t clear their six, and they’ve been killed… or worse, captured.”

Roach rubbed his face in worry, “Yeah, it’s no secret that these cartels do some fucked up shit to those they get their hands on.”
Rook was about to respond when a burst of radio chatter from a scanner they had acquired drew their attention. “Todas las estaciones, tenemos informes de disparos múltiples en un depósito de chatarra en el distrito industrial del sur. Solicitando a todos los oficiales que respondan tan pronto como sea posible.”

“Meat!” Ghost yelled, the Canadian already making a beeline towards the scanner to translate. “Is it them?”

Meat tried not to grin as he looked at the others. “Well, it sounds like whoever’s already there is getting their asses handed to them. That’s gotta be our boy and girl.”

“Right,” MacTavish started, “Meat, Royce, Chemo, Roach and Scarecrow. You take the scanner and try to locate Dash and Shade. Consider anyone who poses a threat hostile; cartel, militia, or even the police if they directly engage you. Nobody gets left behind.”

Shade kicked open the rusted trunk with his good leg, then threw Aziz into it with a water canteen. “Stay here and be a good little boy, otherwise I’ll put that music on again, understood?” A fervent nod by the former-terrorist made Shade smile, “good boy.” He slammed the trunk closed, and used a marker pen to draw a small cross on the surface, before he started to slowly limp-walk his way back towards where he had seen Dash run off to. Despite the fact that he was wounded, he'd be damned to let her face off the enemy by herself.

A few minutes later and the pain in his leg had mostly faded out, allowing Shade the chance to walk and jog mostly normally. As such, he was able to finally find Dash as she staked out an ambush point. “Oi! Ass-iz is secure in a nice little hiding place, so I figured I’d come out and play while I can.”

She whirled on him, startled, “Jesus Christ, Shades, I told you to get to cover!” Dash peeked around her hiding place, and let out a silent hiss, and pressed him back with one hand, “Stay back,” she passed her bag to him, “There should be a few grenades, flashes and frags in there. If you plan on sticking around, I suggest you make use of them.”

He smiled as he dug through the bag and pulled out an assortment of the grenades, hanging them by their spoons on a few spare rows of MOLLE loops on his vest, “Oh baby, you know what I like,” he chuckled, before making sure his weapon was loaded with a round in the chamber, “and don’t you worry about me. ‘Tis only a flesh wound, after all.”

Dash gave him a pointed look, “You have a hole in your leg, Shades, that’s not a flesh wound, that’s a wound, just straight up.” She peeked again, using the mirror of a trashed car nearby, instead of looking around the corner, and signed for Shade to stay quiet as she readied herself with her shotgun.

Shade nodded as he crept away a few steps, looking for his own little ‘vantage’ point. He started muttering to himself, “I get knocked down, but I get up again, you’re never gonna keep me down, I get knocked down, but I get up again, you’re never gonna keep me down. He shoots an M16, he flies an F-16, his little girl’s sixteen, and he’s got everything…” Happy with his position, he throws a thumbs up towards Dash and resumes muttering, “he plays the games that remind him of the good times, and watches porn that reminds him of the best times…”

Dash nodded back to him and readied her own flashbang, waited a second, then rolled it around the corner. She waited for the bang before standing up and pivoting around the corner, taking four quick shots to take down a few before they recovered and spun back into cover, ducking down and shuffling back before the next guy rounded the corner to be met with a wall of hot buckshot.
Shade threw the first frag grenade at the same time, popping up from his spot as it went off to finish off the three men it had taken out, before taking quick shots at those nearby before popping down to a new position. Popping out once more, he caught the same men off guard and quickly dropped them as well. “Aaaaand there’s the kickoff, Chavez goes down first on the twenty meter line for the first tackle!” He called out to nobody in particular.

Dash rolled her eyes at Shade, slinging her duffle over her shoulder again before dashing out of cover and blasting a few as she ran to her next point, where she’d rigged a smoke grenade on a trip wire. She passed it and hid behind some cars and waited as she reloaded with shells from her vest, “Hundred-fifty shells, down to hundred-forty-two,” she muttered, “fifty slugs… hundred-fifty rounds for mah M-9… five flashes, down to four, five frags…” She didn’t wait long before the hiss of the smoke grenade going off sounded and the air was thick with the gray cloud. She came out of her cover and used her knife. Five men were down before the smoke cleared and she ran for her next hold off, ducking behind cover and shooting a shell from her SPAS into the next man to round the corner.

Shade moved from his position to engage a group of gunmen that were closing in on Dash’s position, emptying the remaining rounds in his rifle towards a few stragglers that were approaching him. He decided to be smart and let his rifle hang from its sling, opting to pick up a weapon and fresh magazine from the corpse of a cartel gunman he came up on. The AK’s currently loaded mag was fresh as well, giving him roughly sixty rounds of heavier hitting ammo. Ammo that came in handy when a sedan rounded the corner. Shade dropped to a knee and lit up the sedan as it approached, the heavier rounds having no issue penetrating the engine block as well as the passengers and driver of the car. He chuckled to himself as he stood back up and kept moving.

Dash caught up to Shade and shoved him down in cover, “Take it easy, Rambo,” she hissed, “Feel it or not you’re still hurt and Chemo’ll kill you himself for makin’ it worse.” She got up again in time to shoot someone who thought they could sneak up on them. She stayed with him though, setting her bag on the ground, “I didn’t have time to scout this place, I’ve exhausted all of the points I’d found, we have to hold here.” She shot another few rounds as she popped around the corner to surprise a group moving up on them, before ducking back down and reloading.

“No plan survives first contact, after all,” Shade grunted out as he popped from cover and let out a burst with the stolen AK, “and neither do plans B and C. Right now we’re running on Plan S.”

Dash nodded, “S,” She repeated, “Survive. Stay down and keep me covered.” She stood up and took a step forward before taking shots at whoever dared to get near, when her SPAS was empty, she switched to her M9, taking precise shots and not wasting a single one. When that was empty, she shuffled back, “Your turn,” she said quickly, already reloading her SPAS.

“Up!” He called, tossing a frag over their cover and into the growing crowd, waiting for it to detonate before popping up to empty the AK into the remaining enemies. He threw out a flashbang and quickly reloaded the stolen rifle before firing again, finally dropping it to the ground when he emptied it out and switched back to his 416, “these fuckers are not giving up, like the crowd at a bloody sausage sizzle that’s announced half-off the remaining snags.” He screamed out in frustration, firing in bursts until his magazine emptied.

“I’m up, move back!” Dash called, weapon ready as she moved up next to Shade and took up firing with her SPAS. There were so many. Dash wasn’t sure she’d seen so many bad guys in one place before, but she kept fighting, slamming the stock of her shotty into the head of a guy that got too close before shooting him with her M9. Then they were all over her, the one guy had proved enough distraction and they rushed her, one tackling her to the ground and knocking her M9 from her grip. Dash kicked them off and shot them with her SPAS, the others immediately around her dropping to
the ground as a series of rapid shots rang out.

Shade rushed over with his Glock in one hand and her M-9 in the other, taking shots with each as he stood next to her and gave her some space. “Rifle!” He bent down low, both of the handguns aimed towards different targets as Dash reached for the handle of his rifle and fired it, using his back as a shooting platform. As she shot, he quickly reloaded both handguns, then waited for her to finish before standing up to take on a group of newcomers.

Dash retrieved her SPAS and ducked up beside him, covering his blindside as he slotted her M9 back into her holster before reaching down to scoop up a fallen foe’s MP5A2. A round grazed Shade on the right arm, but he paid no mind to it as he turned to gun down the shooter that hit him, before tossing a frag over to the left side towards a cluster of new arrivals. Dash raised her weapon and fired off a round at a gunman who had gotten too close to Shade’s left side, then swung around to clear their six.

Shade dumped the empty MP5 and quickly reloaded his rifle with his second last magazine, spinning around to cover Dash's blindside and taking out three gunman who were approaching with a quick spray of fire. He wasn’t fast enough, as one of them had managed to get a shot off that caught Dash in her upper right arm. “Fuck!” she cursed, but ignored it and kept firing, trusting Shade to have her covered. He turned with her, swapping sides as he engaged a group off to their left, before dumping the empty magazine to reload.

“Last mag!” He said, dropping to a knee to minimise his exposure. He was almost knocked forward as his vest stopped a round going into his back, the full magazine falling into the dirt next to him. Shade swiveled and drew his sidearm, returning fire as he recovered the magazine and returned it to his vest. He knew better that risk a jam by feeding a dirty mag into his weapon, and instead picked up a small Mac-11 that was on the ground nearby. “Up!”

Dash moved past him, tapping his shoulder as she fired off a few rounds towards some gunmen that were coming too close for comfort. She ducked as they returned fire, and a shard of one of the bullets ricocheted off a rusty car door and caught her in the left cheek, leaving an inch long scratch. She lifted her weapon up and traded fire, and caught a round in her chest for the effort. Thankfully her vest stopped it, but it nearly knocked the wind out of her.

Shade moved up on the other side of the small pathway they found themselves on, spraying fire with the Mac-11 he found and another MP5 he had picked up, holding one in each hand. His vest caught a few more rounds in the front, the first two stopped by his place but the third went high and went through his left collarbone. “Fucking cunt!” He screamed, dropping the Mac-11 and unleashing the rest of the magazine of the MP5 towards the person that hit him.

“Shift right!” Dash called, already side stepping towards where she left her bag, “Extra mags and flashes, load up!” She kept firing, loading one shot and firing now, not taking the time to fully load, switching fluidly between her SPAS and M-9 where convenient.

Shade grimaced as he fell back into cover, waiting for Dash to come past him. As she reached him, a cartel shooter rushed up and fired a short burst towards them. Most of the rounds missed, but one caught Dash in her side, just below where her vest stopped. “D!” Shade yelled, firing the rest of his sidearm mag before leaning out to drag the fallen Dash back into cover. He quickly holstered his weapon and ditched his gloves to try and treat her wound. “D! You good? How’re you feeling?”

“Pissed off,” she groaned, sitting up to one knee, keeping her weight off her wounded side, lifting her shotgun and firing a slug into the chest of one who came too close.

“It’s through and through, but I can’t tell if it’s anything vital.” He said, digging through his IFAK
for something to plug and cover the wound, grimacing as the pain from his shoulder wound started to register, “I don’t have much, hopefully this’ll hold,” he muttered as he quickly patched up Dash’s side the best he could, before tending to his own fresh wounds. “I’ve got one sidearm mag left, and my primary’s dry. The rest of my mags are all empty and out there somewhere, so I have nothing to refill.” He peered up over cover, noting how quiet it had gotten around them. “I think they’re gathering up for one last hoorah…”

“Oh, it’ll be their last…” Dash muttered, “Plan S for Survive, right? This ain’t over ‘till the fat lady sings, and I don’t see no fat lady.”

“I was about to say, I thought Meat was with the others…” Shade chuckled, then grimaced in pain as his chest hurt from where those rounds had been caught. From how he felt, he thought that he might have cracked a rib or two. He reloaded his Glock with its last fresh magazine, and moved up beside Dash. “Hey, Bec’?”

Dash huffed a chuckle as she fully loaded her shotgun, and reloaded her M-9, “Don’t call me that, Shades. Yeah?”

He hesitated for a moment, looking down at the rusted shell of a car they were using for cover, before looking at her again. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for how I treated you since I arrived. I shouldn’t have doubted you and your abilities in the slightest…” He sighed and rubbed his head, “to answer your question, I trust you all the way.”

Dash nodded at him, “Not the time, but thanks, I trust you too. Now let’s show these assholes why you don’t shoot at a Texan and an Australian.”

“Amen to that,” he said with a smirk, “and yeah, looking back on that, that was pretty fucking clichéd.” He peered up and saw that a large group, maybe thirty or more, of cartel gunmen were approaching en mass. “I got fourteen in the mag, one in the pipe.”

“Seven and one for my baby, fourteen and one for my M-9, still got four grenades, extra shells and slugs in my bag,” Dash replied, “We have more than enough.”

“If you say so…” Shade said quietly, not quite as confident, “wait till they get closer, and fire on my fire.”

Dash nodded, “On your go.”

The pair waited for the group to get closer, within less than meters of their cover. When Shade deemed them close enough, his finger closed around the trigger of his Glock. Just as it was about to fire, he almost jumped as a long burst of machinegun fire erupted from their left side and started mowing down the crowd in front. From the side, Roach, Meat, and Royce ran in and started shooting as well, fresh arms, legs and guns making light work of the straggling enemy forces. Scarecrow let off and hopped down from the stack of cars that he had used as his vantage point, whilst Chemo made a beeline towards the two wounded soldiers.

“Doom on you Mr. Tango!” Meat yelled into the air, finishing off the last of them.

Dash laughed and fell back in relief, “And there’s our fat lady now, already singin’ her song.” Shade joined her, rolling back and just laughing and crying at the same time in both relief and pain as the shock of his injuries finally set in.

“Please no, it hurts to laugh!” He tried to say between laughs, hands covering his face in disbelief.

Dash laughed as well, letting her head fall back against the rusted body of the car they’d used for
cover, “We won, Shades… We kicked their asses…”

Shade finally settled down enough to catch a breath, “Fuck the Alamo, remember Nogales,” he sighed out as Chemo rounded the corner with Roach hot on his heels.

“Amen to that, Nogales! A testament to strength of will, preparedness, and fucking back-up ,” Dash chuckled, “Thank fuck…”

“Thank god, you’re alive…” The medic all but burst into tears in relief as he quickly crouched down in front of them and started unpacking his medical pack to help treat their wounds properly, “The guys were starting to freak out, it wasn’t until your little standoff triggered a police response that we managed to find where you lot were.”

“Oh hey Doc, nice of you to join the bloody party,” Shade joked, “We tried saving a few for you, but we got impatient and started without you.” Chemo simply shook his head as he reached over to look at Shade’s shoulder, “Oi! I’m good for now. Dash took a round to her lower torso, patch her up first,” he said, pushing Chemo’s hand away.

Dash was dozing off where she sat against the car, when Chemo moved to her, “Dash, c’mon now,” he patted her shoulder to rouse her.

She grunted, “Forty-two hours, Chem, forty-two without sleep. I am fucking tired .”

“I know…” Chemo responded sympathetically, kneeling next to her, “but I need you to stay awake a bit longer while I stop the bleeding.”

“Yeah D, stay awake and he’ll give you a lollipop once he’s done,” Shade chuckled as he fist bumped Roach, who shared a chuckle with him, “thanks for the save, by the way, mate. No finer sound than hearing that Forty-Eight start singing the sound of my people.”

Roach laughed, “And what sound is that?”

“Rata-tat-tat motherfucker,” Shade mimicked the gunfire, coughing after a few moments. He reached up to his shoulders and pulled the quick-release tab, the vest now falling apart into halves and making it much easier for him to breathe. “Sooo much better now.”

Author’s notes:

(Shade)

I’m saying it now: Shade’s combat-stress reactions are to make movie quotes and sing song parodies. *In Attenborough voice* And here we see the sub-species of the soldier, known as Shade and Dash, in their natural habit. Watch as they dominate everything in their path. *in regular voice* And once again, Shade and Dash just ‘clicked’ when they were in combat. I will admit, some moves were inspired by that mall scene from Mr and Mrs Smith, but that really just sums them up at this point I think. This is our longest chapter so far (At just over 5k) thank you Spitty, and we’re not finished yet, least I don’t feel like we’re closed to being finished. So stay along for the ride!

(Spitfire)

Well that was fun. They went ham on those guys. Bruised, battered, and bleeding, our heroes kicked some serious ass. And then had a moment… (awww) Dash is apparently pretty good at driving aggressively. And is also very stubborn, but we knew that already. (yep) Stop that. Anyway. We’re
seriously cranking these chapters out. It’s just going so smooth and it doesn’t *feel* rushed it actually just feels *so good*. I love this a lot. So that’s all for this chapter I believe, don’t forget to review, we work hard.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Dash fidgeted where she sat and the medic looking her over sighed at her, “Sit still, would you?” he asked, as if it wasn’t the tenth time he’d said that.

“How long is this gonna take?” She questioned back.

The medic, Jay, gave her a pointed look, “Longer if you keep shifting around like that. Five minutes tops if you sit still.”

Dash sighed and complied, shifting into a more comfortable position. She honestly tried not to focus on what Jay was doing, something about it all just… made her uncomfortable. Dash was no stranger to cuts that needed stitches, she’d gotten them all the time even before enlisting, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. She considered anyone who liked getting stitched up to be crazy.

“What did you do to get beat up like this?” Jay asked, sensing her tension.

Dash refrained from shrugging, “Shade and I held off against a couple hundred cartel baddies. Bound to come out of it battered.”

Jay hummed thoughtfully as he moved from one injury to the next, “And what made you think it was a good idea to do that?”

Dash rolled her eyes, “Wasn’t in my playbook, that’s for sure. Alamo all over again.”

Jay raised an eyebrow at her, “If I remember correctly, the Alamo didn’t go over well.”

“Yeah. Alamo, except we had back-up,” Dash waved it off, “And better weapons…” she shook her head, “Fuckin’ sucked though.”

“I’m sure,” Jay responded, straightening up, “All done. Take it easy the next week or so, pop those stitches and you’ll have Chemo to deal with.”

Dash stood up and stretched a little, careful of her injuries, “Thanks doc,” she called over her shoulder as she left. Shade joined her side once she was back in the hallway, held up on a pair of crutches as part of his treatment.

“All good D?” He said with a small smile as he ‘walked’ by her side.

Dash sighed, “Yeah, but I have to ‘take it easy’ for a week,” she groaned, “What am I gonna do for a week?!”

“Eat, sleep, rave, repeat?” Shade offered, sharing her pain. He’d undergone minor surgery to fish out the bullet fragments in his left thigh, the recovery for which had put him out of commission for two to three weeks, depending on how fast he healed up. He was fortunate that the round was a small calibre, and hadn’t broken bone or torn a serious amount of muscle. “How do you think I feel? I only just got here and already I’m benched.”

She chuckled slightly, “Talk to Rook and he’ll give a similar story,” she commented.

“Yeah, we had a quick chat on the flight back up,” Shade started, waiting to the side for Dash to open the doors for the pair of them to leave the infirmary, “he was out for what, a good two months or something. I don’t envy him, but that’s the nature of the beast I guess.”
Dash shoved the door open and held it for Shade, “Month and a half stuck in the infirmary, the rest
of the second month on restricted duty,” she confirmed with a nod, “I certainly would not have
enjoyed being in his place.”

“No ma’am, not in the slightest…” He shook his head as they walked outside into the warmer air,
“At least we got out in relatively one piece, with our objectives complete. It’d have been nice to get
all three of the pricks alive, but after what we went through I’ll take what I can.”

Dash paused and blinked, “Did they ever get Aziz out of the trunk you hid him in?” she questioned,
“...I think I fell asleep…. I don’t remember.”

“Old mate was singing Meat’s praises from what Roach told me. I pulled them aside and told them
where I stashed him, and when Meat pulled him out he was begging him to not let me near him
again, especially with that walkman,” He laughed openly, though cringed when it tugged at the
bandages wrapped around his chest. The plates in his vest had certainly stopped the rounds from
penetrating, but had left him with more than a few bruised ribs, with one suffering a slight crack, “I
reckon that all we need to do is put one on a table and he’ll sing like a bloody bird.”

Dash laughed, “I don’t blame him. Can’t imagine how awful that playlist must be,” she opened the
door to the building that housed the rec room and waited to allow Shade to go in ahead of her.

Shade thanked her then went inside, waiting for her to catch up. “I made the first three volumes as
part of an in-house SERE course my battalion were hosting for the other battalions in our Regiment,
specifically for the ‘Resistance’ phase,” he said with a small smirk, “got more results out of those
three small disks than any of the Warrant Officers that were using more direct methods.”

She chuckled, “That’s brutal, man, just brutal,” she commented, stuffing her hands in her pockets as
she walked alongside him.

“How do you think I feel? I had to go through the depths of the internet, find the source material, edit
it together, burn them onto disks, and listen to each of them to make sure there’s no errors.”

Dash shook her head, planting one hand on his shoulder, “That is some dedication my friend,” she
said, swinging the door to the rec room open and walking ahead to flop down on the couch.

Shade stood alongside her and tapped one of her legs with a crutch, “Oi, shift over damnit. Disabled
parking only.” He chuckled, waiting for her to move and make some room, “we cripples need some
space.”

Dash laughed and shifted, making space for the Aussie. She looked around the empty room,
“Wonder where everyone else is…”

Shade leant back and lifted his wounded leg up to rest it on the coffee table in front of them,
“Probably all resting up. Whilst we were rushed into Emergency, I bet everyone else was up late
getting debriefed. Bet’cha the boss’ll come around and debrief us personally some time soon.” Shade
reached for the remote to the TV and flicked it on, beginning to start his channel search. “... three
thousand channels, yet daytime television still sucks ass. You’d think that the military would spring
for Netflix, but no, gotta save up for that next multi-million dollar fighter jet that can’t do shit.”

Dash chuckled and yawned, “Ugh… This next week is gonna suck …” she complained. Shade
ignored her as he was busy still searching for something decent to watch. He let out a cry of joy
when he reached the sports channels.

“Fuck yes! AFL! The Lions against the Magpies!” He tuned into that channel and turned the volume
up, placing the remote down by his side. “Haven’t caught a footy match in ages…”

Dash jumped at the sudden exclamation and looked at him curiously before looking at the TV, “AFL?” she questioned, watching the sport.

“Australian Football League, or Australian Rules Football, or Aussie Rules, or simply ‘Footy’, depending on who you ask,” Shade said as he watched the screen intently, “it’s the sport of my people, different to Rugby or Soccer.”

Dash nodded absently, “Right…”

“Mhm, and right now, my Lions are getting their asses handed to them by goddamn Collingwood, bastards!” He said with building rage as he noticed the score: 25-93 in the third quarter. “Come on boys! You got this!” Shade shouted at the TV, deeply engrossed in the game now.

Dash laughed at him and shook her head, “I was never much into sports,” she commented idly.

“Neither was I, really, but I follow the home teams when I can,” he said as the game played on, “Kinda got back into it when I was deployed, as it served as a nice distraction from what was happening out there.”

Dash nodded and hummed thoughtfully, watching the game play out. The game ran for another thirty minutes, with Shade crying out in dismay as the siren sounded at the end of the final quarter, the score for the Brisbane Lions at 65 with the Collingwood Magpies winning with 143. “Goddamn it…” he groaned as he handed the remote over to Dash. “Find us something that isn’t as depressing, please.”

She laughed and took the remote, flipping through the channels. She was flipping through the kids channels, trying to get back to the good programs, when she saw pastel ponies singing a song that seemed to be about friendship. Her brow furrowed and she kept flipping. Children’s shows these days.... She mused in her head.

“Little bit of trivia for you: Every team has a song they sing at the end of matches they win. Adelaide’s team, the Crows, their song is based off of the Marine Corps Hymn.” Shade said offhandedly.

“Yeah?” Dash asked boredly, still flipping, “What is it?”

“I don’t know the lyrics, just they changed the lyrics to suit the sport and the team, that’s all. The Lions ripped off the French National Anthem,” Shade said, clearing his throat before bursting into song, “We are the pride of Brisbane-town, we wear maroon, blue and gold! We will always fight for victory, like Fitzroy and the Bears of old! All for one, and one for all! We will answer to the call! Go Lions, Brisbane Lions, we’ll kick the winning score! You’ll hear our mighty roar!”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, stopping on a movie channel, “You’re such a dork…” she commented.

“You love it,” he teased back, poking his tongue out at her, “you’d be bored shitless without me, admit it.”

She grinned, giving him a light teasing shove, “Yeah, I probably would be, but you’re still a dork.”

Shade grinned back, looking back at the TV to watch the movie she’d landed on. Before they could get too engrossed into it, however, the doors to the rec room opened and both Captain MacTavish and Ghost walked in. Shade looked over and stole a glance at Dash, wordlessly saying ‘told you so’,
before looking back at them and sitting up a bit further on the couch. “Oh Captain, my Captain, how can we help you seize the day today?”

Ghost facepalmed whilst MacTavish shook his head and pulled a couple of chairs up for him and Ghost to sit in. “Just checking in on two of our wounded warriors, that’s all. Gave us a bit of a scare when you didn’t check in, you know.”

Shade chuckled sheepishly, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah… comms were a bit spotty once we began the standoff. Good timing for Roach and the guys though, it was like a scene from an action movie or something.” He finished with a chuckle, to which Ghost looked at him concernedly.

“Is he okay, Dash?” Ghost asked her quietly.

She shrugged, “Doc probably gave him pain meds,” she replied, “but he’s not wrong, it felt like we were in a movie with how things turned out.” Ghost nodded in understanding.

“Right,” MacTavish started, looking at Dash, “the pair of you didn’t miss much at the debriefing, apart from hearing about your recount of the exfiltration. Both of our HVTs have been assessed and handed over to the relevant agencies that wanted them, and post-battle surveillance shows the Federal Police responding to the work site we hit and discovering the remnants of what was a internal cartel shootout.”

“Good cover,” Shade interjected enthusiastically, “we were never there,” he finished with a wink.

“Our team’s on the back burner for the time being, until you two are back up on your feet and combat effective again,” the Captain stated as he stood up, “just promise me that you won’t be planning any more ‘last stands’ in the future, okay?”

Dash nodded, “Glad to know I won’t be missing anything major… And speaking of last stands… what was the story for the junkyard?” she asked, “As big a firefight as that was… I find it hard to believe they’d buy it as ‘just’ a cartel shootout.”

Ghost just laughed, “You’d be surprised at how desensitized that place is to cartels and gun violence. That’s how the news is reporting it, as an extension of the site shootout. Same with whatever amateur footage came out of your little chase down the town’s streets. All gang-related,” Ghost paused, and looked back at them with a small smirk, “you two are mini-celebrities on YouTube, actually.”

Dash raised an eyebrow at him “Say what?” she questioned, and chuckled, “This I gotta see.”

Shade already had the remote in hand and had switched from the satellite feed to the TV’s internet browser, and was searching up ‘mexican cartel car chase 2015’. Sure enough, the thumbnail of the first result had a slightly blurry picture of their jeep as it was barrelling down the road. “D!” He said excitedly, pressing enter on the remote for the video to play.

The video started with a series of rapid gunshots in the distance, with the owner of the camera spouting out a rapid string of Spanish. As they reached the window, the videographer saw and started to focus on the old green jeep barrelling down the road with a mixture of bikes and cars after it. In the back of the jeep, Shade could see himself as he tried to climb over, before stumbling and clutching his leg after being hit right as they passed the camera. The video continues on until the jeep rounded a corner and went out of sight, the sound of gunfire echoing off before the video stopped.

“Of all the things, it had to be the moment when I was shot. Not when we did something cool, like when you veered into some of those guys, but it had to be uncool.” He grumbled, folding his arms across his chest in disappointment.
Dash gave a huff of a chuckle, “Didn’t even keep going long enough to see me PIT maneuver that one car and you shoot it with my SPAS…”

Shade threw his arms up in exasperation, “I know right!” He said, looking Dash straight in the eyes. There were a few seconds of silence, before the pair burst out into laughter. “Fuck, we sound bloody ridiculous…”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, “I’m sure the footage exists,” she shrugged, “As long as no one knows it was us, it’s cool.”

Holsworthy Barracks, Australia

It was a rare moment of downtime for the men of B Company, 2nd Commando Regiment, and at the moment they were all making the most of it. One group of Commandos sat around the laptop of another, watching random videos on YouTube.

Corporal Jamie ‘Hangman’ Lynch had the controls and was browsing through the ‘Trending’ video listings when one title caught the eye of another commando, Lance Corporal Andrew ‘Spray’ Mace. “Hey, mate, go back up for a sec?” Hangman did as asked, and stopped when told. “Wow, ‘Movie car chase in Mexico’, uploaded only a few hours ago. And it already has over a hundred grand in views.”

The group of six Commandos watched as a jeep exchanged gunfire with men on dirt bikes and in cars, all wincing sympathetically when it showed the man in the back clutch his leg once he got it. Mace shook his head in disbelief. “Dude, there’s some fucked up shit going on over there. Might wanna have a look at the news reports, there’s no way that someone hasn’t written a story or something about that.”

The rest of the soldiers agreed, though all Hangman was thinking about was how the man in the back of the jeep looked vaguely familiar…

“I don’t think we should worry about that, video quality didn’t seem the best there, not to mention that they can’t see either of our faces,” Shade said with a small sigh of relief, “good thing we weren’t wearing uniforms and shit like that, otherwise the headlines might look a bit different.”

Dash nodded, “Yeah, good thing indeed,” she commented, searching through the rest of the search results to make sure there wasn’t a different angle that did, in fact, show their faces. If it existed it could pose a problem.

“I honestly wouldn’t worry about it though, even if they could make out our faces, it’s not like they have names and shit, right?” Shade said with a yawn, starting to feel tired already from the combination of the pain meds and the traces of fatigue he still felt from the mission.

Dash shrugged, “Facial recognition? I dunno, call me paranoid.” she turned the TV off, and looked at their superiors again, “Anything else we need to talk about?” she asked curiously.

“Nothing from an operation standpoint, though I think Meat said something about planning a night out for the coming weekend. As part of our standdown, the General has graciously given us a weekend pass. So be on your guard.” MacTavish said with a chuckle. “I think that’s where him and Royce are right now, along with some of the others; planning the activities for the night.”
Dash made a face, “Thanks for the heads up, might wanna warn the hospital staff of the imminent hangovers,” she laughed and shook her head, standing up, “If that’s all, I’m gonna go hit the hay.”

“Likewise,” Shade groaned, fumbling for his crutches, “if this is going to go down as well as I think it will, then I’m going to need all the sleep I can get… appreciate the warning, sirs.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Rook said in disbelief, looking at the whiteboard that Meat was standing beside, “I am at a honest to god loss for words.” He, Meat, Royce, Scarecrow and Roach had all gathered in Meat’s room to plan the upcoming and long overdue night out on the town, awarded to them by General Sheppard after their recent mission in Mexico.

“I know, it’s a lot different to what we usually do, but I think we’ve all deserved a change of pace,” Meat said with a self-satisfied smile. On the whiteboard he had written a simple phrase: ‘The Homefront’. ‘I don’t know about you, but I figured just a simple sesh at our normal hole-in-the-wall will be a great way wind down after the kind of week it’s been. No loud clubs or bars, no drunken civis trying to pick fights, and no risk of being thrown out after so much as looking in the wrong direction.”

‘The Homefront’ was a place that most, if not all, of the soldiers in the Task Force considered their little home-away-from-home-away-from-home. It was a decent sized bar located closer to the Denver city centre, yet away from the main entertainment district, and it was run by a primarily veteran staff. The walls were adorned with all kinds of militaria; weapons, portraits, photographs, awards, and even excerpts from famous war stories.

Because it had such a niche theme, and was run by staff who at first glance looked intimidating as all hell, it avoided becoming overcrowded by the younger and unruly drinkers who only looked to get wasted on a friday or saturday night. No, ‘The Homefront’ was a place where a soldier could sit down, relax, and share a drink with his brothers and sisters in arms.

“Besides, we still haven’t properly initiated Shade yet, and there’s no perfect place.” Meat finished, adding a single bullet point under the main heading that read ‘Initiate Shade’.

“Meat, my friend, you are a genius,” Royce said with a wide grin on his face, “I take back any mean word that I’ve said about you in the last three or so days, consider this your redemption.”

Meat nodded at his best friend, then looked at the other guys with them. “Spread the word. Tomorrow night, we shall head to The Homefront!”

“What’s The Homefront?” Shade asked to the group as they sat in the mess for lunch the following day. “Should I be concerned, or…” he trailed off, looking around for an answer.

“It’s only one of the coolest and chillest bars in the state, run by guys like us for guys like us.” Rook answered, digging into his meal with gusto.

Roach hummed in agreement, “Yeah, it’s kind of an important place to most of everyone here. Like, outside of the battlefield and this base, it’s the only place that seems to ‘get’ us, if that makes sense.”

“The wide range of weapons and shit that hang off the walls helps with the ambiance,” Royce stated, sitting down beside Shade with his own meal, “and the owners and staff are great people too. They’ll make you feel at home.”

“Right,” Shade said, feeling somewhat relieved. The way the guys talked about this place made it seem like it was quite the place to be. He spotted Dash walking over and waved her down. “Hey, not
sure if you heard, but the guys are taking us out to this Homefront place tonight.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Dash answered, “I’m not much for drinkin’ though, not worth the hangover in my book,” she shrugged, “I’ll go, but I don’t really drink.”

“Awww, but that’s part of the fun!” Meat mock-whined from his seat, two to Shade’s left, “it’s not fun being the sober one in a group of drunkards.”

“As you say every time, and yet, you’re the one that complains the most when he’s hungover,” Dash countered, “Besides, if all of you plan on getting drunk off your asses who’s left to drive us home?”

“One: that’s what taxis are for,” Meat said, holding up one finger on his left hand, “and two: if anything, Chemo complains the most. You know that medics make the worst patients.”

Dash rolled her eyes, “At least he’s smarter than you and doesn’t wind up throwing up throughout half the next day.”

Meat rolled his eyes and grumbled, “Only because he hogs all the aspirin to himself and doesn’t share, that ass.”

Dash shook her head at him, “Regardless, you could just go to one of the nurses for it. But anyway, that’s not the point, I don’t like being hungover, I’ll have one, maybe two, beers, that’s it.”

Meat opened his mouth to retort, but was cut off by Shade, “What’s this places imports like? Or is it mostly local stuff and craft brews?”

Royce answered him, “It’s a bit of both, you’ll have to ask the Colonel when we get there.”

“Colonel?” Shade sounded puzzled.

Roach cleared his confusion, “Yeah, the guy who owns and runs the place is a retired Marine Colonel, served in the early phases of Iraq before he lost his lower right leg to an IED. Retired and started the bar as a project to keep him busy.”

Shade nodded in appreciation, “Can’t wait to meet him, sounds like a nice bloke. So, when are we leaving?”

Authors Notes:

(Spitfire)

Jay cameeoooo lol. Shade suggested it and I jumped on it. Probably won’t see much more of him, but I was glad to get him in for a bit. Dash and Shade bond over stupid sports and lame TV. And Meat plans an outing to the local bar. And then there’s that youtube video of their less than graceful escape and a slight throwback to Shade’s old team. Pretty slow chapter all-in-all, but still a good amount, gotta wind down from all that tension in the past few chapters. Well, that’s all for now.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)
They lived, Shade’s kinda high on pain meds and is a little loopier than normal. Doesn’t seem be to be any animosity between the pair of them anymore, but we aren’t done yet. And Meat’s back at it again, with a trip that will invariably end with major headaches all around. Gotta say, it’s hard writing slow-paced filler after a major action sequence, but it’s no different to driving on a small suburban street after spending a day on a freeway at 100kph. It just feels much slower than normal.
A Fresh Start

*(Violence tw? Better safe than sorry.)*

It was just as the guys described it back at base: weapons of varying eras and kinds hanging on the walls, portraits and pictures dotted around the place, a good selection of music playing at a comfortable level, the booths and tables very inviting, and the wall behind the bar home to a nice range of drinks and brews, both foreign and domestic. The only thing missing that Shade couldn’t see would be th-

Nope, he stood corrected. A fairly attractive yet intimidating woman walked out from a staff doorway to man the bar, followed by a much older looking man with a very slight limp, barely noticeable unless you were looking for it. The man wore a rather neutral expression that lit up once he saw the crowd that had gathered just inside the doorway.

“Well well well, if it isn’t Mystery Meat and his band of brothers.” The man exclaimed with a warm smile, walking up to greet them all. The man, retired Marine Colonel Barry McDade, was instantly likable in Shade’s opinion, and gave off the vibe that he was an officer that was very much respected by his men.

McDade, or Barry as he insisted and ‘Colonel’ as he was commonly referred to, led the group of ten towards their own large booth near the back of the bar, one which had seen a lot of use in the years if the number of watermarks and stains on the wooden table top was any indication. He bid farewell to them after catching up, having to go attend to a new patron that arrived, and it was at this point that Scarecrow informed Shade that the Colonel was one of the very few civilians that knew who they were and what they did, on the basis that a few of the Colonel’s old men had served in the Task Force at some points earlier.

“So once he recognised them and questioned their transfer, that’s when he was brought into the loop?” Shade asked, holding onto a glass of scotch mixed with Coke, looking around the place for a third time.

“Yeah, the game was kinda up at that point. Since then, he’s let us use this place to unwind and relax, or as a place to pay our dues…” Scarecrow finished, gesturing towards a small display that hung on the wall at the end of their booth. It was a small brass plaque on a wooden board that had a Task Force 141 unit patch pinned to the top of it, with a set of call signs inscribed along it with dates next to each one. Shade didn’t need to ask what those dates meant.

“I see…” He said instead, lifting his glass towards it in a silent toast to those that were before him, “I can see why this place is important to you.”

“Yeah,” Ozone said as he sat down across from Shade, “and since all of the staff and a majority of the patrons here are or were involved in the military in one way or another, nobody questions it when we leave a drink to stand by itself, or doesn’t interrupt if we enter a moment’s silence.” He sipped from his own drink, a local craft beer, before leaning back, “The staff here are very supportive too, always there if you need someone to vent to. They’ve heard it all, even the stuff that isn’t necessarily meant to be said.”

Shade smiled softly, looking around at the bar and everyone in attendance. He could remember the times back home when he and his squad would hit the town in an effort to try and relax, but they could never truly ‘switch off’ and enjoy themselves. They’d constantly be on alert, watching for an invisible threat, waiting to act on a moment’s notice. If they were at a regular bar or club right now he’d imagine it’d be much the same, but here, it felt different. There didn’t feel like there was a
danger nearby, nor was there any risk of being harassed by a belligerent stranger. It was far more relaxed, and he could feel like he could switch off for the first time in ages.

“Not gonna lie, but I think I’ve found my new favourite place.” Shade said loud enough for the rest of them to hear, before lifting his drink up in a mini-toast.

“So, who’s the greenie?” The colonel said, having returned to pull up a chair next to Chemo at the end of their booth.

“Ah, right,” Meat said, leaning out to gesture towards Shade, “this is our newbie, Shade.”

“Shade?” The colonel asked with confusion, extending a hand out towards him.

“Long story sir, and not that interesting either,” he replied, shaking the colonel’s hand, “and I’m a Sergeant from the Australian Army’s Second Commando Regiment. I’m primarily an Assaulter, but I have secondary training in the finer arts of using grenades.”

“Sounds good… Aussie, eh? Dash,” he turned to face the lone female of the group, “I trust he hasn’t done a repeat of ol’ Rook here?”

Dash smirked, “Took a... Mexican Stand-off, but he came around pretty quick,” she teased. She was met with a mixture of chuckles and groans from the rest of the group.

“A for effort, but D in execution,” chuckled Roach as he sipped on his drink. Shade shook his head but smiled at her, then looked at the Colonel.

“Yeah, I will admit I was a bit rough at the start, but D and I are pretty tight now,” he said, extending a closed fist towards her to bump. More than a few eyebrows shot up as she happily bumped him back without rebuking him for the nickname, but none more so than Meat.

“Hey, since when did she become ‘D’? I tried that one awhile ago!” He sounded offended, and Chemo chimed in.

“That’s because you added the word ‘Double’ before that, and I spent a good three hours trying to keep your teeth from falling out.” He groaned, shaking his head at the memory.

“Oh, right...” Meat grimaced, recalling the experience quite vividly, evidenced by the long pull of his own drink as everyone else started laughing and chuckling at him.

Dash rolled her eyes, “Yeah, and because of that, Shades is the only one allowed to call me D,” she glared at Meat for effect.

Roach sputtered as he heard Dash’s name for Shade. “I’m sorry, but ‘Shades’?” He questioned, clearing his throat.

“Yeah, Shades,” Dash answered with a shrug. “Just called him that during the last op and it stuck.”

“‘Deez Shades’,” Meat chuckled quietly to himself, making a mental note to save that for later.

“Meat, don’t get yourself punched in the mouth again,” Dash warned, “because I will do it.”

“You’ll need Chemo to surgically remove that foot he has in his mouth first,” Shade commented from down the table. The Colonel just watched with a grin on his face as he listened to the banter.

‘Faces may change, but the banter stays the same’.
“A millin dollarsh, but f’ the next mishun, your gun shootsh lube and your ‘nades are dildos.” Meat said with a slur, leaning back in the booth as the rest of the group contemplated his question.

Rook leant forward, stopping himself just in time, “... is it in spurts, like with bullets, or are we talking a continu-contiu... non-stop stream?”

“Both. Semi’s the spurts, and auto’s the stream.” Meat clarified with a laugh, “and different grenades are different dildos, too.”

“Whutsh a frag then?” Roach asked, supported up by Scarecrow to his right as they both leant on each other.

“Reg’ ‘do, flash’s ‘re the silver shiny ones… Dash! You’d know, what could we use fo’ smokes?”

“How about those’ little egg thingies, or you could get something that glows, mate,” Shade answered him instead, sparing Dash from the direct brunt of insanity that both he and Dash were witness to. The pair of them weren’t drinking as much as the others: Dash due to her general aversion to alcohol, and Shade since painkillers and excessive drinking don’t mix well. As it was, the three drinks he’d had across the night were hitting him harder than usual, but he still maintained much more coherence than anyone else at the table. He looked towards her with an eyebrow raised. “Are they usually this bad, or is it just tonight?”

She shook her head with a chuckle, “It varies,” she answered simply, “But this is one of their better nights.”

“Better as in ‘they’ve done worse’ better, or better as in ‘this is a new record’ better?” he asked with a chuckle.

“They’ve done worse,” She sat back into the booth and looked around at their friends, “Although it toes the line.”

“No kidding…” Shade said in disbelief, surveying the scene. As the night went on, their seating plan had changed multiple times. Currently, Dash and Shade were seated next to each other at the closed end of the booth. Ozone and Chemo were fast asleep across from them, with Meat, Rook, Scarecrow and Roach were across and beside them. Robot and Royce were at the open end across from each other, trying to have a conversation on their own. “How much longer do you think they’ll keep going?”

Dash checked her watch and held up three fingers, counting down the seconds and pointing at Meat as he face planted on the table. She laughed at him, “They usually wrap up after Meat goes down.”

“He really is the life of the party… though it’s scary and worrying that you can actually time that down to the damn second,” Shade commented as Chemo stirred from the noise of Meat’s impact, before dozing back off. “‘Spose we should start scraping them up and get a move back on home?”

Dash laughed and shrugged, “He usually lasts about three hours,” she explained, then nodded and gave a merciless, piercing whistle to rouse their still semi-conscious friends, “Someone grab Meat, it’s about time we got back home.” Scarecrow nodded, and with some from Roach, the pair half-dragged and half-carried Meat from his position out of the booth and hand him ‘standing’ with an arm around the necks of each of them. One of the staff, an Air Force veteran by the name of Michelle, had a bucket on standby in her hands as the Colonel stood by the door, holding it open for them. For a second, Shade thought he could see Meat’s name stenciled on the side of the bucket, before blinking and thinking that he was just seeing things.
The ten inebriated soldiers slowly made their way out to their vehicle, an MTVR that the guys in the motor pool had ‘rented’ to them for use of tonight. The fresh cool air helped liven up the guys who were feeling sluggish before, and it took some effort to load the unconscious members of the group into the back compartment, but once everyone was loaded and secure, they set off back to base. It was quiet in the cab, Dash driving as she was the most sober, with Shade sitting beside her in the ‘shotgun’ seat.

“Gotta say, that was a great place. Definitely going there again when I have the chance. That Colonel’s a really cool bloke.” He said with a pleased sigh.

“Yeah,” Dash agreed, “it’s a good place to go when you’ve got a lot on your mind. Without all the anxiety inducing crowds and loud music. Very nice when you need a place to be alone, but don’t actually want to be alone.”

Shade agreed with a quiet hum, looking over to her. “Indeed… hey D?”

“Hm?” Dash hummed curiously, focusing on the road.

“… there was a point, back in that junkyard, where I thought for a moment that, well, that was it,” Shade started quietly, looking back to the dark road ahead of them, “four or five days into a new step in my career and bang. Here lies Sergeant Tom Williams, killed in action…. I was confident that we’d make it, but there was that one second when we were staring that final group down, when I thought maybe, just maybe, this might be it…”

Dash was silent for a long moment, not really sure that she’d respond, but she did, first with a sigh, then she confided in him as well, “I wasn’t sure we would make it…” she confessed, “I acted confident and brash, but…” she shook her head, “I wasn’t. I rarely am… When everyone decides to just see the frail little girl I look like, and says I can’t possibly be as strong as I act, it’s hard not to believe them… There’ve been a lot of times I thought I wouldn’t make it out, so, so many times…” she looked over at him for a moment, before looking back at the road, “Ma always told me that people would see me for the way I acted, so I acted confident and strong… but everyone still just sees how small and female I am…”

“You recall how I said I have a sister, right?” Shade asked after a few moments silence. “When she first said that she wanted to be a cop, I had her back one-hundred percent. She should be able to do anything that she wanted to, regardless of what it was…” He chuckled humorlessly before continuing. “...I was on my first deployment to Afghanistan, and she was a year into her policing career. She and her partner were responding to a call out in the Valley, which is my home town’s entertainment district. Lot of bars and clubs, lot of drunkards and hotheads on all kinds of combinations of drugs. Anyway, they roll up and are the first responders to a pretty isolated brawl between a few pissed girls celebrating their eighteenth or nineteenth birthday, some shit like that. She’s in the middle of pulling away one of the girls to get her detained when the girl’s boyfriend, some twenty three year old who’s also had a few just dives right in and shoves my sister to the ground.”

“Her partner’s preoccupied with another two girls and can’t get to my sister, and at the time the next closest patrol is still on foot and five minutes away.” He pauses as he tries to remember the rest of the story. “She scored high on her fitness exams, escalation of force tests, self-defence tests, she scored high across the board. Didn’t help her when the guy pinned her down and slammed her face into the concrete ground a few times, or snapped her left forearm. By the time her partner got free, she was already unconscious and barely breathing. She’s alright now, her arm healed up after a couple of surgeries, she has a nice scar across the right side of her face, and she still suffers from severe nightmares every now and again, but she’s alright…"
“She had all the training, all the tools at her disposal, and was one of the better officers in her intake and at her first station. Meant jack shit when someone was able to overpower her by sheer brute force alone…” He sighed heavily and looked over at Dash with tired eyes. “I’m actually all for women doing what they want, regardless of who says what anyone else says… but there are just some things they shouldn’t, for their own safety. I already almost lost someone to that fact, and as selfish as it sounds, I don’t want it to happen to anyone else.”

Dash let out a heavy breath as she pulled to a stop in the motorpool, “It’s happened to a few men I used to know,” she nodded, “Could happen to anyone, could happen to me. I didn’t enlist just to prove other people wrong, I couldn’t give less of a fuck what other people thought of me, I enlisted to prove to myself that I wasn’t as weak as they said I was. All through life, I can’t do this I can’t do that, ‘oh I’m afraid I’ll hurt you, no’, ” she mocked and shook her head angrily, “I know you don’t understand, can’t understand, but being told you just aren’t what you desperately wish you were, it sucks, a lot. I hear you, and I understand you’re concerned, but I’ve had enough of people telling me where I should or shouldn’t be, Tom,” Dash sighed and hung her head, “I’m not weak, I know I’m not, I’m tough. I’m in the 141, the best of the best! But it’s not enough… It never is for anyone… I told MacTavish after our fight that if we were the best, then our best wasn’t good enough. That’s a standard I hold myself to. Always strive to improve on my best. Max out. Then do it again, and again, and again, until I can push further than max, and repeat. I don’t have the confidence I act like I do,” Dash looked at Shade, “Tom, there are a lot of times I thought the worst was gonna happen, back there with Mexican Meat and Royce, in the junkyard, hell, I was even terrified I’d lose our fight. I’m not enough, and I never will be, but I can try, and bad things will happen, to you and to me and to everyone else.”

Shade sat there in silence, just looking at her. “Bec…” he started, but faltered as he struggled to find the right words to say. Instead, as he was searching, he came to a realisation. “Y’know, you’re right. And I should’ve realised that from the start. You should have never needed to prove yourself to me that you’re up to this… being here, being where and who you are today should’ve been proof enough. I should’ve proved to myself that I can move on from some fucking fear of mine, brought on by things that were outside of my fucking control.” He shifted closer to Dash, and looked her in the eye. “I meant what I said back at the junkyard. I’m really sorry for how I’ve acted. I probably don’t deserve your forgiveness in the slightest, and I wouldn’t think less of you if you chose not to,” he moved back and leant against his seat, “I’ve been a complete fucking tool this entire time, all because I was too stupid to see the fuckin’ truth for what it was… fear. And there’s only two things I can do about it: either hide away from it and let it dominate my life, or confront it and tackle it head on.” He looked over at Dash one more time. “Dash, mind helping me give my fear a swift fucking kick in the ass? I hear you’re good at that kind of thing, if Meat’s any indicator.”

Dash gave a small smile, “Yeah… I guess I am…”

Shade smiled back, and held out his fist for her to bump. “Then let’s do this…”

She bumped his fist and held it there, “Let’s kick some ass.”

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Shade and Dash crept through the hallway with weapons in hand for their mission. To save time and effort, they had carried and assisted all of the guys to the rec room to help sleep the night off. They hadn’t realised that the two relatively sober members of the team had ulterior motives.

Shade smirked as he donned a pair of sunglasses and earmuffs, handing a pair of each to Dash as he retrieved a flashbang from his pocket. Once she had donned the protective items, he handed her his weapon of choice, a megaphone. “For you, maestro.”

“Why a-thank you,” she said, taking it. They came to the door of the rec room, and Shade peeked
inside to make sure none of their targets were awake yet. Once confirmed that they were all indeed still asleep, he looked to Dash with the most devious grin on his face.

“We’re guaranteed to be in all of their shit lists for the next two years, you know this right? Once we do this, we’re both pretty much fucked. Last chance to abort.”

Dash laughed quietly, “Yeah, but it’ll be fun… ‘sides, I warned him about the hangovers…”

Shade simply shrugged as he pulled the pins from the flashbang and held the spoon tight. He cracked open the door, tossed the grenade so it landed square in the middle of the room and held the door shut for a few seconds…

**BANG**

Shade threw the door open amidst the cacophony of swearing, yelling, and furniture being overturned. Dash stepped in afterwards with the megaphone to her lips and turned up to eleven.

“**GOOD MORNING TASK FORCE ONE-FOUR-ONE!!! IT’S SIX AM AND TIME TO RISE AND SHINE!**” She yelled into the speaker.

Everyone who was hungover screamed and groaned in pain, all in various stages of curling up into the foetal position as Shade flicked the fluorescent lights of the room on, cackling with laughter.

Rook, who was sitting ramrod straight on the sofa, turned and gave Shade the deadliest glare he could give him. “You, sir, are a cunt.”

**Authors’ Notes:**

**(Spitfire)**

There was alcohol, there were feels, and then there was a massive, evil prank. Soo… That was a fun chapter, we get to see a lot of what motivates our characters and a lot of the reason behind their actions. This chapter was more or less a rollercoaster of emotions heh… Lots of character diving going on here, and yes, bonding. And then not-so-bonding, they are definitely gonna be on people’s shit lists. Well, that was fun, that’s all for now.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

**(Shade)**

The more I re-read the parts about the bar, the more I want a place like this to exist in reality. There are probably places that do, but I don’t know where they are. We also get to delve into why Shade’s the way he is with Dash (whether or not that justifies his actions is another matter entirely), and as such, BONDING *(And feels)*! Not to mention the evil prank on the hungover members of the team. Shade reeeally knows how to fuck with people in the worst ways possible: Nightcore JB mixtape, flashbang and megaphone call as a hangover cure… yikes. Ghost? Take notes!
The Enemy Within

Just a quick pre-note, we're slowing down uploads for the time being. We're about five chapters ahead and progress is starting to slow down a bit (my fault, real life is being quite a prick right now), but we shan't be stopping anytime soon. - TSO

If looks could kill, the death glares that were aimed at both Shade and Dash would be comparable to setting them both alight and then dumping the ashes into pure hydrochloric acid. Yet, the pair of them were unfazed as they sat at the end of the table, casually discussing the day’s plans while the other eight men present were all nursing hangovers and headaches from their rude awakening.

“Y’know, I almost feel sorry for them,” Shade said as he took a look at them, shaking his head slightly, “emphasis on the ‘almost’.”

Dash laughed, “I don’t, I warned them about the hangovers,” she shook her head, “Lord knows if I ever got that drunk shit would go down if they decided to prank me like this.”

He laughed in agreement, “Oh, we had a number of various prank wars during our downtime back in the Commandos, both at home and while deployed. Everything from the benign to the downright nastiest shit. Can’t wait to see what it’s like here…”

Dash shook her head, “You better be prepared, the other teams on base get involved, it’s not pretty. You’d think Archer would be the one to stay away from that mess, but no, oh no, he’s the mastermind.”

“Archer… Archer… he’s that sniper, right?” Shade asked curiously, sipping his coffee slowly. “I think I saw him once or twice on my second day. Irish accent?”

She nodded, “Real gruff looking and quiet? Yeah, you’ve probably seen him and his spotter, Toad, on the range.”

“She,” Shade dismissed, “met him in the armoury when Meat and Royce were giving me some grief about this bloody ‘Crucible’ PT shit that Ghost does at random. I called their bluff and asked some rando, who was Archer I guess, about it and he confirmed it.”

Dash laughed, “Oh, the Crucible is real alright. He usually reserves it for the especially bad weekends, punishment for prank wars gone too far, y’know, the stuff that needs a little something… extra … but we’ve all done it at least once.”

The door to the mess hall swung open violently, and as if summoned, Ghost strode in. Even through his mask you could tell that he had a wide smile on his face, due to the way the skull’s mouth was slightly stretched. “Good morning ladies!”

Shade stared at him before turning to look at Dash in slight horror, “I guess now is one of those moments where he breaks it out?”

Dash shrugged, “We’ll find out soon enough,” she chuckled evilly, “It’s their own damn fault for over-indulging anyway.”

“I hope every one of you bastards is well-rested and ready to go, because it’s time for our favourite part of the day!” Ghost clapped his hands together loudly, to the dismay of some of the men. “You
all have ten minutes to get changed into your PT gear and meet out on the track. There’s no better cure than a bit of exercise, I always say!”

Shade stood up to start putting his things away when he was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulders, “Except for you, Shade. I know you had somewhat decent intentions, but there is no excuse for setting off a live flashbang grenade outside of the training ranges…” Ghost stood back from him with his hands on his hips, “As such, I want you in your full battle kit and full ammo loud, complete with weapons and attachments, out on the track in twenty. Dash, you too. As the higher ranking NCO, I would have expected you to know the safety regulations and have prevented such an act taking place.”

“Sorry, LT, docs still have us on restricted duty for another week…” Dash shrugged, “Much as I fuckin’ hate it….”

“Ah, right…” Ghost paused for a moment, thinking of a way he could punish the two soldiers in front of him. “Well, in that case, I still want you in PT gear but only doing light exercises. Expect to be hammered once you’re cleared fit though, understood?”

“Sir.” Shade nodded in affirmation, before Ghost leant in close to say something to them quietly.

“Aye, sir,” Dash nodded as well, “Will be a good way to get back in the saddle.”

“Good, however I will give you points for creativity. The only reason I’m bollocking the pair of you is that the Warrant Officer in charge of Health and Safety of the base saw the incident, and wanted me to address it with you.” Ghost near-whispered with a chuckle. “And Shade, I need to see what exactly you had in that walkman of yours. That terrorist you guys were responsible for in Mexico was extremely cooperative.”

“I’ll be sure to leave you a copy on your desk in the next few days, sir.” Shade said with a smirk, sharing a knowing glance with Dash. “I just advise that you listen to it in short bursts on low volume.”

“Duly noted… carry on you two,” The lieutenant said before turning around to parade the straggling hungover soldiers to their feet and out of the mess.

“Why does it feel like we’ve just dodged a bloody bullet?” Shade asked Dash with a relieved sigh. Dash chuckled, “Because we have, the worst Crucible is the one you’re not prepared for. At least now we know it’s coming.”

“That said, if I were him and let someone know they were facing a hard thing such as that, I’d make it much harder than they’d expect. Like pulling a fully loaded Humvee or some shit like that, with full combat gear on.” Shade said as they started making their way from the mess.

Dash thumped his chest lightly, “Quiet! Don’t give him any ideas…”

He rose his hands defensively, “Hey now, I’m just saying, we should prepare for what’s worse than the worst. No harm in that, right?”

Dash shrugged, but shook her head, “The LT has ears everywhere Shades, I wouldn’t be surprised to see a fully decked out Humvee come Crucible time…”

“… you know, you weren’t kidding.” Shade said simply as he and Dash sat on a bench near the training field where Ghost, the rest of the men, and a fully up-armoured Humvee gun-truck was
parked. “Unless this is just one massive fucking coincidence, in which case, just wow.” From the body language of the men, as they were too far out to hear the conversation, the PT session was going to suck majorly for them.

Dash sighed, “I doubt there’s any coincidence about it…” she shrugged, “To be fair, we kind of deserve it, that prank was magnificently evil… Still worth it…”

“A similar thing happened to me back home, which is where I got the idea from. Though, I was in the group it happened to, and substitute the flashbang for a smoke grenade.” Shade grimaced, “that shit’s nasty; kinda like tear gas but heavier. And being inside, it traps it in, the residue is hard to wash out, and it set off the fire alarms so we all got soaked by the sprinkler system.”

Dash chuckled, “This is gonna be fun…”

“Yeah, though we better start doing shit ourselves too, so it doesn’t look like we’re just watching. Walk a couple of laps, warm up a bit?” Shade said as he stood up from the bench with a small grunt, watching as the men retrieved a few heavy ropes from the back of the Humvee and started attaching them through the tow-points in the front.

Dash stood up and stretched, “Yeah, gettin’ stiff just sittin’ around all day… a light jog’ll be nice.”

Shade quirked an eyebrow at her, then gestured to his stitched up leg, “Hey now, some of us can’t jog around just yet.”

Dash shrugged, “I can’t just settle for a walk!” she argued, “I’ve got a need for speed… And a reputation to keep.”

“And I want to be able to talk consistently, not share a few words every time you lap me,” Shade countered, “also, way to sound like every cliche-breathing fighter pilot ever.”

Dash laughed and shrugged, “What’s there to talk about?”

“We never finished our Q and A from the other day,” Shade suggested with a shrug as they began their walk on the track, “after all, the mission did kinda interrupt us…”

“Oh fine,” Dash relented leading off at a walk with her hands in her pockets, “What you wanna know?”

“If memory serves me right, it was your turn to ask questions before we were rudely disturbed,” he chuckled, his limp starting to fade as his legs started to warm up from the movement.

Dash shrugged and was quiet for a moment while she thought of a question, “Why’d you enlist? I already told you my reason.”

Shade smiled in understanding, “Well, I joined a year after graduating high school. I didn’t have prospects to go onto further study, and I gave full time work a shot but didn’t really enjoy it. I figured I’d give the Air Force a shot at first, but they knocked me back as they didn’t have a need for the job area I wanted,” he chuckled, then shot a sidelong glance at Dash, “they already had enough airfield defence guards as it were. Anyway, they recommended the Army and said that I had a few traits of a Commando, and sent me through that pipeline. Took to it like a duck to water, and after a year of being in a regular Army infantry unit, I applied for Commando selection and the rest is history.”

Dash nodded thoughtfully, “I wanted to fly when I first went about enlisting, always had my head in the clouds growing up. My eyes weren’t good enough though, so…” she shrugged, “That fell
through and now I’m here.”

“Rotor wing or fast air?” Shade prompted, curious to know a little more.

“Woulda been fine with either,” she shrugged again, “but, like I said, I have need for speed,” she grinned, “Fast air was what I really wanted, so it stung when I was told I couldn’t because my eyesight wasn’t twenty-twenty.”

Shade chuckled, “Could only imagine what the reaction’d be to hearing your voice on the radio when someone’s calling in for close air support. ‘Hey dude, not only have we got a bomb coming in, but the pilot’s a chick! And she sounds hot too!’ You’d get no respite, as much as I’d hate to admit it, D.”

Dash laughed, “Wouldn’t have minded too much, I don’t think, but Gs and glasses don’t mix well, so that was out…”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Shade agreed, “plus I don’t think it’d be that comfortable wearing them under a flight helmet under normal circumstances anyway.”

Dash shook her head, “No, no I really doubt that’d be comfortable.”

Meat was ready to pass out, the only thing keeping him barely awake was the thought of getting back at Shade and Dash. He was channelling that rage into strength, which everyone else was doing to help them pull the heavy Humvee across the field from one end to the other. It didn’t help that Ghost was sitting behind the wheel and would step on the brake at random intervals.

“Fuck… this… horse… shit…” Royce grunted out from behind him, sharing the pain, “fuck… this… fuck… Ghost… fuck… them…. fuck… everything!”

“Almost there!” Ozone called from up front, the Humvee now less than ten meters away from the end of the track. The men surged forward, and with less than a meter to go, Ghost hit the brake once more. The sudden stop made the eight men collapse where they stood, and they all lay there panting and groaning as Ghost made his way from the driver’s seat to the middle of their impromptu pile.

“Okay men, I think that’ll do. I hope you’re all feeling much better now that you’ve burned off the remaining booze in your systems. You’re lucky that nothing else has been scheduled for the remainder of the day, so take your time to rest and recover.” He said smugly as he began to unhitch the rope from the front of the Humvee and stowed it away. “Have a nice day!” He called as he started the engine and blasted the horn before backing it up and driving it away.

“I swear… if I ever get my hands on his mask… I’m going to burn it. Slowly. In front of him.” Rook groaned out, face first in the grass.

“Get in fucking line…” Scarecrow moaned from his place next to Rook.

Chemo slowly sat up from his place and looked towards Shade and Dash, who were walking slowly and casually around the track at the other end. “Forget the lieutenant, we need to fuck with those two assholes instead.”

“I’ve got a few ideas…” Meat said as he too started to collect himself, “… rec room in an hour, or two, we’ll start planning our retaliation there.”

Dash was practically tearing her room apart. She couldn’t find the pin anywhere, it was supposed to
be on her nightstand, where she left it every night after taking it out of her pocket. It was a US Navy insignia that had belonged to her grandfather, the device that had once upon a time been attached to a dress uniform cover. Dash kept it as a memento of her grandfather, now that he was gone, and now the pin was missing. She tossed aside some clothes she’d thrown to the floor in her search and picked up the MP3 she found there. Scrolling through its contents, she frowned in finding that it was Shade’s. He had copies of those damn torture playlists on it… What was Shade doing in her room? He wouldn’t have stolen her pin… So how’d his MP3 player end up there?

She pocketed the player and left her room, making a point of locking it behind her before heading towards his room. As she approached, she could hear a series of frustrated yells over a song that was playing loudly. “... cause I’m trip hop, all the way to hip hop. I get so plastered, you think I’m drinkin’ gypock. But I’m shit hot, no matter how you look at it, and my lyrics make you want read the book-a-lit. Go. Cause’ I’m cooking it right like the iron chef. That’s why I’m deaf, now to the high clef! FIGJAM!”

Dash stood against the open doorway as she watched the Aussie dig for something under his bunk, before crawling back out with a muffled curse. He rubbed his head and glanced at the door, double taking when he saw her standing there. “Oh, bout time you bloody showed your face. Where the fuck is it, huh?”

“Could ask you the same thing,” She responded, tossing him his MP3 player, “You have my pin then?”

He caught the MP3 player with confusion, “... pin? What pin? And I’ve never seen this before in my life…” He said, tossing it back to her before standing up to look in his desk drawers. “Though if you have any intel on where my damn drop-thigh SERPA holster is, that’d be great.”

Dash groaned in frustration, “My Navy insignia device is missing, belonged to my grandfather,” she said quickly, turning around, “Don’t know what it is you’ve lost, but I’m gonna go find my pin.”

He slammed the drawers shut in frustration. “It’s the holster I used in Mexico for my Glock, had in my room to fiddle with it a bit.” He caught up to her and sighed. “I was hoping to adjust it and make it a little less stiff to draw from… what’s this pin look like exactly?”

“Gold, silver lettering says U.S.N on it,” she answered, “Screw and disk pin on the back.”

“Yikes… and it’s a small thing, ain’t it… know where you last saw it?” Shade asked, his eyes now scanning the ground as they walked through the hall.

“My nightstand,” Dash answered, frowning and looking ahead, “Someone must’ve come in my room last night and taken it, because it’s gone. What about your holster?”

“Sitting on my desk, with thigh panel and the actual holster part separated,” Shade grumbled, “They took the screws too, so I hope to god they haven’t lost anything from it.”

Dash hummed thoughtfully, “All things considered… might be Meat and the boys taking their revenge…”

Shade stopped walking as it clicked into place. “… well… guess it’s hunting season then…”

“Damn straight,” Dash agreed, “He can prank me all he wants, but no one messes with my pin.”

“Last I recall, Meat’s room is two down from mine…” Shade started, turning around to head towards his new destination, “Hey, do you know if the mess has some spare sour cream or stuff like that at all?”
Dash shrugged, “Maybe?”

“Mind dashing down there and checking it out? If they do, grab a container and bring it down here…” Shade asked as he stopped outside of Meat’s room, pressing an ear against it to make sure it was empty. He tested the handle and found it unlocked. “Tsk tsk, Meat… you don’ fucked up…”

“He fucked up when he decided his target was my pin,” Dash commented, jogging past and heading for the Mess Hall.

On her way out of Charlie building, she came across Royce and Ozone, she glared at each as they passed.

“Mornin’ Dash,” Ozone said as he approached, looking a little less like death warmed up, “hey, you alright?”

She whirled on them, but didn’t plan on sticking around long, “I know what you lot are up to…” she hissed, then turned and stalked off. She could hear Ozone turn to look at Royce and say a muffled ‘the fuck did you do…’ before continuing on into the mess hall.

Meat looked up from his meal and coffee with an expression of mock-surprise. “Oh, Ms Dash… I’ve been expecting you…”

Dash snarled at him, “Where is it Meathead…”

“By, whatever could you mean?” He said with an ‘innocent’ tone, before pulling his phone out of his pocket and setting it down on the table top. On the screen was a picture of the pin in question, next to a disassembled SERPA holster, with a copy of the day’s newspaper in the shot below it. “Would it be this pin, perchance?”

She glared at him, “Meat, you ought to know by now that my pin is off-limits.”

Meat barked a laugh at her, leaning back and taking the phone back from the table, “Ha! Off-limits went out the window when you and that goddamn Aussie practically blew us up this morning! We were suffering enough as it was, and Ghost’s little training exercise was already torture enough,” he stood up and leant forwards into her face with what could be defined as ‘rage’, “you don’t understand just how much pain I was in after that little fucking stunt you pulled.”

Dash matched his glare, “I warned you about the hangover… It’s your own fault for over-indulging.”

“Doesn’t matter. You aren’t getting your pin back, and your little bitch Shade isn’t getting his holster back until I’ve decided that you’ve both paid for your crimes,” he said smugly, sitting back down, “and before you start thinking about recovering it yourself, both items are constantly on the move. Even I don’t know where they are, and if you try to coerce myself or someone else for them, then I can’t be held responsible for what will happen to them…”

“We’ll see about that…” Dash hissed, moving off to go find the sour cream, wondering as she collected the container what Shade was planning to do with it. Meat saw her with the container in hand, and called out to her.

“What’s the cream for? To soothe your busted egos?” He teased.

“No,” she responded, “Shade and I are makin’ minced meat tacos…” The low chuckle she let out had Meat suddenly feeling on edge, and he watched in silence as she left the building. Dash made it back to Meat’s room uninterrupted, where she found Shade in the middle of stripping off Meat’s
bunk. A bunch of uniforms and some of Meat’s boots were also scattered around.

“Have any issues?” he asked as he finished up with the sheets, the bare mattress now exposed to the air.

“Meat was in the mess,” Dash answered, handing over the container, “they have our things, said that they’re constantly on the move, and if we try to get someone to tell us where they are they’re gonna do something to them… If I know Meat, telling us they’re on the move is his attempt at getting us to try to strategize a search and waste time while they’re actually in one place.”

Shade took the container and popped the lid, then squatted down to start pouring a small amount into one boot of each pair that Meat had, alternating between the left and right for each. “Uh huh… so that just narrows it down to practically nowhere… he acting alone or do you think he’s got help?”

Dash shook her head, “He got a text picture of our stuff, and said that he doesn’t even know where it is at any given moment. I think it’s a whole web of them,” she grinned, “Remember how I told you Archer is a mastermind?”

“That I do… reckon he’s involved yet or not?” Shade asked, finished with the boots and giving the affected ones a little shake to spread the cream around a bit. He then stood up and started pouring the cream across Meat’s mattress, careful to do long and continuous strings and not have it end up as one big blob. “Because we might be able to recruit him into our cause.”

Dash nodded, “He has a personal rule about messing with people’s gear and sentimental things. He’s not involved with Meat.”

“Good to know, hold this for a second.” He said, handing Dash the container before starting to carefully remake Meat’s bed. “As far as our team’s concerned though, and baring the officers, all eight of them have motive enough to get us. Meat’s made the first move, that we know of at least, and it’s a safe bet to assume that Royce is with him as well. That makes two active players…”

Dash took the container and simply stood there waiting for Shade to finish, “I don’t think it’d be just the two of them either, if it was just the two of them they wouldn’t try it, they’d want a better advantage, four at least.”

“I don’t think Rook’s involved, he made his feelings about me quite clear this morning after we did it. Just not sure about the others…” Shade said, stepping back to admire his work. “He won’t know until he gets into it, which could be anywhere between the next ten minutes to much later tonight….”

Dash nodded, “I don’t know about Ozone either, he seemed pretty clueless when I passed him and Royce on the way out. So what’s the plan? There’s no telling where they’ve hidden our stuff…”

“Hmm… I’ve got a plan.”

Scarecrow sat on the couch in the rec room, reading a novel that he’d been attempting to finish over the last few months. This was one of the first times he’d had in a couple of weeks to actually sit down and pick up the story where he last left it. At least, that was until he felt a weight sit down on the couch beside him.

“‘Sup ‘Crow,” Shade said simply as he picked up the remote and flipped the TV on, flipping through random channels as he shifted a little to settle in.

“Shade…” Scarecrow said in reply, acknowledging the soldier before trying to get back into his book.
“Can’t believe there’s anything good on… five thousand-odd channels, and absolute garbage.”

Scarecrow sighed, already resigned to the fact that his peace and quiet was now permanently disturbed, “Yes… that is a shame…”

“I said this to Dash the other day, you’d think they’d shout us Netflix or something like that, but nope.” Shade stated simply, stretching out and resting his feet on the coffee table with a loud ‘clunk’.

“I don’t think home entertainment is a priority here…”

“Fair point,” Shade agreed, “otherwise we’d never want to leave and go on missions… still sucks balls though.” The Australian remained quiet, finally finding a channel that he wanted to watch. Scarecrow waited until he felt he was safe, then picked his book back up.

“Hey Scarecrow, hey Shades,” Dash greeted as she walked in, Scarecrow biting back a frustrated groan as she sat down on his other side. He rolled his eyes, starting to consider leaving to find another place to read, “what’s on?”

“Jack and shit,” Shade said with a sigh, changing the channel yet again, “’Crows being a conversationalist as normal, too.”

“Yeah? Watch’ya readin’?” Dash asked curiously, peeking at the book.

“... Final Flight, by Stephen Coonts…” Scarecrow responded carefully, now eyeing Dash curiously.

“Oh? I read that a while back!” Shade jumped in, looking towards them, “I enjoyed it, you’d like it too Dash. ‘Bout F-14 pilots in the US Navy…” he trailed off.

“Never read it,” Dash shrugged, sitting back, “Don’t get much time to read ‘round these parts, probably won’t even get to it. It’s whatever, though, I suppose, maybe one day.”

“Endin’s pretty sad, if you ask me. The main guy, Grafton or something, his vision’s failin’—”

“Nope!” Scarecrow said loudly, slamming the book shut and rounding at Shade to glare at him. “You don’t say a word! I’ve been waiting for god-knows how long to finish this, and the last thing I want is you spoiling it for me!”

“I won’t, I won’t… if you help us, that is.” Shade smirked, leaning in close to him.

“… with what?” Scarecrow prompted, putting the book on the table and looking at both Shade and Dash, their expressions putting him on guard. “… wait, what did Meat do?”

“He, and whoever he’s involved with, stole something from the two of us, and we need help getting it back,” Dash answered, sitting back comfortably.

“Oh, oh no. Hell to the no,” Scarecrow started shaking his head, getting up from the couch and backing away, “I’m not involved, and I’m not getting involved. I’m invoking the Switzerland clause, okay?”

“‘Switzerland clause’?” Shade asked, confused.

Dash sighed, “Basically, he’s declaring himself a neutral party and effectively untouchable. He can’t be targeted, on the proviso that he doesn’t help or assist in any manner at all.”

Shade frowned, “Bugger… well, at least we can rule him out.” He said, pulling a small notepad from his pocket to cross Scarecrow’s name off a small list. “Who’s next, Chemo?”
Dash shrugged, “He’s the only person in medical who has gotten involved in previous wars like this. The rest of ’em go Switzerland, like Scaredy-crow here.”

“But he also looked like a damn zombie this morning, too, for someone with access to all of the aspirin and shit,” Shade contested. “Let’s check him out, just to be safe.”

Author’s Notes

(Spitfire)

The prank war begins and the Crucible is on the horizon. However that horizon is very far away, we have a prank war to fight first heh. Dash is Not Happy™ about having her pin stolen, and someone is gonna get their asses kicked when she gets it back. In the meantime, she and Shade are after some revenge. So. That’ll be fun. I am admittedly not the best at planning pranks and stuff, so that’ll be on my writing buddy here xD (strap yourselves in!) See ya next time!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

The quote “I hope you realise that this means war” could not be more apt for this coming set of chapters, a “prank war arc” if you will. Shade’s more annoyed that they’re messing with his gear, but us being upset on Dash’s behalf since it’s her smaller but more sentimental item that’s at risk. So far, for those keeping score: Meat and Royce are the prime suspects, Ozone, Rook and Scarecrow are no factor. That leaves Roach, Chemo, Robot as unknowns. Let’s see what happens.
“I don’t know what you guys did, but please,” Jay said as the pair entered the infirmary, “Never again. He’s insufferable…”

“Don’t know what you’re on about, mate,” Shade innocently, taking a few steps past the desk and into the hallway before stopping, “I just want ask ol’ Chemmy a few quick questions, that’s all.”

Jay narrowed his eyes at him, “He’s hungover and been complaining about the two of you being assholes till he finally passed out half an hour ago.”

Dash grinned sheepishly, but didn’t say anything as she followed Shade.

“Right… which room is he in then, Doc?” Shade asked, as if he didn’t hear anything that Jay had said.

Jay rolled his eyes, “He passed out at his desk in the offices,” he answered, “Now, if you’ll excuse me…” he didn’t elaborate and simply walked away, grabbing a clipboard from the rack by the desk as he went. Shade watched him leave then looked down at Dash.

“… I think Chemo’s not involved…” He said with a small grimacing smile, looking down the hallway, “and I don’t think old mate likes me very much.”

Dash shrugged, “He is busy here, what with how accident prone half the base is,” she agreed, it’d be hard for Chemo to get involved, “It’s just his way, he cares a lot, but it takes him some time to get used to people.”

“Guess that makes sense… that now leaves Roach and Robot.” Shade said, marking off Chemo in his list. “Wonder where we can find them?”

Meat sighed as he stripped his shirt off and tossed it onto his desk, having retired back to his room for a quick nap after his late morning snack. He checked his phone, making sure that the hiding place for his little trophies hadn’t been found, before he flopped down onto his bed with a loud squelch. He paused as the cool sensation of something in his sheets seeped through and made contact with his skin, and as he lifted up from his bed he found himself wondering what the hell was in his bed before he recalled exactly what Dash was holding this morning, and what she had meant by ‘minced meat taco’...

“DASH!”

Robot sat at a table, his disassembled Mark 16 SCAR resting in front of him. He held the trigger group in his left hand, and a cleaning brush in his right, as he cleaned his weapon piece by piece. He found that doing something relatively mindless was a good way to help soothe his headache, as the actions were automatic and didn’t involve much thought… much like a robot. He chuckled to himself at the small irony.

He put the brush down and reached for the bolt, his hand finding empty space as he felt around for the now-missing item.

“Looking for something mate?” A voice drew him from his own head, and he looked up to find Shade holding the bolt group of his rifle in his hand.
“Oh, hey Shade,” Robot started, “mind handing me my bolt?”

Shade simply chuckled, setting the part in question down on the table before sitting down beside him, “Y’know, there’s waaay too many jokes I could make about nuts, bolts, robots and machines, that I’d be here forever.”

“You’d be wasting your time,” Robot remarked as he retrieved the part and started to slowly reassemble the weapon, “I’ve likely heard them all.”

“Seems fair,” Shade agreed. “Hey, you know where my SERPA is?” He asked, all pretenses of acting sneaky dropped as he just came out with his question.

“Your holster? I saw Royce with a holster in his hands after everyone came back from PT this morning… might’ve been yours, though I didn’t get much of a good look.” Robot stated, attaching the two receivers of his rifle together.

“Huh, okay. Didn’t see where he ran off to, by any chance?”

“Nope, but he did hand it off to Exxon from India Team. Ex’ seemed a little hesitant to take it, but took it anyway.” Robot finished, his SCAR now completed and in his hands. “I think I saw Exxon with his team over at the range, maybe ask him about it.”

“Hmm, might do just that… thanks mate.” Shade said, standing up and patting Robot on the back, leaving the armoury to continue his search. Robot watched as he left, then started chuckling to himself.

“By the way, it says ‘gullible’ on the ceiling…”

Dash stood quietly behind Roach as he flirted with one of the women from the intelligence section and smiled, “Oh wouldn’t Jessie just love to see this…” She said with a smile as the intel worker looked at her and back at Roach with an angry expression before huffing, cursing him, and walking away.

“What the hell man?!” Roach turned around, questioning Dash.

Dash shrugged, “You fuck with me I fuck with you, unless… you can help me get my pin back from Meat? In which case… I’m sure I can put in a good word for you with someone…” she offered, watching Roach through narrowed eyes.

Roach frowned in return, before looking around and leaning in close. “Y’know that British Leading Aircraftwoman, McWalters, over in the aircraft maintenance section?”

“I know everyone on this base, Roach-y boy,” Dash answered, crossing her arms.

“Set me up with her, and I’ll let you know where your damn pin is…” He said, matching her stance.

“So you are with Meat…” Dash accused, and grinned, “Well… that’s good to know… by the way, I don’t, actually, know who you’re talking about,” she threw over her shoulder as she left.

“Then your little pin might be on the next supply run out of here!” He called back smugly, watching for her reaction.

Dash stopped, whirled around and stalked up to him, and searched his face, before smiling and patting his head, “If that happens, Roach-y… well… let’s just say that lovely Leading
Aircraftwoman McWalters will never know you existed, neither will a lot of the women on this base…”

His smug expression started to falter, his eyebrow twitching at the threat, “H-hey now… let’s not get too hasty…”

Dash narrowed her eyes at him again, “You got too hasty when you sided with Meat in this war,” with that, she turned and left.

“… Dash!” He called out, standing from his spot against the wall. “Royce’s vest, in his admin pouch. It’s in the gear room, last I checked. Shade’s holster is probably nearby as well.”

Dash stopped, again, and turned, again, and gave him a smile, “Thanks Roachy, I’ll see about setting you up, but if I find out you’re lying….” She smiled, and left.

“Royce was over in the motor pool, last I saw him, and I should’ve thought that something was up when Exxon said that he’d never even seen Royce today,” Shade grumbled as he walked beside Dash, the pair of them headed towards the equipment storage sheds, “bloody ‘Bot gave me a damn bum steer. In hindsight, that was too damn easy to get an answer out of him…”

Dash nodded, “Robot’s a good liar. I feel like it’s too easy for it to just be where Roach said as well…” she commented, “But it’s worth a look.”

“Sounds legit though, I mean, it’s kinda hiding my holster in plain sight. And we’d have never thought to check the pouches of other people’s gear,” He commented, before glancing at Dash and adding, “at least, I wouldn’t have… don’t know about you.”

Dash shrugged, “I might’ve, given it goes on too long for me to care about the ‘sport’.” She might not be the least bit happy about what they’d taken from her, but she wasn’t an asshole, she wouldn’t be a bad sport about it.

Shade grunted in acknowledgement, opening the door to the storage room and letting her enter first, before shutting the door behind him. He failed to notice a vindictive Meat and Royce, assisted by both Roach and Robot, carrying a heavy steel bin to the door and set it down in front of it, effectively blocking them in the storage room until it was moved. “This’ll teach those assholes,” Meat said quietly, before dusting his hands and gesturing towards the rec room, “shall we, gentlemen?”

“So, Royce’s shit is around here, right?” Shade asked Dash, walking along the row of lockers that was assigned for their team.

“Should be,” Dash answered, “Every chance it’s been moved and Roach lied. In which case I might just murder him.”

“As long as I get a piece of him first,” he muttered, before finding Royce’s locker. “Bingo… let’s hope he hasn’t locked it…” Shade pulled the handle to the locker and it opened, thankful that Royce was careless enough to leave it unlocked. He reached in and pulled out the three different vests that Royce kept in there, all three with admin pouches attached to the front of them. “I’ll check his CIRAS, you take his JPC, then whoever’s finished can check his Rhodesian rig.”

“Yeah,” Dash took the JPC and wasted no time searching the pouch. Shade did the same, coming up empty with the CIRAS. Wordlessly, he handed Dash the Rhodesian chest rig for her to take, whilst he returned the two other vests to the locker.

Dash searched the pouch quickly, “Aha!” she exclaimed, pulling the pin out and holding it up,
“Thank god…” she breathed, slipping it back into the safety of her pocket before closing the pouch and handing Shade the vest. He unceremoniously threw it back into the locker, like the other two, before shutting the locker and sighing.

