Stoic

by SpitfireUSN

Summary

This is a romance between the two snipers: Archer and Toad (major slash(boy x boy) warning, don't like, don't read!). Toad, Archer, and the rest of the 141 are stationed in Afghanistan when the unthinkable happens. (full synopsis inside) Rated for language and possible suggestive themes, rating also subject to change.

Notes

Good day my faithful followers/readers! This is probably the first real slash story I’ve ever written, since those parts in Indestructible don’t count because it’s not supposed to be the main focus… But anyway, yes there is slash, major slash! If you don’t know what slash is it means there’s male x male relationships! Consider yourself warned, if you don’t like the idea of it then don’t read, I don’t want any flames concerning the pairing because it’s two guys! You can be harsh with your reviews if you want, so long as you explain what’s wrong and how I can fix it, otherwise, keep it to yourself please! Enjoy the story! ^_^

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher
~Spitfire out

See the end of the work for more notes
There was a deafening bang as Archer neared the solitary humvee. The vehicle went up in a mix of orange and red flame and Archer was thrown twenty meters back into a brick wall.

“Archer!” Toad called, running toward the unmoving sniper, “Man down, man down!” he called over the radio.

Archer had landed on his stomach after being thrown into the wall. The old wall crumbled a bit from the force of him hitting it but no rubble had fallen from it.

As Toad got close, someone shot at the wall, causing several large chunks to fall. Two landed on Archer’s back and left leg, making the man scream in pain.

Toad looked around quickly, hoping to catch the culprit. He saw a figure retreating from the scene with a rifle that had smoke coming from the muzzle. The figure was dressed in a black robe with a hood covering his head. Taliban… Why did they have to get sent to Afghanistan where the fucking Taliban was…

“Hey! Stop!” he yelled, running after the man.

Toad stopped, not wanting to leave the senior sniper behind. He went back to his injured partner. Archer was groaning loudly in pain as the rubble weighed down on him. Toad carefully pulled the stone chunks off of his partner, rolling the injured man to his back once he was clear of the debris.

“C-Chris-tian…” Archer struggled to get the name out in little more than a pained moan.

That’s how Toad knew that shit had gotten serious, Archer never used names, just call-signs.

“Hang in there, mate! You’re going to be okay, just stay awake!” Toad shouted in a panic.

“Toad!” Jayhawk yelled as he ran up, “Christ… What happened?” he asked, kneeling by Archer.

“IED threw him into the wall, someone shot it and it crumbled on top of him,” Toad said quickly, the panic obvious as his voice trembled.

“Hey, calm down man, he’s gonna be okay,” Jay reassured, sliding the guile suit hood off of Archer’s head.

Archer gave a small smile to Toad. A thick line of blood trickled from the right corner of his mouth.

“Y-yeah, C-Christ-tian… I’m okay…” Archer said quietly, straining to speak at all.

“Yeah, I said you’re going to be okay, not you are,” Jayhawk said, examining the burns on
Archer’s face, “Just take it easy, try to stay awake, mate…”

Archer didn’t say anything after that and Toad restrained himself from panicking as Jay worked. There was a growing pool of blood spreading around Archer and he was looking paler by the second.

“Captain MacTavish,” Jay said into the radio, “we need immediate exfil,” he said quickly, “Archer’s going Red,” he added quietly so that neither sniper would hear the practically damning statement.

Red, short for Code Red. It was only called when someone was in critical condition and had little to no chance of survival.

“To solid copy, do what you can for now, scratch LZ points, we’ll come to you, ETA five mikes,” Tavish responded.

Jayhawk tilted Archer’s head to the side, exposing his neck. He pushed the tip of a syringe through the tight skin and let the pain killers do their job. Then moving to inspect the jagged piece of shrapnel sticking out from below the right side of Archer’s ribs.

“Relax, mate, exfil’s coming, you’re gonna be alright,” Jay said quickly and quietly.

“I… know…” Archer responded weakly, “How’d I get… stuck on EOD… duty anyway…” Archer struggled to speak past the blood, he coughed and a bit of the red liquid came splashing out, “Damn IEDs…”

Archer’s breath was heavy and labored and he was looking paler than could be healthy.

In the five minutes it took for the chopper to arrive, Jay tried to slow the bleeding.

“Just stay awake, Archer,” Jay urged, “You can’t rest yet!”

“I’m… trying…” Archer gasped in pain as Toad and Jay lifted him carefully and moved him into the chopper.

They laid Archer down on the floor of the chopper and the blood continued to spread. Archer could feel the coldness of blood loss consuming him and his eyes slid closed.

Archer forced his eyes open, realizing he wasn’t going to make it back, they were too far from the base and he had already lost too much blood, “Chris,” Archer said weakly, blood streaming from the corner of his mouth, “t-take… t-t-the… shot…” he struggled to say the simple three words as his grip on Toad’s hand weakened.

“Ian! No, you’re gonna be okay, man, wake up! Ian!” Toad shouted as his friend’s eyes slipped closed again.

The snipers had always had a code between them. When the primary sniper was unable to make a shot or missed it, the spotter would take the shot in the primary’s place. To Toad and Archer, ‘Take the shot’, meant ‘Take over I’m finished’.

Toad was leaning over Archer’s still body, gripping the older sniper’s hand tightly, “Ian… wake up, please…” he begged quietly.

Jayhawk and MacTavish exchanged worried glances as Toad struggled to hold back the tears that were threatening to fall.
The rest of the ride was silent aside from Toad’s hopeless urging Archer to wake up.

Somewhere along the way Archer had stopped breathing, causing Toad to panic and, after a little while of Jay’s work that proved uneventful, break, letting the tears trail silently down his face.

Toad didn’t even follow Jayhawk when he took Archer to med-bay. He just walked slowly back to his and Archer’s shared room, avoiding everyone’s glance and attempting no conversation with the guys that greeted him.

The next two months consisted of Toad drowning himself in alcohol, missing shots he should’ve easily hit during practice when he bothered to show up, being slow and unfocused during training, and rarely leaving his room otherwise.

MacTavish got the spare key to the sniper’s room when Toad hadn’t been seen for two days. He found Toad in the room, lying on his bunk, back towards the door, crying silently. He really thought Archer was gone but that was his own fault, he wouldn’t listen to anyone when they tried to talk to him. Couldn’t really blame him though, if it had been him and Ghost, he’d have the same reaction, they were best mates. ‘Tavish closed the door quietly, locking it again, he had to do something.

He thought about it for a minute. Before crashing the first time Archer had spoken to Toad using his first name, no one had bothered to address Toad by either first or last name since Archer was moved to med-bay. He figured it was worth a shot and put the key in his pocket.

He knocked loudly on the door three times, “Christian!” he called, “Open the door mate.”

A few seconds later, the door opened. The look on Toad’s face gave away the fact that he hadn’t slept in days and betrayed the depression he was trying to hide.

“There’s something you need to see,” MacTavish said, motioning for Toad to follow.

Toad did follow, albeit hesitantly. They stopped outside a door in the infirmary. Toad hadn’t been paying much attention. He blamed himself for what happened to Archer, if he had been quicker maybe he’d still be here to tell him to stop fussing and practice.

“We didn’t lose Archer,” MacTavish said, facing the troubled sniper, “we tried to tell you earlier but you weren’t listening to anyone, you barely even tuned into what Ghost was saying during training.” a moment of silence ensued what he said, Toad just stared blankly at the door, not believing that Archer was in the room, “He’s in there… hasn’t woken up in a few weeks, he’s okay.”

Toad was somewhat comforted by the news but wouldn’t believe it until he saw it. MacTavish left, leaving Toad on his own.

He opened the door carefully, stepping inside the small room.

To his disbelief, Toad saw Archer lying on the bed, the steady beeping of a heart rate monitor and the slow and steady rise and fall of his chest told Toad all he wanted to know. He told himself that he’d be there when Ian woke up.

Toad sat down in a chair by the bed. Archer had bandages wrapped around his whole torso, his right shoulder and arm, and the sheet bulged where his left leg had been wrapped. The thin sheet covered him waist down.

Toad couldn’t help blaming himself for what happened. The way Archer looked so weak, Toad had never seen him like this. Of course Archer had been hurt before but never this bad. He
could’ve stopped the Taliban guy, if only he had been more alert, he could’ve noticed the obvious wires of an IED and the suspicious man standing nearby.

Toad was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost didn’t notice Archer’s small groan… almost. Toad stood quickly, gently taking Archer’s left hand in his right.

“Ian!” Toad called happily as Archer slowly blinked his eyes open, “I…uh…I-it’s good to see that you’re okay,” Toad stammered quickly, unreasonably nervous.

“Good to see you too, Christian,” Archer said with a small smile, noticing that Toad was still holding his hand but said nothing of it, “You seem nervous, mate.”

“On the chopper… you don’t remember what you said?” Toad asked; Archer just shook his head, “Y-you told me to… take the shot…” Toad said with a slight tremble in his voice.

“Well, I don’t know what I was thinking but obviously, I wasn’t in my right mind,” Archer said confidently, gently squeezing Toad’s hand as if to give assurance that he was okay.

Toad flushed a little at the gesture, “Y-yeah, I guess…”

“You lost it, didn’t you?” Archer asked knowingly.

Toad sighed in defeat, he couldn’t hide anything from the observant eyes of his mentor, “Yeah… I lost it…”

“I can tell you’ve been losing sleep, Christian,” he pointed out.

“It’s nothing, Ian, don’t worry about it,” Toad said quickly, rubbing his tired eyes with the back of his free hand.

“Chris, I need to know, if something happens to me, that you’ll be able to keep going, without shutting out the world,” Archer said steadily, holding Toad’s gaze, “Promise me you won’t lose yourself again?”

Toad nodded, “I promise, Ian, I won’t lose it again,” he said quietly, knowing the sniper would want to hear him say it instead of just agreeing.

“Good,” Archer said with a swift nod, “Now, you need to get some sleep.”

Toad gave a small smile, “Okay, I will,” Toad answered, hesitant to let go of Archer’s hand, “I’ll… see you later…” he added, still not letting go.

Neither of them wanted to let go of the other’s hand. They both flushed, noticing each other’s hesitation and Toad slowly left the room, leaving Archer to his thoughts.

Now that Toad was gone Archer felt colder. He gave a sigh, somewhat satisfied that at least Toad was going to get some sleep.

When Toad got back to the room it didn’t feel as empty, now that he knew Archer would be coming back.

Toad sat down on his bunk and thought for a bit. His hand felt cold after he let go of Archer’s hand. He wondered if the senior sniper had felt the same way. Toad was soon asleep with these thoughts.

He woke up at 0600. He had to report for training, along with the rest of the task force, before he
could go see Archer.

They were going to run the pit first, “Toad! You’re up!” Ghost yelled.

Toad snapped from parade rest to attention and jogged towards the start after equipping an Intervention and M9.

When the buzzer sounded he took off at a run, shooting every target almost perfectly and reloading quickly as he kept moving.

“Good,” Ghost said when Toad finished, “Looks like you’re back in the game.”

Toad gave a nod and got back on the line. Everyone ran the course and when they were done they moved to sparing drills.

When they finally finished training for the day it was noon. Toad ate and decided he’d wait a bit before seeing Archer, taking a rest in the mean time.

He woke up about an hour later and went to the infirmary to check on his friend.

“Hey, Archer,” Toad greeted as he walked in.

Again, he hadn’t paid attention, just followed the route he knew ‘Tavish had taken to find the room.

“Hey, did Ghost give you hell in training?” Archer responded, he was now sitting up with the sheet at his waist.

“Yeah,” Toad answered with a laugh, “Got my ass kicked by Roach.”

Archer laughed a little, “You never could fight worth a damn,” Archer joked, “How’s your shooting?”

“Same as it was before you got your ass kicked by an IED,” Toad quipped.

“Oh, ouch!” Archer responded with a laugh.

They both laughed for a while. This was a new side of the stoic Archer, he never joked or laughed this much. Toad liked this change though, it was good to see his friend laughing and smiling.

“You’re looking better,” Toad commented when their laughter died down.

“Yeah, doesn’t hurt as bad,” Archer replied, “Might even get out soon,” he added hopefully.

“That’d be good,” Toad responded, standing right next to Archer, subconsciously taking the injured man’s hand in his own.

It felt good to Archer, to be able to feel his friend’s strong hand, he knew the same went for Toad, it was written all over his face.

“Yeah, it would,” Archer said quietly, “What about you? Looking better than you did yesterday.”

Toad gave a small smile, “Yeah, I’m good.”

They were silent for a while. Toad flushed under Archer’s gaze.

“Y’know, mate,” Archer said quietly, “You’re pretty obvious…” Toad flushed a deeper red and
Archer smiled, “Don’t worry mate,” he comforted, gently squeezing Toad’s hand, “I’m taking the shot.”

They both smiled at each other.

“We’ve been partners since we were picked for the 141,” Toad pointed out.

“We were together before we even decided to enlist together,” Archer added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, I remember how we met too,” Toad responded with a small laugh.

“Yeah, so do I,” Archer said fondly.

“You were that one scrawny nerd and I was the jockey prankster,” Toad said, smiling.

“Biggest prank of the year was on me,” Archer continued.

“Girliest fuckin’ scream ever,” Toad laughed.

“Hey! You’d have screamed too if you got bit there! Especially by a damn snake!” Archer defended, laughing as well.

Toad laughed, “Still not sure how I pulled it off. Lucky for you the snake wasn’t poisonous.”

“Yeah but I still hunted your jockey ass down!” Archer replied.

“Who knew a scrawny little nerd could hit so damn hard?” he commented, still laughing, “And it somehow led to us being friends.”

“Yeah, then you got me hooked on air soft. I was the best shot there and you had me teach you how to shoot as well as I could,” Archer continued with a smile, “then we decided to enlist together and both became snipers cause I taught you so well.”

They both laughed at the memory for a while. Doc walked in soon after they had stopped and they quickly let go of each other’s hands.

Doc greeted Toad who responded with a smile. Archer seemed partly annoyed.

Doc tilted Archer’s head to the side a little and injected him with something.

“Toad, while you’re here, you could help me with something,” Doc said after asking Archer a couple questions.

“Sure,” Toad shrugged.