“One down, one to go… now, if I were a mischievous prick, where would I put a holster?” He said to himself loudly. “I wouldn’t keep the two items together…”

“Well, my pin was in Royce’s locker, and he and Meat are the ringleaders, so what about Meat’s gear locker?” Dash suggested.

“Worth a shot…” He shrugged before moving down the row to Meat’s locker, pulling it open. He dove in, and found his holster hanging towards the back of the rack. Shade pulled it out and held it in his hands to inspect it. “Bingo bango, but the bastard screwed it back on upside-fucking-down, see?” He held it upright, and sure enough the shell that held the sidearm was pointed the wrong way. “It’s an easy, if time consuming, fix though, so I’m not too bothered by it.”

Dash snorted a laugh, “Well, if you’re gonna play a prank, you gotta do it right and make it easy but annoying to fix.”

“Yeah, unless you’re getting payback, in which case you let the bastards suffer,” Shade chuckled, “Meat’ll have fun with those sheets of his, heh… come on, all this running around has made me hungry.”

“Well, considering this was their payback for this morning…” Dash shrugged and followed him, “Maybe nothing too harsh, don’t wanna over-do it now.”

“Eh, once it comes to pass that Roach sold out the others, they’ll turn their sights on him, and we’ll be free and clear,” Shade said with a laugh as he reached for the door and tried to open it, only to walk into the door itself when it didn’t budge. “The fuck?” he said, confused as he tried to push the door open, only for it to not even move an inch. “It’s not locked…”

Dash frowned and pushed Shade aside and pushed at the door, “That mother fucker… They blocked the damn door!”

Shade just sighed and shook his head, “Et tu, Meat-ey?” He walked over and sat down resignedly on a nearby bench and started to laugh quietly, “Gotta admit, they got us good with this…”

Dash sighed, “Yeah… I’ll give that to them…” she scanned the room, looking for a possible escape. Shade watched for a moment, before standing up and walking to his own locker. He reached in and dug out his empty water hydration bladder, carrying it back to where the door was. He blew into it and inflated it as much as he could, before tossing it onto the ground and laying down onto it, using it as an impromptu pillow.

“Methinks we’ll be here for a while, since I’m pretty sure that there’s no way in or out other than that door. I give it maybe ten minutes before someone from one of the other teams needs to get something out and finds the door blocked up, and clears it.” He said as he made himself comfortable on the linoleum floor.

“Ugh…” Dash groaned and sat down on the bench, before turning and laying down on it. They stayed like that for a minute or two before Shade spoke up.

“What’s the worst prank you’ve seen here, not including your pin being stolen?” He asked curiously.

“In the eyes of the person pranked, or on my own personal scale?” Dash pressed, “It’s a tough call.”
“In general then, or your top three. You pick.” Shade offered, looking up to where she was on the bench.

Dash shrugged, “There was the one time someone bleached Ghost’s mask, never found out who did it. During the holidays once when we were stuck here, someone wrapped the entirety of the Captain’s office in Christmas themed wrapping paper,” she chuckled, “Even covered the walls and his computer and his chair, when I say the entirety, I mean the entirety.”

“Yikes… and I guess that’s a good thing that the person who fucked with the mask never got found out. Can’t imagine them having a long life expectancy if they ever did get found out.”

Dash laughed, “He had the entire Task Force running Crucible for a week since no one would claim the blame. Cap watched with this shit eating grin. If it wasn’t him, I don’t know who else it could’ve been.”

Shade was silent for a few moments in thought, “Unless he did it himself, and used it as an excuse to PT you all into the ground…”

Dash laughed and shook her head, “Nah, he’s a hard bastard, but he’s not that much of an ass.”

“I don’t know,” he started, “I mean, it’s the perfect cover. If anyone asks if he found the culprit, all he’d need to say is ‘they’ve been dealt with’, and that’s that. Everyone would be too shit scared to press for further details.”

She shrugged, “Either way it’s in the past,” she commented, “And I doubt the Cap would admit if it was him, or Ghost if he did it himself.”

“I bet you it’s a conspiracy,” Shade left it at that, going silent as they waited for someone to find them. Another few minutes passed, the pair of soldiers both wondering how much longer it would take for someone to find them. Little did they know that as a parting gift, Meat had gone and taped a sign to the large bin blocking the door, a sign that read ‘NAUGHTY SOLDIERS INSIDE - DO NOT MOVE’.

Shade had his eyes shut, trying to get a bit of rest while he could, when he started to feel warm. He sat up, and looked around the ceiling. “... hey D, is it just me or is it starting to get a bit warm or something in here?”

Dash sighed, “Little shits probably shut off the AC…” she sat up and looked at the small windows, judging whether or not she might be able to fit. She flopped back on the bench with a groan, no way she was getting through that gap, even as small as she was, the window only opened half-way, and she would not be getting out that way.

“If they did, I swear…” Shade said, grunting as he sat up and removed his combat shirt, balling it up and shoving it under his head along with the inflated water bladder, “if I don’t melt, I’m going to shove Meat into a bin. And then kick said bin. Repeatedly.”

Dash chuckled, “Oh come on Aussie boy, it’s not that bad…”

“What if I told you that I took the transfer purely to get out of the heat?” Shade said seriously, no trace of humor in his voice at all, “this place is wonderland compared to home… and this room is starting to feel like home.”

“Tell me about it,” Dash shrugged, “Texas wasn’t exactly a temperate region either. But regardless, I’d tell you you took the wrong transfer to escape the heat.”
Shade chuckled, “I wonder what the transfer acceptance rate would be if this place were based at, say, Hawaii?”

Dash laughed, “Probably twenty percent better.”

“Might even be twenty percent cooler, too, compared to damn Colorado,” Shade laughed with her, “fresh sea breezes, tropical storms are a bit more frequent to cool things down, more opportunity to do ‘amphibious recon’,” he added while popping his eyebrows at her, “Meat’d have a field day if we were based there.”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, “Considering our team? No one would ever get anything done.”

“Very true, but it’d be totally worth it.”

“Agreed,” Dash nodded, “I hear Hawaii is nice year-round. Meanwhile, the AC here breaks every damn month it seems like.”

“No kidding…” Shade agreed, sitting up once more. “You don’t mind if I take this off?” He said, gesturing to the light brown undershirt that he was wearing underneath his combat shirt.

Dash shrugged, “Go for it.”

“Cheers,” he said and quickly took it off, exposing his torso. He wasn’t completely ripped, but he did have a distinct tone to his body. There were a surprising amount of small scars that ran across his back and chest though, all of varying ages and severity, mostly up near his shoulders. “I think I’ve got my Dad’s problem where I feel the heat a more worse than most. He’d start sweating if it was any higher than like twenty five or twenty six degrees Celcius.”

“I don’t mind the heat much,” Dash replied, “Like it better than the cold anyway,” she yawned, “But it also puts me to sleep sometimes,” she chuckled.

“No kidding,” he responded, laying back down, “never really got the experience to do any truly cold-weather operations. The winter deployments to the middle east were a lot slower, since everyone just kinda dug in due to the cold. Summer, when it was nice and hot out, those were the most active ones.”

“Ugh…” Dash sat up again, “How long are we gonna be stuck in here?!”

“If I knew, I’d let you know,” Shade sighed, glancing towards the door.

Two hours passed, and Shade was just about ready to slaughter Meat and Royce now. He’d be pleasant about it, of course, smiling politely the entire time. And he’d allow Dash a chance to get her hands on him as well, it was only fair as she had suffered the same torment.

“Does that make me craaayzey? Does that make me craaayzey? Does that make me craaayzey? Possibbbllyyyyyy! And I hope that you are having the tiiime of your liii-iiiife, but think twiii-iicee, that’s my only adviiii-iiice…”

Dash had dozed off an hour ago, to be woken up by… Shade singing. She groaned, rubbing her face with her hands, “For fuck’s sake how long do they plan on leaving us in here?!?”

It was at that moment a sound from the heavens rang out through the gear room; three strong knocks on the door followed by a familiar Scottish voice.
“Shade? Dash? Still alive in there, I hope!”

“Thank fuck!” Dash yelled, “Finally!”

“We’re alive sir, but only just!” Shade called out, springing to his feet with newfound energy.

“Hang on for just a moment more!” MacTavish called back, before his muffled voice could be heard once more. “Right, you two, move this bloody bin!” There was the sound of metal scraping across concrete, and the door opened to let in some much needed fresh air. Shade waited for Dash to exit first, before following her outside to get a lungfull or three, wiping the sweat off of his face and chest with his shirt.

“Okay… first things first, where’s Dead Meat?” Shade said, looking around to find said man standing behind Ghost ‘at ease’. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to deliver a bunch of minced Meat to the mess.”

“You do you, Shades, I’m goin’ for the AC,” Dash chuckled, stuffing her hands in her pockets as she started walking off, but stopped short a moment, “Thanks for the rescue, Captain.”

Authors’ notes:

(Spitfire)

Well… That’s an end to the prank war. Probably coulda kept it going, but we got other things to get down to. And it is time to get down to business indeed. What that business entails, we’ll leave you guys to wonder until next time. So, with that said, It’s time to close this off and get on that grind as it were.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

And so concludes the prank war, which is good. As far as prank wars go, this was pretty tame. To be honest, I don’t know how much longer we could have kept it running for. But as Spitty said, we got shit to do and get to. I’m glad that you’re along the ride with us, because we’re having fun writing this.
“Field day! Field day! Field day!” Rook called out excitedly as he retrieved his ninety-six hour patrol pack from his locker, his enthusiasm not matched by anyone else. Shade leant over to Dash as he closed the main part of his own pack, gesturing toward Rook with some concern.

“... I expected this kind of thing out of someone like Meat, or Royce, or maybe even Robot… but Rook? I don’t know about the blokes in the SASR, but we Commandos weren’t big on extended range field stuff…”

Dash shrugged, “Pretty sure it’s just him,” she replied, packing up her own gear.

Shade just nodded as he slung his pack onto his shoulder, “This should be a walk in the park, consider what we went through a while ago,” he shifted it around, making sure the weight was balanced and nothing was digging into his back, “I’m going to assume just some land nav, survival training, fieldcraft and other pretty bog-standard shit?”

She huffed a chuckle, “It varies, could be easy, could be fuckin’ Hell Week on steroids.”

“Oh joy,” Shade remarked dryly, “one extreme to another. This’ll be good.” He looked around the room, then back at Dash, “Meet you at the hangars, alright?” He threw a brief wave before leaving the equipment room, beginning to make his way towards the hangar where they were told to meet.

The team had been slated for a week-long field training exercise, focusing on missions that had an extended duration as opposed to raids where they would be in and out of the target area within a day. The intent was to refresh everyone on their fieldcraft, navigation, and survival skills, and how to act if separated from the main element.

Most of the team had gathered at the designated hangar, where a CH-47 Chinook was waiting for them. Some of the guys had already loaded their packs and gear in the helicopter, whilst others were going through them one last time to make sure they had everything they needed. For the trip, Shade had packed a couple of extra uniforms, enough food to ration out through the week, cooking and shelter equipment, plus a few signal flares as instructed by the Captain. He’d also tucked a few extra items that he’d normally take with him in his patrol chest rig, like his knife and multitool, and some light snacks.

Walking up the ramp of the Chinook, he dumped his gear with everyone else’s then took a place in one of the jump seats that ran along the sides of the aircraft, tugging down on his field shirt that he opted to wear in place of his normal combat shirt. Scarecrow and Chemo walked up and sat down beside him and across from him.

“No pain in your leg or anything?” Chemo asked, gesturing to the leg that Shade had gotten shot in weeks ago.

“Nah mate, all good to go. Otherwise I’d still be off, y’know?” He answered with a dismissive wave. “I’m kinda keen to get out there, actually, shake off the rust that’s built up.”

“Same, though maybe you can lend an idea as to why Rook’s acting like a kid in a candy store?” Scarecrow asked, pointing as the Aussie in question entered the hangar with a huge smile on his
“Nope, can’t help you there,” Shade shook his head sympathetically, “must be just a chicken-strangler thing… hey, any idea on what we’re facing?”

“If it’s anything like the last FTX, it’ll be pretty good. Split up into pairs, dropped around random points of a set area. We’re given a map, compass, a set of coordinates, and a time frame of three or so days,” Chemo started to explain, “generally you have to find your location on the map, find the coords on the map, then get from where you are to where you need to be. Pretty simple stuff, no real rush to get to the end. I mean, the trip is long enough to require the good part of a day, camp overnight and finish the trip the next day, but once everyone’s regrouped it turns into more of a camping trip than anything else.”

“Hmm, sounds like fun,” Shade said as he thought over what he’d just heard, turning to watch as everyone started to board the Chinook and take their seats, “can’t wait.”

“...her name’s Dash… of course she jogs with all of her shit on…” Shade said exasperatedly to himself, before taking off at his own ‘jogging’ pace.
The pair made good progress for the first hour, before being forced to slow down as the bushland around them started to get thicker. Shade was thankful he decided to wear his wider-brimmed boonie hat as opposed to his cap, as it helped protect his neck against the occasional branch that tried to flick down onto him.

“Did you much of this pathfinder stuff in Recon?” He asked, breaking their comfortable silence as they caught a breather on a pair of rocks. “We occasionally did stuff like this in Afghanistan, longer range dismounted patrols and shit like that. Just it was far and few between.”

“Quite a bit, yeah,” Dash answered simply, “I was top of my company in it. Did one of these every month or so.”

Shade smothered a laugh, then looked at her. “Sorry to stereotype, but I’m assuming that the guys in your company were always like ‘should we ask for directions, or nah?’”

Dash laughed and nodded, “Every single time. I didn’t mind so much, they knew I’d find the way before they could.”

“So it was more like a harmless tease then, that’s cool.” He said, standing up from the rock and shouldering his pack once more. “Break time’s over, let’s get going… I wonder how the others are goin’…”

“Are we there yet?”

“No.”

“... are we there yet?”

“... shut the fuck up Meat.”

“Are you sure we’re headed in the right way Robot?”

“How the fuck would I know, you have the map and compass!”

“... about that…”

“Hey, pass that beer over here, would you?”

“Respectfully, sir: you’re closer to it, go get it yourself.”

“Rank has its privileges, Ghost… remember that. Now pass me the bloody beer.”

Dash checked their direction and adjusted the course slightly, “Either wanting to murder each other, or a couple hours behind us.”

“Sounds about right,” Shade laughed, now all too familiar with each of the guys quirks after working alongside them for about a couple of months now, “I bet the Captain and Ghost are just kicking back, enjoying the silence right now, talking about the kinds of things that officers talk about…”

“Probably,” Dash agreed, “Meat’s probably being the annoying li’l shit he always is,” she chuckled.

“I wouldn’t even bet on that, too much certainty there,” Shade remarked, stepping around a tree in
his path, “I feel bad for whoever’s paired with him… though it’s more than likely Royce. How the hell does that man put up with him? He has to tell us his secrets!”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, “I dunno, man, Royce seems to be at least half of his impulse control.”

“They do act like flipped sides of the same coin,” Shade said thoughtfully, “which kinda makes sense, since they came from the same unit… on the record, if I knew a guy like that from the Commandos, I’d want to get as far away from him as possible… not that I don’t like Meat, but small doses.”

“I hear you,” Dash agreed, “Can only take so much of him in a day.”

“You know what the ultimate irony would be?” Shade prompted, looking over to Dash with a smirk on his face, “if whoever Meat ends up meeting and settling down with was a vegetarian or a vegan…”

Dash laughed, “Oh man I think Meat might decide to break it off if he found out they didn’t eat meat.”

Shade laughed harder as he thought of something, “That or he might try his hardest to convert them.”

“Maybe,” Dash shrugged as they kept walking. The hours seemed to fly by as they got closer and closer to their destination, until such a time where the light was on the verge of fading over the horizon and making it much harder to navigate the thick brush.

Shade stopped for a breather and dumped his pack onto the ground, stretching his arms and back as he paced around for a bit. “Wanna call it? I’m starting to feel it, don’t know about you…”

Dash gave him a wry smile, “I could keep this pace going for hours yet,” she commented, then looked at the sky and sighed, “but it’ll be harder to navigate once it gets dark, might get off track… So, I suppose we might as well.”

“Cool… mark our pos on the map, I’ll radio it into the boss so they know where we are, just in case.”

Dash nodded and knelt, spreading the map on the ground in front of her. She found their position before long and marked it, “Made good distance today. If we get going at first light we should get there around… say midday, given time for breathers.”

Shade nodded with a small smile, “Awesome.” He retrieved the small radio they were given for emergencies, and turned it on, tuning it to the designated frequency. “All stations, this is Shade. We’re setting up camp at this time, grid to follow, break,” he read out the grid reference and repeated his message once more, before signing off and stowing the radio away.

Dash sat back and stretched casually, sliding her pack off her shoulders and setting it beside her. Shade retrieved his small entrenching tool and began work on a small fire pit, digging it out wide and deep enough for a small fire to cook with. “Now, the all important question: did you bring marshmallows?”

Dash chuckled, and shook her head, “Yeah, right next to the chocolate,” she joked and stood up, “I’ll go find some firewood.” She walked off into the thickets, picking her way carefully around the thorns. Shade sighed as he finished up the pit, then began work to start clearing space for their small shelters. His was basic, effectively a small AUSCAM-patterned tarp called a hootchie that he could string between some trees into an A-shape. He wasn’t too sure what Dash was using for her shelter,
so he cleared up some space for her near his place, careful to be upwind of where the fire was to avoid any smoke or embers landing on them during the night.

He was in the middle of tying up the cord that would suspend his hootchie when Dash returned. “Much luck?”

“Plenty.” Dash answered, dropping her armload of firewood, then the two canteens slung over her shoulder, “Found a freshwater stream, water’s perfectly clean, no dangers of running low.”

“Sweet, might take an APC once I’ve got this stuff done,” he said with a smile, finished with the cord and now fishing out the actual tarp part of his tent from his pack.

Dash crouched by her bag and unclipped the sleeping bag with her poncho liner wrapped up inside of it and unrolled it in the spot Shade had cleared for her. She looked up at the sky and squinted. It didn’t feel like rain… If worse came to worse it wouldn’t be too bad anyway, she decided to leave the liner as a blanket for now.

Shade finished hanging the tarp out and had pinned it down with some pegs he had brought along, and stood back to admire his work. “Looks like a dog’s breakfast, but it gets the job done… a lot easier to take down than one of those bloody civi single-person tents.”

“And mine’s more comfortable too,” Dash commented, sitting contentedly on her sleeping bag, “Don’t think it’ll be raining.”

“Nah, we’ll be right tonight,” Shade agreed, kneeling down by the fire pit where he started to assemble the firewood and prepared some kindling. Satisfied, he leant back towards his pack and pulled out some steel wool and a nine volt battery, then began his attempts to light the fire. It didn’t take long, and before they knew it they had a small fire lit and slowly growing. “Let there be light! Now, I don’t know about about you, but I’m bloody hungry.”

Dash nodded her agreement, “We breaking out rations or going hunting? Saw some pretty fat squirrels and pheasants.”

“Nah, got some rat-packs instead, I don’t feel particularly inclined to go run around for something that mightn’t be worth it,” he said as he started digging through his pack for his food, “wouldn’t put it past Rook though.”

Dash shrugged and pulled her pack closer to her, before digging through it for her own ration packs, “Fair enough.”

The pair ate in relative silence, enjoying the ambient noise of the bushland around them as the light slowly faded into darkness. The fire was now steady, only requiring the barest of maintenance to keep it alive. Shade was leant against a tree that his hootchie was attached to, looking at nowhere in particular as he relaxed. Dash relaxed back as well, laying on her sleeping bag with one arm under her head, the other crossed over her belly as she stared up at the stars.

“Gotta say, this is pretty good,” Shade said idly, “All I need right now to finish this off is a beer, and this’d be perfect. Maybe some better food, but you can’t win ‘em all.”

Dash shrugged, “You’d be surprised what I can do with minimal supplies.”

“... just how many Southern stereotypes you do invoke, D? I mean, you said you grew up on a farm, you talk like a regular cowgirl, and now you’re telling me you can moonshine?” Shade said in bewilderment, shaking his head with a chuckle, “I’m half-expecting you to keep some damn spurs or some shit like that in your room.”
Dash threw a twig at him, “Not moonshine ya ninny, food. Good food.”

“Ah, right,” he said, rubbing his face, “though that still wouldn’t surprise me. Maybe if we come across something on the way tomorrow, we can stalk and kill it. We’re ahead of schedule, after all.”

Dash shrugged, “Maybe… Let’s get some shut-eye, plan on getting an early start in the morning.”

Shade was halfway into his hootchie and sleeping bag when he groaned loudly, “You had me at shut-eye, D, but lost me at early start!”

“It’s not a vacation, Shades, and I always get there first,” Dash replied, getting comfortable inside her own sleeping bag.

“Whatsoever you say, D…” He said, poking his head out one end and looking at her curiously.

“Sleepin’ under the stars? If it gets a bit cool or anything, there’s room enough under this thing for two. And I promise I don’t bite… much.”

Dash chuckled, “Go to bed Shades, I’m fine where I am.”

Dash was awake when the sky started turning it’s blue-ish pink-ish grey, right before the sun came up. Shade, evidently, was not.

“Shade,” Dash called, “Get up, we gotta shake a leg here.” There was no response from the small tent that was housing the man in question. Dash sighed and moved to the pegs supporting Shade’s makeshift tent, “Shade! Final warning, get up!” Still no sign of movement, or life for that matter.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you…” she muttered, pulling the pegs free and letting the tarp fall over the Aussie. There was a muffled yelp as the cool fabric landed on top of Shade, followed by a string of curses as a pair of arms shot out from under one end and pulled the tarp down, Shade’s head popping up shortly after.

“The fuck D? I was having a pleasant dream just then!” He said with a frown as he rubbed his face, still somewhat sluggish.

“Pack up, we gotta get moving,” Dash responded, her pack already secured and ready and firepit cleaned, she had been up for a while before she’d decided to wake Shade.

“Right, give me a few…” He said, finally crawling out of his bag.

It didn’t take long for Shade to finally fully wake up and get his gear together, and with a fresh field shirt on, the pair were back on track and on their way to the rendezvous. “Glad it hadn’t dewed overnight, otherwise I’d have flicked the water all over you in payback…” Shade remarked as he ducked to dodge a low branch.

Dash chuckled and shook her head, going quiet in thought then speaking up a few minutes later, “So how’d you end up as ‘Shade’ anyway?” she questioned.

“Well, it depends on who you ask and which version you want to hear,” he began with a laugh and a slight shake of his head, “like, if you ever asked my company commander and my battle buddy the same question, you’d get two completely different answers.”

“Uh-huh…” Dash stuck her hands in her pockets, “Which do you prefer?”

“I just tell the truth, nine times out of ten, it’s funnier than the ‘official’ version that we tell in polite
company,” he chuckled, “the ‘official’ account is that I tend to lurk and strike out from the shadows, and I was called Shade because one of the guys from A Company already had the name ‘Shadow’, which is true.” Shade looked around, then smirked at Dash, “but the truth is that I tried to hide myself as a lamp shade when the CO walked into the base’s rec room during a raging party. We had maybe a minute to hide, and everyone else did sensible things like hiding behind couches or under tables or in cabinets. Nope, not me. I just grabbed the nearest lampshade, threw it on my head and just stood at attention. This was after I’d finished off an entire six pack of beer and was halfway through a bottle of some serious whiskey, keep in mind.”

Dash snorted a laugh, “I was expecting something lame like wearing sunglasses all the time,” she replied, “A lampshade? Really?”

“What can I say? I was three sheets to the wind at the time, I thought it was a good idea. Y’know, that hiding in plain sight shit.” He admitted with a shrug, “It kinda worked, actually. Everyone else who did actually hide got worse punishments than I did, on account on the fact that ‘I was already at the position at attention and ready to receive disciplinary action’.”

She laughed and shook her head, “I bet it was actually just ‘cause ‘e felt bad you embarrassed yourself like that already.”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Shade said simply, “and I don’t really care. The day after we all finished our punishment, which was gate duty at the base for a solid month, I was ‘christened’ Shade and it stuck to me like bees to honey,”

Dash’s laughing died down to a chuckle, “That’s the most ridiculous reason for a call-sign I’ve heard in a long time.”

“I kinda want to hear the story behind Meat’s, Robot’s, and maybe Scarecrow’s,” Shade wondered out loud, “I mean, how the fuck do you get a name like ‘Meat’?”

Dash shrugged, “He’s declared himself a carnivore,” she answered simply.

“Oh, bugger, I was half-expecting like he was found in a butcher’s shop or something during a mission gone wrong…” Shade admitted, a little disappointed, “or something along those lines…”

“Hold up, I got movement…” Ghost said as he and MacTavish sat in a pair of camping chairs, binoculars in hand as they watched the treeline on the other side of the small lake, “looks like we’ve got our first pair.”

“Who is it?” MacTavish asked, sipping from his beer as he focused on the book in his other hand.

“Dash, and Shade’s right behind her.”

“Hmm… those two are becoming quite the element aren’t they,” the Captain stated, “despite their rocky start, they’ve be able to overcome quite the odds. I imagine that they’ll be quite the team on the next mission, whenever that comes down.”

“No kidding, sir,” Ghost agreed, raising an arm up and waving back as he saw Shade waving towards them through his binoculars, “I think that’s also the fastest we’ve had a team get back to us too, day and a half?”

“That beats her last record by a few hours,” MacTavish confirmed, standing up to set up a few extra chairs for their new arrivals, “now, who do you think’ll be next?”
“Either Rook and Roach, or Chemo and Ozone, whomever comes first, with Meat and Royce coming in after those two. Robot and Scarecrow’ll be the last pair, if previous history is any indicator…”

“Yeah, I’m sure that this is the right way…”

“You fucking said that the last three times we changed direction!”

**Authors’ Notes:**

**(Spitfire)**

There’s a few weeks between the end of the last chapter and the beginning of this one. Long enough for Shade and Dash to get back up and all. Dash is, well, Dash and has to move fast for the rendezvous. Shade would Rather Not wake up that early, thank you very much Dash *(fuck that noise)*. Agreed. So… That’s all I suppose when we pick up next time, camping trip. Woohoo.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

**(Shade)**

A camping trip disguised as a Field Training Exercise (FTX)? I love how my mind works sometimes… totally something I can see these guys doing to get away from the boredom of the base. This is probably the third or fourth time I’ve written a part where Shade explains his name, and out of them all I love this one the most. After all, most nicknames stem from embarrassing moments after all. Some more bonding between the two operators, pretty sure we’re at a solid friendship now, at least that’s the vibe I’m getting from them.
“‘It’s not a vacation, Shades’,” Shade parroted to Dash with a smirk, gesturing to the rest of the team who were in varying states of relaxation around the campfire, “I don’t know, D, but this feels a lot like a vacation to me…”

Dash sighed in annoyance, leaning back against the tree she’d chosen as her ‘spot’. Muttering about getting things done and lounging around like bumps on logs.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Shade,” Ghost started, sitting down on a log nearby, “this is just to relax and unwind from today’s and yesterday’s hike. The real fun begins tomorrow.”

“Oh joy,” Shade said with a wry smile, “oh gracious Ghost of ours, do tell what we might be facing so we can prepare!”

“Nah, that’s for me to know and you to find out,” he replied, “more fun that way… for me, at least.”

“Good to know we’re not spending this whole time being lazy bums,” Dash commented idly.

“I don’t know what your rush is,” Robot spoke up, in the middle of eating from an MRE he had packed, “but I’d prefer stuff like this than sitting around at the base doing the same things we do every other day. It helps break up the monotony, you know?”

“Oh I’m not complaining about being out here, I’m complaining about feeling lazy,” Dash responded, getting up from her spot, “I’m goin’ for a walk.”

“Mind if I join you? Leg’s starting to get a bit stiff.” Shade said, standing up to stretch out a bit.

“Not the only thing,” Meat muttered quietly, Royce smacking him on the shoulder shortly after.

Dash rolled her eyes at Meat’s comment and shrugged, “Sure, what the hay.”

Shade nodded and grabbed his webbing gear, slinging it over his shoulders before making his way to join her on the walk. It was still light out, but it was approaching dusk. “I’m not the only one dreading what Ghost and the boss have planned, right?” He asked once out of earshot.

“Between the two of us? Yeah,” Dash answered, “I can’t take all this sitting around doing nothing,” she shuddered.

“You say that now,” Shade chuckled, letting the statement hang unfinished, “I bet you he has us break down the camp and carry all of the parts to a new position then set it up somewhere else.”

Dash shrugged, “That doesn’t sound so bad to me.”

“I know, that’s where Ghost says he changes his mind just as we finish the setup, then tells us to break it down again and move it somewhere else.”

Dash hummed thoughtfully, but didn’t really say anything as she kept walking, it still didn’t sound too bad. Annoying sure, but physically taxing? It would be a cakewalk.

Shade stopped without and held out a hand for Dash to stop as well, slowly taking a knee as he looked over towards his left. His face wore a serious expression, as if he was looking for something.
Dash watched him with a curious expression, then looked to where he was watching. He continued to look, then slowly started moving off to the side, circling around to his ‘target’s right, signalling for Dash to follow but stay low and quiet. Dash spotted something odd and followed Shade without hesitation. She stopped beside Shade once he stopped as well.

“I think I’ve got two guys, wearing hoodies and commercial camo, about seventy meters or so in that direction...” He whispered to her, drawing his knife from his webbing and holding it in a reverse grip, “they don’t look like hikers... last I checked there weren’t any major trails along this neck of the woods, which is why we’re here.”

Dash narrowed her eyes at them, and whispered back to Shade, “I’m gonna get a closer look...” she said, before moving forward quietly in the cover of the trees, stepping carefully to avoid dead branches or any ‘alarm’ tri-wires these two might’ve set. Shade shot off to further flank right, moving fast but low, seemingly making very little noise. The pair closed to within thirty meters of the unknown persons, and Shade signalled for Dash to halt from his position.

The reason these men were out here became obvious; they were inspecting a small grow field of cannabis. Through the bushland, Shade could see the glint of a handgun in the waistband of one of the men, and signalled as such to Dash to warn her. Dash sent back a signal to let Shade know that she’d seen his warning.

Shade nodded and they continued to watch the two men for a few more minutes, before Shade signalled for Dash to move in and take the gunman, whilst he started moving with the other man in his sights. They crept closer and closer, maintaining absolute silence until they were within ten meters of them. Holding for one last moment, Shade held up a hand and counted down from three.

Once his hand closed into a fist, they leapt into action, Shade lunging for the man with his hands in his pockets and slamming him chest first into a tree. He swept his legs out from under him and pushed the man to the ground onto a large tree root, and dove onto him to keep him restrained. As Shade took down one, Dash charged the other, dodging a surprised fist as she went. She held his arm out in a lock as he drew the pistol and forcing him to let it go. It ended up getting flung instead of simply dropping. Dash cursed at the flash of safety orange that meant the safety was off. Stupid civvies and their stupid lack of common sense and their stupid fucking lack of gun-safety. The handgun hit a nearby tree and went off, but she didn’t hear any evidence of someone being hit, so she focused on wrestling the larger man onto the ground and pinning him there before looking up to see where the bullet had ended up.

Shade looked to her with wide eyes, before looking up to the bullet hole that was lodged in the tree trunk a foot away from his face. “Holy fuck...” he breathed, before schooling his expression and digging his knee deeper into the back of the man he was holding down. The sound of stomping grew louder as Captain MacTavish, Ghost, Scarecrow, Roach and Chemo came rushing through, stopping as they saw both Dash and Shade holding a pair of men on the ground with a handgun lying nearby.

“Anyone hurt?” Chemo said, rushing over to squat between the two soldiers as he gave them cursory once-overs.

“Nah, we’re good mate.” Shade dismissed him, a little bit shaken by the near-miss.

“The fuck’s going on?” Ghost exclaimed, walking over to pick the gun up and render it safe, sticking the magazine in his pocket.

“We busted two assholes with a weed farm,” Dash answered, gesturing with her head at the plants, “This idiot,” she shoved her captive further into the ground, “doesn’t know a damn thing about gun-safety.”
The man underneath Shade finally came to his senses, “Who the hell are you people? Cops?”

“You aren’t that fucking lucky mate,” Shade laughed, tapping him on the back, “we’re military. You’d have heard the police coming from a mile away.”

“Ahhhh fuck,” Dash’s prisoner sighed, letting his head rest on the dirt.

“Yeah, ‘Ah fuck’ is right…” Scarecrow joked, walking over to the questionable plants to take a look himself, “not that much here, quality is dubious at best… they’d probably have to cut it with some other shit to get much out of it…” he turned back, noting the varying looks he was getting from his team members and the two wanna-be drug runners, “what? I grew up in SoCal, what’d you expect?”

It took a few hours for the nearest Sheriff’s office to respond to their call, but the seven of them finally returned back to camp feeling plenty tired. “Is that better Dash? You did say you didn’t like lazing around,” Meat called as they all sat down around the fire to unwind a little from the evening’s events.

“Much,” Dash answered with a nod, “Although that part where the idiot threw his weapon? I could’ve done without that.”

“You and me both, D,” Shade said with a groan as he rubbed his face, “that round almost caught me in the head… a foot lower and I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Dash shook her head, “Were our lives a cartoon, I’d have fainted.”

“Ever since you got here Shade, you and Dash have been nothing but a beacon that trouble just seems to home in on,” Roach started, “I mean, there’s the little fight you two had, the recon you guys did that night in Mexico, the subsequent attempt at re-enacting the Alamo, the ‘wake up call’ you pulled on us, and now this shit!”

“Says the guy we nicknamed Roach for always getting in some ridiculously life-threatening situation and surviving,” Dash threw back at him, “And it wasn’t a fight, it was a sparring drill.”

“Psh, please,” Roach returned, “if that was a sparring drill, then Meat’s a fucking vegan.”

“What can I say? I don’t go looking for trouble, it seems to know where I am most of the time,” Shade offered with a resigned shrug.


Dash chuckled as well and shook her head, “Nah, as suiting as it is, I don’t think it’d stick.”

“Meh, worth a shot,” Meat replied, standing up and stretching out, “I’m sure that I speak for everyone here that all of that has made me tired…”

“Dude, you did absolutely nothing,” Royce interjected.

“… that’s just a detail, regardless, I’m gonna hit the sack. See you all in the morning!” Meat waved a ‘farewell’ before making his way to his small tent off to the side. Once he disappeared and was out of earshot, Shade spoke up.

“… y’know, I knew a Magnet back in the Commandos. And yes, he lived up to that name more than I could even aspire to…”
“This was more like what I was expecting,” Shade commented as he, Dash, Meat and Royce hid under a camouflaged net on the side of a small hill, all of them with binoculars in hand barring Royce, who had a rangefinder instead, “none of that drug interdiction or hiking shit…”

“Mhm, this is what a lot of our missions actually boil down to, actually,” Royce said as he looked down to a notepad and wrote down a range next to an object’s description, “observation and reconnaissance, generally in high risk areas and deep behind enemy lines, or for time sensitive stuff.”

“Yeah,” Meat added on, unusually serious for once, “my first mission with the Task Force was actually a combination of recon and spotting for some UAV air strikes, working with the USAF. We got the guys we wanted after a few days of sitting in our vantage point, watching and waiting. Roach and I are actually both qualified forward observers, though he generally gets to lug around the designator more than I do.”

“Sounds like fun,” Shade says, lowering his binos, “one of my mates had to play assistant to a RAAF JTAC that was attached to our patrol team for an op overseas. He said that whilst it wasn’t initially heavy, carrying the extra batteries, smoke grenades and other targeting and communications did take its toll.”

“But totally worth it when you hear ‘wings level’ followed by the loud ‘boom’ that only a thousand-pounded JDAM can make.” Meat chuckled, glancing at Shade, “they’re the best to use. The danger-close zone isn’t as large as a two-thousand-pounder like a Paveway Two, but the boom is bigger than a regular Mark Eighty-Two five-hundred pounder.”

“Nothing beats the gravelly sound of an A-10’s main gun though.” Royce finished off with a smile, “that shit’ll get you aroused as all hell. Even if you’re a chick, right Dash?”

“Less chatting more scouting,” Dash responded evenly, still looking through her binoculars.

Meat simply chuckled, “Yes, Master Sergeant, ma’am,” before looking down at his notepad as well, reviewing his notes. They were set up on the hill and tasked with watching the small main road that was a mile away, told to maintain a count on the traffic frequency, the kinds of vehicles seen, and record anything that seemed out of the usual.

Without warning, Shade reached over Dash and slugged Meat in the shoulder. “Punch buggy, blue.”

“Bullshit,” Meat returned, grabbing his binos to confirm. “I don’t see it.”

“Third lane, east to west, passing the midpoint now.”

“Tally… you asshole.” Meat grumbled as Shade laughed to himself.

Royce shook his head, “The fuck, are the pair of you fucking six years old?”

“Meat, maybe. But I’m double digits: ten years old.” Shade returned with a smirk. “Just passin’ the time mate, this is starting to get old real quickly.”

Dash rolled her eyes at their banter as she continued to mark down notes on her notepad. At the far end, Royce let out a low groan as he let his head drop down to the ground. “Royce?” she questioned, a little confused by his outburst.

“We just got made… got flashed by a laser, went to find the source and I found Ghost with a laser pointer and a cardboard sign that read ‘You’re dead!’.” He rubbed his face, and Shade let out a silent curse.
“Must’ve seen the glint from our binos…” he suggested, flipping them around to see how reflective they were, “that or something shiny made us stand out.”

“Or,” Dash said a little grudgingly, “he saw you move when you went to punch Meat. Or picked up on the chatter. Or a number of other things.”

“In order of what you said, D, this is my rating,” Shade said, flashing her a small frown, “likely, hell no since he’s over three hundred meters away, and potentially,” he rubbed his face as he sat up, “I’m gonna say it’s the glint off the lenses, since the sun is beaming down on us from our one o’clock.”

Dash rolled her eyes and got up as well, not pressing the matter. Royce spoke up as Meat started packing away the camo netting, “Guess we head back to base camp for the next tasking order…”

“Sounds good, sooner we get there the sooner we can get back out.”

Scarecrow, Roach, Robot and Dash stayed low as they moved among the trees, trying to move up and secure their target, a field backpack that was suspended on a tree. Robot and Roach held their position, watching for movement as they signaled for Dash and Scarecrow to move in to retrieve. They didn’t notice the four bodies hiding strategically around the bag, lying in wait to spring their trap.

Scarecrow was the first to vanish, disappearing without a single word or sound as Royce pulled him down and smothered him, drawing across his neck with a red marker pen to signify his throat being cut. Robot was second, succumbing to the same fate as Scarecrow by Chemo’s hands. Roach turned around to check in with Robot and confirm they hadn’t seen anything yet, but didn’t see anything at all. He tried to signal to Dash, but she was focused on the bag and as such didn’t see his gesturing. It was all for naught as Meat subdued him, taking him down with a few ‘stabs’ to the back as his mouth was covered.

Shade held his position as Dash crept right by him, only meters from the bag now. His face was all painted up with a mixture of mud and camouflage paint, body covered with sticks, branches and leaves in addition to his home-made ‘ghillie’ suit, which was effectively a torn up and painted up burlap sack that he could throw on over the top of his clothes.

‘Just a bit closer… that’s it… just a bit more..’ He thought to himself as he watched Dash stand upright and reveal her position to try and pull the bag down. Once she had her hands on the straps, Shade made his move. He locked onto her and held his arms out front, closing the distance rapidly. Dash, pack now slung around her shoulders, met him head on, but ducked under him with a twist at the last second and ran.

Dash nearly grazed her side, but passed her as he couldn’t slow up fast enough. He rounded on her and tried again, this time aiming for whatever he could in order to stop her and bring her to the ground. Dash, pack now slung around her shoulders, met him head on, but ducked under him with a twist at the last second and ran.

Her twist caught him off-balance, and as he tried to compensate he overstepped and caught an exposed root, tripping him and sending him, in his worse, ass-over-tits. He hit the ground with a solid thud which partially winded him, and he watched as Dash ran off with the bag towards her team’s ‘base’ with a groan. A whistle blew a minute later, signifying the end of the round. “Good job men, almost had them…” He heard Ghost call out as he sat up, rubbing his head.

“No almost about it, LT,” Dash chuckled, strutting back into the area with the pack in one hand, “They might’ve gotten the jump on the other guys, but not me.”
“Quiet from the peanut gallery,” Meat called out, “nobody likes a showoff…” he teased back.

Scarecrow, Ozone, and Dash kept their eyes on the ground as they walked, looking for any clues to lead them in the direction of the other team, consisting of Meat, Roach, and Shade, who were to avoid being caught, while sticking together. Dash was the first to pick up a not-quite hidden boot-print in the mud, mostly hidden by the bushes growing over the road. She got them headed in the right direction, now they just had to make sure they were able to follow any course changes. Scarecrow went off to follow any possible false-trails meant to throw them off, to make sure they weren’t the real-deal, returning to his team once he was sure it just looped back, or radioing if he found it lead onward.

There were subtle signs, a crushed leaf here, a boot print hidden under the leaves there, a broken twig or two, maybe a thread caught on a thorn bush. Regardless, Dash was able to pick them out among the other ‘noise’ and follow them.

From their hiding place high up in the trees, Shade watched as their three ‘pursuers’ followed their ‘trail’, an internal monologue playing in his head the entire time.

‘This ‘eres the wild ‘Becca Myers’, known to the locals as the ‘Dash’. A relentless lil’ creature, she’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth if she has your scent. But fear not, these things have a couple o’ weakness that’ll keep you alive if you remember ‘em.’ He waited until it was clear before signalling to his team to slowly and quietly drop down. ‘First, once the Dash has a scent, it’ll ignore any outside interactions until it either finds its prey or it is well and truly lost. And secondly, they have a severe disadvantage to anything higher than them, so if you can, seize the height advantage and wait them out.’ Taking a look around to make sure they were clear, Shade, Roach and Meat started heading back the other way to the encampment.

It didn’t last long, as Shade was brought to the ground by an unseen attacker, and once he heard the small laugh, he rolled his eyes and submit, only one thing going through his head.

‘Crikey!’

The days rolled by pretty quickly, and soon they found themselves packing up the camp once more for the final time, everyone ready to get back to base for the comforts of their mattresses and nice warm showers.

“I actually quite enjoyed this…” Shade said to Rook, who looked like he was both ready to pass out and eager for more. The SASR operator was in his element, which Shade could understand. He admittedly felt quite at home in the bushland as well, “and it looks like you did too, mate.”

“Mate, I live for this shit,” Rook replied with a chuckle, patting his Commando friend on the back before walking off to retrieve his gear. They were to hike it to a clearing where a Chinook would land and pick them up to take them home. With his own gear set, Shade walked around the practically empty site and offered his help if it was needed. Finding that everyone else was set, he went back to his gear and sat down against a nearby tree, taking the load off. He rubbed at his neck a little, more than certain that something had bitten him there sometime over the last few days, and made a mental note to visit one of the docs to get it looked at.

Dash stretched comfortably as she finished packing up her things and the rest of the camp was packed away. It had been a pretty good week. The exercises had almost been like a competition. It had been a nice bit of fun in the midst of all the tension of waiting for a serious op. She looked around the camp, and out over the water, taking a deep breath of the fresh air. There had been a
place like this near her family’s land. They used to go camping there every month, like a family
tradition. As much as she liked it though, she was sore from sleeping on the ground and ready to get
back to base where she could fall face first into a mattress instead of a pile of leaves probably home
to bugs of all kinds.

Shade walked up beside her and just sighed softly. “Not gonna lie, it’s kinda making me
homesick…”

Dash shrugged, “Just a bit…” she agreed quietly, “Had a place like this back in Texas… my family
and I would go camping and fish in the lake, live off the land for a couple days…”

“I was a city suburb kid, but the terrain around Holsworthy is like this as well,” Shade commented,
“bush is kinda what I did best, ironically enough for a city-slicker.”

Dash nodded absently and stood up once their superiors made the call that it was time to go. They
shared a smile as they boarded the Chinook and sat together in relative companionable silence the
entire flight back.

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Well that sounds fun, I wanna try some of these heh. Busted some drug runners. Nearly shot poor
Shade in the face. Dumbass rednecks and their lack of gun safety. Dash has a keen sense of spatial
awareness, try to pull the wool over her eyes like that and you’ll still get screwed. So.. yeah that’s it,
little bit of homesickness at the end, but that’s okay. And my sleeve keeps stabbing me so I’m gonna
go ahead and wrap this up so I can change jackets.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Some of the stuff they did is stuff I legitimately wanna try, especially that hardcore “capture the bag”
(Definitely top of my list) , can’t imagine how badass that’d be to play. Small shoutout to the legend
that is Steve Irwin, couldn’t resist that if I’m honest (It was beautiful) . And Rook is a confirmed
‘bigfoot’ with how much he loves the wilderness. Not to mention that Ghost is a master troll,
probably king troll of the task force. I mean, laser pointer and a “you’re dead” sign? Dude is on a
higher level.
Range Day

Shade pushed through the door to the rec room wearing his usual outfit of a t-shirt over a pair of combat pants, as well as his plate carrier and his comms headset/earmuffs around his neck, and stood in front of his target once he had sighed it. Dash looked up from what she was doing with a confused expression, “Caaan I help you, Shades?”

“Grab your gear, we’ve got some work to do,” he answered, turning on his heel before walking straight out, “meet me in the range in fifteen!” He didn’t wait for her response as he walked with purpose towards the ranges, and stopped in front of the table that had a nice variety of rifles and carbines he had picked out from the armoury, also picking out a decent selection of attachments such as scopes and optics, grips, and other electronics. He set aside his own rifle as a demonstration item as he waited, looking towards the entrance for Dash’s arrival.

Dash shrugged to herself and put away the journal she had been mindlessly sketching in and hurried to the range. She quirked an eyebrow at Shade as she walked up with her hands in her pockets, “What’s up?” she asked curiously.

“No offense, but your shotgun is kinda… well…” he shrugged back, struggling to find the words, “it narrows down how effective you can be to a certain degree. I know you can switch the kinds of rounds you use, and that you also use your secondary, but I feel that you should at least try and adopt a rifle or subgun for missions where a shotgun isn’t ideal. Preferably before you’re forced to pick something up that you aren’t confident in when you can’t use a shotgun or your sidearm for whatever reason,” he swept his hands out across the table and over the collection of weapons that he had gathered, “which is why I brought out all of these toys for us to ‘try before we buy’, so to speak. Thoughts?”

Dash shrugged, “Fair enough. I may have mentioned that I’ve been practicing on the UMP at some point?”

“I do remember that, yes, but part of the reason why I got a good range of everything is to find something that you just ‘click’ with. Granted, your first love is a SPAS-12, but we’ll find your ‘guy on the side’ soon enough,” Shade chuckled, gesturing her around to one end of the table, where he held up his first choice, “we might start with the basics, and work our way up from there. I trust you’re familiar with the M4A1 platform from your time in the Marines?”

“Course I am,” Dash answered, “Wasn’t great on it, but well, I’m here aren’t I?”

Shade chuckled, handing her the M4A1 and a full magazine, “That you are. Let’s get a benchmark, we can just your performance based on this, our ‘control’, so to speak. I got a basic accuracy range set up on lanes one through three. Multiple targets in different directions at different ranges, a simple ‘snap shoot’.”

“Right…” Dash answered simply, stepping up to the firing line, “Haven’t used a rifle in a while, don’t expect anything pretty…”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of time and ammo. You’ve got a mag to warm up, refamiliarize, and get zeroed in with, then we’ll start scoring. Thirty rounds, in your own time, and your own target selection,” Shade announced as he put on his earpro, looking around before stepping back and calling out, “range is hot!”
Dash shrugged and loaded the rifle before shouldering it, resting her finger on the safety as she found the target in her sights. She flicked the safety in the same movement as her finger moved to the trigger and fired a quick volley of three shots. Checking them, she adjusted her position a little to adjust for her overshoot to the right. She fired three more before fixing the accuracy on the sights. Another three shots let her know that she was just terrible with rifles, all shots within the ‘eight’ to ‘seven’ rings.

Shade stepped up and waited for her to lower the weapon before patting her on the shoulder, “That’s why we’re here, D,” he said, carefully taking the rifle from her grip before carrying it back to the table. He hummed for a moment, then reached down and retrieved the ACR that he had selected, then quickly attached an angled foregrip to the bottom rail, and flipped down the iron sights before fixing a holographic sight to the top. He walked back with a fresh magazine and offered her the ACR. “Try this one, it’s a little lighter and a bit more ergonomic compared to the M4’s. Also took the liberty of attaching a grip and a sight to the top, might make target acquisition a bit faster.”

Dash chuckled, taking the rifle, “Your way of saying I’m awful?” she smirked, “I’m joking. Thanks.” she loaded it and tested the grip, shouldering it for a moment before adjusting the grip’s position. She shouldered it again and found the target in the sight.

The ACR was more comfortable, at least, Dash mused as she took in her results after firing. She had done slightly better, a few shots had made it into the nine ring, but the results were still not good. Shade crossed his arms in thought, looking at the rifle, her stance with it, and her shot placement. “I have an idea…” he announced before stepping away to grab a different weapon. He returned with a submachine gun this time, the Kriss Vector, and he had attached a smaller version of the same grip and fitted a compact red-dot sight to the top rail. “This is the Vector, smaller bullet, higher automatic fire rate but very minimal recoil. Give it a try.” He said, setting it and a magazine down on the bench in front of her.

Dash quirked an eyebrow at him as she took the weapon, “If recoil were really the problem I wouldn’t be using the SPAS, now would I?” she questioned with a chuckle.

Shade smirked back, “Well, if you let this beauty rock ‘n roll, you’ll still get a pretty tight grouping. Probably do a bit more damage since it slings forty-fives, compared to a nine-mil or the five-five-six that other sub-guns and carbines use.”

“Mhm…” Dash hummed as she loaded it and shouldered it, getting a feel for the weight and hold before finding her target and firing. She was slightly shocked by the fire rate, but adjusted easily and checked, the group was tight, but off-center, she adjusted her stance to compensate and fired again, this time getting fairly nicely inside the nine. Her aim could use work, but it was not bad at all. Shade agreed, if the smile on his face was any indication.

“How’d that feel?” he asked, lifting away his earpro.

“Not bad,” Dash smirked, “not bad at all.”

He gestured her over back to the table, to where all the grips, optics and other attachments were sitting, “anything you want to change, perhaps?”

Dash thought for a moment before shaking her head, “Nah, it’s pretty good as is.”

“Cool… this way,” he said, leading her towards the dynamic ranges. He climbed up into the control room, and activated the PA system. “Okay, I set up the first range in the same manner as we had when we beat Royce’s records. I’ll bring up your time and you can see how you did with the Vector and compare it to the SPAS time, alright?”
“Sounds good,” Dash answered with a thumbs up at the camera.

“Alright alright, let’s get this started…” A loud buzz sounded as the targets all loaded in the rooms, the door shut but ready to go, “Shooter on the line, in five…” Shade counted, the red light above the front door changing to green as he said ‘go’.

Dash took off into the course, firing bursts at the targets as she cleared each room. It was cleaner than her SPAS, but it felt slow going and she shrugged after hitting the finish. It would take some getting used to, she supposed, and made her way up to the control room.

Shade was clapping slowly, a wide smile on his face as he stood next to the screen with the time readout. Her shotgun time of 2’29” was on the left side, in red text. Her new time was covered by a sheet of paper, and he waited for her confused look before reaching over and pulling the page down, revealing in green text her time of 2’23”. “Not bad… not bad at all, I’d say you gained a few seconds since you didn’t have to reload or transition to your sidearm.”

Dash grinned, “Aw yeah, I could get used to this…”

“Mhm, once you get more comfortable with it, you might be able to shave an additional second or two off. Keep the SPAS though, because you can adapt that as a breaching tool or as a tertiary weapon if needed,” Shade said as he saved her time into the log, “but I’d stick to the Vector from now on. The more you use it, the better you’ll get with it, and the more you’ll be capable of with it.”

Dash nodded, “Of course I’m keepin’ the SPAS on me,” she commented as if it were obvious.

“Heh, alright…” He said, turning back to look at her, “want to give it a few more runs, try the other courses as well? We’ve got plenty of time, and it won’t hurt to get more practise in.”

Dash shrugged, “Why not,” she agreed and turned, heading back for the start of the course. Shade smirked to himself as he got the targets reset and the timers ready, settling in to watch some new records get set very soon…

“Gotta say, you’re getting a lot more fluid with the Vector,” Shade commented as he walked over to where Dash was sitting, taking a breather after running the third assault course for the fifth time, “your time between shots and groupings are improving, transition from your primary to secondary is smoother. Honestly, you and that gun are getting to be like a match made in heaven,” he finished, sitting down beside her with a wide smile, “but I’d like to hear what you have to say. You’re the one behind the trigger, after all.”

“ Took some getting used to,” Dash shrugged, “but it’s smooth and faster than my SPAS, of course, it’s a shotgun, so that’s not saying much, but you get my point.”

“Mhm, indeed. During my rotation in the Tactical Assault Group, I had to train up a bit more in the use of the MP5s,” Shade with a small chuckle, “so I know what you mean by adjusting to the difference. I mean, it’s not as drastic as moving from a shotty to a subby, but the concept’s still the same. Tell ya’ what though,” he leant in conspiratorially, “it’ll likely freak out the guys when you rock up to the next op using that as your primary over the SPAS.”

Dash smirked and chuckled, “Probably… I adapt quickly though, always have, kinda necessary when you’re workin’ with cows and horses. When something bigger and stronger wants to go the opposite direction you’re taking it, you don’t get much say in the matter.”

“No kiddin’,” Shade said with a slight shake of the head, “let’s get this all packed up. I kinda thought we’d be out here a bit longer than we have, but hey, nothing like being ahead of schedule.”
“Yeah,” Dash nodded, already moving to help gather up the equipment. Together, they got it all put away and cleaned fairly quickly. From there, they retired back to the rec room to kill time until the next meal time. Shade reclined back in the couch as much as he could while channel surfing, occasionally making smart remarks about the show titles that he saw.

“I question the IQ of people who watch shows like bloody ‘Jersey Shore’. Maybe I’m too smart and don’t see the entertainment value in watching a pack of tossers act like absolute pricks…”

Dash shrugged, “I never really got it either…” she commented boredly.

“Mhm, I mean, at least ‘Big Brother’ was a game show disguised as a reality TV show. Everyone was playing a game, and there was a prize at the end for the winner,” he continued, “but there’s no result or end game to Jersey Shore. Oh, and don’t get me started on shit like ‘Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo’… that shit should be quarantined or reserved for high-security prison audiences only…”

Dash scoffed a chuckle, “You sure do have some opinions on what qualifies as entertainment.”

“Oh, believe me, Australian network television can be just as bad. Half because a lot of the shit shown there is just imported from the US or the UK, and half because everything else tries to be the imported stuff. Only a fraction of actual Aussie TV is worth watching, and even then…” Shade trailed off, letting the statement finish itself, “I could probably count on both hands the number of shows I’ve seen come and go that were actually worth watching, and on one hand shows that are still running to this day,” he stopped as a show title caught his eye, and he started smiling, “for example, this was a favourite of mine when it first came out. A cop show called ‘Rush’.”

“Right…” Dash was only half listening, the other half was trailing off into nowhere. Shade just rolled his eyes as he clicked onto the channel and sat back to relive some of his late ‘teen-hood’ memories. He focused on the TV, not noticing Meat and Royce entering the room and taking up spots on the other side of the couch from Shade. They were chatting about something, and the noise they were making was distracting Shade from his show. In an effort to get them to quiet down, he picked up a nearby cushion and pelted it at Meat’s face. It impacted perfectly, knocking the Canadian back slightly as it had caught him off-guard.

“The fuck, what was that for Shade?” He asked with a slightly miffed expression on his face. Shade just gestured to the TV.

“I’m tryin’ to watch something here, mate, but your yapping’s making it hard to hear.”

“Oh?” Meat said, now curious, “What are you watching, I don’t recognise any of the actors or anything.”

“It’s an Aussie show, I wouldn’t expect you to know anyone… maybe apart from the Hemsworth’s,” Shade said with an amused sigh, “according to everyone else, that’s our greatest export.”

“Oh yes, who can forget the Marvel-ous god of thunder, Thor himself,” Royce said with a chuckle, laughing properly as Meat rounded on him with a shocked look on his face.

“Royce! No! I thought we were brothers!” He cried out, to which Dash and Shade shared a curious look.

“We are, up until this damn argument gets brought up again,” Royce sighed, “and I keep telling you, you need to bow down to the superiority that is the Marvel franchise.”
“Nuh-uh, DC for life!” Meat challenged, looking towards Dash and Shade and pointing at the latter. “You there, which do you prefer!? DC, or Marvel!”

Shade looked back at him with an expression that plainly read ‘are you fucking kidding me?’ “I’m with Royce, mate. Marvel all the way. I always found the DC films to be too serious and nitty-gritty for my liking.”

“Dash!” Meat rounded onto her, “please, please, tell these heathens that they must convert and be saved!”

Dash shook her head, “I am not getting involved in this war, I like both, shut up and let it go.”

Meat recoiled visibly, while both Royce and Shade studied his reaction and the sly look on Dash’s face. Shade broke the silence, “… did you just-”

“Yes… yes, she did…” Royce finished, leaning back from Dash slightly as he watched her with a cautious expression. Meat had vacated the couch and was against the wall across from them, eyes locked onto Dash in horror.

Dash simply laughed, shaking her head, “Meat, you need to calm down before you pull the wrong lever.”

Shade and Royce started to laugh as Meat made for a quick escape, practically knocking down the doors and almost sending Roach and Ozone to the floor. They turned and watched as the Canadian fled to safety, before looking at the other three with quirked eyebrows. Shade and Royce kept laughing as Dash crossed her arms smugly.

“Disney, bitches.”

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**Monte Carlo, Monaco…**

It was a pleasant day in the small European city-state, strangely quiet without the high-pitched whining of Formula One racing cars zipping along the tight city streets that made the area world renowned. That small detail did make the area a very attractive place for the world’s elite to live or use as their ‘home away from home’. On a luxurious and expensive yacht, a man surveyed the coastline and how it followed the rolling slopes as he waited for a call to connect through his encrypted satellite phone. It clicked through after a few moments, and the man waited a few more seconds to allow the connection to stabilise.

“I trust that the delivery is going smoothly?” A heavily accented voice asked on the other end, prompting the man to speak.

“From what my associates in South America inform me, there have been a few minor delays in getting your product into Europe, but it was more a matter of problems with the matter of transport.”

“In what regard, exactly?” There was no mistaking the tone of masked disappointment in the speaker’s voice.

“The vessel was held back in port for two days as a critical member of the crew fell ill, and they needed to hire on a temporary replacement before they could depart,” the man said evenly, “I believe it was the chief engineering officer, responsible for the engines and power plant of the ship.”

“I would have appreciated being advised that such an issue had set us back,” his companion said with no amount of veiled threats behind it.
“Had I known that the engineer had fallen ill sooner, then I would have been able to,” he responded, a degree of annoyance in his own voice, “but these things happen. I was assured that they would make haste and work overtime to ensure they made up for the lost time. If all goes well, the shipment should arrive to you on the day I originally specified, maybe a day later if any weather impedes their progress,” he paused for a moment to sigh, “Mother Nature is a rather fickle thing this time of year.”

His sigh was met by one on the opposite end, “As long as your product is in our hands by the end of the month, then all shall be forgiven.”

“I am assured that that will be the case… it is getting rather late here, so I must bid you farewell. Do stay safe, my friend. I would hate to lose your patronage to an unforeseen accident, after all,” he said with a small chuckle.

“Same to you, friend. It’s hard to come by men like yourself in this day and age,” the other man said, “прощай, друг.”

“Addio.” The call ended after that, and the man set the phone down on the table, exchanging it with a small class of scotch on ice. “Vladimir… oh how much you’ve changed…”

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)
MORE FILLER! Smaller chapter this time, with some more bonding between Shade and Dash this time. Meat’s a DC-ving little boy (Shade…), Royce and Shade are modern day Marvels (Shade no…) , and Dash is a Disney die-hard (Damn it Shade) . Sorry, had to. Also, got a bit of a future plot teaser too. Wonder who mystery yacht man is, and what his connection is with that Vladimir bloke… stay tuned!

(Spitfire)
Filler, filler, and filler. Can’t exactly say it was fun, because, well, filler (yuuup) , but it was… interesting. Eh, that’s all I got.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
“I wonder what this is about…” Shade said to nobody in particular as the small group of soldiers waited in the briefing room. It’d been a month since their field exercise and the operational tempo was starting to slow down, not that it had been particularly fast in the first place. He’d noticed that a few of the guys were getting pulled for small ops occasionally over the two months since their field exercise-slash-camping trip, each op being more reconnaissance-focused than the full team strike missions that they would normally take.

When some of the admin staff had pulled him away from some weapon maintenance, he figured it was his turn. He was surprised to find that Dash, Roach and Ozone had also been summoned, as a lot of the other ops he’d seen had only involved pairs. Maybe this was something a little more serious?

His thoughts and hypothesising ceased when Captain MacTavish and one of the intelligence officers, a lieutenant that everyone referred to as ‘Spook’, entered. The lights dimmed as the four gathered soldiers focused up. Captain MacTavish waited until everyone was settled before beginning.

“Alright everyone, I want to begin by saying that this mission is tied in with our big picture objective, hunting down the terrorist Vladimir Makarov.” The simple announcement set the tone of the briefing immediately, the overall mood now in deeply serious territory. Shade had heard mentions of this man during his time in the Commandos, what with international news covering a majority of Makarov’s attacks. He was fully briefed on the terrorist only a couple of weeks ago, and now possessed the same drive to get to him as everyone else did. “If you could please open your packets to the second page, we can begin.”

Shade and the others opened the folders that Spook had provided them, and he found himself looking at a picture of what Shade would consider an ‘everyday businessman’. MacTavish nodded to Spook, who stepped forward. “The target for our current operation is one Clarence La Font D’Montaigne. Thirty four years old, dual citizenship in both the UK and Italy due to his parental heritage, has a bachelor’s degree in business and is a wealthy executive involved in the shipping and logistics industry. He also dabbles in the stock market and investment games, and is apparently very good at it, if his portfolio is any indication. Criminal record is clean of any felonies, but is filled with quite a few speeding infringements and parking fines.”

“Sounds like your average joe,” Roach said, looking up from his file, “is he a guy we’re going to be protecting?”

“No, because he’s also running a side business: logistics and distribution for a wide range of wanted arms dealers. He’s considered the ‘FedEx’ for the illicit guns and weapons trade. Anywhere, anytime, in any method. Because he works on the ‘light side’, he has a deep understanding of customs and border checks, and his wealth allows him to buy out and subvert said checks. Any gains he makes from his ‘dark side’ he immediately invests into his ‘light side’ ventures, serving as his laundry,” Spook answered bluntly, turning around to turn on a projector behind her, “and he blends his ‘dark’ work into his ‘light work’ through very simple but effective means, namely sleight of hand and misdirection. It’s actually taken a long time to get that much information about his operation, and it took a combined effort from various agencies around the world to uncover the vast scope of what he has constructed. I’m actually quite impressed, if I say so myself.”

“Regardless,” MacTavish cut in, “this man is a link to people like Makarov. CIA and MI6 have uncovered previous transactions between Makarov, this man D’Montaigne, and a number of different arms dealers around the world. A few of these transactions, as a matter of fact, occurred a
month or two prior to some of Makarov’s more notable attacks. It’s a safe assumption that Makarov will go through D’Montaigne again, which is why we’re going to pick him up."

“Intelligence has placed him in Monaco, where he is staying for a few weeks before returning to his home in Genoa. He’s been there for a number of days already, so now is the prime time to attempt a capture.” Spook said, handing the floor to MacTavish to layout the plan.

“This will be a ultra-low-profile mission, meaning that we won’t have any backup or cover. We’ve observed that D’Montaigne doesn’t travel with an overt security team, but we aren’t ruling out the possibility that one exists. Big picture: we go in, snatch him, and walk out without anyone even noticing.”

Shade set the file down on the table and rose his hand, “So, I’m going to go out on a limb here, and say that we’ll be posing as tourists for the duration of our stay?”

“Correct. The Monaco GP isn’t far off, and hotels and resorts are starting to fill up. We’ve already taken the liberty of booking and reserving two suites for your team.”

“Suites?” Roach spoke up, looking a little self-satisfied, “remind me to go hunting for these guys more often…”

“Roach, Ozone, you’ll be acting solo for this op, maintaining surveillance and cover over D’Montaigne. Shade and Dash, I want you two to be the ones to get close and snatch him.”

“Why us, sir?” Dash asked curiously, speaking for the first time in the briefing.

“Similar idea and concept to the brief recon you performed for the Mexico op. Monaco is in that ‘romantic’ heartland, and it will not look out of place for a couple to be wandering around and snapping photos or following someone idly at a distance.”

Shade and Dash shared a look, then both turned to look at the Captain with a small frown. “Pardon me sir,” Shade begun, leaning forward, “but is there a particular reason it’s us that you’re pairing up? Why not tag her with Roach, or somebody else?”

MacTavish sighed and gave them an apologetic look, “I won’t lie, but it’s been observed that you two have a certain way of acting with each other that seems… different than with the other members of the team.”

“Eh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Dash questioned, confused and slightly put off by the statement.

“It means that you have a chemistry that will lend believability to your cover. You two are close friends, which isn’t that far from what an established relationship looks like,” Spook offered with an apologetic shrug, “and that is somewhat crucial to this op. If Roach or Ozone were to approach the target at a bar and strike up a conversation, the target might catch on and try to leave. On the other hand, if a couple that were ‘madly in love’ pulled him aside to ask him about romantic hotspots, he wouldn’t begin to suspect anything. The fact that he’s in a tourist hotspot just adds to our advantage.”

“And before you ask, no, we can’t send anyone else in your place under the same cover. I need people I can trust to make the right decisions on the fly.” MacTavish finished up, standing before them with his arms folded across his chest. “Frankly, the pair of you have been working really well together, and are continuing to do so. Given how your partnership started on really rocky ground, myself and a few of the other team leaders think that it’s outstanding. I’m sure you two will be able to pull this off for us.”
Shade leant in to mutter something quietly o Dash, “Didn’t he say the same thing about Mexico…?”
She rolled her eyes at him with a small smile, completely getting when he was coming from.

“If there are no further questions, I suggest you start packing. Take some warmer clothing, it’s getting a little cooler in Monaco this time of year…”

Monaco was just as picturesque as movies and TV made it out to be, Shade thought as they drove through the winding streets to their hotel. He had his phone out and was in full ‘tourist mode’, taking pictures of anything and everything he could see. Dash sat beside him in the backseat, staring out through the window as they neared their destination. Roach and Ozone were still at the airport, trying to recover Roach’s luggage that had apparently been put on the wrong flight back in La Guardia International when they transferred flights.

“So, you two, you on honeymoon, yes?” That was what irked Dash further, glancing at the gold ring on her finger. Meat just had to open his mouth to the Captain and suggest a small adjustment to their cover story. MacTavish agreed, and now ‘Amber Collyns’, a Texan graphic designer, was now ‘Amber Collyns-Davidson’, recently married to ‘Kerry Davidson’, an Australian freelance photographer.

If she was getting fake married, she was keeping her fake last name.

Shade was too busy sight-seeing through the window to answer the driver, so Dash let out a soft sigh and spoke up for him, “Yes, we’re on our honeymoon. Took some time to get here, flying from his home.”

“Yes?” The driver followed up, glancing back at her as they were stopped at a red light.

“Yes, I’m an American while my dear husband is from Australia. We married over there as his parents can’t fly long distance,” she sighed again and rubbed her forehead.

“You do not seem that happy to marry,” he stated with a slight frown on his face.

“Oh no, don’t get me wrong, I’m overjoyed,” she quickly said, putting on a fake smile, “but I didn’t get much sleep on the flight over, bit of a nervous flyer myself. My hubby slept like a rock though.”

The taxi driver nodded understandingly, opting to stay silent. It wasn’t a total lie, but it was more of the fault of the asshole behind her that had long legs. Dash could feel his knees in her back whenever she reclined her seat, as a result she had to sleep upright for most of the flight. She noticed that the car ride became a bit smoother, and she shot the driver a thankful smile as he simply winked back.

It didn’t take much longer for them to arrive at their hotel, quickly unpacking their bags from the back of the cab and paying the driver his fare. Shade shook his hand firmly and tipped him a decent amount, the driver smiling wide and waving them farewell as they walked into the foyer. Shade let out a low whistle at how extravagantly the foyer was decorated, easily within the high ‘five star’ range.

“One of the few times where the military will spare no expense, right D?” Shade said to her quietly as he nudged her side, before grabbing his suitcase and making his way to the reception desk.

“Only the best,” she commented in a cheery voice. She could only hope this would pass quickly as she grabbed her bag and followed Shade.

He smiled at her as she stood beside him, and greeted the receptionist with a cheerful ‘G’day’, playing up his natural accent that little bit in emphasis. “Hey, Mr and Mrs Davidson, got a booking in a suite here for the next week?”
“Ah, yes, yes,” the receptionist began, rapidly typing away at her keyboard to pull up the reservation listing, “ah! Here we go, one suite for the newlyweds. Here are you room keys,” she slid a pair of cards across the counter, “and you should find a bottle of Monaco’s finest in the refrigerator, compliments of the staff. I wish you the best for your stay here and for your lives!” The reception flashed them a wide smile, one that Shade returned with a two fingered salute.

“Cheers, and I hope we will. Come on baby, our room awaits!” He said to Dash, flashing her a wink as they walked away. Once out of earshot, he let out a small chuckle, “If only she knew, heh…”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, “C’mon, I wanna get a nap in before we head out sightseeing.”

Shade laughed properly that time, “Oh, if you keep saying stuff like that, I might actually propose.”

“So, gameplan is to get a general feel for the area before starting our surveillance,” Dash said to the three men gathered around the room. It had taken a good three hours for Roach and Ozone to finally arrive, Roach’s bag having been located and delivered to him after being found left on a baggage cart that was parked near the unloading bays. They were now all lounging around in Shade and Dash’s suite as Dash ran them through a more in-depth briefing, being the NCO-in-charge, “try to make a note of what routes of escape any major point of interest might have, police and local security forces, anything that might either improve or impede our overall mission.”

“Got it,” Roach said from his place on their couch, taking up the entire length of it.

“We should also establish some rally points in the local area, in case we need to regroup for whatever reason,” Shade proposed, spread out on the large queen bed that Dash had quickly claimed for herself and in no uncertain terms had ‘banned’ him from, “and maybe even scout out a few places where we can try and snatch this guy from.”

“Right,” Ozone said, moving away from the windows, “we can probably do that later this afternoon while we’re out and about.”

“Sounds good,” Dash agreed, taking a seat at the foot of the bed, “use your phones to take pictures and video, you’ll look more like tourists that way.”

“And what about you two?” Roach asked, looking towards the pair on the bed. “You planning on consummating your relationship or are you going to join us outside for some fresh seaside air?”

Shade start laughing softly as Dash audibly groaned, flipping Roach the bird before looking up at him, “I get enough of that from Meat, I don’t need you jumping onto that train as well. It’s bad enough he opened his fat mouth to the captain and got us these,” she held out her ringed hand, “I don’t need you constantly cracking jokes about it.” Roach simply held his hands up in surrender whilst smirking, looking down at the ground.

“Roach, mate, I suggest that if you want to reach retirement age, you’ll quit while you’re ahead and leave the room sooner rather than later,” Shade called from his place on the bed.

“Sorry, Meat asked me to get in at least one joke about it,” he apologised, “might as well get it done and out of the way.”

“Roach, mate, I suggest that if you want to reach retirement age, you’ll quit while you’re ahead and leave the room sooner rather than later,” Shade called from his place on the bed.

“Message received, come on man,” Ozone started, walking over to Roach and pulling the man up from his place on the couch, “we’ll see you on the other side, get some rest.” The two men left the room and the other two soldiers to themselves, Shade letting out a sigh of relief while Dash flopped backwards onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.
“I have a feeling that this is going to be a long op…” Shade stated after a few moments of comfortable silence, “especially if those two crack jokes at every opportunity…”

“No kiddin’,” Dash agreed, eyes closed as she rested.

“… want to set some ground rules?” he proposed, looking over to where Dash laid. She frowned, then rolled onto her front to look at him, wordlessly suggesting that he continue. “Y’know, for PDA related to our cover.”

Dash shrugged, “We do what we have to do, no more no less,” she got up and walked over to the bags, pulling out the camera bag and setting it on the table.

“Yeah, I figured that much, but since we’re ‘newlyweds’, Shade said, air-quoting on the word, “we’ll be expected to do a few things or at least allude to a few things. I just want to know what the absolute limits are, that’s all, so it doesn’t make you uncomfortable if we have to reinforce our cover.”

She sighed and flopped down in the chair, “Don’t remind me…” she groaned, “Just… I dunno, fuck I can talk my way out of a situation sure, but this is crazy.”

“Remind me to swap out Meat’s next steak for tofu…” Shade muttered, sitting up on the bed to look at her across the room. “Look, I’ll list off a few actions, you tell me green light, yellow light, and red light. Green for what you’re cool with, yellow for ‘if it’s necessary’, and red for ‘fuck no’. Sound good?”

Dash shrugged, “Yeah, alright, go for it.”

“Right,” he started, holding out his hands to count off, “I’m going to assume that basic shit like hand holding and just general ‘close proximity’ stuff, like sitting against each other’s sides or rest against each other, will be green… my hand around your waist, like small of your back and hip-slash-waist?”

“That’s fine,” Dash answered.

“Right, and I promise to stay at or above the beltline, so don’t stress about that,” Shade clarified, “uh, what else… kissing? Like, simple pecks on the cheek I can imagine being somewhat okay, at least for me. Same for quick kisses on lips.”

“Ugh,” Dash groaned, “Yellow to that,” she shook her head, “As long as we keep away from all… that, y’know? We’ll be fine.”

“Got it, no kissing like the locals,” Shade said, chuckling a few moments later at his own joke, “… what about terms of endearment? Anything that’ll make you cringe or shudder?”

Dash shrugged, “Dunno, but they’ll probably be fine, incredibly cheesy ones I’ll laugh at you for.”

“I’ll have to file that away for later,” he smirked at her, “and fair warning, I’ll likely do the same for you.”

She shrugged again, “If I can even think of any… Now, mister professional photographer, you ever even used a DSLR camera?” she asked, patting the camera bag.

“D, I was field-stripping DSLRs before I could hold a damn game controller,” Shade said with a laugh, “kinda have to when you have a snap-a-holic for a mum.”
Dash nodded, “Good I don’t have to show you then. Hooray.”

“Don’t sound so excited,” he shot back with a smirk, “I’d bet you’d love to get all ‘drill-sergeant’ with me.”

She narrowed her eyes again, “Did you just….?” she shook her head, “No, I don’t want to know.”

Shade just rolled back and started laughing, bursting into song after a few moments, “Your mind’s telling you noooooo, but your body, your boodyy is telling you yeesssss!”

Dash flung the throw pillow at him and smirked when it hit him in the face. He stopped laughing and singing when it hit him, instead clutching the pillow in his hands as he gave Dash a devious smile. “Oh… I never knew you were the type for a sexy pillow fight!”

Dash frowned at him, “No… just… no…” she commented, leaning back in her chair. Shade just laughed again and threw the pillow back towards her, it landing by her side.

“I’ll take a raincheck on that fight later, right now, I got some Z’s to catch up on,” he said, getting up from the bed and walking towards the couch that was his designated ‘bed’, “wake me up if the world needs saving and nobody else answers.”

“Right…” Dash answered and got up, only to flop down on the bed again with a comfortable sigh.

“Oh my… I’ve been living a lie my entire life…” Shade said in delight as he dug back into his meal, only surfacing to take the occasional breath. After their nap, the pair woke to find it close to dinner time, and they made the call to head out into the town and get some local cuisine for dinner. It didn’t take long for them to find a table at a small restaurant and bar, and now they were sitting outside, Shade demolishing a Steak Diane with a glass of red wine and Dash enjoying a roasted chicken in garlic with a white. “Should’ve flown to France much sooner…”

Dash smiled a little, chuckling at Shade as he devoured his meal, eating her own more slowly. The pair continued to eat before he sat back with a contented smile, taking a few moments to savour the taste. Shade glanced around back towards the restaurant before setting his cutlery down. “I’ll be back in a few, nature’s calling.” He stood up from the table and made his way inside, where he asked one of the staff where the restroom was. He relieved himself and was washing his hands when a cubicle behind him opened up.

It took all of Shade’s focus to maintain his composure as their target walked out and took his place at the sink beside him. Clarence La Font D’Montaigne, or ‘Montee’ as Shade had dubbed him for short, was a little bit taller than he appeared to be in the pictures, and was a little stockier than he had expected as well. Though Shade reasoned that if all the food in this town was as good as that steak he was eating, then he could see why Montee would have gained a few kilos during his stay.

“Bonsoir,” Montee greeted him with a curt nod of his head, “c’est une soirée merveilleuse, n’est-ce pas?”

Shade just chuckled, and shook his head, “Sorry mate, don’t speak a lick of French apart from ‘parlez vous anglais’, heh.”

“Ah,” Montee said with his own chuckle, “my apologies… though I should have realised that you don’t quite match the local profile.”

“What gave it away?” Shade asked, curious and a little bit cautious. Montee just continued to chuckle.
“Not one specific thing, just the way you carry yourself. You’re a lot more observant than the locals, taking in everything and anything you can see. Such is the trademark of a tourist, after all.”

Shade nodded in agreement, a little bit relieved that his cover hadn’t been blown so early into the mission. “Guess that makes sense… it is my first time to this region, after all.”

“What brings you here, if you don’t mind me asking?” Montee enquired, moving to dry his hands at the paper towel dispenser. Shade waited for him to finish before doing the same.

“Ah… well, it was my wife’s dream honeymoon location, so here we are…” Montee’s eyes lit up and he took Shade’s hand and shook it firmly.

“Congratulations!” He offered warmly as the pair left the restroom together, pausing at the bar. The criminal waved down one of the bartenders and spoke to them in rapid-fire French. The bartender disappeared then returned moments later with a large bottle of champagne, which Montee took and offered to Shade. “I’d love to meet your wife and wish you both the best, but I have matters that I need to attend to soon, so instead take this. I hope you and your wife have a wonderful and long-lasting marriage.”

Shade was struck at Montee’s attitude and was acting more on autopilot as he accepted the bottom from Montee, and could only thank the criminal before he disappeared. Bewildered, Shade returned to his and Dash’s table with the champagne and sat down in stunned silence.

“Huh,” Dash remarked as she looked at the bottle then back at Shade, “I didn’t realise they gave out bottles of this stuff when you went to the bathroom… Shades, you okay?”

“Montee was there.” He said simply, turning around in his chair to see if he could catch sight of their target.

“Come again?” Dash asked, confused and slightly worried by Shade and how he was acting.

He turned around and leant across the table, speaking in a hushed voice, “Our target, that D’Montaigne bloke, he was in the bathroom. We got to talking, I mentioned our honeymoon cover, and he bought us a bottle of grog and wished us a happy life…” he leant back in his seat and sighed, “honestly didn’t seem like the type that would get engaged in international crime and terrorism.”

Dash nodded, taking a slow sip of her wine, “Perhaps this is not the best place to discuss this, hun…” she commented idly with a small smile. Shade blinked then shook his head, coming to all of his senses.

“Right… right, yeah, good call darling,” he replied, relaxing with a small smile as well before taking the bottle into his hands, “so… do we toast to good health, easy missions, or a long-lasting marriage?”

Dash lifted her glass, “Why not all three?”

“I like the way you think.”

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

Well, this took a lot longer to write than I had hoped, but real-world things take priority. It’s been busy for me at work and at home, so by the time I sit down at the computer to write with Spitfire, I’m
mosty dead on my feet. We’re getting through though, so don’t stress (we finished this chapter after Ch 10 was posted). Shade’s such an awkward teenager discussing PDA with Dash, lel. Dash just wants this mission over and done with. Meat is a jackass as usual, messing with them even though he’s not there in person. And the big bad, Montee, isn’t as bad as he appears at first glance.

(Spitfire)

Some of you are probably wondering where my usual reviewer shoutouts are. Well. As it stands, we’ve just finished chapter fifteen, and we have only ten posted. So… Yeah… wouldn’t get them until late and pretty much just defeat the purpose of the shoutout to begin with. Anyway. Yes I’m still working on Another End while we’re doing this lol I’m a great multitasker. Dash is not enjoying this mission one bit. She will continue to not enjoy it at all. Well, that’s all I got for now.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
“Subject is on the pier, heading towards a large yacht docked towards the end of it,” Roach reported over the radio, watching from his vantage atop a waterfront hotel’s rooftop, “yacht’s name is ‘Freedom’s Provider’, pretty ironic given this dude’s second job.”

“Agreed,” Shade said as he and Dash walked along the pier themselves, stopping and looking at all the various luxury watercraft that were docked there, “but if you’re making an estimated quarter-mil for each job, then I wouldn’t be surprised if he had the name painted on the side in pure gold. We’re gonna pull back, can’t risk him seeing me again after last time.”

After the previous night’s encounter at dinner, Shade and Dash had called over Roach and Ozone for a quick mission update. Shade had explained what had happened and how the encounter had gone down, then Dash went through the basic plan for the following day. They were going to focus on watching their target from a distance, seeing how he goes about a normal day.

“Copy that, I’m going to move back down to the ground, see you two soon.” Roach called out before the radio net went quiet. Shade tugged gently on Dash’s hand, and they turned around to head back towards solid ground.

“So, homeboy has a big-ass yacht. Wouldn’t put it past him to host business meetings on board, away from the public eye.” Shade started quietly, careful not to talk too loudly and catch the eyes or ears of anyone nearby.

“Makes sense,” Dash answered in the same tone and looked around, “I bet the sunrise and sunsets here are gorgeous,” she commented in a more natural voice, playing off anyone who might’ve been suspicious of their whispering.

He smirked a little, then stopped off at the side of the pier, looking over the water and beach. Flashing her a quick look, he pulled her into his front, ‘hugging’ her from behind as he leant down to whisper into her ear, “Wonder what it looks like when out on the water itself.” Sure enough, anyone that had been watching them either averted their gazes out of respect or smiled at the ‘young love’ that was being displayed before continuing on. “Any idea how much the rental on a speedboat is?”