Archer rolled his eyes, “Here we go again…”

“I can’t hold him up, but I need to see how much weight he can put on his left leg. I usually get Jay to do it, but he’s off doing something or another,” Doc explained.

Toad nodded in understanding and positioned himself to help Archer up and to his feet. Toad carefully lifted Archer, careful of his chest and right arm.

Once Archer was up with his weight on Toad and his right foot, he began carefully putting a little weight on his left. When he had almost all of his weight on his left foot it starting hurting and he winced. Toad took the weight he had been putting down.
“Alright, Archer, that’s enough,” Doc said, writing something down on his clipboard, “Another day or two and you should be good to go. Assuming Toad stays with you in case something happens.”

Toad carefully set Archer down on the bed again, smiling at the news that he’d have to stay with Archer at all times. Okay, maybe that was a bit excessive, but still, he’d be there if Archer needed him and he didn’t plan on being anywhere else.

When Archer had gotten situated Doc checked his chest, arm and shoulder, writing things down along the way.

“Alright, everything checks out. In the mean time, Archer, try to get some rest,” Doc suggested as he left the two sharpshooters alone.

Toad instantly took Archer’s left hand again, “What was all that about? Thought after two months you’d be walking,” Toad asked.

“Still waiting for a few fractures to heal, Doc’s been worried about them for some reason,” Archer explained.

Toad sat in the chair next to Archer, still holding his hand.

They stared into each other’s eyes, faces only inches apart, and, without either noticing, getting closer. Their lips brushed before Toad captured Archer’s mouth in his.

Archer, surprised by the sudden and passionate kiss, froze but was quick to return it. Nothing mattered to the two at that moment, the entire task force could be watching and they wouldn’t notice. The only two that existed in that moment were the two snipers. The kiss only ended because they needed a breath. Their foreheads were pressed together.

“I-I should let you…” Toad started but never finished on account of Archer silencing him with another passionate kiss.

“Stay?” Archer asked simply when the kiss ended.

Toad just nodded slowly, their foreheads still pressed together.

“I love you, Ian,” Toad said quietly.

“Love you too, Chris,” Archer responded.

Nothing else was said. Toad soon fell asleep next to Archer. Archer fell asleep soon after.
Here comes chapter two! I know it’s a cheesy chapter title. Also some events in this chapter are mostly pointless and only exist because I felt like messing with the characters. Be aware I may or may not be re-writing all published chapters including ones posted after this.

Archer woke up first, his left arm draped around Toad’s shoulders. He smiled, remembering the events of the previous night. He ran his hand gently through Toad’s reddish brown hair.

Toad woke up and Archer smiled softly at him. They shared a quick kiss before Toad stood and stretched his back.

“How’re you feeling?” Toad asked.

“Never been better,” Archer responded with a smile.

Toad smiled back, “Same here,” he said quietly, sitting down again and taking Archer’s hand in his.

They smiled at each other and shared a kiss. There was a comfortable silence as they stared into each other’s eyes.

“I better go before the others start wondering where I am,” Toad said quietly.

Archer nodded in understanding, but both were reluctant to let go of each other’s hand.

“I’ll see you later, Christian,” Archer said when they finally let go.

“See you,” Toad said as he left.

He headed to the mess hall to get breakfast and then it was training.

Training was insane, as per usual in the 141 base. Toad got his ass kicked in CQC practice. Of course he redeemed himself in target practice, to no one’s surprise. Afterwards he was dismissed. Roach caught up with him on the way to the infirmary.

“Hey, Toad! Where you going, man?” Roach asked.

“To check on Archer,” Toad shrugged and stopped walking.

“So that’s where you’ve been disappearing to now,” Roach responded, “Was wondering after you actually started listening to people, where the hell you went.”

Toad just shrugged in response.

“Man you were messed up. You were that joker then after what happened, haven’t seen you smile until those past two days,” Roach said, “You might as well have been dead!”
“You would’ve been too, bug,” Toad commented sourly.

Toad was anxious to go see Archer but Roach didn’t seem eager to leave. He just stood there, smiling like an idiot.

Toad just rolled his eyes and turned around, only to be met with a bucket of ice water to the face. He didn’t fall or scream out in surprise but he barely flinched back at the coldness. He could hear the laughs of Roach, Meat, and Scarecrow.

“You’re a fucking ice cube man!” Scarecrow laughed.

“Yeah! Why don’t you chill out?” Meat quipped as Toad gave the three a death stare, “Take some time and thaw!” he continued with the jokes, making Roach and Scarecrow laugh harder.

“Dude!” Roach laughed, “That’s so bad it’s funny!”

“Yeah, that’s the point of a bad pun…” Meat said pointedly.

Toad was beyond pissed now, “Why don’t we settle this in hand-to-hand?” Toad suggested but regretted his decision immediately.

‘Hand-to-hand with Meat?! What the bloody hell was I thinking?!’ Toad mentally slapped himself as hard as he could. ‘...I’m starting to sound like Archer...’ He thought to himself randomly.

Roach and Scarecrow laughed harder, “CQC? You? Toad, you can’t fight for shit, but why don’t we?” Meat agreed, “When and where?”

“Right here, right now,” Toad responded, trying to keep his cool as he took up a sparing stance.

Meat smirked and copied the stance before charging at Toad. Toad side stepped and threw a hit at Meat’s back, the attack was blocked when Meat caught Toad’s arm then turned it and forced the punch full-force into Toad’s gut, making him double over. Talk about friendly fire... They both saw an opportunity and went for it; Meat went for a choke-out head lock but Toad saw it coming and countered, putting Meat in the head lock.

There was stunned silence as Toad walked away, back to his room to change clothes; the ones he was wearing were soaked and freezing. It was cold enough as it was, he didn’t need to get sick because of some stupid prank. That would just add on to the list of things he wouldn’t want Archer worrying about.

Toad pulled a clean shirt over his head with a cough, “Great...” he said, talking to himself, “Already sick... Doc’s probably not gonna let me see Archer like this...”

He decided to try anyway and headed out to the infirmary.

He got past Doc and went into Archer’s room.

“We’re done, Toad.” Archer greeted when Toad walked in.

Toad smiled in response and walked over to Archer, sitting down next to him. The snipers took each other’s hands.

“Hey, how’re you feeling?” Toad asked after giving Archer a quick kiss.

“I’m good,” Archer answered happily, “Should ask you the same thing, you look like shit.”

Toad smiled at his friend’s astuteness and chuckled lightly, “I’m okay, some ‘muppets’ decided
Toad smiled at his friend’s astuteness and chuckled lightly, “I’m okay, some ‘muppets’ decided it’d be funny to dump a bucket of ice water on me,” he explained.

Archer gave Toad’s hand a light squeeze, “You feel a little warm… You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, Ian, I’m good,” Toad answered quietly.

They locked eyes and their faces got closer and closer until their lips brushed and Archer captured Toad’s mouth in his, enjoying the feeling of his lover’s slightly feverish lips pressed hard against his.

They refused to break apart. The kiss was searing and passionate.

Archer slowly pulled away, “You need to see Doc,” he said quietly, keeping his forehead pressed against Toad’s.

“Hmm… Why?” Toad asked dreamily.

“You’re sick; I don’t want it to get worse…” Archer answered.

“I’m fine,” Toad reassured with a smile.

“Okay… But at least get some sleep,” Archer conceded.

Toad nodded in agreement and the two shared a quick kiss then pulled away from each other before Doc walked in.

“Toad,” Doc greeted, moving to Archer’s side.

Toad gave a nod of acknowledgment and bit back another cough as Doc looked Archer over.

“When will I be able to get back to work?” Archer asked after a little while.

“That depends on how much weight you can put on your leg,” Doc answered, still checking Archer’s chest, “Other than that, looking good, chest, arm and shoulder have healed up nicely, now let’s see how the leg is. Toad, if you could get Archer up?”

Toad nodded and slid his arm under Archer’s back and lifted him up.

Archer slowly started putting weight on his injured leg. He got most of his weight on his left foot before wincing and having to take the weight off.

“Looking good, Archer,” Doc said with a slight nod of approval and a small smile.

Toad helped Archer back down onto the bed. The bandages that had been around Archer’s chest, shoulder, and arm were removed and his injured leg was now in a lighter wrap that it had been in before.

“So?” Archer asked enthusiastically, making the doctor chuckle.

“At the rate your injuries are improving you could be walking tomorrow,” Doc said hopefully, “Now, I should get a look at those fractures, just to be sure… Toad, could you step out for a moment?” he added.

Toad nodded and reluctantly stepped outside of the room. A few minutes later, Doc came back out.

“I’m done, I’ll be back in a couple minutes with the x-rays,” Doc said simply, walking off towards
some med-lab.

Toad went in the room. Archer was still sitting up. They waited in silence for about five minutes before Doc came back.

He hung up two x-rays so that they could all see them. The one on the right showed that the leg had been broken and shattered in several places. The one of the left, however, was only fractured in a few places and looked like it was healing quickly.

“It’s looking good, a few more days and you should be free moving. You could be on your feet now though,” Doc smiled, gesturing to a pair of crutches.

Archer smiled widely as Doc passed them over to him. Toad was too busy holding back another cough to smile.

He bit back the cough and smiled as he helped Archer up, making sure he was steady on the crutches. Once Doc cleared Archer he and Toad began the walk back to their room.

Archer smiled at his friend as the left, “Finally on my feet… Now if only I could shoot.”

Toad gave a small smile and they walked in silence to their room.

“It’s cold out there,” Toad said quietly, shrugging his jacket off and setting it down on the desk.

Archer chuckled lightly, “Yeah, it is. It’ll probably get colder over night,” he said with a smile, sitting down on the bottom bunk.

Toad sat close to Archer. He smiled lightly and pulled his partner closer.

Toad nestled his head against Archer’s chest, closed his eyes, and smiled contentedly. Archer kissed the top of his head gently, resting his chin on Toad’s head as he wrapped both arms around him.

It wasn’t long until Archer felt the steady rise and fall of Toad’s chest, telling him that Toad had fallen asleep. Archer smiled to himself and carefully lay down with Toad, keeping the sleeping form pressed against him. He pulled the sheet over their shoulders. Toad snuggled further into Archer’s chest and the older sniper fell asleep holding his partner close.

Toad woke up first the next morning with Archer still holding him close in his sleep.

Toad appreciated the closeness and drank in his lover’s sent, a woody dirt type smell that was slightly mixed with pine and gunpowder, it was so uniquely Archer.

Archer woke up next watching his partner trace his newest scar, the one from the shrapnel that had stuck in his side, with delicate fingers. Toad looked up at Archer’s face with shining emerald eyes. Archer leaned forward slightly to press his forehead to Toad’s, kissing him lightly. Toad kissed back, closing his eyes and relishing the contact.

“I wish we could just stay like this…” Toad said quietly, nuzzling his face into Archer’s shoulder again.

“Yeah… But you got to report for training,” Archer pointed out, pressing his lips against Toad’s forehead.

Toad sighed, “Yeah… You gonna come watch just to get out of here?”
Archer chuckled in response, “You know it.”

Toad chuckled, “We better get up then, don’t want to be late.”

Toad got up hesitantly and changed into his PT gear. Once he was ready he and Archer headed towards the PT field, keeping pace with each other.

They made it in time and Ghost was already standing there with the men that were earlier than they were.

“Archer! Finally on your feet, eh?” Ghost greeted.

“Barely,” Archer commented, “Lying around like that was starting to drive me mad.”

Ghost chuckled and left the conversation at that as the men got into formation. He called out the first exercise and Archer watched as everyone else ran through their drills. His eyes mainly found Toad, who had already shed his sweat-soaked shirt despite the cold.

The sweat gleamed off of Toad’s chest as the lot of them dropped into push-ups. He wanted badly to have the corporal tucked against him as they kissed, but it would have to wait until after training. Then they could head to the range and he could help Toad with his shooting. He’d have to set up the hardest target possible to have an excuse though; Toad was getting good, really good.

The PT was over quickly and they moved on to the pit. Toad went last and was doing well until the end sprint to the finish when he was stopped in his tracks by a sudden coughing fit. He stumbled through it and crossed the line still coughing before grabbing his water bottle and drinking. He cleared his throat with a light cough as he caught his breath.

“What the bloody hell was that?!” Ghost demanded, walking up to him with Archer close behind him.

“Sir?” Toad asked like nothing had happened.

“The coughing, what happened?!” he pressed.

“I don’t know. It was just, all of a sudden, like I couldn’t breathe or something. Next thing I know I’m doubled over coughing up a lung…” Toad explained.

Ghost sighed silently, the last thing they needed was both snipes out of action, “Dismissed, Corporal. I can’t have both of our snipers out of action.”

“Yes, sir,” Toad answered with a small salute, before he turned and started walking away, Archer close behind him.

“Let’s go to the range;” Archer said when they were out of ear shot.

Toad smirked and nodded in agreement as they headed towards the range. When they got there Archer set up the hardest target possible.

“How am I supposed to hit that?” Toad asked after missing twice.

Archer smirked, standing behind Toad, “Like this,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around Toad, overlapping Toad’s hands with his and adjusting where they were placed on the rifle.

He rested his chin on Toad’s shoulder to see through the scope, when he saw the target he slowly pulled the trigger and a shot appeared in the center. He smirked and kissed Toad’s cheek, who
then leaned into the body behind him, closing his eyes as his lover placed light kisses on Toad’s neck.

“We should go back to the barracks before they come in for target practice,” Toad murmured.

Archer hummed in agreement and helped Toad put everything away, leaving no trace that they had been there and headed back to their room.

“At least we can spend the rest of the day doing whatever,” Toad commented, sitting down beside Archer on the bunk.

“So long as we stay inside where it’s warm,” Archer added, pulling Toad into his chest as they lay down.

“Yeah,” Toad said, closing his eyes as he nestled further into Archer’s warm chest.

They both fell asleep within minutes, comforted by each other’s presence. And for once, Archer felt like nothing would wake him up.

Toad woke up a while later and stayed nestled against Archer’s chest, hoping to fall asleep again. He sighed when he heard a soft knock on the door. Too light to be MacTavish and too heavy to be Ghost. It was most likely Doc, here to check on Archer.