Dash hummed in thought, “I don’t know, I’m sure there’s somewhere we can check.”

Shade chuckled as he stood up and let Dash free from his hold, reclaiming her hand in his. “Boss is gonna soon regret giving me the company card,” he joked with a laugh, looking around for where one could hire out a watercraft. A few minutes of walking later, and they found a place that rented out jet skis for use. After checking the rental prices, Shade left the small shack and walked back to Dash. “It’s about a grand for a day’s worth, including refuels if we need it.”

“Yikes,” Dash grimaced, “that’s pricey…”

“That’s for two skis though,” Shade continued, sitting down on a nearby bench, “I asked how much it is for a twin-ski, and the guy said he could go as low as four-hundred for us. It was about half a grand, but he saw you waiting patiently, put two and two together, and gave us a ‘discount’. It’s just a matter of if you want a ski to yourself or not.”

“Probably better to just ride together,” Dash answered, “For several reasons.”

“That’s kinda what I was thinking… just gotta ask: who’s gonna drive?”
“You ever driven a jet ski before? Because I haven’t,” she commented, “Texas isn’t exactly known for its beaches.”

Shade grimaced, “Can’t be that different from a quad bike, right?”

“This is one of the reasons why I went army, and not navy,” Shade said from behind the changing room door. They had rented the ski and had gone off to get the appropriate attire: wetsuits. Dash was waiting for him to finish complaining and get back outside, “shit’s tight!”

“Then why did you rent the jet skis?” Dash questioned impatiently.

“I was under the impression that you could wear a singlet, board shorts and a life jacket on these things,” Shade answered with an uncomfortable groan, “not something that turns me into a bloody Ken doll.”

Dash covered her face with a hand and groaned to herself, “Too much info there,”

Shade finally emerged, looking extremely displeased with his life choices as he walked out of the booth in a dark grey short-sleeved full-body wetsuit, picking at the fabric around his crotch. “I have regrets. Many regrets.”

Dash chuckled, “You and me both… At least it’ll be fun?” she suggested with a clueless shrug.

“The sooner we get on the skis, the sooner we can get off them, and the sooner I can get out of this stupid thing.” Shade said with a frown, which broke into a small laugh as he realised how ridiculous he sounded, “god… I sound like a bloody ten-year old right now, don’t I?”

Dash smiled and laughed a little, “Just a bit…”

Shade just sighed and smiled, taking her hand as they left the changing area and ventured outside. The ski they had rented was on the shore ready for them, an attendant standing beside it with the keys in his hand. After a quick instructional course, Shade and Dash were onboard and were being pushed out into the water. He turned the key and gently navigated the ski through the breakers and out into steadier waters, where he opened up the throttle and sped up.

“I take it all back, this is awesome!” Shade had to shout over the wind rushing past them, a wide smile plastered on his face.

Dash laughed, holding on to his shoulders, “I told you it’d be fun!”

They continued to laugh as they shot out across the water, Shade steering them into a series of tight turns as if he was running through a slalom course. He slowed down after a while and brought them to a standstill a good way away from the coast, shutting off the engine and letting the relative silence fill the air. In the time that they had just spent, it didn’t feel like he was on a mission to him, just him killing some time and relaxing in the Ligurian Sea. He glanced behind him and he could see that Dash was having similar thoughts. He looked back and took in the view of Monaco from the sea, and smiled.

“It’s just as good as the postcards make it out to be, isn’t it…”

“Sure is…” Dash answered quietly then looked around at their surroundings, “Let’s swing by the docks, see if we can’t catch a glimpse of what you-know-who is up to.”

“Who, Voldemort?” Shade said with a laugh as he started up the ski and turned them around,
heading back towards the piers they were walking along earlier. “I thought we were after some arms dealer dude.”

Dash laughed and thumped him on the shoulder, to which Shade laughed back. They got within a hundred meters of the dock where their target’s yacht had been docked, and saw it was vacant.

Dash sat up straight and looked at the dock, “Wonder where he got off to…”

Shade turned them around and gunned the throttle, taking them back out towards open waters, “Only one way to find out… keep an eye out if you see any suspect yachts, or dark wizards.”

Dash laughed and shook her head, “You’re such a dork…”

“Heh, you’re just as much a dork as I am, and you don’t see me pointing it out,” he said cheekily, veering the ski towards the right to avoid hitting a marker buoy. Dash lost her balance at the unexpected turn and yelped as she clung to Shade to stop herself from falling off. “Sorry, my bad!”

“You did that on purpose!” Dash accused. Shade shook his head in denial.

“That buoy crept up on me! This is on purpose!” he called out, quickly veering hard to the left and almost throwing the pair of them over the side, if it weren’t for Shade quickly bring them back right to counter the movement.

Dash yelped again and wrapped her arms tight around his middle, “You’re an ass!” she yelled over the motor, squeezing harder than she really needed to.

Shade slowed them down and pried one of her arms off of him, taking a much needed breath. “Okay, okay! I’m sorry!” He said with a choked laugh, looking back at her with an apologetic smile. “We good?”

Dash laughed and relinquished her death grip, “Yes,” she nodded with a self-satisfied smile.

“Good… hey, you wanna try driving? It’s actually not that hard at all, much like a quad bike or dirt bike.” He offered, sitting up slightly.

“Sure, what the hay,” she answered with a shrug. Shade nodded and carefully shifted to hang from the side whilst not overbalancing the ski to allow Dash to slide up front, before moving to sit down behind her, arms holding onto the back of the seat behind him. “Ready when you are!”

Dash looked at the controls and quickly memorised where everything was, before gripping the handles and opening the throttle up to take them onwards, speed building up steadily. Before long, they were back up to the pace that Shade had set. He was on keeping a look out for their yacht, and hadn’t noticed that his hands had subconsciously moved from behind his back where the handholds were, to resting lightly on Dash’s waist as she focused on driving the jet ski around. “Having fun there D?”

“You could say that!” Dash called back, maneuvering smoothly through the water.

Shade chuckled with her as they continued their search. A quarter of an hour passed, and they still had no sign of the yacht. As they made their turn to change their search area, the engine started to sputter. “Hey, what’s the fuel level at?” Shade asked over Dash’s shoulder.

Dash slowed to a stop and looked down at the gauge, “Ah shit…” she muttered.

“Let me guess, we’re past bingo?” Shade asked rhetorically, leaning back and letting out a frustrated
Dash sighed as well, shoulders slumping, “Damnit…”

Shade looked over towards the shoreline in the distance, “I’m no Navy SEAL, but I could probably swim back and get help… it’s not ideal though…”

“I don’t recommend it,” Dash shook her head, “We’ll figure something out.”

He just let out another sigh and threw his arms up, both in frustration and to stretch them out. He twisted his body around, continuing his stretches, when he stopped. “… no fucking way.”

Dash turned to see what he’d spotted, “Well shit… talk about the wolves’ den,” Approaching them in the distance was a nice white yacht, the same yacht they had been watching back at the pier.

“More like hunter being the hunted, but I’ll take whatever help I can get,” Shade said as he stood up and started waving the yacht down. Sure enough, it slowed down and pulled up alongside them, a familiar face popping out over the edge and looking down at them.

“Salut!” the ‘captain’ of the vessel called out, before exclaiming in surprise. “Oh! It’s you, the happy couple I ran into half of last night!”

“No kidding, mate!” Shade called back with a laugh, “Thought I’d take the missus out for a spin on the waves, but we lost track of time and fuel, and now the tank’s drier than the outback at home! Mind giving us a hand?”

Montee simply gave him a thumbs up then disappeared, before the yacht started to pull ahead and spin around slowly so that the rear of the boat was facing Shade and Dash on the ski. Montee reappeared with a crew member and threw out a rope which Shade caught and fixed to a tow point on the front of the ski. Together, Montee and the crewman pulled the ski in close, then extended a hand to Dash for her to disembark.

Dash smiled pleasantly, taking the offered hand and stepping easily onto the boat, “Thank you so much.”

“Anything, anything at all,” Montee responded, turning around to help Shade onto the craft as well, “I have to admit, it is rather crazy to have run into the same person twice in a day, but it is no matter. Heavens forbid how long you would have waited until someone saw you if I had not been nearby!”

“Yeah, Ambie here is quite the impatient one,” Shade said with a laugh, “should’ve heard her after dating for a couple of years. ‘When are you going to propose?’ ‘When are we getting married?’ Oh, her face when I said ‘right now’ after she asked me in front of my parents was absolutely priceless.”

Dash thumped his chest, “Oh hush Ker…” she smiled awkwardly.

“See,” Shade said with a chuckle as he rubbed where she had hit him, “she doesn’t deny it. I swear, she was on my back like a singlet.”

“Need I remind you that it was me that had to remind you what your vows were at the altar?” Dash shot back with a quirked eyebrow, “mister eye-for-the-finest-detail?” Shade stopped chuckling after that, smiling sheepishly at her and Montee.

“You can’t blame a guy like me for being lost for words when you’re standing in front of him, all dolled up in a wedding dress like you were.”
Montee stood to the side, just smiling brightly as he watched and listened to the two banter back and forth, “Oh, you remind me of how my parents were when I was much younger, running around their ankles. Come, come, let us have a drink while Xavier tends to your craft.” He said, opening the back door and gesturing them inside. Shade and Dash shared a look, then walked through the doorway and into one of the most extravagant rooms either of them had seen.

Everything in the room was some classification of luxury, of varying degrees and price ranges. Montee walked past the awestruck couple and moved over to a small bar counter to the side, retrieving three wine glasses and a bottle of wine from a small fridge. “Take a seat, make yourself at home. Would you like a glass?”

Shade waved him off as he sat down, “Thanks mate, but no thanks. Not one for drinking and driving, or skiing in this case.”

“Respectable, and you, madame?” He offered a glass towards Dash.

Dash smiled kindly, “No, thank you, I don’t drink much.”

“Each to their own, I guess…” Montee said with a small smile as he returned two of the glasses and swapped them for regular tumblers. “Would you prefer a water or juice, perhaps?”

“I’ll snatch a water, actually. Being on the sea makes a guy thirsty, after all.” Shade chuckled as he took a water-filled glass from Montee and sipped from it. “Oh, I’m Kerry. Should’ve introduced myself last night, had we not been busy.”

“It’s no issue, Kerry, circumstances were quite rushed after all… and this is your lovely wife you had mentioned to me as well?”

“That I am,” Dash smiled, leaning into Shade, “Amber, pleased to meet you.”

“Clarence, and if anything, the pleasure is all mine,” Montee returned the smile, sipping from his wine, “I don’t doubt that your husband mentioned our little encounter last night?”

Dash nodded, “Oh yes, he told me how kind you were to buy us a bottle. Thank you for that, by the way, it was wonderful.”

“You’re very welcome,” Montee returned, “it warms my heart to see yet another newly formed couple grace our land, the land of romance as they say. If you don’t mind me asking, how did you meet each other?”

They both shared a look, not planning on having a backstory that extended that far. Shade was the first to speak up, “Well, I’m a freelance photographer based in Australia, but I travel the world taking photos for all kinds of companies and organisations. Advertising, media, public relations, anything that can use an image to capture a moment, really.” he glanced over to Dash with a soft smile before continuing, “anyway, I was taking a lunch break in a cafe in San Antonio, finishing up a job for one of the oil companies in the area, where I see a cute young woman working on a laptop near me, with one of my older pictures on the screen.”

Dash averted her gaze down to the floor, slightly guilty at being ‘caught out’, before looking back up at Montee, “Yeah… I’m a graphic designer, and one of my clients was looking for a nice angle of a fighter aircraft to use as part of their logo. Kerry here documented a lot of air shows in his career, and so I thought to use one of his shots as a template to derive the logo for. A pretty simple trace and colour job, to be honest.” She stole a glance at Shade, “imagine my shock when I hear an Australian voice ask ‘did you get my license to use that image?'”
“Not my proudest moment, and not the best pick up line either…” Shade admitted as he rubbed his neck, “I don’t think girls fawn over the whole ‘copyright and intellectual property law’, but I was a little more focused on protecting my stuff. Anyway, we got to talking, time passed in an instant, and we ended up getting kicked out when the cafe closed later that afternoon.”

“He thought he was smooth, giving me his ‘license’ to use his image,” she shook her head with a fond smile, “It was just a napkin with his number and email on it.” Shade just smiled sheepishly as Montee started to chuckle loudly.

“That sounds pretty smooth to me,” he said, tilting his wine glass towards Shade who just shrugged.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Shade said, then looked down to her and planted a soft kiss to the top of her head, “worked out well in the end.”

Dash smiled, leaning into Shade’s side, “That it did.”

“Say, Clarence, what do you do for a living,” Shade asked as he looked around the room, “if you don’t mind me asking, that is.”

“I can see why one would ask such a question,” Montee answered, “and no, I don’t mind at all. Personally, I’m involved with a number of shipping and logistics companies around the world, and part of what I earn I invest back into things like the stock market and real estate. It’s actually become quite lucrative and profitable for me of late.”

“No kidding…” Shade stated as he nodded in agreement.

“Part of my wealth comes from my parents though, more specifically my father. He was a British national, whilst my mother was Italian. They both were involved in the private sector of the military, working with supply contractors and manufacturing plants in various capacities. My father actually was head of a design division before his health started to fail him… but they were successful, and always told me the importance of a good work ethic as well as a good work and life balance.”

“I hear you there, mate,” Shade said as he leant back and placed an arm around Dash’s shoulders, “my old man was ex-Air Force, worked as a techie on the old F-111s before he retired. Didn’t see much of him growing up when I was little, but we made the most of the time we had. B’s parents were a little more conventional though, Mum was a high school teacher and Dad was with the Sheriff’s Department, right?”

Dash nodded, “That’s right,” she answered with a smile, “Dad took care of horses in his free time though, not quite the glamorous lifestyle, but it was comfortable.”

“Glad he wasn’t the type of father to bust out the shotgun and go all ‘y’all take care of my little girl, y’hear?’” Shade joked, nudging Dash in the side slightly.

She laughed, playfully hitting his shoulder, “Believe me, both my mother and I spent a good few days when we were first planning the wedding to convince him not to carry his shotgun and have it by his side during the ceremony. Just as well we held it at your home, otherwise he just might have done so.”

At that moment, the crewman from earlier stepped into the room. “If I may be excused, the guest’s watercraft has been fully fueled up and is ready for them.”

“Ah,” started Montee, rising to his feet, “I had completely forgotten about that. As much as I’d love for you to stay a little longer, I can’t be responsible for you staying out and losing your deposit on the rental.” He stepped over and pulled Dash into a quick farewell hug, then took Shade’s hand and
shook it firmly, “if our paths meet again, so be it, but if they don’t, then allow me again to say congratulations and wish you the very best for your future. You two make quite the happy, and beautiful, couple.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Dash smiled sweetly, “It was great to meet you.”

“Again, it was my pleasure. Xavier will guide you back to your craft,” he said with a smile and a wave, and the two undercover soldiers left the room and followed the crewman back to their jet ski. It wasn’t until they were back on the ski and away from the craft that Shade spoke up, sitting up front and driving.

“See what I mean? He doesn’t strike me as a criminal-slash-terrorist type…”

“If he struck you as the type he’d strike other people as the type,” Dash commented, “It’s probably just a cover.”

“Very bloody good one, you gotta admit that…” he continued, then glanced back at her, “Hey, speaking of covers, good save with the backstory assist back there.”

“He’s been at it for several years,” she shrugged, ignoring his compliment for the most part, “of course his cover is good.”

“Fair enough… how’re you feeling? I could use a nap after being out on the water for all this time.” Shade asked, changing topics away from their work.

Dash simply yawned her answer, “Tired.”

He laughed as they fell silent for most of the return trip back, wasting no time to return the ski and get changed into his regular clothes. By the time they returned to their hotel room, the day was starting to end, and they paid no mind to each other as they both flopped down onto the bed and fell asleep near-instantaneously.

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

I think Shade could make a good author if the military lifestyle falls through, heh. Talk about getting to know your enemy. Just a focused chapter this time around without many splits, this is on day two of their five day op. Stay tuned for more, as we’re still pumping these out at a decent rate.

(Spitfire)

Dash is still not happy. (She doesn’t seem ‘not happy’ if you ask me) Playing it up for the cover. Anyway. Mm… I dunno what my writing buddy’s got planned really, but I got a bad feeling about it xD (come on, give me some leeway here, have I let you down yet?) lol not at all. The bad feeling is for our characters’ situation, not ours. Not much else to comment on so I’ll wrap this up.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Ozone fiddled with his phone as he walked down the sidewalk, passing a mixture of boutique shops and stores on his way. To the average passerby, he’d appear to be either following a GPS map to someplace in particular, or messaging a friend as he made his way to meet up with them. That wasn’t too far from the truth, though he wasn’t following map directions, nor was he on his way to meet with a friend.

About twenty meters ahead of him, Clarence D’Montaigne weaved his way around a small group of local school-aged girls before continuing his morning walk. Ozone and Roach had watch today, and after seeing that his yacht had re-docked and their target was having breakfast with an unknown, they had opted to follow him on foot to see where he was moving next. They were operating on the suspicion that he was in the process of organising another shipment for someone.

Right now, Ozone had followed the man at a distance for nearly an hour at this point, making sure to act as naturally as he could; appearing uninterested, walking past when his target had stopped at a store, then resuming the tail when his target had taken the lead once more. He checked his watch, noting that Roach’s turn to take over was in about five minutes time.

He glanced up from his phone, where he was typing notes about Montee’s movements when he noted that the man had seemingly disappeared. Schooling his expression, he picked up his pace and soon passed the place where D’Montaigne was last seen, carefully looking around whilst not broadcasting his intentions. With a small sigh, he shot a text to Roach then continued on his way, resuming his ‘casual stroll’ cover.

NUMA NUMA - 10:45am

Our buddy’s not here, gonna have to leave without him.

RAID-PROOF - 10:46am

Gotcha, I’m parked around the block. See you soon.

D’Montaigne watched as the earphone-wearing man kept walking past and subtly looked around before moving on, disappearing around the corner a block away. He shook his head and made a mental note of the man’s features; hair colour, build, skin tone, anything he could remember in order to test him later, if he saw him again.

Being in an industry like the one he was engaged in, one learned how to detect tails and followers as well as how to subsequently lose them and practically vanish. Though he had to give his most recent tail some credit, for he’d only registered him as a tail only minutes prior. However Clarence recalled seeing the same man around for the greater part of an hour, but hadn’t thought much of him.

It was the surreptitious glances over his phone that had tipped him off as being a potential threat, and D’Montaigne acted accordingly, ducking into a small alleyway to hide behind an industrial bin. He had hid there for a few minutes, returning to the sidewalk where he now stood, watching his tail disappear himself.

He had to move carefully now, and be cautious of who was around him at all times. This wasn’t the first time that someone attempted to make a move on him, and he would be damned if this was the last time, feeling for the small Walther PPK/S tucked into his jacket pocket.
Shade looked down to his phone with a small frown, soaking in the sun’s rays by their hotel’s pool. The four of them had set up a group message in order to get in contact with everyone at the same time, using aliases for anyone trying to snoop in. To anyone trying to digitally eavesdrop, the string of messages would read like those from a group of friends. It was his idea to adopt the somewhat weird aliases, just to further throw off any unwelcome eyes.

Lampshade - 11:00am
So, old mate’s not coming?

Numa Numa - 11:02am
Nah, he wasn’t there when I checked his place out.
Pretty sure he’s trying to dodge me though.

Lampshade - 11:03am
No shit, already?
Bugger.
Might have to fetch him myself.
If you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself.

Numa Numa - 11:06am
Hey, I don’t know what to say man. My bad?
I’m no 007, y’know.

Lampshade - 11:09am
Idk mate, you kinda are.
If you think about it, at least.

Numa Numa - 11:10am
I guess, but it’s a stretch.
What does her holiness think?

Lampshade - 11:13am
She-who-must-be-obeyed is currently out of contact.
Phones and pool water don’t mix too well, y’know.

Numa Numa - 11:15am
… you two suck, you know that?

Lampshade - 11:16am
Duly noted mate.

But when the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

And the bell tolled for thee.

Give Gazza my love, tell him we wish he could be here.

Not.

:D

Numa Numa - 11:20am

He says, and I quote:

“Screw you buddy, and the horse you rode in on.”

Shade set his phone down with a laugh, adjusting his shades as the small cloud blocking the sun moved away and bore down on him with all of its might. He smiled, relaxing into the chair with a pleased smile. ‘If only more missions were like this…’

“Well… ‘she-who-must-be-obeyed’, I don’t know how I feel about that…” a distinctly southern voice said with an audible smirk, stirring Shade from his relaxation.

“Hey, figured that I could steal a few terms I heard my Dad use when referring to Mum,” he said with a shrug, looking up to Dash with a smug smile. Said smile disappeared when he took in what Dash was wearing. It was a fairly reserved and simple navy-blue one-piece swimsuit, but he couldn’t help but take in just how… drop-dead stunning she looked in it. It seemed to show off nothing, yet everything at the same time; a highly toned and trained body with years of combat experience which honestly could rival some of the more world-renowned models, if the business wasn’t so averse to scars from frag wounds and explosions of the past. A piece of advice that one of his friends back in his unit sprung to mind.

“Mate, staring at hot chicks is a lot like staring at the sun. It’s not the best thing to do unless you’re wearing really good sunnies, and even then, only in small doses.” He quickly averted his eyes to something else, and chuckled. “I hope you don’t mind me saying something like that, kinda is part of our cover after all.”

Dash shrugged and plopped down in the lounge chair next to him, “It’s fine I guess,” she commented, reclining back and folding her arms comfortably under her head.

He turned her head to look at her again, careful not to lose his concentration, “So, was the pool nice?”

“Bit crowded for my tastes,” Dash replied, “got boring real quick.”

“Fair enough,” Shade said in agreement, “not as exciting as swimming around mines and trying not to be shot at… though little kids do pose a similar sort of threat, heh.”

Dash grunted and rubbed at her temples, “Don’t even get me started on the kids….”

“It is holiday season around this time in these parts,” he commented idly, picking up his phone again to browse the internet through the free Wi-Fi the hotel had on offer, “so we can’t be too surprised. You took a little longer than I thought when those two families made their arrival known, y’know?”
“Didn’t want to seem rude,” Dash answered simply. Shade simply laughed at her answer.

“Or you didn’t want to yell at a kid when he or she cannonballed a meter away from you.”

Dash sighed, “Still hoping my phone recovers….” she commented.

“If it’s one of the later models, it should be somewhat splash-resistant,” he said, glancing over to her, “as long as you got it dry relatively quickly.”

“Of course I dried it quickly!” Dash retorted. Shade rose his hands defensively.

“Okay, okay!” He said, looking at her, “I’m just sayin’, alright? I can take a look at it later, if it’s still playing up on you.”

Dash shrugged with a sigh, “Yeah…” Shade noted her tone, and opted to change topics. He sat up and turned around to face her properly.

“Well, it looks like Ozone might’ve been made already… any thoughts?” He said quietly, not to arouse suspicion.

“No, not really… though it does mean that we have to adjust who’s watching him and when. We’ve already met him twice in twenty-four hours, and now that Ozone’s likely been blown, if he sees us again so soon he might get a little more suspect of us.” Dash said with a sigh as she sat up and looked at Shade.

“Yes, if I were him, I’d either bunker down in one place or be walking around with my head on a swivel,” Shade said in agreement, “that or he might bug out sooner than he had planned.”

Dash hummed thoughtfully, “With as long as he’s been at this… it’ll be hard to keep tabs on him without him knowing.”

“I think we should start working out a plan of attack sooner rather than later. I’ve already got a couple ideas that might work, just gotta time them right,” he offered, looking around before laying back down on the deck chair, “it’d be a shame if that expensive yacht was targeted by pirates, after all…” he started chuckling to himself.

Roach groaned as he watched D’Montaigne from the driver’s seat of his rental car, phone in his lap as he texted the others about his observations.

Raid-proof - 3:40pm

It’s been fifteen minutes, and old-mate hasn’t budged.

I know the sea’s pretty, but it ain’t changing anytime soon.

Texas Ranger - 3:42pm

Don’t get your panties in a twist.

He could be meeting with someone.

Raid-proof - 3:45pm

She lives!
Was wondering why you hadn’t see anything until now.

**Texas Ranger - 3:47pm**

Blame some italian ten-year old.

Dove into the pool, phone was caught in the splash.

Lampy seems to have a magic touch with phones though.

**Numa Numa - 3:49pm**

Bow-chicka-bow-wow

;D

**Texas Ranger - 3:50pm**

Don’t make me go ‘Taken’ on your ass

I will find you and kill you if you keep that shit up.

**Numa Numa - 3:52pm**

No ragrets!

‘Texas Ranger’ changed their name to ‘Sick Of This Shit™’

**Lampshade - 3:53pm**

Wow, smooth.

And real mature mate.

‘07 called, they want their meme back.

**Sick Of This Shit™ - 3:55pm**

They also want their joke back.

**Raid-proof - 3:56pm**

Goddamn it guys

I’m trying not to blow my cover here

Already getting odd looks by peeps while trying not to laugh.

‘Ey up, he’s got company.

Roach tucked his phone away as he focused his attention on the newcomer that was sitting beside D’Montaigne, the person wearing pretty casual clothing as well as a cap and sunglasses. Internally, he had to give points for the successful attempt to conceal their identity. It was hard to tell exactly who they were or what their relationship was, but their discussion lasted for roughly ten minutes by Roach’s estimation.
What was curious was the fact that the stranger left behind a small backpack, which D’Montaigne slung over his shoulder as he stood up to leave. Roach quickly snapped a few photos before turning the engine on and pulling out of his parking place, driving away and taking a place around a corner before getting back on his phone.

Raid-Proof - 4:10pm

Daddy’s back.

So, old-mate had a meeting with new-mate.

Might have a new bunch of friends if you ask me.

Sick Of This Shit™ - 4:12pm

What was your first clue?

Maybe he got sick of our shit?

I know I am.

Lampshade - 4:14pm

Aww, don’t be like that.

Numa, y u do dis

Raid-Proof - 4:16pm

SENT - IMG_5161.png

Old-mate picked up a gift

No telling what’s inside.

Lampshade - 4:20pm

Right.

Look, meet up with us.

We’re gonna start planning the surprise party anyway.

Raid-Proof - 4:22pm

OMW

Dash, Shade, and Ozone sat around a small coffee table with a map of Monaco’s piers in front of them, as well as the various photos they had taken over the last couple of days. They were quietly discussing a potential plan of attack when Roach finally arrived, looking fairly flustered. Shade
poked his head up and frowned at Roach’s slightly disheveled appearance.

“Oi, what was the hold up?”

“Police checkpoint, and I had to land the one cop in Monaco that didn’t speak a lick of clear English,” Roach answered with a groan as he sat down beside Ozone, “almost got in a shouting match with him until his sergeant stepped in and took over, at which point I nearly got a ticket for disturbing the peace.”

“Tough break,” Ozone commented with a chuckle.

“Mhm, but I got away free,” Roach finished, surveying the map in front of him, “so, what did I miss?”

“Not much, but we’ve agreed that the yacht is likely our best chance to corner and restrain him. Also gives us a way to extract fairly cleanly if we need to,” Shade started, nodding to Dash.

“We’re just trying to figure out a way to get onto the yacht without tipping him or anyone that he might work with off,” Dash continued, sitting upright with a small groan, “we know of a couple of deckhands from our experience the other day, but besides that, well, intel’s still foggy.”

“I figure the sooner we hit the better,” Ozone interjected, “after he saw me, I’m sure that he’ll be extra careful with his movements, today’s little exchange notwithstanding.”

“That’s the second reason for targeting the yacht; it’s highly likely that whatever was in that bag is now being kept in the yacht,” Dash spoke up, “meaning that we have evidence that we can use when we turn him into Interpol.”

“So, you need to get onto the boat, yeah?” Roach asked, looking at both Dash and Shade with a level expression.

“That’s right,” Shade clarified, looking back at Roach curiously.

“Well, you’re the freelance photographer. Tell him that you want to take some shots of his boat for a boating magazine or something, while it’s out on the water,” he stated, as if it was obvious, “and say that Dash can do up some of the pictures for his own use, pro-bono as a way to repay him for his generosity. No shrewd businessman would turn down free PR like that, right?”

Both Shade and Dash shared a look, then looked back down at Roach, then back at each other. Shade started to smile.

“That might just work, y’know.”

“One problem,” Dash started, looking back down at Roach again, “he didn’t exactly leave us his card to get in contact with him.”

“It’s a small town, you might run into him again if you head out tonight,” Ozone said from the side, “a guy like him might go out for a drink if he’s had a rough day.”

The two other soldiers shared a look again, Shade shrugging. “Sounds good to me… what do you say D? Feel up to a night on the town?”

Dash sighed, “I’m gonna regret it in the morning aren’t I…”

“If anything, we’ll have sore feet from all the walking around looking for the guy,” Shade said
sympathetically, “and at most, we might only have a drink each for the entire night.”

“Well,” Dash leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest, “it’s all we got, I suppose, let’s do it.”

“I’ll be back in a bit, alright?” Shade said with a small smile as he disappeared towards the bathroom, leaving Dash alone in the third bar they had visited for the night. She frowned to herself then started walking around the venue to find a table or booth to sit in, looking around casually to see if she could see their target amongst the crowd. This place was a little less classy than the other places they had visited previously, and as a result was also quite a bit busier.

Sure enough, she found her target sitting slumped at a small table not far from an empty table she had seen a few seconds before. With a sigh, she steeled herself and approached him, resting a hand on D’Montaigne’s left shoulder to rouse him.

“Hey, you okay?” She said loudly enough to be heard over the noise of the bar and crowd. Montee stirred and sat up with unfocused eyes.

“Je suis désolé officier, je faisais juste une sieste...” he slurred as he came to his senses, before turning to look at the familiar face. “... oh, Madame Amber... what a surprise to see you here? Where is your husband, is he here too?”

“Of course, it was his idea to come,” Dash smiled, “He’s in the bathroom. Are you alright?”

He waved his hand dismissively as he reached down and pulled an empty stool from out of the table, wordlessly inviting Dash to sit down with him, “As much as one can be, I suppose, it has been rather stressful today...”

Dash frowned sympathetically, taking the seat, “Oh that is a shame... and in such a... what’s the word...”

“Wonderful? Amazing? Beautiful? Perfect?” Montee offered as he rolled his eyes, his less than pleasant mood starting to show, “it’s nothing to do with this place, thankfully. Just problems with my work, that’s all.”

Dash nodded her understanding, “Ah, you shouldn’t let it get to you too much...”

Montee nodded as well, “I try, but it’s a bit difficult when a client you’ve spent a good year on organising a contract with tries to screw you on a deposit. It does not bode well if someone says and agrees to do one thing, then tries to do something else entirely...” he sighed as he took a sip from his drink, “especially if it affects the bottom line. Truth and trust are two things I hold very close.”

“As well you should. Loyalty is hard to come by these days it seems,” Dash gave a small, regretful smile, “Such a shame...”

“That’s why when I say that your husband, Kerry, is such a lucky man to have found someone like you, it is the truth. All those words I used to describe this city?” he started, looking at her with a fond smile, “all apply to you as well.”

Dash smiled awkwardly, “That’s kind of you to say.”

“If I’m entirely honest,” he continued, shuffling his stool a little closer than was appropriate, “after seeing the pair of you ‘ride off into the sunset’ yesterday, I felt quite jealous,” he sighed, then looked at her with a sidelong glance before taking another sip of his drink, “I’ve been so deeply involved in
my work, that I’ve not had much of a chance to find someone to share my life with. Yes, there have been many fleeting encounters, many shared nights with strangers, but I’ve never found my soulmate, not yet at least…”

“Maybe you’ll find someone in your line of work,” Dash offered, “Like Kerry and I did.”

He sighed, then turned to face her, resting one of his hands on her thigh as he looked at her intently, “It’s lonely, being at the top like I am. Of all the women I have met, most only want me for what I can give them with my wealth, not what I can give them emotionally or physically… if only they would give me the chance…”

Dash gave a tense, awkward smile, moving his hand off of her and wondering when Shade would get back, “Maybe you just need to take a vacation.”

Montee laughed humorlessly, gesturing to around them with his hands, “That’s why I’m here, but an executive like me can never truly switch off and escape the madness!” He looked around, and then gave a sly smile to Dash, “you know… if I were a few years younger, I’d be tempted to try and steal you away, you know… hell, it’s tempting as it is right now.”

Dash grimaced, moving away slightly, “I-I’m sorry… um…”

He moved closer, leaning forward, “He wouldn’t have to know, would never need to find out…”

Dash frowned this time, “Clarence, sir, you hold truth and trust close to your heart, and I hold loyalty close to mine,” she glanced over to the side and saw Shade approaching with a confused frown on his face, “and maybe, in another life, we might have had something,” she got off the stool and met Shade halfway, almost dragging him back to the table to continue speaking, “but I’m happily married, and I love my husband deeply…” she took a short breath, looked up with a tight smile, then pulled Shade down into a passionate kiss.

Shade could only stand stunned for a split second before rolling with it and kissing back, resting his arms around her back as they kissed for a few more seconds, the pair of them pulling away with flushed faces and slightly out of breath. Dash blinked then looked back down at Montee.

“I’m not going to risk that, that’s just not who I am… come on, darling, I want to go back to our room…” Shade let himself be lead out of the bar by Dash as he looked between her and Montee, still stunned by her actions. It took a few minutes for him to come back around and speak up.

“Firstly, wow… secondly, why?” Shade asked, sounding really confused, his hand still in hers.

“Little shit was hitting on me…” Dash groused, “Here’s hoping to never having to do that again.” Shade’s expression darkened, and his grip unconsciously tightened on her hand.

“… good thing we left then, otherwise I’d have fucking defenestrated him,” he muttered quietly, before taking a slow breath to calm himself down, “though there goes the photoshoot cover idea…”

Dash hummed thoughtfully, “There’s always Plan B.”

Shade nodded, then started to laugh after a few seconds of silence, “As long as we don’t revert to bloody Plan S again, alright?”

Dash chuckled, “Agreed. Fuckin’ hate Plan S.”

“You and me both… come on, this has been enough excitement for one day… let’s get back,” Shade offered, to which Dash nodded in agreement. Neither of them noticed that they never let go of each
other’s hand for the entire walk back, too busy chatting about nonsense instead as they let off steam from their encounter.

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

So. That was a thing. It was most certainly a thing. The chat thing was something that I just threw in for laughs (more as a test if anything) and paid off brilliantly. Montee’s a sad drunk, confirmed, even though he’s still well-spoken (mostly). And Dash has basically taken a .50 to Shade with that surprise kiss. He’s still reeling, it just doesn’t seem like it. Oh well, now the fun really begins.

(Spitfire)

Dash “Done with your Shit™” Myers. Heh. Still not happy with the situation. At all. But it’s almost over, she can deal with it. Surprised Montee didn’t get smacked for the move he made on her. Dash would’ve knocked anyone else’s teeth out for that. But she’s gotta be all polite and shit so nooo . Lol That’s all for now.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Bags were packed and loaded in the rental car, rooms had been cleaned and checked out of, and the four soldiers were watching the yacht docked at the far end of the pier from their position in the nearby street, leaning against the car as they went over the plan one last time.

“... once we get on board, I’ll confront him about last night and basically go all ‘angry husband’ on him, Dash will get involved. While he and his crew are distracted, Roach will slip on and seize the controls. We restrain the prick, release his crew onto the pier, then drive the yacht around to the agreed RV point. Beach it, call the authorities, Ozone’ll pick us up before they respond, and then we book it,” Shade said, counting off each major point on his hand, “any final concerns or questions?”

“Nope,” Ozone said, cracking his neck as he walked around and opened the driver’s side door.

“All good here,” Roach said as well, tapping on the USP that was hidden in his waistband. They’d agreed for the three that were boarding to be armed, just in case. Shade nodded at him and looked to Dash.

“What about you, D? Ready to play the vengeful husband and scorned wife?” He asked with a cheeky smirk.

“He’s lucky I didn’t sock him last night,” Dash shrugged, to which Roach snorted at.

“If you ask me, it looked like you socked Shadey instead,” he shook his head, “wait ‘till Meat hears about that …”

Dash glared at him, “I’ll sock you if you don’t shut it.” Roach laughed off the threat instead.

“C’mon, I know I can be an ass sometimes, but I’m not a complete dick. You’re little secret is safe with me,” he glanced towards Ozone with a smirk, “can’t speak for Oz’ here though.” Ozone just shook his head and mimicked zipping his lips shut.

Shade chuckled quietly, “Good, I’d hate to get my gloves dirty by tearing your balls off.” He sighed and stretched out, then put on his ‘restrained rage face’. “Welp… time to go kick an ass. Ready, dear?” he asked Dash, extending a hand out to her.

Dash sighed and took his hand, “Let’s get this over with.” He nodded then looked towards Roach.

“Wait a few after we get on, then jump on.” He said, to which Roach flashed a thumbs up. Satisfied, they made their way down the pier. As they made their way closer, Shade was running a few choice words through his head. He was undecided on what he should open with, and looked down at Dash.

“Hey… what do you think I should open with? ‘Wakey wakey you slimy bastard’, or ‘Rise and shine, you prick’?”

Dash shook her head, “Those are both awful…”

“They have to be. The asshole made a move on ‘my wife’, so I’m naturally gonna be pretty pissed about that,” he stated with a shrug, “Oh! How about ‘get your bloody ass out here, you adulterous fuckstain’? Reckon that’s good?”

Dash raised an eyebrow at him, “You’re over thinking it… Just say ‘hey, asshole!’.”

Shade shook his head dismissively, “Nah, I want everyone around to know or at least have a rough
idea what he tried. Hurts his rep, plus people are more likely to not help him. Otherwise we just look like a couple of pirates or some shit like that.”

She rolled her eyes, “You do you, hun…” Shade just chuckled, and smiled at her briefly before replacing it with his frown again. They reached the small boarding ramp for the yacht in no time, and Shade started to storm across it.

“Hey, fuckface! You try to take my wife?” He screamed at the top of his lungs, turning more than a few heads. Shade reached the end of the ramp and stepped onto the boat, walking towards the nearest entrance he could find. “Wake up, you bastard! Judgement day awaits!” He started banging his hands on the windows to make noise. As Shade had stated, the people around the dock either started moving away to avoid the spectacle, or kept their distance and watched the drama play out.

After a few moments of the barrage, a clearly hungover Clarence D’Montaigne emerged from the rear entrance of the yacht’s main cabin, and was holding his head in his hands. “Douce mère de dieu, que diable est cette raquette?” He became alert when Shade approached him and grabbed the collar of his shirt, pressing him up against the side wall.

“G’day, mate. We need to have a little talk…” Shade said with a low smirk, glancing over towards Dash, “Hey baby, this is the prick that tried to sweet talk you, right?”

Dash nodded, arms wrapped tight around herself as if she were nervous about seeing him, “Yeah, that’s him.”

He looked back from Dash to Montee, and just growled. “Come on, let’s go inside, shall we?” He didn’t offer him a chance to respond as he pulled him away from the wall and roughly shoved him back through the doorway from which Montee had emerged from. Shade grabbed a pair of cable ties from his pocket and dove on the man, wasting no time in restraining Montee’s hands and ankles together, picking up him once more and depositing him on the nearest chair he could find.

Dash stepped in after him and closed the door, then sighed in relief, now able to drop the facade. She walked past Shade and over towards an internal doorway, checking the hallway that connected this room to the other rooms on board, before turning back around to stand in front of Montee. “Alright, where’s the rest of your crew?”

Montee looked at her and then at Shade, before looking back at her. “M-my crew, why?”

“Just answer the bloody question mate, alright?” Shade said over his shoulder as he began digging through different compartments. The audible thudding of another person boarding had him poke his head up. “Roach’s here…”

Dash nodded and then focused back on Montee, squatting down in front of him. “Crew. Where are they?”

“I-I… I g-gave them the day o-off… Madame Amber?” Montee responded, now finally waking up and coming to his senses, “wh-what is the meaning of this?”

Shade stepped over and sat down beside the man, resting a hand on Montee’s shoulder. He looked at him then at Dash. “Should we tell him both reasons? Or just the truth?”

Dash shrugged, “He does value the truth, after all,” she grinned.

“Sounds good to me…” Shade said with a smile, before turning back to face Montee. “Clarence La Font D’Montaigne, whilst we aren’t police officers of any sort, we are detaining you for questioning on behalf of the US Military and NATO for your actions regarding the international arms trade,” he
started, standing from where he sat, “since you have been linked to terrorist groups, you are a terrorist by association, and therefore any rights to things like lawyers and shit like that are automatically waived,” he leant down and stared Montee down, “your ass is ours. Plus,” he glanced at Dash over his shoulder, “you tried to sleep with my ‘wife’, so your ass is also mine. D, mind keepin’ old mate here company while I check up with our friend upstairs?”

“You got it,” Dash answered with a nod, “also, I want a divorce.”

“What’s mine is yours D, you know that.” Shade said as he left the room and headed upstairs to find Roach. Montee watched him leave then looked back towards Dash with a mixture of confusion and terror.

“... who are you people?”

Dash smirked at him, “I’d tell you, but then we’d have to kill you, and the authorities would much rather have you alive.”

“But I am merely a businessman! I do as my clients ask of me!” He started to say frantically, attempting to plead his innocence. “I never meant any harm, I just move things from point A to point B, that’s it!”

Dash glared at him, “While avoiding every single security check that would tip off anyone else to the fact that you’re transporting weapons. Weapons that murder innocent people once they reach ‘Point B’.”

He shook his head in denial, “So? I’m not the one planning to blow up a school, or shoot up a shopping place! I’ve never pulled a trigger in my entire life!”

“No, you’re just the one that gives them the means to do so. You’re just as guilty as they are,” Dash hissed, in his face now. “You might not pull the trigger, but you load the magazine.”

Montee had no answer to that, opting to just hang his head and stare at the floor, a shell of the man they had met a few days earlier. The engines started to rumble, and both Montee and Dash could feel the boat start to move away from the dock. He picked his head up and all but whimpered his question to her, “Where are you taking me?”

“It do not matter to you?” He could only whimper at that answer, breaking out into quiet sobs as Dash stood up and left the man to wallow in his misery, and the realisation that the free life he was accustomed to was now over.

It took a better part of an hour for Roach to navigate the vessel towards their rendezvous point. Shade and Dash killed the time by trying to extract more information out of their prisoner and by searching the craft from top to bottom for any additional intelligence. Shade had found the bag that Montee had collected earlier, the same bag that Roach had taken a picture of, as well as confiscating the man’s phones, laptops, notepads, anything that had a name and number on it. His wardroom was effectively an intelligence gold mine.

Montee himself had maintained his clamshell impression for the rest of the trip, only breaking his silence to sob and whimper quietly, but otherwise not speaking to the soldiers as they barraged him with questions. Even Shade doubted that his music mix would be effective with how Montee had become emotionally shut down.

They felt the boat turn towards the right and start to pick up speed despite heading towards land. Shade walked over to Montee and picked him up from his chair and lead him over towards the rear
wall, sitting him down firmly against it. “Hang on tight, it’s gonna be a bumpy ride soon… D! Strap yourself in!” He shouted out to Dash, who quickly found her own ‘safe’ place to brace herself.

With a loud crunch, the yacht hit the beach and slid up the sand a good distance, listing sharply to one side before stopping. Once the engines cut out, and the power subsequently died, they all picked themselves up and checked for injuries. Shade looked over to Montee and picked him up by one arm. “Still in one piece, eh? That’s unlucky mate…” he said, shaking his hand. He looked over to Dash, who was climbing over an upturned couch near where she had bunkered down. “Mind leading the way, Little Miss Recon?”

Dash chuckled, shaking her head, “That’s the Ranger’s motto, not Recon,” she commented, taking the lead anyway. She tried sliding open the rear door, but it had jammed shut during the ‘landing’. With a small shrug, she kicked it down, stepping away to let Shade and their prisoner through. “Ladies first,” she said with a smirk.

“You heard her, mate,” Shade said as he leant down and broke the tie around Montee’s ankles, “whiny chicks first.” With a shove, he guided Montee through the door and helped him over the side and onto the sand. Roach was there, waiting for them, and Shade handed the prisoner off to him before jumping back on to retrieve the bag of intel from inside. He was the last one off, and had reached the car to see Montee sitting between Dash and Roach in the backseat, while Ozone was standing outside the driver’s seat on the phone to whom Shade presumed were the local police.

He climbed inside, Ozone following a few seconds later, and in no time they were driving along the coastal main road towards the city of Nice. Roach and Dash shoved Montee’s head down as Ozone called out a procession of emergency vehicles that were coming towards them on the opposite side of the road, only letting him up once they were clear. Shade, satisfied that they had made a clean escape, pulled out a satellite phone from the glove box and handed it back towards Dash.

“Hey D, wanna call it in to the bossman and tell him we’re good to go?”

Dash took the phone with a smile, “Gladly,” she answered, keying the sequence and waiting, “Package is secure,” she said with a satisfied shove of her shoulder at Montee, “We’re inbound to rendezvous now.”

“Got it Dash, extract is waiting at hangar fifteen at Nice-Cote ‘d Azur Airport. India Team has the place secured for you; Exxon and Aphid are posing as security staff at Gate Bravo.” Ghost replied over the static-filled line.

“Copy LT, see you soon,” Dash responded and hung up the phone, turning to face Ozone, “You got that Oz’?”

“I know the RV’s at the airport, that’s about it,” Ozone responded, merging into the next lane over to bypass some traffic, “where exactly are we going?”

“Gate Bravo, Exxon and Aphid are waiting for us as ‘security’, our ride is in hangar fifteen,” Dash responded, handing the phone back to Shade to be tucked away again. He stowed away the phone and pulled out his sidearm to rest it at his side, in the off chance that they would get ambushed.

The ambush never came, and they made their way through Nice and to the airport without any trouble. Exxon and Aphid waved them through the gate when they approached, and they rolled into hangar fifteen to find Ghost standing at the steps of a Gulfstream G650 ready to roll. Shade let out a groan as he stretched after getting out of the small rental car.

“Hey guys, if anyone one of us suggests a road trip in the future, just don’t.” He said as he ducked
down to retrieve the bag of intel from the car floor. Roach assisted Montee out of the car before tossing a black hood on his head, leading him towards Ghost. Ozone and Dash went to the truck and started getting out everyone’s luggage, assisted by another India Team member, Poet.

There was little fanfare as everyone packed up and boarded the Gulfstream, it only taking thirty minutes from the time that Shade and the team arrived to the moment the luxury jet lifted off the runway, destined to take the tired soldiers back home to base. Shade watched them ascend through one of the jet’s small windows, then looked over to Dash who was sitting across from him. He smiled at her, and offered her his fist to bump.

She returned a small, tired smile of her own as she bumped his fist, “Another day, another ass kicked.”

“Sooooo…” Meat said as he leant on the table, sitting beside Dash in the mess hall, “... how was Monaco?” he asked with a sly grin on his face.

Dash frowned at him, “Meat, I will punch you.”

He didn’t relent, “Awww… but Shade got a kiss. Why does he, the guy who basically wrote you off, get that while me, the man who supports and enjoys your presence, gets threatened with a violence?” Meat said with a fake whine, leaning in a little closer. “Not even a peck on the cheek?”

“How about a sock instead?” She asked, letting her fist fly into his gut. He grunted and folded inwards, his face landing on the table top with an audible smack.

“... that works too…” he wheezed as the guys around him laughed at his misery.

Much like a week ago, Shade, Dash, Ozone and Roach found themselves in one of the briefing rooms. MacTavish, Ghost and Spook were in attendance too, and the seven of them were running through a debriefing of the entire operation, reviewing actions and discussing how things could have been done better.

“... now, you had planned to gain access onto the target vessel peacefully, but the next morning opted to basically assault the man in broad daylight? Mind explaining that one to me?” Captain MacTavish said as he looked over the four in front of him, “Did it occur to you that you might have triggered a police response?”

“Not at the time, sir, no,” Roach started after a minute of silence and shared looks between them, “but we had to adjust our approach due to unforeseen circumstances…”

Ghost scoffed at the comment, “Do enlighten us…”

“Well, in order to propose the idea of Shade taking photos of the boat,” Ozone began, glancing over to the Australian, “they needed to approach him and see if he was interested. The night before we made our move, both Shade and Dash visited a few bars in the area to try and find him. We’d noticed that he was a bit of a barfly, so it was a safe assumption we’d find him in such a venue.”

Shade sat up, “Yeah, pretty sure the guy can put a fair bit away. Anyway, we got to this one place and I had to relieve myself. Dash found him while I was away and engaged him in conversation…” he trailed off, letting Dash finish the story.

“He tried to seduce me,” She finished bluntly, “It was not an ideal situation and led to some consequences, making our rather… loud … approach natural.”
MacTavish frowned at the description of the target’s actions, whilst Ghost suppressed a chuckle, “So, you acted as a pissed off husband instead? That’s one way to play a cover ID…”

Spook stepped forward, hands on her hips, “If you don’t mind me asking… how far did he get before you broke contact that night?”

MacTavish turned to look at the intelligence officer, “I beg your pardon, Lieutenant, but what relevance does this hold?” Spook looked down at the captain with a quirked eyebrow.

“Depending on how the Master Sergeant answers, we can slap a sexual assault charge onto his rap sheet, even if it is a lesser charge compared to ‘accessory to terrorist activities’…” she stated levelly, before looking back at Dash, “so, if you don’t mind…”

Dash shrugged, “Not far, touched my leg, that’s about it.” Spook just hummed in thought before shaking her head, sitting back down at her laptop and gesturing for the Captain to continue.

“Well, aside from that small detail… I can say that the overall mission was an outstanding success. Our target was secured without much harm or public notice, the little confrontation at the pier and the beached yacht notwithstanding, and we’ve gained a significant amount of intelligence relating to a large number of dealers and terrorist groups, including Kingfish,” MacTavish said as he stood up, closing his own laptop, “we’re on a partial stand down while our intelligence group goes through what we’ve gathered, but I feel that we’re another step closer to getting Makarov. If nobody has anything else to add, then you’re all dismissed.”

Shade stared at the ceiling of his room, laying back on his somewhat comfortable bed after the long debriefing and unpacking his stuff from the most recent mission. His phone was beside him, a song playing quietly from it’s speakers.

“Hey now… all you sinners, put your lights on, put lights on… hey now…all you lovers, put your lights on, put your lights on…”

Slower songs like this helped Shade unwind after the particularly rough or long missions, and though it wasn’t the worst or hardest mission he’d ever been on, this one qualified.

“‘Cause there’s a monster, living under my bed… whispering in my ear…. And there’s an angel, with her hand on my head… she says I got nothin’ to fear…”

From the outside, the mission was basically flawless. They got in, surveyed the target, snatched him, and got out relatively clean. Good as gold, if you asked him. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that something hadn’t gone as planned, but he couldn’t place what it was exactly.

‘... her lips were pretty bloody soft…’

Check that, he had a general idea of what the problem was, he just didn’t want to admit it.

‘... she full of damn surprises, that woman… bloody hell.’

If he was to come close to admitting it, then he’d also note that this little problem dated back to that night after the Mexico op. Looking back at it, he could feel that there was a chance, a spark of sorts, after their conversation on the way back to the base. At least, that’s how he felt. He wasn’t too sure where this would lead, or if Dash even had the same thoughts.

To be perfectly honest, for her to turn around and kiss him like she did after their conversation about PDA on the first day in town, he wouldn’t be lying if he said that it caught him completely by
He also wouldn’t be lying if he said that he wouldn’t mind doing something that again…

Dash pursed her lips, then frowned and chewed on her lower lip as she studied her sketch. She was by no means a talented artist, but sketching was a good way to de-stress. It had been recommended to her when one of the docs noticed she had a hard time unwinding from the high-tension of a mission. She’d tried it on a whim and made a habit of it. Recently, she’d found the faces she kept sketching looked awfully similar to a certain Aussie.

Dash rolled her eyes at herself and closed the sketchbook, leaning back in her chair with a breath, trying to convince herself it was just the ADD that made her keep thinking about why exactly she had kissed him when simply storming out would have worked to, more or less, the same effect. Regardless of why she was thinking about it, she couldn’t seem to dismiss the thought, nor could she really find an answer that she would care to admit to.

She stood from her chair and left her room, heading for the rec room. It would be loud in there and it would keep her from thinking about things she didn’t care to think about. Because she certainly did not like him in that way.

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

It is nearly 5:30 am and I cannot brain at the moment. I could, really just do this later, but eh, so this is what we got. Li’l hustle and tussle with Montee, got away pretty easy. Dash is glad that’s over. Aaand that’s about it?

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

So, old mate Montee has been bagged and tagged, Monaco has come to a close, and now our two highly-trained operators are engaged in psychological warfare with their greatest foe: their own minds. Things will start getting a little more interesting from now on, as long as you don’t mind being dragged along for the ride, heh heh.
It was eerily quiet in the rec room today, though not to the point of being unsettling. The noisier members of the team were out running practice drills. The rest; Dash, Shade, Scarecrow, Robot and Roach, were gathered in the rec room, everyone doing their own thing. Scarecrow was reading a book on the couch beside Roach, who was watching a movie, and Dash, who was sketching away at something. Robot and Shade were at a table nearby, their vests in front of them and stripped of all the pouches and attachments.

“The grandma told me ‘never never never take no shit! Especially from that-” The loud ringing from a phone broke the relative peace and quiet of the room, and Shade let out a silent curse as he fished his phone from his pocket. He took a look at the screen and his eyes widened in surprise, eagerly answering the phone.

“Hey, this is-” he winced as the shout of the voice on the other end was audible from across the room, “Jamie, hold- Jamie!” He all but shouted into the receiver, before taking a breath, “okay, take a break and start from the beginning… what… when? Just now?! All three of them?!” Shade’s voice was losing its level tone, and he stood up and started making his way to the door. Unbeknownst to him, everyone else had their attention on him as he spoke. “Shit… where are they taking them, Alex or the Royal? Okay… look, Jamie, I know you don’t like going there, but you need to be there…” Shade’s voice cut out as the door closed behind him, leaving the other four in the room confused and slightly worried, as they had never seen the Australian shaken up quite like this before. Roach turned to Dash, and shot her a meaningful look, to which she shrugged back.

“Aren’t you going?” Roach clarified, Dash frowning slightly at the question.

“What do you mean? Whatever it is, it sounds personal, and I ain’t getting in his business…” He rolled his eyes with a scoff, “Come on, you two are basically besties at this point, I’m sure he’ll appreciate it if you saw to him.”

Dash squinted at him, “I can see what you’re trying to do, so stop it.” Roach raised his hands up in surrender.

“I have no idea what you mean,” he said innocently.

“Him, Meat and Rook are trying to hook the two of you up,” Scarecrow stated plainly, not looking up from his book as Dash now gave Roach a smug expression.

“Okay, so we might be trying to do that, but it’s for your own good!” He said in his defense, “the way that you two talk, act around each other, hell, when you two fight together! Anyone with two eyes and a heartbeat can see it!”

Dash rolled her eyes at him and crossed her arms out in front of her, “Firstly, mind you’re own damn business. Secondly, Shades and I are just friends, simple as that. You and I are the same, yet I’m not tryin’ to get in ya pants,” she held up a hand to cut him off, “and before you open your fat trap, it’s goin’ to stay that way, ‘kay?”

Roach was about to respond, but was cut off when Shade rushed back into the rec room. “Guys, boss would be in his office, right?” He asked, clearly unsettled by the phone conversation. The hand
holding the phone was clenched tightly, practically a death grip while his other hand was ran through his hair nervously. He didn’t wait for an answer as he turned back around and all but ran through the doors.

Dash and Roach shared a look, the pair of them now greatly concerned for their friend, and she got up from her seat and quickly followed him out. She found Shade already near the main entrance to the block, and jogged over to catch up. “Hey, Shades, are you okay?”

“I guess, all things considered,” He said tightly, his eyes front and focused on his path. He said a steady pace, one that Dash had no issues matching, “just need to see Mac about something.”

Dash frowned at him, clearly not seeing through his bullshit. “Uh huh…” she settled on saying, not necessarily wanting to provoke the wound up man. They walked the rest of the way to Captain MacTavish’s office in silence, the Aussie actively avoiding anything that might delay him.

They entered the admin block, and Dash watched in mild shock as Shade just blew past the staff inside as they tried to stop him from proceeding in further. “Let him through, the Captain called him in for something urgent,” she said loudly, startling everyone nearby. Dash saw him flash her an appreciative smile as she caught up, and she shook her head, gesturing him to continue on.

The pair of them reached the Captain’s office, and Dash stopped Shade from just barging in by holding her arm out in front of him. He stopped and shot her a look, “D?”

“Manners, Shades… we don’t know if he’s alone or got company,” Dash said quietly before knocking on the door. A “come in” was heard, and Shade gave Dash another smile before opening the door and entering, Dash following him inside and closing it after her. She stood towards the side, watching as Shade approached MacTavish’s desk.

“Sir, I need a direct flight to Brisbane International as soon as humanly possible,” he said simply and with a sense of calm that contrasted how he was acting moments earlier. Both MacTavish and Dash raised an eyebrow at his somewhat weird request.

“I understand that we’re on a partial stand down still, but we haven’t been given any long distance leave, Shade,” the Captain began, leaning back in his seat slightly, “though there must be some extraordinary reason for this request on such short notice.”

Shade nodded and took a slow breath, before speaking, “Sir, I just received a phone call from my younger sister back home about five to ten minutes ago. She told me that our parents and youngest sibling have been involved in a major car crash,” he paused to steady his voice, “from what limited information she was told by the police, it’s looking highly likely that our Dad won’t survive his injuries… or that Mum might lose her left leg below the knee…”

MacTavish let out a loud sigh, and leant forward with his head in his hands contemplatively, while Dash stood there in shock. In that moment, how Shade was acting and how his demeanour on the phone was all made sense. She had already made the assumption that something was wrong, just not this wrong.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, sir, but I want to be there for my family… my sister is a nervous wreck and almost literally shuts down if she has to visit a hospital, my brother is also getting treated, and the next closest family member to them is me.” Shade said quietly, wiping a forming tear from his eye. “They’re all I’ve got, and they need me…”

“... I’ll write up the movement order for Gale to fly you over direct. Even on such short notice, it’ll take about an hour before we can get you wheels up…” MacTavish started, turning to his computer
to start the process, “go get yourself packed up with what you need. I’ll tell the team what is happening.”

Shade could feel the relief wash down on him, so much so that his knees almost buckled, “Thank you sir… you have no idea…”

“Family comes first, Sergeant, we always look after our own, now get going. Dash, if you could stay for a moment.” She nodded at MacTavish’s instruction, and watched Shade almost sprint out of the office before turning back to look at him.

“Dash, you get yourself packed too.”

She looked at the Captain in surprise, “Pardon sir, but why?” She asked him, confused.

“If it is as bad as Shade says, I’m sure he could use the extra hand over there. Both with his family and with himself.” MacTavish said as he finished typing up their movement orders, “he’s going to need all of the emotional support he needs, especially if the worst comes to pass. And in the time you two have worked together, you’ve rapidly grown into one of the stronger partnerships in the task force, both on and off the battlefield. So go with him,” he finished as he handed the printed orders to her, “and watch his back. I’m sure that he’ll appreciate it looking back.”

She hesitated before taking the orders, “and what if we’re called up for a mission?” MacTavish waved her off.

“Either we pull temps from India and or Foxtrot teams, or we hand off to another team entirely. But don’t worry about it, you’ve got your own mission now.”

“… understood sir.”

It took less than an hour for Shade to change into civilian clothing, pack his bag with the bare essentials, as his parents likely kept his older wardrobe intact at home, and briefly explain to those who asked what was wrong. He received a lot of sympathy from his friends, especially those who had already lost one or both of their parents, and he was waiting in the base’s small terminal for his flight to finish its preparations.

“Room for one more, I hope…” a woman said from the entrance, and Shade was surprised to see Dash standing there in civis with a duffel bag by her side.

“D? The hell?” He asked, standing up and walking over to her.

“Captain asked me to go with you, said I’m to watch your back,” she explained, picking up her bag and walking to where Shade had deposited his own bag, “I hope I packed the right clothing for the climate, last thing I want is to melt while wearin’ a jacket and jeans.”

He shook his head in disbelief, sitting back down next to his bag. “If anything, it’ll be a little bit warmer, not uncomfortably hot or anything like that.”

Dash joined him and sat by his side, “I’m sure they’ll be fine… doctors and those guys tend to plan for the worst, I mean, have you met Chemo or Jay? The day I see them show some actual optimism will be the day I turn in my rifle.”

“I know what you’re trying to do, so don’t,” Shade said quietly, looking down at the ground, “you’re wasting your breath… one second.” He stood up and pulled his phone from his pocket, dialing his sister back in Brisbane. It was getting close to three in the afternoon at the base, meaning that it’d be
a little later in the morning for Jamie.

“Tommy?” His sister answered on the first ring, her voice tight yet raw with emotion.

“Yes James, it’s me… any word yet?”

“No, not yet… Derrick’s driving me down to the R-Royal, I think we’re still twenty minutes away.”

“Good, good… my boss let me go, and I’m stepping onto a direct flight from here to there in about twenty minutes or so,” Shade paused, checking his watch, “might be another sixteen or so hours until I’m home. You able to hold the fort for me until I get there?”

He could hear her sniff back a few tears, his heart clenching at the sound, “I’ll t-try…”

Shade collected himself for a moment, his voice dropped to a quiet level, “Jamie… just in case… can you tell Dad that I love him, and that I always will?”

“I will… but only if you don’t t-tell him first, you hear?” Despite her own voice and how upset she clearly was, he still had to chuckle at her choice of words.

“I will, don’t you worry about that…” Shade noticed a door to the side open to let a man wearing a flight suit walk in, “hey, I’ve gotta go now Jamie… you stay strong for me, okay? I love you, and I’ll be there in no time.”

“Stay safe, Tommy… I-love you too.” Jamie replied before the call ended, Shade putting the phone in his pocket and walking over to the pilot. To his surprise, he saw an Australian flag on his shoulder.

“Are you two shooters the ones who need outta here?” He asked in a broad accent, Shade taken back slightly by how ‘stereotypical Aussie’ he sounded.

“That’s us Gale,” Dash spoke up as she picked both hers and Shade’s bag off the ground, “super urgent flight to Brisbane.”

“Alrighty then, come this way and we’ll get you guys set.” Gale said as he turned around and led the other two towards the aircraft in question, “now, El’Capitan said that this is quite literally a matter of life and death, so he told me to use whatever I could to get you home as fast as possible,” they came to stop in front of a luxury jet that was used mostly for VIP transport, “figured we could take ol’ Sammy for a spin.”

“Sammy?” Shade questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“I call ‘er Samantha, Sammy for short. Sleek and stylish, yet she’s amazing to have a ride on,” Gale smirked as he winked at Shade, “Sammy’ll get us to good ol’ Brissie in no tile.”

“Good, the sooner we get in the air the better,” Shade stated, stepping away and over towards the jet’s boarding staircase. Gale frowned and looked at Dash.

“What crawled up his ass and died?” She winced at the poor choice of words, glad that Shade was out of earshot.

“His parents were in an MVA. His dad might not survive the next twenty four hours, and his Mum is at risk of a left leg amputation…” Almost instantly, Gale’s rough demeanour softened.

“Oh, fuck… I can see why Macca wrote a blank check for this transport…”
Shade watched with a mixture of unbridled excitement and overflowing anxiousness as the bright lights of the Brisbane skyline at night grew closer and closer through the windows of the jet, his hand resting on his phone in his pocket as he expected it to start buzzing once within cellphone range. He had to fight himself in order to tear his view from the window and move back to sit down in his seat, letting out a slow breath as he desperately tried to calm himself.

“The sooner I’m on the ground, the better…” he said to no-one in particular, but he looked over to the other side of the cabin where Dash was, fast asleep across one of the fold-out bunks. He figured that they were maybe another half an hour from getting clearance to land, so he stood up once more and moved over to Dash’s side. He smiled as he saw how relaxed she looked asleep, and subconsciously brushed a few strands of hair from her face before shaking her on the shoulder lightly to wake her. “Hey, D, we’re almost there.”

Dash woke up slowly and sat up, stretching comfortably. She stood and moved to the window to see, “Home sweet home?” She asked, looking over at Shade with a small smile.

“Indeed… come on, we need to get moving. I don’t know if the Captain secured us a fast track through customs or not,” he stood up and stretched out, then walked towards the back of the cabin and retrieved his suitcase from where he had stored it, “so the sooner we can get through, the better.”

Dash nodded and stood up with a small yawn, “Sounds good… what time is it anyway?”

Shade checked his phone, quickly making sure it was set to local time, “Close to two or three in the morning… it was a sixteen hour flight, after all…” he finished with a yawn, rubbing his face. Dash frowned at him for a few moments as she watched him closely, and saw that he had dark circles beginning to form under his eyes.

“Shades, did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not as much as I hoped…” he answered after a moment's hesitation, “just couldn’t shut my mind off and relax. I could bloody murder a coffee right now, to be honest.” The two soldiers bid their farewell to Gale as they passed the cockpit, and walked down the stairs to find a white sedan with Australian Defense Force license plates parked a few meters away with a soldier standing beside it. Shade sent a confused look to Dash, who returned it, before walking over to approach him. “Evenin’ mate!”

“Evening Sergeant, and Master Sergeant. I’m Lance Corporal Day, 9th Battalion of the Royal Queensland Regiment, and I’ll be your driver for the time being,” the young soldier said as he walked around towards the back of the car and opened the boot for Shade and Dash to stow their bags, “you’ve been pre-approved for customs and immigration, given the urgent nature of your visit. Good thing about your late arrival is that traffic into the CBD should be nearly non-existent.”

Shade sighed in relief at the news as he and Dash climbed into the back seat and settled in, LCPL Day quickly taking his place behind the wheel and starting the engine.

Dash sighed after a long silence, “Breathe Shades… I can’t say it’ll be okay, but I can say you will be.”

He rubbed his face and leant back into the seat, taking a few slow breaths to help maintain his calm, “I know…”

She watched him for a few moments, then glanced out through the window as they merged onto the arterial road that fed in and out of the airport. It felt a little weird to be on the opposite side of the road, but it wasn’t completely foreign to her. “Hey, if you were guiding a tourist here, what would
you say are some of the things you can do?” Dash asked in an effort to both break the silence and try to distract Shade.

“Well, I guess it depends on what you enjoy doing. But South Bank is a must, as is the Botanic Gardens next to the city centre,” Shade said quietly with a smile, “and Mount Coo-tha is a good place to see the city and it’s surrounding areas…”

Dash cheered for victory in her head as Shade opened up and started rambling on about his hometown, noting that he became more and more animated as their conversation progressed. She also noted that his accent became a little more pronounced with certain words. Neither of them had realised that they were minutes away from their destination until LCPL Day spoke up from the front seat.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we’re almost at the RBH, Sergeant.” Day began as he merged across the lanes to get into the correct turning lane into the hospital entrance, “I’ll drop you off at the front if that works for you.”

“Yeah,” Shade replied, all of his energy now gone as he came back to reality, “that’ll be great, mate…”

The sedan came to a stop and they quickly unloaded their bags. Shade was about to step away when Day stopped him. “For what it’s worth Sergeant, I hope your family is okay.” Shade nodded at him and shook his hand, then turned to walk inside. Dash stood there with a worried expression on her face before shaking her head and following him inside.

It took a few minutes to get directions, but Shade could finally relax upon walking out of the elevator car. He turned right and walked towards the nurses station and waiting room, where he saw his sister and her boyfriend sitting beside each other; Jamie fast asleep on Derrick’s shoulder as he read from his phone.

He walked up quietly and set his bag down nearby before stepping over and sitting down on Jamie’s other side. Carefully, he tapped her on the shoulder to wake her. She stirred with a soft groan of displeasure, turning to see who disturbed her. “… w-what…”

“Hey, told you I’d make it,” Shade said with a soft smile and tears forming in his eyes, leaning forward to capture his sister in a firm hug that she eagerly returned.

Dash smiled fondly at the scene, once upon a time her family would’ve greeted her like that. That was a thought she quickly pushed away as she sat a little further away with their bags, letting Shade have his moment with his family. It was far too seldom any enlisted person ever got to see their family, and Dash had sense enough to let the reunion go uninterrupted.

The hug lasted a good minute, and Shade had to practically peel his sister off of him to look at her, “Any word?”

Jamie sniffed, rubbing fresh tears away from her eyes, “Dad’s still in theatre, has been for the last five hours now. Mum’s stable, they’re a lot more confident that they can save her leg.”

“And Henry?” He followed up, referring to their younger brother.

“He’s resting, he has a few bruised ribs from the seatbelt and airbags, as well as some cuts from the broken glass and metal, but nothing else that was serious,” she answered with a sigh of relief.

Shade nodded and glanced over to Derrick, “What happened exactly?”
“Your folks went out to collect Henry from his mate’s place around four in the morning, something about a party that had ended. It was just going to be your Mum but Jackson went with her and drove. They were around Kedron when one of those skip-bin trucks ran a red and caught them side on,” Derrick said, reciting what the police had told Jamie and him hours earlier, “your parents had to be cut out of the car while ‘Ry was able to climb out himself.”

“And the truckie?” Shade asked, sitting upright as he tried to control his slowly growing anger.

“Blew over the limit, so the cops are throwing the book at him,” Derrick said with a smirk, “facing a few dangerous driving and reckless endangerment charges, maybe a couple of grievous bodily harm ones too.”

“Good,” Shade said, standing up from his seat, “I’ll be back in a few, gonna try and see Mum and ‘Ry, okay?” He received a nod from Jamie and a thumbs up from Derrick, then walked over to the nurses station.

Jamie and Derrick watched as Shade walked off and down the hallway before looking over to where the woman that arrived him was standing, also watching Shade with barely masked worry. Derrick glanced at Jamie, then back at the woman.

“Sooo… you must be Tommy’s girl, right?” He posed, wanting to break the sombre silence, “Name’s Derrick, I’m his-”

“-Sister’s boyfriend, I kinda gathered that,” she responded with a southern twang that caught the pair of them off guard, “and no, I’m not ‘his girl’, despite what everyone else says…”

“… it doesn’t seem like that to me,” Jamie spoke up quietly with a gentle smile, “given the way you were watching him earlier.”

The woman quirked an eyebrow at them, “An’ what’s that ‘sposed mean?”

“Well… if you aren’t involved with him, why did you come down here with him?” Jamie posed to her.

“We’re soldiers; we back each other up whenever and wherever,” she responded, coming over to sit down in front of them, “plus our boss didn’t want him to go alone.”

“Right…” Derrick drawled, “Oh, I didn’t catch your name either.”

“And even though he shouldn’t, Tommy shares more about his work than he should… you can trust us,” Jamie added, shooting a look to her partner.

Dash kept her eyes narrowed on Derrick for a moment before lightening up and looking at Jamie with a small smile, “Rebecca Myers, pleasure,” she stuck her hand out in greeting.

“The pleasure’s ours, ‘Bec,” Derrick said as Jamie and Dash shook hands, “especially if you’re keeping Tommy in check.”

Dash raised an eyebrow at him, “Uh-huh…” she replied sarcastically.

Jamie slapped his arm and frowned at him, “Come on… just because he accidentally broke your arm during that footy match last time visited doesn’t mean you can be nasty about him, alright? He was really apologetic about it.”
“I know… just didn’t seem like it back then, that’s all…” he defended weakly, “though in all seriousness, it’s good to know that someone’s got his back out there.”

Dash nodded at him, pleased to not have to defend her position again, “It’s what I do,” she shrugged a little, then grinned, looking at Shade to ensure he was out of earshot still, “And for what it’s worth, I nearly broke his arm in a sparring match,” she chuckled.

“No shit, really?” Derrick asked in disbelief with a small chuckle, to which he cut short after receiving a ‘death glare’ from Jamie.

“Why did you nearly break my brother’s arm? Aren’t there rules to sparring and training?” Jamie asked, directing her frown towards Dash.

Dash chuckled sheepishly, “To be fair we weren’t on the best of terms and I wanted to avoid the life-threatening route of proving him wrong.”

Jamie sat there for a moment processing what she had just heard, before rolling her eyes with a groan, one of her hands coming up to brush against a faint set of scars on the side of her face, “…goddamn it Tommy…” she muttered quietly before looking back up at Dash, “I hope my brother’s opinions haven’t caused you too much grief.”

Dash shrugged, “I’m used to it, and it turned out better than the other guy that had similar opinions.”

Derrick opened his mouth to speak, paused, then shook his head, “Y’know what, I don’t wanna know.”

“Still…” Jamie spoke up, smiling with a glance to the hallway that Shade had disappeared down, “it’s good to see you two have dealt with your differences…” she flashed Dash a knowing smirk.

Dash nodded, “Yeah, it could, admittedly, have gone better, but we’re both still here and in one piece, so I’d say it worked out.”

“Trust me, I know how stubborn my older brother can be… try living with him for as long as I have,” Jamie said with a laugh. Dash and Derrick started laughing with her, the mood lightening as they continued to talk about Shade and how life is around him. The man in question shivered whilst he was sat beside his sleeping mother, but wrote it off as chill from the room’s air conditioning.

Nothing bad could come out of having his sister and his team mate talking, right?

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

That was a bit of a slog to get written out… real life hit the pair of us like a bloody Mack truck. Spitty was pretty sick (literally) and I was just flat out with work and other commitments. Slow scenes aren’t exactly my forte, and slow and serious stuff isn’t either (I’m still learning!). Anyway, we’re now in the Land Down Under (insert song lyrics here) (damnit it’s stuck in my head now) and Shade is only now just starting to relax after physically seeing that his family is ‘relatively’ okay. We’ll be in Brisbane for a little while yet, so stay with us. And I apologise in advance if I go all description crazy (hometown bias and all that jazz)…

(Spitfire)

It took us forever this time, as Shade said, I was not well. I am now though (hopefully…), so we’ll
be grinding chapters out again before we know it heh. I’ll keep this short...

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Damage Control

Shade looked over his shoulder towards Dash and his sister as he left the nurse’s station and headed towards the room where his mother was being kept. It didn’t take him long to get there, and he was quiet and careful when he made his entrance. A nurse was by her side taking some readings and checking her IV, and his mum was awake but clearly worn out. Her face and what was visible of her arms had a few small bandages covering up cuts and abrasions that she had sustained from the crash, and her left leg was wrapped up and set in a cast.

His mum looked away from the nurse after answering a short question, and her eyes widened and welled up with tears forming in near instantaneously at the sight of her son, “Thomas?”

“Yeah mum, I’m here,” Shade said with a soft smile as he walked over and leant down to hug her carefully. They held each other for a good minute, then he let go and pulled a chair close to her side, sitting down with her hand in his. “I got a flight over as soon as Jamie called me,” he started, wiping his face of a stray tear that was threatening to escape, “boss let me go as soon as I said what had happened, hell, he basically handed a jet and pilot to me.”

Alice chuckled softly, shaking her head, “As long as you weren’t in the middle of something important,”

“Mum, you know what the deal is,” Shade said with a soft sigh and a frustrated smile, “family first, work later. How’re you holding up?”

She sighed and glanced at her leg, “The doctors say I’m lucky to have kept my leg, but it’ll be a while before I can fully walk on it again unassisted. A few of my ribs are bruised as well from the seatbelt, and I’ve got a few more cuts and bruises all over the place…” Alice sighed and rubbed her face, “your father took most of the impact on his side. The paramedics were surprised that he was still alive when they responded, as grim as that is to say.”

“Yeah,” Shade said as he leant back in his chair, “Jamie said as much to me over the phone. But he’s been through hell before, so I’m more than confident that he’ll pull through.”

“I swear, if he dies on me, I’ll kill him,” Alice said with a frown, before chuckling with Shade quietly. They sat there in silence for a few minutes before Alice yawned quite loudly, Shade struggling to bite back another chuckle. “Oh quiet you, you try being awake for a full day after a crash.”

He looked at her, taken back by her remark, “Uh, excuse me, you do remember that I am a soldier right? I’ve had more than my fair share of sleepless nights due to various kinds of things that legally I cannot tell you about.”

“I was only pulling your leg, Thomas, no need to get so worked up about it…” Alice said with her classic motherly smirk, “Now, go find that brother of yours and give him a hug for me, alright? Poor dear was scared witless throughout the entire ordeal.”

“Will do, Mum,” Shade said with a smile as he stood up and hugged his mum once more, before saying farewell and stepping out of the room. He asked a passing nurse where Henry’s room was, and quickly made his way there, stepping inside to find his youngest sibling neck-deep in his tablet, playing some game. “I leave the country for a few months and this is what happens, huh?”

Henry looked up from the screen and saw Shade standing against the doorway, “Well, someone had
to cause trouble in your absence,” he replied back, setting his tablet aside and sliding off the bed to meet his older brother halfway for a much needed hug.

“I’m glad you’re okay, ‘Ry,” Shade said quietly as he held his brother tightly, letting him go after a few moments.

“I’m glad you’re back, though I wish it were under better circumstances…” Henry replied, sitting back down on the side of the bed.

“Same here, mate… what’s the damage report?”

Henry sighed and looked over himself, gesturing to the bandage that covered his forearm, “Just some cuts from when I climbed out of the side window to get out, and a few bruises from the seatbelt, but that’s about it. I’m actually discharged, but they let me keep the room for the time being, until someone else needs it of course.”

Shade nodded at the statement, “Fair enough… Dad’s still in the OR, if you hadn’t heard,”

“One of his doctors is giving me updates every now and again; from what they told me a little while ago it’s going pretty well.”

“That’s good… wanna get out of here?” Shade said, nodding to the doorway.

“Tommy, I can hear my bed calling out for me from here.”

“... the look on everyone’s face when we pulled up outside of school in the back of a patrol car was absolutely priceless,” Jamie finished telling the story with a laugh, Derrick chuckling along and Dash sitting in front of them bemused, imagining a teenage Shade trying his best not to draw attention to his method of transport for that particular school trip, “everyone was talking about it, and I think they even mentioned it at his graduation ceremony at the end of that year.”

“I’m goin’ to say that he didn’ appreciate it that much?” Dash queried with a chuckle.

“Oh, he had won the award for ‘classiest arrival to school’, and had all but given up on arguing against everyone about it,” Jamie stated, “but it did get a good laugh when the school captain had mentioned it as an aside comment during their graduation speech. Tommy was good friends with most of the leadership group and council, after all.”

Their discussion was interrupted as Shade and yet another unfamiliar face returned to the waiting area, the younger man giving Dash a weird look before looking up at Shade. “... you didn’t mention that you had a girlfriend, Tommy?” He asked with a smirk before looking back at Dash, “Let me know if he isn’t treating you right, Jamie and I will set him straight!”

Dash raised an eyebrow at him, then looked at Jamie, and back to him, “Ain’t no one’s ‘girlfriend’,” she finally replied evenly, “I’m just here to lug our bags around,” she joked with a chuckle.

“Oh, in that case, are you free to-ow!” He was cut off as Shade caught him with a light slap in the back of his head.

“Dash, ignore my little brother. Henry, keep it in your bloody pants, alright?” Shade said with a frown before walking up and sitting down beside Dash. “How many times has that even worked for you?”

Henry chuckled and sat across from him, “Well, there was this one girl-”
“Bullshit,” Jamie ‘coughed’ as Derrick chuckled, but Henry continued on.

“...that I’m working on an assignment with at Uni, and she’s pretty chill.” He finished with a shrug, looking over at Dash again with a smile. “I’m sorry, by the way. But you can blame Tommy, I get it all from him.”

“To quote our lovely sister, ‘bullshit’, ” Shade said with raised eyebrows and a laugh, “if I had influenced you at all, you’d be rocking a combat helmet instead of whatever haircut you call that,” he finished as he gestured to Henry’s ‘current trend’ undercut hairstyle.

“Tommy, the nineteen-forties texted me and want their haircut back,” Henry retorted with a laugh as Shade mocked a kick at him, then turned to Dash.

“See what I had to live with? See why I joined the Army?” He said overdramatically.

Dash chuckled and shook her head, checking her watch, “If you lot are done, it’s nearly three a.m. and tomorrow is gonna suck if we all don’t get some sleep.”

“You guys got transport already?” Derrick asked as he freed himself from Jamie’s arms and stood up to stretch, “if you haven’t and you don’t need to head to a hotel, I can take you to your place.”

“That’d be great, actually. Didn’t give too much thought to accommodation back at the base, actually…” Shade admitted with a sheepish smile, looking over to Dash as she stood up herself. He got up and made to retrieve their bags, then turned around to look at everyone. “Jamie?”

“I’ll stay with you guys… saves you a phone call if something happens,” she answered quietly, knowing exactly what Shade was asking, “you’ve still got your room, by the way.”

Shade looked at her surprised, “Wasn’t Dad going to turn it into a man-cave? I swear he mentioned that last time I spoke to you guys.”

Henry laughed, “Yeah, and Mum stopped him from doing so. After the fifth failed attempt, he gave up and let Mum have her victory.”

“Bloody hell,” Shade said with an exasperated laugh, shaking his head at the news, “remind me to hug mum once more when she’s awake and able. Come on, let’s get a move on.”

It took almost a full hour to complete a half-hour journey, mostly due to the that Derrick ran into an issue at the exit gate of the parking complex and that they came across a police breath testing checkpoint halfway through their journey. Shade found himself relaxing soon afterwards as they drove through familiar territory, and was soon smiling once his home of nineteen years came into view.

It was a two-floor house at the end of their street, tucked off to the side between a pair of low-set homes. The garden was well tended as always, but the grass was in need of a mow. They wordlessly stepped inside, Henry shooting up the stairs in search for his own bed whilst Jamie bid Derrick goodbye outside before he drove to his own place. Shade set the bags down on the floor to the side and took a few paces further inside, looking around the house as he was hit with wave after wave of nostalgia. He finally looked back at Dash with a wide smile on his face.

“Goddamn, it’s good to be home…” He sighed happily, collecting his bag and gesturing for Dash to follow him, “You can take my bed, I’ll grab the spare foam one from under ‘Ry’s bed.”

“Nah, it’s cool, Shades,” Dash shook her head, “You take your bed, I’ll be fine.”
Shade shook his head as they walked up stairs and towards his room, “I insist D; you didn’t need to be here, so as my ‘guest’ you can take my bed. Pretty sure Mum changes the sheets on it weekly even though I’ve moved out.” He said as he stopped at his door and opened it, reaching in and flicking the light on. If the contents of the room was an art exhibit, it would have been summed up as ‘Ode to the Teenage Lampshade’. Posters of soldiers, fighter aircraft and other military equipment decorated the walls, while his bookshelf was filled with all kinds of books, movies, and games all related to the same subject matter.

He smiled as he stepped in further and placed his bag aside, taking a seat on his bed as he took in all the memories of his later childhood and early adulthood, before departing south for basic training. “Wow… hasn’t changed at all since I left. Not sure if I should be impressed or concerned, heh…” he said with a chuckle as he shifted back further on his bed to lean against the wall.

Dash hummed thoughtfully, then accepted she’d lost the argument, “If you’re not takin’ your bed back, I’ll just make breakfast,” she said simply in a tone that brokered no argument, “Southern home-style.”

Shade smiled and nodded, “Provided you can find what you need to use in the fridge and cupboard. Don’t think Woolies’ is open at bloody four in the morning…” he let out a yawn, then stood up from the bed, “make yourself comfy, change if you need to, it’ll take a good few minutes to get that mattress out and ready.” Shade left the room after that, calling out for Henry to ‘wake his ass up and give him a hand’. Dash chuckled at the brotherly banter, noting how Shade acted the same with his blood siblings as he did with her and the rest of the team back at base.

Dash stretched comfortably, sitting on the bed after changing into a pair of pajama pants. She figured she’d be up with the sun as she always was, as she was never able to stay asleep once the sun came up, and given the jet lag and general tiredness of the others, Dash considered whether she’d have time to take a walk around the area in the morning, maybe hit the store Shade had mentioned for some things they probably wouldn’t have already. She figured she would cross that bridge when she got to it and shrugged to herself.

There was a shout, a thud, and a laugh that sounded like Shade and Dash chuckled, then thought for a moment. Shade seemed to be doing much better now that he was with his family, but then, his dad was still in trouble and there was no forgetting that. She considered it’d be just like Shade to put up a front for his family, be an infectious confidence. A few short knocks on the door drew her from her thoughts, and she quickly opened the door to find Shade and Henry holding a large single foam mattress in their hands.

“Quiet you, the sooner we get this in the sooner we can get to sleep.”

“Told you it’d be a fight, but we got it out. It was pretty tight though,” Shade said, slightly out of breath.

Henry laughed, “That’s what she said.” Dash and Shade rolled their eyes, Shade mentally resolving to never introduce him to Meat on the off chance the Canadian ever followed him home.

“So, I give it thirty seconds from the time my head hits the pillow to the time I’m fast asleep. Did you want the over or under on that?” He asked as he sat down on the mattress, pulling over a spare sheet and bedcover that he had also retrieved whilst changing.
Dash shrugged, “Given you didn’t sleep on the plane, I’d say you’re on the money as far as you go. Don’t know about myself though, I did sleep.” Shade chuckled and shook his head, moving from his seated position to lay down on the mattress.

“Trust me, once you get comfy on that thing, you’ll be out faster than Meat at a veggie market.”

Dash laughed and laid down, getting comfortable, “Dunno about that now, but sure.” She waited for Shade to shoot back another remark, but was met with silence. With a slight frown, she peered over the edge of the bed to find the man practically passed out beside her on the floor. She sighed and rolled back over, looking at the ceiling as she let the day’s events finally catch up to her.

She didn’t notice how fast it took to drift off to sleep.

Dash wouldn’t admit it loudly or to anyone who actually knew her, but she was lost. She knew that the stereotype that Australians were upside down and backwards was completely and utterly false, but as she tried to navigate her way through the local grocery store, she could start to see some of the logic behind that remark. More than once she had to stop herself from chuckling as she noted that they even walked on the opposite side.

Another thing that she found different was how active and friendly the staff were. As she was busy trying to find some seasoning, a staff member had approached her and asked if she was okay or if she needed help with anything. She was also greeted with a genuine smile and a ‘how are you today?’ by the younger cashier when she went through the checkout with all of her purchases.

Dash reflected on that and a few other differences, such as how items were branded and priced up, as she sat outside a small cafe, waiting for a coffee before she made her way back towards Shade’s home. She was in the middle of reading something on her phone when a snippet of conversation from a small group at the next table over caught her attention.

“...I hope Jamie’s holding up okay, you heard what happened to her family, right?” One voice said, that of a young woman.

“No?” Another woman’s voice piped up, along with a few others. The first woman sighed and continued.

“They were caught in a crash the morning before yesterday…” The group let out a sympathetic noise before she went on, “she sent me a message soon after, saying that she was trying to get a hold of her brother.”

“Which one?” A young man spoke up, “Henry? I heard he was at his mates place earlier that night.”

“No no, her older brother… she was really freaking out as her call wasn’t getting through properly.”

“Isn’t he down in New South Wales though?”

“I thought he was deployed overseas again…”

Dash decided to risk it and turned around to study the group that were clearly talking about Shade and his family. They were a group of six; four women and two men, all of varying ages. Most of them were engrossed in their conversation, but one of the women happened to glance over and caught Dash’s eyes. Dash broke eye contact and looked back around, a little annoyed that she was caught snooping. But she was thankful for at that moment, the barista called for her name as her drink was ready to go.
She was about to make her escape when the woman from earlier caught her on the way out. “Excuse me… I don’t mean to be rude, but I couldn’t help but see that you were kinda listening in earlier…” She began, looking back at her group.

Dash smiled awkwardly, “Sorry, couldn’t help but overhear,” she chuckled a little. She noted how the other woman’s eyes widened in surprise when she spoke, clearly not expecting the vastly different accent at all.

“Oh!” She started, smiling a little bit, “don’t worry about that then, I guess it’s okay to be a little curious from time to time. How long have you been here for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Got in late last night,” Dash answered simply, “but uh… I should be going… no tellin’ when the others are goin’ to wake up and I’m cooking.”

The woman smirked and glanced at her small watch, “I think they could wait a few more minutes… if you got in late and they’re still asleep, they might be out for the count until this arvo,” she chuckled, then gave Dash a curious look, “Why’re you staying so far out of the city? Admittedly, there’s not that much to do out here…”

Dash gave a tight smile, “Call it short notice,” she shrugged.

“Fair enough,” the woman shrugged, then looked back over at her group. “Well, I hope you have a good stay here!” She bid farewell and left to return to her group, sitting down with a smile as she rejoined the conversation. Dash watched her before turning around with coffee in hand to begin her walk back ‘home’.

She didn’t get far before her phone started to ring, quickly juggling the bag of groceries and the coffee to retrieve it without looking at the caller ID. “Hello?”

“Wazzzzuuuuuuup!” Shade groaned out with a chuckle as he trailed off, “Mornin’ D!”

Dash frowned, “Shade… you sound drunk.” There was another audible laugh.

“I still feel tired as all shit, like I’m hungover without actually having been drunk… hey, where are you by the way?”

“ Took a little walk, I’m on my way back,” Dash answered simply, “Go back to sleep if you’re so tired.”

“You don’t think I’ve already tried that?” He chuckled humorlessly, “Fuck, D, it’s like half ten, almost eleven in the morning now… I couldn’t force myself to sleep even if I tried knocking myself out.”

“Uh huh… Well I’ll be there soon, hope you lot are hungry,” she chuckled a little.

“I’ll drag ‘Ry out of bed now. I think Jamie’s awake now too, if the running water from the bathroom is any indication. What do you think of the area now you can actually see it?”

“Nah, let him sleep, it might still take awhile to get everything made,” Dash responded, “It’s nice, comfortable, the cafe down the street a ways is good.”

“Remind me to take you on a proper tour once I’m alert and awake enough to drive,” Shade said with a yawn, “I’ll show you the sights and such. I’ll let you go, gonna go clean myself up. See you soon D.”
“See ya,” Dash replied before hanging up and juggling the phone back into her pocket as she walked.

Shade, Jamie, and Henry all leaned back in their chairs in extreme contentment as Dash watched on with a smug and satisfied smile on her face. Her ‘southern home-style brunch’ needed a few adjustments as she hadn’t been able to find a few of the ingredients she needed, but it didn’t stop her from making a meal that was still just as tasty and filling.

“At the risk of getting slapped, but why don’t you help out at the base’s mess again?” Shade asked as he looked over to Dash lazily.

Dash chuckled, “Because then I’d be too busy in the mess cookin’ for the entire base and wouldn’t have time for anything else, training, combat missions, all the fun stuff out the window.”

“Fair call…” he responded, letting out a loud burp seconds later. The three siblings all shared a laugh before Jamie gave Dash a curious look.

“What do highly trained soldiers do in their spare time, anyway, besides all of the training and practise. Surely, you can’t be doing that all day now…”

Dash shrugged, “We do about the same as anyone else, prank each other, go out on the town, laze about.”

Shade laughed and shook his head, “Yeah, I thought the Commandos were the ‘work hard, play hard’ type… Dash’s crew, they’re a few steps above, I tell you.”

Henry and Jamie looked at Shade confused, then shifted their focus onto Dash instead. “Dash?” Henry asked, a little bit confused.

She laughed a little and nodded, “Yeah, I run.”

“You run?” Jamie repeated.

“She’s really fast,” Shade said with a chuckle, “probably could outrun bloody Jem’ or Manchild while wearing full kit.”

Jamie and Henry shook their heads, “It’s probably safe to assume that the whole team or whatever you’re on is full of those names, right?”

“Meat, Robot, Chemo… yeah, you’re on the money with that,” Shade nodded his head, “Nobody goes by real names unless they’re deep in the shit.”

Jamie laughed, “Like when mum busts out the Thomas Andrew?” Shade visibly cringed at the use of his full first and middle name.

“Like you can talk, Jamie Lynette…” Henry shot back slyly. Jamie turned and looked at him with a death glare.


“I know the feeling bro, I get that same look every time I call Dash by her name or another nickname that isn’t ‘D’,” Shade said before grinning at Dash, “ain’t that right, Bec?”

Dash let her smile drop and simply looked at Shade, “What was that, Sergeant Williams?”
Shade simply sighed and let his head fall onto the table in front of him in surrender as his siblings started laughing. It was good to be home...

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Sooo. Yeah this Doc is long as all hell. Still enjoying every moment of it. The name drop happened, those were fun heheh. Dash was unsure about Derrick but they’re cool now. Still touch and go on Shade’s dad, but at least the rest of his family’s okay. Well, till next time!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Whelp, that was an effort to write. Not so much the content, just finding the time to actually sit down and write/type it all out. Work has been ramping up in the lead up to Christmas, plus my other hobby of playing and making equipment retextures for ArmA 3, and I’ve ended up relatively time poor at the moment. At least Uni has ended for me (at the time of writing). We just had to open a new Google Doc for this story as we’re running at 198 pages as of this chapter, and the pair of us aren’t happy waiting a good two minutes for the damn thing to fully load… heh. Anyway, until next time!
Traffic jams, no matter where in the world or what side of the road you were driving on, sucked majorly, Dash concluded as she shifted in the front seat of Shade’s ‘rental’. She distracted herself from the oddness of everything being backwards by staring out the window, at buildings, other cars, studying their surroundings and getting a feel for the land. It was strange, how the place felt familiar, yet incredibly different, even if it was only a change of perspective and -

"Was that a lime green police car?" Dash questioned. Shade started to chuckle quietly from his place behind the wheel, while Jamie turned her head to see the car in question pass them in the opposite direction.

"Huh, haven't seen that one on the road for a while… must be going out for a service or something," she mused with a soft smile, before turning back to look at Dash, "and yes, that was a lime green patrol car. Part of Road Policing Command, you know."

"Fatal Four, right James?" Shade spoke up as they started to move forward in the traffic, "they've got those new four Clubsports now, right?"

"Yeah, in bright yellow. Hard to miss 'em," Jamie answered with a small chuckle.

"No doubt about that," Dash said as she chuckled along, looking back out the window, "hey, what do you do now, if you don't mind me asking?"

Jamie waved off her concern, "I'm no longer a cop, if that's what you meant… but I do work closely with them, helping out with the PCYC's and other youth events," she said with a small smile, before sighing softly, "I also go around and do talks on how violence can affect someone directly… I found that by sharing my story and teaching people how their rash actions can have consequences, it helped me move past my trauma."

Dash turned back and looked at her for a good few seconds, a little taken back by what Jamie had told her. Jamie looked out the window at nothing in particular and continued, "I still have nightmares about that night, though infrequent as they are these days, and I can't go into the Valley unless I'm with a decent group of people. But I found a way to use my experience for good…"

"Bastard got what, ten years, right?" Shade asked with a low voice, to which Jamie rolled her eyes.

"Seven, with a non-parole of four," she answered, "though Christie says that he's been on good behaviour for all of the time spent so he might even get out later this year."

"Fucker shouldn't get out at all if you ask me…" Dash muttered, facing forward again.

"If it makes you feel any better, Dash," Jamie started, hesitating as she used her call sign, "my patrol partner landed a solid shot to the guy's ass with his Taser. One prong in each cheek, actually..."

Shade barked a laugh, "Shit, I never heard that little detail before. Bloody hell, remind me to buy Colin a beer when I see him next." He looked over to Dash with a soft smile, reaching over to nudge her gently. "Thoughts so far?"

"It's… a little odd, seeing everything from the opposite side, but it's nice," Dash answered with a chuckle.

"Bet it would be… once we hit the city and get into South Bank, you'll get to see the 'prettier side' of..."
"Don't forget GOMA, QPAC, the State Library and Museum..." Jamie chimed in.

"Nerd," Shade shot back with a cheeky smile, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

"Dork," Dash said as she leveled a smirk at Shade while Jamie started laughing, "though, you're gonna have to speak 'English-English' to me, not 'Aussie-English'. What are those places?"

"Gallery of Modern Art, and the Queensland Performing Arts Centre," Jamie clarified, "where us cultured folk go to have a fun time." She smiled smugly at Shade and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Her besties were all theatre and arts majors, so she was dragged into the scene through them," Shade remarked off-handedly as they crested the hill and merged onto the road that would take them over one of the bridges that fed into South Bank, "never was one for the whole artsy stuff myself."

Dash stifled a laugh, "I don't know, some of those insults you made back in Mexico were quite... creative..."

"... touché." From the back seat, Jamie frowned and let out a groan.

"Please tell me that he isn't still referring to movies and such while he's out there with you, please..."

"He most certainly does," Dash answered grimly, then chuckled, shaking her head, "And his puns are awful, have they always been that bad?"

Jamie nodded solemnly, "Try living with him for twenty-three odd years..."

Dash winced sympathetically, "I am so sorry." Jamie shook her head.

"No, if anything, I'm sorry for you. Thankful, but still sorry." Shade glanced between them with a displeased expression on his face.

"I'm beginning to regret ever introducing the pair of you... bloody hell," he said with a sigh as he focused back on the road, "Hey, Jamie, we're almost there."

"Okay," she replied as she got her handbag and other belongings ready to go. Within minutes, Shade pulled off to the side and let his sister out, sending a quick 'goodbye' before pulling back out before any potential traffic officers could ticket him. Once back onto the road, he smiled.

"Good to see you two are getting along well... even if it is at my expense..."

Dash laughed, "Would it honestly be any different back on base with the Task Force?"

"If anyone, and I mean anyone, suggests a 'bring your siblings to work day', I will take a flashbang and strap it to their crotch," He said completely deadpan, "the last thing I want is my sister being exposed to the manchild that is Meat."

"Not what I meant, but fair enough, I can't imagine Meat would make the greatest first impression," Dash laughed.

"I honestly don't know what would be worse: Meat flirting with her to the point of trying to sleep with her, or Jamie sharing all of my embarrassing stories to the entire team and essentially giving them major blackmail material..." Shade said with a sigh, "both outcomes scare me, heh."
"You say that like she hasn't already," she smirked at him, "Mister 'Classiest Arrival to School'," she finished with a laugh, laughing harder when Shade just let his head rest on the wheel in dismay.

The pair of them were walking along the path that ran alongside the Brisbane River, the CBD and Riverside Expressway visible on the opposite site. It was fairly busy for the mid afternoon, surprisingly so, with families, individuals and couples all out on the bank.

"... place gets packed for Riverfire, so much so that the police end up locking the place down to keep the crowds from getting too big," Shade explained as he recounted a story from a time before he joined the Army, "I was actually sent up here during my TAG rotation one year; we were speeding around on a RHIB on the river, helping the water police keep the area clear."

Dash nodded thoughtfully, hands in her pockets as they walked, "Remind me what Riverfire is?"

"It's a big fireworks show they hold at the end of September," Shade began, "the culmination of the month-long 'River Festival', which celebrates all of the city's culture and history. Every year the ADF do some aerial display in the afternoon prior and do a fly past at the start and or the end of the fireworks display. Brings in huge crowds from all of South East Queensland, hotels and apartments get booked out months in advance, and all of here, South Bank, gets filled with just shy of half a million people. You can see why both the state and federal government gets a little paranoid about security and counter-terror."

"Yikes, yeah, that many people in one place is just begging for trouble," Dash nodded, "Sounds impressive though."

"That it is… operational readiness permitting, we should come back here when it's on. I'm sure the guys would get a kick out of it." He said with a chuckle, before reaching into his pocket to retrieve his ringing phone. Shade checked the number then answered it with a slightly puzzled expression, "Tom Williams… oh, hi… yes… that's, that's actually amazing… t-thank you!" His voice transitioned from his usual level and steady tone to one of excitement and relief, and with a final thank you he hung up the call and pocketed the phone with a huge smile on his face.

"Good news I take it," Dash guessed with a smile. Shade nodded and rubbed his face.

"Dad's out of theatre, and his expected to make a full recovery, however long that might take. The surgeon, he's the guy I was speaking to just then, said that Dad looked a lot worse than he actually was. He's very lucky, but they're going to keep him in for another couple of months for observation and initial rehabilitation stuff…” he finished with a soft but pleased sigh. Just by looking at him, Dash could see that the weight had lifted off of his shoulders.

"That's great, Shades," Dash grinned, "One less thing to worry about."

"Indeed… one moment, gonna quickly let Jamie and 'Ry know." Shade said before retrieving his phone to shoot off a text to his siblings. After returning his phone once more, he looked back to Dash. "So… feel like anything in particular for lunch? We've got a fair bit of choice here on the Bank."

Dash shrugged, "What do you recommend?" Shade hummed quietly as he looked around where they were walking, quickly spying a particular place in mind. He looked back down at Dash and smiled.

"I know a good burger joint that's not far, sound good?"

"Sure."
"Shawty had them apple bottom jeans - jeans - boots with the fur," Rook and Roach could only watch in horror as a tanked Meat busted out his best rendition of Flo Rida's 'Low' in the middle of the base's rec room. It had been quieter than normal over the last couple of days, especially since the team was 'stood down' until Shade and Dash returned from his emergency flight to Australia. This particular night, someone had suggested to the rest of the team that they bust out an old karaoke game that was hidden away from view.

In hindsight, Roach could see exactly why the game was hidden. Had he and the few sober-ish members of the team had known then what they knew now, they would have set up the game disk up on the firing range and let loose with an M240B machine gun.

"Oi!" Rook said over the music, thumping Roach on the shoulder with one hand and gesturing out to the door with the other. Roach noted that Rook's phone was ringing, and he quickly put two and two together. They made it outside in no time, where Rook answered the call.

"National Headhunters; you tag 'em, we bag 'em," He greeted with a laugh, putting the phone on speaker.

"Goddamn it mate, if I wanted a gag answer, I'd have rung Meat," Shade's voice spoke up from the other end.

"Yeah, Meat's a little… indisposed for the time being…" Roach spoke up. A combined laugh could be heard over the line.

"Dare I ask, or are we better off not knowing?" Dash asked rhetorically. They all shared a laugh, before Rook asked the question that had to be asked.

"So, what's the news?"

"Well… Dad's in ICU but they say he's expected to recover fully, even though it might take a while. Mum got pretty banged up as well, but she's in good spirits. Little bro made it out relatively unscathed, if a little bit shaken up. And my sister's no longer a nervous wreck now, so there's an improvement…"

"That's great to hear mate," Rook said, Roach nodding with him, "we've just been chilling out all up here, you guys should go on holiday more often."

"Uh-huh…" Dash said sarcastically, "Man, first week back's gonna be fun ain't it Shade?"

"Yeah… real excited to get back to those runs in full kit, drill after drill after drill. Can't wait!" The four of them started to laugh together, enjoying the moment while they could. "I haven't been able to reach the bossman yet, could you pass along the news and the detail that we might be here for the rest of the week just to help settle everything down. Just need to tee up a few things with a few assistance agencies for when my folks get discharged, y'know?"

"All good mate, you take your time. I'm sure the Captain will be more than able to help you out from his end," Rook said, "and if there's anything you need us to do, just give us a yell."

"Will do! See you guys soon!" Shade called, Dash throwing in a "don't burn the place down" before the call ended. The two shared a look, relieved to hear that things were going well for them.

The next couple of days passed by in a blur, with Shade and his siblings running around to help organise the house and set up schedules with part-time carers to help look after their healing parents.
Shade, with Dash's and Henry's help, had set up the lounge room as a temporary bedroom, minimising the number of times that his parents would need to venture up and down the stairs.

When not running around the house, Shade and Dash kept busy by going out around the city to indulge in the usual 'tourist traps': climbing the Story Bridge, the Mount Coot-tha lookout, the Botanic Gardens, Queen Street Mall, more trips to South Bank, just to name a few. Shade couldn't remember the last time he had been so relaxed, never having the chance to truly unwind back at the base.

The pair of them were enjoying a movie back at Shade's family home, having spent most of that particular day on their feet running around getting the last few pieces of furniture arranged for his parents. After a fairly simple dinner, and after his brother had retreated back to his bedroom for the night whilst his sister left to spend some time with her boyfriend, Shade and Dash made their way into the second smaller lounge room to sit down and relax. And as he leant back into the cushions of the couch he was laying down on, he could help but see noticed how quiet and comfortable Dash was, more so than normal, or at least as normal as one can get when living on base.

That was discounting all of the help she had been when dealing with stuff related to his parents, always lending a hand here or offering a reassuring word there. Initially, he felt a little guilty at first, regarding the fact that she was sent along to watch his back, but now found himself dismissing that guilt. Despite the circumstances, the trip to Brisbane had definitely benefited them both: him with being able to help his family, and her with a 'vacation' of sorts.

Not that you could call shopping around for mobility aids that attach to a toilet a typical 'vacation' activity.

"Hey D," Shade asked during a quiet part of their movie, assuming that Dash wasn't really paying that much attention to it, "I know I've said this like a thousand times by now, but thank you."

Dash chuckled and shook her head, "No worries, Shades."

"Have you enjoyed yourself down here? I don't want to make it feel like I'm working you too hard or dumping everything onto you…"

Dash scoffed a laugh, "Are you kidding?!" she questioned, "This has been like a damned vacation!" She shook her head again, "Can't say I'm not ready to get back to work, but this has been a nice change of pace. Besides, you know I like to keep busy."

Shade laughed too, shaking his head in disbelief, "That I know too well. But seriously, I don't know what I'd have done without you her-" he was cut off as his phone started to buzz on the coffee table between him, "the fuck? It's like almost eleven, who could be ringing me at this hour?" Dash shrugged at him, and he answered the call. "This is Tom."

"Shade," the voice of their captain caught him off guard, "firstly this is a secure line so you don't need to worry about OPSEC. Secondly, put me on speaker; I apologise if I was interrupting anything but Dash needs to hear this as well."

Shade complied with the instruction and gestured for Dash to speak up, "Good, now that I have both of your attention, I'll get down to it. I need the pair of you back here ASAP. Hotel's been slated on an urgent mission, straight from the General himself."

The pair shared a frown, Dash looking back to the phone, "What are we looking at Captain?"

"Shepherd wants us on standby for a series of ops in and around Afghanistan; some key members of
the insurgency there have started opening ties with the Russian Ultranationalist party behind closed
doors, and we're on call to cut those ties. India Team has already made landfall and has
commenced preparations for our arrival next week."

"Understood," Dash answered, "We'll take tonight to rest and pack up and leave tomorrow
afternoon."

"I've got Gale flying back as we speak; he'll give you two a call when he's touched down and ready
to fly you back. I apologise if this causes any issues with recuperation and rehabilitation for your
family, Shade."

"It's all okay sir, D and I managed to get most of what we needed to do, whatever's left is more than
able to be handled by my siblings. I mean, it'd have been nice to be here when they're actually
released, but that's not for another month or so yet," Shade said with an understanding yet regretful
tone, "hopefully they'll be up and walking by the end of the tour."

"Let's hope so. I'll let you two go back to it; the team won't get themselves organised if I leave them
alone for too long," Captain MacTavish said with a laugh over the phone line.

"Isn't that what Ghost is for, sir?" Shade asked with a laugh, "I can't believe I'm reminding an officer
about the power of delegation."

MacTavish laughed again, "Believe me, Ghost is a double-edged sword. In the right environment, he
can be just as bad as someone the likes of Meat. Just don't tell him I said that," Dash and Shade
shared another laugh at that remark, "I'll see you two soon."

They said their goodbyes before the Captain ended the call, and Shade leant back onto the couch
with a sigh, hand covering his face with a sigh before sitting up to look at Dash with a bemused
smile. "Been a while since I've visited the sandbox. Can't say I miss the place though."

Dash simply hummed with a slow nod, "Yeah, can't imagine it's much better than the last time I saw
it."

"It'll be good to run around for a bit though, kickin' doors, findin' bad buggers and take 'em out." He
chuckled, shaking his head as he got up from the couch and stretched. "We can start packing
tomorrow morning, say our farewells, rush over to the hospital and give Mum and Dad a farewell
hug, grab a bite to eat before Gale decides to leave our asses behind."

"I'd stay a lot longer if I could, believe me I want to," Shade said remorsecfully as he leant down to
give his father a parting hug, "but work's just ramped up and they need us back to lend a few hands."

"As long as you don't worry about us," his father, George Williams, said with a hoarse voice, "go
fight the good fight and make the world a better place for us, okay?" George looked over to his right
where Alice sat beside him, the pair having been moved into a shared room in one of the regular
wards.

"I'll smack him for you if he doesn't," Dash piped up from where she stood in the corner, watching
the three interact, "I hope you two get well soon. If there's anything you need, we're only a phone
call away."

"Thank you… Rebecca, right?" Alice asked, still unfamiliar with her son's colleague, "I trust you to
keep him safe."

Shade chuckled at the predictable request, "Mum, don't worry. She's got my back, and I've got hers.
We've gotta get going now, our pilot is a bit of an impatient bugger, and if it weren't for our boss he'd likely have left us behind now."

All four shared a laugh, then bid final farewells with barely-restrained tears. Shade and Dash emerged from inside the hospital a few minutes later, wordlessly piling into a taxi to take them to Brisbane International Airport where Gale would be picking them up. Halfway there, as the driver emerged from the airport link tunnel, Shade sighed.

"Probably won't see them for another eight or nine months, hopefully this tour goes fast and we don't see any heavy actions or the like."

Dash nodded, "We do our jobs well, watch each other's backs, and you'll be back to visit in no time. Like you said to your folks, don't worry or stress about it," she patted him on the back, "I'm sure that after this tour we'll all get some much needed time off. I know I'm coming here again, whether it's with you or not."

Shade smirked at her, "Oh, is that so? Did my hometown happen to grow on you?"

"I will neither confirm nor deny that statement…"
Same Shit, New Environment

Fire Base Phoenix, Shahjoy Province, Afghanistan

Four days later…

“Goooooooood morning Afghanistaaaaaaan!” Shade said loudly as he and Dash sat down with the rest of the team in the base’s mess tent. They’d been here for a day now and already he, and the rest of the team, were sick of it. More for the memories it drew up over anything else, but also for the sub-par food they were being fed while on tour.

He looked around the tent to study the other soldiers that were currently dining. Phoenix was primarily a US-operated base; as such, it was unsurprising to see that the vast majority of troops were either Army, Marines or even Air Force. Also unsurprising was the sight of Afghan National Army troops on base, as this base also served as a mentoring outpost.

“Heard ol’ Shep was gonna be lookin at a candidate today,” Dash commented idly, “Gonna have him run the pit I think.”

“Any idea on where he’s bein’ pulled from? Just to know what we’re facing as far as fresh meat’s concerned.”

Dash shrugged, “There’s a bunch of Rangers around, probably one of them, other than that, I don’t know. Rumor among them is he’s looking at a whole squad and picking the best.”

“Right,” Shade nodded, quickly digging into his breakfast, “reckon we should give ‘em a show, see just what they’re expected to do?”

She grinned, “Are you suggesting we go show off to the nugs? We humble elites? Running the pit with the movers on full speed? Showing the rookies how it’s done?” Dash laughed, “Shadey boy, you are speaking my language.”

Shade laughed with her, “I’m fluent in ‘operator’, and I was thinking we run a solo each then do a tandem run to finish. That should scare off any prospective applicants.” A round of laughter from a far corner in the tent caught his attention, and a large grin erupted on his face when he saw the source of the noise, “No fucking way! Talk about a small world, heh.” Shade looked back at Dash and threw a thumb over his shoulder towards a group of US soldiers in the corner. “I remember those guys from my second deployment, I think they’re from the First of the Seventy-Fifth. Did a few patrols with those guys during my first deployment as a Commando, since Rangers and Commandos fill a similar mission type, y’know?”

Dash nodded, peering over his shoulder to look at the Rangers. “You should go say ‘G’day’, or whatever it is you crazy Aussie’s say,” she said with a smirk.

“If I didn’t know any better, it would sound like you’re trying to get rid of me,” Shade smiled back as he stood up from the table.

“Ah, you caught me,” she replied with her hands held up in mock surrender, “now hurry up and go talk to your fellow door-kickers before I regret cutting you loose.” Shade rolled his eyes as he walked over to the corner where the group of five Rangers sat.

“Well well well, long time no see, Dunny,” Shade spoke up as they looked up to him. Three of them quickly started to smile with the other two looking on in confusion, “and are those three stripes I see,
Corporal Andrew Dunn stood up from the table and embraced the Aussie firmly, Shade eagerly returning the hug. “The hell are you doing back here man? Last I heard, you lot were raising hell with the Dutch in Uruzgan?”

“Last I heard, we still are, just not as much nowadays. But I’ve been a little out of the loop, so who knows what’s goin’ on.” Shade shrugged, pulling up a chair beside Dunn as they both sat down. Dunn shook his head, and Shade reached across to shake Sergeant Michael Foley’s hand.

“It’s good to see you again, Corporal.” Shade chuckled at Foley’s formality.

“You aren’t the only one who picked up a third stripe mate, but likewise Sarge.” He looked around the table and fistbumped the third member of the group he recognised, Corporal Tim Wade. “Wadey mate, you still lookin’ lost as ever.”

“You know me Tommy, without me, who else is going to keep Dunn focused?” Wade shot back with a laugh, Dunn slapping his friend on the shoulder. Shade laughed with them and then looked to the two newcomers.

“G’day, Sergeant Tom Williams, Second Commandos from Australia.” He offered his hand to them, receiving a pair of shakes in reply.

“Private First Class Joseph Allen, nice to meet a fellow Tier Two from across the pond.”

“Private James Ramirez, I take it you know our squad lead from before?” Ramirez asked.

“Yeah, rolled with them back when Foley here was a Corporal a couple of years ago. Was a few joint ops between you Rangers and us Commandos, since we’re similar kinds of units. I got seperated from my section and regrouped with Foley and Dunn.”

“Practically saved your life, if I recall correctly,” Dunn interrupted with a knowing smirk.

“Hey now, it’s not my fault that someone put a wall in my way.” Shade defended, the table erupting in laughter as they continued to catch up after so long.

“I take it your boy toy is off cheating on you with those Rangers, eh?” Dash rolled her eyes at the remark from Meat as they walked through the base from the mess.

Dash scoffed a chuckle, “And here I thought you’d be more concerned with Royce over there getting his ass kicked on the basketball court.”

Meat shook his head dismissively, “Nah, he’s saving it for the end. He plays the long game, after all,” he chuckled then looked at her, “and nice try, but you aren’t gonna avoid this topic forever.”

“What topic?” Dash asked with a shrug, “We just went through like five.”

“You,” Meat started, holding up his hand and forming a ring with his fingers, “and Shade,” up went his other hand with two fingers extended, “that topic.”

“Meathead, I want you to think real hard about where you’re headed with this,” Dash chuckled, “Before you lose a tooth.”

He smirked evilly, “Like you’re thinking his real hard- ow!” He rubbed his arm as Dash had slugged him arm in the arm.
“Consider that your first, last, and only warning, Brian.” The look she was giving him, accompanied by the way she said Meat’s first name made him pause.

“... message received.” He said cautiously, breathing a small sigh of relief when Dash turned back and started walking again. “In all seriousness though, weren’t you two planning a demo or something soon? I’d have thought that you and him would be rehearsing now.”

Dash scoffed, “Rehearse? Us?” she chuckled, “We don’t need to rehearse.”

“Then forgive me when I start to laugh after watching you eat shit in front of whoever happens to watch when you and Real Slim Shadey trip each other up,” Meat chuckled with a shrug, “I should film it, maybe submit it to Funniest Home Videos.”

She shook her head, “You didn’t see what happened in Mexico. We’re not gonna trip each other up. It’s called communication. You should practice that, y’know, maybe you’ll save some humiliation in the Pit?”

He quirked an eyebrow at her, stopping and folding his arms across his chest. “Is that a challenge I hear?”

Dash gestured widely, “Please, Meathead, do remind us your scores on the course back home?”

Meat squinted at her, then leant down to get in her face. “Thirty minutes from now. The Pit. You and Shade. Royce and I.”

She smirked at him, “Bring it.” Meat started to chuckle at her, standing back upright.

“And to make this more interesting, if you two lose: you have to ask Shade out on a date when we get back. And I’m talking a proper date, none of this ‘casual drinks’ or shit like that in a tee and jeans. I’m talking dinner at a restaurant, followed by a movie, followed by a walk in a park or whatever romantic shit you do, in a nice dress and makeup.” He smirked at her confidently. Dash simply sighed.

“Okay,” she said without any displeasure or hesitation, to which Meat frowned.

“Okay? Just like that?”

“Yeah,” she repeated, “just like that. But if you lose… you and Royce have to do exactly the same thing. Don’t worry, I’ll let you two work out who can wear the dress.” Meat stood there silently in thought as he mulled over his chances. After a few moments, he sighed and extended his hand for Dash to shake.

“Sounds fair… I wonder if Shade’s a ‘short skirt, long jacket’ kind of guy?”

Dash chuckled, “Too bad, we’ll never find out.” They shook hands and separated to find their respective partners, both of them thinking about the consequences if they were to fail.

"Now can I get a yeeeee, for who I'm in the building with? Who I came with is who I'm still chilling with. The sound that we started, they stealing it. But that just let us know they still feeling it…”

Royce ran up to the hoop and jumped for the layup, successfully scoring the point and putting himself in the lead in the impromptu one-on-one basketball match he found himself in against an American infantry soldier. The crowd cheered as he ‘danced’ to the song playing on the nearby stereo to celebrate his point. He walked up to the soldier he was playing against and clapped him on the back.
“Sorry brother, but you ain’t got nothing on this,” he taunted as he bounced the ball to him and readied himself for the next play.

“Royce! Need you here!” A voice called from the side, and he looked to find his friend Meat gesturing for him to approach. He apologised to the soldier and tagged out, then jogged over to Meat.

“Yeah man? What’s up?” He asked, a little out of breath and plenty sweaty from both the desert heat and physical exertion of the game.

“We’re doing a pit run in twenty mikes, get your gear together.” Royce looked at him confused as Meat turned around and started leading the pair back to their tent.

“Uh, okay, but why?”

“Our dignity is at stake man. Come on, we got some work to do.”

Dash stepped into the mess tent, noticeably emptier now that it wasn’t a meal time, and wasn’t surprised to see the five Rangers and one Commando still seated at the table, deep in conversation.

She plopped down next to Shade, “How many Mexican cartel goons does it take to hit an Aussie?”

“Uh… seven?” One of the Rangers, his name tag reading Ramirez, offered as the others looked at their new arrival.

Shade just gave her a flat look and shot back, “How long does it take a Texan to slap a drunk Italian arms dealer?”

“About ten seconds flat,” Dash answered with a smirk.

“That’s funny,” he chuckled, “I remember it taking at least twenty…”

Dash narrowed her eyes at him and shrugged, “Twenty’s what we got to get to the pit to kick Meat and Royce’s asses. Minutes… twenty minutes.”

“And pray tell, why are we kicking their asses?” Shade asked, curious yet flashing a look at the Rangers as they watched the conversation take place.

“He was talking shit,” she shrugged, “Cracking jokes about our course times and other ridiculous shit. He needs a refresher.”

Shade shrugged back, “Sounds about right…” he looked back to the others, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to take a pair of Canadians back to school. You’re more than welcome to come along and watch.”

“Watching you run The Pit? I ain’t gonna miss that.” Another Ranger, this one named Dunn, spoke enthusiastically. The seven of them rose from their seats and made their way towards the armoury.

Dunn dropped back a little to walk beside Dash. “Well hey there, name’s Dunn. Andy Dunn…”

Dash raised an eyebrow at him, “Hay’s for horses, Corporal.” Dunn continued on undeterred.

“Hay’s also fun to roll around in,” he remarked as he popped his eyebrows, “Used to be in the ‘Cav before I was a Ranger.”

“Uh-huh…” Dash remarked blandly, “You ever get kicked?”
“No, but I love ridin’. Bet you do too; bein’ a nice southern girl, heh.”

She frowned at him, “First time for everything, Corporal.” Dunn was about to retort when Shade looked over his shoulder at them.

“Oi, Dunny! Be careful back there, the Master Sergeant’s got a bit of a bite on her.” He called back with a laugh as Dunn quickly paled in realisation. Dash merely smirked, though was a little miffed that Shade got the last laugh and not her.

She chuckled at Dunn’s expression though, “Master Sergeant Myers, at your service.”

“P-lease to meet you, Master Sergeant…” he stammered, opting to go silent for the rest of their walk.

“Ease up, I only kick the idiots, like our very own Meathead,” Dash commented, “Call me Dash.”

“Alright, Dash…” he started cautiously, “I’m sorry, by the way. If there’s any way I can make it up to you…”

“No worries, Dunn,” Dash shrugged, “I was messing with you more than anything,” she laughed. Dunn started to laugh too, relaxing now that the bad air was mostly clear between them.

“That’s reassuring.” The walk to the pit didn’t take much longer, and they spotted the two Canadian operators waiting outside for them.

“Gotta wait a little longer, some Greenies are taking their ANA counterparts through right now,” Royce spoke up, referring to the small detachment of Green Berets that were also on the base.

“I’m down for waiting, gives me a little more time to warm up,” Shade remarked casually, setting his rifle down against the wall. He looked over to Meat and sighed. “You keep it up the way you are, I’ll have to start carrying a roll of bloody duct tape with me.”

“Hey, she started it!” Meat cried out, pointing at Dash. “If you’re gonna tape anyone, tape her!” He paused for a moment, then laughed. “Actually, don’t: she might enjoy that!”

Dunn tapped Foley on the arm and whispered to him. “And these guys are supposed to be the best of the best, from what Tommy said, right?”

Meat adjusted the sling on his rifle for the fifth time in as many seconds, then looked to see Royce staring at him with an unimpressed expression on his face. “What?”

“Meat… I’ve never seen you this nervous before. You were much more collected on your first op with us than you are now. What’s the deal?” Royce asked him, a little worried for his friend.

Meat looked over to where Dash and Shade were standing, still in the midst of getting their gear organised, then leant over to Royce. “Look… I made a bet with Dash, alright? Loser has to do something embarrassing that the winner picks.”

“… that’s it?”

“Yeah. I told Dash that she had to take Shade out on a proper romantic date, complete with makeup and a dress.” Royce snorted back a laugh.

“Dude, I don’t think she even owns a dress, let alone would wear one willingly.” Meat nodded.
“Exactly, which is why she was quick to accept the bet.”

“And if they win?” Meat hesitated, then sighed. “What?”

“We have to do the same.” Royce was quiet for a few moments.

“So? We just go out, pretend that we went on a date when in fact we visited a range and literally shot the shit.” Meat shot his head at the suggestion.

“No, you don’t understand. We have to go on a romantic date, complete with one of us in a dress... “ Royce was silent for a lot longer this time, shaking his head at what his closest friend got himself into. “And you know what Dash is like; she’ll make sure we carry it out in full.”

“... goddamnit Meat.”

“So,” Shade started as he let the bolt of his HK416 slide home, “how’re we gonna do this? Split the area into halves and cover a side respectively? Or just pick targets and hope we don’t pick the same?” He let the rifle hang from it’s sling as he tapped the top of his helmet and then pulled the chinstrap tight to lock the helmet in place on his head.

“First option. You cover right, I’ll take left,” Dash replied, running a last check over her Vector. “I swear to high heavens, if we lose this Shades...”

“Message received: I’ll try not to fuck this up.” Shade chuckled, glancing over towards where Meat and Royce stood, closest to the course’s starting position. The two teams had agreed that they would wait in the ready area and not spectate each other’s runs. Their audience of Rangers, however, were up in the observation tower with Dunn at the control panel. “Remind me, why are we doing this again?”

“Like I said; to teach Meat a lesson in how not to shoot his mouth off.” Dash replied smugly, shooting a meaningful look towards the Canadian in question, who shied away from her gaze. Shade shook his head and laughed quietly.

“You’d think that his life is on the bloody line, what with how seriously he’s taking this.”

The PA system crackled to life, and Dunn’s voice echoed through the speakers. “Okay ladies and gentlemen, since we’re all top-shit soldiers, I’m going to skip through the usual safety bullshit and just go through the ground rules. First, each team will stay in the ready bay until the completion of both runs. Second, each team will only have one attempt. Times will be given once both teams have completed their attempt. Thirdly, for each set of targets to appear, you need to ensure the previous set were all knocked down. Lastly, there are civilian target plates in the course. Hitting these will incur a time penalty of five seconds.”

“With that out of the way, Team One, enter the course. Time will start once the first set of targets appear. Good luck!” Meat and Royce shared a fist bump and pushed open the gate to enter the course, their rifles at the ready. Once they were situated, Royce flashed a thumbs up to the control station. With a loud buzz, the first sets of plate targets lifted. Meat lifted his rifle, an ACR, and quickly engaged the first two targets on the left side of the course while Royce dropped the third with his Mark 18. They moved forward in sync as the next sets deployed, all targets dropping back down in short order. Meat reached the door first and sidestepped to the left, taking out the first target in front of him just before it moved behind the civilian plate.

Royce swung to the right and hit the second and third targets in short order, then made his way up the stairs. He struck the target with his boot then leveled his rifle on the first two plates in front of
them, dropping them with a single shot at Meat took the next two on the right. “Covering!” He called as he took a knee, engaging two targets down back on the ground on the left as Royce jumped down and engaged two more on the right. Meat followed him down and they made short work of the remaining targets before sprinting to the finish, their run ending with another loud buzz and a round of applause from the Rangers gathered in the observation tower.

Dunn wrote down the time on his notepad, Team 1: 0:31:25, then reset the course. “Alright, good run guys. Team Two, course is all yours.” Back on the ground, Meat and Royce unslung their rifles and began taking off their gear as Shade and Dash took their mark.

“Good luck Dashie, you’ll need it!” Meat taunted, to which she replied with a simple hand gesture. Dash then pulled Shade aside.

“Stick to sidearms, it’ll be faster.” She said, to Shade’s confusion.

“Y’think that’s wise, D? I mean, I don’t know about you but I think it’d be easier to stick with primaries.”

“You’ll move faster with a sidearm, trust me on this.” Shade just shrugged and unslung his rifle, letting it lean against a sandbag wall and un-holstered his sidearm, a Glock 21, holding it in his right hand. Dash did the same with her M9.

“If you say so…” he said as they walked towards the starting point.

“You do remember why I’m called ‘Dash’, right?” she joked, flashing a thumbs up to Dunn in the control booth. Shade didn’t get a chance to reply as the buzzer sounded and the targets went up.

They snapped into action and quickly downed the three targets, moving on to clear the next sets with ease. Shade entered the house first and stepped right, knocking down the two targets and leaving the hostage to Dash. He then charged up the stairs and rammed his shoulder into the stairwell target before engaging the targets to the right with one hand. Dash was right behind him and quickly downed the remaining two before the pair jumped down together.

Shade hit the ground awkwardly, costing him his balance and a few precious seconds to recover as Dash took out the first three of four targets, leaving him the forth before they engaged the last set of targets. They sprinted to the finish, Shade lagging behind with a slight limp as they crossed the finish line. Dunn frowned a little at how Shade appeared to be moving, before writing down their time, Team Two: 0:32.84.

“You guys know we have rifles for a reason,” Meat began as he approached Shade and Dash, squatting in front of Shade, who was now sitting down and leaning against the wall as he undid his boot. “Hey, you alright man?”

“Just landed awkwardly on that jump, rolled it a little bit,” Shade answered, grimacing a little as he rotated his ankle around, “I’ll get Chemo to check it out once we’re done here.” He looked up at Dash and smirked, “Y’know, I think you might be onto something with the whole ’sidearms are faster’ theory.”

“Of course I was,” Dash smirked back, “I’m Dash, for a reason.”

“I wouldn’t get too ahead of yourselves,” a voice said from the entrance, and the four Task Force soldiers turned to see Sergeant Foley with the rest of the Rangers behind him, all looking quite impressed by the speed and accuracy displayed by them, “I have to admit, that was some quality gunslinging there. But judgement time has come. Corporal Dunn, the times please?”
Dunn stepped forward with his notepad in his hands, and cleared his throat. “Alright, so, Team Two: Shade and Dash. You ran The Pit in thirty-two point eight-four seconds. As far as a pairs run in The Pit goes, that’s top five material.” He then turned to look at Meat and Royce. “Team One: Royce and… Meat? You guys ran it in thirty-one point two-five seconds. New pairs run time record.” He put the notepad back in his pocket, “Congratulations, I suppose.”

Meat and Royce let out a shout of delight, then Meat turned around to Dash and started to laugh. “Well then, Dashie, time for you to pay up!”

She glared at him, “We got shit to do, Meat, later.” Meat frowned and stepped over towards the ramp that lead in and out of the Pit.

“Oh, uh-uh, this’ll only take you a few seconds to ask. Then you can be on your merry way.” He said, crossing his arms over his chest. Royce shot him a warning look, but it went unnoticed, while Shade watched on obliviously.

Dash narrowed her eyes dangerously, “Meat… I suggest you move. Before I move you.”

“Would you rather I ask him on your behalf?” He teased, before looking over her shoulder towards the man in question, “Hey, Shadey, Da-”

“Meat…” Royce interjected with a tone that brooked no argument, flashing an apologetic look to both Dash and Shade, “drop it. Time and a place, okay? This ain’t the time.”

The two Canadians looked at each other for a few moments, then Meat dropped his arms and stepped to the side, not before facing Dash. “Treat it like a bandage Dash, the sooner and the faster you do it, the less it’ll hurt.” Royce gripped Meat by the arm and started to lead him out, with Dash, Shade and the Rangers watching on in a mixture of shock, frustration and sheer confusion.

Shade broke the tense silence after a few seconds, “What the fuck… I’ve clearly missed something here…” He looked over at Dash, who could best be described as a bomb that was seconds away from going off, “D, I think we need to talk…”

Dash sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, “Later, Shades. We will talk about that later.”

“Whenever you’re ready, as long as it’s sooner rather than later.” He offered, putting his boot back on and collecting his rifle. He turned to the Rangers, “Sorry you had to see all that… we’ll catch up some more later.”

Foley and Dunn waved him off, “It’s alright man, do what you need to do. I think we’ve got shit to do soon anyway,” Dunn said as Foley herded the other Rangers towards the exit, “See you around.”

He watched them leave before turning back towards Dash, who had now collected her own weapons and was ready to leave. He nodded to her, and together they slowly made their way up and out, Shade still limping slightly. “Hey… have you even seen Chemo today?” He asked, “I’ve not seen him since we got here, barring at night and occasionally at the mess…”

Authors’ Notes

Spitfire

This got very long very fast. Dash is not happy and I doubt Meat is going to let her live any of this down. I don’t think Dash even has ‘date’ clothes… That is a problem for another day! Dash is about ready to punch the hell outta one mouthy Canadian. So, that’s all I got for now.
Shade

Meat’s definitely in the doghouse now, with multiple people. He needs to learn to let things slide and when’s the right time to open his mouth (hint, it’s never). Shade’s still clueless as to the real reason why Dash and Meat are coming to blows, since he hasn’t seen them this ‘stand off-ish’ before since he first arrived to the task force… oh Shade, how little you know… until next time I suppose.
New Players

Shahjoy Province, Afghanistan

The next day…

Shade stood idly at the front entrance to the plain-looking house, watching the street and the gathered crowd as they watched the spectacle of twelve heavily-armed soldiers raiding a resident’s home in the middle of the town. Internally, he mused that most of these civilians were jaded and had become used to such events, as most of the spectators gave them a few glances and carried on with the rest of the day.

He was drawn from his thoughts when Rook walked out of the door, rifle slung in front of him and helmet in his hands. He clipped it to his vest and pulled his cap out from a pocket on his combat pants. That was another detail that helped keep people away. They had been informed that they’d all be wearing full combat uniforms, complete with flags and ID patches, as opposed to the usual mixture of unmarked uniforms and civilian attire that they’d normally wear in the field. From what Shade recalled in the initial briefings, it was to project an additional sense of force whilst also concealing that they were a ‘special forces unit’.

“Y’think the tooled up rifles and gear give us away mate?” Rook asked after sipping down a few mouthfuls of water.

“If this was oh-three, maybe. But these days, even your bog standard infantryman has everything from magnified reflex optics, multi-function illuminators, ergonomic grips… hell, I think I saw an M4 with an built-in iPhone cradle.” Shade replied with a chuckle, shaking his head, “how long have we got to go?”

Rook looked over to his friend, “The Captain, Ghost and Meat are still ‘interviewing’ the homeowner, everyone else inside is wrapping up SSE. I think we got another five or so minutes before we find our next lucky contestant.”

Shade nodded as he looked to his right, where the two vehicles they drove in on were parked; an open-top four door Land Rover armed with an M2 machine gun in the gunner’s station towards the rear of the vehicle, and a soft-top two door Land Rover. Both were tan with an improvised camouflage scheme spray painted over the top; an addition made by Meat, Royce, Roach and Scarecrow to make them ‘theirs’. Chemo and Scarecrow were standing guard at them, keeping any overly curious civilians away.

“We’ve got, what, like two more people to hit today?”

Rook nodded, “Yeah, two more for today, then we got tomorrow for more prep and planning, then six the day after. Rinse and repeat until either we finally finish the list or ol’ Sheppy loses interest and we can focus entirely on Kingfish.”

“Never was a big fan of the whole search and destroy thing, especially when you replace ‘destroy’ with ‘recover a bunch of papers and notes that might prove useful but ultimately were just chapters of a Arabian slash fiction’,” Shade said with a restrained chuckle, turning to look at Rook, “And yes, that did happen to my team back in the Commandos once.”

“I’d ask how you found out, but I figure the less I know the better,” Rook chuckled with him, shaking his head in mild disbelief.
“How’re we doin’ boys?” Dash said as she walked through the doorway, a duffel bag slung over one arm and her Vector over the other, “All quiet on the Eastern Front?”

“Just another day in A-stan, if you ask me, D,” Shade answered, looking back out to the street, “I’m sure if you ask ‘em, you’ll get the same kind of response. Maybe they’ll point out how we all look different, but that’s about it. How much did you grab?”

“The General knows how to pick his targets, I’ll say that much,” she responded, shifting the bag under her arm, “this guy is practically an intel goldmine.”

Rook chuckled, “Good thing Spook ain’t here, she’d likely have a moment in her panties.” Both Dash and Shade rolled their eyes at his dirty remark.

“With some of the stuff we found, I wouldn’t blame her. Meat and Ozone have another two bags each, and Robot’s pouring over the new laptops we found as well,” Dash continued as she started to make her way to the Rovers, Shade and Rook following, “I’m sure that our little find here will shift the way things are going both here and everywhere else, especially with Kingfish.”

Shade shot a knowing look at Rook, “That’s reassuring, might be out of this over by the end of the month at this rate.”

“Sooner the better if you ask me…” Rook agreed, then looked back at the doorway, “I’ll see if the others need a hand.” He turned and walked off, leaving Dash and Shade relatively alone. There was a tense moment of silence as Dash loaded the bag into the back of the Land Rover, then re-adjusted her weapon to rest in front of her.

“Look, as much as I hate to bring it up, but about yesterday…” Shade started in a quieter tone of voice, glancing at Ozone and Meat to make sure they were out of earshot.

Dash rolled her eyes, “Meat’s got it in his head that we should go out. He’s an idiot, don’t worry about it.”

Shade recoiled a little bit, feeling slightly offended, “The way you say that makes it sound like a bad thing. I mean, I get the whole ‘not dating coworkers’ thing and everything, but I don’t see the harm in a one-off outing,” he said. “But that’s just me though.” Shade quickly added after realising that he might have sounded a little desperate.

She raised an eyebrow at him, “You realize he’d never let us live it down? Or shut up about it?”

He shrugged, “I say we humour him, go out on this ‘date’, if you even want to call it that, and then say some shit like ‘we just didn’t click enough’ or ‘we decided we were better off friends’.” Shade started to walk backwards towards the building entrance, “As much of a dick as he can be, I’m sure if you sat him down and explained to him that we just didn’t have that ‘spark’, then he might actually back off.” He turned around to face her, “Hell, if you lay it on thick, he might even feel guilty about it.”

“Uh huh…” Dash droned skeptically, “Because Meat totally isn’t the conspiracy theorist of the team,” she shook her head, “And besides that, the closest thing I’ve got to ‘semi-formal’ or whatever are my utilities.”

Shade raised an eyebrow at her, “... I don’t know about you, but if I were taking you out on a date, with what I would have planned, you wouldn’t want to wear anything remotely semi-formal.”

Dash shrugged a little, “Was part of the bet Meat set, but honestly, I don’t give a fuck.”

“Seems to be the team motto, doesn’t it,” Shade said with a laugh, “‘Hotel Team: We Don’t Give A
Das chuckled and leans back on the Rover, “What did you mean by ‘what you would have planned’? Have you actually thought about that?” She asked with a smirk.

“I’d hate to deflate your ego, D, but while I have thought about that, it wasn’t specifically with you in mind…” Shade partially-lied, hoping his little jab would deflect any suspicion, “But in general terms, I have. Too many guys I’ve known have done the whole cliche of dinner and a movie, or the ‘Netflix and Chill’. I’d take my dates out to stuff like Paintball, or skydiving, or out to music concerts and venues. Not that I had much of the chance between leaving school and enlisting, or even during the breaks between deployments and training stuff.” He looked out into the street, “A handful of the guys I knew back in the Reg did similar things with their girls… I think most are still dating, a couple even married.”

Dash nodded thoughtfully, “Skydiving and paintball, huh?” She chuckled at him, leaving it at that for the moment as she saw the others coming back, “Sounds fun.”

Shade laughed and shook his head, “Hard to believe, I know. I’m still a fun guy,” he started as he walked past her, “but I hate mushrooms.”

Dash laughed and shook her head, smacking him on the back of his head, “That was awful.”

“You still laughed though!” Shade shot back, shrugging off the hit as he went to lower the tailgate of the lead Rover. The remainder of the team piled out in short order afterwards, Ghost leading out an Afghani man with his hands bound behind his back and a black bag over his head. With a little bit of prompting from Meat and some assistance from Royce and Ghost, they loaded the man into the back of the back of the second Rover. Everyone else took their seats, and it soon became pretty cramped in the back of the Rover. Dash was fortunate to have called ‘shotgun’ and sat up front beside Shade, whilst Ghost sat across from their prisoner immediately behind them.

“Back home?” Shade asked over his shoulder towards the guys in the back, and was met with a series of affirmative grunts and groans. “Alrighty boys, and girl,” he said, smirking at Dash, “homeward bound we go!” The engine turned over and Shade followed Roach, who was driving the lead Land Rover, as they made their way out of the narrow streets. “Keep your hands in the vehicle at all times, unless you’re using the international sign language for ‘fuck off’,” he continued, holding up his middle finger towards the guys in the back, “Any potential terrorists understand that, right?”

“That or a quick burst of five-five-six works too,” Royce chimed in, glancing to the traffic behind them, “Usually shuts them up real quick.”

“That it does indeed,” Shade agreed with a chuckle, the cab going silent as they continued their way back. While it seemed fairly relaxed, both Shade and Dash sitting in the front, as well as Scarecrow and Meat who were sitting right at the end of the Rover, were scanning rooftops and alleys for any potential threats. Everyone in the two vehicles had noted how ‘quiet’ it had been for the raid; the approach had no resistance, they encountered only a small handful of fighters inside the structure and they posed no real threat, there was no attempt at a counter-attack, and even their exfiltration seemed to be going off without a hitch.

“... we’re sure that we hit a HVT’s place, right Shades?” Dash asked after a few moments of pondering. He simply shrugged and shot a glance at their prisoner over his shoulder.

“That’s for the bosses and the spook’s to work out, D,” he said, “All we do is kick down the door they point at. Not much else we can do, I’m afraid.”
Shade subdued a chuckle as he walked past the small line of Rangers outside of the pit, bumping fists with the Corporal who was manning the ammo tables. “They got you babysitting, have they Dunny?”

Dunn returned the bump and sighed, watching as a Ranger finished loading his rifle in preparation for a run on the course. “At least I’m not Foley. He’s up on the range with Allen teaching ‘How to Shoot One-Oh-One’ to the ANA detachment that’s here.” Shade grimaced sympathetically, knowing just how hard it was to teach some of the Afghani servicemen. “But we got five runners today, including Allen once he’s finished being the teacher’s pet.”

“Cool cool… sorry that we’re the ones poaching one of your guys,” Shade offered, patting Dunn on the shoulder, “if it’s any consolation, I’ll try to make sure he’s all in one piece by the time he gets back to you.” Dunn chuckled and waved him off.

“Don’t sweat it man,” he said as he looked over to the line of Rangers ready to go. “Better get to a vantage point with some popcorn, I have a feeling that we’re in for a hell of a show. Oh, and thank you by the way for graciously ‘lending’ some of your kit for them to borrow.”

Shade winked and backed away, holding his arms in surrender, “I know nozink!” he laughed, putting on a fake German accent before walking up the ramp and around to one of the observation towers where Dash was waiting. “Sorry to keep ya waitin’ D, just had to get one last look at the potential fresh meat. Y’know, give them one last look at who they’ll be joining.”

Dash chuckled and thumped him on the shoulder, “Then ya shoulda sent me down there, insteada your pansy ass,” she teased with a grin.

“Hey now, I didn’t wanna scare them off completely now… gotta leave them with some semblance of hope.” He returned back, then stiffening as he saw who was in the next tower over. “Oh shit… didn’t realise that the Big Boss would be here…” Shade nodded over her shoulder towards the three men in question; two Rangers, presumably officers from the headquarters element, and General Shepherd himself, complete with his Magnum revolver in its brown leather holster.

Dash looked over her shoulder and nodded, “He oversees all the runs, the ‘Force is handpicked, who did you think by? Tavish? He’s just the field commander, the Task Force belongs to the General, so he picks who’s in it. Cap and the other officers can make requests and suggestions, but ultimately it’s up to him.”

Shade hummed and nodded appreciatively, “Huh… not even my old bosses were that ‘hands-on’… now I’m curious as to why I got picked, never had to do any kind of real testing or anything back at Holsworthy. Just a quick interview with some colonel, and that was it.”

Dash shrugged, “He has his ways. I found out on the transport back to base after an op, no idea when or where he ever saw me, but he must have at some point.”

He shrugged, “Guess some things are better off unknown, I’ll just write it off to my rugged charm and good looks,” Shade finished with a ‘hair flick’.

She laughed and shook her head, “You’re ridiculous.”

“Oh I know, that’s probably another reason why I’m here.” He laughed, focusing on the Pit below them. “So, Dunn said that there’s five runners today, he palmed off a list of names with his ‘tips’, Shade fished out a small piece of notepaper with five names hastily written down on it, “We’ve got McCoy, Beckensall, Ramirez, Hayworth and Allen. Dunn’s tipped Ramirez and Allen as the most likely to be pulled, based off of field performance and range scores.”
“Yeah? What’re we lookin’ at?” Dash looked over his shoulder at the list, then back to the pit, where one of the men was approaching the gate, “Ay up, who’ve we got up first?”

Shade looked down to the contender and studied the list, “If I’m right in assuming that Dunn wrote these in running order, then that’ll be good ol’ McCoy,” he set down his list and leant against the front wall of the observation tower, “Don’t have his full bio or his stats, so we’ve got nothing else to go off apart from Dunn’s tips.”

“Uh-huh… They not running Dunn through?” Dash asked curiously, “Seems like a take-no-shit kinda guy…” she shrugged.

“I remember asking about it last time I saw him,” Shade said as the buzzer sounded and McCoy entered through the course, “but he’s got aspirations for becoming a platoon non-com, something I doubt he’d get if he lateraled into the Task Force.” Below, McCoy cleared the first batch of targets but ran dry on his rifle as he entered the building, effortlessly switching to his sidearm to engage the next batch.

Dash frowned a little, “Pretty sure he shouldn’t be out of ammo already…” she commented idly.

Shade shrugged, “Might’ve jammed, though that transition was pretty smooth…”

“Maybe…” McCoy reappeared at the second floor, and hesitated for a couple of seconds before slowly lowering himself down from the ledge onto the ground below. She chuckled, shaking her head, “Maybe he got wind of you messing up your landing…”

“Obviously he didn’t get the memo about fighting through the pain,” Shade grumbled in reply, “that’ll cost him.” McCoy’s run finished without much more incident, and the two soldiers glanced over towards Shepherd to see him softly shaking his head.

“Didn’t think so…” Dash shrugged, “What was that like.. ninety seconds?” she was exaggerating, of course, but the run had been particularly slow, especially by the 141’s standards.

“Give or take…” Shade said, watching as the next Ranger readied himself at the gate. The next few runs went much the same, with some differences. Beckensall appeared to take a little too long taking aim and actually engaging, which cost him precious time. Hayworth looked to have a promising run, until he caught his foot on the stairs and slammed his face into the target at the top of the stairs. Ramirez’s run was impressive, compared to the other three, with smooth shooting and transitions. The only drawback was his tendency to shoot from the hip, costing a couple of civilian targets their ‘lives’.

“Okay… last but not least, the teacher’s pet, PFC Allen.” Shade said with a chuckle as he watched Dunn and Allen share a few words.

“And what’re we expecting from him according to our ‘expert’?” Dash asked curiously.

“Dunn was playing his cards close to his chest regarding Allen, so there’s gotta be a reason why he tipped him to ‘win’, just don’t know what.” He offered, crossing his arms over his chest. “We’re about to find out though.”

The buzzer sounded, and Allen took off like a rocket. Within seconds, the first set of targets dropped followed by the second set, and both Shade and Dash could only watch on as Allen flew through the first section with a fluidity not seen by the other Rangers. In a manner of seconds, he had re-appeared on the second floor, taking well placed shots just before he ‘walked’ off the edge and hit the ground with a roll, snapping up with his sidearm to take out the next few targets. He kept it out for the final
set, engaging the last one with his sidearm extended in one hand as he broke out into a sprint down the final hallway.

Shade let out a low whistle as he looked over at Dash. “... not bad.”

“Not bad at all,” she agreed with a nod, looking over to Shepherd’s observation post. He was already gone… She looked back and around and shook her head, “Boss ‘n his disappearing acts…”

“Guess we have a winner…” Shade mused as he started making his way down the ladder, waiting for a few moments for Dash to descend before continuing, “I think he’s got the right kind of pace for a breacher, thoughts?”

She shrugged, “Definitely not a heavy-gunner, doesn’t have the ‘march forward shoot everything’ attitude,” Dash chuckled.

Shade was about to continue, but was cut off as a series of loud alarms started to ring out across the base. At the same time, a convoy of Humvees rushed through the gate and pulled to a halt, soldiers dismounting and medics rushing to aid the wounded among them. “The fuck?” He said, sharing a glance at Dash before breaking out into a jog to where Dunn, Ramirez, Allen and Foley were standing. “Hey, where’s the fire?”

“One of the BCT’s has come under heavy fire and gone dark on the radio,” Ramirez answered, loading his M4A1 and attaching it to the sling around his neck. Foley was off to the side barking commands.

“Right... got room for one more?” Shade offered after a second’s thought, catching the Rangers by surprise.

“Uh, I guess…” Allen answered, looking over to Dunn who was nodding fervently as he secured the chinstrap of his IBH.

“Make that two,” Dash commented from behind him, holding out Shade’s rifle to him. He nodded and quickly made sure it was ready to go. Foley turned back around and stepped forward.

“Everybody mount up, we’re moving out.” Everyone nodded in acknowledgement and separated to board their respective vehicles, Shade and Dash joining Foley, Dunn and Allen in their Humvee.

The amount of gunfire being exchanged across the river was something to be amazed at, though Shade would be lying if he said that he didn’t regret fitting a magnified optic onto his rifle. Sure, the holographic he had on there right now was usable, but he had the feeling that he was missing more shots than he was landing on target.

He and Dash were taking cover behind an overturned dumpster near the stairwell, firing shots at whatever targets they could see in the distance, as the Rangers and their overwhelming fire superiority forced the enemy’s forces back. Above them, an armoured bridgelayer was making its final adjustments before extending its arm and lowering the bridge to cover the gap. “Having fun yet, D?” Shade had to nearly shout over the gunfire.

“You know it, Shades!” She responded, “You keeping up over there?”

“As well as I can,” he said, popping up to fire off a quick burst. “I think we’re almost good to go.”

No sooner had he said that did the bridgelayer start lowering the bridge into place, and the last enemy forces began to retreat. They waited for a few more seconds as Rangers started to move from their positions and head up the stairwell and back to their vehicles, joining the line once there was a break...
in the traffic. They got to the road to see a number of Rangers with phones or cameras in their hands.

Shade walked up next to Dunn and tapped him on the shoulder. “What’s with the news conference?”

“JTAC’s called in an Eagle for an airstrike on that highrise, release is in a manner of seconds.” Dunn said dismissively, Shade shaking his head.

“This close?”

“Shepherd doesn’t care about danger close, you of all people should know.” Shade had no answer to that, there had been a few times where a Hellfire missile had landed a little too close for comfort. The sound of engines overhead had the Rangers cheering, which was quickly drowned out by the impact and explosion of a GBU-38 JDAM. Despite wearing ear protection, Shade found himself covering his ears with his hands.

Once the dust and noise subsided, he turned to Dash with a bemused smile. “Gotta love a big boom, am I right?”

Dash gave a crooked grin, “Damn straight.” The two shared a fist bump as the Rangers around them started to board their Humvees, Dash and Shade doing the same in short order.

“What now?” Shade asked Dunn.

“Time to find the bad guys and bring them down!”

Authors’ notes

(Shade)

Well, we’re finally in the campaign now. A few adjustments here and there will be made to account for the two extra characters, so forgive us for that. We’ve also stretched out the timeline to make it a little more “realistic” in terms of rest, recovery and transit. I never liked how they picked up Allen on day one, and then he’s in the airport in Russia on day two… no wonder his cover was blown…

(Spitfire)

This is gonna get interesting really fast. Like Shade said, the addition of our characters is gonna have some effects on the course of the storyline. And, yeah, it felt really weird to suddenly go from ‘fresh 141 recruit’ to right by Makarov in the airport so, we’re gonna extend the time frame.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
“I don’t like these alleyways, D, not one bit…” Shade muttered as all five soldiers in the Humvee kept their eyes peeled for moment. Ever since they drove past the three insurgents standing proudly on the balcony of a building by the road, the entire platoon had been on edge. The remaining forces of the BCT were still trapped deeper in the city, but the Rangers, as well as the two 141 operators with them, knew that rushing to a fight would only make things worse.

“Stay focused, those troops back there gave me the wrong impression,” Foley spoke up, peering over his sights to look at Dunn in the driver’s seat, “Who knows what they have planned…”

“Regardless, it’ll be us that gets screwed.” Dunn piped up as they turned down a narrow side street, following the Humvees in front of them. The sound of a ricochet followed by a sharp crack of a Dragunov gunshot set everyone off. Rifles snapped up and safeties clicked off, the engine of the Humvee revved up and the whine of the M134 Minigun that Ramirez was manning signified the start of something that Shade would refer back to as ‘a proper clusterfuck’.

“I don’t see ‘em!” Ramirez called from his place up top, ducking down a little to make himself a smaller target.

“Keep spinnin’, we’re almost on the school!” Dunn called back as he brought the Humvee around a tight bend. The two Humvees ahead of them started to spew fire from their own mounted weapons, the gunners and passengers engaging any and all insurgents they could see. Shade recoiled a little as a round glanced off of the door he was sitting behind, before peering down his sights to line up on a target.

“We’re in the shit now, D!” He called out after firing a short burst.

“No shit!” Dash yelled back, firing a few rounds from her Vector. Everyone in the Humvee continued the exchange of fire as they progressed towards the school. Explosions started to erupt as a group of RPG gunners appeared from nearby rooftops and yards. “Rockets!”

“Dunn! Get us outta here, drive, drive!” Foley shouted as Dunn swore loudly, fighting to back the Humvee up amidst the hail of gun and rocket fire they were experiencing. The Humvees ahead of them cleared the path and Dunn managed to get moving at a decent pace, but not before an RPG impacted the ground right next to them, threatening to flip the vehicle and showering Dunn, Ramirez and Shade in a rain of dirt and dust.

“God-fucking-damnit!” Shade screamed as he let go of his rifle and started rubbing at his face, now regretting the choice to wear his sunglasses and not a pair of goggles. He yanked them off and cleared his face of any dirt that had stuck to him, blinking repeatedly to clear his vision as some of the debris had gotten past the glasses. “Okay, now I’m pissed!”

The gunfire started to die off but was still persistent as they sped down the narrow streets, slowing down at parts to avoid wiping out against a wall or a bin that lined the sides of the road. The Humvee in front of them turned right, and Dunn slowed down to make the same turn, but slammed on the brakes as an armed technical cut off their path.

“We’re cut off! Shit!” Dunn called out as Ramirez opened up on the vehicle with his Minigun, Shade opting to hold his rifle out through the window and fire blindly in assistance. Foley slammed on the dashboard of the Humvee and looked at Dunn.
“Push through, force past it!” Dunn nodded and gunned the accelerator, sending the Humvee forwards and into the front quarter of the now-wrecked technical, the engine smoking heavily as its occupants lay dead inside. They rounded the corner and made it about fifty meters before Ramirez screamed out in alarm.

“RPG, top floor! Incoming!” He ducked down into the passenger compartment and held on tight while Dunn slammed on the brakes and everyone else braced themselves for impact. The rocket hit the ground just in front of the front driver’s side wheel, sending the front end of the Humvee up into the air before it flipped onto its right side. Dunn and Shade fell out of their seats and landed on Foley and Dash respectively, whilst Ramirez lay on the ground outside dazed and confused.

Dash groaned and tried to shove Shade off of her, “That sucked… get off.” Shade grunted as he tried to move, eventually managing to half-roll and half-lift up off of Dash, moving into an upright stance above her, as much as the Humvee would let him.

“You okay Dash? No obvious breaks?” He asked a little worriedly, coughing slightly as he tried to catch his breath.

“All good here… a bit bruised but I’ll live,” she shrugged, “You?” Shade gave her a thumbs up with a tired smile.

“Just a lil’ winded, but I’m set,” he looked to his side where Dunn and Foley were ‘standing’. “You boys good?”

“Yeah man, shaken but I’m good.” Dunn replied, the four of them going silent as gunfire erupted from beside them. “Shit, we’re a sitting duck here.”

“Sergeant!?” A Ranger called from outside, another calling for covering fire as the sound of boots trying to climb up the roof of Humvee echoed inside. In seconds, both of the left side doors opened up as Corporal McCoy and another Ranger held them open and peered inside. “Thank fuck you’re alive! Ramirez is dazed but alive and is inside. We gotta get you out of there!”

Foley nodded and started to climb up the seats, “Then stop talking and start lifting, the sooner the better!” He finished climbing out, reaching down to retrieve his rifle from Dunn before he too started to climb out. Shade looked to Dash and helped lift her up from her spot on the ground, holding her Vector for her as she climbed out. Once he returned her weapon, he slung his own over his back and climbed out himself, jumping down to the ground and rushing through the open doorway where the remaining Rangers were all gathered. Foley, Dunn and McCoy were gathered together deeper in the room, and Shade tipped his head towards them while looking at Dash, gesturing for her to follow.

“... and we lost everyone in the lead truck too, Sergeant…” McCoy finished up, Foley shaking his head at the news.

“Damn… we’ll have to recover them later, right now, we need to link up with BCT One and clear a path for them. Dunn, find Allen and gather an advance team, we need to keep moving.”

Dunn nodded and seperated to find the Rangers in question, Foley turning to both Shade and Dash. “We don’t have much more distance to cover, the BCT is two blocks past that school, but there’s a lot of resistance between here and there.”

“Say no more Foley,” Shade said as he checked over his rifle, “Dash and I are with you all the way. We’ll tag along with Dunn and the others.” Foley smiled softly and nodded at the Australian.

“I appreciate it,” he said, looking to where Dunn and his small team had set up near the stairwell,
“Better get going.”

Shade and Dash left the Sergeant with a parting nod before jogging over to Dunn and Allen, the latter preparing a flashbang for use. “Ready when you boys are,” Dash quipped as they joined the small line of stacked Rangers.

“Let’s have some fun,” Dunn replied as he tapped Allen on the top of his helmet, the younger soldier quickly tossing the grenade up the stairwell in response. It detonated with a loud bang after a few seconds, and the six soldiers stormed the stairwell and quickly cleared it out of any insurgent fighters. “Clear! On me!” Dunn led the way out the back door and down the stairs, where they could freely start firing on the remaining forces that were visible in the front of the school house. They cleared the front playground out and stacked up on either side of the front entrance to the schoolhouse.

“Frag and clear,” Shade called, preparing a frag grenade to throw it in. Everyone nodded, and he lobbed it through the front door. It detonated seconds later, the loud bang echoing through the hallway as Shade and Dash led the Rangers inside. The enemy forces that were beyond the blast of the grenade quickly opened fire, forcing the group to take cover behind whatever they could find, a few ducking into an adjacent classroom to their right.

Progress inside the school was much slower to how outside was, as the insurgents had the defensive advantage with fortifications and ambush points already established. Subsequently, the Rangers, Dash and Shade were forced to stop at almost every door and clear every room, making sure that nobody was hiding in place to ambush them. “This is just like high school!” Shade shouted out over the gunfire.

“Okay, let’s keep kicking ass and cut a path for them,” Shade finished, checking over his rifle as the others did the same and reloaded if necessary, “Sooner we get out of here, the sooner we get back to Phoenix and can crash in our racks.”

Dash shook her head in bemusement, “Weren’t you the one complaining about no action yesterday?”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that statement, D,” he chuckled with a smirk, watching as Allen, Dunn and the other Rangers took point, “let’s go, before these boys steal all the fun.”

Dash smirked as well, “Let’s…” Shade extended a hand out for her to take the lead.

“Ladies first.”

“Twentieth century chivalry in a twenty-first century warzone, who’d’ve thought?”

The pair quickly headed outside and rejoined the Rangers as they made their way down the street.
didn’t take long for them to get into contact, though with the narrow streets and the better training, the advantage was now on their side. The group quickly reached a small garage, where they had pushed back the enemy forces. The insurgents attempted to push back, but were quickly cut down by a barrage of fire from an adjacent street, where the remainder of Foley’s team as well as troops from BCT One had approached.

“Talk about timing,” Dunn said as he lowered his rifle and walked over towards Foley. Shade and Dash shared a knowing look, understanding exactly what Dunn meant by that statement, “I thought you were right behind us?”

“We were, but the remaining Humvees found a pathway that was less populated by the enemy. They took us around here to where we thought you would pop out.” Foley replied, looking back down the street where Dunn’s element had approached.

“And you didn’t think to get us on the comms?” Allen asked, more than a little annoyed at this bit of information.

“We tried, but we couldn’t reach you,” The sergeant shot back, crossing his arms over his vest, “Might’ve been interference or something.”

Allen rolled his eyes, “That’s fuckin’ likely…” he said before turning around. Shade and Dash watched him with neutral expressions, before looking at a small alleyway where wounded were being carried through. Shade’s eyebrows rose as he spotted a familiar figure, and he nudged Dash’s side to get her attention.

“Ain’t that the boss? The hell is he doing out here?”

Dash looked over and her expression mimicked Shade’s, “Dunno…” she shrugged, “I’d say we probably have our ‘recruit’, but he generally gets that done somewhere, y’know, less of a live fire zone?”

Shade shrugged as well after a moment’s thought, “Fucked if I know… the stars work in mysterious ways, after all…” He threw a friendly parting salute to Foley and the Rangers, and gestured for Dash to follow him over to where General Shepherd was. He was barking commands to the medics, offering the use of his helicopter. Upon turning around to see two of his operators nearby, he quickly made his way over.

“Soldiers, good work out there today, you probably helped save a lot of lives,” he offered with a shake of the hand to each of them, “Have you seen a Private Allen among these Rangers?”

“Uh, yeah sir,” Shade replied, looking over to where Allen and Ramirez were standing, inspecting a fallen enemy’s FAL, “just over that way. Is he our newbie?”

“In a manner of speaking, Sergeant, now if you’ll excuse me…” Shepherd pushed past them and started walking over to Allen, Shade and Dash watching on in mild shock and surprise. After a few moments of relative silence, Shade started to laugh softly.

“Y’know… Dunn can really pick ‘em.”

Shepherd wanted to take Allen back to Phoenix almost immediately, requesting that Shade and Dash come with them. However in that short time span, he had forgotten that he had sent his Pave Low back to base with a load of wounded, so now the three soldiers were waiting near the cleared landing zone while the General conferred with the gathered platoon commanders nearby. Shade had removed his cap and headset, his sunglasses perched on his forehead as he wiped his face of sweat.
Dash had opted to sit down against the side of a barrel that was by the LZ, her weapon resting against her leg. Allen was just standing there slightly awkwardly, not really expecting to be drafted out of the Rangers and into a special unit.

Shade could sense his hesitancy, and broke the silence. “So, Allen, tell me something: what do you think people like Dash and I do?” He shot a look over to Dash that said ‘this’ll be good’, as Allen thought of his response.

“... well, you guys probably take on jobs like Delta and the SEALs, right? Stuff that us mere Rangers can’t?” Shade nodded at his answer, then looked over to Dash, and then back at him.

“Well, yes and no… D? You wanna fill him in on the parts he’s missing?”

“We take low profile high priority, yeah,” Dash shrugged, “But we’ve been known to dive in hard too. Y’know that ‘thing’ that happened in Mexico? Chalked up to gang violence?”

Allen laughed, “Kinda hard not to when your squadmate grew up around there,” he rubbed his face, “Ramirez was going on and on about that when the news broke… wait, why do you ask?”

Dash smirked, “Shade’s the one that got hit. I was driving.” Allen’s eyebrows shot up, recalling that video instantly.

“No way, that was you?” He looked between them, “Jesus… what was the op? Or is that still classified even to the new guy?”

Shade and Dash shared a look, and Shade gestured him closer. Once Allen was next to him, he pulled him close, “Well, we got a hint that the cartel boss was joining forces with the bad blokes over here and a bunch of bad blokes from South America, using their tunnel networks to smuggle them into the US. Our job was to capture/kill the group leaders and neutralise the tunnels. It went well until the extract…” he grimaced, looking over to Dash.

“Remember Nogales,” she said in return, not offering any kind of explanation past that.

“Remember Nogales indeed,” Shade chuckled, looking back at Allen, “Fuckin’ Plan S… but that’s the jist of it. We tackle ultra-high risk and time-sensitive missions, stuff that’s a little out of scope for the SEALs and D-Boys. We’re a colourful cast of characters too, from all over the world. Just wait until you meet Meat.”

The conversation continued for a while longer, covering a few other topics like what was to be expected, Shade and Dash’s careers both in the 141 and prior, as well as Allen’s service history. It ended once the General’s Pave Low made its approach and landed in the clearing, the three of them plus General Shepherd boarding and waiting as a few more wounded soldiers were loaded.

“... standard team composition is about twelve guys per team, with each team having a certain kind of specialisation or purpose. Our team’s the go-to for the high priority stuff, teams like Bravo and Golf are more focused on maneuvering and vehicle-based stuff, Alpha is a mountain warfare unit, and so on.” Shade explained as he sat down beside Allen, who was listening with wide eyes, “Once we get you back stateside and properly assessed, you’ll likely get tossed into one of those teams. Might even get shuffled around depending on operational requirements. Oh, how good are your PFT scores?”

Allen looked puzzled at Shade’s seemingly random question, “Uh, they’re pretty good… not the best in the platoon but I can hold my own, why?”

Dash chuckled, “Ghost is gonna have fun with you…” Allen looked over to Dash perplexed, caught
off guard by her remark.

“Uh, who’s Ghost?” The two experienced soldiers looked at each at Allen’s question, and started to laugh.

“We’ve only been here a week, and we’re being pulled?” Shade said as the rest of the team dug into their meals, “So much for bloody intelligence gathering and hunter-killer stuff…”

Meat lifted his head and looked at Shade, “Not the first time this has happened,” he said after swallowing a mouthful of food, “and it’s not going to be the last. Ops get pulled and teams get shuffled around all the damn time.”

“Such is life,” Rook finished with a knowing smirk, taking a sip from his drink, “priorities change after all. Maybe the handful of raids we did proved to be more fruitful than we thought.”