He carefully got up as to not wake Archer and went to the door, opening it quietly. Sure enough Doc was standing there.

“I need to check on Archer’s leg,” Doc said simply, “and Ghost tells me you had a bit of a coughing fit.”

Toad gave a tired shrug and opened the door to let the doctor in. He sat down on the bunk and gently shook his partner awake.

“Hey,” he yawned, sitting up and stretching his back, “What’s up?”

“Doc needs to check your leg out,” Toad answered.

Archer hummed a response but it was lost on everyone in the room as Toad turned away, hit by a sudden coughing fit. Archer sat up on the edge of the bunk, worried for his partner as he stumbled over to the desk, gripping the edge tightly as he tried to control the coughs. Doc was beside Toad quickly, pressing him back to sit down next to Archer again.

By the time Toad got the coughing under control Doc was concerned. When Doc moved to examine his lungs Toad waved him off, using the opposite hand that he’d been coughing into, keeping it closed in a fist.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m okay,” Toad insisted, his voice rough from all the coughing.

“Right,” Doc said sarcastically, grabbing the closed and exposing the palm to reveal a red splatter, “This, this is what I was worried about. Down,” Doc ordered pushing him back to lie down.

Toad groaned in annoyance and Archer stood out of the way, resting his weight on the desk. Archer sat patiently as Doc examined Toad’s lungs.

Toad stopped short of a breath as his chest seized up and he tried to hold the cough back. Doc pressed a firm hand to Toad’s chest, “Exhale,” he said firmly, pressing down on Toad’s chest
as he obeyed, “That’s it, slow and steady,” he said quietly.

The next breath was shaky and slow but he didn’t cough until the next breath.

Doc finished looking Toad over and moved to Archer, “So? What’s up with Toad?” the sniper asked.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out,” Doc answered quietly, “You know the drill, weight on your left until it hurts.”

Archer rolled his eyes at the change in topic but took his weight of the desk and slowly put it on his left leg. He smirked when he managed to get his right foot off the ground without anything worse than a dull thud. Though he had to put his foot back down as he was unbalanced.

“’Bout damn time,” Archer muttered as Doc gave a satisfied look.

Doc chuckled, catching the off-hand comment, “Don’t get your hopes up just yet, still not steady enough,” he said, pressing lightly against Archer’s chest, making the sniper stumble, proving his point as Archer grabbed the desk for support, earning a glare from Archer.

Doc chuckled again and picked his bag up, “I’ll be back tomorrow,” he said, leaving, he knew how to read between the lines, how sleepy-eyed Toad was when he opened the door and yet his bunk looked untouched, the space next to Archer big enough for Toad to lie down next to him, had he been someone else, their relationship would still be a secret between the two snipers and would not have included the medic.

It was worrisome enough that it was Toad that had to wake Archer and not the other way around, but Doc shook the thoughts off as he left to go back to the infirmary in hopes of figuring out what the hell Toad had picked up.

Archer locked the door behind him and went to lie down next to Toad. Toad rolled to his side to face Archer and smiled at his Brit. Archer smiled back and draped an arm over Toad’s hip, kissing the top of his head lightly.

Toad smiled and nuzzled his face into Archer’s neck with a content sigh. Archer tightened his grip around Toad’s hip, feeling like it was his duty and his alone to protect the American. And he would until he died.

Toad looked up at Archer’s face, messy brown hair and soft blue eyes that were so uniquely Ian.

“Get some sleep, love,” Archer said quietly.

Toad smiled softly, nestling his face against Archer’s chest again and pulling his knees into his own chest. Archer wrapped himself protectively around Toad and pressed his face into Toad’s soft reddish brown hair. They stayed like that for a while, just relaxing.

Before they were able to fall asleep Toad’s stomach made itself known, making Archer chuckle softly.

“Maybe we should go eat,” Archer suggested.

Toad chuckled and nodded as they both go up. Archer stood up on his own power, determined that he was going to walk on his own.

Toad smiled at his mentor, “Maybe we can go shoot afterwards,” he suggested.
Archer nodded, “Sounds good,” he agreed as they left the room to head to the mess hall.

Toad was the first to notice that they were being watched by both the lieutenant and the captain.

“Think Doc told them?” Toad asked Archer quietly, “Y’know, about what happened?”

Archer looked discreetly over his shoulder at the two and shrugged, turning back to Toad, “Probably, he’s the medic and they’re our superiors, he kind of has to.”

Toad hummed in response, “I don’t even know what that was… I wasn’t even coughing all that often and all of a sudden I just coughed up blood…” he said, poking at his food.

Archer paused, suddenly worried for his partner, “Well… I’m sure there has to be a reason…” he said.

“Yeah, Archer, I’m not worried, just confused,” Toad said with a chuckle.

Archer laughed in response, “Alright, tough guy,” he joked, “now, what actually happened to get you sick?”

Toad shrugged, “Didn’t lie the first time: A couple idiots thought it’d be funny to dump a bucket of ice water on me,” Toad explained.

Archer didn’t question him further as they finished eating. When they did finish, they stood and left to the range.

Archer set up a couple difficult targets for Toad. After ten shots Toad had circled the center without being able to hit it.

He groaned in annoyance, “What is it with you and impossible targets?” he asked rhetorically.

Archer chuckled, “It’s not impossible, it’s hard,” he corrected, “and straighten up, you’re slouching, elbow in… there,” he said, fixing Toad’s position.

“It won’t steady out, shaking like a damn Chihuahua…” Toad said simply as he looked up from the sights, leaving his finger outside of the trigger guard with the safety on.

“Come on Toad, you’re missing the basics here,” Archer said softly with a hand on the small of Toad’s back, pushing his partner’s hips out a little, “pelvis out, hips towards the target, you know this stuff,” he said with his other hand on Toad’s him, angling them towards where the target would come up.

Toad bit the inside of his cheeks and fought down a blush as Archer’s hands lingered on his hip and back as his mentor steadied him.

He felt weak at the knees as he felt Archer’s breath skim his neck. He didn’t say anything, not trusting his voice at that moment.

“Lean against me, keep the shot…” Archer said softly, trailing his hands up to overlap Toad’s, adjusting them carefully as Archer fixed his own positioning.

Toad complied, leaning back against Archer but keeping his position. The target popped and Archer helped Toad pull the shot off and take the center of the target out. The both exhaled slowly and calmly, as if coming out of a trance or something.

Toad set the rifle down and turned to face Archer, still wrapped in his arms, thinking randomly
about what would happen if they were captured or something happened, “And I know that you freak out when someone comes near you with a blindfold,” he mentioned simply.

Archer chuckled, “Yeah, but lucky me, I’ve never been captured and neither have you,” Archer replied simply, “What brought that up?”

Toad ignored the question, “I plan on getting you over that ridiculous fear of yours,” Toad pressed, resting his head on Archer’s chest.

“Good luck trying,” Archer commented with a chuckle, resting his chin on top of Toad’s head.

Toad laughed, burying his face in Archer’s chest, “I’ll do it, you’ll see.”
When they woke up the next day, Archer didn’t feel any more pain in his leg and had to go see Doc to have the fractures checked.

When Doc confirmed that the fractures had healed well he cleared Archer for action. Toad, on the other hand was not as lucky as a cough once again stopped him in his tracks. Doc examined Toad’s lungs further, this time managing to find out exactly what was wrong. It was a quick fix for someone as skilled as Doc. Toad would be ready to get back to it by the end of the day.

He caught up with Archer later, when the Brit was running the pit for the first time since being injured. Archer was a little slow and sloppy, but, after two months out of action, it was more than expected.

“Hey,” Archer greeted when he finished, “So? What’s with the cough?”

Toad shrugged, “I didn’t really understand all the medical gibberish, but Doc’s cleared it up.”

“That’s good,” Archer commented, “I hate seeing you sick, mate.”

Toad chuckled lightly, “I don’t like it anymore than you do, trust me.”

“Tocher, Toad!” Ghost called, coming down from a jog and stopping in front of them, “I just got word that Doc’s cleared you both for action. Just in time too, Cap needs a base scouted and you two are the only ones experienced enough to get it done right.”

“Yes, sir,” Archer answered with a nod, “It’ll be good to get back out there.

“Meet us in the briefing room in ten mikes,” Ghost nodded, “Wish I could say we weren’t seeding the two of you into the meat grinder,” he added as he left.

Archer smiled and threw his arm around Toad’s waist, pulling him close, “Finally getting out!” he said happily.

Toad chuckled, “Let’s go then!” he said, heading towards the briefing room, pulling Archer with him.

Toad finally released Archer’s arm as they neared the briefing room. Ghost and MacTavish were already waiting there, discussing something in hushed tones. Archer and Toad stood by at parade
Archer, Toad,” MacTavish finally turned to them, “Ghost has already told you this is a high risk mission. Security will be very tight and you’ll be behind enemy lines for several days. The risk comes with the patrols, there will be a lot of them,” a screenshot of feed from a scout drone appeared on the projector, it detailed patrol routes and stationary guardsmen, to the side, notes had been made of what times the shifts changed, the gaps, however few they were, in the security; MacTavish pointed to a cliff covered in trees and dense foliage, “You’ll be staking out here,” he traced the perimeter of the base vaguely, “the base is outlined by cliffs, some taller than others, of course. There’s only one way in or out of this base. It should help if you are discovered, and give you the time you need to disappear again,” Ghost handed each of the snipers a file containing the details of the mission, “The rest is protocol. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Archer and Toad answered at the same time.

“Good, go gear up, we leave in thirty mikes,” Ghost finished for MacTavish, who simply wished them luck.

They gave quick salutes and hurried off to the armory. The files they carried detailed the terrain, the target, and the expected weather for the days they’d be there. Toad retrieved both guile suits while Archer pulled their rifles from the rack.

Archer handed Toad his Kevlar, having hurriedly already put his on while Toad was laying out the suits, and pulled his suit on over the armor. He flipped the hood down, and pulled on a mask that only covered the lower half of his face before putting his hood on properly. Toad matched his motions stroke for stroke.

Toad paused a moment then chuckled, looking down at himself, “Never realized how ridiculous we look,” he laughed.

Archer chuckled in response, “Relax, we look badass, if anything,” he joked.

Toad chuckled as well and took his M14 EBR from the table as Archer clipped himself up to his Barrett .50 cal.

“Check suppressors,” Archer reminded, making sure the one on his rifle was secured tightly.

Toad made a sound of acknowledgment, and prepped the rest of his gear, “Got your med kit?”

“Always,” Archer answered, tucking a small emergency kit away in his Kevlar vest.

They finished packing their gear, moving around each other smoothly, and checked each other’s load out to make sure they had everything they needed.

“Let’s go,” Toad said suddenly, “We got ten minutes to get to the chopper!” He shouted, taking off towards the landing pad.

Archer smirked to himself and ran after Toad. They came up to the helipad with a few minutes to spare. Of course, MacTavish and Ghost were already there, waiting with Nikoli and his helicopter.

They gave small nods, saying they were ready and boarded the chopper.

MacTavish and Ghost were silent for the entirety of the ride, if Ian didn’t know any better, he’d think that the two officers were nervous for him and his partner. Their mission was going to be a tough one, and Archer’s first since he’d been injured in Afghanistan. Both snipers looked more
than ready, though. They were prepared to take the risk, excited to, even.

They arrived at the drop off point and the snipers stepped off and immediately headed towards the lookout point.

“Archer?” Toad asked as they approached the cliff.

“Hmm? You sound worried,” Archer answered quietly, careful to keep his voice low.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Toad responded as they got in position.

“Me too, but I won’t let anything happen to you, I promise,” Archer assured, looking through his scope at the base below.

The next three days consisted of hushed voices reading off stats and confirming visuals.

On the third day, things picked up, “I’m seeing increased activity around the road. Looks like they’re doubling patrols,” Toad informed quietly.

“Agreed,” Archer spoke only loud enough for Toad to hear him, “Keep your eye out for Makarov.”

Thirty minutes later they had a few close calls with patrols getting too close for comfort.

“I got him in my sights, twenty degrees east, elevation… non variable, wind is with us five miles per hour,” Toad read off the stats as Archer adjusted his sights, “Shit he’s looking right at us.”

“Stay calm, Toad, don’t move,” Archer whispered.

Makarov grabbed the officer of the base by the arm, yelling to him in Russian while pointing at the ridge. The officer relayed the orders to get men up there immediately, yelling instructions and pointing.

“Shite they’re on to us… Let’s move,” Archer spoke quickly and stood, grabbing Toad’s arm and dragging him up as well as he pivoted around and ran.

The sound of angry Russian voices nearby told them that they’d been spotted.

“Move, move, move!” Toad shouted, sprinting past Archer as the Russians gained on them.

“RPG!” Archer yelled as it roared past him and just barely missed Chris, hitting the ground beside him.

Bullets were flying past and Archer felt several being stopped by his Kevlar. He saw Toad stumble before he heard his scream as a bullet pierced his thigh and he couldn’t run anymore. Archer ran forward and scooped Toad up quickly, throwing his partner over his shoulders as they ran.

The chopper was there in the five minutes it took Archer to run the distance and Toad was looking pale. Once onboard the helicopter he was breathing heavily from the exertion of running so fast so far with a heavy load on his shoulders, Christian had a much larger, more muscular, frame than Archer did.

He held on to Toad’s hand, “Come on, Chris, you’re alright, just hang in there,” he urged breathlessly.

He leaned back against the hull of the chopper, trying to catch his breath.
“Get some sleep, Arch, Toad will be fine,” Jayhawk ordered softly, looking over the younger sniper’s wound.

Archer nodded wordlessly, his breath finally coming back to him, and fell asleep easily.

Once they arrived back at the base, Archer quickly put his gear away, knowing he wouldn’t be allowed to enter the infirmary with it, and made his way back to medical as quickly as he could.

“Archer,” Doc greeted simply, about to suggest that Archer shower, after three days in the Russian wilderness, he certainly didn’t smell any better than when he left.

“Where’s Toad and how is he?” Archer demanded, cutting the surgeon off.

“He’s fine, Jayhawk’s with him right now. The wound was through-and-through, it won’t take long for him to be back up,” He explained simply, “But he did lose a lot of blood and the wound was infected. He was lucky it hadn’t spread far.”