The conversation drifted from their rather short tour back to more inane subjects, like kill scores, current events, and disparaging remarks about the other ‘regular’ forces that were on base. The table faded into silence once Allen approached, looking unsure as to whether he was welcome just yet. Shade looked at everyone and rolled his eyes, gesturing to catch the American’s attention.

“Oi, Ally, over here mate,” he called, tipping his head to the vacant spot on the bench beside him, “Guys, I gotta say, it’s been fun being the fucking new guy, but I can now safely pass on that honour to Private First Class James Allen.” The table erupted into a mocking applause as Shade pat the sitting Ranger on the back.

“Welcome to hell, Allen,” Royce said, reaching across to shake his hand, “I’m Royce, you’ve already met Shade, and Dash from what I heard, and the bonehead beside me is Meat.”

“Before you ask, you’ll get your name soon enough,” Meat spoke up between mouthfuls, “Unless you’ve already got one to share, like some of us did.” He shot a pointed look to both Shade and Royce, who rolled their eyes at him.

“Right...” Allen said, unsure of what to say.

“Relax, Meat’s harmless once you get to know him,” Shade offered reassuringly, then started pointing out the rest of the team, “There’s Rook, Roach, Scarecrow, Robot, Chemo, and Ozone. The Captain and Ghost are off doing ‘officer’ shit… hey, where’s D at?”

Roach shrugged his shoulders on Shade’s other side, “I think she was back at our tent, don’t know what she’s up to though. She said she’d eat later…”

Shade shrugged back, “Fair enough… anyway, Ally, this is only a handful of the bad-ass motherfuckers that form the Task Force. Hopefully they won’t all scare you away, like they tried with me.”

“Bullshit,” Rook ‘coughed’ back a laugh and started to shake his head, catching Shade’s attention.

“Pardon mate?”

“Nothing mate, just had something in my throat.” Shade frowned and crossed his arms.

“I figured as much, sounded like bullshit…”

“So, a Ranger, right?” Rook continued on, deflecting the conversation back to their newcomer, “You
and Shade’ll get along well, what with being the same kind of unit after all.”

Shade looked over to Allen and smiled, “Actually, while I haven’t seen Allen before now, I’ve worked alongside some of his squad, namely his current platoon sergeant and his second, a pair of guys called Foley and Dunn.”

“Were they the same Rangers that you went outside the wire with?” Scarecrow asked curiously, “Come on, it’s not like we weren’t going to find out. Ghost wanted a headcount once the alarms started blaring, and once you and Dash were MIA, we kinda put two and two together.”

Shade rubbed the back of his neck, “Yeah… you don’t need to remind me…” Both Ghost and Captain MacTavish were not pleased at both his and Dash’s little venture outside the wire, though upon learning that General Shepherd had personally thanked them for their help, their anger morphed into quiet disapproval. “I think that’s two Crucibles that I’ve gotta pay up now.”

“Well, aren’t you right fucked then,” Roach piped up with a laugh, “I forgot you haven’t cashed in that first one in from your fucking wake up call.”

“Wake up call?” Allen asked, now curious as to the backstory.

“Hey, I’m kinda hoping that Ghost forgot about the first one, and only gives me the one for what happened today!” Roach simply shook his head and remorsefully put his hand on Shade’s shoulder.

“Buddy, Ghost never forgets.” The loud laughter from the table was barely enough to suppress the groan that came from Shade as he leant forward to press his face into the table in dismay.

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Well I finished an AE chapter and then, well Shade finished this one up, but still. I’d say things are gonna start getting fast paced, but I think we’re gonna try to draw some things out for passage-of-time sake. Of course that might entail the odd time skip. But other than that we’re a rockin’ and a rollin’. See ya next time.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

That’s the first two ‘campaign’ missions done, the first steps taken in our little ‘altered universe’ of ours. Allen’s now been called in, he’s met Hotel Team, but both he and them are unaware of the issues that are around the corner. I hope you all are excited for this as we are.

On a side note, this writing has gotten the pair of us back into MW2, and we’ve just been plowing through the Special Ops missions lately (if anything, I think we’ve spent more time playing the game than bloody writing it, heh). It helps us ‘get into character’. That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it! (Spitty: Also good ref for combat scenes. Fighting styles n stuff)

That too, even if Shade has to carry most of the time… heh heh… (I blame the lag…)

So, until next time!
A week later...

The Australian Defense Force may not be one of the largest military forces in the world, but for what they lack in numbers they make up in training standards and equipment. Those aspects are what keep the ADF a more-than-capable force in the Pacific.

One downside of where they are located geographically: not a lot of opportunities to go through Cold Weather and Mountain Warfare Training. A fact that Shade and Gale were presently more than aware of. However Gale had a nice thick leather airman’s jacket to shield him from the cold.

“T-t-take me b-back to th-the sweet-t-t times, th-th hot-t nights, e-e-everything’s g-gonna b-be alright-t in the summert-t-time…” Shade sung to himself, gloved hands tucked between the gap of his vest and jacket, head tucked down low as he tried to preserve the little bit of heat he had left. Him, Dash, Chemo and Scarecrow were gathered around a small fire near the back end of a CH-46 Sea Knight, waiting for the signal to deploy and collect Roach and Captain MacTavish from their recovery mission at some mountaintop airbase, searching for and picking up key components from a downed satellite. “A-and even if-f-f I have t-t-to wait t-til next y-year, I d-don’t c-care, a-all I kn-know is th-th-that I’ll m-meet you there, in th-th summert-t-time…”

“Bloody hell,” Gale exclaimed as he walked down the ramp of the helicopter, a steel mug of fresh coffee in his hands, “Haven’t heard a damn Thirsty Merc song in ages.”

“I’m th-thinking hot t-though G-Gale, f-figured I’d g-give the th-theme for B-Bondi Rescue a t-t-try,” Shade answered, feeling miserable in the cold.

Scarecrow looked between the two Australians and the vastly different attitudes to the cold, “I’m sorry, Gale, but I don’t understand why you seem comfortable while Shade here looks like someone’s dipped him in liquid nitrogen.”

Gale smirked and sat down in front of the fire, extending his free hand to catch some warmth, “That’s because Shade was born and raised in sunny Queensland, while I’m a cold-blooded Victorian. We don’t get snow regularly, but it’s still pretty bloody cold.”

“S-s-screw you,” Shade shivered out behind clenched teeth. Gale simply chuckled. “Spoken like a true Queenslander.”

“Gale,” Dash hissed from her position, huddled close to the fire, “Where the hell did you get coffee?”

Gale smirked and shook his head, “A magician never reveals his secrets, young Dash,” he chuckled before taking a sip, sighing contentedly afterwards, “Besides, you all knew we were coming to the cold… should’ve packed your own shit.”

“Hey Shade,” Chemo spoke up, waving at him to catch his attention, “Let me know if you start feeling warm all of a sudden, okay?”

“I’m in f-front of a f-f-fucking fire, Ch-Chemo…” Shade shot the medic a nasty look. He just dismissed him with a hand wave. “I meant from deeper inside. The second that happens, you say so. Don’t want you succumbing to
hypothermia, alright?”

Scarecrow chuckled, “The great and fearless Australian, brought down by mere cold weather.”

“F-f-fuck off… wh-why aren’t y-y-you lot hassl-ling D-D-D-Dash?” Shade stammered repeatedly to the others amusement, “Isn’t she from t-the b-b-b-bloody d-d-d-d-desert anyway?”

Gale laughed, “Because we don’t wanna fuckin’ die mate,” he then looked at the soldier apologetically, “And no offense Dash, but you’re a nasty sheila when angry.”

Dash flashed him a confused smile, “Thanks… I think,” she then looked back down to Shade, and shuffled to sit closer to him, “Hey, you aren’t the only one feelin’ it.”

“… n-n-no fuck-king doubt that Roach-ch is inside a warm b-b-build-ding right now…”

Roach quietly swore to himself as he hid outside a doorway to a small hut, peering around to the four enemy soldiers that were in his way, all of them gathered around a space heater and dressed in thick cold-weather uniforms.

“Couldn’t bloody hide shit on a tropical island, can’t they…” he muttered, steeling himself before leaning around with his suppressed ACR at the ready.

“In all seriousness though,” Chemo spoke up, looking at their pilot, “where did you get that damn coffee? Might help Shade out actually, even if it is for a few minutes…”

Gale shrugged and nodded his head back towards the aircraft, “It ain’t mine, actually. NJ brought his extra-large thermos for the pair of us.” He took another sip, “If it’s for medicinal purposes, I’m sure he’ll share a little bit around…”

Chemo smiled behind his facemask, “Would you mind asking?” Gale nodded and disappeared back into the aircraft, while Shade gave Chemo an appreciative look.

“Why don’t we just move him back into the aircraft if he’s at risk of turning into an Aus-sicle?” Scarecrow asked with a small laugh.

“One, the fire is out here and providing some kind of warmth. Two, while the cargo bay is out of the snow, it’s still a cold steel tube. We might as well walk into a freezer, for how much good it’ll do,” Chemo answered, “And three, I can’t be assed walking in and out to check on him and stay by the fire every few minutes.”

“Aww, h-h-he really d-d-does care…” Shade muttered out from behind his balaclava, turtling up into a ball even more, “I love you too, Doc.”

“Stop talking, Shade,” Chemo shot back with rolled eyes, “You’ll save energy and warmth that way.” The Australian nodded in acknowledgement and kept quiet, focusing on warm thoughts and the like. Gale reemerged a few minutes later with a small can full of the warm coffee, and handed it to the freezing Aussie who, despite the comparatively scalding temperature, quickly downed it in a few gulps.

“Thanks m-m-mate,” he muttered with a welcome sigh, feeling the warmth spread through his body slowly, “b-b-bloody lifesaver…”

Dash smiled softly, then glanced to her watch. “Captain’ll hopefully be finished soon, we’re about
another hour or so from the extract time.” The resulting dismayed groan from the rest of her team had her laughing softly to herself.

Twenty minutes had passed. NJ was now sitting with them in his flight suit and jacket, discussing his life in Alaska and previous experience with the freezing cold, after Shade had asked him in no uncertain terms, “how the fuck aren’t you even shivering?”

The Aussie was now firmly between Dash and Scarecrow, the two of them sharing their body heat with him under Chemo’s direction. Despite all the teasing, they were concerned for how poor Shade was feeling in the cold. Had they known that he had a very low tolerance for these conditions, they would have not put him on the team.

“... and the bears, damn, even in four foot snow they can move like a freight train, and take just as long to stop. Pops had to put a pair of three-oh-eights in a bear’s head to stop it when it started to charge our home.” NJ shook his head as he recalled the memory, “But we got some nice bearskin rugs made out of it as a result, so that was pretty cool.” He was about to continue when the radio on his hip came to life.

“Kilo Six-One, this is Hotel Six. We’ve been compromised! Our primary exfil is no-go, we’re headed to the secondary on commandeered enemy snowmobiles!” The team sprang to life, Scarecrow assisting the nearly frozen Shade to his feet, and they all climbed on board. “We’ll meet you there!”

NJ climbed into the cockpit as Gale’s hands flew across the multiple consoles, the twin engines of the Sea Knight coughed into life and began spinning the two rotors on the top. Dash tuned into the radio to respond to the Captain.

“Copy that Hotel Six, we’re launching now, out!” Everyone strapped in as the rotors spun up and started shaking the aircraft’s frame. Within minutes, Gale and NJ had the helicopter airborne and speeding towards the rest of the team. Dash and Scarecrow were on the seats right at the end of the ramp, the top half of the hatch retracted so they could keep a watch for the snowcraft that Captain MacTavish and Roach had stolen. Chemo was further up going through his supplies, getting a few bandages out and setting them on the seat next to him in preparation. Shade, now thawing out from a mixture of the aircraft’s heating system and the adrenaline rushing through his system, was watching out of the side hatch, adding to their field of view.

They flew low and reached a large frozen lake, where they could see a large force chasing two vehicles around the small ‘islands’. “I see them!” Scarecrow called out, pointing out to everyone else.

“Good!” Gale called back over the intercom, “We’re getting low on fumes up here. Get them to get a move on, will ya!?”

“Will do!” Dash said as she keyed her radio, “Captain, we have you visual, but we’re getting low on fuel up here.”

“Copy that, we’re taking heavy fire down here but we’re almost there!” Was the reply, engine noise and gunfire audible in the background.

“I’m swinging ‘er around, drop the ramp and cover ‘em!” Gale shouted over the intercom, Scarecrow reaching up behind him for the ramp controls, lowering the ramp down enough for both him and Dash to lean out slightly with their ramp and send harassing fire out to the enemy forces that were closing in. They started to back off, affording both MacTavish and Roach enough room to breathe. “Okay, get ready for landing! We gotta make this quick!”
Dash and Scarecrow watched from their vantage point at the ramp as they shot ahead of their team leader, flying over a large hillside dotted with trees before coming to a steady but rapid descent in a clearing across from the gorge. She shared a look with Scarecrow before focusing her eyes back out to the hill, “They aren’t—”

“Roach! Pin the throttle! Don’t slow down!”

“You gotta be shittin’ me!” The four soldiers watched in shock as two snowmobiles sped down a steep hill, swerving and dodging trees, before launching off of the end of the hill where a natural ‘ramp’ of sorts had formed. Time felt like it slowed as Roach and Captain MacTavish soared over the open chasm and landed on the other side, slowing down to a halt just before the Sea Knight.

“Fuck me!” Roach screamed as his feet hit the soft snow, almost stumbling as the reality of what he just did hit him. “Fuuucking fuck!”

“Come on! Let’s get goin’, can’t dawdle here all day!” Gale shouted from the cockpit over the noise, Scarecrow helping the shaken Roach on board while Dash and MacTavish held security. Just as fast as they had arrived, they took off and flew away, back to base.

Shade sat down next to his friend and pat him on the shoulder. “Bloody hell mate, you’re makin James Bond look like an amaetur with stunts like that.”

“Fuck mate, Bond can do his own damn stunts!” Roach shook his head, calming down from the adrenaline rush.

“I hope you remembered your GoPro.”

“... god fucking damnit!”

“... then the Captain told me to pin the throttle, and I’m thinking ‘what the fuck is the boss thinking?’ We speed down this steep fucking hill, swerving between trees, and I look up to see this huge fucking cliff at the end of this hill…” Roach was talking a mile a minute, recounting the story of the mission to an audience in the rec room, a day after their return. Shade was sitting on a nearby couch with Dash beside him, watching the scene with amusement. They had both heard it on the flight back from Kazakhstan, though certain details had changed between that version and the version that was being told right now.

Shade turned to Dash and nudged her side, grabbing her attention. “When do you think he’ll sell the movie rights?”

“When the reports are declassified in twenty-never?” She chuckled back, shaking her head and going back to her sketch pad.

“Reckon they’ll get Hemsworth to play the part of me?” He continued on, “Either Chris or Liam, doesn’t really matter. Then we get… uh… Liam Neeson as the Captain, Chemo can be played by that guy from Ted… y’think Chris Pratt can pull off a British accent?”

She rolled her eyes at him, tossing the sketch pad and pencil onto the coffee table, “Chris Pratt could pull off an accent that doesn’t exist yet.”

“That’s great,” Shade said excitedly, missing the point as he went on, “Jeffrey Donovan can be Scarecrow… that just leaves you, D…” he studied her for a few moments, hand on his chin, before snapping his fingers, “Emily Blunt or Jessica Chastain.”
Dash chuckled and shook her head once more, “I never took you for a fanboy, Shades.” The man shrugged at her, leaning back into the couch.

“Eh, I wouldn’t call myself a fanboy exactly. I just like movies, and without an internet connection stable enough to watch stuff online or play games, we watched a lot of movies during our down time on deployments back at the Commandos.” Shade sighed wistfully, “And after watching the same batch of movies with the same sets of actors and actresses for at least five times per tour… well, you end up learning their entire filmography.”

“Uh-huh…” Dash replied skeptically, leaning back comfortably. “Say what you want, you’re still a dork.” She started to chuckle as Shade sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. She went back to her pad, picking it up and opening it up to a blank page. Shade glanced over to her then focused his attention back to the crowd, where he noticed a new face amongst the audience. He stood up and made his way over, standing beside his target and tapping him on the shoulder.

“Oh, hey man,” Allen said as he looked at Shade in surprise, “How’ve you been?”

“Keepin’ busy mate, and you?”

“Working hard… I thought the RASP was tough, you guys are another five levels above that.” Allen said exasperatedly, rubbing his neck to Shade’s amusement.

“We are the best of the best of the best, after all, what else did you expect?” He said, patting the American on the back, “Any word on what team you’re posted to yet, or is that still up in the air?”

Allen scrunched up his face in thought, “Not yet man, they’ve been putting me through all these different training courses that I didn’t even know were even things that you would need. Thank god I have Russian heritage, otherwise I’d still be in that damn classroom.”

Shade quirked an eyebrow at him, “Oh yeah? What do you mean?”

“Well, they’ve been putting me through stuff like intelligence gathering, linguistics and languages, some real James Bond, double-oh-seven kind of shit.” Shade thought about this bit of information carefully, trying to make sense of it. “We’re wrapping it up very soon though, so I expect a placement soon.”

He nodded and looked over to Dash, then back at Allen. “Sweet. Well, if you have any dramas or questions or whatever, you know who to see.”

Allen smirked, “Not you, from what I’ve heard.”

“... you’re learning really quickly.” Shade nodded in approval, to which Allen chuckled.

“The banter’s the same, you just have a lot more options for material with you guys.”

“Is this a bromance I’m witnessing?” Meat called out, walking over and slinging an arm around both the Australian and Americans’ necks, “Better be careful, Allen, don’t want to have Dash find out that Shade’s cheating on her with you.”

Allen looked at Meat and Shade in confusion, “Wait, I thought you said that you two weren’t a thing?”

Shade shoved Meat’s arm off and frowned at him, “We aren’t, but Meathead over here has it in his thick skull that we are.”
“My tag should’ve been Cupid, always bringing people together. Just you wait, after your date you’ll come to me all ‘how can I ever repay you? I’m so much better for having Dash as my one true love!’ And I’ll be all, ‘worry not, I’m just doing what I do best?’”

“Being a pest?” Shade shot out with no amount of restrained venom. “Seriously, fuckin’ drop it or I’ll drop you.” Meat lifted his hands in surrender, stepping back from the Aussie.

“Alright, alright… I’m just sayin’ man, I reserve the right to say ‘I told you so’, okay?”

Shade rolled his eyes but let the man off, “Whatever…” He turned around and headed back to the couch where Dash was still seated, Allen internally smirking as he realised that Shade wasn’t doing anything really helpful to defend his case. Now that Meat had called attention to it, actually, Allen could kind of see what he and a few others had remarked to him. There was definitely something there, but it was faint.

He was drawn from his thoughts when a young-looking Lance Corporal dressed in a British Army uniform tapped him on the shoulder. “Excuse me, PFC Allen?”

“Yes?” He answered, turning around to face the newcomer.

“General Shepherd has requested your presence in his office, immediately. Said it was an urgent matter regarding your position in the unit.” His eyebrows shot up, maybe he was about to find out his team placement now. He nodded and thanked the young soldier, then flashed a confident thumbs up to both Shade and Dash as he made his way out and towards the administration block.

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*One month later…*

“Do you seriously not own anything even remotely fashionable?” Staff Sergeant Amy Bradford said with a frustrated sigh, turning back around and rounding on her ‘subject’, Dash. Said subject was laying back on her bunk with her sketchpad once again in her lap, a disinterested look on her face.

“Nope…” she answered plainly, “it’s not like I was expecting to be coerced into a date.”

“I’m more surprised by the fact that you actually agreed to that kind of thing,” another woman, Lieutenant Emma Moore-White, spoke up from the end of Dash’s bunk, “I think you’ve been around Meat a bit too long,” she chuckled at the end of her remark.

“Oh please! The only reason we didn’t win was ‘cause Shade mucked up his landing!” She argued, flicking her pencil at the Lieutenant.

“That’s beside the point,” Amy said, leaning against the wardrobe door, “even if you knew you were going to run, why’d you accept those conditions?”

Emma jumped in, “It doesn’t seem like you to take that risk,” she shifted around and swung her legs down to the floor, “so there has to be more to it.”

Dash rolled her eyes, “I thought there was no way in hell we’d lose. Ain’t no more to it than that.”

“Factor out your odds of success,” Emma began, “if Meat made it so you had to go out with, say… Gale, or Ghost, or Scarecrow, would you have still taken the bet?”

“Not if I had to run with them. Except maybe Ghost, the LT kicks ass. But if it was still me and Shade runnin’ it, yeah. ‘Cause I wouldn’t expect him to muck up like he did.”
Amy hummed in thought, then paced over to Dash’s desk and sat down on the chair behind it, “Did he know about the specifics of the bet before you two ran? I mean, the way you tell it makes it sound like he took a dive for the loss, y’know.”

Dash rolled her eyes and sighed heavily, “You people and your conspiracy theories… No, he didn’t know.”

The conversation was interrupted by a series of short knocks on Dash’s door. Emma jumped off the bunk to greet the newcomer, Sergeant Jasmine Hubbard. In Jasmine’s hands was a sizable zipped bag. “Nice work Jas, this is everything?”

“That I could find or borrow, yeah,” she replied, stepping inside and setting the bag on the small table beside Dash’s bunk, “Once the other ladies heard what it was for, they all rallied together.”

“Ugh…” Dash groaned, flopping back on the mattress and covering her face with her pillow. Jasmine looked at her and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Honey, you do realise that you and your boy-toy of yours are the talk of the town, right?” She said with a smirk, glancing at the other two women in the room, “While you get to go out and play, us others need stuff to do and talk about.”

“Fortunately for us,” Amy said from her corner, “and unfortunately for you, the not-a-relationship you have with Shade is our topic. Like, if the Task Force had a magazine, you and him would be the cover article.”

Dash moaned incoherently and muttered something too muffled by the pillow to make out.

“I’d never thought I’d see the day, even if it is just a ‘friend date’,” Roach said from his place on Shade’s bunk, flipping through a magazine he had bought recently. “I’m sure it’ll do her the world of good, get her outside of the base and actually doing something she’d want to do.”

Shade shrugged as he flicked through his wardrobe, “Maybe, I mean, she did enjoy herself when she came home with me…” he paused and shot a warning glare to the three men in his room, “… when she accompanied me home during my family emergency.”

Rook shook his head and laughed, “I know what you meant mate, relax. Besides, we’re the ones keeping bloody Meat away while you head out.”

“We have your back,” Royce finished, internally cursing his friend into damnation for the situation he’s caused, “And I know I’ve said it before, but I’m sorry for how far this has gone.”

“Don’t worry about it Roycie,” Shade said dismissively, “You had your hands tied, and you’ve helped keep him in check this far. Who knows what he’d have done if you weren’t there.”

“Fair point,” the Canadian conceded, “So, where’re you taking her?” The others listened on in interest, and Shade turned around with a few shirts on their hangers in his hand.

“I was thinking just a simple night out; dinner, movie, something pretty basic. Nothing overly romantic or anything…” he said, drifting off a little wistfully, something that the others didn’t miss.

“… mate, you don’t actually have a thing for her, right?” Rook asked, eyebrow raised in suspicion. When Shade failed to respond and turned back to his clothings, Rook frowned. “Shade…”

“… maybe, I don’t know, alright?” He answered finally, returning the clothes to the rack. “I mean,
she’s awesome to have a friend, rock solid and dependable, and bloody hell, she moves like a damn Taipan.” He moved to sit down on his bunk, “Doesn’t help that she has that soft twang to her voice that just… ugh!”

“I think she’s got you hook, line and sinker,” Roach commented.

“And that fucking scares me,” Shade responded, looking at him squarely, “There’s a reason why they didn’t initially have chicks on the lines, and there’s a reason why couples don’t serve in the same units. Say we hit it off, get something started. Then what? One of us is eventually wounded in a firefight, and the other foolishly risks their life to save them. They go down, and more of us get put at risk…” he sighed loudly and fell back onto his bed, “Not to mention the fact that the pain of losing her would probably be greater than losing any of you…”

Rook scoffed, “Gee, feelin’ the love here…”

“You know what I mean, mate,” Shade shot back, a little irritated, “I love all of you like bloody brothers, and I’d be fucking devastated if I lost any of you… but I don’t think I could function if I lost her… don’t get me wrong, I’d love to actually be with her… but I’ll be more than happy just being her friend…”

Authors’ Notes

(Spitfire)

It’s now four am. Dash is not very excited about this ‘date’. She wants it to be over. Especially with all the gossip and fawning the other ladies are doing. That’s… all I got.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

The plot thickens, both for Shade and Dash’s relationship dynamic, and for the MW2 plot at large. Gave a bit more context as to how Allen was prepped for his eventual infiltration into Makarov’s team. I gave him some Russian heritage (on his mum’s side) so he’d have some foundations for the language and culture. Plus some more ‘spook’ shit too, as he’s going under cover.

Oh yeah, Dash and Shade about to go on a ‘not-date’. About time, even though they aren’t that enthusiastic about it, given the circumstances… oh well.
This was happening. This was actually happening. Despite all of her thoughts and opinions on the matter, it was happening. If you told anyone that knew her (that wasn’t a member of her team, mind you) that this was happening, they would not believe you for a second.

Dash. Was on. A date.

She fought the urge to sigh as she and Shade walked down a city street, having parked a couple of blocks away from their destination as most of the parking directly outside was already taken by the rest of the town’s population as it seemed. And while walking was a good way for her to assess any threats or hazards to their outing, in particular a Canadian soldier who had threatened to follow them, it also meant that there was more time spent with an awkward silence between them. It wasn’t that neither wanted to talk, but it was best to avoid ‘shop talk’ around a bunch of nervous civilians. That and discussing missions and tactics was hardly ‘romantic’.

Dash briefly shook her head of the thought; she was sure that she didn’t like the Australian like that. Shade was a good friend to have, despite their rough start and rougher first op together. Though she had to wonder if the Monaco mission was designed specifically with them in mind. Chasing down an internationally wanted arms dealer aside, the time spent in the coastal European country was pleasant; a room in a nice hotel, shooting across the waves on a jet ski, eating nice food at a nice restaurant. It was a welcome change of pace when compared against their previous missions in Mexico or Kazakhstan.

Brisbane was nice as well, Dash mused, for different reasons. Yes, they were there for a reason as well, like any other mission, but there wasn’t that pressure of working by a timeline. If the Captain hadn’t called them back due to the tasking in Afghanistan, who knows how much longer they could have been there. But being able to properly unwind, without having to worry about an arms dealer, or terrorist cell, or components of lost satellites, that’s what made the trip down to Australia nice.

Shooting a glance to the man by her side, she let her thoughts run. If she were to disregard everything else about Shade that she knew, she would be loathe to admit that he wasn’t a totally bad looking guy. Much like all of the guys on the team, they shared that ‘rough’ exterior that hinted towards a lot of physical work and time outside. She was the same, admittedly not as bad as the guys. He cut a slightly intimidating figure as well, though that was more a result of his height than anything else. Shade was easily one of the tallest on the team, maybe of the entire Task Force perhaps. But he wasn’t exceedingly muscular, kind of like her with her runner’s build but with that extra bulk that a soldier generally carries with them.

No, there was something different about him when compared against say, someone like Rook, or Scarecrow, or even Ghost for that matter. Maybe it was his laid back nature, and how he doesn’t let much worry him. Or his somewhat weird bizarre sense of humour. She could still remember some of the jokes he cracked while on missions and during down time at the base. Or maybe, thinking back to the firefight in Nogales and their trip in Brisbane, it was his dedication to the people closest to him; his family and friends. Back in Mexico, he waved off Chemo and told him to treat her first, even though he was just as badly wounded, maybe even moreso. Then how he leapt to his siblings aid, and comforted them when he himself was shaken by his parents accident, putting them before his ow-

“Dash?” Shade said with a small smirk, amused by how she looked when she was staring into space. “We’re here.”
Dash shook her head clear of those thoughts again and returned to reality, then studied the outside of their destination. “Huh… this should be good, though I don’t know if I should be surprised or not…”

Shade laughed, “Hey, as much as they can take the man out of Australia, they can’t take Australia out of the man.” It was a rather small looking place, but the decorations on the sign and front window left little imagination as to the restaurant’s theme: an Australian bar and grill. They stepped inside, and were greeted by the smell of freshly cooked steaks and meat, and what Dash assumed was an Australian group’s music on the speakers.

“… I’ve been here for what, three years now, and I’m only hearing about this place now?” Rook said as he thumped the headrest and leant back in his seat, clearly disappointed.

“Well now you do,” Meat said from the front seat, a DSLR camera in his hands and aimed towards the doorway where their targets had just walked in, “and once this is all said and done, you know where to go now.”

“Will you two shut up? I’m honestly surprised that Bec’ hasn’t shot you two in the mouth yet, with all the bickering you guys do,” Amy sighed angrily, looking at both Meat and Rook from her place in the driver’s seat, before looking back at Meat, “Why did we bring him along if you’re going to argue all this time?”

Meat shot a meaningful glance at their fourth passenger, whose nose was in a book, “Because you brought Emma along, that’s why. It was only fair.” Amy grumbled and turned back to watch the restaurant. “I’m surprised you wanted to join us and not follow them on your own.”

Emma lifted her nose up and looked at Meat, “It would’ve been more suspicious if they noticed two cars on their tail and not just one. With one, you could just write it off as them going to the same place. But two? I can’t speak for your friend, but Dash doesn’t normally subscribe to coincidences.”

Rook shrugged, “Makes sense… I guess. Hey, when are we doing the food run?” When the car remained silent, he sighed and pulled out his phone. “… goddamnit. Fine… what does everyone want?”

Shade was content. Nothing quite beat a nicely cooked T-bone steak, some sausages, a fried egg, some chips and a cold beer. Well… maybe the sight of Dash struggling to finish her own steak was up there but not quite enough to steal the top spot. He chuckled to himself and sipped from his drink, leaning back and taking in the sight of the establishment around him. It reminded him of home… if home was filled with a number outlandish and outdated stereotypes, that is. It still had the Aussie charm though, with framed pictures of the notable tourist traps from each major city.

Shade finished his surveying and looked back to Dash, who at this point had basically given up. “Having fun there?” He asked with a small laugh.

Dash sat back with a sigh, “You’re a bottomless pit if you can eat that whole plate…”

“I was raised on this kind of stuff, so I guess you could say I’m used to it,” he offered, shrugging, “You did well yourself though.”

“While you were raised on biggass steaks I was raised on Southern Home Cooking, good fill-you-up
foods, chicken and dumplings, meatloaf, country-fried steak 'n gravy, the like,” Dash leaned forward again to rest her arms comfortably on the table.

Shade nodded and conceded, “Fair enough.” He sat silent in thought for a few moments, then looked towards the door. “Might give dessert a miss, what about you?”

She gave him a pointed look, “Is that really a question. I couldn’t eat anymore if I wanted to.”

He chuckled, raising his hands in surrender, “Hey, was just checking, alright? No need to bite my head off.” Shade finished off the last of his beer and set the bottle on the table, then pushed himself out of his seat to stand. “I’ll get the bill, if you wanna wait outside for me?”

“Okay…” Dash made her way out of the booth and towards the door, she caught a group in the corner of her eye, but on looking, she saw nothing out of the ordinary and continued out of the restaurant. Shade joined her after a few moments, and gestured for her to follow him as he started walking.

“I find a walk helps after a big meal like that…” He started, stretching his arms out wide with a content sigh escaping his lips, “plus I looked up a good place where we could hang out, kill some time before we head back.”

Dash walked along, stuffing her hands in her pockets comfortably, “Oh yeah? Where to?” Shade just smirked and linked an arm with her.

“Just follow me, I know the way.” Together, they walked arm in arm for a few blocks, in no time ending up in front of another bar, this one more of a ‘hole in the wall’ kind of place with no major signage or advertising. Dash was a little weary, but followed Shade in regardless as the man walked in like he owned the place.

Inside, the lights were dim, the music was quiet, and the general vibe that Dash picked up was that this was simply a place to kick back and relax, no rush or need to do anything energetic like dancing or pushing through dense crowds. If anything, the bar they had entered was practically empty; besides the pair of them and the two bartenders behind the counter, there were only four other people there, two men sitting separately at the bar counter watching a replay of some sports match on a TV screen, and a couple having a quiet conversation while tucked away in a booth towards the corner of the ‘main space’. Up near the back wall were a few pool tables, to which Shade started walking to.

“You ever play Pool before?” He asked, retrieving a pair of cues from the rack on the wall before stepping over and offering her one.

“Once or twice, but it’s been a little while,″ Dash replied with a soft smirk, taking the offered cue, “I’m sure I’ll pick it back up easily though.” Pool and Billiards was one of her hidden talents, having won a number of bets against the other guys on the team whenever the game was played. But Shade didn’t know that, yet.

Shade chuckled to himself as he arranged the balls in the triangle rack, setting them up at one end opposite the ‘D’, then stood up and returned the rack to its place next to the cues on it’s own hook. He then gestured to the other end of the table with both hands, “I’ll let you do the honours.”

“Like I’d have given you a choice in the matter,” Dash shot back cheekily, stepping up and leaning down to take the opening shot. As she took aim, she flicked her eyes up at Shade and winked at him, thrusting the cue forward into the white ball. It flew down the table and hit the triangle squarely, scattering the balls across the tabletop. One ball, #11, rolled right into the corner pocket, giving Dash the first ‘point’ of the match. “Well, I get the ‘biggies’, you’re on the ‘smalls’. Be sure to remember
that, okay?” She teased, standing upright as she picked out her next shot.

Shade had lost all focus though, instead of listening to her taunting or thinking of his next shot, he had been too busy studying Dash… seeing her leaning over the table and stretched out like that in the clothing she was wearing, it was quite a sight. The fact that it was just casual wear that she could wear everyday didn’t detract from it either, if anything, it enhanced it for him.

Most of the time spent on base was in some kind of uniform, be it regular utility ear, PT clothing, combat uniforms or something else. And those forms of attire were hardly flattering. But now? Shade was all too aware now that Dash was indeed a woman, and a pretty attractive one at that.

The click of balls impacting brought him back to reality, and his eyes locked onto #2 as it was knocked from its resting place and rolled to a stop near a side pocket. The white had stopped nearby, and he was left with a fairly easy shot to take. “Thanks for the set up,” he joked as Dash stepped back from the table.

“Just don’t waste it, can’t be holding your hand for everything,” she shot back, “I do it enough on missions as it is.” Shade shook his head and walked around the table to line up his next shot. He was about to strike the ball when Dash spoke up, “By the way, did enjoy the view?” He flinched and struck the white ball on the side, sending it wide and clearly missing any of his balls on the surface. It bounced off of the side cushion and tapped #15, barely enough to nudge it.

“Uh, I, uh, what did you say?” Shade stammered, his face going red at the realisation that he’d been caught. “What view?”

Dash rolled her eyes and chuckled, coming to stand behind where the white ball had stopped, “I know I’m oblivious at times, Shades, but even a blind person could see that you were eyeing me up…”

“Keep tellin’ yourself that…” Dash grumbled as she took her next shot, sending #9 into a side pocket with ease, then following up with #10 and #12 in follow up shots. “Want another shot?” She teased as she stood upright and backed away from the table.

As much as Dash would hate to admit it, Shade was right. Who knew that the pale blue button-up short-sleeved shirt he was wearing would highlight his arms, or that in civilian attire he didn’t ‘stand out’ like a regular soldier would. No, he had that definition that all elite troops gained, but he still could blend in like an everyday man who was fairly fit. That and his relaxed nature just made him that much more inviting… she bit her lip as she chased those thoughts away and tried to focus back on the game. “At least some of us are subtle about it. You looked like a deer caught in the headlights.”

Dash flashed him a smirk, one he returned confidently, “Was that you admitting that you were checking me out, D?”

Shade let out a bark of laughter, “Name one time I’ve actively shown off for the point of being
‘checked out’ by others? And you can’t count any training shit, because we both bring our A-game for that.”

Dash planted the end of her cue on the floor and leaned on it slightly, “Nogales, you most certainly didn’t need to keep running around with a bullet hole in your leg. And then Monaco, pretty much the entire time. Now hurry up and shoot, I wanna get on with kicking your ass.”

He laughed again and leant down to take his shot, “Sure, because what was going through some of those gangbanger’s minds was ‘Hey, look at that gringo ey! He got that smooth sense of style, yo’! That shit was just me being one determined bastard, or stubborn if that makes you feel any better.” He struck the ball, sending it down the other end to cleanly sink #2 into a corner pocket. His follow up shot had the ball tap number five, with no apparent clean shot for Dash to make. “And Monaco? I’m sure if you weren’t there by my side, playing the part of my ‘wife’, then yeah, I might have showed off a little more… I am an Aussie, after all, and we’re pretty big in Europe from what I recall.”

Dash chuckled and shook her head, “For being mouthy and insane maybe…” she commented, lining up a shot and jumping the ball over the ones in her way to sink #14 with a glancing blow, sending it into the nearest pocket. She smirked as she walked past Shade, hearing him mutter a quiet ‘what the fuck’ before leaning down beside him and taking aim. Dash struck again, and sent the balls across the table to generate some space, with her two balls ending up at opposite ends of the table.

“At least I’m not Meat,” Shade finally shot back in retort, trying to refocus on the game and his current crushing loss. He studied his options, and took a calculated gamble. He hit the white ball firmly, sending it straight towards #7. They connected with a solid click, #7 rolling into #6, which then rolled right into a corner pocket. He smirked, then followed up by sinking the prepared #7 into the same pocket. “That makes us even, right?”

“Oh not by a long shot, Shadey boy… not by a long shot,” Dash smirked at him and lined her next shot up. She sunk fifteen easily and moved smoothly to send #13 into a side pocket. Shade shook his head in dismay at her fluid shots, finally realising that he’d inadvertently set himself up for failure from the beginning.

“… y’know, I never figured you to be a ‘pool shark’…” he said, calmly lining up for his attempt to reclaim victory, aiming for #5, “You never fail to surprise me, D…” He took his shot, #5 quickly finding its new home in a pocket. He followed up with a desperate shot onto #4, but let his head hang down when it stopped short an inch from the rim of the side pocket.

Dash gave a sympathetic smile and nudged the table with her hip, shifting it just enough for the ball to fall into its place. She shrugged when Shade looked at her and moved to line up a shot on eight. The shot was easy and impossible to miss, and with a quick, firm strike to help put Shade out of his misery, she sunk #8.

Shade let the cue rest against his shoulder as he offered Dash a slow ‘golf clap’ before turning around to return the cue to its place in the wall-mounted rack. “Well played D, well played… despite the fact that had no idea I was fighting a losing battle from the beginning…”

She chuckled and mirrored his actions, “I would have given you a fair warning, but watching the look on your face was way more fun.”

Shade shook his head ruefully, nudging her in the side playfully as they made their way back towards the bar counter, “Why am I not surprised by that? Have I been in the force that long that I’ve finally become desensitized?”

Dash slapped him on the shoulder in response, “If so, it’s about damn time. Taken you long enough.” The two shared a laugh as Shade glanced up at the clock on the wall.

“I don’t know about you, but I feel like a walk…”

“Could he be any louder?” Emma muttered as she leant back in her seat and shot a glance at the sleeping soldier beside her, Rook passed out and dead to the world as his face rested against the car door.

“You don’t have to share a tent in the field with him, so you can’t complain.” Meat shot back quietly in return, setting down the camera to rub his face. “Ugh… I never thought I’d say this, but can this date fucking end?”

Amy chuckled, shifting in her seat. “Hey, at least it looks like they’re enjoying themselves. Can’t ask for much more than that.” They’d parked down the street after following them as they left the small bar for a walk to a nearby park. The trees and other plants had blocked their view, but from where they were, the four of them could see Shade and Dash sitting down on a bench and relaxing comfortable. “If you didn’t know them, they look like a happy couple just enjoying time together.”

“And the guys thought I was crazy,” Meat said with a knowing smirk, “wait until they… wait… no way!”

“What?” Emma piped up, leaning forward to poke her head between the two front seats.

“I think they’re gonna-”

Dash would be lying if she said she wasn’t enjoying herself right now. Looking back at the night’s events, she was surprised at just how relaxed and stress-less she felt. It had been a long time since she’d felt this at peace; sure, she could always find some time alone at the base to unwind and such, but the white noise of gunfire, vehicles and aircraft, shouting and chatter from members of the task force was still enough to remind her that she was still a soldier.

Out here, on a small wooden bench in a quiet park and watching the twilight sky darken as the night drew in, she felt normal. The air felt cooler and fresher, no lingering heat or smells from engine exhaust and gunpowder.

She’d also be lying if she said that having Shade’s arm around her shoulders was uncomfortable, too. Though, to be fair, she wasn’t with Shade right now. The Shade she knew was the laid back, speak-first-ask-questions-maybe Australian soldier that was both infuriating yet reliable. No, right now she was with Tom; a funny and charming, yet respectable and caring Australian man that she had, as much as she hated to admit it now, quite enjoyed spending the evening with. The small detail that caught Dash off guard the most, and had trouble coming to terms with, was that she didn’t want this night to end.

To Shade, he too was coming to that startling realisation that maybe, just maybe, this night might be the first step towards something more. Over the course of the night, he’d noticed how Dash’s walls had slowly come down. The apprehension at the start of dinner had faded away fairly quickly, and was replaced by something that he’d not seen much of while back on base; total peace.

Right now, Dash looked to be the most peaceful and rested that he’d seen, even after returning back from missions. Sure, they’d enjoyed their time in Monaco, but they couldn’t unwind completely as they were there on a mission. With Brisbane, they’d travelled around and the like, but he’d had his
family’s wellbeing in the back of his mind. But now? They weren’t a pair of highly-trained soldiers out risking their lives. They were just two people, out to spend some time together, be it as close friends or something.

He studied her for a few moments, then opted to risk something by lifting an arm up to rest it across the top of the bench backrest, behind Dash’s shoulders. She shifted a little, but didn’t protest or give him any kind of snarky remark. Whether she just didn’t mind or was too relaxed to care, he couldn’t tell, but he counted it as a win regardless.

“I hate to say this, but remind me to shake Meat’s hand when we get back,” he mused with a soft chuckle, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Oh don’t you dare,” Dash laughed, almost startled by the fact that she didn’t really disagree, “We will never hear the end of it.” Here she was, Rebecca Myers, rough and tumble country-girl run from home, who didn’t take shit from anyone... enjoying a date with this laid-back, charming as hell Aussie.

“I wouldn’t tell him the details, but that the night out and away from the base was what the doctor ordered,” Shade said after a few chuckles, “I’m not stupid enough to shoot myself in the foot like that, alright?” He turned his head to look over his shoulder, both to stretch his neck a little and to look around. “Hey… that silver sedan… I swear I’ve seen it before…”

Dash looked back at it and her brow furrowed, “They were behind us the whole way to the restaurant…”

“... I’m pretty sure that’s one of the rentals we keep in the motor pool back at base, too…” Shade said, turning back to look at Dash with a soft smile. “Either the Captain’s acting as an overprotective father figure, or Meat’s following through on his threat to watch us.”

Dash frowned, “That mother fucker…” she muttered, “Shoulda known he would…. Fucking Meat.” Shade shook his head, both at Meat’s apparent dedication and at Dash’s frustration.

“Y’know, we could always mess with him,” he offered after a moment’s thought.

“We could…” Dash shrugged. Shade smiled and nodded, then took another quick glance back at the car over his shoulder.

“Just gotta think of something that’ll get the best reaction out of him…”

She smirked, “Remember Monaco?” she asked, mischief in her smile. Shade laughed and looked at her with a smile.

“How could I forget? One of the better missions we’ve done… but why?”

Dash rolled her eyes at him, “My god you’re dense. Sealing the deal? Against Montee at the bar?”

He paused as he tried to recall that particular moment, then gave her a surprised look. “... I thought we agreed to never speak of that again?” He said, half-jokingly, “Though I can see the shock value in it…”

“Shock value might be an understatement, all things considered,” she shrugged. Shade shrugged back, then shook his head lightly in disbelief.

“Right…. Well, your idea, you can take the lead…” He said, trailing off quietly as he finished.
“Wuss,” she muttered, but made the move anyway, one hand on his shoulder as she leaned in. Shade shifted around, and began to lean forward to meet her half way.

*beep-beep-beep beep-beep-beep beep-beep-beep*

The pair froze as both of their phones started to sound an alert. It wasn’t a normal message tone, and for both of their phones to be going off at the same time only meant one thing.

Shade was the first to dig his phone from his pocket, but he sagged as he read what was on his creen. “Oh shit,” he said, both at the fact that their ‘moment’ was interrupted, and at what he had just read.

“No kidding…” Dash agreed quietly, looking at his screen with her own phone in hand.

[URGENT RECALL - ATTACK AT ZAKHAEV INTL AP - ALL TEAMS REPORT TO COMMAND]

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

Ha! Sike! (It’s psych) You really thought they were going to kiss for a moment there, didn’t you! Nah, they’ll get their moment soon enough. But first they’ve gotta save the world. This took a bit longer to put out, because at the time of writing, I’m now back at Uni! Yay me! It really shouldn’t impede that much, we’re still on that 3-4 chapter lead so we can comfortably upload if we run a little behind. Thanks for keeping with us for this long so far though!

(Spitfire)

Whelp, that happened. Dash was tempted to go drag Meat out of the car and punch him in his smug face. So. Yeah. Shock value. (That’s one way to put it) Next time we’ll be experiencing the aftermath of Allen’s demise. So, that’ll be fun I’m sure heh. (*[feels preparations intensify]*) What he said. Yeah that’s all I got for now. See ya!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Shade had never seen the base so alive, not since he first arrived. Support staff were running down pathways as members from other strike teams were dressed in full combat apparel and loaded for bear. The silver sedan that they had spotted earlier that evening slid to a stop beside them, the four occupants jumping out in a hurry. Both Dash and Shade were too in shock at the alert message to be angry at who had followed them.

“I was on the phone with Roach on the way back,” Meat said as he walked up to Shade, “the team’s gathering in Briefing Three, then we’re gearing up.”

“The fuck are we waiting for?” Shade replied as they started making their way through the busy walkways. “Any more intel on what the attack was?”

Rook looked back down at his phone, where he was reading off of a message that Scarecrow had sent him. “News agencies are still trying to get the full story, but it’s Makarov. He hit the airport with NATO weaponry, mowed down everyone and anyone in sight, including first responders and local law enforcement.”

“Fucking…” Dash sighed, pushing open a door as she lead the group into the building where the briefing rooms were. “How many so far?”

“Major international terminal like that?” Shade started, “Bastard would get over a hundred easily, plus many more wounded.” He looked back at Rook, “Hey, what did you mean by ‘NATO weapons’?”

Rook held his phone for Shade to take, “There’s images of him and his crew with M4s and a Two-Forty-Bravo, and another of one of the gunmen with a Striker. Nothing Russia or ex-Soviet that I’ve seen.” Shade nodded as he flicked through some of the images, but came to a stop as he looked at a picture of one of the gunmen, taken from a CCTV camera in the security foyer. Rook and the others noted his sudden halt, and looked at him worriedly. “Mate, what is it?”

“Allen.” Shade said, turning the phone around to show a picture of the recently recruited Ranger, an M240B in his hands. “Allen was there.”

In no time, the entirety of Hotel Team was gathered in the briefing room, all of them anxious and waiting for what was to come. The word that one of their own was involved in the attack had hit them hard, though they knew better than to speculate about the ‘why’. They’d all get an answer soon enough.

Captain MacTavish, Ghost and their resident intel analyst Spook were the last to arrive, the first two dressed in their ‘urban’ warfare gear minus vests. The look that the Captain gave them all as he walked up to the front of the room ensured that none of the team began speaking until he was ready.

“At twenty-two-forty hours our time, or eight-hundred-forty hours local, Vladimir Makarov and four of his associates conducted a mass shooting terrorist attack on Zakhaev International Airport in Moscow, Russia. An estimated two hundred plus civilians and law enforcement personnel have been killed, with triple that wounded. While the Russian FSB were quick to respond, Makarov escaped.” MacTavish read off of a report, taking a moment to let the information sink in, “There are two important facts to this attack: firstly, is that Makarov and his men were using weapons primarily used by NATO military forces. Reports indicate the use of M4A1s, M240s, Strikers, and other small arms.
Secondly, and most disturbingly, was that an American was involved in the attack.”

The news came to a shock to most of the team, barring Shade, Dash, Meat and Rook. “Our most recent recruit, Private First Class Joseph Allen, had been seconded to the CIA under General Shepherd’s approval to infiltrate Makarov’s inner circle. We don’t know how, but Makarov discovered his real identity and left him to catch the blame. Russian media is reporting that one of the terrorist’s bodies was an American, but so far haven’t yet identified him.”

Spook stood forward and took a place beside MacTavish, “We have reason to believe that the Russian Ultranationalist Government will latch onto this information and use it to justify a declaration of war against the United States. Satellite imagery on bases in the eastern regions of Russia have already shown a major mobilisation of airborne assault forces with tactical and strategic air assets also preparing for departure. A number of the teams here are already mobilising in response, primarily deploying to high value facilities in order to bolster defenses.”

“Not us,” MacTavish spoke up, “we’re going on the hunt. Thanks to intelligence gathered from former arms trader Clarence D’Montaigne, as well as intel gained by CIA officers posted in Moscow, we back-traced a shipment of arms that landed near Moscow back to Brazil, sent there by one Alejandro Rojas. It’s highly likely that Rojas, also known in some circles as ‘Alex The Red’ supplied the assault.

“We’ll be heading down to Rio De Janeiro to pay Alex a visit,” Ghost said from the side of the room, “though we won’t necessarily be coming back here afterwards. Dress in civis, like we did for Mexico way back when, but pack for an extended tour. We don’t know where we’ll be going after this, so bring enough for everything.”

“Time is critical. Allen was on a Black Op; while we’re the only ones who knew what he was doing, our credibility died with him. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can avoid a full world war breaking out on our hands. Dismissed.”

Shade had a two duffels open on the floor behind him. In one, he had seven sets of uniforms: two desert, two woodland, a cold weather set, an extra set of rugged civilian clothing, and a casual civilian set, plus the necessary basics like toiletries, socks and jocks, and his caps and bush hats. The second bag he was filling up with his helmets, and whatever vests, rigs and smaller packs he wasn’t planning to immediately use in Rio. He was already wearing his MMAC vest and had his brown cap and headset hanging from a carabiner off the side, his sidearm tucked away in its holster and his rifle resting on the bench next to his clothing bag.

Around him, everyone from his team, and members from other teams, were all doing the same: basically stripping their lockers of whatever gear they could carry for the huge fight ahead of them. Like Spook had said in their briefing, most of the teams were being sent to both the eastern and western coasts to help with defenses. At this point, only a handful of them remained. Hotel was tasked with their hunter-killer mission on Makarov. Foxtrot, India and Omega were being kept as reserves for homeland defense. And Sierra were being kept as backup for Hotel should the need arise.

“Hotel Team! Wheels up in forty! Get your shit and get moving boys!” A voice called from the entrance of the gear room, and Shade slammed his now-practically empty locker shut. He slung his rifle around his neck and let it hang in front of him, then zipped shut his gear duffel and slung each of the heavy and fully-loaded packs over each of his shoulders, then began the lock trek from the gear room to the airstrip. They had a C-130 with their name on it for their flight down to Rio. From there, they’d deploy while their gear would be taken to another place. Where, Shade didn’t know.
It took him a little bit longer than he had hoped, but he reached the waiting Hercules with plenty of
time to spare. Most of the team were already embarked and inside, and he was quick to dump his kit
with the rest then take his place on an empty jump seat beside Dash. He leant back as much as he
could to get comfortable, then looked at her. “This is all kinds of fucked up.”

“Yeah…” she agreed quietly, “I can’t stop thinking about Allen though... he was there, he watched
it happen…”

Shade sighed, closing his eyes. “As bad as it sounds… maybe he’s lucky. I couldn’t imagine living
with myself if I went through something like that, taking part in something like that.” He paused
before making his next statement. “You saw the footage… they were all shooting… fuck, maybe he
hesitated and that’s how his cover was blown…”

Dash sighed as well, leaning back in her seat, “Maybe…”

“If I knew… had I known he was being recruited specifically for that op… I’d have vetoed it, told
him to not try… poor kid didn’t deserve to be used like that.” He said quietly, “Once his name gets
out, and it will, there’ll be more hell to break loose. We do this right, we do this fast, we clear his
name.”

Dash nodded along silently. She looked up as Gale and NJ passed by, helmets tucked under their
arms.

“We’re wheels up in ten!” Gale called, “Make sure everything’s locked down and ready to go.” He
caught a crewman by the back of his collar when he strayed too close to the cockpit and redirected
him back towards the cargo bay, “Final checks in five!” With that, he and NJ disappeared into the
cockpit to begin their preparations.

Shade watched the cockpit door close, and then looked back at Dash. “I’m probably stating the
obvious, but he looks a little more wound up than normal…”

She shrugged, “We’re all on edge after what happened. I can’t blame him.”

“I don’t… christ almighty, this is real, isn’t it… World War fucking Three.” Shade mutters out, head
in his hands as he leans forward.

Dash sighed, “Yeah… it’s real… In their eyes, we’re the bad guys… can’t blame ‘em, Makarov just
pulled the dirtiest trick in history.”

The engines start to rumble to life, and Shade raises his voice high enough to be heard, “And it’s
going to be hard for the rest of the world, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if Russia lashes out at the UK,
Australia, Canada, any one of them or the US’s major allies if they so much as step in their direction.
As much as I hate to say it, but I think we’re on our own…”

“I can’t say it’s the first time we’ve been left out to dry,” Dash replied, “Still sucks.”

Shade opened his mouth to continue, but was interrupted by Chemo standing up and calling for
everyone to listen in on their radios. Both Dash and Shade tuned in, listening through their headsets
to help deafen the engine noise. “Okay guys, this is a short notice op so we’re going to do things a
little different here. We are headed down to South America. While we expect to be operating in an
urban area, there is still a risk of contracting different diseases. I understand that the inside of a
Hercules isn’t the best environment to be administering vaccines against a number of tropical
illnesses, the flight time will help allow the shots to take effect, meaning we can get into action
sooner once we touch down.” He leant down and unzipped a large carry pack full of small auto-
injectors, and started to hand out small groups of them to be handed around. “Inside each pack are three shots; they’ll cover against Malaria, Dengue, a few other tropical nastys, as well as the usual Tetanus, Meningitis, Hepatitis… the shit you’ll expect when running around low grade conditions like the Favelas and other regional slums. Alternate injection sites, and if you have any reactions, which you shouldn’t if each of your medical records are accurate, scream out for me or our lovely assistant medic Jay, who’s sitting up near the cockpit.”

Shade, along with most of the others in the team, looked up to where their medic was pointing out. “Shit, I didn’t know we were dragging him along,” Shade said to Dash, an approving smirk forming on his face despite his negative-sounding statement. The smirk disappeared after a few moments, “Wait, why the hell are we self-administering?”

“Because you can and it saves time,” Roach chimed in over the intercom, accepting one of the packs and passing another along the line, “though we really only do it for urgent ops, like this.”

Shade shook his head in mild disbelief, “Wow… I thought I had everything figured out, and it takes a war to show me just how little I actually know…” he said half-jokingly, receiving his pack of shots a few moments later. “At least they’re those auto-jays, kinda hard to fuck up with them.”

“Be careful with them, still,” Dash spoke up as she rolled up a sleeve and prepared one of the shots, “otherwise it’s just a waste. If you can’t do it yourself, hand ‘em here and I’ll shoot you.”

Shade quirked an eyebrow at her, “Mind rephrasing that?” Dash rolled her eyes, then blinked as she triggered the injection, recapping it and setting it back into the pack before retrieving the next one.

“You know what I meant, you ass.”

Shade idly tapped on the steering wheel as he waited for the light ahead to flick to green, careful not to accelerate too fast and approach their suspected target vehicle ahead of them too quickly. He cast a glance at Roach, who was in the front passenger seat beside him, then back at Dash and Captain MacTavish behind them, before focusing back on the road ahead of them. They looked inconspicuous enough, at least as much as a group of four caucasians in a beat-up sedan wearing tactical gear could be.

While he wasn’t necessarily religious, Shade did shoot a quick and quiet ‘thanks’ to whomever it was that had kept them from being stopped by any local law enforcement. Now that was something he was worried about.

The rest of the team was in two other cars not far away: Ghost, Meat, Royce and Robot were a block over to their right in another sedan; Chemo, Scarecrow, Ozone and Rook in a van a block to their right. They were positioned in a manner that allowed them to rapidly thwart any escape attempt fairly easily, especially in this particularly ‘dodgy’ part of Rio.

“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, marchando mi combo forma un alboroto…” Shade started muttering under his breath, to Roach’s amusement.

“Don Omar?” The Brit asked, breaking the relevant silence. When he saw Shade’s questioning look, he continued, “The song, it’s Don Omar, right?”

“Yeah, I think…” Shade answered, a little unsure himself. Roach chuckled at this, and shook his head.

“I only know it from Tokyo Drift,” he explained.
“Yeah, because you put it on whenever it’s your turn to run the movie night,” Dash piped up from the back, “Heaven help us if we watch something else other than damn street racing…”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad.” Roach started, turning back to look at Dash with a playful frown.

“Need I remind you of what I said last time this was brought up?” Captain MacTavish interjected, levelling a warning glare at both of them.

“No sir…” Roach said quietly, turning back around. Shade looked back at the Captain through the rearview mirror.

“At the risk of triggering someone, what is that order? Can’t say I’m familiar with all of them, even after all this time.”

Dash tried her best not to chuckle as she spoke up, “I believe it was after viewing number fifty-five in the span of two months, that the Captain decreed ‘if the movie Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift is ever played again without the consent of all involved parties, the disk shall be donated to Archer for use in target practise’.”

Shade raised his eyebrows at this fact, and took a careful glance at Roach. “Wow… fifty-five times in two months? I like my movies, mate, but wow…”

Roach opened his mouth to respond, but MacTavish rose his hand to keep him quiet while he tried to listen to an incoming radio message.

“Hotel Six, we’ve got a positive on the plates you sent us.” The intelligence operator informed them, and the mood in the car went from jovial to tense in a manner of seconds.

“Copy that, Six out.” MacTavish signed off, switching back onto the team’s frequency. “Ghost, the plates are a match.”

“Copy, any sign of the right hand man?” Ghost responded over the net as Shade slowly closed in on the van.

“Negative… wait, they’re stopping… hold one.” MacTavish answered, reaching forward to tap Shade on the shoulder. Understanding what he was trying to convey, Shade slowly pulled the car over to the side of the road. The four soldiers waited patiently, hands on weapons and door handles for ‘just in case’. They watched as three armed men emerged from the van with sidearms in hand, a fourth man walking out from the building to meet them. “We’ve got a positive ID on the assistant, but he isn’t that happy to see whoever these guys are.”

Without any kind of warning, Rojas’ assistant drew a Desert Eagle from behind his back and quickly gunned down two of the militiamen, finishing one off with a headshot before turning to shoot at a third that was back at the van. When he fell, the assistant turned his eyes on the sedan carrying the four 141 operators. Shade realised what was about to happen and crouched down behind the wheel, an arm flinging up to get Roach to do the same. “Get down!”

MacTavish and Dash ducked just in time to avoid the set of rounds the assistant had fired through their windscreen. No sooner had the barrage of fire stopped, all four soldiers leapt from the van in pursuit. “He’s getting away, let’s go!”

Roach and Dash took the lead, pushing and weaving past panicking civilians. Shade was close behind them, with MacTavish bringing up the rear as he called to Ghost on the radio. “Ghost, we’re on foot. Cut him off at the Hotel Rio if you can!”
“Roger, we’re on the way!” Dash caught a glimpse of their target as he sprinted across the road, barely missing the sedan that Ghost was driving.

“He’s headed down that alleyway!” She called out, pushing extra effort into her legs and overtaking Roach as they reached the road.

“Get him D!” Shade called out, he and Roach right on her heels to back her up if needed.

“We need him alive, non-lethal takedowns only!” MacTavish reminded them, to which Dash smirked as she closed the distance. With barely a few feet to spare, Dash let her Vector hang from its sling and she leapt forwards, arms outstretched as she brought the assistant down in a hard tackle. They dropped with a hard thud, and in seconds Dash straddled him and quickly had her Vector pointed right into the man’s face.

“Go on, try and run.” She said, only slightly out from breath from the sprint. The footsteps behind her alerted her to the arrival of the rest of the team.

“Nice tackle D, remind me never to play against you in a game of footy,” Shade said with a chuckle, kneeling down to seize the assistant’s hands and bind them together with some cable ties. Once he was secure, they lifted him to his feet and quickly checked him over for any injuries.

“As much as I like this alleyway, we need to get moving. It won’t be long until first responders are crawling over this place…” Scarecrow said as he and the remainder of the team walked up. Royce only chuckled at his statement.

“Dude, I’d be surprised if a cop showed his face in the next fifteen minutes… we haven’t got anything to be worried about.”

“Regardless,” MacTavish said as he and Ghost walked up to where Shade and Dash were holding their prisoner, “we should move to someplace more… secluded, away from prying eyes…” The way that the Captain spoke had Shade suddenly on edge, and he looked around the rest of the team to see them all wearing rather neutral expressions. “This way, come on.”

Shade sighed and let his head rest against the concrete wall he was seated down against, looking around the room at the other members of the team that were taking a break. MacTavish, Ghost, Chemo and their prisoner were in the next room over, and the brick walls did very little to cut down the noise from the ‘question and answer’ session they were having. And while this wasn’t Shade’s first experience with a field interrogation, the exact methods that he was partially witnessing through what he was hearing… he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t unsettling. Especially with how Ghost sparked a set of jumper leads after finding them and an old car battery in the alley.

MacTavish appeared from the doorway that lead into their improvised interrogation room, “This might take a while longer. Meat, take Roach, Royce and Shade and start making your way north through the favela. That’s where our intel has Rojas, but if we find anything else, we’ll let you know.”

“Got it boss,” Meat responded as he pushed himself off of a bench that was across the room from Shade, retrieving his M4A1 from the ground.

“The rest of you, be ready to get moving. I’m sure the militia is already scrambling to this area.” Everyone nodded in acknowledgement while Shade and the other three quickly prepared themselves to head out. With his rifle in his hands, Shade waited until the others walked outside before stepping through the doorway, only to be stopped by Dash’s arm.
“Be careful out there…” She said quietly, dropping her arm to let him go past. Shade nodded back to her, the mood in the air too serious for any kind of light-hearted or joking remark.

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Ah, well, I actually forgot to write this note when we finished this chapter so… uh… Yeah all I got is that the next one’s gonna be tense with the favela fight. See ya there.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

We’re in the thick of it now. We took some creative liberty on how the fallout from Allen’s cover op affects the rest of the task force as well as the start of how Takedown progresses, to allow for the additional characters and the like. Not much else I can really say about all of this. Just that I hope you’re all ready for what’s next!
"Quick rundown. Favelas are basically a modern-day lived-in maze. There is an organisational system to them, but it's hard to figure out unless you're a local," Royce briefed as as the four men jogged down an alleyway, "corridors can be of varying widths and lengths, and can have all kinds of entrances and exits lining them. Keep mobile but be mindful of your surroundings."

"Sounds like fun," Shade commented dryly, "kinda like getting my teeth kicked in."

"Because the favelas are all residential," Royce continued on, "there's a guaranteed civilian presence. And the militia recruit the residents as security. So watch your fire, but don't hesitate or put yourself at risk."

"Meaning?" Roach asked, a little confused by Royce's finishing statement.

"If a civi's reaching for an AK, drop him." Meat said plainly, to both Shade's and Roach's combined shock. Shade was flat out floored by the remark, Roach less so, as he'd worked alongside the two Canadians for a long time now.

"Got it…" Shade said after a few moments of silence, holding for a bit to let the three men go up a small set of stairs. They rounded a corner and found themselves on an elevated platform that overlooked the lowest section of the favela they needed to enter.

"Let's get these civis out of here, shall we?" Meat asked rhetorically, jumping down the ledge to the muddy ground below. He raised his M4 and started firing into the air while shouting out in Portuguese, "Este lugar não é seguro!" Shade landed behind him, with Roach and Royce following soon after, and together they watched as the space around them effectively emptied out.

"Well… at least they're out of the way…" Royce said lightly, tapping Roach on the shoulder as they started to head down one of the corridors. "I'll take Roach and go right, you two head straight, and we'll see you on the other side."

"Syotos, buddy," Meat said back as he jerked his head for Shade to follow. Seconds after they passed the first building, both Meat and Shade had to duck for cover as a group of militiamen rounded the corner ahead of them and opened fire. They were quickly dispatched after their initial barrage, and the two operators found themselves repeating the pattern of move, cover, shoot multiple times a minute. Roach and Royce weren't faring any better, despite the fact that the route they were taking was wider and had clearer lines of sight. The lack of available cover was the downside to their path, though.

What felt like hours but was actually minutes passed as the two pairs fought through a nearly endless wave of militiamen. Royce dove into cover as an enemy opened fire with an RPD in his direction, showering him in debris. "Royce, give me a SITREP, over."

"We're facing heavy enemy resistance in the lower village, and we've got no sign of Rojas!" Royce called back over the radio, poking out to quickly shoot a militiaman that was about to ambush Roach.

"Copy that, keep searching. Call out if you need backup. Out."

"Roach! Left side!"

Dash waited anxiously, gripping her Vector tightly as she listened to the gunfire being exchanged not
too far from them. It wasn't just her, either. Scarecrow was constantly flicking the safety of his M249, Rook kept looking back in the direction of where the others had gone, Robot was trying to distract himself by fiddling with his helmet patches, and Ozone was pacing around the entire room.

The sounds of torture had long since silenced, replaced by a quiet conversation that could only be heard if the rest of the room was dead quiet. The door opened and Chemo emerged, peeling a pair of bloodied blue latex gloves off of his hands. His face was a mixture of disgust and anger, and whatever questions any of the others had on the tips of their tongues were quickly kept at bay.

"The prick's just his local fixer, not really an assistant," Chemo spoke up after a few moments, "Turns out that Alex is a one-man-band that does a lot of outsourcing. Rarely hires the same guys twice unless they're really talented."

"And the fixer?" Rook asked, beating Ozone to the punch. Chemo shook his head in mild frustration.

"Not much use, though he did give us Alex's local address." He tossed the gloves into a bin and walked over to retrieve his weapon. At the same time, both MacTavish and Ghost emerged from the other room.

"We've got Rojas's living address for this area, so we're going to pay him a visit. Unfortunately, he's bought out the local militia as his security force, hence the resistance that Meat and the others are facing." The Captain said as he gestured everyone over to a map. "Alex was due for a meeting where we picked up the fixer, and was going to take this route to get here. This is where the others are now. We're going to hook around and come back down this way. With all the fighting, Alex is likely going to retreat back. We'll box him-"

"This is Roach, we need assistance urgently! Meat and Royce are both down, and we're pinned!"

The radio broke the tense silence, and everyone snapped into action.

"Chemo! Rook! Go!" MacTavish called out, both men already halfway out the door by the time he had finished. "Everyone else on me!"

Shade swore loudly as he tossed another grenade through the window and out into the corridor where the militia were gathering. He ducked down and stole a glance at Roach, who was busy trying to keep Royce from bleeding out. The man had taken a few rounds to his chest, one penetrating and catching him in the lower torso. He was barely conscious, and in a lot of pain. Meat was against the wall beside him, keeping one hand on another wound that Royce had sustained on his upper right leg, while also keeping a bandage on a nasty through-and-through wound on his own torso, just above his left hip.

"Come on man, stay with us! Keep talking to us!" Roach pleaded loudly to Royce, trying to keep him awake.

"It'll... take more... than... that... to shut... me up..." Royce coughed out, fighting against the pain.

"How's he doing mate?!" Shade called out as he emptied a magazine at a cluster of enemies, reloading quickly and switching targets.

"Not good! Any sign of the others?" Roach called back.

"Jack and shit!" Shade screamed loudly, poking out and letting off another long burst of fire. "I'm getting low here!" The team hadn't expected a protracted firefight like this, and as such had only packed fairly lightly as far as ammunition was concerned.
"Shade, here!" Meat called out, letting go of his leg wound to slide some of his own unused magazines across to him. "I won't be needing them!"

"Cheers!" Shade quickly repacked his vest with the four fresh magazines, then poked back out to re-engage. "I'll draw them away from you!" He said, standing up and rushing out the doorway.

"Shade?! Shade!" Roach screamed out, hopeless and now worried for his friend. Meat tied off the bandage around his leg, then shifted so that he could cover the entrance with his sidearm.

"That crazy asshole is gonna get killed," he said as he turned around.

"That crazy asshole is also an Australian. If he's going down, he'll be taking everyone with him." Roach stated quietly, looking back down at Royce. "Fuck… wake up Royce! Wake up!"

Rook and Chemo sprinted through the alleyway towards the sound of gunfire, weapons ready to go. They had tried to reach Roach over the radio to get an idea of what they were to expect, but hadn't been successful. Truth be told, he'd rather hear that they were beyond saving than absolutely nothing. That way, they were at least prepared for something.

Rook took the lead once they reached the lower section of the favela, where the others had made their entrance. The gunfire had died down, but there was still the occasional burst of what sounded like an M4 or M16. Quickly but cautiously, they made their way down the corridor in front of them.

"Shade?" Rook called out carefully, his eyes constantly scanning for any signs of life. The ground around them was littered with shell casings, and in some places a number of bodies. "Roach?"

"Rook?!" A voice called from their right, and both Rook and Chemo swivelled to see Shade jogging towards them. "Fuck me, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"No fucking kidding," Rook replied.

"Come on, this way." Shade turned around and started running back towards where Roach and the others had holed up. "Meat got tagged but is somewhat stable, Royce is all kinds of fucked though…” Chemo grunted in acknowledgement as they ran to the small dwelling.

The medic all but pushed past Shade and crouched down across from Roach, hovering over Royce as he assessed his injuries. "Rook, take Roach's place. Roach, you and Shade get back out there and into the fight. The others are headed to Alex's house up in the hills, but you need to be their blocking element."

"Shit…” Shade said as he ran a check over his remaining ammunition. Including the four magazines that Meat gave him earlier, he only had three full magazines and a partial left, not including the other partial currently loaded. "Hey, can someone spare a few extra mags?"

Rook handed him two, while Roach collected an extra five from both Meat and Royce's vest. He handed three to Shade and kept an extra two for himself. "We're set… you two sure you'll be fine?"

"We'll have to. I'll stabilise Royce and then call in Jay to pick us up." Chemo said as he went to work on Royce.

"Jay?” Shade asked, a little confused by the mention of the second medic.

"He's on standby, ground-based CASEVAC. It'll take him a few to get here, but he's our best shot of getting Royce and Meat out of here alive."
"Right… good luck guys," Roach said, tapping Rook on the shoulder as he turned to leave.

"Back at you, mate."

"This is Shade. Roach and I, we're headed back up the hill towards you guys. Chemo's getting Royce stabilised and prepped for CASEVAC, Meat's wounded and out of the fight but it's not serious." Hearing the familiar voice on the radio calmed down Dash's nerves greatly, even as they were pushing through a crowded favela street and against a fleeing crowd. "We haven't seen the bastard yet, but I think we're getting close with how much these guys are putting up a fight."

"Copy that Shade, we're facing heavy resistance up here as well," Captain MacTavish responded, ducking behind a corner as an enemy machine gunner opened up at him. Ghost was quick to take him out. "We're headed towards Rojas' location on the upper levels, I can't send anyone else down to you, so you'll have to push through on your own with Roach."

"Got it, we'll see you there!" The radio cut off after that, and the focus returned on getting through the militia's blockade. They managed to proceed another two blocks, when Dash saw movement on a rooftop to her left.

"Sir! I've got Rojas! Top left, got a bag on him!" She called out, raising her Vector to send a few rounds in his direction.

"Don't fire on him, we need him alive! Ghost!" MacTavish replied.

"I've got him too sir! 'Crow, give me and Dash a boost!" Ghost said, running over to where Scarecrow was. Using the gunner as a platform, both Ghost and Dash climbed up to the rooftop where Rojas was running and set off in pursuit.

Dash sprinted after him, but he knew the terrain, or rather the rooftops, better than she did and was able to use that to keep a comfortable lead on her. She was fast and agile though, he couldn't lose her. Which meant he couldn't lose the rest of the team either.

"Stay on him!" Ghost called from not far behind her, rifle up and ready to eliminate any threats to himself and Dash as they raced across the ramshackle roofing. He let off a burst of fire towards an emerging enemy in a doorway, forcing him back as they sprinted past. Down below, MacTavish and the others were able to keep up a decent pace. By having Ghost and Dash break away, as well as Shade and Roach approaching from the south, they were beginning to stretch the militia's coverage thin. And with them now in three different elements, Rojas had virtually nowhere to go.

MacTavish felled an enemy and looked up to see Rojas, followed by Dash and Ghost, jump between a narrow gap above them. Pausing, he looked further down and saw that Rojas's residence, and a potential escape vehicle, was not far ahead of them. "Scarecrow, cover me!" He called, sprinting forward towards the front door of the building. The door swung open with a swift kick, and he hurried his way up the stairs.

Above, Dash landed onto a rooftop just as Rojas made a jump for another one. She looked to where he had landed and saw that he had reached the balcony of his 'house', and saw that an old-looking sedan was parked outside. Putting two and two together, she called up as much of her energy as possible to surge ahead and make the next leap. Behind her, Ghost watched as Dash jumped and was mere meters away from their target. "He's getting away!" He called out, frantic as they were so close to catching him.

Time slowed as MacTavish replied with a collected "No, he's not" and burst out through the main
balcony doors, tackling Rojas into the rail and over the side, the pair landing on top of the parked car below. Ghost jumped down from the low rooftop and quickly rushed to help secure him, his M4 aimed right at Rojas' head with MacTavish straddling the top of him. Scarecrow and Robot quickly took up security, checking the nearby buildings for threats as Dash clutched to a support beam back up on the balcony, having almost been knocked off by the Captain's unexpected tackle. She sat down, letting her legs hang over the side of the balcony as she caught her breath.

Shade and Roach trotted up not long after, nearly spooking Robot who'd been checking an alleyway, "Nice of you two to join us!" she called down to them with a grin.

"Nogales ain't got shit on this!" Shade called back with a half grin, letting his rifle hang as he walked over to where Ghost and the Captain had dragged Rojas. He eyed the broken balcony and the crushed car, then looked back up to Dash. "So… who pulled a 'three hundred' on the bastard?"

"That'd be the Captain," Dash answered with a shrug, "Hell, he nearly took me down with them."

"Heh," Shade chuckled, stretching his neck around, "Kinda wish we were all wearing cameras or some shit, sounds like a kickass moment from a movie or game." He then looked back up at Dash quizzically, "Hey, how's the view from up there?"

Dash made a show of looking up and around before looking back at him, "I've seen better." With that she jumped down, landing neatly on the ground. Shade and Roach clapped politely, with Roach holding up a pretend score sign.

"I give it an eight-point-two." He said with a smirk, earning a slap on the shoulder in response.

"What's the word on Meat 'n Royce?" Dash asked curiously, turning her attention to Shade.

"Chemo was up to his elbows in Royce's gut when I left," Shade answered seriously, "and Meat took a round to his upper leg. Likely fractured a bone, but it missed his artery so relatively speaking he's okay… Last I heard was that Jay was going to pick them up and evac 'em back to Gale's angel wings." He finished, shaking his head. "They're both out of the fight for the foreseeable future, and I'm not certain that Royce'll fully recover…"

Dash grimaced, "Poor guy… They're in good hands with Jay and Chem' though, none better."

"Except maybe actual surgeons," Scarecrow chimed in as he approached the group, "but we got them out well within the Golden Hour… plus I'm sure that Meat'll drag Royce through his recovery, kicking and screaming if he has to." A slamming door had them all look towards a decrepit shed that Ghost, MacTavish and Rojas seemed to have occupied. Shade let out a low whistle.

"Bastard'll get what's coming to him now," he commented, "Ain't no way that the Boss is gonna let this slide…"

"No shit..." Roach agreed, rubbing his face with a bare hand, his gloves discarded as they had been coated in Royce's blood down in the lower levels. "Any word on our exfil?"

"Not a clue, though it doesn't sound too good." Robot spoke up, walking over with a grimace on his face. "But look at this." He said, holding his phone out for everyone to see. On the screen was a press release from the US Department of Homeland Security.

RUSSIAN FORCES MAKE LANDFALL ON CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. ALL CIVILIANS ADVISED TO SEEK EVACUATION OR SHELTER IN PLACE.
"Well shit..." Shade's words echoed through the empty lot, summing up everyone else's thoughts.

Fifteen minutes later, though the time felt like an eternity to those involved, MacTavish and Ghost emerged from the shed. Ghost's gloves were particularly bloody, though the Captain's hands weren't that clean either. Wordlessly, he summoned the six remaining soldiers to gather around. Ghost, however, was the one to start. "All we got out of Rojas is that the only person that Makarov hates more than an American is imprisoned in a Russian gulag."

"That's not the only pressing concern though," MacTavish interjected, "We're down four men, and with most of the US Military engaged with homeland defense, we're effectively on our own."

Shade and the others barely suppressed a groan, internally dreading having to either escape out of Rio with a low profile or having to fight their way out. "So what's the plan then?"

"I know a guy, he works locally doing odd-jobs for the highest bidder. I made sure to call in a few favours though, and he's on his way to pick us up from the south-east side of the Favela." MacTavish continued. "I called in with Chemo; Royce is stable but critical. Both him and Meat are being evacuated by another military transport back to base. Rook and Chemo will meet us on our evac flight, then we'll proceed to get the hell out of Brazil."

Distant gunfire caught the attention of the group, and everyone separated to secure their perimeter while Ghost climbed to the roof of Rojas's home. "Sir, the Militia's closing in. Roughly two-hundred of them, front and back!"

"Let's go," MacTavish called, gesturing for everyone to follow, "We're going to have to fight our way out of here."

"Time to embrace the suck," Shade muttered out as he rushed past Dash, "fuckin' hope we don't run out of ammo on the way. Didn't exactly pack for a long fight."

The group of eight made their way out of the small courtyard, leaving the battered and bruised Rojas behind, and were quickly engulfed by heavy enemy fire. The militia effectively swarmed the team as they returned fire. Cover was sparse, with any decent solid cover a rarity as the heavy 7.62mm rounds from the militia's many AKs and FALs tore through timber, brickwork and metal like paper.

"Thought you'd know better by now, Shades! Especially after we went to Plan S in Nogales!" Dash teased over the noise, "We always pack for a long fight!"

"I like my firefights the way I like my women: short and quick but full of violence and action!" Shade shot back as he lobbed a grenade towards a cluster of fighters around a small shack.

Ghost ran up between them and ducked down to reload. "Will you two stop bloody flirting? There'll be plenty of time to suck face on the chopper out of 'ere, now get your arses moving!"

"Technical!" Roach screamed loudly, everyone taking cover as a battered pickup truck drove into the fight, the heavy fifty-calibre machine gun mounted in the tray firing off rounds inaccurately towards the team. Roach, crouched back from the corner of a brick shack, readied his underslung grenade launcher and keyed his radio. "The fucker has me suppressed; somebody draw his fire for me and I'll nail 'im with a forty."

Dash peeked around the corner of her cover and settled with the first plan to come to mind, "I'm on it! You better be ready on that launcher, Bug!" With that she dashed out of cover and planted her feet, right in the open. "Ey! Pendejo!" She shouted, firing a few shots from her Vector in the technical's direction before diving behind the nearest, hopefully solid, cover.
Sparks showered down as the large rounds passed through the sheet metal above her, cutting out fairly quickly as a large explosion sounded out. She poked her head out and saw that the remaining militia fighters were beginning to retreat, the technical that had been suppressing them now a burning wreck. She shook her head and saw that Shade was jogging over with a bemused expression on his face.

"Balls of bloody steel, D," he began, offering a hand to help her stand up, "though I'm pretty sure you were after 'idiota', the Portuguese version, not Spanish."

Dash lightly pushed his hand away and stood up, brushing off the dirt and dust she had picked up during her dive, "I'd ask how you know, but I know that Meat would've taught you all the ways to swear in other languages."

"Guilty," Shade shrugged with a smirk, "now let's go before Ghost shoves us into a dark closet somewhere. Dash rolled her eyes as the pair caught up with the rest of the team, pushing past the burnt out wreck of the technical and down the street, deeper into the favela. The fighting was fierce, with militia fighters appearing around practically every corner. By the time they were approximately halfway, Shade had estimated that as a team they had paved their way through a minimum of fifty fighters.

"Grabbin' an AK!" Roach called out as he reached out to collect a fallen fighter's weapon, his own ACR hanging on its sling around his back with all of its ammunition depleted. Everyone else was running critically low on ammunition, and soon everyone else had claimed an enemy weapon for their own use, scavenging ammunition where they could.

Shade crouched down behind a car, the stock of an FAL digging into his hip as he awkwardly reloaded the large battle rifle. Handling the weapon was taking some adjustments, but he couldn't fault the stopping power of its heavier round. Dash was struggling with similar issues, having picked up a rather banged up MP5K and a few extra magazines for it. She swapped out the magazine and slapped the charging bolt down, then looked at Shade with an exhausted expression on her face. "How many of these guys are out here?"

"No bloody clue, but they're bound to run out soon." Shade said back, popping up to send a few shots into a fighter that had emerged from cover. He looked around and saw that they were beginning to head back into a series of narrow corridors, an environment not necessarily suitable for the long-barreled FAL he had. "How much longer have we got to go?!" He called out to the Captain, who was covering around a corner across the street.

"Not far, just through that alleyway then onto the rooftops." MacTavish stepped back and lobbed a grenade into the marketplace between them and the alleyway. He charged forward just as it detonated, "Move! Push through!" Ghost, Roach, Scarecrow, Ozone and Robot followed after him, Shade and Dash bringing up the rear.

To their relief, the marketplace was the last bastion of resistance for the militia, and the eight soldiers soon reach the rooftops and had the final landing zone in sight. Shade looked up as he dodged an exhaust fan vent to see a battered CH-53 Sea Stallion fly overhead before making a turn to come down into a hover less than two hundred meters away. Ahead of him, MacTavish and the others jumped over a gap between buildings. Everyone made it, apart from Roach.