Archer nodded quietly, “Can I see him?”

“Not right now,” Doc answered quickly, “Soon, though, you can wait here if you want.”

Ian nodded and sat down. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been waiting when Jayhawk came to tell him he could see Toad.

“He’s resting right now, but you can see him,” he’d been told, “He’ll be awake in a few hours.”

Archer made a sound of acknowledgement and followed Jayhawk back to where Toad was resting. He sat down in the uncomfortable chair placed beside the bed. Archer wasn’t awake long, though, he was exhausted from the op, and he fell asleep with his head resting on Toad’s shoulder.

When Toad woke the next morning, Archer was still there and still asleep. For a moment, Chris thought there might be something wrong with him.

“A-Archer?” Toad asked quietly, nudging the elder sniper with his shoulder in hopes of rousing him.

He let out a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding when Ian sat up, looking at him blearily.

“Hey, Chris,” he greeted around a small yawn, stretching his arms and back.

“Hey, yourself,” Chris grinned, “You almost had me worried something had happened to you.”

Archer chuckled a little and took Christian’s hand, squeezing comfortingly, “Never.”

Chris made a face and laughed, “You stink,” he commented lightly.

Ian laughed in response and stood, “I guess I better go shower then,” he turned to leave, but not before ruffling Chris’ hair and placing a light kiss on his forehead.

Toad would be fine in a few days and Archer only needed a bit of rest to recover from the fatigue. Doc chuckled to himself, it seemed like only yesterday that Archer was the one stuck in bed, unable to walk. These snipers certainly seemed accident prone. He just hoped no one else found out about their relationship, not everyone would be so accepting.

Archer returned hours later and he and Toad talked for a while before the pair fell asleep against
When Archer woke up the next day, Toad was still sound asleep, so he decided to wake his partner in the best way he could think of.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips firmly against Christian’s. A few seconds later he felt Toad smiling against his mouth. Toad deepened the kiss, holding Archer close.

Archer chuckled lightly when Toad pulled away a while later, looking at his partner curiously.

“I knew that would wake you up,” Archer nearly whispered.

Chris smiled, “Best wake-up call ever,” he answered simply.

Archer chuckled again, standing up and stretching his back. Toad smiled up at him, glad that Archer hadn’t been hurt.

Ian steadied himself as his head spun a little, “Doc’s good at what he does,” he commented offhandedly.

“Yeah, he is,” Toad agreed, sitting up and leaning against the wall behind him.

Chris watched Ian, admiring the older sniper’s lithe runner’s form as he stretched casually. Toad gave a small smile, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and planting his feet firmly on the floor. He stood slowly, using the bed for support, as Archer turned to face him.

“Doesn’t your leg hurt?” Archer asked as Toad wrapped his arms around his neck and he wrapped his arms around Toad’s chest.

“Feels fine,” Toad answered simply, pressing his forehead against Archer’s.

Archer chuckled lightly and pressed his lips against Toad’s. Chris smiled against Ian’s mouth and returned the kiss, deepening it and running his fingers through the hair on the back of Ian’s head.

The more Chris thought about it, the more it sunk in how close he and Ian really were. They’d been together since fifth grade, been through trial by fire together in the form of Archer’s father and the war. Chris noticed things that no one else could. Ian had his little tics and habits that even he didn’t notice, but Christian did, and he knew every one of them and what they meant. The way that his lips parted ever so slightly when he was focused in on his shot, that’s how you knew not to disturb him, or else you might risk a frightened fist to the face. The way he barely licked his lips while he lined up the shot and lightly bit his lower lip before taking it. His hands would sometimes twitch only slightly in the field, it was the only emotion he showed concerning his targets; Archer’s hands never shook.

Chris was the only one to ever be able to call him out on his bluffs during poker and other card games, and yet no one questioned them, they knew not to, they knew they’d known each other for far too long to not know those things about each other. That’s not to say that their silent conversations don’t annoy the hell out of them, of course.

It was the smallest things that Chris had learned to notice. If Archer was in a mood, Chris would be the first to notice and fix it. The look Archer was giving him right now was so relaxed and satisfied, and in love.

Christian smiled widely and moved to kiss Ian again. They stood there for a while, wrapped in each other’s arms.
Archer guided him back and pushed him down to sit down on the bed again, “If your leg’s hurt, you need to lie down and let it heal,” he urged, sitting down beside him, “We don’t want it getting worse.”

“My leg’s fine,” Toad hummed, nuzzling against Archer.

Ian chuckled lightly, “Is that so?” he asked, pulling Christian into his lap so he could wrap his arms around him easier.

Chris smiled, wrapping his arms around Ian’s neck again, “Mhmm…”

“Well,” Ian paused, mischief flashed across his eyes, “That’s good,” he commented simply, pushing Chris back to lay down, “But you should still be resting.”

Christian groaned in annoyance, but didn’t complain otherwise. Archer sat down in the chair and ran his hand through Toad’s hair. Chris sighed and turned on his side to face him. He gave a comfortable smile as he let Archer’s touch lull him to sleep.

“You might want to be careful about who finds out about this,” Doc said from the door, making Archer jump slightly.

Ian was suddenly nervous and stumbling over his words, trying to come up with some kind of explanation.

Doc chuckled, “It’s okay, Archer, I won’t tell anyone.”

Archer was silent a moment and gave a relieved sigh, “Thanks…”

Doc gave a small nod of acknowledgement, “Hey, I’m a civvie doctor with a soft spot for the military,” he shrugged.

Archer chuckled then, “I keep forgetting you’re a civvie,” he commented plainly.

Ian looked over at Toad as he sighed in his sleep and shifted a little.

“You look tired,” Doc pointed out after a few moments of silence, “You should get some sleep too.”

Archer nodded and Doc left, satisfied with the silent answer. Archer stood and walked over to the other side of the bed. He lay down next to Toad and pulled his partner close against him. Archer fell asleep slowly, comfortable knowing that Doc would keep their secret.

When Archer woke up, Toad was already awake and messing with his hair. Archer smiled and sat up with Toad.

“How long have you been up?” Ian asked, pulling Chris’ hand from his hair but not letting it go.

Chris shrugged, “Not long, Doc said I could go back to training and the field now.”

“And you wanted to wait for me to wake up before you got moving again?” Archer asked knowingly.

Christian smirked, “Why wouldn’t I?”

Archer returned the look, pressing his lips against Toad’s cheek, “Then let’s go,” he suggested suddenly, standing up with Toad’s hand still clasped in his.
Toad grinned and got up, letting himself fall purposely into Archer’s chest, feeling strong yet slim arms wrap around him. They put a little distance between themselves as they left, that was, until Christian randomly started laughing and threw his arm around Ian’s shoulders, making Archer grin softly, his hands comfortably in his pockets.

To everyone else the snipers looked to be back to their old selves, before the explosion that had taken Archer out.

They went to the rec room where Ghost was chatting with MacTavish about a new corporal coming in, Meat and Royce were playing video games while Scarecrow and Ozone multitasked watching and playing cards. Archer and Toad sat down amongst the chaos of betting on who would win the games being played and Toad started laughing when Meat got aggravated at Royce for beating him. Money and handshakes and laughs and pats on the back were exchanged. Archer kept his ever present stoic expression that Toad could read so well. Archer smiled ever so slightly at the sound of Toad’s laugh, things were finally getting back to normal for the pair.
A few weeks later, Archer and Toad had only grown closer and had been on a few successful scouting ops. By now, a new corporal had arrived and was assigned to Archer’s ‘squad’. He was an Irish sniper named Alexander McKay. He was quite proud and boastful, and he flirted with just about everyone, serious or not. He seemed carefree enough. Alex was a joker, much like Meat, he took all the pranks he was hit with rather well.

After shooting just outside of the bull’s-eye Alex growled in frustration, making Archer chuckle a bit, “What are you? A dog?” he joked, “Relax, McKay, take your time, you’re taking the shot too quickly.”

Alex sighed with a nod and reloaded. He tried the shot again, this time following instruction. Closer this time, but still not center.

“Better. Try it again, don’t pop the trigger, slowly squeeze it, and follow through this time,” Archer coached, briefly looking over the Irishman’s position, “And stop gripping,” he commented, tapping the man’s forward hand, the one supporting the barrel, “You’re using too much muscle trying to grip it, completely relax into the floor, let the sling hold your position.”

Alex nodded again and readied his next shot. He put the rifle down randomly, looking over his shoulder slightly.

“Someone’s comin’,” He commented, taking up his sights again and adjusting the butt-plate in his shoulder.

Archer tuned towards the entrance, it opened a couple seconds later to Toad on the other side. Archer smiled at him and moved closer to him and away from Alex.

“Toad, you weren’t supposed to be back for another couple hours,” Archer said, smiling fondly at his partner.

Toad shrugged, “What can I say? I couldn’t wait to get back.”

Alex gave a small snarl. He didn’t like Toad and Toad didn’t like him. Toad was protective of Archer and it made Alex suspicious of their ‘just friends’ relationship; he wasn’t sure that was all there was to the pair.

“Bloody hell, McKay, what’s with you and sounding like a dog?” Archer questioned rhetorically.

Alex had forgotten Archer had the best hearing in the 141.

Toad chuckled lightly, “MacTavish wants to see us in ten, Arch.”

Archer nodded in response, “Alright, let’s go then, best not to keep him waiting. McKay,” he added before turning to leave, “keep practicing.”

They walked off, leaving McKay to practice on his own. Once they were out of sight, Toad threw his arm around Archer’s shoulders.

Ian chuckled, “MacTavish didn’t ask to see us, did he?” he questioned suspiciously.
“Oh he did,” Toad answered, nuzzling his face against Archer’s shoulder, “But we got about an hour, he, Ghost, and Roach are making plans.”

“Well, aren’t you the sneaky one?” Ian stated, pulling Chris against him, “Guess we got time to kill.”

“We do,” Chris replied, placing a kiss on the corner of Archer’s mouth.

Ian turned his face and connected them fully at the lips. Chris smiled into the kiss before pulling away.

“Come on then,” Archer grabbed Chris’ hand and pulled him along towards their room.

They sat down together on Ian’s bunk. Chris leaned his head against Archer’s shoulder and Archer pulled him into his lap. They laid down, getting as much rest as they could in the short time. Chris had only just gotten back from an op and fell asleep rather easily, while Archer just lay awake, holding his partner close to him.

“Toad, Archer,” MacTavish greeted as they stepped into the room, “Roach and I are heading out to recover the ACS, I want the both of you on standby, this is a high-risk high-priority op, and we can’t risk not having the support we need.”

“Yes, sir,” Archer assured, “We’ll be ready.”

“Good, dismissed,” MacTavish responded, sitting down again.

Toad and Archer left the small office. Toad headed towards their room while Archer turned towards the range.

“Arch, where’re you going?” Chris asked, stopping.

“Range, I’ve got to finish up with McKay,” Ian answered, facing him.

“Aw, come on Ian, that Irish bastard can practice on his own for a while longer,” Chris complained.

“Chris,” Ian said firmly, closing the gap between them, “You know I have to do this. I have a job to do.”

“Well, yeah, but… since McKay got here things haven’t been the same between us…” Chris worried, wrapping his arms around Ian’s chest.

“Christian, things haven’t been the same since the IED. If that couldn’t separate us, then this sure won’t.”

Chris gave a small sigh, “Yeah, I guess you’re right…” he relented and unwrapped his arms from around the other man, “I’ll… see you later then…”

Ian nodded in response and left for the range.

At first, McKay was only suspicious of Archer and Toad’s relationship, but he saw the way they looked at each other, the way Archer’s face lit up a little when Toad walked in. It wasn’t his business, he knew, but he did care about Archer, and he didn’t want the military to end up separating them. He didn’t want to see what that would do to Archer.

Sure, he could keep Archer busy and away from Toad during the day, but the two shared a room.
He could at least help keep the suspicions down, he figured. Alex couldn’t really care less if Toad was sent way, but Archer was a different story, and one he didn’t want to see play out.

If Alex was honest with himself, he’d fallen for that one British sergeant called Roach, he was cute. The sandy, dusty brown hair and boyish grin sold it. Alex couldn’t let himself admit it though, he had a younger sister to take care of back home and wouldn’t risk getting in a relationship only to be separated. Besides, who was even to say that the feelings were mutual?

Without realizing it, Alex pulled a shot off and completely missed the target. He secretly hoped Archer wouldn’t notice.

“What the hell was that?” Archer questioned, defeating his hopes of his fail going unnoticed.

“I… uh…”

Archer smirked a little, “Put the rifle down,” Alex bit his lip and did as he was told, “Sit,” Archer ordered lightly, gesturing to the chairs set behind each position.

Archer pulled up a chair from another position and sat beside him, “Who’s got your mind and when did this happen?”

Alex looked up suddenly, “How did you-“

“I know that look, McKay,” Archer cut him off firmly “Now tell me who’s caught your eye.”

Alex sighed in submission, “Roach,” he answered quietly.

“That bug?” Archer chuckled, earning a glare from the Irishman, “he’s pretty ‘accident prone’; gets hurt just about every mission. The bug’s bloody fuckin’ hard to kill, hence the name.”

“You point?” Alex questioned.

Archer chuckled, “Mate, if you haven’t noticed, we don’t exactly follow regulations in the 141. As long as Shepherd doesn’t find out, I say go for it.”

“Okay, but if the relationship isn’t a problem, how do I even know he’d feel the same?” Alex questioned, eyeing Archer pointedly, this could be his reasoning for his relations with Toad, but he was sure that Shepherd would find out eventually and that would spell disaster for them both.

“I suppose you don’t. You want me to, or are you going to man up and do it yourself?” Archer asked simply.

McKay went wide eyed, “Wait… what?”

Archer shrugged, “Either way, he’s going to be talked to.”

“You are not talking to him about this!” Alex protested.

“Then you will,” Archer responded casually, leaning back in his chair.

“What? No!” McKay shouted, “Roach is not going to hear about this, from either of us!”

“Oh he will, one way or another, either you talk to him, I do, or he finds out the awkward way,” Archer insisted, “Better figure it out soon, He and ‘Tavish are heading out soon and they want Sniper Team One on standby.”