To Shade, it looked like Roach had subconsciously slowed down in hesitation without actually realising it. Without that extra speed, he had landed short of the ledge and was hanging on the edge. "Roach! Hang on!" Shade called out, causing Ghost, Dash and the Captain to turn around and rush back towards the dangling Brit.
They could only watch in shock as Roach slipped just as the Captain dove to grab him, missing him by mere inches. It was a decent drop to the ground below, maybe ten or so feet. They all peered over to see Roach unconscious and sprawled out on the ground. Shade slung his rifle over his shoulder and stood back up to assess the area. He spied a drainage pipe that fed from the gutter of his rooftop to the ground beside Roach. Making a decision right there, he tightened the sling on his rifle.

"You guys keep going, I'll get him up."

"What?!" Dash called out, looking out from across the gap.

"I'm going down. You lot head to the evac, we'll see you there." Shade ignored the protests from the rest of the team and started to shimmy his way down to the ground.

Authors' Notes

(Shade)

In the thick of it now! Shade's doing the typical stupid heroism shit, though deep down they all know they can't leave him behind. Not much else I can say about this chapter really, just that I find it hard to drag out parts from the game that drag out, like the favela fight and the rush to the chopper.

Shade (the character) is also on tumblr now, 'Shadeops21' is the page. Most of the content there will be IC though do expect me to use it to vent and bitch occasionally, heh.

(Spitfire)

Well Shade's doing the dumb shit Jay would normally do, so that happened. Dash is most definitely gonna chew him out for that. In regards to Shade's AN, the CoD rp community on tumblr is practically dead (except for this month where everyone's agreed to be active, which by the time you're reading this will be over...), so, by all means, come and check us out, revive the fandom. Jay's blog is cordemente.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
A sharp slap to the face was the first thing that Roach felt upon returning to the world, quickly followed by throbbing soreness across his entire body and the back of his head. It took longer than he hoped for his vision to focus, but when he finally regained relatively clear vision, he recognised the shape hovering above him as Shade.

“Mate, get your ass up, we got a bunch o’ bastards on their way,” the Aussie said, offering a hand to help Roach stand. He took it and with a pained grunt, he was upright and getting his bearing.

“Get the plate of the truck that hit me?” He asked with a groan, taking off his helmet and inspecting the damage. The rear, just above the nape guard, was dented in slightly where it had taken the impact of hitting the ground. “What now?”

“We de-ass the area with the quickness,” Shade said, looking over his shoulder down the alleyway where the sound of incoming militia was growing louder.

“Shade, how’s Roach?” Captain MacTavish’s voice broke the radio silence, and Roach beat him to the response.

“My bell’s ringing sir, but I’m good,” He said, fixing his damaged helmet to the back of his vest.

“What’s the plan boss?” Shade asked, starting to make his way in the opposite direction of the militia and gesturing for Roach to follow.

“We’re moving to a secondary exfil point at the end of another set of rooftops. But you need to get into gear now, the militia are about fifty meters behind you! Keep heading straight and then take a right when I tell you! We’ve almost got eyes on you.”

“Copy that, we’ll see you soon!” The two soldiers broke out into a run, going as fast as Roach could manage. Shade was no combat medic at all, but even he could recognise the signs of a concussion. “Keep up mate, the sooner we’re on that bird the sooner we can be kicking back with a beer!”

“That idiot!” Scarecrow, Robot and Ozone could only watch in worry and mild confusion as Dash continued her subdued ranting at their colleague’s selfless-yet-stupid act. The three of them had reached the chopper first, and had only found out about Roach’s fall over the radio. It was when the others arrived with a angier-than-normal Dash that they had found out that Shade had jumped down to help him out. They couldn’t understand exactly why Dash would be mad at him; nobody gets left behind after all. Had they known or were there when it happened, they would have done exactly the same thing.

“I’ve got ‘em!” Ghost called out from where he was, situated in one of the side doors of the Sea Stallion’s cargo bay. “Ten o’clock low, heading north!”

With a speed that was even for Dash, she was up and leaning over Ghost’s shoulder to see where her friends were down below. It took a moment, but she saw them: Shade in the lead with Roach right behind him. Not far behind them, though, were the militia.

“Roach, Shade, the militia’s right on you!” MacTavish called out as he looked over Ghost’s other shoulder. “Take the next right, go through that building!”

Dash moved back away from Ghost and walked down the cargo bay towards the rear ramp, taking a
safety strap and clipping onto her rigger’s belt, then leant out the end of the helicopter to get a better view of the scene below. Sure enough, she caught sight of them as they flew overhead. Dash was tempted to bring her Vector out and try and thin out the militia behind them, but she knew that it would be pointless and extraordinarily risky; the pistol calibre rounds from her Vector would have little effect from this distance, and there was no guarantee she wouldn’t hit a civilian or even Roach or Shade with how much the helicopter was jostling her around.

Movement beside her caught her attention, and it seemed that Scarecrow didn’t share those concerns. He had another spare strap attached to the back of his vest, and his M249 was on the ramp’s edge with the bipod deployed. “Hey Captain, get our pilot to hold us steady for a few, will ya?” Dash couldn’t hear the reply over the rotor noise, but the helicopter did slow down and steady up, the tail pointing in the direction of the approaching militia. Scarecrow adjusted his grip, then let out a controlled burst of fire.

Shade glanced at the helicopter above as it slowed up and steadied out, before making out the sound of machine gun fire in front of him amongst the screams, shouts, and engine noise. He and Roach instinctively ducked, and saw that the front of the pack that was chasing them was slowing down and being cut down by gunfire.

“Crow’s covering us,” Roach said, making the realisation that their team’s gunner was providing supporting fire from the back of the chopper. Their hopes revitalised, the two soldiers picked up the pace and made their way back to the rooftops.

“I swear to god Roach,” Shade called out as they began their final leg of the escape, “if you slip and fall again, I’m leaving your ass behind!”

“Duly noted buddy!” Roach shot back, jumping down and sliding down a slanted sheet metal roof. “Hey, last one to the bird-”

“Not the bloody time!” Shade yelled, ducking as he narrowly missed a low-hanging telephone line, diving for the same roof that Roach had reached first.

“We thinned them out, but we’re running on fumes now! You have sixty seconds to get to us!” Captain MacTavish called across the radio, the Sea Stallion swinging around to the right and pulling into a hover near the edge of a building at the end of the favela. The coastal region of Rio was visible, highlighting just how high up the hill this favela region of Rio was.

Both Shade and Roach could see the Captain standing in the open door of the helicopter, a long ladder hanging from below. “He can’t be fucking serious!” Shade exclaimed, looking at the ladder as he ran.

“I don’t see any place to land that prick!”

They burst through the final door, fifty meters of open rooftop between them and the end of the ladder. Halfway across, the first militia fighter ran through the same doorway. At the end, Shade and Roach made the jump for their lives.

“Fuck this shit!”

Dash let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding when she saw the two men clinging to the ladder as their pilot swung the chopper around and away. Relieved, she stepped back from the hatch and sat back into one of the canvas jump-seats that lined the cargo bay. It took longer than she
had hoped for the two to climb up and into the helicopter, the pair taking seats across from her and clearly out of breath and out of nerves, if the pale faces were any indication.

Dash was about to start questioning them, but was stopped as Captain MacTavish stood between them. “Shade, while I appreciate your efforts and what your intent was, you still took an unnecessary risk and endangered not only yourself but the rest of the team too.”

Shade looked up at him as if he had been slapped, “With all due respect, sir, you don’t know if Roach would’ve woken up as quick as he did without my assistance. Right now, he’d likely be strung up somewhere in Rio being paraded around.”

“Or, we could be extracting a paraplegic or quadriplegic right now. Your ‘assistance’ might’ve further injured him or complicated existing injuries. Granted, you have basic combat medical training, but did it occur to you that he might’ve damaged his neck or spine upon landing?”

MacTavish crossed his arms over his chest, pausing to let Shade think over that question.

“... no sir.” He replied relatively quietly, turning to look at Roach with a concerned expression. Roach quickly shook his head in reply.

“Don’t worry, just a little bit sore, that’s all.”

“We’ll get Jay to check you out once we regroup. I got word in from him once we reached the helicopter that a medical team from the Brazilian Air Force have both Meat and Royce stabilised and ready for transport. Gale’s just waiting on us to return before he leaves.”

“And when is that?” Scarecrow asked from beside Ozone, a few seats down from Dash to her right.

“Nikolai?” MacTavish called out loudly, looking over to the cockpit.

“Da, comrade?” A heavily accented Russian voice replied, catching everyone but MacTavish and Ghost by surprise.

“ETA to those coordinates I gave you?”

“Fifteen minutes, maybe less if tower controller was not a complete blyat.” The response broke the tension inside the helicopter, with everyone chuckling at the pilot’s frustration with air traffic control. MacTavish left to go take a seat up near the cockpit, leaving Shade, Roach and Dash to themselves.

Dash narrowed her eyes as she stared at Shade, “You... are a fuckin’ idiot...”

Shade looked back to her and rolled his eyes, “Look D, I’m still adjusting to the new one that the boss just tore me, don’t need you adding to it.”

“How big does it need to be for the message t’ sink in?” She looked at him pointedly, “Maybe you forgot that we’re a team , and that we make decisions as a team.”

“Oh fuck off,” Shade dismissed her, “it’s not like we had bloody time to sit down and go through a fucking risk analysis. We had a man down, with bad bastards about to run him over. Split second decision; shouldn’t even need to discuss it.”

“Doesn’t mean you go all one-man-army on us. If you needed to carry Roach, who would’ve covered you? If you needed to hoist him up a wall, who’d assist you? If you got hurt yourself, who’d drag both of your sorry asses into cover? Fucking nobody , that’s who, all because you decided to try and play hero.” Dash was leaning forward across the aisle at Shade, eyes focused on his. “We could very well have two filled body bags laying on this steel floor right now thanks to your actions.”
Roach sat there in silence, looking between the two intently and wondering if he should break the tension between them. He opted to remain silent, though he knew if Meat was sitting there, the Canadian would be chanting ‘fight, fight, fight, kiss, kiss, kiss’.

“No sharp pains when you move or turn your head?” Jay asked, standing behind Roach as he examined his neck and back.

Roach paused and testingly turned his head a couple times, “No, just sore as all fuck…”

Jay straightened up, “Good, then you got lucky. Some nasty bruises from catching bullets with your plates, and a concussion, but nothing long term.” He faced Shade who’d been standing off to the side, he glanced over him briefly before looking him in the eye, “I take it you went through the window first…” Jay nodded at Shade’s arms, a large and bleeding gash in particular, “That’ll need stitching, come here and sit down.”

Shade sat down begrudgingly, averting his eyes from both the medic and the wound on his left arm. “I heard that Royce should be fine.”

Jay nodded as he worked, “Got him out in good time. Should recover fine.”

“Good to hear…” Shade trailed off, wincing as Jay cleaned his wound. “… feel good to be back out in the shit? I mean, you aren’t out in the thick of it, but close enough is good enough, right?”

Jay paused before he chuckled and finished cleaning Shade’s wound so he could stitch it, “Better than being stuck behind the damn desk.” Shade chuckled along with him, shaking his head a little.

“Shame it took a bloody world war though.” He sighed, his free hand fiddling with a flap on his pants pocket. “You meet the boss’s friend?”

Jay shrugged, “He did odd jobs for us when I was still on the team. Old friend of his I think, never got the full story.” Jay quickly finished the stitching and sat back, “Done. Anything else I need to know about?”

“Just a sore shoulder from all the recoil, but that’s about it.” Shade said with a small smirk, sliding off the table. “If anything comes up, I’ll let you know.”

He nodded back and turned to start cleaning up his kit, “I’ll believe that when I see, or rather hear, it.”

“Duly noted,” Shade shot back with a laugh before walking off, rejoining Roach who was waiting outside. “Doc said I’ll never be able to play the guitar again.”

“That’s a damn shame mate, always loved your rendition of Wonderwall.” Roach remarked with a laugh.

“Ach, fuck off,” Shade smiled, “y’know you loved it. That and Smoke On The Water.”

“Any hack can play Smoke. My Nanna can play Smoke, and she’s suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and Parkinson’s.” The two joked back and forth as they made their way to where the rest of the team was, packing up their gear for the next leg of their campaign. “So, where are we headed?” Roach asked the group.

“Russia,” Scarecrow answered, packing away his weapon into a carry case, “we’re hitting some oil rigs. Captain’ll brief us in flight.”
Shade stiffened at the mention of oil rigs, his mind now starting to race with the possible mission type. Roach and the others didn’t notice it and kept talking, “Any particular reason why?”

“All we heard is that there’s an enemy of Makarov’s locked up somewhere, but the rigs are in our way. Can’t go around, so we gotta go through,” Rook said, stowing away his bloodstained clothes into a trash bag. “But at least we’re taking the fight to them now, so I’m happy.”

“Gonna make ‘em regret setting foot in my home…” Dash snarled, pacing restlessly.

It was strangely quieter in the Hercules this time around, Shade mused to himself. Sure, everyone was catching whatever sleep they could at the time, but the absence of the two loudest members of the team, Meat and Royce, was noticeable. Every now and again he expected some kind of smartass remark to follow a nasty patch of turbulence, or for a heated exchange of words and insults to break out over a harmless game of cards. But there was none of that.

He could use the distraction, if he was being totally honest to himself. Shortly after they had left Rio, the Captain had called them together for a quick briefing on the next phases of their operation. They were linking up with a US submarine a fair distance from their objective, a set of oil rigs off the coast from Russia, then were subsequently going to swim from the sub to get to the rigs, in order to neutralise the air defense network that the Russians had established as well as rescue the civilian hostages that were still onboard.

All of this was the precursor for a combined arms assault on a recently fortified gulag to recover their key objective, ‘Prisoner Six-Two-Seven’. When the Captain had passed on the intel gained from Rojas to General Shepherd, the general had used his recently awarded ‘blank check’ to assign a nearby US Navy Carrier Battle Group and it’s contingent of aircraft and US Marines to assist the Task Force with their assault.

Fighters would provide close air support and suppress enemy air defenses, helicopters would ferry the 141 from the rigs to the gulag and also be in place to extract them with the prisoner, and the Marines would take over security of the rigs as well as provide external security of the gulag during the assault. Only the ten-strong team of 141 operators, backed up by a squad of SEALs would insert into the gulag itself and make the retrieval.

From there, whatever Six-Two-Seven offered would then dictate where the task force headed next. Shade had asked the Captain how the homefront defense was, and while it wasn’t looking good, there was still hope as most of the major fighting was still confined to eastern and western coastlines, with the furthest penetration into CONUS by Russian forces being Nevada and Virginia respectively.

“Hey.” Shade snapped from his thoughts and looked to his left, where Dash was looking at him with a mildly concerned expression on her face. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighed as he rubbed his face, growing slightly more tired as time passed. He was one of the unlucky ones that were unable to properly sleep while flying. Add that to a bad experience with sleeping tablets many years ago, and it wasn’t uncommon to find that he was the only one awake in the entire aircraft, barring the flight crew. “Just thinkin’…”

“About?” Dash prompted, sitting upright and shifting around to get comfortable in the jump seat.

“Our next steps; the rigs and gulag, Six-Two-Seven, how shit is back home, what happens after that…” Shade shut his eyes as he thought of the words, “Just don’t want this to turn into a wild goose chase while our home’s under siege, y’know? I get that we’re making headway, but at what
“Likely less than if we gave up and went back home. This the closest we’ve been to Makarov since the Task Force was raised,” Dash began, looking at Shade squarely in the eyes, “and we’ll be damned if we’re going to let him get away after so long. And this Six-Two-Seven is our first solid lead. If he’s as valuable to Makarov as we think he is, he’s likely an intelligence goldmine. This could all be over within a week or so.”

“Then what,” Shade asked after a few moments of silence, “Seriously, then what? Say we bag Makarov, dead or alive, doesn’t matter. The ultimate objective for the entire Task Force is complete. Do we get re-tasked or dissolved?” He turned to look at Dash, rubbing his face of any visible fatigue. “The TF’s that were set up during Iraq were all disbanded after they reached their goals, it’s more than likely that the same’ll happen to us too. I’ll go back to the Commandos and you back to Force Recon.” He sighed and leant back into his seat, “We might get a few months grace as we clean up after Makarov and help re-establish peace, but I can’t see us being kept active after that.”

“And?” Dash asked, more than a little curious as to where Shade was headed with this train of thought.

“Well… I’ll miss all of this. There’s a sense of camaraderie and that to a level that I never got with the Commandos. We’re all the best of mates, sure, and we have each other’s backs, but here, with you guys… it’s something more. Some of the shit we talk about or pull on each other I can’t back home. I’ll miss it.” He had to bite his tongue to prevent an ‘I’ll miss you’ slipping out, memories of all the time he and the Texan had spent together during his career in the Task Force coming to mind as he spoke.

Dash heard what he wasn’t saying and smirked at him, then sighed, “Yeah, I’ll miss it too. I mean… where else do we really get to make this much of a difference. Certainly not in Recon…” she shrugged a bit, “Who knows, maybe they’ll keep us around. Terror never rests after all.” I’ll miss you too…

“Ain’t that the truth…” Shade grumbled, yawning softly. “We’ve got what… another ten or so hours to go?”

“Think so… might be longer though,” Dash replied, leaning her head back against the jump seat’s top rail as an improvised headrest.

“Might at least try to catch some sleep, as impossible as it is for me…” He muttered, mirroring Dash’s posture and closing his eyes. The fatigue that had been building up since they left Rio had finally hit him, and he fell asleep fairly quickly for his standards. Dash wasn’t far behind him, and neither of them had realised that they were resting against each other, her head resting on his shoulder and his head atop of hers.

They also didn’t notice Roach take a photo from across the cargo bay, the knowing smirks of Scarecrow and Robot, or the handful of dollar bills being exchanged between Ghost, Rook and MacTavish.

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Whelp. Another chapter, more blatant flirting, and then a ~moment~. Jay got his angsty ass out from behind the desk, so, that happened. Assume for now it’s just that once though lol. Plot convenient cameos are fun. But he’s not sticking around for the next one, Meat and
Royce are a handful after all. Sooo… uh, what else… Dash has some pent up frustration about the attack on the US. Shade had some feels. That’s about it I think.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

So, if you haven’t yet noticed, we’re running with an Everyone Lives AU kind of concept, though also abiding by the whole injuries and time off kind of thing too. Roach’ll be feeling the fall for a little while, Royce isn’t out of the woods just yet, and Meat’ll be out of action for some time.

More recently: awwwwwwwwwwwww… they fell asleep on each other… then again, there are pictures of entire fireteams of Marines that use each other as pillows, so it’s not that uncommon. Thank you for sticking with us this far. We’ve got some stuff that’ll hopefully blow you away coming later on.
“Reason number sixty-three why I didn’t join the Navy: bloody vertical space.” Shade grumbled as he narrowly missed collecting his head on the top of a low hatchway as he and the others walked through a corridor on a Los Angeles-class submarine. Captain MacTavish, Ghost, Roach, Dash and himself were onboard one of the two subs assigned to them, the USS Chicago. The other half of the team were on the second, USS Dallas, and together with the contingent of US Navy SEALs seconded to them for this mission.

“Vessels are made for the majority while also keeping in mind space and size limitations, Sergeant,” the SEAL Team leader, a Lieutenant who introduced himself as ‘Zach’, spoke up from in front of the pack, “since you’re part of the narrow percentile that’s above the average height, you’ll just have to make do. Besides, it’s only for the next five or so hours you’ll be on board, so suck it up.”

Dash and Roach chuckled behind Shade as he rolled his eyes, biting his tongue before he said something he’d regret to the frogman. Shade glanced at Dash, “To be bloody honest with you, I think I’d rather stay here than swim in that freezing water… why can’t we fight in the tropics?”

“To paraphrase Zach, ‘suck it up, Princess’,” Roach teased, earning a thump on the arm from Shade once they reached the spare berthing that had been loaned to them.

“Stick it up your… fuck off.” Dash simply shook her head at the banter, splitting off to take a seat on one of the free bunks once they entered their destination.

“It’s not that bad…” She offered, looking up to the Aussie and Brit.

“’It’s not that bad’, she says,” Shade repeats with rolled eyes, “after likely spending entire tours on naval craft with the Marines. Besides, you’re short. You probably feel like a bloody giant here.”

“… you’ve got me there,” Dash conceded, laying down on the bunk to rest up. “So, what now Captain?” She asked MacTavish, turning to look at him and Ghost as they set themselves up on their own bunks.

“Well, I don’t expect us to be at the target area for another three or so hours. We’ll have a short briefing with the rest of the team on the Dallas, but until then… amuse yourselves.” He replied, climbing up onto his bunk and using a small backpack as a pillow. “Smart move would to catch some shuteye while you can; I’m not sure how much more rest we’ll get once we get started.”

“Copy that sir,” Roach said, Shade and Dash both nodding in agreement, “I’ll set an alarm for us.”

Dash woke two and a half hours later, ahead of the scheduled ‘wake up call’. With a soft groan, she sat up and looked around the room. MacTavish, Ghost and Roach were all still out of the count, but Shade was nowhere to been seen. Yawning, she climbed out of the bunk and stretched out, heading to the hatchway that led to the rest of the sub’s interior. Compared to the much larger LHDs and other ships she’d been on during her time in the Marines, the submarine was much quieter. Likely by design, since they had to be able to defeat sonar, she mused.

A few minutes of exploring, and a few directions from some of the submariners later, she reached the surprisingly large mess hall. It was fairly empty, with a few seamen gathered around a table talking to the man she was looking for. Smiling softly, she made her way over to them.

“I didn’t take ya’ for the type t’ talk t’ squids, Shades,” she teased, patting him on the shoulder as she
took a seat beside him to his surprise.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, D,” Shade shot back with a smirk to the amusement of the sailors, “besides, I befriended you right?”

“But I’m a Marine, not a squid; there’s a difference.”

“Hate to remind you, ma’am”, one of the sailors piped up from across the table, “but it does read ‘Department of the Navy’ on your seal…”

“Yeah, but what’s the Navy’s official policy on a gunfight?” Dash asked him with a knowing smirk, the other sailors starting to chuckle amongst themselves.

“…send in the Marines.”

“Damn straight,” Dash nodded. The conversation continued for a while before the group of sailors had to leave for their watch. She leant back in her seat and looked at Shade with an amused smile.

“So… found some entertainment?”

“Nah, got bored of exploring… I don’t know what’s worse: sleeping on a Herc or sleeping on ships.” Shade said with a quiet groan.

“So what, you’re saying you get motion sickness or something?” Dash asked, now curious. Shade shook his head in response.

“Nah, not full blown sickness, just discomfort. Headaches and some mild vertigo.”

Dash nodded an understanding and shrugged, “’s not so different from ridin’ a horse for me. Get used to the rhythm, and you can ride with it, smooth as day. You ever ridden a horse? Lot bumpier than this tub unless you post right. Air’s fresher though. Considering there aren’t any closed in walls and a hundred plus people sharin’ the same space.”

“Haven’t ridden a horse, no,” Shade replied, “and it’s only big aircraft and large ships that mess with me… they have that slow-ish motion that isn’t really noticeable but is still ever-present.”

Dash nodded, “I should teach ya how to ride when all this is over, ’s fun. Better than a jet ski,” she smirked, “no wetsuits. We’d have to go someplace other than my parents’ though, not sure my pa would be happy with me turnin’ up like that after how we parted last I saw ‘im,” she commented, exaggerating her accent for Shade’s amusement.

Shade frowned a little, and looked at her curiously, “What happened?”

“Oh I never told you about my home life did I?” Dash shrugged, “My pa was the kind that thought women belonged in the kitchen, cleanin’ house, an’ sewin’. I prefered ridin’, and generally everything he deemed ‘not a woman’s work’. We butted heads, he wouldn’t let me ride anymore after I turned eighteen, so I enlisted.”

Shade let out a low whistle, “And I thought I was a prick… I’m gonna assume you two ain’t talking anymore”?

“Not these days, no,” Dash shook her head, resting her arms on the table, “Still, it’d be nice to see mom again. An’ my brothers, annoying as they were. Four kids and I was the only girl, can you believe that?” She kept her tone more light-hearted than her words, she had moved past her father’s bull-headed asshole-ness a long time ago, and her mother still wrote her sometimes, even included little notes from her brothers, pictures of her horse, Dynamo, and the family herding dog, Shadow.
She made a mental note to show the pictures to Shade some time.

“I can, actually… barring my adopted younger brother, about seventy five percent of my cousins and their kids are girls,” he said with a bemused smirk, “Always made family get-togethers fun, especially as most are either five to six years older and younger than me. Nobody really in my age bracket.”

“Sounds borin’,” Dash commented idly, “Family get-togethers for us usually consisted of rodeo shows. I’d do barrel racin’ and calf ropin’, up ‘till I turned eighteen anyway, and my brothers ‘n cousins would try to beat me. Course Dynamo was the fastest horse we ever trained, and I was lighter than my male counterparts, so it was an easy win. After the show and between competitions we had a barbeque.”

“Most of the family meetups were barbeques at someone’s house; it was rotated around so that everyone got a turn. And between ages eleven and sixteen were some of the more boring ones. Too small to play with the teenagers or be with the adults, and too big to play with the younger ones… Jamie was really my saving grace back then, she would spend more time with me and keeping me company than play with the others…”

Dash nodded, “I liked Jamie when I met her, easy to believe she’d take care of her brother like that. My brothers were good sports, ma taught ‘em well, disagreed with my pa, nothing they could really do ‘cept for helpin’ me sneak out for a ride every now and again before I shipped out. Made sure I knew they were proud of their lil sister.”

Shade nodded understandingly, “That’s good. Not gonna lie, but my folks were a little shocked at my move. Dad was understanding, having served in the Air Force himself as ground crew, which I guess helped ease my Mum and siblings fears.” He started to chuckle as he recalled a memory, “Jamie didn’t want to let go of me when it was time for me to head south for Basic, took Mum, Dad and even Henry to pry her off me so I could go… She put the other families and even some girlfriends to shame with how clingy she was.”

At that moment, a sailor wearing a green digital combat uniform approached the pair. “Excuse me, but your team’s been called for the briefing.” Shade noted the small skull and crossbones insignia patch on his sleeve, one of the trademarks of a Navy SEAL.

Dash frowned, “It ain’t due for another half hour or so.”

The SEAL shrugged, “We’ve entered the target zone ahead of schedule, and your commanding officer wants to capitalise on it.”

“Bloody Shepherd…” Shade muttered as he stood up from the table.

“My comments about wetsuits still stand,” Shade said as he clipped the last of his dive gear into place, adjusting the sling of his weapon to hang to the side of the bulky rebreather.

“What comments were they?” Roach asked as he looked at his friend in confusion

“Something about Ken dolls,” Dash replied, “back from when we rented the ski in Monaco… didn’t Shade tell you that?”

“I remember hearing about the jet ski; that was how you ran into that arms dealer, right? I just didn’t know about the wetsuits… please tell me you got pictures.”

“One or two…” Dash grinned, “Had him pose with the jet ski, so we blended in better as tourists.
Can’t believe we never told y’all about that. I’ll have to drag everyone inta’ whatever ward Meat ‘n Royce got put in an’ show ya.”

“I reserve the right to veto the viewing, a’ight?” Shade shouted as the others laughed. He shook his head before leading the group into a small compartment where MacTavish and Ghost were waiting for them. “There’s no chance we can just surface and take a RHIB in, right?”

“Visibility is still substantial on the surface; their sentries would spot us coming and sound the alarm,” MacTavish answered with a barely hidden smirk, “coming up from below is the only option.”

“Right,” the Australian said quietly, disappointment evident in his tone, “thought that might be the case.”

“Just think warm thoughts,” Dash said with a chuckle, nudging Shade’s side, “it worked for you last time, right?”

“Oh ha ha,” Shade shot back, barely suppressing a laugh himself, “if you see a pair of balls floating on the surface, pass ‘em to me… they’re likely going to be mine after they shoot out my throat from the icy water.”

Dash rolled her eyes, “Oh, stop being a baby.” The others, Captain MacTavish included, started to laugh in earnest at her comment, Dash herself smiling smugly at Shade. She kept up a humored smile as she checked her weapons were secure, then checked her watch, “Less than five minutes before we deploy,” she looked around the room and dropped her arms, “Where’d the frogmen go…”

“They’re already out, preparing the SDVs for use,” Ghost answered before turning to check over MacTavish’s dive gear. “Just us that need to head up.”

“Then the hell are we waiting for? Christmas?” Dash questioned, and turned to address the rest of the team, “Let’s get a move on. Chop, chop!” The rest of the team started to chuckle as they climbed the ladder up into the dry dock shelter of the submarine. She waited until the Captain, Ghost and Roach had disappeared before climbing up herself. Shade stepped forward to go next and looked up, catching more than an eyeful of Dash’s wetsuit-clad backside.

Memories of Monaco as well as their recent ‘not-date’ flashed into his head, and it took a tap on the head with Dash’s foot to bring him back to reality. “Huh, what was that D?” He said, shaking his head and looking up.

“I said, stop looking at my ass and get yours up here, preferably before the war ends?” She shot back with a knowing smirk to the rest of the team’s amusement. Shade just rolled his eyes and climbed up into the module, sealing it securely behind him. Within minutes, the team activated their rebreathing gear and gave the thumbs up to the DDS operators to flood the space and open the hatch.

The two sailors manning the control station became quickly versed in the colourful language of an Australian exposed to near-zero water temperatures.

It was a mercifully short trip from the submarines to the target oil rig, and Shade was already halfway onto the bottom platform by the time the Russian guard that Roach had taken out had begun to sink. “Thank fuck that’s over with…” he muttered to himself as he shed his dive gear and readied his weapons.

“That was the easy part,” Dash reminded him, nudging him on the shoulder as she re-secured the suppressor of her Vector after draining it of remnant water.
“I’ll take fighting on a confined oil rig over swimming through freezing near-arctic waters, thank you very much,” Shade shot back with a smirk.

“Settle down,” Ghost warned the pair of them, gesturing for everyone to group up and follow, “up the stairway, we’ve got a rig to secure.”

Dash nodded and moved close behind as the team climbed the steps to the next level.

“Keep it tight…” MacTavish ordered as they moved to the first platform.

“Got one by the railing.”

“Take ‘em out, suppressed weapons only…” Dash didn’t pay attention to who had made the shot, just moved forward with the rest of the team as they stacked up against the doors to the first room.

“Civilian hostages at your position, watch your fire,” one of the SEALs commented quietly over the radio link.

The breach went fast and quiet, the Russians guarding the prisoners had barely had time to react. They hadn’t been expecting a sudden breach by special forces. Dash guessed they thought with the war going on in the States that no one would notice or care about the rigs and its workers.

Two of the SEALs stayed behind to secure the workers while the rest of the team moved up to the next level and prepared for the second breach. There were only three in total, and with how off-guard they’d caught the first group, Dash wasn’t expecting any trouble securing the platform. Then again, stealth wasn’t exactly her specialty, given the ‘just in case’ shotgun on her back.

They ducked behind walls and crates as a patrol heli passed by and moved once it had gone. Once again they stacked up at the doors to a room full of hostages and the men guarding them, clearing them quickly and efficiently. Ghost directed half of the team, the half that had deployed from the Chicago, to escort the first group of hostages down below decks for extraction, while MacTavish radioed in to command their current progress.

These men had reacted faster than the others, and there was a steady stream of Russian coming through one of their radios.

“Fuck me… Oi! I think we’re gonna have company, sir,” Shade commented, nudging the radio with the toe of his boot.

“Copy that… Plan B, get C4 on those bodies.” MacTavish called out, walking over to where Ghost was riffling through a small pack he was carrying.

“Plan B?” Zach questioned, looking between the five operators with a mixture of confusion and concern.

“Plan B.” Dash replied shortly, catching the assault pack that Shade had been wearing and digging out one of the C4 demolition charges. It didn’t take very long for the team to lay their trap, so she got to cover underneath the platform Roach and the Captain had climbed.

Shade joined her in the tight cover before long, “Y’know, a betting man wouldn’t have laid odds on this…”

“Why bet on the sure thing…” Dash continued with a chuckle.

“Quiet down,” Ghost ordered, “Here they come.”
“Hold your fire until they get closer. We’ll blow the C4 when they discover the bodies,” The Captain said quietly.

These men looked ready, their weapons were up and ready, Dash saw a flash of safety orange on one, their safeties were off. One entered the room and shouted before Roach blew the C4 and the Task Force opened fire on the remaining Russians. More quickly followed, opening fire on the team.

“This is so outside of protocol!” Zach shouted over the alarms and gunfire.

“Suck it up, frogman!” Dash called back, “We tried your way, now it’s time to go in Devil Dog style!”

“If anything,” Shade said as he ducked into cover beside Dash, “this is coming more like One-Four-One style!” He popped up and fired a quick burst towards the enemy, “Seriously, when was the last time we had a clean op?”

“Two-thousand and never!” Roach called from ahead, ducking behind a large pile of what looked like rebar as the chopper swung around and begun spinning up it’s guns. He set his rifle down and grabbed the AT-4 sitting conveniently on top of his cover. It was a tense moment before the chopper strafed into Roach’s crosshairs and was shot down, allowing the Task Force to push forward in their attack.

The team quickly cleared the rest of the deck, and held before heading up the next stairwell to regroup, reload, and catch a breath. Shade clicked a new magazine into place before setting his rifle down to quickly shift his wetsuit around. “Bloody hell… I swear to god, I’m calling shotgun on the first hot shower we get to okay?”

“Whatever happened to ‘ladies first’?” Dash said, smirking and smacking Shade on the shoulder. Roach chuckled at the pair while Zach and the couple of SEALs that were with them looked at them curiously.

“I’ll go back to chivalrous ways when I can feel my nuts again, a’ight?” Shade shot back, nudging her with his elbow. Dash rolled her eyes, focusing on the Captain as he approached.

“One deck left, let’s get moving.” MacTavish lead the group up the final flight of stairs, and no sooner had Zach cleared them a series of small explosives detonated in front of them. Reacting on instinct, they all took cover. Ghost poked his head out from where he was behind a shipping container and called out what he saw.

“Bastards are deploying a smokescreen.”

“They’re likely sighted in with thermal optics as well,” the Captain added on, tossing a frag grenade out into a smoke-covered corridor, “so keep out of the smoke as best you can.”

The fight stalled there for a few moments, with shots being traded back and forth through the dense cloud of smoke. Shade ducked across from cover to cover towards the left side of the deck, having spotted a fairly clear avenue of approach. “D!” Dash needed no further prompting, and within seconds she was right behind him as they made their way through the clearing haze towards one of the doorways. To their right, they could make out the rest of the team clearing a path towards the other entrance.

“Looks like the final room is covered in C4,” Ghost spoke over the radio, likely using a small mirror or camera to peer under their door, “Check your shots, no flashbangs.”

“Then why the fuck are we blowing down the doors with charges…” Shade muttered to himself
quietly as he set up the aforementioned breaching charge. Nodding to Dash, they both took a step back and turned away. He detonated the explosive, and Dash all but leapt through the open doorway, her Vector blazing away at the multiple targets in front of her. Shade was right behind her, and swiftly took down one enemy soldier that was in Dash’s blindspot.

The remainder of the room was quickly cleared out by the other half of the team. The SEALs began to unrestrain the hostages and defuse the explosives while Shade and Dash regrouped with MacTavish, Ghost and Roach.

“Okay, we’re moving onto Phase Two. The others are already on a bird towards the Gulag, we’re regrouping with them in flight. A few fighters from the Navy will run SEAD for us before we make our approach. Our bird will be here in a few minutes, so take stock of what you need to replenish now.” MacTavish said, leading the four out towards a helipad where an MH-60 Knighthawk was disembarking a team of Marines. It took off and was quickly replaced by an MH-6 Littlebird.

The team quickly boarded and hooked themselves up to the safety lines, with Shade and Ghost reaching back into the back seats of the chopper to start handing out ammo and grenades to the rest of the team. Once he was fully reloaded, Shade turned to Dash and shouted over the noise of the wind and engines.

“This is gonna suck, isn’t it!”

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

Not gonna lie… it was hard to write this chapter, purely because (at the time of writing, not uploading) my muse has been jacked by another fandom. But I’m keeping on this story the best I can. Anyway, oil rig mission. Nothing to remarkable and nothing much we can do differently. Some parts feel rushed because it’s a straightforward clearance mission, get from A to B to C to D, really. But now we’re onto the Gulag. Should be a bit more to play with here.

(Spitfire)

Mmm what do we got here to cover… rig mission went pretty by the book by TF standards. On to the Gulag. I have to say it probably will suck for our favorite special forces unit. A bit of inter-branch banter. That’s about it I think. Till next time.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Jailbreak

Shade watched as the two US Navy F/A-18s banked away after releasing their payload of AGM-88 HARMs at the radar site on the coast, nodding in satisfaction at the subsequent explosion. He covered his eyes as they flew through the smoke, wiping them as their target, the Gulag, came into view.

“Here we go!” He shouted out, flexing his fingers around his rifle as their helicopter pulled up and swung around. He craned his head around to look through the aircraft as MacTavish, Roach and Ghost raised the Mark 14 EBRs that were stored in the back of the helicopter.

“Snipers, this is MacTavish. Prepare to engage!” For once, Shade and Dash both felt thankful they were on the other side of the helicopter: Dash was a pretty bad shot at range when she was standing still, so she had no hope to hit things from a moving helicopter; while Shade just did not particularly enjoy firing from an aircraft in general, concerned that something would happen and he’d send a round through the rotors by mistake.

They made quick work of the men on the first two towers, and had settled into position to strike the third tower when a missile impacted it without any warning, shaking the small helicopter with its shockwaves. Seconds later, the Hornet that had fired the missile flew overhead really close, catching them with its jet wash. Dash and Shade swore as they were shaken around, gripping onto the bench seat for dear life while MacTavish called over the radio for the fighters to back off.

“I’ll try to buy you some time,” General Shepherd’s voice answered over the radio, “one man in a Gulag doesn’t mean much to the US Navy right now…”

“Bloody Yanks… I thought they were the good guys!” Ghost grumbled.

“All due respect, Lieutenant, but civilians are dying in the States while we’re here pulling a man we know nothing about out of a Gulag. For all we know he’s already dead. The Navy doesn’t know why we’re doing this, and frankly they don’t care. I don’t blame them.”

“Dash, Ghost, cut the chatter, stay frosty!” MacTavish snapped as the helo made its approach to the landing area to drop the team off. Shade unclipped himself from the safety line and sympathetically pat Dash on the shoulder as they descended, everyone on board lifting their legs up as the skids hit the ground. Ahead of them, the other five members of their team plus a squad of SEALs had secured the first half of the courtyard.

Together, the squad made short work of the resisting force and made their way down the stairwell into the depths of the Gulag. “Hey… I get where you’re coming from, about earlier… but what if this guy is alive? What good is it if we’re killed by those fighter’s strikes? The sooner we get this bloke, the sooner we get out of here and get closer to ending this damn war.” Shade said to Dash quietly as they jogged down a flight of stairs.

“What would you do if it was your home?” Dash asked in response, “Wouldn’t you want to be there? Doing something you know is going to help, not… out here doing something that might help?”

“Truth be told, I’d still be out here and taking the chance of ending it early, rather than be home and stuck on the back foot against an advancing force…” Shade said resolutely, “That’s why we’re here: in a way, we’re taking the fight back to the Russians.”
Dash was silent for a minute, “I haven’t heard from my mom… or brothers. I don’t know if they’ve attacked my home. I don’t know where my family is. I don’t know if they’re a-”

Shade pulled her aside and led her to the side of the hallway, letting the rest of the squad go ahead towards the control room, “D, stop. Listen to me: last I heard, a lot of the fighting is still confined to the coastal areas of the US. Most of the inland population centres are still untouched. If your folks are still back home in Texas, they’re more than likely alive, aight? Probably worried out of their damn minds for you, but alive,” he squeezed her shoulders reassuringly, “focus your worry and anger on the task at hand. I got your back, have you got mine?”

Dash thought for a moment and took a breath, “Yeah… yeah I got you…” Shade nodded at her, shooting her his confident smirk.

“Righty-o then, let’s get back to kickin’ ass.” He stepped back and motioned for her to catch up, the pair reaching the control room moments later. “Sorry about the hold up boss, slipped on an icy patch of concrete.” Shade said to MacTavish before he could ask where they were.

“You okay?” Chemo piped up, a hand reflexively reaching for his first aid pack. Shade waved him off, shaking his head.

“Nah mate, I’d rather not expose my bruised ass to the cold air. I’m good to fight.”

MacTavish looked at Shade curiously, flicking his gaze over to Dash and then back at the Australian. “Right… Ghost, get into their systems and see if you can locate Six-Two-Seven from here. Scarecrow, Chemo, Ozone, stay with him and provide security,” the three nodded and went off to set up their positions while Ghost pulled up a chair and started typing away at a computer console, “the rest of us are on cell duty. Let’s go!”

Shade followed after Roach as MacTavish led the team down the stairwell and onto the first ring of general population cells. Everyone scrambled for cover as incoming fire ricocheted off of cell doors and the vertical bars separating them from everyone else. “Fuck!” Rook shouted as a round glanced off a bar mere inches from his head, sending a burst of fire back towards the Russians.

“Keep your heads down and move from cover to cover!” The Captain called out, ducking from a stack of boxes towards a low concrete wall.

“Easier said than bloody done,” Roach grunted out beside Shade as he reloaded. He looked back up to the control room and keyed his radio. “Hey ‘Crow! Any chance of some fire support down here?”

“I’m on it!” Seconds later, a large stream of fire erupted from one of the control room windows down onto the section of corridor ahead of the team. The Russians had no place to take cover from both Scarecrow’s suppressive fire and from the rest of the team’s advancing fire, and were quickly taken down. “Ghost asked me to relay that he’s got a searchlight tracking hostiles moving to your pos, I’ll engage where I can.”

“What about the location of Six-Two-Seven?” MacTavish asked over the radio.

“No joy sir, but he’s still looking.”

“Roger that,” MacTavish responded, barely masking his disappointment. He looked back towards the others, “Keep your eyes peeled, he might be in one of these cells!”

Together with Scarecrow’s suppressive fire and Ghost’s searchlight, they made quick work of the remaining enemy forces on their current level.
“Sir, I’ve got him! Six-Two-Seven’s in the west wing; you’ll have to move through that armory in the centre to get there,” Ghost called out over comms, “It’s the fastest way to get there!”

“Copy that, you heard him! Everyone get to the armory!” MacTavish repeated, leading Roach and the others ahead. It didn’t take long to reach their destination, and Shade let out a low whistle at the small stockpile within.

“Bloody hell…”

“See anything you like?” The Captain asked, sounding uncharacteristically smug.

“Where the hell did they get this ordinance?” Robot asked, picking up a Benelli M1014 from one of the racks.

“Beats me, but I know what I’m using,” Roach replied, grabbing a pair of Glock 18s from another, “Say hello to my little friends!”

“Bad news guys,” Ghost interrupted, “I got eyes on three, wait, make that four hostile squads moving on your position.”

MacTavish swore to himself quietly, and looked around the armory. The sound of the approaching squads was getting louder, and Shade took it upon himself to walk over to the exit doorway with his weapon raised. “They’re getting closer!”

“Ghost, get this door open!” The door that the team was ready to leave through buzzed, then just as it started to move it locked shit.

“Bloody hell, they’ve locked it on me by hardline… I’ll have to bypass or override it!” Ghost sounded plenty annoyed over the radio, a fact mirrored by the team in the armory.

“Contact!” Shade called out, letting loose a burst of fire towards the first group of Russians that he could see. The others in the team, Roach and Robot especially, opened fire as well. Shade ducked back into cover to reload, where he caught sight of a potential solution.

“Boss!” He shouted out, catching MacTavish’s attention. When he had it, Shade pointed to the far wall, where a pile of riot shields were resting.

“Good call! Everyone, grab a riot shield!” Shade, Rook and Roach each grabbed shields, slinging their own weapons over their shoulders for the time being. Dash stopped Shade before he could round the corner and into the line of fire.

“Shades, wait a second. I have another idea!” She called out over the gunfire, grabbing a small box off the shelf and tearing it open. “Turn around!”

“Why?” He asked, a little puzzled.

“Just do it!” Shade shrugged and turned around as asked, and Dash started pulling 12-gauge shells from the box and pushing them into the spare webbing loops on the back of Shade’s vest. “You’re my ammo-boy, alright?” She said after she had fitted an extra fifteen shells into place, slinging her Vector aside and readying her SPAS-12. “You cover, I’ll shoot.”

Shade, seeing exactly what she was planning, nodded and crouched down. Dash placed a hand on his shoulder, and together they rounded the corner. With everyone in place, the door finally started to slide open. Dash squeezed Shade’s shoulder, and together they lead the group out of the armory and into the fight.
From behind, MacTavish could only watch in a mixture of astonishment and approval as the two operators worked seamlessly to clear a path through for the rest: Dash taking close-proximity shots at whoever she could see while Shade literally bashed his way past the enemy. Whenever Dash needed to reload, she would duck down behind him and pick out the shells she had attached to his back earlier while he would use his sidearm to cover her.

The aggressive push by those two allowed the other two pairs to move up and support them, and in no time they had reached the breach in the wall that Ghost had informed them was the best way to get down and to the west wing.

“I hope there’s no ‘no smoking’ rules here,” Shade mused as he tossed a smoke grenade out to help cover their rappel. He dumped the barely functioning riot shield onto the ground and walked back over to where the lines were attached and quickly hooked himself in. He stepped off the edge and walked down the wall head first, covering the distance faster than normal. At the last second, he righted himself and landed on the ground feet first.

“That was bad, even for your standards,” Rook said to Shade with a cheeky smirk, referring to his pun just earlier.

“Oh come on... it was so bad it was good!” Shade protested as they made their way to the next wallway.

“Switch to night vision, power’s out ahead,” MacTavish warned, pulling his own goggles onto his head and into position.

The rest of the team mirrored their captain’s actions and followed his lead deeper into the prison.

“Dash. Take point. Clear these cells. Careful of any stragglers,” MacTavish ordered as the team held before a row of what appeared to be solitary confinement cells.

Even in the green-washed night vision Dash could easily identify the blood on the floor and walls of the first, otherwise empty, cell. They tortured people here. It made Dash sick and she felt no remorse snapping around a corner into the next cell and sending a round of buckshot into the Russian hiding there. The rest of the team passed her and cleared the last open cell, before being knocked down to the ground as the entire gulag shook with a large explosion. Debris rained down from the ceiling and filled the air with dust and smoke.

MacTavish started shouting into the radio, “Shephard, get the Navy to cease fire! They’re going to bring the place down on top of us!”

“Standby, but the Navy isn’t in a talking mood right now.” The team shook their heads at the general’s remark, but carried on regardless. They cleared the hallway and proceeded out into the next section of the prison, removing their NVGs as the power in this part was still active.

“I can’t imagine the kind of horrors that go on in this place…” Shade muttered quietly as they moved into the next area.

“Honestly mate,” Rook spoke up, falling back beside his friend, “I’d rather not… from the looks of it, it’s all kinds of fucked up.”

It was a tense moment of walking down the tunnel to the next junction before Shepherd’s voice came back on the radio again.

“Hotel Six, the Navy is holding fire at this time for now. I’ll keep you posted.”
“How nice of them…” Dash said as she rolled her eyes, switching back to her Vector from her shotgun as she prepared to round the next corner. Behind her, the rest of the team checked and reloaded their weapons; Shade signalling for her to move by tapping her on the shoulder.

She and Shade could hear voices as they paced further and further down the corridor, and spotted a pair of Russian soldiers standing guard down the end of the hallway. They quickly dispatched them with a quick burst of fire. No sooner had they hit the ground, though, another group of soldiers rounded the corner and opened fire on them. Dash hit the floor and returned fire, but one of the Russian’s rounds hit a pipe right near Robot, sending a hot jet of steam into his face. He screamed out in pain, dropping his rifle and grabbing for his burned face. Rook dragged him back into cover as Shade took his place and furiously returned fire.

“Watch your fire!” Dash called, “Those pipes must be steam and gas lines!”

“No shit!” Shade shouted back, deliberately aiming for the pipes above the Russian’s heads. He pierced a few with a quick burst, sending scalding steam right onto their faces. “How’s that feel, you fucking pricks!”

The team waited for a few moments, both so that Rook could stabilise Robot and to see if any more enemy troops were approaching. Satisfied that they were in the clear, MacTavish turned back to where Rook and Robot were. “How is he?”

“I can fi-” Robot began to say, then hissed as Rook applied a cream-covered bandage to the side of his face.

“I’m not Chemo, boss, but I don’t think he’s good to fight.” The Australian stated, looking down at the Brit in his lap sympathetically.

“Right… Chemo? Thoughts?” MacTavish asked over the radio.

“A blast of pressurised steam like that to the face at that distance? Without seeing it first hand, I’d say second degree burns are a guarantee… get him up here and I’ll assess and evac from there.” The medic replied back. MacTavish nodded to Rook, and the Aussie shouldered his rifle and leant down to pick up Robot and support him.

“We’ll see you top side.”

“Go get that arsehole!” Robot called out as he was assisted away.

“Alright, let’s get moving. Not much longer until we get our man.” They pushed past once the pipes finished bellowing steam, and made their way down a small set of stairs. The next area was a small room and was probably a maintenance access for the pipes. There were tool boxes, wrenches, and duct tape on the floor near a recently patched white pipe.

“There’s an old shower room about thirty feet on your left… the entrance is on the other side, so you’ll have to blast your way to get in.” Ghost radioed in, Shade and Roach looking at the wall in question.

MacTavish glanced between the wall and a red door that was ahead of them. “Copy that… Roach, plant the charges on the wall. We’re taking a shortcut.”

Roach nodded his head and looked over to Shade. The Aussie looked back and smirked. “Would you like your tools, maestro?” He walked over to the Brit and dug through his small assault pack, retrieving a sizable breaching charge. “What are we playing today, sir?”
Roach chuckled as he and Shade attached the explosives to the wall and primed it, “It’s the One-Four-One Concerto in key C-4.”

“Excellent choice, maestro.” Shade smirked, looking over to a rather unimpressed MacTavish and Dash. “...sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell...” Dash grumbled as the four took a few steps back to protect themselves from the explosion. She watched as Roach held the detonator in one hand, and retrieved a flashbang to hold in the other. Shade reached across the pulled the pins out for him, then did the same with his own flashbang.

“On your go mate...”

“Three, two, one, blasting!” Roach called out, clicking the detonator rapidly to set off the charge. The explosives sent the wall flying inwards in multiple different chucks, with the two troopers tossing in their flashbangs immediately afterwards. “Go go go!” The four surged forward and through the hole, taking out the few unfortunately souls that survived the blast from the breach but were caught up in the flashbangs.

Shade quickly dropped a group of soldiers that were to his front before ducking into cover to his right, swinging around to fire at the Russians who held the higher ground. “Watch your heads! Shooters up high!”

“Copy that! Keep pushing up!” MacTavish called back, him and Roach quickly clearing the walkway above Shade’s head before moving up towards the next part of the showers.

“Shades! Move!” Dash screamed as she ran past him, her Vector blazing as she swept the opening between the two parts of the showers. She held on the corner and drew a frag grenade out of her vest, cooking it before tossing it deep down the far end. “Frag out!” There was barely a second before it went off, and together they pushed forward with MacTavish and Roach into the lockers.

“Incoming! They have shields!” Roach pointed out as he ducked behind a set of lockers to reload.

“Frag ‘em!” Dash responded, her and Shade both retrieving their last grenades to toss. Shade threw first, the grenade landing right behind the first cluster of shielded soldiers. There was nothing they could do to protect themselves, the group succumbing to the blast immediately as it went off. MacTavish and Roach repeated their actions to the same effect, and it didn’t take much longer for the four of them to push through and jump down the large hole in the floor of the final third of the shower block.

Shade jumped down first, ducking and rolling as he landed. He swung up and quickly checked all around him before signalling for the others to join him. Sighing, he let his rifle hang for a few moments, “Jesus... hey, was it just me or did it feel like that scene from ‘The Rock’ back up there?”

“Can’t say I’ve seen it,” MacTavish muttered quietly before shaking his head, “Ghost we’re in the old tunnel systems, heading southwest. How much further to go?”

“Okay, keep going down that tunnel...” Ghost walked them through and soon they came to a solid wall at the end of the tunnel. “I’m picking up two heat signatures. One of ‘em has to be Six-Two-Seven.”

“Copy that... Roach!”

“Got it!” The charge was quickly set and they all stacked up ready to breach. As it went off, Roach charged through and caught sight of a Russian soldier being strangled by a man wearing prison
overalls. He hesitated, and it was enough time for the prisoner to shove the Russian’s body away and catch him by surprise with a right cross.

Shade and Dash stepped in right as the prisoner leveled an AK at Roach’s face. “Drop it right now!” They both screamed as MacTavish ran straight in and drew his sidearm, pressing it right to the man’s neck.

“Drop it!” There was a moment’s silence, barring everyone’s rather heavy breathing.

“... Soap?” The prisoner spoke up, sounding unsure of himself. Rather confusingly to everyone but the man himself, MacTavish tensed up; something he ever did on missions. More to everyone’s shock, MacTavish de-cocked the pistol and lifted it away from the prisoner’s head.

“Price?” The two men finally looked at each other, and there was a clear sense of recognition on each man’s expression before MacTavish flipped the pistol around in his grip and offered it to the prisoner. “This belongs to you, sir.”

“Alright, who the fuck is Soap?!” Shade said after the ‘moment’ was finished, just as the room began to shake again with another explosion. Dash rushed forward and picked up Roach from the ground.

“We’ve gotta get out of here, move!” She shouted as everyone made their way for the exit.

“Hotel Six,” Shepherd began to speak over the radio, “The Navy’s resumed their bombardment early. Get the hell out, now!”

“We’re on the way!” MacTavish responded, leading the group down a hallway. At the far end, they saw an MH-6 pull into a hover waiting for them. “There’s the chopper, get ready to jump!”

“This is just like bloody Rio!” Shade shouted over the noise of the gulag crumbling around them. He nearly fell over himself trying to stop as part of the hallway collapsed ahead of them. “Shit!”

“Back! Back! We’ll find another way out!” They doubled back and took the first turn out of the hallway and down another set of halls into what appeared to be the mess.

“Crap, it’s a dead end!” Dash shouted out as they looked around for another way out.

“Six-Four, where the bloody hell are you?”

“Hotel, I got no eyes on you! There’s too much smoke!” A familiar voice called out over the radio, just as debris started to rain down on top of them. Everyone tried to seek cover, but Roach was caught and knocked to the ground.

“Damnit!” The prisoner, Price as MacTavish had called him, grunted out and ran over to him. Dash followed, and helped him lift off the debris that was covering the younger Brit. “Whatever you’re gonna do Soap, do it fast!”

MacTavish nodded and aimed his rifle straight through the holes in the ceiling, firing up a red flare. Seconds later, the helicopter crew responded that they saw the flare, and dropped an extraction line.

“Everyone, hook up!” Shade and Dash helped Roach and Price hook up into the line before connecting themselves, and within seconds, they were lifted up and out of the prison just as it began to explode and collapse in on itself. Shade screamed loudly as he and the rest of the group hung from the ling underneath an MH-53 Pave Low, and didn’t finish screaming until they were well and truly clear from the explosion.
“Holy shit! We fucking did it! Fuck yes!” He shouted, pumping his fists excitedly as he looked up towards the rest of the group. He pointed up at Price, who was hanging from the connection above him, “Whoever the fuck you are, you better be fucking worth it!”

Authors’ Notes

(Spitfire)

Chapter word count here is very… mildly infuriating. (12 more words!) Regardless. I’m not gonna subject you guys to it, I’ll leave that to Shade if he wants to. So. We’ve rescued Price, Worm will not be making an appearance, Dash is concerned about her family and a tad on edge. Until next time where we will have a bit of a meet ‘n greet with good ole Price.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Bloody hell… 12 more words and we’d’ve had a clean 4000 word chapter… oh well. Can’t win them all I suppose. We managed to fill an entire mission into a chapter once more, so I’m not sure if that’s a sign of us just compressing for content, since we took two chapters per the first few 141 missions, or just running out of ways to expand upon an already-defined sequence of events… only so many ways to skin a cat.

Shade’s a pep-talk pro (not high school coach level though), and Robot’s down with burns from steam pipes (which aren’t fun, speaking from experience). Price is now with the team, and I’m sure that the reunion will be very cordial and loving… Until next time!
Just a quick note before we get started:

TSO here and I just wanted to apologise for the delay between the posting of CH31 and this chapter (CH32). Real life got busy for the pair of us, what with work ramping up (for me) and the resetting of proper sleeping schedules (for Spitty), plus muses for other fandoms have hit me with the force of a 2000lb'er JDAM.

We're working through CH34 at the time this is uploaded, and we hope to have that complete and CH35 started by the time CH33 goes up. We've been aiming to keep at least two chapters separation from what's WIP to what's uploaded/posted.

Again, sorry about the wait! Hope you enjoy!

Roach, Scarecrow, Rook, Ozone, Chemo, Robot, Shade and Dash all sat together at one of the many tables in the USS America's mess bay: the first four were busy finishing the rest of their lunch; Chemo was doing his best to keep Robot from picking at his bandaged face; Shade and Dash were focused on the conversation being held between Ghost, MacTavish and the recently 'rescued' Captain John Price.

"So that's the boss's old boss, huh?" Shade asked after a few moments of pondering. "I mean, I'd heard that the boss and old mate had served together during that shit storm back in twenty-twelve… didn't know they were that close." He shrugged and finished the rest of his drink. "Goddamn, it feels good to finally be in some warm and dry clothing…"

"I'll drink to that…" Rook said with a chuckle, raising up his coffee mug and catching the rest of the group's attention, "Here's to dry clothing, warm food, and somewhat comfy bunks."

"Cheers!" The soldiers shared a laugh, with Scarecrow nudging Chemo in the shoulder.

"Yo, any word on how Meathead and Royce are going?" He asked, the table going quiet for Chemo's answer. The medic shook his head and smiled softly.

"Well, Meat's as good as he can be. He's confined to his bed until his bone heals up; one of the rounds chipped a piece of his femur off. They've fused it back together, but he's got a bit of rehab until he's combat ready."

Shade set down his plate and looked at Chemo expectantly, "And Royce?"

"Mark…" The medic sighed, "... as it turns out, Mark is a real tough man to kill. Despite the fact that we got him out of Rio stable, he got far worse during the flight home. His heart stopped on the table once, then once more in post-op ICU. He's stable now though, but he's not out of the woods. They've got him in a medically induced coma until his body's healed up to the point where he won't be in too much pain."

The tension that had built up at the start of Chemo's news slowly faded, with Rook tapping Roach on the shoulder. "Heh, you might have to get a new nickname soon mate…"
"Bugger off," Roach said with a laugh, reaching shoving the Australian in the shoulder playfully, "There can only be one Roach on this team, and that's me."

"Don't know about that," Robot piped up, "Could always change your name to Cock."

"Nah, we've already got one of those," Dash jumped in, smirking as she looked at Shade evily, "Isn't that right, Shades?" The table erupted in laughter as Shade tried to shoot back a scathing comeback, instead opting to just plant his face into the table in defeat.

MacTavish fought to not frown outwardly at his former commanding officer as he looked over to his team a few tables over as they laughed loudly at a joke that appeared to be at Shade's expense. The two Captains had caught up as much as they could, with MacTavish bringing Price up to speed with current events as best he could.

"So, how many are in your team again?" Price's voice brought MacTavish out from his thoughts.

"Normally twelve. We lost two to injuries during an op in Rio before we arrived, and then Robot… I mean Sergeant Lipton sustained some minor steam burns in the Gulag minutes before we reached your location. Our medic Senior Airman Brent, or Chemo as we call him, says he should be fine in the next few days, as long as it isn't aggravated. He's lucky it was only a short blast, otherwise he'd be facing second or third degree burns." MacTavish informed his superior… equal, which felt weird when he thought about it.

"Right… right… so you're effectively down to eight." Price stated plainly, looking back over towards the table. John felt a little surprised, wondering if Price was mis-counting his team at the table.

"You mean nine, sir." Ghost corrected, having the same thoughts as his Captain.

"The woman, she's actually part of your team?" Price asked, turning around to look at the pair of them.

"... yes she is…" MacTavish started cautiously, internally starting to wonder if bringing the old Captain into the fold was a good idea after all.

"... 'spose I should introduce myself." With that, Captain Price stood up and started to walk over to where the team was sitting. Ghost watched him leave then looked back at his Captain.

"All due respect, sir… but I think he's a bit of a wanker."

"... on point with your supporting fire by the way, Crow," Shade continued, pointing at the gunner in question, "I don't think we would've advanced as far as we did without it."

"Hey, it was your idea," Scarecrow replied, waving off the praise, "I just shot where you told me to."

"Be that as it may, your fire was right on target. We had them between a rock and a hard place, so to speak…" Shade trailed off as he looked up at the new arrival that was standing at the end of the table. "... can we help you, sir?"

"Thought I'd introduce myself to you lads," Captain Price begun, pointedly avoiding looking at Dash, a gesture not missed by the rest of the men present, "Captain John Price, formerly of the Twenty Second Special-"
"Special Air Service Regiment, British Army," Roach finished, standing up a little excitedly as he offered to shake Price's hand. "I've heard all about you sir, you're a bit of a legend back at Hereford. Director MacMillan shared a few stories about you whenever he'd visit the barracks."

"Oh, ol' Mac's still kicking around eh?" Price said, looking back curiously at MacTavish at the other table. "How is the old bastard?"

"Well… he's Director of Special Forces now, so I imagine pretty well… sir." Price nodded at Roach's little tidbit of information, "Oh! I'm sorry, I'm Sergeant Gary Sanderson, though everyone calls me Roach."

"Roach… I assume everyone else here has a funny little name?" Price asked a little derisively.

"Uh, yes sir…" Roach answered, a little unsure of himself now. He started by gesturing to the soldier beside him, "This is Sergeant Matt Greaves, or Scarecrow. He's the team's primary machine gunner, came from Delta. Next to him is our medic, Senior Airman Nick 'Chemo' Brent, from USAF Pararescue. At the end is-"

"Sergeant Graham Lipton… I believe Soap called you Robot?"

The man in question, as did everyone else, paused at the mention of the unfamiliar name before making the connection, "You mean the Captain?"

"He never told you his old callsign?"

"… never came up in conversation," Scarecrow said after a moment's silence.

"Huh… and I thought his name was weird… anyway, I hope that burn isn't too nasty, but carry on." Price gestured for Roach to continue.

"Anyway, up this end is Sergeant Jayson Cooper, or Rook, from the Australian Special Air Service Regiment-"  

"G'day," said the Aussie to the other's amusement.

"That is Sergeant Michael 'Ozone' DuFresne, Canadian Joint Task Force Two-" Ozone waved politely, ",- beside him is our other Australian, Sergeant Tom 'Shade' Williams, 2nd Commando Regiment-" Shade tipped his non-existent hat in greeting, ",- and last but certainly not least is Marine Master Sergeant Rebecca Myers, though she much rather prefers 'Dash'."

"Howdy," Dash said, looking up at Captain Price with a polite but level expression on her face.

"Hmm, it's a pleasure to meet you all… your Captain mentioned you were down two more men?" Price said after a few moments, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Ah, yes," Chemo spoke up, "That would be Meat and Royce, or Brian Tanner and Mark Roycewitz. Both of them Sergeants from the Canadian Special Operations Regiment; they were badly wounded in a firefight."

"They likely to return soon?" The captain asked, no pretense in his question.

"Meat's looking at rehab for the next few months, Royce is in a coma for the same amount of time or longer… they got pretty badly banged up," Shade answered tersely. "What's with the twenty questions, sir?"
"Just getting to know the team, Sergeant… if you'll excuse me, I'm sure that your commanding
officers are keen to speak to me some more…" With those parting words, Captain Price left the
squad alone at the table, with Captain MacTavish following behind him.

"... I don't suppose that MacMillan bloke ever mentioned that he was a dickhead, right?" Shade
spoke up after the two officers were out of earshot.

"The world's gone to shit more than I thought," Price said to MacTavish as they left the mess hall.

"Aye, we've got a mess here," MacTavish nodded. "We're doing our best at cleaning it up though."

"Guess I came back just in time, looks like you need all the hands you can get." Price pushed open a
door that lead to a briefing room, set aside for the 141 as per General Shepherd's request. "How long
has the lass been with you?"

"Dash? She's been with us for… a few years now. She's one of our top troopers," MacTavish
answered, "Why do you ask?"

"Who's idea was it to bring her in? Equality case or part of some trial program?" Price continued on,
walking over to a desk to retrieve a map of the regional area.

MacTavish quirked an eyebrow at his old captain, "Shepherd put her file forward and I approved it."

"So orders from above…" Price muttered, shaking his head disapprovingly before setting a map
down on the table between them. He pointed out a position along the coast, "This is Rybachiy naval
base, Russia's largest submarine base. Just so happens that there's an Oscar-Two class attack
submarine being fueled up and armed before it sets sail to the US."

"Aye… do I want to know how you found this out?" MacTavish looked up at him and received a
shake of the head in reply. "Fair enough… what do you plan on doing?"

"Hitting the base and disabling that submarine as well as any supply facilities they have. That port is
the last on-shore stop before any vessel sails the northern Pacific, barring the smaller bases up across
from Alaska. If we do this right, it'll bring a faster end to the war."

MacTavish nodded thoughtfully, "Alright…. It's your plan, you can lead it if you want."

"Good, as long as your team doesn't have any objections about the change in leadership… speaking
of, I want the lass to stay back."

"She's a skilled fighter. May I ask why you don't want her in the team?"

"It's going to be a tough op, and I need the absolute best from your team. It's not just her I don't want;
her and the one with the burns are both staying back. And I don't necessarily trust her to keep up
with what I have planned," Price started, standing up and folding his arms, "Besides, a smaller team
means less chance of being compromised during the insertion… need I remind you of the last time
we were in Russia together?"

MacTavish leaned back on one foot, scratching at the scruff that had grown around his jaw, "She is
one of our best. If I had to recommend two to stay back it'd be Robot and either Ozone, Chemo or
Scarecrow..." he leaned forward a little and dropped his voice lower, "... this has nothing to do with
your 'old school' thinking, does it sir?"

Price frowned at his protege, "I don't like what you're insinuating, Soap…"
"Look, Price. She's already put up with a lot of that. I'm just trying to look after my team," MacTavish responded, "She doesn't need any more of it. She's earned her place here same as anyone else. Shepherd would've listened to me if I'd passed her over when her file crossed my desk. I put her on this team."

"My op, my lead… you said that yourself… let's get a hold of that General you think so highly of and get this op moving…"

"... don't say I didn't warn you if you get a lot of pushback from them."

"Are you serious?" Dash asked loudly, her voice distinct over the rest of the team's fairly loud arguing and objections.

"I am, and my decision is final." Price said firmly, arms folded over his chest as he stood in front of the team in the briefing room. The conversation with General Shepherd was shorter than MacTavish had expected, though that was partly because Price had ended the call prematurely.

"Boss? Are you sure this is a good idea?" Roach asked, looking towards MacTavish for an answer, "I mean, we're already down Robot as it is. For what Price is suggesting, you want every set of hands available."

"I'd agree with you there Roach," MacTavish replied, sounding resigned, "but only if the op was planned as a full assault. Stealth is a critical factor here, and as Captain Price pointed out, the fewer bodies we have the better the odds are of you getting in undetected."

"That's bullshit and you know it," Shade called out loudly, standing up and looking at Price squarely for a few moments before looking over to MacTavish, "How do we know old mate over here isn't going to have a heart attack halfway through the op? What if he breaks his hip if he slips on the bloody ice?"

"Sergeant!"

"Who's to say that he isn't informing on the Russians!? I mean, if that Makarov dude wanted him dead, he could've had him executed!" Shade continued on, looking around the room.

"Shade. Cool it," Dash sighed, "He doesn't want me on the team then that's fine. He doesn't trust me so I'd rather not have a repeat of Mexico and risk going on an op with an officer that doesn't trust his team." Shade looked at her, then back at Price who seemed to have a slight smirk on his face.

Sighing loudly, he took his seat once more. "I just want it on the record that I think this is bullshit."

"Duly noted, Sergeant." Price said rather smugly. "Now, if there are no further questions, then I suggest you all get yourselves ready to go, we leave in two hours. Dismissed." Grumbling, the team all rose from their places and slowly filed out of the room, leaving Price, MacTavish and Ghost the last men remaining.

"Lieutenant," Price started as Ghost began to make his way out, "Got a quick question for you…"

Ghost paused and cast an appraising eye over the old captain, "What do you need?"

"The sergeant, Shade, I think you call him, and the lass… they seem rather close, don't they?"

Ghost chuckled, "They didn't exactly get along when Shade first arrived. Mexico changed that. Last stand Alamo style'll do that."
"Uh huh… as long as they're aware of regulations regarding fraternisation… I'd hate to see them leave…" Price said before turning and leaving the room. Ghost looked at him rather puzzled, then looked over at MacTavish.

"I didn't realise we had those rules… we do have those rules in the Task Force, right?" It took a few moments of silence on MacTavish's part for Ghost to finally clue in, "Oh…. oh…. I don't know if you'll be able to claim your part of the betting pool if you interfere with the outcome…"

"I don't make it a point to get involved in what two consenting adults do in their own time, as long as they remain effective on the battlefield and remain focused on doing their jobs," MacTavish replied diplomatically, "just look at Archer and Toad for example… if anything, they're more effective than they used to be."

Ghost just shook his head in disbelief and started to laugh, "Fair enough… Archer and Toad, huh?"

"Who the fuck does he think he is, huh?" Shade said as he zipped his grey cold-weather jacket shut over the slick plate carrier he wore over his combat shirt. "Did the General even approve him to join the force? I thought he was a damn prisoner. There's gotta be a process that was overlooked or something…"

"Shade, drop it mate," Rook said, walking up and resting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We're all just as annoyed as you are, but no amount of bitching is going to change anything."

"So what, I'm just expected to follow granddad into battle then?" Shade shot back, brushing the hand away as he bent down to collect his chest rig. "I get that the man's a damn war hero, but so is our Captain. I can understand why Robot was benched, I'm fine with that… but D?" He shook his head. "Roachy!"

"Yeah bruv?" Roach called back, turning around to face the two Australians.

"You saw how old mate was avoiding Dash at the meet-n-greet? It wasn't just me?" Shade asked him across the room.

"Ain't gonna lie, he didn't seem too pleased to see her…" The Brit responded, "But the guy's old school. He likely isn't used to seeing chicks being door-kickers like us."

"Old mate's gotta get with the bloody times then," Shade said as he buckled his rig into place, "but I'm not gonna be the one helping him cross the road in the middle of a fight."

"Why don't you tell us how you really feel," Scarecrow said as he and Chemo walked past, smirking at Shade's continued tirade.

"Why don't you open your bloody mouth and say something then?" Shade turned around and pulled on Scarecrow's sleeve. Before things could properly kick off, Chemo stepped in between them and pushed them apart

"Guys," he began, shooting each of them a stern warning glare, "as Rook said, we're all a little peeved about this, but it's out of our hands. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't risk the NJP over something as trivial as personnel assignments." Chemo dropped his arms and stepped back. "Let's just focus on getting this op finished, ending this war, and going back home."

"Amen to that," Ozone chimed in as he walked past the others, "let's go kick some frosty ass."
"This is Dingo Two-One, we're at the DZ. Dropping our pax now."
Gale spoke over the radio as Dash, Robot and MacTavish watched on a live satellite feed from the America's tactical operations centre.

"Copy that Two-One."

"Two-One copies, out."

"I don't like this…" Dash said quietly as she used another screen to look at a static image of the base the rest of the team were about to hit. 

"Sat recon shows a slightly increased presence at the base, but not enough to indicate that they're actively involved in deployment activities…" Gesturing for both Robot and MacTavish to watch, she used a marker pen to highlight a few positions in and around the base. 

"This base doesn't even look that alive. If they were in full 'war mode', I'd expect to see more patrols around the perimeter fences, vehicles parked in the open on standby, and quite a few more ships and submarines docked and being serviced."

"But aren't they kinda busy with an invasion at the moment?" Robot asked, sounding a little bit confused at Dash's observations.

"The Russian Armed Forces as a whole has an estimated force of just over a million; about sixty thousand of them are airborne forces while another three hundred-odd are regular ground troops. As far as we're aware, it's a combination of ground and airborne forces that have hit the United States, with naval forces more than likely steaming across as we speak. It's also more than likely that said forces are being sent to the eastern coast, where Washington is, crossing the Atlantic. We would be more effective if we were hitting where their Atlantic fleet is stationed, not this one…"

"Price did want to disable their submarines, and this is their largest sub base," MacTavish offered, 

"The Russians do pride themselves as being effective submariners and have quite the stockpile, just like the US Navy and their aircraft carriers."

"Maybe… but still, even if they were going to employ their sub force, the base should look a lot more alive than it does… hey, where's Roach going?" She said, pointing to the live feed that was showing Roach drifting away from the main group as they parachuted in.

"I don't know… Roach, this is MacTavish, SITREP?"

"This is Price, he took a bird-strike to the face. Looks like he's been knocked out. I'm going after him, out." They watched as Price's GPS tag veered towards the drifting tag of Roach and held their breath as their view on the feed was obscured by trees and cloud.

"Price, I can't see him anymore due to interference. Have you found him?" MacTavish asked after a few moments.

"I've got him Soap, he looks intact. We're going to head northwest to the base, over."

Dash and Robot let out a collective sigh of relief and focused back on the other feeds, Dash using her keyboard to bring up the feed displaying the rest of the strike team at their LZ. She flagged down MacTavish and pointed them out to him.

"Copy that, the rest of the team landed far to the east at the original DZ."

"Tell them to proceed as planned, Soap. We'll regroup with them soon, out." Price's comms went silent, and they watched as both his and Roach's tracking tags started venturing north-northeast.
"Okay, I've gotta ask now, otherwise I'm going to go insane…" Robot started, turning around to
look at MacTavish. "Why the hell does he call you Soap?" To both his and Dash's shock,
MacTavish actually looked rather sheepish.

"... it's my old SAS nickname, got it while I was in selection." Dash quirked an eyebrow, hinting at
the Captain to continue. He sighed, dropping his head down as he pulled up a seat behind him, "I
was the only trooper in my intake to have a totally clean personal record, officially and unofficially."

"Unofficially?" She asked.

"Well, to be considered you have to not have any major disciplinary infractions recorded within the
previous twelve to eighteen months, though they can be 'overlooked' depending on the rest of your
service history. Most candidates have at least one or two infractions of the minor kind. Mine was
totally clean," MacTavish said with a humourless chuckle, "squeaky clean, 'like I washed it with
soap on a daily basis' as my assessor had remarked during my interview just prior to selection. That
made it to the rest of the selection course staff, and by the time I got my dagger I was known as
Soap, instead of Sergeant MacTavish. First words that Captain Price said to me when we met were
'What the hell kind of a name is Soap?'"

The two younger operators sat there, absorbing the new information. Dash smiled and shrugged at
the Captain. "Well, it's not the worst name you could have… though I might stick to calling you
'boss' or 'sir', Soap just doesn't have the same ring to it."

"Ditto, sir." Robot said, the pair turning back around to watch the feeds. "By the way, that Predator
is almost on station, give it another six or so minutes."

"Perfect… finally something that's gone to plan with the mission."

Authors Notes'

(Shade)

Whelp, Price is back and has brought his old-school way of life with him. The team (and by
that I really just mean Shade) is not happy about his decision, but have to put up and shut up
or else. We're getting into the tail end of our outline (though we have deviated a bit, but what
can you do... I like where we're going better anyway) but that still is like... another eight or
more chapters.

(Spitfire)

I don't think I really did much here, I did some of Soap and Ghost's dialog but mostly I was
dying to insomnia and Shade just ran it over like a freight train (the perks of taking time off
work) Uh-huh. Anyway… Dash is putting up with 'that' again from Price this time. Still up in
the air how we're gonna fix it, or if we'll fix it at all... heh.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Fractured Arrows

The only saving grace about this op in Shade's mind was that Petropavlovsk was close to sea level and not up in the mountains like Kazakhstan had been, and therefore the cold wasn't nearly as severe. He could actually function here, unlike the frozen mess he'd been the last time he had seen the snow.

"Once again, Roach proves he is unkillable," Rook said as the six operators made their way through the snow and trees towards the rendezvous point. "Mate takes a bloody bird to the face while parachuting, lands without a scratch."

"If only the rest of you could have some of his powers," Chemo grumbled, "It'd make my job a damn sight easier."

"Love you too Chem," Shade shot with a chuckle, "love you too."

"Bite me, Mr Last Stand."

"Oi, shut the bloody hell up back there," Ghost said, stopping and whipping his head around to stare down the rest of the team, "I'd rather not get killed because you lot couldn't keep your traps shut." He waited before turning around and walking. Shade smirked under his facewrap and shot Chemo the bird as he walked past.

Dash had to bite her tongue from saying the fateful 'so far, so good' out loud, lest she risk jinxing the mission even further. Roach's little collision and the near miss with the roaming patrols that both he and Price had to navigate their way through aside, the mission was still on track.

"Boss, Predator's on station. I've got it orbiting the village outside of the base, and have eyes on both elements of the team. " Robot said, his hands on a set of controls off to one side. "Ready for the ground team to take control of the weapons system.

"Good," MacTavish acknowledged, "Price, this is MacTavish. Predator's ready for you to use."

"Copy that… Roach, get control of the drone." They watched as the camera turret on the Predator swiveled around slightly as Roach got a feel for the controls, before it swivelled down and started tracking the village below. The image barely lasted a few seconds before a streak of fire erupted from the southern end and tracked up to the drone, static filling the screen moments later.

"What was that?" MacTavish and Dash asked at the same time.

"There's a self-propelled anti-aircraft site in the village. They just shot down the Predator… we need a new Predator on the double, Soap!"

"Robot! See if you can get a hold of another drone or something." MacTavish said, tossing him a satellite phone. "Use my name if you have to!"

"On it!"

"Fucking… that was our air support!" Scarecrow called out as they watched the wreckage of the Predator drone fall to the sky.
"Bloody hell… let's get moving, otherwise the next thing that enters this airspace will get knocked down too!" Ghost called, motioning for everyone to pick up the pace.

It didn't take much longer for the six to reach the north eastern section of the village, and Shade saw Price and Roach sliding down a snow-covered slope to their left. "I got the others! Check left!"

"Eyes on the SAM site, it's a pair of Tunguskas," Ozone called out as he unslung the AT4 he'd been carrying. "Backblast!"

"All clear!" The men around Ozone ducked out of the way as he fired the light anti-tank rocket at the target. It penetrated the turret and detonated, completely destroying the vehicle. Rook took aim with his own AT4 and fired it at the second vehicle, hitting the fuel tank and sending the vehicle up in a cloud of fire and smoke.

"Good kills! Good kills!" Scarecrow said to them as they dumped the empty tubes onto the snow. Ghost lead the others to the road and across to where Price and Roach were.

"Check your fire, friendlies to your twelve!" Ghost took a knee beside Price as Roach peered from cover and fired at the approaching enemy soldiers with a 'tactically acquired' RPD. The rest of the team spread out and started engaging the enemy as well, slowly pushing through the village and towards the base.

"Price, we've got another drone on the way, ETA one minute." MacTavish informed over the radio as Price lobbed a grenade over a wall across the road.

"Copy that, we're almost clear here. Proceeding onto the base now." Price replied as he stood up from cover, "We're moving on the base, let's go!" He started running from his position, engaging the two enemy soldiers ahead of him and eliminating them with startling precision.

Shade and Roach shared a look, the Aussie rolling his eyes at the Brit's admiring expression. "So Pops can kick some ass, so what?" The pair joined the rest of the team and followed Price down the path that lead to the back of the base. They all held when the treeline ended and left them with a clear view of the section of the base they were hitting, complete with the first submarine Price had made clear was his target. "Jesus fuck…" Shade said quietly, noting the swarming patrols and multiple vehicles, "We've gotta get through that?"

"Yes we do, Sergeant… Soap, is that Predator overhead?" Price asked over the radio after answering Shade's question.

"UAV's overhead with a payload of four Hellfire missiles… make them count."

Price nodded his head at the information and looked over towards Roach. "Hey Roach, soften 'em up with the Predator."

"On it sir," Roach responded, sitting down on the snow and pulling out the control console. "I've got eyes on that Hind, a BTR-60, a few jeeps and multiple patrols…" He aimed the camera and locked onto the idling Mi-24 that was sitting on a rooftop helipad. "Missile away." The team watched as a missile streaked down from high above and impacted the helicopter at it's engines, sending it skyward in a cloud of fire and smoke.

Alarms started blaring and the team, at Price's orders, ran down the rest of the slope and began their assault on the base proper.

"Ground team is in the base, good kills on an Mi-24 Hind." Robot reported, making the associated
notes on his notepad. Dash pressed her headset tighter to her ears as she listened to radio chatter.

"Base has entered lockdown mode, orders are going out to any and all vessels to disembark immediately." She reported, looking up at MacTavish.

"Price, the base has entered into an alert status, and they're ordering all ships to evacuate. You only have a few minutes before those subs start diving."

"Copy that Soap! Everyone, pick up the pace! We've got a few minutes to get to that sub!"

The three watched as the team moved from a storage yard deeper into the base, passing by a fuel facility. "Missile away," Robot called as he watched the feed from one of the screens, "Impact, likely ten or so killed in that transport truck."

"Looks like Rook's planting charges on the fuel dump," Dash observed as she watched two figures on her screen rush over to one of the fuel tanks. They ran away and rejoined the others a safe distance away before the tanks exploded. "Boom…" In her head, she was imagining where she would be on the ground with them.

"Missile away… that's another ten-plus troops killed." Robot called again.

"Roach, you have one Hellfire remaining." Soap informed over the radio.

"Copy that boss, one missile left. I'll make it count."