“So? What does that have to do with anything? It’s just too and Toad, always has been,” McKay
replied skeptically.

“Yeah, it has always been just the two of us, and yeah, ‘Tavish probably only meant mean and Toad, but I am in charge of this squad, and he asked for Sniper Team One. I have the liberty to choose my team, and how many that team has,” Archer explained, “And I want both of you ready and on standby.”

“You’re doing this just because I have a thing for Roach, aren’t you?” McKay questioned suspiciously.

“Oh no, no my reasons are much more practical,” Archer chuckled, “It’s a high-risk mission, they’ll probably need the cover. Now come on, let’s get your kit together.”

When they walked into the armory, Toad was already there and getting his and Archer’s kits and setting them out on the table. He eyed McKay as he set his vest down.

“He’s coming too?” Toad asked.

“Yes, he is, you heard McTavish, it’s high-risk, they’ll need the support,” Archer answered, “And I expect you two to act like a team for once.”

He pulled his Barret .50 cal. From the rack and set it on the table, checking its sights.

“You know anything about the terrain, Arch?” Toad asked, looking over their limited selection of guile suits.

“Snow, mountains, and sub-zero temps, pack light but make sure you don’t freeze to death,” Archer answered, clicking a suppressor into place on his rifle before making sure he had enough ammo.

Toad nodded and pulled down what they would need from the collection and set them with their kits as Archer found his small med-kit.

“You got a kit yet McKay?” Toad asked, pulling his light vest on and securing it.

Alex shook his head in response.

“Alright, let’s get you set up then,” Archer said, securing his own vest.

“Archer, don’t waste your time, we’ve got to be ready in ten,” Toad commented, cleaning his own EBR.

“Don’t worry, Toad, we have plenty of time,” Archer assured, “McKay, pick a rifle and a side arm, and I’ll help you with your vest.”

Alex nodded and went over to the rack of rifles, considering each one carefully. He eventually settled on a M14 EBR and set it down where Archer had told him and then went over to the side arms and quickly picked out a M93 Raffica.

“Alright, now grab a vest and put it on, I’ll fix the fit,” Archer instructed, slipping the magazines for his rifle into the pouches of his vest.

He picked a vest and slid it on. Archer pulled the straps tight and secured it.

“Okay, now, for right now, we’ve only got two of each guile, so you’ll have to make do with a standard uniform until we can get more in,” Archer informed, passing him a helmet.
Alex nodded in response and put the helmet on.

“You got three minutes left Arch,” Toad warned, already starting to head towards the door.

“Alright, you two go, I’ll catch up,” Archer instructed, tucking his med kit away and securing his guile suit over everything.

Toad hesitated, waiting for McKay to leave, and pulled Archer close, giving him a quick kiss before leaving. Archer smiled softly and pulled the half mask up. He picked up the rifle and tested the stock and butt plate in his shoulder before clipping it to himself and holstering the pistol. He checked his watch, two minutes to run to the helipad, no problem with the light gear.

He took off at an easy run and headed towards the helipad. When he got there, McKay and Toad were glaring daggers at each other as the chopper landed.

Archer broke down their stare off by stepping between them, throwing both of them a dangerous look.

They sat down on the chopper, MacTavish and Roach boarding with them and sitting across from the sniper team. The chopper was quiet other than MacTavish and Roach going over their plan one last time and the ever present obnoxious whirring of the rotors.

The chopper stayed relatively quiet after they left and McKay sat across from Archer and Toad once the Captain and his protégé had disembarked. Toad stretched his shoulders a little and leaned back on Archer’s shoulder.

“Get some rest while you can, this could take a while,” Archer suggested to the both of them.

Once McKay appeared to have fallen asleep, Archer wrapped an arm around Toad’s shoulder and let his head rest against the hull of the chopper. He sat up again to pull his half mask down and flick his hood back, then leaned back again and let his eyes slip closed as the chopper set down at the RV point to wait. Toad fell asleep tucked against Archer soon after.

Almost an hour later, Archer jumped awake at the sound of gun fire coming through the coms, waking Toad and McKay up in the process.

“Archer, we have a bit of a situation here!” MacTavish yelled over the com, “They knew we were coming and we’re taking heavy fire!” MacTavish had to yell over the shooting.

“Copy that, sir!” Archer answered and signaled to the chopper pilot to take off so they could give support.

“Negative, do not engage, Sniper Team One. We’re making our way to the secondary RV on commandeered snow mobiles, just be ready in case we can’t shake ‘em,” MacTavish replied.

“Copy that, we’re ready for you,” Archer responded as the pilot set the chopper down again at the secondary RV point.

He stepped off the chopper and Toad knelt down to Archer’s right, a few feet away, and McKay set up between and behind them.

A minute later, the team saw their Captain and Roach speeding down one of the steepest hills they’d ever seen. Roach took the little time he had in the air to pull his left arm into his chest as if to protect it. He cringed when he grabbed the handle again.

He swerved to dodge a tree at the bottom, but it made him hit the jump at an angle, there was no
landing that jump safely. Alex dropped his rifle and pressed forward at a sprint as Roach landed and the snowmobile started careening.

“McKay!” Archer called after the man as he took off at a sprint, going faster than anyone he’d ever seen run.

Before anyone could blink, McKay had shed his helmet and vest to reduce weight and the snowmobile was already tipping. In the next millisecond, McKay had his arms around Roach’s torso and was curled around him to protect him from the impact with the not-so-nearby brick wall. He was knocked out on impact when his head lashed back into it.

Roach stayed where he was in shock, the new kid had just saved his ass, and he had a feeling it wasn’t just the luck he was named for this time. Roach pushed himself up, looking down at the Irishman that had just saved him and back at the path he’d run to do it, he saw the man’s helmet and vest laying in the snow.

He saw Archer rise and start jogging over, his white guile suit highlighted against the dark body of the chopper. Roach put a shaking hand over the bleeding wound where a bullet had ripped through his forearm. Archer came up, slinging his rifle across his back. He looked down at McKay as he brought Roach’s arm up to inspect the wound.

Roach drew away, waving Archer off, “Check him first,” he insisted, pulling his arm protectively against his chest, “I’m fine.”

Archer gave him a curious look but knelt down beside McKay, checking his pulse and vitals. He gave a satisfied nod and looked him over for external injuries.

All he saw was a scrape on the back of his head that was bleeding a little. Archer made sure it wouldn’t get infected and picked McKay up in the fireman’s carry and took him to the chopper as MacTavish went in.

“What happened?” he asked upon seeing the newest sniper unconscious.

“I lost control and he tackled me off before it flipped and took the impact with a brick wall,” Roach explained, his voice shaking a little.

“Are you alright?”

Roach nodded slightly, “Just shaken up…”

After collecting the shed gear, Archer returned to the chopper and checked Roach’s arm. It was through and through and wouldn’t be much trouble. Archer said as much as he cleaned and dressed the wound. Roach nodded in understanding, his eyes locked on the unconscious form of Alex McKay.

“Is he okay?” Roach asked, nodding towards the Irishman.

Archer looked over the Irish sniper with a small frown, “We’ll know when we can have Doc check him out.”

Roach hummed in response, still a bit shaken from recent events.

When they got back to base, Archer wasted no time in getting McKay to Doc and Jayhawk. Roach followed and once McKay was in the medics’ hands, gave a disappointed sigh.

“Come on, Roach,” Archer said simply, “Let’s get your arm taken care of.”
Roach shrugged and followed Archer, sitting while Archer collected supplies. Archer unwrapped the temporary patch he’d put over the injury, cleaned, and re-dressed it.

They waited a while for Doc to finish up with McKay and made small talk while they waited. They weren’t waiting long, though, as both Doc and Jayhawk came in not ten minutes later.

“Well?” Archer asked after a few silent seconds.

“Ribcage was practically shattered, right shoulder dislocated, left hip fractured, and a moderate concussion,” Doc explained, his hand in his pockets, “But we won’t know more until he wakes up.”

Archer nodded and Roach simply looked at the floor.

“Archer? A minute please?” Doc asked, motioning for Archer to follow him.

“What’s up?” Archer asked when they were alone.

“I was hoping you could tell me… What’s going on between you and Toad? He seems a little distant. Did something happen?”

“What? No! I don’t know what’s up with him, he doesn’t like McKay for some reason… I mean, the two were fine with each other before we found out he was in my squad,” Archer explained.

Doc hummed in response, “I think he might be scared. You’ve been spending a lot of time training Alex, Toad’s afraid you might start ignoring him, maybe.”

“Like I would or could ever ignore him…” Archer denied.

“I know that, but does he?” Doc asked, looking behind Archer to where Toad was waiting out of earshot, leaning on the wall.

“I don’t see how he couldn’t… I’ll go talk to him,” Archer answered with a small sigh.

Doc nodded in agreement, “Maybe this whole mishap’ll give you the time you need to spend some time with him instead of training Alex.”

Archer shrugged a little and walked away, towards Toad.

Chris met him halfway and, before Ian could speak, connected them at the lips, not caring who could simply walk into the infirmary and catch them. Archer smiled into the kiss before pulling away, and simply stared into Chris’ burning emerald eyes.

The two had no need for words, they simply left the infirmary and headed on their way to their room. They avoided suspicions by keeping only a bit of distance between them. When they got in they both lay down on their bunk in the center of the room. Toad straddled Archer’s hips, smiling down at him and pinning the Brit to the mattress. Archer chuckled and attempted to sit up but was pushed back down by his shoulders. Archer heled eye contact with Chris as he intertwined their fingers. He moved Chris’ hands apart, getting him closer. When their faces were just inches apart, Archer leaned up and kissed the corner of Chris’ mouth. He pulled away slightly before capturing him in a real kiss.

Back in the infirmary, Roach was checking up on McKay. The Irish sniper was still unconscious with his entire chest wrapped, his right arm in a sling, and a small wrap around his head like a sweat band. Roach sighed at the sight, it had almost been him. He had to question how McKay had moved so fast.
Roach heard a quiet moan and looked down at McKay, who he saw was starting to wake up.

He blinked his eyes open and groaned slightly, “Well that sucked…” Alex commented gruffly, his accent thick.

Roach chuckled, “You sound so very fucking Irish,” he commented.

McKay sat up, adjusting his arm comfortably, “Well maybe that’s ‘cause I am fuckin’ Irish,” he replied dryly before realizing who was standing there.

He felt his face heat up slightly and hoped that the blush wasn’t noticeable. Then he realized the only things keeping Roach from seeing his back and legs were a thick wrap of medical tape and a thin, white sheet.

“I… I should go get Doc… you’re not supposed to be up yet,” Roach suggested nervously, turning to leave.

McKay was alone again. He sighed to himself and shifted his legs a little. At least he still could. He remembered when he’d been injured on a mission, when they’d told him that he’d been paralyzed waist down and would never walk again. When he’d heard about the experiment he’d jumped at the chance to be a test subject, if it meant walking again, he was willing to try anything. He was the only physically disabled subject they’d had, and, coincidentally, the only success thus far.

“McKay?” Doc’s voice broke him out of his thoughts and he looked over to see the medic.

“Oh, hey Doc…” he greeted simply, Roach was with him.

McKay had to lightly bite the inside of his lip to keep from smiling.

“You’re not supposed to be upright yet. You feel dizzy, disoriented at all?” Doc asked, fishing a tiny pen flashlight from his pocket and shined it in each of Alex’s eyes, testing his body’s reaction time.

“I’m fine, Doc, nothing hurts, I’m not dizzy or slow,” McKay insisted, stopping himself from laughing at his own expense at the unintentional joke.

“Oh really?” Doc asked suspiciously.

McKay nodded and lightly tapped the back of his neck where the bio-tech was integrated into his nervous system, “You know why,” he said simply, accelerated healing, thanks to ‘nanites’ that were basically overpowered white blood cells, it was the only thing that had worked on everyone and not killed anyone.

“How’s that possible?” Roach asked curiously.

Alex bit his lip and looked at Doc, who simply shrugged, “Nano tech… it’s connected to my nervous system, so, when I’m hurt, it receives the signal and can send nanites to repair the damage,” Alex explained hesitantly, Archer had been right at least on one account, Roach would find out one way or another, “The experiment that did this is the only reason I can walk, let alone move fast enough to do what I did,” he added, standing up to reveal the bio-mechanical braces running down the sides of his legs.

Roach still looked utterly confused, “Wait… So, without that… you can’t walk?” he questioned.
“Not a step, wouldn’t be able to move anything waist down,” Alex answered, sitting on the edge of the bed and crossing his arms.

“Okay, so you went from no movement at all to lightning fast? How does that work?”

“Like I said, it’s connected to my nervous system, targets deficiencies and then corrects them and improves them tenfold past the normal standard. These… things on my legs, they run all the way up my spine. There was no response coming from my legs, but otherwise there was nothing wrong with them, just needed a gap in my spine bridged, so, by some unlikely accident, everything to do with my legs was improved twentyfold,” Alex explained, looking at Doc to ensure that he was getting the mechanics of it right.

Roach nodded in understanding, “So you’re like… The Flash then?”

Alex laughed a little, “Yeah, that’s uh… that’s my call-sign, ‘Flash’… Thought I’d give you 141 guys a chance to give me one of your own.”

Doc chuckled, “You do know he’s gonna keep calling you that until it sticks with the others, right?”

Alex shrugged in response, “I suppose they might’ve come up with it on their own eventually.”

“Sweet!” Roach cheered, “We have a superhero on our side!”

Alex laughed and stood, “Let’s uh… Let’s just keep this between us, okay?”

Roach nodded in understanding and McKay gave a thankful smile and left, Roach following behind him.

“It’s a bit chilly,” Roach commented as they stepped outside into the night air.

McKay nodded, deciding not to speak, save some embarrassment he was sure to cause himself.

They walked quietly through the barracks as to not wake anyone that was already asleep. It took McKay a minute to realize that Roach was following him instead of going straight to his room. He knew because Roach was higher up the command chain, having been one of the first recruits. His room was with Ghost across the hall from McTavish. Alex’s was by Archer and Toad’s room on the other side of the barracks.

Alex ignored it, slightly thankful for the company, the barracks had an eerie feel at night. When they got to Alex’s room, McKay hesitated to go in, but did before Roach could question him. Roach sighed to himself and headed back to his own room with Ghost, who was laying on his bunk reading.

“No luck?” he asked when Roach entered the room.

“Sod off…” Roach muttered, dropping heavily on his bunk with a huff.

Ghost chuckled, “I’ll take that as a no? He even awake yet?”

“Oh he’s awake all right,” Roach replied simply.

“Oh? Already?” Ghost pressed.

“Yes, already, no I can’t say how,” Roach answered, pulling his pillow from under his head and burying his face in it.
“You can’t, or you won’t?” Ghost asked, sitting up and setting his book on the night stand.

“He wants to keep it between me, Doc, and himself,” Roach muttered, his words muffled by the pillow.

Ghost shrugged, “Guess that’s a ‘black ink’ thing then? His file’s covered in it. Basically all we can know is his name and what he’s good at… and basic medical stuff, obviously…”

Roach sat up, “You should’ve seen it. He was so fucking fast, if you blinked you’d have missed it,” he commented after a short silence, staring at the ceiling as he laid back again, “Swear the guy’s like Flash…”

“Gonna guess you’re going to keep calling him that?” Ghost asked simply.

“Yeah.”

Ghost chuckled lightly, “Go to bed, Roach.”

Within minutes they were both asleep.

When Archer and Toad woke up the next morning, they expected to find McKay still out cold in the infirmary, but, when they left their room, McKay just so happened to be leaving at the same time, stunning both snipers into a shocked silence.

Alex chuckled, “Surprised?” he asked simply, “Roach was too,” he commented, leaning against the wall casually.

“How…” Archer finally managed to speak, Toad simply looked discreetly down at the floor.

Alex shrugged, “Rather not say, actually,” He commented.

“Okay…” Archer replied skeptically, “I… guess that means back to work then…”

“I guess it does,” Alex agreed.

Toad lightly hit Archer’s arm in a silent ‘see you later’ and walked away. Archer stared after him for a moment before turning back to McKay.

“Okay, now that we’re back on track… I think we’ve been training you in the wrong place,” Archer commented, “You can’t shoot right on the range because you’re not a scout sniper like Toad and I, you’re a runner,” Archer explained, halting any chance Alex had to question him, “You haven’t run the pit yet have you?”

“No.”

“Good, you’re about to. Come on,” Archer motioned for McKay to follow as he walked away.

Alex followed and they came up to the pit where Ghost was once again trying to break his record of fifteen seconds. He stopped when he finished again and spotted the two marksmen.

He chuckled, “Roach said you were up, just didn’t think he meant you were actually up,” he commented, “So, that means the two of you are back to it?”

“Yes, sir. After seeing him run the way he did, figured we should drop the range and hit the pit,” Archer explained.

Ghost nodded thoughtfully, “Alright, let’s see what you got. Load up and get set, timer starts as
soon as the first target pops.”

Alex nodded in response, walking over to the tables lined with weapons. He picked up an M14 EBR, a M9, and, of course, the standard combat knife. He stepped over to the gate as it opened and got set to run. He dashed around the corner and popped the first three targets in no time at all. Alex ran through the rest of the course, managing to avoid the ‘civvies’ and shooting every ‘enemy’.

Ghost gave a low whistle, “I know Roach said he was fast but damn,” Alex had already finished. Even through the mask, Archer could see Ghost’s jaw drop as he checked the time.

Alex had demolished Ghost’s record with a time of nine point six seconds.

Archer suddenly had a sinking feeling that Ghost was going to pit them against each other.

A matter of hours later, Archer entered the rec room and flopped down on the couch beside Toad with a tired huff, wincing when he landed on a particularly sore spot.

On seeing Archer’s training vest and helmet covered in splotches of yellow and pale blue paint Toad was shocked, “What the hell happened to you?” he asked, “You and Ghost go at it again?” Ghost had been the only one known to nail Archer like this.

It wasn’t that Archer was too good for the others to get him, he just usually managed to get them before they could get him.

“Had to be a bloody fuckin’ runner…” Archer muttered simply.

“You okay, Arch?” Jayhawk asked suppressing a laugh.

“Alex is not a scout sniper… quick little bastard is a god damn runner… Lost count of how many times he hit me after twenty…” Archer muttered his answer, “Ghost’s record’s been blown, by the way.”

“By how much?”

“New record is nine point six seconds,” Archer answered around a yawn.

There was a low whistle as someone else asked, “How is that even possible?”

But Archer had fallen asleep. Toad chuckled and stood.

“I got him,” he said, waving Jayhawk off as he hauled Archer to his feet, effectively waking him.

Archer groaned in irritation at being woken up, not that it was hard to do, he was such a light sleeper the sound of a needle hitting the floor would wake him up.

Toad chuckled again, “Come on Arch, if you’re tired enough to fall asleep in here, we need to get you back to the barracks.”

Archer simply nodded in agreement as they left the rec room. Halfway there, Archer’s head was resting on Toad’s shoulder as he tried to stay awake, and it was only noon.

As soon as he was on his bunk, Archer was out. Toad smiled at him as he carefully took the fake helmet off, inspecting the numerous paint splotches curiously. He knew in training that one side used yellow, and the other used pale blue. To get both yellow and blue splotches he had to have gotten close enough to McKay for him to have stolen a weapon and used it against him. Alex had
to be pretty damn quick to do that, Archer had unrivaled reaction time. Until now, apparently.

He set the helmet on the nightstand and sat next to Archer’s sleeping form, smiling softly as he ran his hand lightly through the messy, cool brown hair of his partner. Toad was slightly worried that it hadn’t woken him, but he dismissed it quickly, he was probably used to it by now, not to mention the poor man was exhausted.

Toad stood and walked towards the door. He wondered how many times McKay had been hit. He walked back to the rec room to find Meat and Royce playing video games, Roach, Rook, and Scarecrow were playing cards, and Ozone and Jayhawk were watching Meat and Royce.

“Hey, Toad, you think I could beat McKay if we were pitted?” Meat asked at the end of some racing game they had been playing.

“Don’t know… He got Archer well over twenty times, and how many times have you hit Arch?” Toad asked in response.

Meat shrugged, “I’ve only gotten him once or twice, but that’s not the point!”

Toad shrugged in response, “I haven’t really seen him in action other than tackling Roach off a speeding snow mobile.”

“It’s ‘Flash’,” Roach commented from the table, “McKay’s call-sign… it’s Flash,” he elaborated when the others simply looked at him.

“Flash? …Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” Toad shrugged.


“Don’t be so sure, Meat, I’ve seen him run, he’s really fast,” Roach commented, laying down a card.

“Come on! No one’s beaten my free-running! I don’t care how fast ‘Flash’ is, I can beat him,” Meat scoffed.

“Oh?” Alex asked as he walked in, “And how many times have you nailed Ghost?”

Meat laughed, “You kidding? Nobody has nailed him but the Captain!”

Flash shrugged, “Guess I missed that memo,” he commented, his accent thick as he entered the room, a grouchy looking Ghost entered behind him, with five perfect splotches of yellow paint on his helmet and vest.

McKay, on the other hand, had perfectly clean gear.

“Too… Fast…” Ghost muttered, “Talk about dodging a damn bullet…”

“Hence the name,” Roach called.

“Say, where’s Archer?” Ghost asked randomly.

“He all but passed out when he came in here, had to take him back to the barracks, he’s down for the count,” Toad answered.

“He okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine, just tired.”
Ghost nodded simply.

“You know how often Archer gets hit that hard?” Meat asked, not waiting for an answer, “Never! Ghost is the only one that’s gotten him more than five times, but twenty plus hits?! It’s never happened!”

“I find that hard to believe…”

“Somebody’s confident,” Scarecrow commented, “Think you can beat me, Meat, Roach, and Royce?”

McKay shrugged, “Four on one sounds a little unfair,” he commented.

“Okay, fair enough, what if you had Toad spotting you?”

“Never said I couldn’t do it, but if you’re offering me some help, you have a deal,” Alex replied with a cocky grin.

Toad shrugged, “Scout sniper and runner versus three free runners and Roach? Why not?” he agreed, “Not like I don’t get my ass kicked every other time I’m pitted…” he muttered under his breath.

McKay chuckled, “Okay, let’s do it then.”

Ozone laughed, “Still ready to go after two rounds against two of the best? Damn, Scarecrow, you guys are screwed!”

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“Flash, you’re on an intercept course with Roach, 100 meters ahead on your left,” Toad supplied as McKay ran down an alley way.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Flash responded, slowing down only a little, allowing Roach to enter the alley ahead of him.

When Roach started shooting, Flash dropped and slid right under him, getting a center mass shot as he went. He had hesitated to shoot, though, and missed his chance to roll back to his feet before hitting the wall behind Roach.

“Flash! You better high-tail it outta there! Meat and Scarecrow are closing in, only ten meters out!” Toad called, “I’ll try to draw their fire but I’m not sure how long that’ll last.”

Alex groaned and pushed himself to his feet, his right shoulder had been dislocated by the impact. He pulled his pistol out in his left hand wand waited, sure enough Mean and Scarecrow jumped down from the rooftops and surrounded him; he was backed into a corner. He eyed both of them and lifted the side arm quickly, leveling it center-mass with Meat. He flinched as his right shoulder was jostled by the motion. Toad took the opportunity to hit Scarecrow, buying enough of a distraction for Flash to recover and take Meat down.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief, “Thanks for the assist,” he commented over comms, “Would’ve been done for if you hadn’t made the shot.”
Having taken Royce out first, thanks to Toad, the match was over. Alex pressed his back against
the wall and slid down to sit on the hard dusty ground for a moment, gripping his injured shoulder.

“No problem, man, I learned from the best,” Toad commented, “You okay?”

“Yeah… Yeah, I’m good, I think my shoulder’s dislocated though,” Alex answered, hauling
himself to his feet.

“Come on back, Flash, we can have Jayhawk check it out,” Scarecrow suggested, helping Royce
up.

“That was a pretty slick move, Flash,” Roach commented, “Right up until you hit that wall.
Looked pretty painful.”

Flash chuckled in response, “Yeah, I usually roll back to my feet, missed my chance.”

Roach nodded, helping Meat up, “We should get back.”

When they arrived at the start gate, Jayhawk moved immediately to check Alex’s shoulder,
slapping away any attempt of his to touch the injured limb.

“Just a simple dislocation,” Jayhawk commented.

The medic took a hold of his arm and made quick work of relocating the joint.

Flash kept the noise down to a pained groan as he clenched his jaw.

He paused for a breath, “Ow…” he commented sourly.

Jay chuckled, “Well did you expect it to feel good?” he asked jokingly.

Alex rolled his shoulder experimentally and flinched at the soreness.

“Come on, let’s get some ice on it,” Jayhawk suggested simply.

Flash nodded and followed Jayhawk to the infirmary. When they arrived, they found Doc going
over a few files. He looked up when they came in to see Alex trying to massage the soreness from
his shoulder.

“What happened?” Doc asked curiously, putting the file he was going over down.

“Slid under Roach and missed my chance to roll,” Alex explained, “Smacked shoulder first into a
wall.”

Then Jayhawk came back with a cold compress, “The dislocation wasn’t bad, but it’s a little
swollen,” he added, speaking to Doc as he wrapped a bandage around the shoulder and compress
to keep it in place, “Try not to over work the arm, you’re done for the day.”

Alex shrugged his agreement and left. He went back to his room to find Roach waiting outside.

“Hey,” he greeted simply, “You okay?”

“Yeah, a little sore, but I’ll live,” Alex answered, “You need somethin’?”

“I was wondering, why did you hesitate?” Roach asked.

“What’re you talkin’ about?” Alex asked in response.
“You hesitated to take me out,” Roach specified, “Why?”

“I… uh… I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alex lied.

“What? Did you hit your head? You hesitated to pull the trigger on me, but nobody else,” Roach persisted.

“No I didn’t,” Alex insisted.

“Yes, you did, you could’ve rolled in time if you hadn’t hesitated, so why did you?” Roach wasn’t giving it up.

Alex saw that he wasn’t going to concede and sighed in defeat, “Okay, I hesitated, but… I don’t know why,” he lied, hoping Roach would buy it.

“Well… I guess that’s it then… I’ll uh… I’ll see ya later…” Roach said simply, turning to leave.

Alex sighed and watched Roach leave, close call. He was going to find out eventually, one way or another.

“You chicken out again?” Ghost asked when Roach came in.

Roach, predictably, flipped him off and flopped down on his bunk.

“He’s gonna find out, mate, better you tell him now…” Ghost suggested, only to have a boot thrown his way.

“Sod off, will you? I’ll deal with it when I deal with it,” Roach insisted halfheartedly.

Ghost chuckled, “Well, you better ‘deal with it’ soon. Shepherd is sending us out to Rio soon.”

“Mph… What about that means I need to deal with it soon?”

“Occupational hazards,” Ghost shrugged, as if it were obvious, “We’re taking you, Driver, ‘Tavish, Meat, and Royce, Jayhawk, Flash, and me.”

“Whatever…” Roach commented, getting settled in his bunk before flipping the lamp off and getting comfortable.

Chapter End Notes

*- The advice/coaching Archer is giving in this chapter are actual techniques used by my JROTC rifle team and by the USMC. Our Varsity team is one of the best in the nation. If you have questions on the techniques say so in a review or PM and I’ll answer what I can.

Phew! I had no idea how long this chapter was ‘til I typed it up! This is almost 7,000 words! Well, that’s it for this chapter, hope you enjoyed Alex’s debut ^_^ Please let me know what you think, it’s very important that I get feedback!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher
~Spitfire out
Heat

Everyone was running, they had made a stop in a small town outside of Rio to stir the hornet’s nest, so to speak, before hitting their target.

“Sir!” Roach yelled over the gun fire when they paused at an alley way, “Remind me again why we did this!?”

“To pull defenses away from Rio. This is a distraction” MacTavish yelled back, “Keep moving! We’ve got to get to the vehicles.

They ran into the alley, Alex covering them from a small distance as he ran towards them. When the others made it to the trucks, Alex lowered his weapon and picked up speed.