"Soap, I'm going for the sub! Everyone, get on that guard house and cover me!" Price's announcement had everyone sitting or standing up straighter, as there was no mention of anyone attempting to board any of the craft at the dock.

"What does he think he's doing?" Dash said, looking over at MacTavish.

"I don't know…" He replied, his attention now fixed on the satellite feed. "All he told myself and Shepherd was that this raid would stall the Russian advance… wait…" He moved from his place behind Dash over to a console, where he started keying in information. "He sent a bunch of schematics to Shepherd of one of the subs in port, an Oscar-II…" When he found what he was looking for, he punched the screen in anger.

"What, what is it sir?" Robot asked after a moment of tense silence.

"Price, the silo doors are opening on the sub! I repeat, the doors are opening on the sub!" Ghost's frantic voice echoed through the room, "Come on! The doors are opening! Hurry!", and the three of them shared a feeling of immense dread at Price's reply, "The silo doors are open! Price! Do you copy?!"

"Good."

"No!" Robot shouted, standing up and away from the desk in horror as the feed showed a large ball of fire erupting from inside the submarine, and Dash's hands covered her mouth in silent realisation of what Price had just done.

"Wait, wait, Price no!" Ghost screamed into the radio as the fireball tracked away from the submarine and into the sky, "We have a nuclear missile launch, missile in the air! Code Black, Code Black!"
The seven of them barely registered the unannounced ceasefire that had overcome the base as they watched the missile climb into the air and out of sight, everyone just standing there in complete shock as the horrific implications of what occurred started to sink in: Ghost pulled off his headset in disgust and threw it onto the rooftop, swearing up a storm; Chemo continued to watch the space where the missile had vanished to, quietly convincing himself that it was just a dream; Scarecrow's weapon slipped from his hands as he fell to his knees; Ozone and Roach stepped over to lean against the railings of the roof, gathering their thoughts; Shade and Rook shared a look as they turned to see Price walking down the ramp from the submarine and onto solid ground.

They waited silently for Price to return, Shade slinging his rifle and letting his hand rest on the grip of his holstered sidearm that sat on his thigh. The others noted Shade's quiet fury and all watched intently for the confrontation that they knew was about to take place. Price didn't get a chance to say a word to them when he reached the rooftop before Rook came up from behind him and violently tackled him to the ground.

Despite his many years of experience, Price struggled against the far younger soldier. But his resistance stopped as Shade pressed the barrel of his Glock to Price's head. "Move. Go ahead. I fucking dare you."

Slowly, Price let go of Rook's harness and moved his hands to where Shade could see them, "Sergeant-"

"Don't you dare 'Sergeant' me!" Shade screamed into his face, "You just launched fucking nuke! Do you know what you've just done!"

"I do… do you?" Price answered calmly, his eyes flicking over to where Ghost was standing, watching the entire ordeal take place. "Lieutenant, I suggest you get your men under control…"

"… Rook, Shade, take his weapons and cuff him." Ghost said levelly, turning around to look away. "As far as I'm concerned, he's just killed a hundred thousand people. I'd say shoot him but I don't think MacTavish would approve."

Price just sighed and closed his eyes, letting his head rest against the snow as the two soldiers above him stripped him of his rifle, sidearm and knife. "If that's how you want to play, then I'll play…"

Scarecrow walked up in front of him with a small roll of tape in his hands, "Mind if I invoke his right to remain silent?"

"Robot, have you worked out a trajectory for that nuke yet?" MacTavish asked as he was frantically trying to get in touch with General Shepherd.

"I think I've got it!" Dash answered instead, bringing up a plotting chart on the screen. "Target zone is… Washington DC, impact estimated within the next half-hour to forty minutes…" Dash let her head hang down in despair. "I'm going to kill him… she said quietly, but not enough for the others to not hear her. Understandingly, MacTavish let the comment slide.

"Sir? I don't think all is lost…" Robot spoke up, catching both of their attentions.

"What is it Robot?" MacTavish asked as he surveyed the flight path.

"Well… the missile is flying really high, too high for a conventional launch." He started, switching the display to show a projected flight path. "Just looking at the tracking data, it appears that when the weapon reaches DC, it'll be a high altitude airburst, not a low level airburst or a ground detonation."
"So what, Price has basically done the equivalent of a 'warning shot' but with a nuke?" Dash asked, confused.

"At that altitude, most of the radioactive materials will be trapped in orbit or even dispersed into space... but the landmass below will still be affected by the electromagnetic pulse." Robot finished, looking at both Dash and MacTavish. "That EMP will indiscriminately knock out electronics and unshielded circuity across the entire eastern seaboard..." He looked at Dash pointedly, waiting for her to make the connection. After a moment, Robot concluded, "... by frying DC with the EMP, he's knocked out communications for both sides, but the defending US Forces will still be able to use the shielded landline system and any other shielded equipment they have to communicate, while the Russian forces will be left completely frozen. Not to mention that a lot of their vehicles are unshielded too: aircraft, tanks, transports..."

"... I should've seen this coming," MacTavish said quietly, sinking into his seat, "He asked Shepherd how one would extinguish an oil fire; by setting off a much larger explosion beside it. The explosion claims all the oxygen and chokes the fire, putting it out..."

"The invasion was the oil fire," Dash realised, "and the nuke's the extinguishing explosion..." Her expression hardened, "It's no excuse! He could've told us his plan instead of going behind our backs," she huffed in frustration and checked the missile's path again, this time checking it against flight paths for high altitude aircraft and satellites, "... The ISS will be in the blast radius. No time to evac by shuttle, the people on board are as good as dead... I'm sending re-route orders to the high altitude craft in the area monitoring the situation. Hopefully they'll be out of range by the time that bomb goes off."

Dash pushed away from the desk and left without another word, avoiding looking at Robot and MacTavish.

The flight home from the naval base back to the ship was quiet, in multiple meanings of the word: Gale and NJ had told them that they weren't locked on by the Russian's air-defense radar network, even though it was active and tracking them; the remaining Russian soldiers at the base had clearly seen the large Pave Low land, collect and leave with the team but didn't bother lifting a weapon; the passengers of said Pave Low remained quiet as they pondered their next moves; and Price's silence was forced after a rather vindictive Scarecrow had duct taped his mouth shut.

Even MacTavish had been silent over the radio, with Robot seemingly handling communications after the missile launch. Not that there was much to say outside of the usual request for transport call.

"Okay.... nuke hits an American city, say Los Angeles: massive casualties, both civilian and military on both sides of the conflict. The five-stars track it to a Russian sub, and they're unaware of our op either due to timing, lack of intel or just because they're ignoring outside, and fire nukes in response. Result: Mutually Assured Destruction and the end of the civilised world as we know it..." Chemo says to the others halfway through the flight, breaking the tense silence.

"... nuke hits a Russian city, like Vladivostok or hell, Moscow: massive civilian casualties. Russian leadership somehow uncover our involvement, demands more blood, and fire away their nukes to the US and any other nation that contributes to our Task Force," Shade adds on, "US and their allies respond in kind as best they can. Result: Mutually Assured Destruction and the end of the world."

To everyone's surprise, Ghost chimes in, "Nuke hits an American or Russian city. Our involvement is made clear and regardless of the actual facts and details on who pressed the button," he shoots Price a look, "the Task Force becomes disavowed and disbanded, and all parties involved on the mission become labelled as criminals and are either executed, imprisoned for life, or extradited to a
country that *does* execute." He sighed loudly and lifted his sunglasses to rub at his eyes, "No matter the outcome, we're *all* f*cked. Plain and simple."

"It's just a matter of *how* f*cked we are." Roach summarised, everyone murmuring in agreement. "And Makarov goes of relatively scot-free. He's probably camped out on some island or town in the middle of nowhere, just watching with a sadistic smile on his face."

Chemo rose his hand, drawing the group's attention, "I call first dibs on that low life, after MacTavish of course."

"Get in line! I already called shotgun!" Rook shouted out, the mood starting to lift in the cabin. The rest of the flight back to the carrier was made with idle chatter, the subject focused on Makarov and how each man would exact vengeance upon the world's most wanted terrorist. They didn't realise that they were just about back to the carrier until Gale had announced it over the intercom at the same time that the helicopter dipped and banked for it's approach.

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Dash was on the flight deck and watched as the Pave Low touched down and began shutting down. Having left the ops centre of the ship shortly after the launch, she had no real knowledge of how the team fared afterwards. Was there a Russian counter-attack on the base? Was anyone injured during the assault?

She counted the men as they walked down the ramp and into sight, but her mind froze as she tried to comprehend the sight of Ghost guiding an unarmed, restrained and gagged Price off the aircraft and across the deck. Shade was in front of the group, so she started to approach him to ask him the all important question. He beat her to the punch though.

"Any intel on where that missile is headed?" He had to shout over the residual engine noise.

"It detonated in low orbit," Dash answered, "There shouldn't be any nuclear fallout, but the ISS was destroyed. Whatever civilian transports that hadn't been grounded were redirected away from the area as the blast will cause an EMP over most of the eastern seaboard, killing any unshielded electronics."

"Where did it burst over?" Shade prompted as they stepped through the doorway and into the tower.

"Washington DC, that's where the Russians are hitting hardest, they took the White House a few days ago… We've been at a stalemate trying to get it back." She looked back at the doorway as Price was escorted through, "American casualties are high already, no doubt they'll be even higher now. Did you sock Price for me?"

He shook his head, taking off his helmet and running a hand through his hair, "Believe me, I was bloody tempted to… I settled for pressing my Glock against his forehead instead…" He leant in closer to her so that only she could hear, "If it was only me out there… he'd be in a damn body bag, not in cuffs. I'm assuming the boss didn't know about this?"

Dash shook her head, "No, 'Tav would've told us. Fucker went behind *all* of our backs."

Shade grit his teeth, then wheeled around and slammed a hand into one of the steel walls of the hallway in frustration. Immediately, he winced and shook it. "God-f*cking-damnit!"

"I'm right there with you…" Dash sighed, patting his shoulder, "The hell was he thinking…"

He blew some air through his nose as he tried to calm himself down, holding his hurt hand with his other, "Come on… I'm sure you want to see Mac' tear the old bastard a new one." Shade nodded his
head down the hallway where the rest of the team had gone.

Together, they walked down to the ops centre and found the rest of the team all standing along the back wall, each man focused on either Price or the image of General Shepherd on the main screen. Quietly, they moved to stand beside Rook. "What'd we miss?" Shade asked under his breath.

"Not much… boss didn't give old mate the chance to speak, instead putting a call through to the big boss himself," Rook chuckled to himself, "Not gonna lie, I think Shep approved of how we bound and taped him; he looked amused for a split second." Shade shook his head in mild amusement, before focusing on the conversation at hand.

"... you do realise that your actions may have inadvertently escalated the entire war to a point from which we cannot return?" Shepherd's face on screen was eerily calm, and the team had the shared thought that right now, Shepherd was more like a father doing his best not to erupt at a misbehaving son, "How else did you expect this to play out? Did you even think about the consequences such an event has?"

"General," Price responded, calm and collected to the point where he gave off an air of arrogance, "to be blunt, your forces were getting their heads kicked in by the Russians on all fronts. I can guarantee that your preliminary reports will say that their advance in the Washington district has practically stopped dead in its tracks. They're going to be disorganised, and without any form of functional communications, they'll remain that way for the foreseeable future."

"And what about our guys? EMPs are like landmines; they can't discriminate between friend or foe."

"Anything that wasn't powered on during the blast should still be functional, or at the very least will be fairly easily repaired. And you and I both know that parts of Washington's critical infrastructure were shielded against such kinds of pulses as well," Price smirked at the General, "the stalled advance should allow your troops to reorganise and formulate a plan to counter attack, or at least start pushing back. You know that's why soldiers still train with iron sights, after all."

Everyone could tell that Price had a point, as loathe as they were to admit it. The nuke, while completely reckless, did serve a purpose that did bring part of the war to a standstill. Other parts of the US were still under attack, like New York, but they would likely be disrupted by the freeze in Washington as well.

"... Price, you're a madman... I'm going to go back to the Joint Chiefs and run damage control for your stunt. MacTavish?" The General sounded resigned as he asked for the other Captain.

"Sir?"

"It pains me to ask this of you, but Captain Price is to be detained and stripped of his rank, pending further word from me. If all goes well with the Chiefs, then he'll be brought back into the fold. However," Shepherd focused his gaze onto Price through the screen, "I will not hesitate to throw you to the wolves if this blows back on us. As far as the approved mission plan was concerned, you went against official orders and launched that missile. And you'll be tried for it, you and you alone. Dismissed."

The screen went blank, and everyone remained quiet as General Shepherd's words sank in. Price looked over to MacTavish with wide eyes, "Soap?"

The Scot shook his head and lead Price out of the room wordlessly, leaving the rest of the team behind. Ghost stood up from where he was seated and looked at the gathered soldiers, "Right… we
don't know how long it'll be until we get word again… take the time to decompress, gather your thoughts, and rest up. We all know we've bloody earned some at least…"

Authors' Notes

(Spitfire)

I never realized how close we were to Loose Ends, daymn… Well that's on the horizon. Dash is Not Happy with Price right now and is just biding her time to chew him out. I never liked how Price was just like… instantly cool with the team, didn't make sense to me. So… Next chapter, some decompression, probably some talks between characters about what all's going down.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Stealing a line from Deadpool… I think we can all agree that shit just went sideways in the most collossial way. Looking at MW2, there's no way that Price did what he did and didn't get reprimanded in some way or form. Hell, it just went on like business as usual. I know there's some suspension of disbelief for the games, but that's not how we roll here.

Loose Ends and Enemy of My Enemy is around the corner… I'm sooo looking forward to that… until then, see you next time!
"... Jamie? Yeah… it's me, Tom," Shade said through the phone, holding it away from his ear as his sister screamed loudly on the other end, "Yes, yes, I'm still alive…" Currently, he was sitting on the end of the flight deck, his legs dangling over the edge and above the inactive Sea Sparrow missile site that sat below, "I'm doing as well as one can do in the middle of a war, but thanks for asking." The conversation seemed to run on for hours, the two siblings talking about how their parents were recovering, how Henry was doing, how anxious everyone back home was when war broke out, and how their Mum had nearly suffered a heart attack when news broke about the nuclear detonation over Washington.

"The news says that the Russian government had announced that it never authorised the launch, and that it was 'taking measures to both secure its arsenal as well as locate', and I swear this is what their spokesperson said, 'the rogue officer or officers that made the launch'," Jamie said with a humourless laugh. Shade personally felt a little relieved, as it meant that a world-ending crisis had just been dodged. 

"... I miss you Tom, and I know I said it earlier but we're all worried for you…"

"Not as worried as I am for you guys, trust me," Shade said reassuringly, "You're all the reason as to both why I do what I do and how I get back safely every time."

"As long as you get to come home when all of this is over and done with," Jamie said quietly, "I know you can't promise me anything, but please… survive this war and come home…"

Shade had to wipe away a tear before it threatened to fall down his face, "I… I promise, Jamie… and tell Mum and Dad that too… I promise I'm coming home…"

Further up the deck and sitting inside Gale's Pave Low, Dash held her own satellite phone in her hands. A war of its own was playing out in her head. Admittedly, she found the entire situation that the team was facing to be such a cliche, that she had inwardly hoped that a director would call 'cut' and they'd all walk off set for a break. But no; apparently the whole 'ring home and speak to your family before the end of the world' thing happened in the real world.

At least half of the guys on the team had broken away to make their calls in private, while the ones that didn't stuck together in the mess, seeking a distraction from current events. Either they had tried to call their families already and were unsuccessful in doing so or, as was the case for a couple of the guys, had no family to ring. Dash didn't know which was more depressing to think about: the fact that there was the uncertainty of your family still being contactable, that they'd either had to evacuate or worse; or that their only 'family' was their team.

At last there was a click on the other end and a very busy sounding woman answered, "Hey mom…. Yeah, I know I never call, I'm sorry, things tend to get a little… busy. As it is I don't have a lot of time, things are a bit tense what with the situation over there. Are you and everyone else okay? The invasion hasn't made it to you I hope… We're trying to stop it, but it's slow going…"

Dash stopped and listened as her mother updated her on everything that had happened since her last letter. Dynamo had fathered a foal, Shadow was getting to be old and they'd gotten a new dog to take her place as a work dog, but she was still healthy and happy, napping in the kitchen and being a general obstacle for her busy mother. Her oldest brother had brought his grades up and graduated college and Dad was putting him to work on the farm while he did some job hunting, the youngest had just gotten into college.
"When are you coming home?! We miss you!" Her mom finally finished.

Dash chuckled a little, "Soon, I hope. Think you can get Dad to admit he was wrong yet?" she laughed, "I'm glad to hear that you're all safe… I'll get home as soon as I can… Stay safe, please, if the fighting gets close to home please promise me you'll get away."

"I promise, Rebecca. I should be the one saying that to you anyhow," her mother replied, "You're the one out there in the middle of it all."

"Yeah, I know. I'll stay safe, I've got good people watching my back, don't worry too much…" With that they said their goodbyes and Dash hung up with a sigh, leaning back into her seat as she let the phone rest in her lap.

A series of knocks from the aircraft's side doorway caught her attention, and she looked over to see a familiar face. "Oh, hey Shades."

"Hey D," he said with a soft smile, "you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm good," Dash nodded, "You?"

Shade sighed, "Like I said to Jamie, as well as I can be… mind if I join you? Not many quiet places on this damn ship…"

Dash gestured to the seat across from her, "By all means." He nodded and walked up the small stairway, moving over to take a seat beside her.

"Get in touch with home base?" He asked after a few moments.

She nodded and smiled, "Texas went full Red Dawn soon as the invasion started… Russia hasn't been able to touch it. My family's doing good."

"Red Dawn?" Shade questioned, "I don't think I've seen that one…"

"It's a movie about a Korean invasion of America," She chuckled, "I'm not kidding. And there's this little resistance cell that just goes to town on the Koreans occupying their home, full guerrilla warfare. It's a good movie, we should sit down and watch it some time…"

Shade shook his head and laughed, "Only if we watch Tomorrow, When The War Began. Practically the same thing, but replace America with Australia and the Russians with an unspecified Asian country. Other than that, it's basically identical. Though it's a group of teenagers that were out camping out in the countryside that spearhead the resistance."

Dash laughed and shook her head, "No way? Ah it's been a while, but I think in Red Dawn it's teenagers too, but I don't think they were camping in the beginning, I think they escaped to some bunker or something in the woods. They might've been, but like I said, it's been a while, I don't really remember."

"We'll make it a date then," Shade said automatically with a laugh, before realising exactly what he'd suggested.

Dash smiled, but didn't answer immediately, not for what might've been a while, "Yeah. Sounds good." Shade breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing back into the seat as much as he could.

"So, the parents are recovering well… if you were wondering. Dad's on crutches for the next few months still, but progress is good."
"That's good. Sorry I didn't ask, I meant to," Dash chuckled a little.

"Don't worry, with all the shit that's been happening, I don't blame you," he said reassuringly, "though Jamie did relay a question from my parents on 'when I'm bringing my not-girlfriend' over again. I think you made an impression on them when we were over there."

Dash laughed, "Good to know. If it makes you feel better my mom asked about any cute guys in my unit."

Shade let a bark of laughter slip before covering his mouth, "I know she ain't talking about me, then."

Dash chuckled and smirked, "Don't be so quick to put yourself down, Shades."

He rolled his eyes and smirked back, "I'm just saying that I can't compare to the manliness that is Meat... I mean, damn..." Shade couldn't contain his amusement and started laughing again. "Nah," he started after calming down, "I know I'm irresistibly sexy, at least that's what some say."

Not to be outdone, Dash looked over at him, "Oh, I don't know... I heard some of the other women at base make some pretty interesting remarks about you..."

Shade leaned over and was all ears, "Do tell!"

"Well, for starters you're an Australian, so you have that inherent advantage over most of the other guys, especially when accents are concerned," Dash began, counting on her fingers, "secondly, you're tall and toned, not overly muscular or too scrawny like Scarecrow or Gale, respectively, and some of the girls I speak to see that as appealing."

"Good to know I'm doing something right," Shade chuckled.

"It shows... thirdly, you're not wound up as tight as some of the other guys, not just in our squad but in the entire Task Force as a whole. I guess that's just a side effect of being an Aussie, as it's a trait that's shared with Rook, Gale, and a few of the other soldiers and staff from your home."

Shade nodded appreciatively, "That is true, we are quite a relaxed lot."

"But most importantly," Dash said, leaning in close to him, "you're the easy option."

"... come again?" Shade asked after a few moments of processing. "I'm the what now?"

"All the girls want a piece of MacTavish, some even daring to reach for Ghost, but they're both unavailable. Either it's a issue of rank, or their relationship status as they're both very private about that kind of thing, or the girls being too 'afraid' to ask. You? You're like them in a lot of ways, but without that fear or position on the podium."

Shade just sat there, shell shocked as he took in Dash's words, before he started to laugh to himself, "Wow, D... just wow, way to take a man down a few levels... check that, a lot of levels."

Dash was chuckling to herself, "Sorry Shades, but you made it way too easy. You've only got yourself to blame." She rested a hand on his leg, "If it makes you feel any better, you are in the unofficial 'Top Ten'."

"Only the top ten?" Shade wheezed as he started laughing harder, "I'd thought I'd rate within the top five at least!" He sat up and took a few breaths before fixing her a curious look, "... where am I on the list?"
Dash merely shook her head, "Uh uh, that's for me to know and you to never find out. I will tell you if you move up or down though, is that fair?"

"I'll take whatever intel I can get at this moment," he said with mock desperation, chuckling again.

Dash chuckled with him, leaning back comfortably. The two shared the silence for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of the waves and other ship activities.

"If it makes you feel any better, Jamie told me that the news is reporting that a retaliatory strike for the nuke isn't on the horizon," Shade spoke up after a while, "don't know exactly how accurate or old that news is, but at least we aren't facing certain doom right now."

Dash nodded absently, "Yeah?"

"Yeah, Russian Government said that despite the conflict they're engaged in, there was never any consideration as to deploying nuclear weapons, let alone any approval. They're claiming that it was likely a rogue Captain and his crew or something along those lines, and are working on resolving the problem."

"That's good… Still wanna knock Price's teeth in though."

Shade hummed in agreement, "Probably a good thing he's confined away from the rest of us, to be honest." He yawned, stretching his arms out before standing up. "Bloody hell… I'm so tired I could probably sleep through a nuke right now… gonna head down to the bunks and catch whatever sleep I can."

Dash nodded, "I'll be… somewhere... Wonder if this tub has a gym…"

Shade shook his head in bemusement, "And here I was trying to be subtle about it… D, go get some sleep too. You look how I feel right now, and that's absolute shit." She shrugged, but didn't comment.

Gale poked his head through the open door at that moment, "Oi lovebirds, get a room that isn't my bird will ya."

Both Shade and Dash flushed out of embarrassment, "And here I was trying to be subtle about it… D, go get some sleep too. You look how I feel right now, and that's absolute shit." She shrugged, but didn't comment.

Gale poked his head through the open door at that moment, "Oi lovebirds, get a room that isn't my bird will ya."

Both Shade and Dash flushed out of embarrassment, "Sorry mate," Shade said as he moved towards the exit, "but all the other rooms were taken." Gale simply shook his head and watched smugly as the two soldiers quickly exited the aircraft.

Once they were out of his earshot, Dash looked up at Shade, "Seriously… what is it with people and thinking that we're together or something?"

Shade shrugged, "I mean… I can't really blame them. We do tend to spend a lot of time together, we had that op in Monaco, and then there was that 'date'," he said with air quotes, "and we have become rather close friends despite how we first met…"

"True…" Dash allowed, stuffing her hands in her pockets as they walked.

"And in all honesty?" Shade continued, smiling to himself. "In another life, where we both aren't soldiers and in the middle of a war, I would definitely try to date the hell out of you."

Dash chuckled, "And I might give you the chance."

"Hey! That wasn't a no!" Shade cheered over-enthusiastically, throwing a fist into the air. Settling down, he looked at her again. "Y'know, we haven't had the chance to discuss that…"
Dash was silent for a moment, "...Do you want to discuss it?"

"Well..." his face scrunched up slightly as he tried to find the words, "We both know that it was purely as friends, so that's covered... but," Shade sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "I'm not the only one that felt that something was just right that night, right?"

"No... It was... I dunno..." Dash shrugged, "I'm not good at talking about these kinds of things honestly."

"I get you. I feel like I'm reverting to a teenage version of me that's thinking about confessing to a crush," he said with a humourless chuckle, "but, that night, I just felt normal. I wasn't a soldier taking a break from work, but just a regular guy enjoying a night out with a pretty cute girl that he likes." It took a few seconds for Shade to realise exactly what he'd said, but it was too late for him to attempt to backtrack. Instead, he just hoped that Dash wouldn't read too far into what he had just said.

Unfortunately for him, his words left Dash reeling internally. It didn't take much to see what Shade had meant by his remark, though what really left her speechless was the conclusion that she agreed with what he had said. That night had been the first night in a long time where she could well and truly relax and be a regular person; to unwind and have fun with, to phrase it like he had, a rather handsome and attractive guy. What this it felt when someone realised that they had fallen for someone without knowing it?

"... Yeah," Dash said, breaking the tense silence and looking up to him with a small smile, "it felt exactly like that..." She fought not to laugh at how Shade's shoulders seemed to drop in a flood of relief. "I... I wouldn't be lying if I said that I wished the night didn't end the way it did."

"Same here..." Her eyes flicked down to his hand and to their immediate surroundings as Shade stared off at something in the distance, and with a quick breath to settle her nerves she gently grasped his hand with hers. Again, she fought not to laugh as Shade stiffened under her touch.

"You okay Shades? Looks like a cat's got your tongue." She teased, though she wasn't prepared for the smirk that he shot her in return.

"Yeah, the bloody thing dashed off with it." Shade recoiled as she slapped him in the arm with her free hand. "Hey! You set that one up, you only have yourself to blame."

Dash rolled her eyes, "Is it too early to break up with you yet or no?" She didn't get an answer as Roach walked around the corner. Reflexively, they separated their handhold and tried to act casual. "Oh hey, what's up Roach?"

"Captain's called a meeting; Shepherd's verdict is in."

The team gathered again in the operations centre, much like they had many hours before, with Price situated on a seat front and centre. His hands were unrestrained this time, and MacTavish stood behind and off to one side of him. Looking off to one of the systems operators, he gave a nod, and within seconds General Shepherd's visage was on screen.

"Gentlemen," he began, looking at Price first, "I have spoken with the Joint Chiefs regarding the incident involving that submarine and the nuclear missile detonation over Washington DC. Reports are coming in that Russian forces are being pushed back and out of the capital, with our forces using the blackout brought on by the EMP to their advantage and reclaiming key structures including the White House. The repercussions of this are being felt across the other invasion zones too, with advances on New York, Boston and Norfolk all starting to falter as well. Captain Price..."
your stunt saved a lot of lives. Against my recommendations, the Joint Chiefs have sought to relieve
you of any charges and have reinstated your rank and position within the Task Force. Though if you
act out like that again, no amount of bureaucracy will keep you out of a prison cell. I'll make sure of
that myself…"

"Duly noted, sir," Price acknowledged with a simple nod of the head.

"As for Makarov… I've been given a blank check, and we're going to use every cent hunting him
down." The rest of the conference call detailed how Shepherd had used part of his 'blank check' to
comb every piece of intelligence for any indication of Makarov's location, and how he and a team of
analysts had narrowed it down to two locations: a mountain retreat on the border of Georgia and
Russia, and an former US disposal graveyard deep in Afghanistan.

"Sounds like we need to be in two places at once," MacTavish remarked as he studied the plans for
each location.

"Not an impossible task, for us at least," Shade whispered to Dash quietly.

Price stood up and walked over to stand beside MacTavish, "Two teams, strike each site
simultaneously to prevent any kind of early warning getting across."

"Sir," Ghost spoke up, "Permission to lead the safehouse team?"

"Granted, Soap and I will take the boneyard." Price answered, cutting off MacTavish.

"Very well," Shepherd said, grabbing everyone else's attention, "We will cut off all routes of escape
for this man. This ends now." The call ended, and Price said something to MacTavish but only loud
enough for them to hear.

"Ghost," MacTavish said as he turned around and looked to the team, "you'll take the majority of the
team to the mountains. I'll only need a couple of extra hands along with Price."

"It's your team, sir," Ghost shrugged, looking over a satellite map of the safehouse. "How soon can
we get Archer and Toad here?" He asked, looking up at his captain. "I'll feel better about having a
small team if I can have an overwatch element."

"A day, tops," he answered, "They were attached to Kilo Team on the western US. I can have them
wheels up in an hour, they can meet you on the way."

"Gives us plenty of time to plan and prepare," Ghost nodded, "who're you planning on taking with
you and Price?"

"Rook and Dash," he answered, "Price and I are going to run our op primarily as stealth, but those
two are good options in case it all goes belly up. Preliminary plan is to have them minding our extract
vehicle."

"Sounds solid… hopefully one of us will catch the bastard..."

Twenty Hours Later...

A pair of helicopters started to spool up on the flight deck, their fuel tanks filled to the brim so they
could make the long journey to a mid-flight refueling point, from which each aircraft would proceed
onto their destinations: the Caucasus Mountains and Afghanistan.
Below decks, in the carrier's hangar bay, the team made their final preparations for battle. The team lead by Ghost were all kitted up in cooler-weather uniforms and assaulter loadouts; slick armour vests worn underneath their jackets with load-bearing vests and chest rigs over the top. A few of the men had packed an extra plate on their external rigs where they could, as they all expected quite a fight. Beside them, Price, MacTavish, Rook and Dash wore gear more suited to where they were going and what they were doing; camouflage netting mesh over their shirts, plate carriers and soft covers.

Everyone was anxious; this was the mission to end all missions, potentially their real 'last' operation if all went according to plan. By the end of the day, at least one of the teams aimed to have Makarov in cuffs. Alive or dead.

Catching Dash's eye for a few moments, Shade excused himself from the group and walked over to the side of the hangar where it was more secluded. Dash arrived behind him a few moments later. "You okay Shades?" She asked him, a little puzzled by the wordless summons.

"Yeah… well, I don't know… maybe?" He replied, giving her an unsure smile. "I just can't believe this is it… that this is happening?"

"The fact that we have Makarov within our reach or the fact that you finally admitted that you liked me." Dash teased, stepping beside him and grabbing for his hand to hold reassuringly. Between the briefings, planning meetings, and other operational activities the team had to complete before they set off, the two soldiers had managed to find the time to sit down and discuss everything that needed to be discussed.

There had been a lot of realisations, a number of revelations, and a fair share of jokes exchanged before they finally acknowledged that yes, they both liked each other. It was even agreed that if ever the present day Shade and Dash went back in time and told their past versions of themselves that they would very likely fall for each other, they would've been laughed at.

"Hey now, I seem to remember someone else making a rather compelling confession too…" Shade shot back, squeezing her hand. "Honestly though, it's more the first one. I mean, this is it. We're going after him. One of us might even see him…"

"You're making it sound like you want to get him to sign his album or something," Dash said as she rolled her eyes, "remember exactly who you're crushing on, alright?"

"Is someone jealous?" He teased, nudging her in the side. "I think somebody's jealous…"

She didn't have the chance to retort as MacTavish's voice boomed across the hangar. "Shade! Dash! Let's get going!" The fairly cheery mood that had built up between them vanished, and hesitantly they let their hands separate.

"Hey, D…" Shade whispered before she stepped away. She turned around and was caught off guard by his expression. Seeing him look so unsure of himself when he would normally be confident and composed, Dash stepped back over and drew him into a tight hug. It felt awkward with all of their gear on, but it didn't matter to them at that moment. It felt like ages when Shade finally spoke up, lifting his head up to look at her. "Stay safe out there," he said quietly.

"Only if you do to, alright?" Dash whispered back, slowly pulling out of the hug. Shade drew her in one last time and pressed a gentle and chaste kiss to the top of her head, the gesture conveying everything he wanted to say but couldn't.
"See you when you get back."

"Not if I see you when you get back," Dash smiled, "I am the faster of us two, after all…"

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

You're welcome. *drops mic*. If you say that it 'escalated' quickly, then you've obviously just as blind as they are and not as perceptive as you think you are. Before you wonder, yes, this was planned out in the very early days of this story, a kind of enemies-friends-lovers thing, though whether it gets that far is yet to be fully detailed.

We're on the eve of both Loose Ends and Enemy of my Enemy, and by separating the two 'main' characters, we'll be bringing you POVs from both of them! It's going to be one hell of a ride, believe me. I'm just as excited (read: dreading) to write it as you all are to read it! Until next time!

(Spitfire)

And the slow burn finally reaches its boiling point. My muse kinda Noped out in the middle of the heart-to-heart and didn't come back so this was mostly Shade. So... uh I think he about covered everything in his AN so I'll just wrap this up.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~ Spitfire out
"This is fucking it…" Shade whispered to Roach as they crouched along a pathway, waiting for Ghost's order to advance. Everyone in the team was eager to set off, but they had to wait until an agreed upon time so that their assault would occur simultaneously with MacTavish's and Price's assault raid: any earlier and they risk a warning message being sent out, and any later and the risk of their target receiving a warning dramatically increased. Timing was essential.

Shade stole a glance to the two ghillie-clad snipers perched at the edge of the rocky outcropping, overlooking the target house. He'd met them a handful of times back at the base, but never actually got to know them like he did the members of his own team. Archer and Toad were somewhat unique in that they were their own 'unit', attached to whatever team or operation required their services.

Archer was an expert sniper and reconnoissance man that had been recruited from the Royal Marines, while Toad was a former Marine Scout Sniper himself as well as being quite adept at demolitions. The two together were hyper-lethal, working by themselves or as an overwatch element. And they were loaded for bear, if the nature of what they were using was any indication: each man had an M110 semi-automatic sniper rifle in their arms, with an M107A1 anti-material rifle loaded with armour-piercing incendiary rounds at the ready. Furthermore, they had a Javelin missile system and enough spare missiles to take out a tank platoon.

Shade chuckled evilly: Makarov was in for a whole load of trouble today.

Roach reached into his pocket and retrieved a small chain, holding it in his hand and looking at it with a fond glance. Shade looked over and nudged him in the shoulder, "Hey, you right mate?"

With a humourless chuckle, Roach closed his fist around the chain and shook his head to clear it. "As right as I can be, mate…"

"... who's were they?" Shade asked knowingly after a few moments of silence. He'd recognise a set of dog tags from anywhere.

"An old friend of mine," Roach began, "we were recruited to the one-four-one at the same time a few years ago but were assigned to different teams. Stardust was on an op with Kilo team; they were raiding a known weapons cache in Tajikistan that Makarov was known to travel to… place went up in flames shortly after he and a few others entered, and satellite imagery that we all reviewed after the incident showed that Makarov himself was watching from a building down the road with a phone in his hand."

Shade let out a sympathetic sigh as he rested a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "So this is personal for you…"

"He was practically my brother at that point; we'd met at selection and pushed each other through it all, were assigned to the same squad in the SAS, and were brought into the task force together. I should've been there with him." Roach looked over at Shade with a grim determination. "So yeah, it's personal for me."

Shade squeezed his friend's shoulder, "I'll make sure to hold him down for you then. Don't think any of the others will object to that either."

Roach laughed quietly, "Y'know, I think you and him would've gotten along well." Shade looked up as Ghost started making his way up the line of troops on the pathway, the Lieutenant tapping
everyone on the shoulder as he passed.

"Strike team, go. Engage Makarov on sight." He started to walk down the slope, waving his hand forward for the team to start moving up. "Let's go, let's go."

The small patch of forest was eerily quiet as the seven troopers advanced. The silence was broken, however, by a sharp metallic click after Robot stepped past a seemingly harmless bush. Instinctively, he dove off to the side and curled up as best as he could as a small metal disk flew up to waist height, then detonated.

"Ambush!" Ghost screamed, him and everyone else diving to the ground as more landmines sprung out from the ground and blew up, scattering the team as they sought out cover. Tracers and RPGs started to rain down on them from above.

Shade rolled onto his back and started spraying up to the rocks to their top left, focused more on suppression than accuracy. "Contacts high left!" He shouted out, scrambling back to find a piece of cover. It took a few more seconds for the rest of the team to regain their senses and finally fight back, Ghost instructing them to push forward and counter-attack into the smoke. Mortars started to rain down, impacting the ground where the Task Force was just moments earlier.

"This area's been pre-sighted! Keep moving!" Scarecrow called out, firing his M249 from the hip as he ran into the smoke. Everyone on the team was firing on full automatic, using the sheer volume of fire to push back any of the defending Russian forces back even further. Soon, they had turned the tide of the fight and had reached the road leading up to the front of the house.

"We've got two trucks leaving the area,″ Archer reported as the two vehicles in question sped right past, making an escape. The team opened fire on them with everything they had, but they appeared to be bulletproofed heavily. "Firing Javelins, danger close."

"Javelins incoming, get back!″ Ghost warned, moving up the road and out of relative danger. The two missiles streaked up and impacted each vehicle directly, stopping them dead in their tracks.

"Archer, any sign of the target?"

"Negative, we have not seen Makarov at this time, and nobody's left the house. Trucks were probably decoys."

"Roger that, we're advancing on the house.″ Ghost acknowledged, gesturing for the others to follow him. They made short work of the remaining hostiles outside of the house, with Scarecrow reaching into the last two parked jeeps to steal the keys from their ignitions. "Roach, Chemo: front door with me. Ozone, Robot; take the kitchen. Scarecrow, Shade; basement." Each man headed to their designated entry points and prepared their breaching charges. Together, the three charges detonated.

Roach and Chemo charged forward through the front doors, clearing the foyer, living room and an adjacent office with ease as Ozone and Robot swept through the kitchen and dining room before darting upstairs. Down below, Shade and Scarecrow cleared out another bedroom, bathroom and storage room, with the Australian uncovering an armory in one of the rooms. "This is Shade, I've got a major cache of weapons and ammo here."

"Chemo here, we've got a lot of intel just waiting to be scanned here… plans, checklists, the whole nine yards." The medic reported over the radio, picking up a set of pictures from one of the tables in the living room

"Upstairs is clear," Ozone added, "nothing to report apart from sleeping quarters and some food…"
"Hey Roachy!" Robot called out as he made his way downstairs, something in his hands behind his back, "found your girlfriend!" He laughed as he revealed the object, an inflatable doll.

Shade started to laugh as Roach slapped the doll out of Robot's hands. "Fuckin' hell, I thought I told Stacey to stay home before we left. Scarecrow's gonna be pissed."

Scarecrow called out from the kitchen, to the others amusement, "You can have Stacey, Roach. I'm with her sister Jasmine now." He walked in with another doll, identical to the first one.

"Enough fuckin' around guys," Ghost jumped in, his tone a mixture of bemusement and frustration, "Scarecrow; photographs," Ghost said as the team regrouped in the entryway of the safehouse, "Ozone, Robot; clear the bodies out of the stairwells and doorways, don't want us getting jammed up." They acknowledged and began their tasks, and Ghost switched radios. "Shepherd, this is Ghost. No sign of Makarov, I repeat, we have no sign of him. Captain Price, how's Afghanistan?"

"Busy, at least fifty hired guns, but no sign of Makarov yet. Perhaps our intel was off…" Price answered, voice low.

"Well quality of the intel's about to change," Ghost answered, "this place is a bloody gold mine."

Shade and Roach stepped away from the others and walked back down to the basement, "Mate, it's a goldmine down here. They're bloody stacked for the next two wars." Shade said as he led his friend towards what used to be a bathroom, and was now an armoury. "If you need to repack any mags or the like, do so now. I'll take a few cans upstairs for the others."

"Good find," Roach said as he slung his ACR over his shoulder and picked an L86A2 LSW off the wall. "Think the boss'll let me keep it?"

"I wouldn't even tell him." Shade answered with a smirk, two cases of ammo in his hands. "Have fun." He turned around and walked back upstairs, over to a desk where Ghost was messing around with a computer. "There's a literal armoury downstairs guys, I brought up some five-five-six if you need it but anything else you'll have to fend for yourself."

"Cheers," Scarecrow said as he continued taking photos.

"Shade, go with Ozone and start setting up our defenses. There's a whole stack of claymores and belt-feds in that back room to our left." Ghost said as he typed away, establishing a connection between the DSM and the computer.

"Sir?" Shade questioned, looking a little confused.

"Shepherd's bringing an extraction team in about five minutes. I guarantee you that Makarov's men will be here in two. We're running an operations playbook. Scarecrow! When you're done there, grab whatever you can and get up high."

Both men nodded at Ghost and carried out his instructions; Scarecrow ran downstairs to retrieve an extra two cases of linked rounds for his M249, while Shade retrieved the MG4s and L86s that were in the back dining room and placed them, with extra ammunition, at key points around the house. Ozone had finished placing his claymores when Archer made his call.

"Strike team, I've got multiple helicopters inbound from the northwest and southeast, ETA fifteen seconds."

"Copy that Arch, thin 'em out for us." Ghost answered.
"Task Force, this is Price... more of Makarov's men have just arrived. Rook, cover me: I'll grab that
guy and get into their comms... Ghost, we'll be silent for a few minutes, good luck up there. Price
out."

"Alright, the DSM is working," Ghost stepped away from the computer and checked his weapons,
tensing at the shouts of Russian outside, "Here they come, get ready!"

Shade chuckled as he hefted an MG4 over to a window ledge, an extra belt of ammo draped around
his neck. He shot a knowing smirk over to Roach, "Dash is gonna kill me when she hears she missed
another 'Alamo'."

"That's only if the Russians don't kill you first," Roach replied with a laugh, shaking his head.

"Nah, she'd find a way to kill me again," Shade stated, saving the rest of his statement for later. "I got
contacts front!" He called out, spotting the first set of Russian soldiers approaching from slope to his
twelve.

"Light 'em up!"

Dash waited with bated breath as both she and MacTavish held their position against the side of an
old KC-10 Extender fuselage, listening to both their own comms and to the ambient chatter of the
two ultranationalist soldiers around the corner. A few moments passed and the voices faded with
their footsteps, and she let the breath she was holding out slowly.

"I'm beginning to see why Shade took the assault option… doubt he'd be able to keep still in a place
like this…" She whispered more to herself than anyone else.

"Not going to lie here, Dash, but I'm surprised you're here and not with him…" Captain MacTavish
spoke up as they moved from the Extender and over to the shell of an M1126 Stryker ICV.

"Hey, you're the one that assigned me to this op, sir," she shot back, peering around the corner.

"And I half-expected you to protest and recommend either Ozone or Robot to take your place and go
with the others." His comment gave her pause, and she looked back to see a knowing look in his
eyes. "Well?"

"... the thought did cross my mind," she admitted after a moment, "but then I figured you want speed
and agility for this op, and that has my name written all over it."

MacTavish hummed in agreement, and they moved to their next position within the seperated nose
section of a C-130J Hercules. "That is a reason why I pulled you for this team, but not the main
reason. But as far as I'm concerned, you've removed any doubt I had in my mind."

Dash rounded on him in barely masked shock. "You had doubts? Of me?" She tried her best not to
outwardly show her sheer surprise at the revelation.

"Not just you… Shade too. I was also half-expecting him to jump onto this op as well… but it's
reassuring to be proven right about my instincts." MacTavish said as he peered through the broken
cockpit windows through his Intervention's scope.
"I…" Dash started before stopping as his statement started to make sense in her head, "... you were testing us, weren't you."

"Can't put anything past you, can I..." MacTavish remarked with a chuckle, lowering his weapon and looking over to her, "whatever thing is going on between you and Shade isn't any of my business, but it will be if it affects your operational performance or your objectivity. Seeing as neither of you spoke up against being separated for this mission speaks plenty for both yours and Shade's level of professionalism."

Dash looked away, hoping to mask her slowly growing brush at being caught out by her captain of all people as checking their immediate perimeter. MacTavish continued on, "I don't know if you've noticed, but while individually you each are effective operators, when put together the pair of you become something more. Sure, everyone works their best when they're paired up with someone they trust and work well with, but the way you two operate so seamlessly is something else entirely."

"Like you and Captain Price, I assume?" Dash said, her face now free of the red hue as she looked back up at MacTavish. "You two seem to be able to read each other's minds from what I've seen."

"Much like tha-"

"Soap, we've got company." Price's raspy voice cut the Captain off and the two snapped to their rifles. "Bunch of helicopters just touched down outside of the complex near the airstrip, and Makarov's men have no idea who it is."

"Copy that, we've both seen more of the patrols move towards that general direction ourselves… any theories?"

"Could be a recovery or engineering team here to collect scrap parts?" Rook offered.

"What aircraft were they?" Dash asked.

"Uh... I count two Pavehawks, three transport Littlebirds, two gunship Littlebirds, and a Pave Low..." The Australian responded after a moment. "I guess that's a negative on my answer."

"That's an unusual composition, and doesn't sound like anything that Makarov would have..." MacTavish mused as he and Dash started to climb down from the cockpit.

"... it's Shepherd." Price spoke up soon after. "I see black uniforms, American weaponry, the aircraft don't have any identifiable markings... has to be Shepherd."

"But why would Shepherd be here? He's the one that sent us here," Dash questioned, "Makarov used American weaponry at the airport, maybe one of his contacts?"

"Makarov's men are going crazy," Rook pointed out, "their radio net is buzzing with chatter and from the sound of it, they ain't happy."

MacTavish shook his head and motioned for Dash to follow, "Let's get some better eye on this… Ghost, this is MacTavish, give me an update, over."

The pair bounded across from cover to cover before reaching a half-buried C-130 tail section, MacTavish pulling Dash into cover as gunshots started to ring out across the complex. "Shepherds' men are firing on Makarov's." Rook reported, Dash poking her head out to watch the nearby group of Ultranationalist troops start running towards the fighting.

"I'm not getting any response from Ghost!" MacTavish called out.
"He's cleaning house, tying up loose ends." Price remarked surprisingly calmly.

"Shepherd betrayed us..." MacTavish's voice was low, and Dash couldn't help but shudder from the sheer rage that was barely restrained in her Captain's voice.

"Have to trust someone to be betrayed, I never did... Rook and I will work our way back to you." There was a pause as MacTavish and Dash broke from their cover and started to move, the pair ditching the assault ghillie shrouds they were wearing over their heads and shoulders. "Nikolai, you've got our position?"

"Da, but I am not only one here. Shepherds men on one side, Makarov's on the other..."

"And we've gotta get between them to get out..." Dash mused to herself.

"Stick to the edges of the fight when you can, let them take each other out. Only engage if there's no other choice..." MacTavish instructed before the pair moved from their cover and crossed a clearing to the other side.

"Soap! Shepherd's trying to wipe out us and Makarov at the same time! Head for rally-point Bravo, and trust no one!" Price yelled through the comm.

Dash shared a look with MacTavish as they ducked in cover in the fuselage of an old aircraft.

"Copy that old man, you and Rook be careful as well," MacTavish replied lowly, the fighting was happening just outside of where he and Dash were hiding now, and the pair used the gunfire to mask their footsteps as they made their way out of the metal tube and onto the dirt, hiding beside a red container full of scrap electronics and wires.

They could wait the fighting out, avoid having to kill men that had no idea what was actually going on. Once the fighting seemed to move a bit away the pair moved forward, cover to cover, only firing at those who raised their weapons at them. They had only crossed a road when the comms came to life again.

"Nikolai, this is Price! Be advised the LZ is hot, I repeat, the LZ is hot!"

"Okay, Captain Price! I am on the way! Try to get situation under control before I get there, ok?" The Russian replied, voice almost echoing in the cockpit of his C-130.

"Right, whatever you say, Nikolai, just get here sharpish!" Price shouted back, "Soap, let Makarov and Shepherd's men kill each other off as much as you can! I'm gonna try to contact Makarov."

That gave Dash pause. Makarov? The Kingfish himself? The man Price and MacTavish had been hunting for who knew how long? And Price was about to contact him... For what? She kept an ear on the conversation on the comm as she and MacTavish picked their way across the Boneyard.

"Makarov, this is Price," his voice was cool, like he was talking to an old teacher he hadn't gotten along with, "Shepherd's a war hero now. He's got your operations playbook and a blank check. Give me what you got on Shepherd and I'll take care of the rest," A deal?! He was cutting a deal with Makarov?! There was a long pause as Price waited for Makarov to respond, "I know you can hear me on this channel Makarov. You and I both know you won't last a week."

"And neither will you." A chill ran through Dash and she froze a moment, a grenade exploded uncomfortably close and her arm and face were peppered by shrapnel before MacTavish pulled her back. His voice was so... cold.
"Makarov…" Was Price really doing this? This was actually happening? "You ever hear that old saying… 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"Price," Dash tried not to listen this time as she and MacTavish came over a ridge, using the fuselage of an old C-130 as a position to pick off any stragglers before sliding down and continuing, but the voice drilled into her regardless, "one day you're going to find that cuts both ways. Shepherd is using Site Hotel Bravo. You know where it is. I'll see you in hell." A deal with the Devil himself, another chill ran down Dash's spine and she took a moment in cover to take a breath and wipe the sweat from her face.

"Looking forward to it. Give my regards to Zakhaev if you get there first," Price's voice took on a cold tone as well and Dash opted to focus on the gunfire around her instead of the comms as Price yelled to Nikolai again and she and MacTavish continued to pick their way to the runway.

They were within ten meters of the runway when a jeep suddenly swerved through the gunfire and the brakes screeched as it halted in front of them, Rook in the driver's seat and Price in the back. MacTavish hopped in the back with Price as Dash took the front passenger seat, Rook putting the jeep back into gear and gunning it down the field towards the runway. MacTavish and Dash fired at the vehicles following them and Dash inwardly remarked about the Shadow Company's tenacity as she shot out their tires. Nikolai's plane was just ahead and Dash had to wonder how exactly they were going to get aboard like this.

"Nikolai! Drop the ramp, we're coming in!" MacTavish yelled and Dash rolled her eyes: in true One-Four-One fashion, of course they were making a rather dramatic get-away.

The moment was quickly replaced by her heart in her throat as blood splattered across the front of the car and her uniform and Rook slumped in his seat with a cry of pain.

"Shit!" Dash cursed, grabbing the wheel and steering towards the ramp as it dropped, "Shit, shit! Rook! C'mon man either stay awake or wake the fuck up!" The jeep went rather violently into the C-130's cargo bay and Dash was instantly pulling Rook out of the seat and laying him flat on the floor, pressing her hands over the wound in his chest.

He coughed up blood and it dribbled down his chin, adding to the growing pool under him, "Ow…" Rook rasped, coughing again.

"Hang in there Rook, you're gonna be okay, just hang in there," Dash spoke quickly. First Shepherd, then Makarov, and now this. As if things could get worse, "Saved your ass before and I'll do it again you just gotta stay with me Rookie. 'Tav! I need a hand!"

MacTavish was on Rook’s other side in a moment, setting the first aid kit to the side as he held gauze over the area, ready to press it into place when Dash let go. The gauze was in place in an instant and then Dash was pressing back into the wound, the blood already soaking her hands. She felt panic bubbling in her chest but shoved it down and bit hard on her lip as she focused on stopping the bleeding, adding layer after layer of gauze, packing the wound.

It felt like hours later before the bleeding finally stopped and Dash sat back with a shaking breath. Her hands were completely coated in Rook's blood. He'd passed out, to pain or blood loss Dash wouldn't know, but his heart was beating and he was breathing, however shallow and rattly it sounded. She could guess that his lung had been punctured, and it only added to the problems building up. And then she thought about Shade.

"Why didn't the others warn us if the same thing was happening to them?" She wondered numbly.
Authors' Notes

(Spitfire)

Whelp. It took us absolutely forever to get this written. Numerous factors, namely, I'm on insomnia meds now woo-hoo, so no more 2am-6am writing sessions lol. So... Yeah, I suppose we managed to make it work, given we're here now. Drama, angst, and people getting hurt, aka: my specialty lmao. Well that was a trip and a half to write, after changing the transition like five times. Let us know how we did!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

[insert Law and Order 'dun dun' here] That happened. And we're still yet to see the fallout from Ghost's element yet either. One of the sucky things about having to write a pair of missions that canonically happen at the same time is trying to find the right time to switch as well as to fill in the gaps in a manner that makes sense... oh well, I think we got it done here fairly well...

Until next time!
The inside of the safehouse was eerily quiet, considering what had transpired here within the last twenty or thirty minutes. Shade sat with his head held in his hands on the stairwell just past the front doors, rifle on the step leaning against the wall beside him. His chest rig was undone, jacket opened and slick plate carrier loosened, helping ease the weight that was both metaphorically and literally pulling him down by his shoulders.

Nobody could've seen it coming. Yet it was also so plainly obvious that they all questioned whether this was just some weird as fuck dream they were all sharing.

No sooner had the DSM had finished its download, Makarov's forces began shelling the safehouse with the intent on bringing it down on their heads. As planned earlier, everyone scattered in different directions: Ghost and Roach down the hill towards the landing site as they had the DSM with them; Chemo and Robot carried a wounded Ozone down the road and out through the way they had come; he and a banged up Scarecrow had legged it towards a nearby boathouse that was a short sprint away.

When General Shepherd had walked down the ramp of the flanked by men wearing black fatigues that gave a general 'fuck off' vibe, Shade had made the realisation that they'd been played.

Didn't stop Shepherd from gunning down both the Lieutenant and Roach at point blank with his revolver. Nor did it stop his goons from drenching them in gasoline and setting them alight. It took Scarecrow all his effort to stop Shade from popping them right then and there, in order to not blow their cover.

Not that it mattered much in the end anyway. A handful of Shepherd's black-clad men worked their way through the area in search of them. Radio reports from both Robot and Archer said that these men were clearly looking for them, acting on Shepherd's orders to 'clean house.'

He let himself smirk as he looked over at the duct-taped 'Shadow Company' soldier that was strapped down to an office chair in the order, eyes wide and flickering between the other survivors of their commander's attempted betrayal. Shade wasn't above admitting that there was a little bit of pleasure at taking his frustrations out on the man. But it served a purpose.

He sighed and stood up, collecting his rifle and letting it hang by its sling behind his back, and walked over to where Scarecrow and Robot were sitting by one of the large windows. Both men had seen better days, but were leagues better than the four men confined to the camping stretchers they were laid out on.

"You 'right?" Robot asked as Shade pulled up a stool, careful not to tear the bandage that was wrapped around his upper left leg.

"I don't fucking know mate…" Shade answered with a heavy sigh. "Fuckin'… fuck."

"I hear you," Scarecrow said as he took a swig from a bottle of something he'd found in the Russian's fridge.

"Chemo better bloody get double overtime for all of this," Robot remarked as he looked over his shoulder to where the medic was working, fluttering between their four wounded friends. Ghost and Roach were the most critical of his patients, having been shot at point blank range in the chests as well as being burned. While their uniforms and jackets were designed with flame resistance in mind,
they weren't flame proof. Whilst they would escape with mild burns on their arms and torsos, their heads and hands were entirely other matters.

Ghost’s balaclava had saved most of his face, but the foam and plastics of both his headset and sunglasses had melted and bound to the cotton, making them near-impossible and too dangerous to attempt removal. It was a similar story for Roach, whose goggles had melted and burned the skin around his eyes and nose. The damage was relatively minor, but would still require proper treatment.

The burns weren’t the worst of their injuries though: Chemo had to insert small valves into each of their chests to relieve the pressure from their collapsed lungs. Whilst their slick plates underneath the jacket had stopped the forty-four magnum rounds from penetrating completely, the force had broken a few ribs and penetrated into one of their lungs, filling the chest cavity with air. Combine that with their other lesser critical injuries, including the numerous lacerations and frag wounds they’d sustained in their run to the extraction point, and they were still fighting for life.

Ozone was in no better shape, having sustained similar wounding to what Royce had back in the favelas in Rio, though coupled with a heavily wounded right leg as he had tripped a leftover mine during their own escape through the forest.

Toad, Archer’s spotter, had taken a few rounds to his unprotected chest too from a Shadow Company counter-sniper team. Archer had finished them off before beginning to attend to his wounded partner, thankful to be joined by the arrival of Chemo and Robot.

Everyone else was battered and bruised, but still able to fight. Though while their bodies were still capable, their spirit and morale was non-existent. How else would one feel after realising that the entire fight up to this point was now effectively worthless?

"Any word from the others?" Scarecrow spoke up, breaking the silence.

That was the other major concern. There had been no contact with Captain MacTavish and the remainder of their team since Price’s sign off just before the Russian counter-attack. The SATCOM radio that Ghost was using to keep in touch had not survived the flames, and the only ones in the team able to transfer the cryptography and frequencies from that particular handset into a new one were either unconscious, in Afghanistan, or in a hospital bed back home in the States.

And if Shepherd was clearing house and had hit them here in the mountains, then chances were that he’d have done the same in Afghanistan as well as the rest of the Task Force stateside. With no long distance comms, there was no way to warn the others, or even find out if they were alive.

Shade shook his head to answer Scarecrow’s question. "Fuck…" was whispered in response, the single word summing up the feelings of everyone present.

The one saving grace to all of this was that the others had managed to scavenge the bodies of the attacking Russians and Shadow Company troops for crucial medical supplies such as bandages, QuikClot and tourniquets, and were thankful for the discovery of a makeshift medical station in a basement bathroom. It wasn’t enough for Chemo to actually properly treat their own wounded men, but just enough to hold off for a much needed CASEVAC.

"... team... is Dingo Two-One... king in, over?"

If there ever was a god, they were looking down upon them all and had decided to offer mercy to them at that moment. Shade leapt up from his seat and rushed to the charred remains of Ghost’s chest rig. While the melted SATCOM handset was kept in a pouch on the front of his rig, the other AN/PRC-152 radio that their Lieutenant kept for backup was in its own pouch on the side, and
hadn't been exposed to the fuel and flames.

By the look of it, when the headset was disconnected it had switched to speaker mode, and was still keyed into their 'command' frequency. The same frequency used to communicate with aircraft operating with the Task Force.

With trembling hands, Shade keyed the radio open. "Dingo, this is…Echo-Six-Sierra-Whiskey." He hesitated at broadcasting the team's callsign or his own name over the net, opting to go for a generic 'personnel callsign'.

"Shade!" Apparently, Gale had no such reservations. "Fucking hell, am I glad to hear your voice mate! Where the hell are you boys? I've been orbiting the secondary LZ for the last five minutes now!"

"Gale," Shade began as he walked over and sat back down with Scarecrow and Robot, "We need to get the fuck out of here like yesterday."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Too dangerous to tell you over the freq, and not enough time. I need you to try and put that bird down right outside the house, or as close as you physically can get it. Shit's hit the fan down here. Ghost, Roach, Ozone and Toad are all down and non-ambulatory…"

"Jesus wept… right, I'm on my way. Hang tight mate!"

Shade set the radio into an empty pocket of his pants, then turned to look to Scarecrow and Robot. "Looks like we're not completely fucked after all…"

"No kidding, 'bout time we got a damn break," Robot mused, "but what then? Odds are that we'll get knocked over once we're back at the boat, assuming that we'll even get close enough in the first place."

"That's assuming that Gale isn't playing us," Scarecrow added, "what if he's got another Shadow Company kill team on board? What then?"

"You really think that Gale, who's been with us from fucking day one of this shitshow, who's had our backs from before then, is going to sell us up the damn river?" Shade asked pointedly, glaring at Scarecrow for even insinuating such a thing, "You heard his voice, right? You can't fake the kind of surprise and shock that he had."

"What about the DSM?" Robot asked after a few moments of tense silence. "We can't very well go back empty handed…"

Shade stuck his arms out and gestured towards the large living room they were in, the walls and tables that had been pushed aside covered in photos, books, computers and phones. "Pack your bags, we're going to take anything that isn't bolted down."

The cargo hold of the C-130 was deceptively silent barring the drone of its engines. Dash had taken a seat halfway up between the cockpit and where their escape vehicle was strapped down, watching over a slowly deteriorating Rook. The rough patch job had stemmed most of the external blood flow, and a crude IV blood transfusion was helping replenish some of what had been lost, but it was by no means a proper solution. Nikolai must've been properly paranoid to have even packed a handful of O-negative blood bags in the small crew mini fridge. Not the first time that such paranoia has come in handy when the Task Force was involved.
… was there even a Task Force anymore? The events of the day certainly hinted towards something, especially if Shepherd was bold enough to send his own attack dogs after them. She found herself wondering about Ghost, who’d been a constant and appreciated challenge in the ring, Roach, who was like a little brother, Chemo, ever the mother hen, Scarecrow, Ozone, Robot… Shade, who she’d found a certain companionship in she hadn’t had before. How could this have gone so wrong? Dash pulled her knees to her chest and sighed, resting her chin on top of them. Suddenly she’d had someone that felt like home and just as suddenly it had been ripped away. The safehouse team weren’t answering their comms, so either the radio had caught a bullet, or they were dead. And what a pleasant thought that was. They would need to stop somewhere, the plane couldn't fly forever and they needed to put themselves back together and take stock.

Where could they even go? It wasn't like it was hard to track a C-130… Shepherd would be looking for them, hunting them as soon as he realized they were still active. She huffed, active felt relative as she looked over at Rook, breath rattling in his chest, there was still blood everywhere.

She felt the seat she was on shift, and looked to her right to find Captain MacTavish taking the seat beside her. He’d removed his chest rig and jacket, revealing a stained shirt and arms covered in small bandages from frag wounds. "How's he holding up?"

"Well as he can… which isn't great..." Dash sighed in answer, "He needs a doctor, I'm not entirely sure he'll last the night."

"Nikolai's taking us somewhere, not quite sure where exactly though. It's a safehouse run by the loyalist resistance movement." MacTavish sighed and rubbed his face, "Still no word from the others either. I've tried all the backup frequencies and channels on the SATCOM. Either the uplink between us and then has been severed by Shepherd, or..."

Dash took an unsteady breath, "Or they're faring worse than Rook…" she let a small silence drag before she sat up a little straighter, looking for any explanation that could mean they were okay, "But they've got Chemo… maybe they'll be okay?" It was a long shot and she had no illusions about that, she sighed and dropped her chin back to her knees.

"That's a lot of trust in just one man… but I see what you mean…” MacTavish said understandingly, turning to look at her. "What about you?"

She shrugged, "Shaken, still kinda trying to process it… Trying not to think about the worst case, y'know?"

"Could use that optimism myself," he chuckled dryly, "As much as I respect and trust Price, he's more of the cynical pessimist… though you don't need me to tell you that..."

"No kidding," Dash rolled her eyes, "No offense but he could've handled the whole 'I don't trust you' sha-bang a lot better. And thinking about the team being… gone isn't helping anything, it fucking sucks, but… at the moment we need to focus on now."

MacTavish started to chuckle to himself quietly, pausing when Dash gave him a look, "Sorry… that just sounds like something I should be saying to you, not the other way around…" he rubbed his face and sighed, standing up from the seat, "but I agree. Focus on what we do now, and everything else will fall into pl.""

"My friend!" Nikolai's accented voice managed to carry over the sound of the engines, and both MacTavish and Dash looked over to where the cockpit was. "We have problem!"

Frowning, the pair made their way up to the cockpit and found Nikolai quietly muttering to himself
as he messed with a small aircraft radar screen. "What is it?" Dash asked, confused as to why their Russian pilot was mildly distressed.

"We have company," he pointed out two small dots on the screen that were approaching rapidly, "but they're not American."

"More of Shepherd's men?" MacTavish asked, taking a seat in the vacant flight engineer's station.

"Unless he has direct command of a fighter squadron as part of Shadow Company, then unlikely." Price answered as he tightened the straps of the co-pilot's seat.

Dash frowned and then looked at the radios. "Hey, switch it to the Guard frequency, they might be trying to hail us." Price looked back over his shoulder to Dash and then over to Nikolai who shrugged, then reached up to the radio panel and tuned into the frequency.

"... transport, at flight level one-five, heading two-seven-zero at two-hundred knots indicated. This is Holden Five, flight of two F/A-18 Super Hornets approaching at your seven o'clock. You are in violation of a no-fly-zone, and will be fired upon if you fail to respond. Respond to this message, or squawk three-six-zero-zero if you are unable to respond to communicate."

"That's us alright, but what kind of a callsign is 'Holden'?” Price mused aloud. Dash replayed the message in her head, and quickly came to the answer.

"They're Royal Australian Air Force…” When she received three blank stares, she rolled her eyes and continued. "They operate Super Hornets, 'Holden' is an Australian car brand, and I can't be the only one who recognises that accent, right?"

"You sure about that?" MacTavish asked after a minute's tense silence, "I need absolute certainty from you."

"One hundred percent… look, think of it this way. They're Australian, so they're out of General Shepherd's immediate influence. If he wanted them to shoot us down, there would be a lot of red tape involved. Plus that just puts a huge mark on him too, because why would a General want a seemingly harmless transport shot down…" Dash began, "I can't say what'll happen if and when we get to where they want to take us, but it's better than any other alternatives…"

"Soap…” Price began, when MacTavish cut him off.

"If you're certain about this, then…" He removed the headset he was wearing and offered it for her to take. She took it and put it on, and MacTavish switched the headset over to broadcast onto the radio. Dash took a deep breath, then spoke.

"Holden Five, this is… Hotel Four-One, we read you loud and clear. Sorry about the delayed response, we're undergoing an in-flight emergency at this time."

"Understood Hotel Four-One, we're coming into position on your starboard wing. We request that you change vector to two-zero-zero and lower altitude to flight level one-zero. What is the nature of your emergency?" Both Dash and Nikolai looked out the right cockpit window to find that the two grey F/A-18Fs had more or less 'parked' themselves into a formation off their right wing.

"Holden, we're at a semi-critical fuel state for our destination field, plus we have one critically wounded patient on board in need of urgent medical care… what can you do for us?"

"Hotel, stand by while we work on something for you. In the meantime maintain this heading, speed and altitude, change to frequency one-three-three point seven megahertz, and squawk three-six-zero-
Shade watched from the end of the ramp as the damned safehouse disappeared in the distance, turning around once it was out of sight to walk back up the cargo bay and into the Osprey's cockpit. He took to a squat between Gale and NJ, and snatched a spare intercom headset. "Thanks for the lift..."

"No fuckin' problem mate, that's what we're here for." Gale said as he reached back and tapped Shade on the shoulder reassuringly. "So, shit's fucked?"

Shade chuckled at his fellow Aussie's bluntness, "You don't know the half of it mate. Shepherd's sold us up the fucking river. He popped Ghost and Roach when they came in for the extract, then made off with the DSM containing all of our intel while his goon squad tried to clean up the rest of us."

Gale sat in silence as he processed this information, then reached forward and smacked the top of the flight instrument panel in anger. "Mother fucker!" Beside him, NJ took controls as Gale vented his rarely seen rage on unimportant parts of the cockpit. "That fuckin' explains that message we got from control."

"What message?" Shade asked, frowning.

"We got a transmission back from the ship," NJ began, "advising that we cancel our extract as they'd lost contact and not to bother coming over."

"I told them to 'get fucked' and that I'm going to bring you boys back even if it killed me." Gale added as he shook his head disappointedly. "Been off the main comms ever since."

"Right," Shade hummed in thought and glanced up to the radio panel, "... wonder what they're saying now." Gale and NJ both got the hint, and NJ switched the main radio back to the correct frequency.

"Broadsword, this is Dingo Two-One checking in."

"Two-One, this is Broadsword... where the hell have you two been?" The radio operator's voice was a mixture of relief and anger, something which Gale smirked at.

"Fighting fires, Broadsword. We did a fly over of the target area to see if we could get eyes on the team... we've got their bodies on board, but we took some light anti-aircraft fire on the way back..." Gale responded, looking back at Shade with a wink, "We've got a ruptured fuel line and have sluggish hydraulics... don't think we'll be making it back to the boat in one piece."

"Copy that Dingo, wait one..." NJ chuckled to himself as he reached over towards the transponder panel and waited, Shade watching along in confusion.

"Listen to this..." Gale said as he nodded to NJ, the co-pilot switching the transponder completely off.

"Dingo Two-One, I just lost your transponder, check in." Both Gale and NJ started to laugh quietly to themselves as the radio operator tried to get back in contact with them, before switching off the radio completely. Gale steered the aircraft off their current course, then looked back at Shade with a
cheeky grin.

"So, how's it feel to be a fuckin' dead man?"

Authors’ Notes:

(Shade)

Well, who knew that punching through a writers block would mean that you'd punch out roughly 8-9k words in a period of 48-ish hours? I didn't. But I ain't complaining, that's for sure.

I've practically adopted Gale as my own OC at this point (so Spitfire has said herself), and he's definitely taking after me now. "The Aussie is strong in this one". Both teams are in crisis mode now: Shade and the safehouse team survivors are licking their wounds and working on getting someplace safe; Dash and the others are currently being tailed by the Aussie Air Force (better than the USAF if old mate Shepherd's involved) and are being taken who-knows-where...

We're back into heavy AU territory now guys, so keep tuned for what's to come next! Until next time!

(Spitfire)

Feels good to get rolling on this again. As Shade said, once we got through that one block we got Moving. And yes, he's basically adopted Gale now, so that happened. Dash finds her head and gets her moment of Master Sergeant Myers taking command and everything. She's also been spending way too much time with a certain Aussie apparently. Shade and the Safehouse crew are playing dead, Dash and the Boneyard team have met up with some friendly faces, lucky break I'd say. Guess that's all we got for now, see ya!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Unlikely Allies

"Pilot! Shut down your engines, and open your rear cargo ramp!" The sound of a soldier's voice through a megaphone did little to calm Dash's nerves as she, MacTavish and Price waited at the end of the C-130's cargo bay. They'd been escorted by the two Australian fighter aircraft all the way to their operating base in the United Arab Emirates, meeting up with an Australian KC-30 tanker aircraft along the way for the much needed fuel.

Upon landing, the escort switched from fighter jets to a set of Bushmaster armoured vehicles, each armed with remote weapons systems that were trained upon the cockpit and engines of their aircraft. They were met at the parking apron by more vehicles and a contingent of heavily armed soldiers, all waiting for them.

As Dash waited for the ramp to drop, she recalled a rather appropriate rule from a list that was a common joke shared around by soldiers, sailors and airmen alike: Murphy's Military Laws.

*Friendly fire; isn't.*

The ramp started to open, and Dash began to lift her hand to shield her face from the harsh sun, but quickly forced herself to stop as it might've been seen as her holding some kind of weapon. Instead, she squinted her eyes and trusted herself not to stumble down the ramp like an idiot.

"You three on the ramp! Hands behind your heads, walk down slowly in single file!"

Price grumbled to himself but complied, taking the lead as they all walked down the ramp slowly and carefully. As her eyes adjusted, Dash could begin to see the approaching soldiers a little more clearly. They didn't look like your run-of-the-mill infantry, as while they were clearly Australian they were still armed with M4s and HK416s.

They didn't get the chance to properly step away from the ramp before they were seized by the soldiers and forced onto the ground rather roughly, hands tugged away from their heads and down towards their back, where they were bound together by a rather bulky cable tie.

"Rebecca Myers, Master Sergeant, United States Marine Corps, Zero-One-Three-Five-Six-Two," Dash said out of reflex, and she could see both MacTavish and Price turn their heads to look at her. Even the soldier that was restraining her paused for a moment.

"Shut the fuck up, nobody even asked for that shit," the soldier finally said, and Dash rolled her eyes.

"John MacTavish, Captain, British Army, Two-Zero-Seven-Three-Five-Two-One."

"John Price, Captain, British Army, One-Six-Five-Nine-One-Four."

"Jesus christ," another soldier said, the exasperation clear in his voice, "that only fucking matters if you're a prisoner of war, alright? This detainee shit is more for your safety."

Dash tilted her head to the side and up at the soldier who was speaking, his face halfway covered by a camouflage wrap. "There's another one of us in there, but he's badly wounded."

The soldier looked down at her and cocked his head, "Guess you'll rattle off his info too, right?"

"Jayson Cooper, Sergeant, Australian Army," Dash smirked to herself when she noticed the soldier stiffen in shock, "One-Two-Six-Seven-Four-Eight-Two." The soldier guarding her look over to two
of his fellow team and gestured with his head to go into the aircraft. The two soldiers rushed in, weapons low but ready, and there was a pause as they moved past the stowed jeep.

"I need a medic in here fucking yesterday!" A shout was heard from inside, and the soldier guarding Dash knelt down beside her head and got into her face, glaring at her.

"You're going to tell us who the fuck you people are, and what the fuck happened, alright?"

Dash blew a strand of hair out of her face and matched the soldier's glare, "It's a long fucking story…"

What felt like hours later, Dash found herself sitting in a small nondescript office room. The setup was vaguely reminiscent of a police interrogation room, though the shackles on the table, the voice recorder and one way glass were missing. She was bound to the chair with cable cuffs by her wrists and arms, and she'd been stripped of all of her field clothing short of her undershirt, combat pants and boots.

Rook had been rushed off by a group of medics, and the Australian soldiers that were escorting herself, MacTavish, Price and Nikolai barely restrained their animosity towards them with the knowledge that one of their own had been grievously injured in their presence. And she hadn't seen where the others had been carted off to. They'd all had bags shoved over their heads as they were led away from the aircraft, and any contact between them during transport was non-existent.

The door to the room opened, and one of the soldiers from earlier walked in. He was still wearing his plate carrier and other equipment, but his cap and mask were missing. He had short sandy blonde hair, green eyes and tanned skin. He looked vaguely familiar to Dash, as if she'd seen him before somewhere.

"So… Master Sergeant Rebecca Myers, right?" The soldier began, taking the seat across from her. "Mind if I call you 'Bec'?"

"I do, but I don't think it'll stop you," Dash shot back with a smirk, to which the soldier chuckled.

"You'd be right there… I'm Sergeant Jamie Lynch, if you were wondering," Jamie began, leaning back in his chair, "Look, before you ask, this isn't a formal interrogation or questioning or anything like that. We save that shit for the officers, y'know? My bosses are talking to your bosses, MacTavish and Price, that's their names, right?"

"Yeah…" she answered cautiously, and Jamie nodded.

"Cool, cool… hey, that Aussie you had with you, Cooper… he's on the table right now with some of our best doctors out here working on him," Jamie sat up straighter in his chair, "he'll more than likely pull through."

Dash sagged back in her chair in relief, a tell that Jamie didn't miss but chose not to comment on. "That's… great to hear, actually… about time we got some good news for once."

"Rough day, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it…" she shot back with a small smile, "like I said back on the tarmac, it's a long story."

Jamie nodded and stood up from his chair, walking around the table and retrieving a small blade from his rear pocket. "Sounds like one hell of a tale, one that I probably will never hear about it
given the circumstances." He knelt down and cut away the ties from her legs and then moved up to her wrists, "Sorry about the restraints. Them's the rules, you know?"

"Well aware, believe me, but definitely not the worst thing that's happened to me in the last few weeks." Dash answered, rubbing at her wrists. "So, what's your deal? I didn't know you guys were working out here."

Jamie shrugged as he sat back down, "Someone had to pick up the slack and keep the peace while you Americans had to run and fight for your home. It's actually not all that bad. Once people saw Russia take the gloves off, everyone in this neck of the woods kinda fell back into line." He chuckled, "Maybe they realised that all this petty religious infighting and tribal shit pales in comparison to a global war between superpowers and decided to give peace a chance before we're all nuked like a leftover dinner."

Dash chuckled at Jamie's rather plain way of speaking, "Of course… can't blame them though, after what happened back in twenty-eleven…"

"That's probably what did it; they're all avoiding, or trying to at least, a repeat of history."

"Mhm… so what have we got here at least? I mean, I saw the fighters earlier…" Dash queried, and Jamie started to shake his head.

"Nah, not going to happen…” he began, "I know what you're trying to do… but I'm not talking…”

"Please… if you're worried about clearances, you can relax." Dash offered, then stopped as she noted a small patch on Jamie's right sleeve: a double diamond with a dagger above where they joined. "... Second Commando, right?" She pointed out, nodding towards his insignia patch.

Jamie sat up and looked to where she gestured, then sighed and pulled the offending patch off to hide it. "Fuck… how the fuck do you even know that?"

"You didn't happen to know a Sergeant Tom Williams by chance?" Apparently he did, if the way that Jamie suddenly froze up was any indicator. Slowly, he turned to face her with wide eyes. "Transferred out back in two-thousand and fifteen?"

"How do you know that name? How do you know that?" Jamie asked after a few brief moments.

"Because he transferred into my unit." Dash said levelly, and the Commando sat up from his chair and walked around to sit up on the table right next to her.

"Tell me everything."

"So we're headed to Iran?" Robot asked Shade as the latter took a seat in the back of the Osprey.

"That's what Gale said. There are a handful of old few NATO-operated bases there that are inside his fuel range. We're trying for one that isn't occupied by US forces, or anyone for that matter, as Shepherd might have an influence or be able to directly control the troops there and finish the job he started." Shade explained, "If the place is empty, we just raid it for whatever supplies we can, like fuel and medical shit. If it's occupied by a non-American but friendly force, we'll be practically untouchable as Shepherd would have to jump through quite a few hoops to come near us."

"So basically, we're pulling a Julien Assange?" Robot stated, catching Shade by surprise. "I mean, it's basically the same thing, isn't it: fleeing to a foreign base within a friendly country to escape extradition and persecution?"
"... yeah, we're pulling an Assange." Shade agreed after thinking about the parallels. "Though hopefully, if all goes well, we won't have to stay there for the foreseeable future…"

"And still no word from the others?"

Shade shook his head, "No, nothing on the aircraft's long range comms, not since we 'died' at least."

Robot tapped his helmet, which was balanced on his knee, in thought, "... would either Gale or NJ know how to transfer crypto?"

"I asked them earlier," Shade answered, shaking his head, "but they can't. Apparently, that's something that isn't taught to flight crews, despite them handling more complex aircraft radio systems."

"Sounds about right," Scarecrow chimed in. "So we're deaf, blind and for all intents and purposes, dead."

"You make that sound like a bad thing," Robot shot back with a smirk, "Means we can get some semblance of rest for a change… it's like what the instructors used to always say, 'you can sleep when you're dead'. Well guess what: I'm dead."

Shade chuckled, relieved to see that the team's sense of humour hadn't been a casualty yet. He looked up and over to where Chemo was sitting, watching over their four wounded friends with Archer. With careful footsteps, Shade made his way over and took the seat beside him. "How're they doing Chem?"

"As well as they can be," the medic said with a tired sigh, "Roach and Ghost are still relatively unresponsive, but their breathing hasn't changed for the worse… Ozone's in and out of consciousness, partly due to fatigue and partly due to the low dosage of pain relief he's on. Toad's my main cause of concern at the moment, as I'm worried that he's still slowly bleeding internally."

Chemo leant over to show Shade the chest drainage tube that he'd inserted into Toad's side, and revealed that it was slowly dripping blood into a plastic bag. "I've been trying to recycle the blood he's lost in order to stave off further loss but it's not a long-term fix. Especially if he's bleeding out of something critical, which I can't tell because I don't have an x-ray." He sat back up and rubbed his face. "At the very least, I need an extra set of hands and a couple of hours to do some exploratory shit in order to see what else needs work…"

Shade reached over and placed a reassuring hand on the tired medic's shoulder, squeezing it firmly, "Hey, don't stress about that shit okay… focus on what you can do for him and the others, even if it's as simple as monitoring their pain… we all have your back, alright?"

"And I've got yours…” Chemo responded wearily. Shade nodded and stood up from his seat, making his way back up the cabin towards the cockpit. Taking his place between Gale and NJ, he tapped on the former's shoulder.

"Oi, what's the battle plan?"

"Well," Gale said as he flicked one of the LCD displays over, "We've got maybe another hour's worth of fuel, tops, and I have no idea if there are any potential candidates for landing sites within that range… I'm beginning to think we should've risked it and either gone broke for Kuwait or cut west and try Turkey, but all of those places are US-run."

"And we definitely don't have the gas for Al Minhad," Shade added, "which would've been the ideal place to go."
"What's at Al Minhad?" NJ asked, and Gale looked over at his co-pilot.

"It's where the ADF's basing all of their middle east operations out of, just south of Dubai; its predominantly air assets like fighters and patrol aircraft, but they have a small ground contingent there as well… ever since the declaration of war on the US by Russia, the rest of the coalition has had to pick up the slack in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria."

"And because the ADF's a major player in the area now, they've got operational control over a significant region and any forces within it. Shepherd'll have a hard time trying to touch us if he hears that we're there." Shade concluded.

"Just need to get the gas to get close enough…" Gale muttered, loud enough for the pair of them to hear. "Hey, how's everyone else back there?"

"Crow and Robot are catching a much needed nap, Chemo and Archer are sharing the title of guardian angel, and the others are all in varying states of 'not quite dead'," Shade responded humorlessly, "though Toad's really touch and go right now… the sooner we get to some kind of base or even a fuel source, the better."

"I hear that…"

It seemed that every single insurgent in the region had opted to finally give up once news that Russia had openly declared war on the US reached this place, as was the opinion of the small team of mixed special operations personnel stationed at the rather remote observation and operations post. The amount of shellings, assaults and general harassing fire that they'd come to get used to disappeared practically overnight.

So much so that when word of this was reported back to their commanders, they were subsequently told to hold fast, watch their consumption of supplies like food and water, and maintain a scaled back presence in the area.

The last supply drop was a week prior to that advisory and while they weren't completely running low of the necessities, the niceties of life like current newspapers, a fresh selection of movies, and mail from home were all starting to be craved.

"Still no word from upstairs," Master Sergeant Mike Chastain said with a groan as he sat down beside his Battalion, Captain Arnold Miller. The Marine Recon officer shot a knowing glance to the NCO and shrugged.

"Not surprised, probably too busy with the shitshow back home to deal with guys like us…” he raised a hand to cut off Chastain before he could speak up, "... and if you say anything along the lines of 'we should be back there' one more time, I'll feed you to the dogs. I hear enough of that shit from the junior guys we have here as it is…”

"Not what I was going to say, but message received…” Mike answered with a bewildered expression at the captain's outburst. "I was going to say that if we time it right, we could be in the nearest village in time for dinner… nothing like some hearts and minds to help break the monotony."

Miller snorted, "Mikey, you really think that the boys are going to even try some of the shit the locals cook up?"