There was a rain of fire going at him and the others had to wonder how he wasn’t being peppered by the bullets. Then the familiar sound of a sniper rifle echoed across the favela and Alex’s eyes widened as a bullet tore through his right knee as his left foot hit the dirt. The sudden increase in weight and momentum on the leg broke the bone in at least three places as Alex tumbled to the ground and time seemed to slow.

Everyone was in a shocked silence as Flash tumbled and rolled across the hard packed earth. He slid to a stop just outside of the alley and there was a single, silent moment when all eyes were on the still form of the Irish runner.

“Flash!” Roach broke the silence and ran from cover to his fallen teammate.

“Roach! Get back!” Ghost shouted after him, “That sniper just took ours down!”

Roach ignored him and slid down on his knees next to the sniper. He carefully rolled Flash to his back before struggling to pull him to cover.

“Jay! Jayhawk, get over here!” Roach called, “He’s barely breathing!”

Jayhawk ran from behind the truck to the wall where Roach was taking cover, “Back up Roach, let he see,” he said softly, kneeling by the prone form.

He took a minute to check Flash over, “Jayhawk, status!” MacTavish shouted as he and the rest of the team held off the enemy.

“Doesn’t look good, sir!” He called back, “We need to get him out of here ASAP!”

“Copy that! CASEVAC is five mikes out!” MacTavish responded.

“Make sure Doc’s ready when we get there, I’m not sure how long he can hold on,” Jayhawk spoke worriedly, wrapping the bleeding wound in Flash’s knee.

Five minutes later, Flash was barely hanging on when they loaded him on the chopper.

“Jay, you go with him, the rest of us have to finish this and get Rojas,” MacTavish ordered as the rest of the team piled into the trucks.

“Yes, sir. We’ll get him back on his feet. I’m not gonna let him go this early in the game,” Jayhawk reassured.
Then the chopper took off and Jayhawk went to Flash’s side, unable to do anything but monitor his vitals, he needed Doc to help him set the broken bones; he’d had several encounters with being punched or kicked by an unconscious soldier while setting a broken bone or two.

When they got back to base, Doc was waiting at the helipad.

“Jayhawk, give me the rundown,” Doc ordered as they set the sniper on a gurney and ran towards the infirmary doors.

“Critical. Broken ribs, there’s a good chance a fragment stuck his lung, shot through the right knee, left snapped in three places when it took the weight and speed, moderate concussion.”

“Damn… he really got worked,” Doc commented as they entered the medical bay, “What happened?”

“He was running down an alley when a sniper shot his knee.”

“Shit. Alright, we need to move fast. I’ll get the scans and x-rays, go get a room ready.”

Jayhawk nodded in agreement and they split up. A couple hours later the two medics had set the bones and had fixed a small puncture wound in his lung caused by a piece of his rib.

When they’d done all they could they moved him to a recovery room, and, after no anesthetics, he was still unconscious.

When Roach got back the next day he went straight to the infirmary and found Doc.

“Where’s Flash?” He asked instantly, forestalling any question from the doctor.

“He’s in ICU, Roach, he hasn’t woken up yet,” Doc answered simply.

Roach felt his breath catch in his throat, it was almost like Ghost had known it would happen, “C-can I see him?” Roach asked.

“You can, but you may not want to, he was pretty banged up…” Doc answered quietly.

“I don’t care, I want to see him,” Roach responded stubbornly.

Doc sighed slightly, “Alright, come on then,” he turned around and motioned for Roach to follow.

Doc led Roach through the halls towards the ICU recovery room Flash was in. He stopped outside the door and took a breath as he faced Roach.

“If he wakes up while you’re there come get me,” He opened the door for Roach.

When Roach went in he was shocked at how weak and vulnerable Alex looked.

Roach sighed as he sat down next to him, “I should’ve listened to Ghost…” He said to himself, “Should have told you when I had the chance…”

Roach stood from the uncomfortable chair and stepped closer to the bed, looking at the Irishman’s face. His lips were parted slightly and his breathing shallow.

Roach leaned down slowly, closing the distance and let his lips brush Alex’s. He held the contact for a few seconds before backing up a little, eyes snapping open—he didn’t even remember closing them—to see McKay’s hazel eyes staring back at him.
He backed up more, “Uh… S-sorry, I-I wasn’t… um…” Roach stammered barely noticing the hand on the back of his head that was pulling him closer.

McKay shut him up by returning the kiss he had woken up to. He fell back into the pillow, unable to support himself for long.

“Y-you… I-I… um… You’re awake?”

Flash shook his head slightly, chuckling, “Not for long… I’ll probably be out again before long…”

“Maybe I should go, let you get some rest…” Roach replied nervously.

He was gone before Alex could protest.

Doc was leaning against the wall outside of the room, “No luck?” he asked when Roach came out, knowing already what had happened in the room.

Roach shook his head, “He’s… really bad off isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is hurt pretty bad… but he’ll be okay,” Doc commented with a nod.

Roach gave a short chuckle, “You’re a miracle worker, Doc,” he commented and walked away.

“Tell me something I don’t know…” Doc said to himself before walking into the room to find Flash appearing to be asleep.

*At least the nanites are doing their jobs…* Doc thought, checking over his vitals. He gave a satisfied nod when his heartrate had picked up and he was breathing more steadily now. Alex would be fine, given a bit of time.

The Irishman opened his eyes with a light groan and looked over at Doc.

“Nanites aren’t letting you sleep?” Doc asked knowingly, *Scratch that… They aren’t doing their jobs then…*

Alex shook his head simply, still at a loss for words from his ‘encounter’ with Roach.

“Where’s it hurt?”

“Every-fuckin’-where,” Alex answered sourly.

Doc nodded simply, “Not surprising, you took quite a spill… You remember what happened?”

“All I know is that I was running… fast…”

“Can you tell me where you were?” Doc nodded at the answer and questioned him further.

“Some favela right outside of…” Alex cut himself off with a sigh, “outside of Rio de Janeiro…”

Doc placed a light hand on his shoulder, “You need to let go of what happened in Rio, Alex, there’s no use in holding on to that.”

Flash glared, “Let go? I can’t just let go of something like that! Especially when I’m reminded of it every damn time I take a walk! …I should’ve been killed…” he retorted angrily.

“You look like you got a lot on your mind, bug,” Ghost commented as Roach walked into their
Roach let out a breath and flopped down on his bunk, "Nothing, nothing at all," he answered with a light smile.

Ghost sat up and looked over at Roach, "You told him, didn’t you?" he guessed.

"No… H-he wasn’t awake when I went to check on him…" Roach said simply.

Ghost hummed suspiciously in response, "Sure," he said skeptically.

"What? Don’t believe me?" Roach questioned, "Go see for yourself, he’s out. Doc’s not sure when he might wake up."

Ghost scoffed, "The kid should be dead!" he pointed out.

"So should I…" Roach retorted sourly.

"Aw come on, bug, you know I didn’t mean it like that."

"Yeah… just tired I guess," Roach shrugged, closing his eyes as if to fall asleep.

"Yeah, long day…" Ghost spoke around a yawn, "and to think we’re going back in a couple weeks to mop up the militia after we get Rojas…"

Roach hummed tiredly in response, he didn’t really have the energy to actually form a coherent thought, never mind a sentence.

"Hey, Ian?" Chris asked, lying down next to his Brit.

"Yeah?" Ian replied, his accented voice cutting through the dark room.

"You ever notice how it’s getting harder to hide… well…’us’?" Christian asked, "I mean, first Doc finds out, and now Flash is suspicious…"

Archer chuckled lightly and turned to face his partner, "It’s only two people, love, and one’s got a degree in just about every medical field and the other is a runner and a sniper. They’re too observant to not be suspicious."

"Yeah, but… we know Doc won’t tell anyone, but what about Flash? How do we know he won’t say anything?"

"He won’t."

"How can you be so sure?" Chris asked in response.

Archer chuckled, "Because he’s got a thing for Roach… And he’s not even sure besides."

Toad didn’t argue further, he just pressed his face into Archer’s chest. Archer smiled softly and wrapped his arms around his partner.

The next morning Alex was awake and trying to move around. Each movement sent a flash of pain up his legs. He didn’t mind it, it reminded him that he wasn’t still paralyzed. Doc tried to get him to sit still, he insisted that it’d take longer to heal if he didn’t. Alex didn’t care, ‘as long as he could still get on his feet’, he didn’t care what happened.

Then Roach walked in and Alex stopped moving.
“Hey,” Roach greeted, “You’re up?”

Alex smiled, “Yeah, I’m sure Doc wishes I was still out though,” he commented with a chuckle.

Roach chuckled in response, “Why’s that?”

“Keep moving around, reminding myself that I’m not paralyzed anymore,” he shrugged.

Roach looked at him strangely, “But… doesn’t it hurt?”

Alex shrugged, “The nanites numb the worst of it.”

“They can do that?!” Roach questioned in awe.

Flash laughed a little, “Yeah, pretty sure they only thing they can’t do is set broken bones and relocate joints,” he responded with a grin.

Roach chuckled, “Really? Wow, what else can they do?” he asked curiously.

Flash thought for a second, then, spotting a scrape on Roach’s arm, grinned, “Watch,” he said simply, touching Roach’s arm, over the scrape.

Roach looked at the spot then over at Alex and back. The scrape was slowly disappearing under his hand. Roach looked back at Alex again, he could feel the small wound disappearing slowly. Shocked, Roach looked back at McKay to find the Irishman looking back with a soft and confident grin.

Alex took his hand away to reveal that there was no trace of the scrape.

“H-how…” Roach stared in disbelief.

Alex just smiled and shrugged, “The nanites are small enough to get through pores, so I can trick them into healing other people’s injuries. Just takes skin-to-wound contact,” he explained, “The drawback is that it takes a lot out of me for anything worse than that. The worse the injury the more it wears me out. If it gets bad enough… well I’m pretty sure you can guess.”

Roach’s eyes widened at the thought, but he shook the thoughts off and took Alex’s hand, “Ghost made me promise that, when I had the chance, I’d tell you something…”

Alex managed to sit upright, his right arm wrapped and secured to his chest, “Oh?” he asked curiously with a knowing smile.

Roach’s face reddened as he stumbled over his words and tried to explain. Alex laughed and stopped him short by pressing their lips together.

“You think I’d forget what I woke up to?” he asked with a smirk, “I was trying to figure out how to tell you the same, actually…”

Roach smiled widely and, had Alex not been so hurt, would’ve hugged him tightly.

Flash smiled back, “And now you know why I hesitated.”

Roach laughed, “Seriously?!” he questioned, “You got yourself hurt because you like me?”

“Well, it wasn’t that bad, sure it was sore for a bit, but that’s about it,” Alex shrugged.
Roach shook head and rolled his eyes with a chuckle. Alex grinned and shifted a little closer to Roach and simply stared at him.

Roach looked back at him. Hazel eyes and short cropped, copper hair were defining, and when he smiled it was almost cat-like and the green in his eyes overshadowed the brown.

Alex flashed his trademark flirtatious grin, leaned forward and briefly kissed him, “Guess Archer was right when he told me you’d find out,” he thought out-loud, barely recognizing that he’d actually said it rather than keeping the thought to himself.

“Wait… Archer knows?”

“He found out, something about the look on my face or something…” Alex shrugged.

Roach chuckled, “Leave it to Archer to know when someone’s got a crush, just by the look in their eye…”

Flash chuckled as well, “Yeah… he would know the look.”

“What do you mean?” Roach asked curiously.

Alex shook his head, “He’s just really fuckin’ observant,” he covered.

“He better be, he and Toad are the best scouts we’ve got,” Roach agreed.

“Because they can read each other like children’s books,” Alex laughed

“You ever wonder why that is? I mean, Archer doesn’t let anything show, and yet Toad reads him like a damn pop-up book.”

‘Because they love each other,’ Alex thought, but he didn’t dare say it, he didn’t want to risk others finding out, so he just shrugged, “Well, Archer did mention that they’ve known each other since grade school.”

“Yeah, good point, but still, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Arch smile. And the look in his eyes… He’s seen a lot of shite in his time,” Roach commented thoughtfully.

Alex nodded, “A lot of us have,” he commented simply.

Roach looked over at Alex and placed a light hand on his forearm. When Alex looked over, wearing his signature smirk—and probably faking it—Roach leaned in and kissed Alex firmly, and Alex kissed him back. Neither of them noticed the sniper and lieutenant standing at the door, one grinning underneath his mask, and the other only grinning on the inside; they had been right all along, of course they had been.

As soon as Archer had found out, he had gone to talk to Roach’s roommate, Ghost, only to find that Roach felt the same. They glanced at each other in approval.

When the two sergeants separated they finally noticed their company and stared wide-eyed with red faces at their superiors.

Ghost grinned under his mask and Archer was grinning only on the inside, “Told ya so,” they spoke at the same time.

The sergeants sent them glares. Archer allowed a smirk and Ghost chuckled.

“You two planned this shit?” Roach questioned, sounding moderately offended.
“No, but we did plan on getting you two together eventually. It was painfully obvious the two for you had it for each other,” Archer commented casually with a shrug.

“Oh? And how would you know, Mr. Show-no-emotion?” Roach commented, that had honestly sounded better in his head.

“Ohhh, good question… How do you know what to look for?” Ghost backed him up and ignored the lame attempt at a joke.

“Uh…” Archer was panicking on the inside, but kept his cool on the outside, this could not be happening right now, “I um…” Archer started backing up, he had nothing for this.

Ghost chuckled darkly and blocked Archer’s escape, “Oh no, you’re not getting out of this one that easily, mate.”

“Hey, Arch,” Toad’s voice sounded from behind him, “We gonna go to the range or what?”

Archer faced Toad, thanking whatever deity was out there for the intervention. They held a silent conversation, Ghost looking between them in confusion.

“I hate it when they do that…” he muttered.

Toad chuckled seemingly randomly and looked at Ghost, “He knows what to look for from our years in high school I was the jock and had a lot of girls after me; he figured it out from watching them.”

Ghost looked to Archer, “And you couldn’t tell us that?”

Archer shrugged and ducked away, ending up next to Toad, “If you need us, we’ll be taking up the outdoor range for practice.”

“That was too close,” he breathed when they were out of earshot, “Glad you showed up when you did, love.”