"I'm no Anthony Bourdain," Mike shot back, "but you'd be surprised at just how good some of the local cuisine could be."
"Alright… organise a party then, but I swear to god Chastain, if it looks like a fuckin-"

"Boss!" The shout from one of their Marines surprised the pair of them, and they both turned around to look at the newcomer.

"What is it, Tone?"

"We've got visual on an aircraft, looks like a tilt-rotor, approaching the camp, and it's not responding to our hails." The news had both Chastain and Miller on their feet, and they followed the Marine back outside and to one of the camp's main observation towers. Inside, they were met by First Lieutenant Jake Salt, a Marine Aviator attached to the battalion as a Forward Air Controller.

"What's the word Salty?" Miller asked, lifting a set of binoculars to get a better look at the approaching helicopter.

"I don't know boss… that bird isn't answering any of my radio calls across any of the known frequencies…” Salt answered as he flicked through a notepad, "plus we aren't slated for any kind of supply drop in the next few days."

"Do we have anyone in the area that uses Ospreys?"

"As far as I'm aware, V-22s were only used in Afghanistan, not Iran… apart from us, there aren't any other known assets within flying distance."

The four operators watched silently as the aircraft drew closer and closer to the camp, flying a slow loop while it's rotors tilted backwards before settling into an approach path onto the single helipad near the rear. "Mikey, get your boys up and armed, we don't know who the hell's on that bird!"

Miller had to shout over the deafening roar of the aircraft's engines as it settled down onto the pad not far from the tower.

Dash had to physically stop herself from falling off of her chair laughing, Jamie leaning back on his with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "... oh yeah, the boss was none to pleased about that particular night. Said that old Shady had some brass balls for trying something like that and that he 'admired his creativity and initiative' but still called him a dickhead."

Jamie, or Hangman, as he was known in his own circle, was giving his side of the story of how Shade had earned his name. There were so many more facts and details that Shade himself must have deliberately omitted for his own sake. Just as well, as Dash now had more than a year's worth of blackmail material over his head; he just didn't know it.

"You shoulda seen the dressing down we got when we set off a flashbang in the rec where all the guys passed out after a night out," She chuckled, "Still owe the LT a Crucible actually… they took it easy on us 'cause we were still recovering from Mexico."

"Mexico?" Hangman asked, his laughter coming to an abrupt halt, "Wait a second…” he pulled out his phone and messed with it a bit, before turning it around to show Dash a video he had saved on it. It was the same footage that both her and Shade had seen in the aftermath of that operation: the passing shot of her driving a Jeep with Shade in the back, shooting at the pursuing cartel gunmen. "This happened a while back… you mean to say that this was your team?"

Dash only had to glance at the screen before she nodded, "Yeah, that's us. I was driving, Shades took the hit. Dumbass shoulda moved when I told him to."

Hangman shook his head in disbelief, pocketing the phone, "Man, that's definitely Shade alright…
was always one to take the initiative without thinking ahead. You know, you guys caused quite the stir down there." He sat back in his chair and shrugged, "I mean, civilian news was all the same story: cartel versus cartel violence. But our intel guys were also watching, and all we heard after a couple of weeks was that an American SOF team intervened. Didn't actually say how or when, but that they jumped in and that was the end of that."

"Stir might be a bit of an understatement, don't ya think bud?" Dash chuckled, "All I got to say is Plan S fuckin sucks."

"I hear that," Jamie nodded understandingly. The door to the room opened, and another Commando walked in followed by an older soldier wearing the regular uniform. "Sir," Jamie snapped to attention at the sight of the man.

"As you were Sergeant," the new arrival spoke up, "Master Sergeant, I don't know if Sergeant Lynch here has spoken for us and apologised yet, but if he hasn't then allow me to do so. I've been speaking to your companions and they've brought me up to speed regarding your situation."

Dash nodded, "It's been a rough day… Any word on Cooper?"

"Still in surgery, but from what I've been told it's looking good. He'll be out of action for quite some time, but he's alive." The soldier stepped forward and offered his hand out, "I'm sorry, I should've introduced myself. Major General Stephen White, commander of Joint Task Force Six-Three-Three."

Dash shook his hand in a firm grip, "It's good to meet you, sir. I'd introduce myself but you already seem to know who I am."

General White smiled at her remark, taking back his hand, "Indeed. Though, your little outburst on the tarmac did accelerate matters. But that brings me to a point that I've already informed your officers." White took the seat that Hangman had occupied, and rested his arms on the table. "We tried to look your personnel file up on the shared NATO database, to see if we could get in contact with your command offices. You, Sergeant Cooper, and Captain MacTavish were all listed as 'Missing-In-Action' as of seven hours ago."

Dash sighed and sat straighter in her seat, "It's a long story…"

"I've already been briefed on the situation by Captain MacTavish," White said, holding up a hand to stop Dash from going on, "and the sheer fact that you've gotten this far is a testament to your training and sheer luck. Now, before you ask, we aren't going to report your appearance to your commanders just yet. I will ask our intelligence officers to keep an ear out for any requests for information regarding your teams, both of them that is. But if your commander, General Shepherd… if he asks if we've seen you, I am bound by regulations to report it."

Dash frowned, "And he was following regulations when he tried to kill me, and my team I take it?"

"You misunderstand me… if we've seen you. Didn't say anything about us sheltering you or the like. For all that Shepherd knows, we could've seen your C-130 as a blip on the radar headed for Kuwait." White smirked at her, "We've got your back here, Master Sergeant. I promise you, we'll keep you safe here."

Dash gave a relieved smile, "Thank you, sir…"

"No need. Go get yourself something to eat or drink, or maybe even a shower," he said with a small chuckle, "looks like you could go for all three. Rest up, you've earned it."
Shade walked down the side stairwell of the Osprey with hands laced behind his head, goggles over his eyes and a shemagh around his face to keep the dust from the helicopter's rotor wash out. He could barely hear the shouts of orders over the engines, and he kept proceeding slowly further and further out towards the voices until he was tackled to the ground harshly.

"What part of 'stop the fuck right there' do you not understand!?!" An American-accented voice said close to Shade's ear, and he felt his stomach drop. Of all the random outposts to spot and pick to land at, they had to pick an American one.

"Couldn't hear you!" Shade had to shout back, half because of the engines still, and half due to having his face shoved into the dirt.

"Then listen better!" There wasn't a chance for Shade to snark back before he was hefted up to his feet and dragged off even further away from the aircraft. Now outside of the dust cloud, he could see the many armed troops that were surrounding his aircraft with rifles aimed at it, ready to fire. "Over here, asshole." He was pushed forward and shoved into a chair, and the soldier came around front and pulled Shade's shemagh down to reveal his face. "Alright, who the fuck are you and where the fuck did you come from?"

Not a soldier, but a Marine, based on the uniform, equipment, and language that Shade's interrogator was using. "Russia, or Georgia, depends on who you ask really." That was clearly the wrong answer, as Shade was quickly doubled over when the Marine planted a fist into his gut.

"You don't sound like a damn Ruskie… so try again."

"Is that what your mum told your dad when they made you? 'Try again?'" Shade said reflexively, earning another fist, this time to his wounded side. "Ah fuck!"

The Marine straightened up and cracked his fists, "Apart from the pilots, were you the only one on board?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Shade said, looking up with a smirk. The Marine frowned, sighed, and wound back to hit him again.

"Haverson! Cut that shit out right now!" A strong voice called out from the side, and both men turned to look at another pair of Marines approaching them. "Is he from that helo?"

"Yes sir, but he's being uncooperative." Haverson replied, dropping his fist.

"Is that what you say about all of your failed dates?" Shade couldn't resist getting the last word in, and to his surprise the second Marine failed to cover a laugh.

"Dude, you just got burned by a fucking prisoner."

"Enough, Jackson… Haverson, go back and get your team together to search that helo. I'll talk with our guest." The Marine commander said, and Haverson nodded before shooting Shade one last glare. Shade snorted and looked up at the officer.

"Frat boy didn't get his Gatorade fix, I take it?" The question took the commander by surprise, but he shook it off.

"I apologise for Lance Corporal Haverson's actions, but you were being somewhat of an asshole."

"Don't sweat it," Shade said with a shrug, "not the worst thing that's happened today… probably deserved some of that, actually…"
The commander nodded, then took a glance at the tilt rotor as it began to shut down. "Forgive me if I'm repeating an earlier question, but who else is on board?"

"Total of ten of us: two aircrew, eight wounded including me, all ranging from 'only lightly wounded' to 'seven shades of fucked up'. Hope you have a few good medics here." Shade answered flatly, "I'll give you the full story soon, but I just need my guys to be brought back from nearly-dead first… that something you can do?"

Authors' Notes:

(Spitfire)

So Dash gets a hell of a break, and Shade ruffles some feathers. Meanwhile Rook's getting taken care of and the future of the other wounded (Ghost, Roach, Ozone, and Toad) remains to be seen. Chemo needs a nap, Archer probably needs to chill (honesty there's no telling with him), and Dash finds some friendly faces and gets all the gossip.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Not gonna lie, it's too perfect for them to have encountered Shade's old unit. But hell, it works. I just wanted an excuse to bring them into the fold. I'm sure it won't just be on Dash's side that they'll encounter some very helpful allies in the future. They need all the friends they can get right now…

Not much else I can say about this here… so until next time!
Dash found the remaining three members of her team seated around a conference room table with a series of maps and lists laid out in front of them. Nikolai was talking on a satellite phone with one hand while writing on a notepad with his other, as MacTavish and Price studied one map in particular.

"Rook's out of theatre," she said as she walked up, setting a small cardboard cradle holding a set of coffee cups down between her and them, "and Hangman showed me where the coffee maker was." She snatched her own and let out an appreciative sigh after taking a sip. "Oh my god, I've needed this so badly…"

MacTavish chuckled at her as he took his own, "We all have… I take it that this Hangman is one of our newfound allies?"

"Mhm," Dash answered with a nod, cocking her head in thought, "You know, who would've thought that of all the potential forces that might operate in this region, we'd find a unit where one of us came from."

Price looked up from a map to look at Dash, a little puzzled by her statement, "I thought Rook was SASR, not a Commando."

"No, these are Shade's guys. Hangman was actually promoted to fill Shade's slot after his transfer last year," she clarified, pulling up a chair. "Between him and another old friend of his, a guy called Jaffa, I've got maybe two years worth of blackmail material on him now." Dash glanced down at the maps and frowned a little in confusion. "So… what's all this for?"

"It's where Shepherd's more than likely hiding, Site Hotel Bravo," MacTavish answered, turning a map around for Dash to see better. "It was originally constructed as a forward operations base for our task force, but when we realised that Makarov was centered more towards Europe and western Russia, Shepherd pulled the pin on finishing it out."

Price snorted, "Looking at this latest satellite imagery provided by the intel office here, Shepherd had the site finished and fitted out… plenty of men in black there."

Dash nodded, inspecting the map closely, "So this is where we'll find Shepherd then? What's the plan? I see a few good approaches…" she leaned over the table a bit to get a look at the plans the Captains had started to make. She looked up after a few seconds of silence, and saw them both exchange a look. "… what, what is it?"

MacTavish rubbed his face, "Dash, while I appreciate your enthusiasm, I don't want you on this op."

Dash narrowed her eyes at him, "You want me to stay back. You want me to stay here and sit on my ass and do nothing? While the two of you go, all alone, with no backup, to hunt down a General of the United States Army." She stated plainly, clearly far from understanding.

"Yes," Price answered just as plainly, crossing his arms for effect.

"Dash," MacTavish jumped in before the pair could come to blows, "I know that you want a piece of him as much as any of us do, but this'll be a one way trip. There's going to be no exfil."

She frowned at the two captains, "You think I fuckin' care about that? The team's gone. My family is gone now, thanks to that bastard. Ya damn right I want a piece of him!"
"And if he kills the three of us, there'll be nobody left to take him down," Price pointed out, "You can still play a part in this even if we fail. You and Rook. That's the other reason."

"Shepherd's still likely got his men out on the hunt, I don't know if he's just got it out for us or for the entire unit; the assault teams and our supporting staff. We need someone back here who can run damage control, maybe even turn this thing around on him." MacTavish said, coming around the table to rest a hand on her shoulder, "I trust that you can do this for us. Besides, someone needs to keep Rook company as he recovers, and keep him safe."

Dash was silent for a long moment before growling in frustration, "This is bullshit."

"Welcome to the real world…" Price muttered grimly.

"So?" Shade stood up from his waiting spot outside of the outpost's large medical tent, walking to where Chemo had just exited.

"I was expecting a few more jokes regarding the Air Force, to be honest," the medic said as he peeled off a pair of gloves, rubbing his face once they were off. "They're working on Toad now, he should become a lot more stable once they're finished. Ozone's improving slowly too. The pair of them just needed a fresh set of hands and a few more units of blood in them to keep them going."

"What about Roach and the El-Tee?"

Chemo shook his head, "Nothing much else we can do for them out here. They both need a proper hospital for their injuries."

Shade frowned and rubbed the back of his neck, "Fair enough… can't win 'em all now, can we…"

"How're we doing for other supplies?"

"Well," Shade began, beckoning for Chemo to follow, "I spoke with the outpost commander, Captain Miller, and they're going to see what they can do for us regarding food, water, ammo and other basic medical supplies. Fuel's the main concern though."

"That's no surprise," Chemo said, letting Shade enter the outpost command and control structure first, "I'm a little bit surprised we got guys out this way."

"Yeah," Shade said with a nod, "While a lot of the forces got recalled after the invasion broke out, their higher ups decided it would be prudent to keep at least one finger in the pie over here. These guys are a reconnaissance battalion from the Fourth Marine Division." Shade continued ahead for a few steps before realising that Chemo had stopped dead in his tracks. "Chem, you 'right mate?"

"Fourth Recon Battalion?" The medic questioned, a disbelieving look on his face forming.

"That's what Miller said… why, what's up?" Chemo started to laugh to himself, his volume starting to grow steadily to the point where he had to sit down against a wall. "Chem, what the fuck?"

"Dude, this is Dash's home unit." The medic said as he started to contain himself, wiping a tear from his face. "Oh my god, the fucking odds…"

"No fucking way," Shade said, coming to terms with this new piece of information, "You cannot be bloody serious…"

"As serious as a sucking chest wound, Shade," Chemo responded as he picked himself back up, "I'm
surprised you didn't remember yourself."

"I knew she was Recon, just didn't remember which one," the Aussie defended, the pair resuming their walk, "You can't expect me to remember her exact posting now, do you? I don't remember what squadron you came from, only that you're from AFSOC. Scarecrow's from Delta, which is super-fucking-secret anyway, and Robot's from the SAS. Anything more than that is just a detail, as far as I'm concerned."

"Shit, would've thought you'd know just a little bit more about your girlfriend's history."

"My what now?!!" Shade said with barely a shout, "Do I need to see if you've been self-medicating mate? Because you're high on something if you think that we're an item…"

Chemo shook his head, "Dude, you and Dash… not the world's best kept secret. And that whole 'sneaky final words' thing you two did before we left for this shitshow? Come on, give us some damn credit." The medic laughed and patted Shade on the back, "If you ask me, it's about damn time anyway."

"Excuse me?!

"You two were awfully chummy after that snatch and grab in Monaco, plus that small 'fake dake' thing you went out on just before this all began?" Chemo pointed out, "Pretty sure the entire Task Force is in on the betting pool at this point."

Shade could only sputter and stammer in response as the pair reached their destination, a small room set aside for the Marines to pass the time in. It was somewhat reminiscent of their own base's rec room, but just with plywood walls and ceiling, and far less comfortable. Scarecrow, Robot and Archer were all seated with a group of Marines that were off-duty, and the entire group seemed to be chatting rather animatedly.

"The Navy docs are working on our boys right now, but at this stage it'll all upwards from here," Chemo said as he and Shade joined the group.

"Finally, some good news," Archer spoke up. Shade had noted that the sniper had been rather quiet throughout the entire ordeal, and had been a near-constant fixture at Toad's side, "Any idea on what to do from now?"

Shade shook his head, "Not as yet. Captain Miller's working with his guys and trying to scrounge up an option for us. They've got enough supplies for us, but fuel's the main concern."

"We do keep an aviation fuel reserve on base, but we save that for the CASEVAC flights that come out here, as they're generally close to fumes by the time they reach us," one of the Marines, a female First Sergeant with the name of 'Robins' on her utility uniform, spoke up. "I could have a word with the Captain. Just depends on how much you have in the tank right now and how much you need."

"I'll have to see where Gale's disappeared to, in that case." Shade nodded appreciatively.

"Shade," Robot interjected, "We, uh… still no word, right?" He asked after a moment's hesitation. The table grew silent as his question sunk in with the Task Force members.

"... no, still nothing yet mate."

"How many of you were there, exactly?" Another Marine, this one named Burnett, asked.

"Twelve in our team to begin with, though that's been slowly whittled away to a grand total of…"
what, three active members now?” Chemo answered unsurely, "Archer was attached to us for the op, so that's four if you include him."

The last Marine, a rather solid man with an air of calm that followed him and the name of Ortolano spoke up, "You've definitely taken quite the hit, in that case…"

Shade nodded, "That's an understatement, but when your target is the Devil himself, what else do you expect?” He shook his head, "Makarov's been the goal for this unit since day one, and we were so close…" Shade looked up as he noted the three Marines stiffen at the mention of Makarov.

"You're after that Russian dick?” Robins said lowly, barely restrained anger lacing her voice. She calmed down once Ortolano rested a hand on her shoulder.

"We lost a number of our own in that detonation all those years ago,” he explained.

"Including PFC Jackson's older brother," Burnett added, "Kid joined up just to avenge him, so he told me."

Shade chuckled darkly, "Well, he can get in fucking line… half of our team, including our Captain, went dark in Afghanistan the same time our own damn General turned up to wipe us out." The Marines all winced in sympathy, "So we don't even know if they're alive or not, and if so, they have no idea that we're alive. All we have is the charred remains of our SATCOM set, and no-one to transfer crypto over."

"I can take a look," Burnett said, catching the attention of all the Task Force operators, "I mean, there's no guarantee I can actually get it working, but there's no harm in trying…"

Shade and the others shared a look, and with a careful hand, he handed over the half-melted SATCOM handset over to the Marine, who frowned when he took it into his grasp. "Give us a shout if you have any luck, alright?"

"You'll be the first to know," Burnett responded, giving the Australian a reassuring smile.

"Hey, if you don't mind me prying," Robins jumped in with a smirk, "but what were you and the Doc here stammering about when you were walking in?"

"... what's it matter to you?" Shade shot back defensively, causing Robins to smirk more.

"Shade's just a little more wound up because his new girlfriend is on the other half of the team,” Chemo answered gently, nudging Shade's shoulder with his own. Both Robot and Archer shared a glance, then Robot chuckled as Archer fished out a pencil and notepad to write up an IOU.

"Girlfriend?” Robins questioned, quite surprised by the admission. Shade opened his mouth to argue the point but Scarecrow beat him to it.

"She's the only female member of the Task Force's assault teams, but she's more than earned her place with us. Shade here had a few issues, but she beat it out of him both figuratively and literally…"

"Thanks 'Crow, really feelin' the love here…"

"And I think that op you two pulled with Roach and Ozone in Monaco really turned things around.” Scarecrow finished, looking over towards the Marines. "Dash has him around his finger at this point." At this detail, the three perked up.
"This 'Dash' you speak of… she's short, rather feisty, really quick on her feet, but absolute trash with an M4?" Robins questioned, leaning towards Scarecrow.

"That's her alright," Shade answered, smiling genuinely for the first time in ages, "But she's mean with a sub-gun and shotty. Not to mention how'll she's able to tear you down verbally too. Gave that target in Monaco quite a run for his money a number of times." Beside him, Chemo was doing his best to conceal a shit-eating grin.

"So that's where Myers went after she transferred out," Ortolano mused out loud, "She did say she got picked up by a Tier One group, but MARSOC hadn't opened roles up to women at that point in time."

"We all thought she'd jumped over to Force Recon instead," Burnett added, "guess that wasn't the case…"

"Wait… wait a second," Robins spoked up, catching everyone's attention, "that means that… Bec…" the realisation that she had come to now hit everyone, and the table fell silent.

"Not yet," Shade said after a few moments, "As far as I'm concerned, she's still alive. Until I can physically see and touch her body and confirm it myself, she's alive."

"Sergeant Williams!" Shade turned around to look at the doorway to the rec room, where Captain Miller had just entered, "A word with you and your team. I think we've got something for you."

Dash sat quietly, watching over the sleeping form of Rook as he recovered from his recently completed surgery. The medics at this base had done wonders, patching up the most serious of his wounds despite the rather shoddy field medicine her and the others had performed. It'd been an hour after he'd been brought out, which was an hour after the revelation that she'd been sidelined once again from a mission.

"You know… I can hear you beating yourself up despite the anesthetics…" Rook croaked softly, catching her attention. His voice was rough from disuse, and she stood up to retrieve a cup of water that was on his bedside. "That's twice you've pulled my ass out of the fire now."

"And twice I've saved a member of my family," she responded, helping him sit up a bit so he could drink, "How you feelin', man?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck after running a full marathon in full kit, after two back-to-back crucible runs…" he said with a dry chuckle, "but I'm still alive, so I can't complain…"

Dash nodded, pressing the cup into his hand, "I hear that… 's been a rough day."

"Rough is having to put up with Meat's crazy conspiracy theories while waiting for a target that never arrives…" Rook shot with a roll of his eyes, "Today is well beyond rough… I think even FUBAR is selling it short…"

"Got a point there," Dash agreed with a sigh.

"Hey… where the hell are we? I mean, there's a distinct lack of shackles and chains, or men in black uniforms guarding the doorway…" Rook asked after a few moments.

"No shit… we're being guarded by the Commandos? Might as well surrender now…” Rook said with a smirk.

Dash chuckled with him, "No shit."

Rook sighed and leant back into his pillows, "Nah, they're alright. I mean, they've gotten us SASR guys out of a tight spot once or twice. Much like the Army Rangers. We're better at sneaking around and making things go bump in the night; they're better at storming the castle and poking bears three time the size of them. Probably explains why Shade's such a cheeky bastard, now that I say that out loud… hey, where's the bossman and his boss?"

Dash sighed and leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms, "Planning for an op. They're goin' after Shepherd."

"Right… reckon they can dig up a pair of crutches for me? Or at least take one on my behalf and shove it up his ass?"

She gave a wry smile, "I'll take it up with them 'fore they head out." Rook frowned at her.

"Wait, you ain't going with?"

"Tav sidelined me for this one…” She answered, casting her eyes down at the floor, "It's a one-way trip apparently."

Rook nodded in understanding, "Ah… guess that makes sense… they do have the element of surprise though, if Shepherd thinks we're all dead. What does that mean for us though?"

"I don't know… We still don't have contact with the others, getting back to the States is risky… Honestly I think all we can do is lay low…"

Rook sighed and moved to fold his arms across his chest, but stopped and winced as it pulled on his freshly stitched wounds, "Bad move… and to be honest, laying low sounds like the best option. Besides, we're not far from Dubai, right? I hear it can be a party town if you look in the right places."

Dash faked a smile for him, "Yeah man, soon as you're up and around we'll go looking for those places."

"That's the spirit," Rook said with a laugh that turned into a yawn, "Ugh… I only just woke up and yet I feel like I could sleep for a damn week…"

"You rest up, man," Dash nodded at him and stood, "I'm gonna go find the gym. Or a track. Or somethin'..."

"Jeez Dash," Rook said as he laid back down, shaking his head mockingly at her, "Why don't you practise what you preach and get some rest too. You've earned it, for fuck's sake." He finished with a chuckle as Dash simply flipped him off in response. "Love you too!"

Shade and Captain Miller stood to the side of the helipad, watching as a team of Corpsman and Marines loaded the four wounded men back into the Osprey. Gale and NJ were standing with a few other Marines as they worked on filling the fuel tanks to the brim. They'd been at the camp for quite some time now, and the light was beginning to fade.

"You sure you can't stay the night?" Captain Miller asked for what felt like the tenth time to Shade. "It'll give your men more time to rest and recover."
"I appreciate the offer, but the longer we're here, the easier it'll be for General Shepherd to trace us and take us all out. Not saying that I don't trust you, but I can't risk it either. We don't know who he has in his pocket, or what other assets he'll bring to bear," Shade said politely, "I can't thank you enough for what you've done for us already…"

"Doesn't matter what flag we're under, we all gotta watch out for one another," Miller started, turning to face Shade and offering his hand, "If it means that you finally manage to pin that asshole Makarov to the wall and make him pay, then I'll gladly do it again. You be safe out there."

"No need to tell me that twice, sir," Shade shook the officer's hand firmly with a smile.

"Sergeant," Burnett spoke up as he approached the two men with a newish-looking SATCOM handset in hand. "I don't know what kind of tech you have access to, but be sure to start sharing it around soon. The encryption software on that set you gave me was nothing like I've seen before." He handed over the new handset to Shade with a triumphant smile, "I got everything I could swapped over: frequencies, presets, encoding and decoding matrices… all that it needs is to have the receiving handset active."

"And that's the million dollar question… what good is only one end of the link," Shade remarked dryly. "Better than nothing, I guess."

"You have that list of frequencies as well as the navigation plan for your pilot from Lieutenant Salt, right?"

"Yeah," Shade said, looking over to Gale for a second, "No sooner had I got them, I handed them off to our pilot. You sure we've got the fuel for this?"

"We're giving you as much as you can load, and then some. As long as you're on the right frequency by the time you're feet wet, you'll make it to your destination." Miller reassured, "Lieutenant Salt has a knack for these kinds of things, and it's something I trust him with all the way."

"Let's hope this all goes to plan then…" Shade said, "Again, thank you… and hopefully you and your guys get home soon and in one piece, sir."

"If it's all the same with you Sergeant, I'd rather be out here and not get shot at, then be back at home and getting shot at…" Captain Miller said, then shook his head, "Can't believe I'd ever say anything like that."

"The world's gone crazy, what can I say?" Shade shot back as he made his way towards the aircraft. "Gale! Let's get this show moving, a'ight!" The pilot shot Shade a thumbs up as the Marines disconnected the fuel hose. With everyone else on board, the doors closed and Gale fired up the engines.

Captain Miller and the rest of the Fourth Recon Battalion watched as the MV-22 slowly rose and started its long journey southward, all of them wishing the men on board the luck they needed to get to Dubai safe and sound.

Authors' Notes:

(Shade)

Going to have to play with time and fuel physics for a bit. There's a reason why I never specified the exact location of 4th Recon's FOB, as it's too much mucking around to make sure
that both the safehouse and Al Minhad are within a 's maximum range. I mean, realistically, they'd barely get to Kuwait (one way), but you gotta play with these things for the sake of plot… so yeah.

It's looking like the reunion of our two characters is looming… that'll be fun to write.

Until next time!

(Spitfire)

Dash has been sidelined again. She's not happy about that, not one bit. Rook's ok, so is everyone on Shade's side of things, things are starting to calm down for our poor exhausted teams. Uh… That's all I got lol

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Dash had managed to catch a relatively decent sleep, all but passing out once her head hit the pillow after she called it for the night. The days events had caught up to her: the mission, the firefight, the exfil, the tense flight out and over to this base, the subsequent ‘informal questioning’, being sidelined by MacTavish and Price, and her brief conversation with a wounded but recovering Rook, not to mention the rather quick session in the gym to release the remnants of her fading adrenaline and growing stress.

She almost wanted to fly out and murder Shepherd right then and there when a quick check of her watch showed she’d only slept for four hours.

Try as she might, she couldn’t bring herself to sleep anymore, so with a heavy sigh she swung herself out of bed and changed into a spare uniform that one of Major General White’s female officers had loaned her. She opted to forgo the blouse, keeping to her undershirt and a set of Desert Auscam-print combat pants she left the barracks and made her way over to the base’s still open mess hall and recreation facilities. She smirked to herself as she realised that Shade would likely suffer a mild heart attack if she saw her wearing an Australian uniform.

It didn’t take long for her to secure a small snack for herself: a fresh coffee and a couple of small chocolate and coconut coated sponge cakes that were called ‘Lamingtons’, if the small label on the packet was any indication, and she headed from the mess into the rec room. She was surprised to find a few of the Commandos still awake, Hangman included.

“Oh hey,” he called out as he noticed her arrival, “What dragged you back into existence?”

“No idea man,” Dash responded wearily, still shaking off the tails of her fatigue. She took a long sip from the coffee and sighed as she took a place beside Hangman and relaxed back into the couch, “First half-decent sleep I get in over a day and it’s barely four hours…”

“We all know that tune,” Hangman offered sympathetically. He pointed out the three other Commandos that were seated around them, all focused on the sporting match on the TV in front of them, “Dash, meet Dove, Jezza and Ninja.” The three turned their attention towards Dash at the mention of their names, “Guys, this is Dash. She’s on the team that Shade got recruited to.”

Dove and Ninja nodded in acknowledgement while Jezza made a noncommittal grunt before focusing back on the game. “Rather accommodating group, aren’t they…” she muttered quietly to Hangman, who chuckled in response.

“Can’t blame ’em. It’s Collingwood versus the Bulldogs in the footy. Rule one about the footy: if Collingwood is playing, a-”

“Always support the other team,” Dash smirked, noting the surprise on Hangman’s face. “Not the first time I’ve seen a ‘footy’ match. Shade’s given me the standard brief.”

“He’s taught you well,” Hangman nodded approvingly, to which Dash snorted.

“Doesn’t mean I really care though. It’s all the same to me, regardless of where or who plays it,” she
shrugged, “You have one bunch of burly guys trying to carry a ball from one end of a field to another, with another bunch of burly guys trying to stop them. Occasionally someone gets hurt, occasionally a fight breaks out.”

“Then why do you watch it?” Dove asked, looking at Dash as if she’d grown a second and third head.

“Why do people watch NASCAR?” She smirked as she sipped from her coffee. “For the crashes.” Dash received a few chuckles from the guys as they all agreed with her remark, before settling into relative silence as the game continued on. They got into the last ten minutes of the final quarter when a soldier burst into the room.

“Lynch, gather your team, we’ve got another interception.” The Commando and his fellow men all groaned in dismay while Dash perked up. “They’re about an hour out, it’s a rotor wing they picked up over the gulf.”

Dash turned to Hangman, “How many times does this happen?”

“Intercepts are actually surprisingly common: generally though it’s a local civilian transport that’s gotten lost on our side of the no-fly-zone, aid workers that stay a little too far off their registered flight plan, or a bunch of hot shot contractors that have no regard for the rules.” Hangman answered flatly as they all made their way to the armoury. “Eight times out of ten, the fighters just guide them back out and it’s all said and done. Suspicious aircraft are brought back here, like you were.”

“And you all gear up for the landing?”

“Don’t know who or what is onboard,” Jezza spoke up from behind Dash, “Rather be safe than sorry, y’know?”

“Stiles said it was a rotor wing, so it’s probably some contractor or some shit like that,” Dove added, smirking. “They think they’re top shit, but they pull their heads in when we roll up in the Bushies and armed to the teeth.”

“Sounds like you enjoy that kind of thing,” Dash shot over her shoulder.

“Nothin’ like putting a righteous bastard in his place,” Dove responded.

“Jason Statham.”

Archer shook his head with a smirk, looking down at the drugged up Ozone, who was laying down on a stretcher across from him. “Statham? Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Ozone said, fixing Archer with his best ‘serious’ expression, “I mean, you’re all ghillied and masked up, nobody would really know that it’s him.”

“But you really think a guy like him will take a role where he isn’t kicking absolutely everyone’s ass?” Scarecrow spoke up from two seats down. “You’d be better off with Gerard Butler, he could pull off Archer better than Statham.”

“How’s that?” Archer questioned, legitimately curious.

“Well, you both can play the part of the ‘grumpy bastard’ perfectly.”

Shade shook his head at the mindless discussion, prompted by Ozone’s mention of selling their story
for movie rights. The man had woken up from his state halfway through the flight, and his painkiller high-induced ramblings provided the team a moment to finally take their minds off of survival and onto much more important things.

Such as which A-list movie actors would portray each member of their team.

Shade stood up from his seat as the discussion devolved into a petty debate over who was the better action actor, and made his way into the cockpit. He glanced at a panel that indicated the time, then looked over to the GPS display.

“Alright,” Shade said with a heavy breath, tapping NJ on the shoulder as the co-pilot tuned in one of the radios to one of the frequencies that Lieutenant Salt had given them back at the Marine observation post, “here’s hoping that this works…”

With the radio set, NJ flashed a thumbs up to both Gale and Shade, and with a nod Gale keyed his mic. “Radio check, how copy?” There were a few moments of tense silence, and Gale began to contemplate getting NJ to switch to another frequency before there was a response.

“Unidentified broadcaster, you are on a restricted radio frequency.” To both Gale and Shade’s surprise, the voice was that of an Australian woman, “Please cease and desist from using this frequency.”

“Sorry,” Gale said reflexively to both NJ’ and Shade’s amusement, “Callsign is Dingo Two-One. We’ve sustained casualties, looking for flight following and assistance to the nearest friendly airfield… how copy.”

“…Wait one, Dingo Two-One,” the speaker replied after another tense silence.

“Two-One, standing by… hey, can I get a callsign to call for you?” Gake asked.

“Two-One, this is Wedgetail Five-One. I need you to switch to One-Five-Seven point Seven, and wait for contact.” NJ switched over the new frequency as requested, and together the three men waited for a sign of life over the radio.

“Dingo Two-One, do you copy?” The new voice spoke over the radio.

“Dingo,” Gale responded, stealing a glance at Shade who shrugged, “here with you.”

“Dingo, squawk four-five-zero-two and state aircraft type.” The next few minutes of chatter between Gale and a controller on a patrolling E-7A Wedgetail AEW&C aircraft consisted of a lot of navigation instructions as well as identification. No sooner had they complied with the directions, did they hear the dull whine of jet engines on either side of them. To their combined amusement and surprise, they saw they were being escorted by a pair of F/A-18Fs.

“Gettin’ the royal treatment,” Shade remarked as Gale flicked the navigation lights from dull to bright in a silent acknowledgement of the escorting aircraft’s arrival.

“Dingo Two-One, this is Ford One-One, off your port side. We will be escorting you across the gulf to home plate, please report your fuel state.”

“Ford, this is Dingo, we’re at… four thousand pounds of gas. Probably enough for another twenty minutes of steady flight at this rate.”

“Understood Dingo, stand by.” The fighter pilot went silent for a few minutes, though the delay felt like hours to them. “Dingo, when possible, climb to flight level fifteen thousand feet and maintain
“Speed two-two-zero knots.”

“Shit… that’s near our max speed…” NJ pointed out as Gale responded and put the aircraft into a climb.

“Copy that Ford, moving to fifteen thousand and two-two-zero… what’s the game plan?”

“You’ll be meeting with our tanker, Caltex Nine, and they’ll give you the fuel you need to get to our home plate.”

“Understood Ford, what’s their ETA?” Gale asked as he maximised the fuel consumption display on one of the MFD screens.

“Ten minutes, Caltex is our tanker; type KC-30A with a hose fitting from the boom extension.”

Gale and NJ exchanged a look, something that Shade didn’t miss. “… why don’t I like the sound of that?”

“Shade,” Gale said as he looked back, “get everything that is loose and tie it down super secure, then get strapped in… it’s going to get very bumpy soon.”

Shade nodded and turned around, quickly going through the cargo bay of the Osprey to make sure that the stretchers and the wounded laying on them were all strapped in firmly, then informed the others to take their seats, strap themselves in and hold on.

“All good to go Gale!” Shade called out as the sound of the tanker aircraft in the distance slowly grew louder. The ten minutes passed fairly quickly, and Shade could see from his seat the large tanker aircraft filling most of the Osprey’s cockpit windows. The turbulence from the KC-30A knocked the tilt rotor around a substantial amount, but Gale was nothing if determined, and he managed to maintain some sense of stability as they connected and began refueling.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for the Osprey to receive the necessary amount of fuel needed for the rest of the journey, and the turbulence faded away once they were clear of the tanker aircraft. When it felt safe, Shade disconnected himself from his seat and made his way back up to the cockpit. “How’d it go boys?”

“Pretty hairy, if you ask me,” Gale began as he wiped his sweat-covered brow, “they must’ve had flaps down two or three notches as to avoid stalling. We were going fast for us, but really slow for them… to be honest, we’d’ve been better tanking off of a C-130 Hercules or other prop-based platform.”

“Desperate times, desperate measures.” NJ remarked with a dry laugh, to which Shade chuckled at too.

“Don’t we bloody know it, the last day has been nothing but desperate times…” he said with a shake of his head, “So what… another half hour or so to this base?”

“Probably closer to an hour, but yeah…” Gale answered as he glanced at the GPS, “We’re almost there… just this last stretch and we’re free.”

Dash stood beside Hangman as the pair watched the remaining Commandos of his squad form a defensive line, the helipad that the incoming aircraft had been instructed to land at now surrounded
on all sides by armed personnel and vehicles.

“Feels weird to be on the other end, doesn’t it,” Hangman remarked to Dash with a chuckle. She nodded her head in agreement.

“Got that right… not gonna lie, but I feel just as anxious as I did when we got here.” She commented, “I mean, it’s probably nothing, but there’s a small part of me that thinks that these are more of Shepherd’s men.”

Hangman shook his head, “Doubt it. Aside from our initial information request to get you lot identified, we haven’t had any comms with the main American chain of command. They likely know jack shit about your presence here.”

“Stranger things have happened, Jamie…” Dash shot back quietly, folding her arms over her chest and leaning against the front of the parked Bushmaster they had arrived in.

Jamie went to speak up but was cut off by a transmission in his headset, and he stepped away to listen in properly. The sight bugged Dash a little, as she wanted to be in the loop and be fully aware of what was going on. Standing on the sidelines was doing very little to ease her slowly growing anxiety and stress.

The man returned after what felt like minutes with a small smile on his face, “They’ve made landfall now, probably another five to ten minutes before they’re visual, depending on how fast they are.”

“Right… know what kind of bird it is?” Dash asked, quietly dreading the answer. ‘Please not a Pave Low, please not a Pave Low…’

“I’m not quite sure what you guys call ‘em, but they’re those fancy ass aircraft that can turn from airplane to helicopter and back. Two huge rotors on them, I think your Marine Corps operates them a lot.”

‘What?’ Dash froze up for a second, and voiced her thoughts. “What… wait, a tilt-rotor? Like an Osprey?”

Hangman clicked his fingers and nodded his head, “Yeah, an Osprey. Knew it was some kind of bird name… our fighters ID’ed it as an Osprey. They had to tank up over the Gulf before finishing the flight… wait, is that bad news for you?”

“I…” Dash started before hesitating, buttoning down the rising feeling of hope before it took hold. She didn’t want to get too optimistic only to have it crushed by a false alarm, “… don’t know. I don’t think Shepherd uses the Ospreys, but who knows…”

“Hmm… well, we’ll find out soon enough… hey, I think I see it… they must be pushing it through if they got here that fast…” The pair watched, along with the other troops on the ground, as the MV-22 Osprey closed in on the airfield in the distance. It was flying fairly low, and didn’t show any signs of slowing down as it grew closer and closer.

Dash’s heart stopped as the aircraft flew right past them and banked into a turn, her mind instantly recognising the markings all over its body. She watched with wide eyes as it turned around, slowed down and began it’s landing, touching down and coming to a complete stop thirty meters away on the helipad. From this distance, she could see a pair of vaguely familiar aircrew helmets through the cockpit glass.

“Pilot! Shut down your engines, lower your ramp and open all of your doors, or we will fire upon you!” Jamie’s shout through his megaphone cut through her shock, and they all watched and waited
as the rotors slowed their spinning while both the rear cargo ramp and the right side entrance opened up. “Good! To any passengers on board, remain in your seats or we will fire upon you. We will come and escort you off shortly!”

Hangman lowered the megaphone and stole a glance at Dash, who was fixated on the parked MV-22 Osprey in front of her. He reached up to his vest and keyed the microphone on his headset. “Jezza, Dove: take ‘em.” From the side of the pad, a group of four Commandos approached the Osprey with rifles up and ready to fire.

Shade sat waiting tensely with his hands resting on his legs in clear view, looking over to the other conscious members of his team. Everyone barring Chemo was copying his posture; the medic standing between the mounted stretchers to keep an eye on the wounded. Gale and NJ were still seated in the cockpit, with their helmets off and hands resting on top of the instrument panel at Shade’s urging.

It was a bit of a shock to them all when they touched down and were met with a large welcoming party, with weapons aimed at them ready to fire. It was also a mild shock to hear the calm but authoritative voice of an Australian soldier over a loudspeaker, though Shade couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d heard that voice somewhere before.

“Passengers, we’re coming in! Do not move, do not speak unless spoken to, do not look at us unless we tell you to! Understood!?” A shout from the side doorway caught Shade’s attention, and as everyone else dropped their gaze to the steel floor of the Osprey, he glanced at the doorway across him to his left and saw the end of a gunbarrel poking through.

“Loud and clear!” He called back, lowering his head down like the others. There was a muttered order and then they listened to the sound of footsteps making their way up the short stairwell, followed by boots on steel as the first of the search party entered the cargo hold proper. Shade felt a tap on his shoulder, as he was the closest to the door barring Gale and NJ up front. “You, lift your head up. Name, rank and serial.”

Shade took a quick breath and looked up at his ‘captor’, for lack of a better word. “Williams, Tom. Sergeant, One-One-Four-Seven-Two-Two-Four.” His captor nodded and moved on to Scarecrow, who went through the same questions. It took a few minutes for everyone to be questioned while the wounded were assessed by a pair of medics that were ushered on board, then the soldier that spoke to Shade first returned to him.

“On your feet, face the front and put your hands behind your back,” Shade complied with the instructions and was quickly restrained by a set of cable tie handcuffs, an item that he’d used to cuff many people with but never as the one being cuffed. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed that the others in his party were going through the same treatment. “Alright, you’re going to walk down that ramp at the end and out of this aircraft slowly. Once clear, you’ll follow the others out. Any sudden movements and the guys outside won’t hesitate to light you up.”

“Got it: slow and steady,” Shade repeated to assure his guard that he understood, “Sooner I’m out of this bird, the sooner I can get into a fresh set of clothes…”

Dash watched anxiously as the first group emerged from around the back of the Osprey: four pairs of Commandos carrying a stretcher each, accompanied by a medic. From this distance, she couldn’t recognise who was being carried underneath all the bandages, shreds of clothing and blankets that were wrapped around them. As they were rushed to a line of waiting ambulances, she did catch a glimpse of a black balaclava before that particular stretcher was carried out of sight.
Her attention returned to the small group that emerged after them, a Commando escorting each of the passengers and crew. Her heart leapt into her throat when she recognised the faces of Chemo, Archer and Scarecrow, all up the front. Without thought, she started walking away from Hangman and over towards the pad.

“Hey,” Jamie began stepping out to cut her off, but she leant out of the way and avoided his grasp, breaking out into a jog, “Wait!”

Dash continued out and past the front line of guards, closing the distance rapidly. Past Scarecrow she saw Gale and NJ in their battered flight suits, and behind them was Robot, being assisted by a Commando with an arm around his shoulders. And just past him…

“Shades!” She all but cried out, sprinting past the rest of her team to their shock and confusion. Shade’s eyes lit up at the sight of her, but any words that he had were cut off as Dash all but tackled him onto the hard helipad tarmac, arms wrapped tightly around him and head buried into the crook of his neck.

“Fuckin… Dash?” Shade managed to say as he caught his breath, mildly winded by the surprise tackle hug. “Fuck me… we crashed. We crashed, died, and I’m now dreaming or some shit…”

Dash picked herself up and waited for Shade to be helped back to his feet before delivering a swift and firm punch into his left arm. “You asshole! That’s for making me think you were dead!” She shouted out loudly despite only being a foot away. Both Shade and his escort flinched at her volume.

“If you’ll allow me,” he prompted, holding up a pair of small wire clippers. It took a second to comprehend what the guard meant, but Shade quickly held his hands back for the guard to cut away the cuffs.

“Not my fault we lost co-” Shade’s retort was interrupted by the sensation of dry, chapped and desperate lips pressed against his equally worn and cracked ones. Yet, despite that, it felt right.

If Dash or Shade noticed the rest of their team hooting and hollering in celebration, they didn’t notice it as they were lost in their little world: Dash’s arms locked firmly around the back of Shade’s neck, tugging him down towards her for better reach. The pair exchanged a long and drawn out kiss that was months worth of slowly pent up emotions in the making, brought to light by the looming end of the civilised world as they knew it, and finally ignited with the passion that only a narrow escape from death could provide.

Dash was the first to pull away, only enough to separate her lips from his. Their foreheads were still touching, and her eyes locked with Shade’s as his fluttered open. She chuckled softly at his bewildered expression, “That’s for coming back to me in one piece…”

Their little moment was interrupted by Shade’s guard, who tapped him on the shoulder. “If you’ll allow me,” he prompted, holding up a pair of small wire clippers. It took a second to comprehend what the guard meant, but Shade quickly held his hands back for the guard to cut away the cuffs.

Shade rubbed his wrists where the plastic had been tight against his skin, then wasted no time in wrapping his arms around her. Dash froze up for a second, hesitating a moment before hugging him back. She felt… good. No. She’d felt good riding her horse, she felt good when she ran, when she exercised, fought, won. This wasn’t good. This was home. She squeezed just a little harder before letting go and stepping back to look at him… and then to the side were the rest of the team were still standing, watching them with barely contained smiles and grins.

“Nice to see where your priorities lie!” Robot called out cheekily, breaking the moment as he and the others approached, Dash finally letting go of Shade to embrace the rest of their team.
“Goddamn… it’s so good to see you guys…” she said, wiping the beginnings of tears from her eyes, “I thought that Shepherd had gotten to y’all…”

“He’s going to regret it,” Chemo said bluntly, his dark tone striking a chord with the others, “We’ll get him.”

“Where’s the bossman and the rest of your element?” Shade asked, nudging Dash’s side.

“The captains are someplace in that building over there still plotting their revenge, most likely,” Dash answered, hesitating before looking at both Shade and Chemo, “Rook… he got hit in the extraction. We got him patched up the best we could with what we had, but he was barely hanging onto life when we got here.” She took a quick breath and continued before the others could begin panicking, “He’s resting over in the infirmary, woke up a little while ago actually… he’ll be overjoyed to see you.”

The guys relaxed slightly, and Robot sent Chemo a knowing look. The medic sighed and spoke up, “He’ll have company soon enough.”

Dash fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, “I saw the stretchers… who-”

“Ghost and Roach were shot at point blank by Shepherd with his forty-four magnum, then were badly burned when Shadow Company tried to dispose of them,” Chemo began, and Dash gripped Shade’s hand tightly for comfort, “We got to them in time…Ozone’s taken an absolute beating, he was touch and go at one point. Toad was badly banged up not as seriously as the others… the rest of us are walking wounded.”

“So… we’re all here… we haven’t lost anyone?” Dash asked hopefully.

Scarecrow shrugged, rolling his shoulders, “For the time being, yeah…”

“I don’t know about you guys,” Shade spoke up, “But the sooner I get away from this bloody aircraft, out of this uniform, and into some air conditioned comfort, the better.”

The group chuckled at Shade’s remark, the guys that had been on the Osprey with him voicing their agreement to Dash’s amusement. “Let’s get you all inside, I’m sure MacTavish and Price’ll be happy to see you.”

Authors’ Notes:

(Spitfire)

Whelp. That happened. As Shade put it in our ‘outline’: “THE MOMENT WE’VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR- A big damn kiss” lol. That was long awaited huh? Thirty-nine chapters of sweet slow burn. Well next up we got the Caps heading for Hotel Bravo, and the team just wanting to go home.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

Well, they’re all back together now! We’ve reunited the big, wounded, tired, beaten, vengeful, relieved family. I couldn’t bring myself to kill anyone off, I love everyone too much to do
that… I’m not against bringing them to the very edge of death…

Anyway, the fam’s back and is taking a well earned and much deserved breather. I don’t have much else to say… Until next time!
Note from Shade:

I am sooooo sorry this took a long time to come out. A combination of factors are to blame for this: busy work situations, a severe case of writer’s block for future chapters (we try not to upload until we’ve nearly completed two chapters in advance, and I’m not breaking that rule), slightly waining interest (but re-invigorated, so don’t panic), growing interests in other fandoms and areas, and the release of Ace Combat 7 (the week and a half after release, I got zero writing done).

I’ll try my best to not leave you all in the lurch again. But I do make no promises. Uni is looming on the horizon now, so I’ll try to make the most of my free time while I have it.

Anyway, enough from me. Onto the (long awaited) chapter!

Dash was not jealous. Simple fact. Plain truth.

Maybe a bit miffed, perhaps slightly disgruntled, a touch annoyed, or even a little upset.

But jealous? No.

She hadn’t spent upwards of twenty four hours separated from her newly realized and recently returned boyfriend only to have him whisked away by his former squadmates after he’d been caught up in a string of checks, debriefs and meetings with both the Australian Army’s staff and with Captain MacTavish.

Maybe she wanted to spend some time with him to catch up, unwind and just relax with him by her side in the same manner they had before this shitshow of a mission, or even like they had with their little mock date a couple of months ago.

… okay, maybe she was a little jealous. But she was loath to admit it, and maybe a little annoyed at herself for it. This was his team after all, they were close, and she hadn’t seen them since he left for the Task Force. So she shoved the jealously down, beat it with a stick, and let Shade enjoy catching up with his old team. There would be plenty of time to relax and de stress later. They had to get home of course, and the flight would be long.

“When was the last time you slept?” A voice to her right startled her, and she turned around to see Chemo standing beside her with a small smirk on his face.

“Define ‘sleep’, Chem,” she answered, rolling her eyes at his question. Not even back for a day and already he was mother henning.

“Longer than six hours uninterrupted,” he shot back, folding his arms over his chest.

“I could ask you the same…” she replied steadily, “You look like you’ve been on back-to-back
Crucibles.

Chemo chuckled, shaking his head in amusement, “Honestly, I’d prefer that over what we’ve been through… seriously though, how’re you holding up?”

Dash sighed, crossing her arms, “Well before now, I thought you all were dead so… all things considered I’ve been better… You?”

Chemo nodded, “Until now we didn’t know what the hell happened to you guys… What’d the docs say about Rook?”

“He’ll be fine,” Dash answered, “It wasn’t as bad as the first time I saved his ass apparently, but shit man, I don’t know how you do it…” she closed her eyes against the memory of her hands covered in Rook’s blood.

Chemo rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder, sensing her discomfort, “You did a good job. The fact that he’s still alive is testament to that.”

Dash sighed and dropped her arms, rubbing at her hand, thumb pressing into her palm, “Yeah… I’m gonna go find where Shade ran off to… Don’t get too caught up with the wounded, these guys know what they’re doing, get yourself some rest.” She didn’t wait for an answer before walking off.

Chemo watched her leave, shaking his head slowly as she disappeared from sight.

She found him in the rec room, chatting and laughing with Hangman, Dove, and Jezza. Dash plopped down on the open space next to Shade. She attempted to catch up to the story Dove was telling before giving up and just sitting back and leaning against Shade’s side. She didn’t miss how he shifted, and then lifted his arm up to rest around her shoulders and pull her in closer to him.

“... seen Mikey’s face when the MP’s spoke up behind him. No amount of cammie paint would’ve masked how pale he went,” Dove finished, looking over to their new arrival. He shot a wink to her, then looked back at his teammates, “Yo, I just remembered that the boss wanted to see us real soon.”

Hangman frowned while Jezza shook his head in bemusement, “Mate, we just saw the boss like half an hour ago…”

“Yeah,” Dove said, stealing a sideways glance at Dash and Shade, “and he asked to see us again real soon…”

“No, he did-” Hangman began to protest before Jezza smacked him in the arm, “What the fuck was that- oh , yeah, I remember now…” he said as it dawned on him. He looked over to Shade and smiled, “We’ll finish this catch up later.”

The three Commandos left the room, leaving Shade and Dash by themselves in the room. “It’s reassuring that Hang’s just as socially clueless now as he was before I left,” Shade spoke up after a few moments silence. “I’d’ve thought that being bumped up to squad leader and to Sergeant would’ve fixed that…”

Dash chuckled, “I dunno, maybe he has his moments. But is it really that surprising? I mean look at Meat. He’s just as clueless if not moreso.”

Shade shrugged in agreement, “Yeah, true that…” he trailed off, then without warning pulled Dash across with both arms to have her sit across his lap, wrapping his arms around her in a tight hug. “It feels so good to be back… you have no idea how much…” he half-whispered, half-murmured into her ear as he held her close.
Dash’s first instinct was to fight the hold, she wasn’t one for affection or cuddling, but this… she needed this right now, so she let her head rest on his shoulder and nodded, “I feel like it’s all kind of just… setting in now…”

“What: the fact that we’ve been betrayed; that we were almost killed; or that we cheated death once more?” Shade asked quietly, loosening his hold a little.

“All of it,” she muttered, “Just… God, Shades you shoulda seen Rook… I don’t know how he held on long as he did.”

“You know just as well as I do how much of a stubborn prick he can be, when he puts his mind to it…” he said with a dry chuckle, “almost like a certain someone I know…”

That made her chuckle, almost a full genuine laugh, and it felt better, “Yeah…” She sighed and picked her head up and moved off of his lap to sit beside him again, still leaning into his side.

“I spoke to Mac earlier, before I got ambushed by the boys,” Shade began after a few moments of comfortable silence, “He gave me the rundown of what happened on your end of things, as well as what’s next. He wants us to head back stateside and spread the word of what happened.”

Dash nodded, “Yeah… I know. He and Price were still planning it all when I caught up with them… One-way trip my ass… Only way that’s a one way trip is if they lose, right? So the fuck does he think he’s doing going in without back-up?”

“Well, the only other way it’s one way is if we don’t do our job,” Shade answered. When Dash looked at him blankly, he continued, “Shepherd might have the DSM with all the data we downloaded… but we brought back a few duffle bags worth of physical intel plus a large number of hard drives. Sure: going and hunting down a Lieutenant General is practically suicide, but if we can prove that Shepherd wasn’t as loyal as he claimed to be…”

She huffed a sigh, “Yeah.. It just… I dunno, it feels like he doesn’t trust us, or himself, or something equally stupid.”

“You do remember what happened to MacTavish the last time he went after a major HVT? Zahkaev? He lost his entire squad, if what I read in both the media and online is correct.” He rubbed his face, trying to keep himself awake as he started to feel the fatigue start to set in. “I wouldn’t put it past him to think that he’s avoiding the same outcome this time around.”

Dash considered it a moment, “I still don’t like it…”

“We don’t have to like it,” Shade shrugged, “I don’t like it, you don’t like it, I’m sure the others won’t like it when they hear of it… hell, I can guarantee that if Ghost was awake and hearing of this, you’d hear him all the way across town with just how much he wouldn’t like it.”

She chuckled and smiled at the thought, “Yeah… I wonder how the boys back home are… if Shepherd sent guys after them too…”

Shade didn’t respond to her remark, not sure exactly how to process that thought. He had hopes that Shepherd wouldn’t dare go after someone who clearly couldn’t defend themselves and posed no threat, but he also wasn’t sure if him clearing house was limited to just their team, or to the entire Task Force itself. “If he has… then Mac and Price better bring back his head on a pike.”

Dash nodded, “… Any idea how we’re getting back home? It’s not exactly running distance…”

“Nothing’s confirmed just yet, but we might be getting a first class ticket back on a Globemaster,
courtesy of Thirty-Six Squadron,” Shade responded, “That General White, he said to MacTavish and Price that he’d look after us since our own guys won’t. The only problem I can see with it is getting a RAAF flight into heavily defended US airspace. I mean, a lot of the fighting was confined to the eastern coast of the US, but I don’t think the USAF will let us just fly right in.”

“They might if they hear we have wounded and don’t know anything about what happened with Shepherd,” Dash shrugged, “It’s a long shot, honestly, I’m not sure what the plan is there, but… well… we’re the One Four One, and Hotel on top of that, we always find a way.”

Shade nodded in agreement, then slowly smirked at her, “Fuckin’ ‘Plan S’ strikes again.”

She smirked back, and nodded, “At least it never fails.”

The pair settled back into a comfortable silence once more, and Shade adjusted himself on the couch so that he was laying down with his head on Dash’s legs. The events of the last day or two had finally caught up to the tired man, and Dash could see that he was fading fast.

“Hey,” Shade spoke up from where his head was using her lap as a cushion, “I’ve got a message to pass on to you by the way. A few, actually.”

“Yeah?” She asked curiously as she absent-mindedly carded her fingers through his hair.

“Yeah… Robins says to ‘kick some Army ass’, and Captain Miller just told me to tell you to ‘stay frosty’.”

That gave her pause, “The hell did you run into Fourth Recon?” She demanded curiously.

Shade shrugged, “Pure luck, I suppose. We were in Iraq, I think, and we were getting low of fuel. Gale and NJ touched us down at a pretty remote but well fortified and equipped outpost or camp somewhere in the middle of nowhere, and low and behold we meet a group of Marines.”

She chuckled and shook her head, “Damn… I run into your old squad and you run into mine? What kind of luck is that? I take it Ortolano got promoted to my slot?”

“Honestly, I didn’t ask… we were kinda running the clock and only stopped to get some fuel, rest up a little, and have some actual medics give Chemo and Archer a hand with stabilising and treating the others. Might’ve only been there a few hours, tops. Your mate, Burnett, I think… he salvaged Ghost’s SATCOM set and transferred the crypto over to a new unit. Just never got the chance to try and hail you. And it was Miller that gave us the location and frequencies that the guys here work on. You can thank them for getting us here, because we’d be probably in the middle of bloody nowhere right now if we didn’t find them.”

“Fair enough,” Dash nodded, “Burney was always a tech junkie, figures he’d fix up the radio without having the qualifications.”

“Yeah… he was goin’ on about how primo our kit is,” Shade continued on, eyes shut as he rested, “He only got it back to me just before we departed. Must’ve taken him all the time we had to get it set up. Remind me once all this shit is settled to send him a carton of beer or something.”

She nodded with a smile and yawned, “Yeah…” everything was catching up to her now: everyone was safe, that she knew of; things were finally calming down; they had a plan and they were going home soon. Dash was brought out of her musing by a soft snore from her lap, where Shade had finally succumbed to his fatigue and fallen asleep.

She chuckled quietly and let her head fall back against the cushion of the couch, it seemed she
wouldn’t be moving for quite some time, so she might as well nap while she was stuck there.

Another day passed, with the men and woman of Hotel Team waiting somewhat anxiously for any indication that Shepherd might’ve known that they were still alive. As the time flew on though, and with no news on their rogue General, their focus shifted over to the defense of their home.

“The Russians are withdrawing,” Scarecrow said as he stood at the end of the table of the mess where the rest of the team, those who could walk around freely at least, were gathered, “We know that EMP that Price pulled a few days ago practically stopped the invasion, right? Our boys took advantage of that and have pushed them all back now.”

“That’s the first piece of good news I’ve heard all week,” Robot said as he set down his can of soft drink.

“It gets better: all of the capital cities across the entire eastern coastline are reporting that they’re clear of any major Russian threats. There are a few stragglers, of course, but for the most part we’re looking clear. The Canadian Forces have also sent down infantry and air power to bolster our numbers as well as interdict any fleeing Russian forces before they get out of range,” Scarecrow continued, “Not to mention that the remaining Russian fleet that transported that force has now got to take a really wide berth around Western Europe to avoid getting shelled by the Brits and Norwegians.”

“I thought the British Government said that they weren’t getting involved,” Shade pointed out. Robot chuckled and shook his head in response.

“That’s what they said… though nothing’s stopping them from their patrol boats and aircraft engaging in a purely defensive manner,” he pointed out with heavy emphasis, “something which I’m sure a lot of sailors and airmen will claim in a heartbeat.”

“After the whole airport fiasco I thought more people would be on the Russians’ side, to be honest,” Dash admitted, leaning back in her seat with her bottom lip between her teeth.

“And a lot of governments were, up until the CIA willingly gave up their information about Allen and his operation the day before the invasion. Sure, nobody believed them initially, but doubt started to grow when other nations noticed that the Russians mobilised forces to strike well before the information was published. Everyone criticized them as governments do all the time, but were smart enough to stay out of the fight,” Scarecrow admitted as he finally sat down, “Even President Vorshevsky finally admitted that while he wanted vengeance, launching the invasion was a clear mistake that will weigh heavy on his heart and has since called a ceasefire.”

Dash nodded thoughtfully, “So now we’re just fighting the Ultranationalists who only follow Makarov’s orders… and Shepherd’s men if they ever find us…”

“And that’s another problem entirely,” Scarecrow spoke up once more, “After Vorshevsky’s statement, the party and military has fractured into two halves: those who want no more war and are loyal to the President, and those who see him as a coward and are following after Zakhaev’s protege Makarov.”

Archer chuckled from his place up the far end of the table, “Bloody hell… now we’ve got Separatist-Ultranationalists and Loyalist-Ultranationalists, on top of the already Loyalist Russian forces that were already fighting against the Ultras? Fuck me.”

“Hell of a mess we’re caught up in…” Chemo commented tiredly, on what had to be his fifth cup of
coffee that day.

The doors of the mess hall opened and the members of the team looked up to see Price and MacTavish enter and head directly towards them. MacTavish was greeted warmly by his team and Price received a few halfhearted ‘hello, sir’s.

“So… Captain,” Robot said, addressing MacTavish, “What do we do now? I mean…. with Shepherd still out for our blood, and Makarov’s whole civil war.. we’re kind of caught between an unstoppable force and an immovable object…”

Both Captains looked at Dash. She sighed at their combined looks and stood, “Price and MacTavish are going to Site Hotel Bravo to hunt down Shepherd. It’s a one way trip, Nikolai will drop them off. The rest of us are going home, where we will present the evidence against Shepherd collected by the safe house team and clear our names so that we can focus on Makarov.” She took a breath and steeled herself, “And with both of them gone and Ghost out of action for the foreseeable future… there is a gap in Hotel’s leadership… and as the highest ranking among those of us who are capable, it falls to me. As the next highest ranking, Archer, you’re my second, welcome to Hotel I guess.”

“No problem,” Archer nodded understandingly, “whatever you need, consider it done.”

She gave him an appreciative nod, then looked over the rest of the assembled team, “Questions?”

Shade looked around at the team as they all sat silently, and shrugged when no-one spoke up, “Guess not… at least, I’ve got nothing.”

“Alright… the RAAF will get us back to HQ, but from there we’re on our own. I don’t know what’s going on back home. I don’t know if Shepherd sent men after the other teams or turned them against us, so we’re basically going in blind. We’re well past Plan S here.” Dash sat down, “It’s a tough situation… to say the least.”

“No kidding,” Rook muttered, catching a small glare from Shade.

“If there’s nothing else left to discuss,” Captain MacTavish spoke up as he stepped in, “I recommend everyone rest up as best they can. From what General White told me, our wounded should be stable and ready for transport by mid-morning tomorrow. After that, it’s about a twenty-hour flight back, so by the time you touch down… well…” he trailed off, leaving the most likely outcome of his and Price’s own mission unsaid.

The implication left the team in a sullen silence, an uneasy feeling settling in their stomachs.

Dash shook her head, “You’re Captain Mac-fucking-Tavish. You killed Zakhaev, you formed this team, you pulled off some of the most impossible operations to date. And Price? If even a fraction of what Roach said about you is true… The two of you won’t fail. You’ll kill Shepherd, and make some fucking dramatic getaway with your lives, in true One-Four-One fashion. Because that’s what you do.”

At that moment, Major General White and a pair of his advisory staff entered the room and made their way to the group of soldiers gathered at the table, “If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” the officer spoke up, waiting for the pair of Captains to nod their approval, “Right… there’s been a slight hitch in the plan. We can spare an aircraft for you without any issues, but we don’t have a full aircrew on hand to fly you for another few days. The pilot that we had slotted for this mission has fallen ill, and our other pilots are either already tasked for other flights or are on a mandatory rest period as they’ve reached their hourly limit.”
MacTavish, Dash, Shade and Price shared a look, before all looking at the end of the table where Gale and NJ were seated. “Oi mate,” Shade spoke up, catching the attention of the Aussie pilot, “You’re fixed-wing qualified, right?”

“Shit yeah,” Gale answered, sitting up in his seat, “First posting was with Thirty Seven Squadron flying the Hercs before they transferred me over to the Army’s One-Seventy-Third to fly the Blackhawks.”

General White turned to look at the pilot, “You have any time on the Globemasters?”

“I’ve got a few hours,” Gale smirked back, “besides, they’re basically the same as an airliner. All you gotta worry about is the take-off and landing. Autopilot handles the rest of it.”

“Looks like we have our pilot,” MacTavish said, catching everyone else’s attention, “was that all you had to tell us, sir?”

“No, but this is the better news. I’ve received word from our chief medical officer that all of your wounded are stabilised and safe for transport. Say the word and I’ll have our teams prep them all for transport.”

MacTavish looked at Dash expectantly. Reluctantly, she nodded, and the Captain then focused on Archer and Chemo. “Arch, Chemo; go with the General and supervise the preparations for everyone. Get familiar with the equipment they’re being hooked up to, just in case something happens during the flight.”

“Sir,” the both echoed before standing up from the table.

“The rest of you, start gathering your gear and belongings. It’s time we get moving.” MacTavish, Price and Dash watched as the rest of the team began to rise (or wheel away, in Rook’s case) from the table and out of the mess hall. Once it was just the three of them, not including the Australian officer and his assistants, the Captain turned to look back at Dash. “Dash, from the day we recruited you into the unit, I’ve always thought that you’d make an excellent team leader.”

Dash’s shoulders dropped, “Y’don’t just get given the master sergeant rank. Gotta apply for it, take a test, whole shebang. Doesn’t mean I ever wanted to be in charge. ‘Specially when someone else could do it better.”

MacTavish smiled sympathetically and pat her on the arm reassuringly, “I can’t think of anyone else better for the job. You get our guys home safe, alright? Consider it an order if you have to.”

She nodded, “We’ll take care of things on our end. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Good, because I’ve got enough to worry about…” the Captain shook his head ruefully, “Good luck out there.”

Authors’ Notes

(Shade)

Homeward bound, I say! Ugh, this was a bit of a slog to get through, but we’re getting into the slightly more intense stuff next round. No hints just yet, but we’ll say all won’t be well when they finally get home… heh heh heh.
All from me for now, until next time!

(Spitfire)

Dash takes command, she’s not particularly excited about that, but she’ll get the job done right. Shade’s got her back in any case. So much for Gale getting a break lol although to be fair I think he’d probably feel weird riding instead of flying, so it works out. Next chapter: home sweet fuckin’ home (or is it <_<).

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Square One

It’s very normal for someone to experience a sense of unease, to feel a certain kind of dread, when heading into a situation that they know very little or completely nothing about. It’s actually a chemical response in the lead up to the body activating its survival centres, the ‘fight or flight’ reaction, in preparation to react to a perceived threat. The heart beats faster, lungs work harder to extract fresh oxygen, the adrenal glands secrete epinephrine into the body which in turns slows down digestion, dilates blood vessels and stimulates muscles into a ‘ready’ state much like a coiled spring.

All this happens in a near instant, and generally fades after a threat has been addressed and dealt with, or when the threat no longer exists. Depending on the situation at hand, that ‘fight or flight’ state could last anywhere between ten seconds to five minutes.

For the nine conscious members of Hotel Team aboard the C-17 Globemaster III as it crossed through American skies to Task Force Headquarters, they’d been in that hyper-aroused ‘fight or flight’ state from the second the wheels left the ground of Al Minhad Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, fifteen hours ago.

They’d tried alternating between keeping watch and sleeping the best they could, but the longest anyone could ever truly sleep for was just under an hour. Conversations were very short-lived, because despite the wired state that everyone was in, nobody was completely and fully alert. Everyone was a dangerous mix of fatigued and anxious, even for those that typically showed calm under fire.

Even Gale and NJ, who at least had the welcome distraction of monitoring air traffic communications and had the task of keeping the aircraft flying, were feeling jumpy. Occasionally, a controller they would be talking to would go silent or hesitate for too long, and one of them had to keep the other from manually taking control of the aircraft to dive below radar coverage on the off chance they were being followed.

Back in the massive and mostly empty cargo hold, the team were going through their own little activities to try and keep them somewhat sane yet distracted: Shade and Dash rested on a pair of camping stretchers that the ground crew had packed for them to use; the Australian going through what was now the tenth complete disassembly of his rifle and sidearm, while Dash sat on the end of hers with her vest in her hands, leg bouncing away as she repacked her ammo and utility pouches for the fifth time.

Chemo and Archer kept themselves busy by keeping a watchful eye on the sleeping and comatose forms for Ghost, Roach, Ozone, and Toad. Each of the wounded men were hooked up to all kinds of machines, from respirators and heart rate monitors to IV and IO drips feeding them a mixture of blood, antibiotics and painkillers.

Rook, Robot, and Scarecrow were occupying themselves tossing cards at one of their helmets, set on the bench across from where they were sitting as a ‘goal’. Their celebrations whenever one of them landed a card into the helmet were minor and didn’t last long until the next man’s turn. There were cards littered all across the floor and benches, cards flying and arching in unexpected ways. Once they had gone through the deck they argued almost half-heartedly about who had to go pick up the cards before deciding that the one with the fewest ‘points’ had to.

Rifle reassembled, Shade set it down to rest against the stretcher before swivelling around to lay down, rolling his head to the side to study Dash as she wrestled with a rather stubborn twelve-gauge shell pouch. “Reckon they made it? I mean, they said they were leaving just after we were…” He
posed, eyes now looking up at the cargo bay ceiling and the dim fluorescent lights fitted along its length.

Dash was silent a long moment, considering the question, the weight of it bearing down, “Shepherd’s dead. I’m sure of it.” She said finally as she slipped the shells into place.

“It doesn’t make me a bad person to hope they did it slowly, right?” He rested his arms behind his head and sighed, “Would’ve been too kind to do it quickly…”

“I dunno,” Dash sighed, “With our luck if they did it slow he’d get away somehow… it’s what the bastard deserves, but I dunno.”

She looked around at the team spread around the bay. Archer was sitting with Toad, who was still under sedation apparently. Chemo was flitting between all the wounded like a hummingbird on energy drink-or a medic on anxiety-checking over everyone again and again. Robot had just sat down again from picking up the cards and was now splitting them between himself, Rook, and Scarecrow. She could hear the hushed voices of Gale and NJ in the cockpit, keeping conversation, keeping each other from submitting to their anxieties.

Her next breath was heavy, “The sooner we touch down at home base the better…” there was a long pause of silence, Dash bouncing her knee quickly in response to the constant flood of adrenaline from the anxiety, “I’m gonna go see how much longer we got…” she said quickly as she snapped to her feet and immediately started towards the cockpit.

“This place looks like a ghost town…” Gale remarked as they taxied the large cargo aircraft from the runway over to the apron where the One-Four-One’s own transports were usually parked. On a regular day, the tarmac was covered in all kinds of planes and helicopters, however today only a select handful of aircraft remained: a pair of C-130 Hercules, three MH-60 Pavehawks, and two MH-53 Pave Lows sat parked across the wide apron. The blacked out hangars and minimal lighting of the surroundings just added to the sense of unease.

“There was an invasion,” NJ pointed out, “our crews probably got seconded to the regular forces to assist with transport and logistics, both for our guys and everyone else…”

“I know, I know…” Gale rubbed his face as the brought the Globemaster to a halt outside of a seemingly empty hangar, “I’m just not used to seeing this place so empty… no ground handlers, the tower was silent…” he shook his head as he and NJ began the shutdown sequence.

Down in the cargo bay, Chemo and Archer finished preparing their four wounded for transport off of the aircraft. Everyone else, barring Rook as he was still confined to his wheelchair, had their gear back on and weapons loaded and locked. Shade and Dash sent a nod over to Scarecrow and Robot, the pair staying back with the others while she and Shade left the safety of the aircraft first to see if they could either find some help or get some transport to move their wounded.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Shade said quietly as the pair walked down the front stairwell of the C-17, weapons lowered but ready to use if needed.

“You and me both Shades, you and me both,” Dash responded, her eyes and head on a swivel, watching out for anyone and anything. “Come on, let’s see if there’s something in the hangar to use…”

The Aussie nodded and followed behind her, raising his rifle as they approached the large open hangar in front of them, weapon lights and handheld flashlights lit and sweeping across the open
spaces inside. Together, the pair cleared out the few nearby hangars that were open relatively quickly. Shade, in his clearance of one hangar further down the apron, found an unlocked transport truck, the keys hidden behind the sunshade above the steering wheel. “Yo, D!” He called out, his voice echoing through the large space, “We got wheels!”

“Fire it up and get it over to the jet,” she called back, making her way over to the vehicle and climbing up into the rear cargo bed. Shade nodded and started the engine, then slowly pulled out and drove the truck out to the rear of the C-17. As they pulled up, they had noticed that Gale had dropped the rear ramp, and that NJ and Robot were standing on the ground pulling security. Dash hopped out just before Shade pulled up, walking over to her teammates. “Are we all set?”

“Chem’s got the guys ready to roll, though Ozone’s beginning to stir.” Robot reported, looking over his shoulder and up the ramp. “We’re not sure if it’s voluntary or not, but Chem said the sooner we get to the infirmary, the better.”

“Agreed… Shades, back the truck up so the end is at the ramp.” She called out, and Shade held a thumbs up out of the driver window in acknowledgement before he started to swing the truck around. “Robot, go grab Scarecrow and get him to give us a hand. NJ, find Gale and get him down here once he’s finished shutting down the jet. You two can start loading the bags of intel that Shade’s guys grabbed from the safehouse.”

“Hey guys?” Rook called as he wheeled himself over, his rifle resting in his lap.

“Yeah?” Dash responded, looking over to him.

“We were expecting a welcome party, right?” He asked, pointing out to a small convoy of Humvees that were speeding out to where they were standing on the tarmac.

“Damn, alright. Here’s hoping it’s not Shadow Company. And if it’s our guys…. here’s hoping they’re still our guys,” Dash took a steadying breath as NJ and Gale reappeared on the ramp, each with two duffle bags over their shoulders, “Alright load up! We got company! Make sure your weapons are locked and safe, we don’t wanna give ‘em a reason to shoot at us. Gale, NJ, you’re unarmed, drop the bags by the truck and stay in the plane. Chemo, get the wounded down here. Even if they’re not exactly friendly they can’t possibly say no to treating them. Weapons low but ready, if it’s Shadow Company we can’t let them catch us off guard.”

The team all acknowledged by flicking the safeties of their weapons off, eyes fixed on the approaching vehicles as they all tensed up in anticipation of a fight. She watched them get closer and closer, trying to see if she could recognize any of the people hanging off the sides of the vehicles in the dim light.

On a hunch, Dash fished out a small compack flashlight she kept tucked away in a small pouch on her vest and held it up by her head in a reverse grip. With a steady breath, she clicked it on and off in a controlled set of flashes that the Task Force used as a non-verbal way of identification.

The breath she was holding escaped when the headlights on the lead vehicle returned the same series of flashes just before it pulled up twenty meters in front of them. The relief was short lived however, as the men riding along the side rails of the vehicles dismounted and approached them all with weapons raised.

“Don’t move Dash!” The familiar voice of India Team’s second-in-command, Exxon, had her and the rest of the team pause in a mixture of concern and confusion.

“What’s going on Exxon?” She called out, looking to see other members of India team approach the
remnants of her own.

“Just don’t move, that goes for the rest of you!” He called out, and Dash looked behind her to see the other members of Hotel stand still on the ramp, hands resting on weapons but not making any moves. “Is that everyone?”

Dash felt the frustration growing inside her, “What do you mean ‘is that everyone’? What are you talking about?”

“Dash, I hate this as much as you do, but please, work with me here. You can start with setting your weapons on the ground slowly.”

“I will, if you tell me what the fuck is-!”

“You’ve been disavowed!” The air around them seemed to go dead as Exxon’s statement sank in. Dash felt her heart drop to her stomach, glancing back at her team then back at Exxon.

“Disavowed…” her voice was nearly a whisper, yet it seemed to carry across the entire aircraft apron.

“Yeah,” Exxon confirmed, possessing enough decency to look sheepish as he approached her with his weapon down. “I shouldn’t actually be sharing this, but there was a kill-on-sight order attached to you and the others…” He paused to let that detail sink in, Dash rubbing her face in disbelief before he continued, “but fuck that order. I didn’t get an official reason, so I figured I’d hear it from you guys before we do anything else.”

“Right,” Dash managed to say, her voice almost betraying just how broken she felt right in that moment, “it’s… fuck, it’s a long story.” She looked up from the ground and into Exxon’s brown eyes. “I’ve gotta ask: is Shadow Company here?”

“Only a small command detachment. They’re the ones who passed on the order on General Shepherd’s behalf.” Exxon confirmed her fears, “So, is all of Hotel here?”

“Yeah, aside from Captain MacTavish and Captain Price,” Dash answered, stealing a glance at the base over Exxon’s shoulder, “and Meat and Royce.”

The team leader noticed where she was looking and caught on, “Those two are under guard, the kill order didn’t extend to them. Look, I promise that I’ll watch your back, but for now you have to play along.”

Dash took a moment to consider her options, then nodded and held her arms out by her sides, head hung low and eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. Exxon nodded and closed the distance to reach forward and unclip her weapon from it’s sling, quickly unloading it and rendering it safe before setting it down to retrieve Dash’s sidearm. The remaining members of Hotel took the hint and also began the process of disarming themselves, placing their unloaded weapons on the ground in front of them.

It only took a few minutes for the survivors of Hotel Team to be restrained and loaded into the vehicles that India Team had driven out in, with Chemo and Poet, India’s medic, working together in the back of the truck that Shade had found to monitor their wounded men as they were transported over to the base infirmary.

Shade let his head rest against the plaster wall of their improvised cell, one of the base’s secure conference rooms. It had been stripped of all of the essentials though, leaving the room barren except
for a few fixtures such as the projector in the ceiling and a secure telephone system in the far corner. The members of the team that could walk and that weren’t in need of immediate medical treatment had been escorted here by a mixed guard made up of their fellow Task Force operators and a handful of Shadow Company soldiers.

It was clearly obvious that their fellow men were doubtful of why they had been disavowed but weren’t in a clear position to contest it or challenge it if the intimidating glares that Shepherd’s ‘goon squad’, as Shade had taken to referring Shadow Company by, were giving them. Though, it was likely that the mere presence of unaffiliate Task Force operators were forcing Shadow Company to ‘behave’ as it were, otherwise Shade and the others would have likely been killed by now.

“They’ve killed him,” Archer said quietly from where he sat against the wall, across from Shade. His voice caught the attention of the others that were resting in the room. “That’s the only reason why we would’ve been disavowed.”

Robot frowned, “But how? If he’s dead, then how could’ve he given the order?”

“It was his dead man’s switch,” Dash chimed in from the corner in the far end of the room, furthest away from the doorway. Shade looked over to where she sat, with her knees pulled in to her chest and head tucked down. “In case he knew he was going to die as a result of his actions being uncovered. Our disavowment meant that even if he went down, he’d take us down with him.”

“Doesn’t fucking surprise me,” Shade said with a loud sigh of dismay, “seems like the kind of thing a prick the likes of him would do. And the evidence we have on him is in his goon’s hands.”

“Actually, NJ and I hid it in the crew baggage compartment of the Globemaster,” Gale jumped in with a cheeky smirk. Dash looked up and frowned at the pair, and Gale waved her off, “Yeah, I know you said toss ‘em in the truck, but I figured we’d need a trump card up our sleeve. Just need a way to get Aphid, Nike, or someone else on our side to get to the goods before Suckmy Cock-any can.” Shade and a handful of the others chuckled at Gale’s own nickname for the mercenaries, while Dash rolled her eyes with a small smile.

The moment was cut short however as the door opened to let a group of Shadow Company men inside. Two of the three were in their full combat attire of tan vests over black utilities with grey helmets and balaclavas. The third was lacking his vest, balaclava and helmet, instead just wearing the utilities and a black beret.

“If it weren’t for your friends in that other team greeting you on the tarmac,” the newcomer began, arms folded behind his back as he surveyed the operators in front of him, “you would all be dead. Now, your current state of being all depends on how well you all cooperate with us.”

The members of Hotel team sat in silence as their captor’s threat hung in the air. Only Dash held her gaze with the man’s eyes, defiant and unwavering. The man scoffed after a few moments and looked back at the group at large. “For now, you’ll all wait here while we figure out what we do with you. If you need the bathroom, just poke your head out and one of these lovely gentlemen will assist you. We aren’t total monsters, after all.”

With a self-satisfied smirk, the man turned around and stepped past the two appointed guards before they followed him outside the room and closed the door behind them.

“Well they seem nice,” Dash commented sarcastically after a few moments of silence, “Back to business… I think I know someone who’d be eager to help, trouble is getting word to him…”

“Who’ve you got in mind?” Scarecrow asked curiously.
“Jay,” The others looked at her with mixed reactions, obviously looking for an explanation, “C’mon is it really a question? He was one of us, he’s one of the most loyal guys we know, if anyone is gonna both believe us and help us it’s him. Once Hotel, always Hotel.”

Shade nodded in agreement, “We could get Jay to spread the word to the others, especially about the intel too. I mean, they might be guarding the bird that we took, but they might not either.”

“If we get Aphid on side, he can get his team to get the rest of who’s still on base to fight off Shadow Co,” Robot suggested, “it’s just a matter of convincing him.”

“We get to Aphid and the others through Jay,” Dash stood up from her place in the corner and moved closer to the others, casting a thoughtful look to where Rook was sat. She smiled at him, a little too sweetly for his liking. “Hey Rook… how’re you feeling?”

It took a few moments for him to catch on, a grimace forming on his face as he began to play along. “I think Chemo’s last batch of meds are wearing off… plus I think my dressings could use a changeover…”

Authors’ Notes

(Spitfire)

The team has arrived home to something they have mixed feelings on. Could’ve been worse. Also could’ve been better. They’ll have to get clever to get out of this one.

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

(Shade)

The team’s back together now, they’re back home, shit has hit the fan and is currently sliding down the walls… just what has Dash planned in that clever head of her’s, huh?

Guess we’ll find out next time!

Until then!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!