“You were taking too long, figured I’d check on you,” Toad shrugged.

Archer hummed in response, “Right on time, just like always.”

“Yeah… Come on, I’ve already got our positions set,” Toad urged, pulling Archer along.

Archer smiled lightly, catching up with his partner. Ian took a moment to make sure they were alone before giving Chris a quick and light kiss.

Chris smiled, “Love you too, Ian.”

They got in position, Toad picking up his binoculars as Archer shouldered his rifle.

Toad listed off the location of the first target he spotted, “Elevation twenty feet, wind…” he paused, double checking first, “non-variable, but it could change in an instant,” he advised.

“Eyes on target,” Archer cocked the bolt action, “One in the chamber, finger on the trigger.”

“Copy, fire when ready,” Toad replied, both hated the formalities of the shot process, but on the range it was required; Shepherd would show up at any moment and question their effectiveness if they weren’t following procedure.
“Firing,” Archer advised, a bang punctuating the word.

“Clean hit, target down, kill shot to the head,” Toad droned, then chuckled, “I’d be worried if you’d missed.”

Archer chuckled as well as Toad called the next target’s location, “Did Archer just chuckle?!” a very sarcastic comment came from behind them.

The pair turned over onto their backs, Archer was careful not to move his elbow and mess with his perfected position. They had to squint against the sun and couldn’t see. The figure shifted to block the bright light from their eyes.


“What makes you think I want something?” Meat asked, feigning hurt.

“The only time you come to the range is when you can’t avoid it,” Toad pointed out bluntly.

Meat rolled his eyes, “I was curious how our scouts operate,” he shrugged, “Don’t let me stop you from…” he gestured vaguely down-range, “assassinating cardboard…”

Archer and Toad looked at each other and shrugged, turning back to their scopes.

Toad relayed the information again and they went through the shot process for the second time.

“Clean hit, target down, kill shot to the chest. Next target thirty mills east, shoot to wound, wind’s picking up: east to west about three miles per hour.”

Archer shifted his hips, adjusting his NPA* for the wind, and cocked the bolt action, “One in the chamber, finger on the trigger…” his bottom lip was between his teeth as he eased his breathing and brought his sights down onto the target.

“Fire when ready.”

“Firing…” It was barely a whisper and, with the bang that accompanied it, Meat wasn’t sure he’d heard it.

“Clean hit, target wounded, non-lethal to the shoulder.”

“Do you guys actually say all that on the job?” Meat asked curiously.

“No,” Archer answered quickly, “We can’t afford to blow our positions because we were going through range regulations. We’ve learned how to speak without speaking,” he explained.

“Show me?”

Archer shrugged and kept his eyes on Toad’s face from the corner of his eye. Toad found the next target and looked over at Archer slightly, relaying the position and conditions silently. Archer shifted, moving his sights over the target and taking it out, looking back at Toad who confirmed it down silently.

“How do you know he’s not just finding the target on his own?” Meat questioned Toad.

The snipers looked at him over their shoulders, “Because I can’t?” Archer answered, “I’m colorblind… I thought everyone knew that?”

“No, can’t say I did,” Meat replied, “Exactly how are you colorblind? Like… what co-“
“I know what you mean,” Archer cut him off, “Mono-chromatic, I can only see in black and white,” he answered and turned back to his targets, “I can see them just fine, it’s just a little difficult to find them, so Toad gives me the direction and distance so I can find it.”

“That why Toad takes solo-ops and you don’t?” Meat asked.

“Yeah, there’s no other reason they’d send me and not Arch,” Toad answered simply, “he’s a better shot. I learned from the best though,” he grinned.

Archer suppressed a laugh and jokingly punched Toad in the shoulder, making his partner laugh and shove him back slightly, he didn’t want to offset Archer’s position too badly.

“What?” Toad asked through the laugh, “It’s true and you know it!”

Archer just looked at him, he’d be grinning if Meat wasn’t there.

“Oh fine, killjoy,” Toad said, rolling his eyes, “Back to work then…”

Meat walked away, meeting up with Royce, Scarecrow, and Ozone.

“They are so more than friends,” he said with a smirk, “Only a blind man couldn’t see it.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ozone questioned.

“Archer, of all people, was laughing!” Meat exclaimed, “What other proof do you need?”

“I don’t know Meat,” Ozone said skeptically, “Archer’s changed since the IED… honestly, who wouldn’t? He had brain damage, it probably messed with his personality or something…”

“Trust me, it wasn’t like that, there was more to it than that, there was something behind it. I mean, the way they just read each other, hold entire conversation without ever saying anything?” Meat shook his head, “There’s no way they’re not… y’know…”

Scarecrow shrugged, “He does have a lot on his mind, man. The guy’s never been captured, but he’s still seen some of the worst forms of torture in existence. He’s gotta laugh about something sometimes, I’d be worried about him if he didn’t…”

Meat groaned in aggravation, “You people are hopeless…”

“I believe you,” Royce offered, “Even back when Archer got hurt that one time and got sent home, Toad absolutely freaked, for good reason, but still…”

*-- NPA – Natural Point of Aim – this is where you aim when completely relaxed. A shooter adjusts their NPA by shifting their hips left and right. NPA is very important in getting accurate shots, you don’t want to be fighting to bring it center; you want your NPA to be right on the target.

Holy shit I actually finished this chapter. How long has it been omg…? Well, there’s that, it’s long as shit… How did I let these chapters get so long good lord I think the next one’s longer T_T Just so you guys know, I already have most of this hand written (I’ve finished up to Chapter Seven, not letting myself start on Eight until I catch up), it’s just a matter of getting motivated and having time to type it. Anyway, as always, I really hope you’re all enjoying this, I certainly am having fun exploring characters, world, and writing techniques ^_^ Please leave a review and let me know what you think, more reviews = more motivation which equals more
chapters faster! :D

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Okay, just going to put this out there: I started this chapter right after I finished the last one, but it’s like two in the morning as I’m typing this and I have family that I don’t like coming over soon (I’m probably working on this as an excuse to not have to be around the small children, they make me uncomfortable…). So, here we go, Chapter six let’s do this!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

Scarecrow and Ozone shared a look. They thought it was obvious too, but, unlike Meat and Royce, they didn’t care. They’d have to talk to the snipers.

They waited for Meat and Royce to leave before going to find Archer and Toad. They found Toad getting up from his position, untangling his legs from Archer’s. Toad helped Archer to his feet, spotting Ozone and Scarecrow approaching.

“Hey,” Ozone greeted, walking right up to the pair while Scarecrow hung back a couple paces, “You two are obvious, Meat and Royce figured it out, but unlike us, they care.” Ozone commented bluntly.

“And not in a good way,” Scarecrow clarified.

Archer just looked between them, “The bloody hell are you two talking about?”

“Your relationship with Toad,” people have always had their suspicions about you two, even since you first got here,” Scarecrow said, “Most of us couldn’t care less…”

“But others, like Meat and Royce, do care and don’t like it,” Ozone finished for him.

Archer and Toad looked at each other, holding another one of their silent conversations.

Scarecrow and Ozone weren’t sure if it was rude or appropriate given the situation. Eventually Toad just shrugged and they looked back at them.

“What do you suggest we do about it?” Archer asked.

“You’ll want to wait a bit first, they only just figured it out, it’d be suspicious if you did something to throw them off now,” Ozone answered, “But I suggest you fake an argument that would break you two up.”

“Ozone, Arc and I have been friends since we were little, what argument could possibly break us up?” Toad questioned.

Ozone and Scarecrow exchanged a look and shrugged, “No idea,” Scarecrow answered simply, “There’s got to be something? Maybe a third-wheel kind of thing?”

That gave Toad an idea, “What about Alex? He’s got his own suspicions, maybe he could help somehow.”

“Yeah, once he’s out of medical…” Ozone commented plainly.

“I don’t know,” Archer spoke, “Is it believable? Does it even solve the problem? I mean, what do they have a problem with about this? The fact that we’re both guys?” he shook his head, “I don’t
think adding a third-wheel situation will help.”

“You got any better ideas?” Toad questioned.

Archer shook his head, he had no ideas.

“Well you have time to think about it,” Ozone shrugged, “Best not to try throwing them off right now, they’ll only get more suspicious,” he reminded.

Archer nodded in acknowledgement, “We’ll figure something out, thanks for the heads-up.”

Scarecrow and ozone nodded back and walked away, leaving Archer and Toad to their business.

Toad leaned back against Archer comfortably and tilted his chin back to look at the man behind him, “Told ya so,” he commented lightly.

Archer gave a brief chuckle, “Oh hush,” he muttered with a smile, kissing Toad lightly, “We’ll throw ‘em off.”

“How? Arch, we’ve known each other since elementary, what could possibly break us up?”

“Don’t worry, Chris…” Archer replied, wrapping his arms around Toad’s waist and resting his chin on the other man’s shoulder, “I’ll think of something.”

“We could be sent out at any time, Ian, we need to figure it out soon,” Chris insisted, turning in Ian’s arms to face him.

Archer lifted his head, “That… that gives me an idea,” he remarked with a smile.

“What’s that?”

Archer frowned a little, “You’re not gonna like this love…” he admitted, “I’ve got to get a solo scouting job…”

“No!” Toad denied instantly, “Archer you can’t go on a job on your own.”

“I know,” Archer spoke softly, “But I love you, and I don’t want to lose you to because of this.”

“But what if an enemy sniper spots you while you’re scan-“

Archer cut him off with a firm kiss, “I will be fine,” he said slowly when he broke it, “Just let me explain my plan for now, okay?”

Toad hesitated but nodded, mumbling something incoherently into Archer’s chest.

Flash was fast asleep, finally. Doc let out a tired breath and rested his forehead against his desk. He still had so much to do: reports to file, people to check and look after, gear to check, and on top of it all he always had to be ready for emergencies. He sighed and pushed himself up, he hadn’t been this tired since college, he was usually good about getting sleep and not exhausting himself. He stood and made his way towards the door, he needed some coffee. Of course, Jayhawk chose that moment to walk in.

“Doc? You don’t look so good, you okay?” Jay asked.

“Yeah, yeah I’m good, just… tired…” Doc answered, waving Jayhawk off.

“When was the last time you slept?” Jayhawk questioned.
Doc thought for a moment, but just shrugged, he was too tired to bother trying to remember.

Jayhawk scoffed, “And you get on to us for not sleeping?” he commented, “Get some sleep, Doc, I’ll take care of things around here.”

Doc nodded in response, “Thanks…”

“Don’t mention it,” Jayhawk replied as Doc left.

Roach sat beside Alex as he slept, the pain had lessened and the nanites were finally letting him sleep. Roach looked at him, Alex had fallen asleep with a soft smile on his face, and he looked at ease. He’d looked kind of terrified when he was awake. Alex had been trying to hide it, but Roach saw through the façade.

Flash had a wrap around his chest and right forearm, which was resting lightly over his abdomen. His right knee was bent slightly, probably to take the pressure off of the wound. The left leg was lying flat, but had a thick wrap around it to allow the breaks to heal properly. He’d been hurt pretty badly.

Roach felt he could sit there and watch Alex sleep for hours. Before he knew it, it had been a few hours and Flash was waking up. He fully woke up and smiled at Roach, pushing himself up into a sitting position.

Roach smiled and stood. Alex placed a hand on the side of Roach’s jaw. Roach leaned his face into the touch. They brought their faces together and kissed lightly.

“No, Archer, it’s too risky! You can’t go on your own!” Toad protested after Archer finished explaining, “At least take Alex with you!”

“I’m doing it Toad, alone, unless you have a better idea?” Archer retorted, he admitted the idea was crazy and reckless and there was a good chance he’d get hurt, but he had to do it, it was the only idea they had.

Toad’s face fell, “But… I-I don’t…” he couldn’t finish the thought.

Archer held him, “I know… but we have to do something to throw them off… them and everyone else that might be catching on…”

Toad sighed in defeat, “Okay… Just… be careful… please.”

Archer tightened his grip around Toad, “I will… but I can’t promise anything, you know that…”

“I know…” Toad admitted reluctantly, “but if you get hurt, I’ll be pissed.”

Archer chuckled, “I’ll try not to get hurt,” he answered, “but while I’m gone, you have to stay calm and not worry about me, alright?”

Toad nodded and stood away from Archer, “You just come back alive.”

“I will,” Archer assured, “They can’t sneak up on me.”

“Yeah, I’m more worried about the things that don’t try to sneak up on you…” Toad commented, a somewhat bitter tone accompanying his voice.

He definitely did not approve of Archer’s plan and nothing would make him like it.
Two days later Flash was on his feet and moving, albeit with some help from Roach, and Archer had been granted his solo assignment.

He was to scout out the favela, make a map of the militia’s position, and draw up a map so that the higher-ups could form a game plan.

“Archer, I don’t like this,” Toad complained as Archer got his gear together, “What if—“

“Toad,” Archer cut his partner off with a sharp voice, “Calm down. For the last time I’ll be fine!”

“Archer, there’s a reason you’ve never been sent out alone, you need a spotter,” Toad spoke, steadfast in his worry.

“Didn’t stop me when we played airsoft,” Archer pointed out.

“That’s different!” Toad shot back.

“How?” Toad, it’s the same thing only the bullets in airsoft don’t kill you,” Archer said bitterly.

Toad groaned in frustration at his partner and left the armory. Archer sighed, he hated having to fight with Toad, but it had to be done. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and headed out to the chopper.

Toad slumped down on the rec room couch, hoping to take his mind off of Archer. He thought about going to talk to Doc, but decided against it, he was probably busy anyway. Meat and Royce walked in a few moments later while Toad was still trying to think of something to do.

“Hey little Toady, aren’t you worried about Archer getting hurt?” Royce asked.

“Yeah, didn’t you guys say he can’t find the targets on his own?” Meat added.

Toad shrugged, somehow managing to play off his worry, “Never stopped him when we played airsoft… And don’t call me Toady…”

“So… you’re not worried?” Royce questioned suspiciously, “At all?”

“Not really,” Toad shrugged, “He can handle himself.”

Meat and Royce shared a look and walked away. Toad sighed and stood, figuring he should just get some sleep. He climbed up to his own bunk, he hadn’t used it in what felt like forever and it felt cold now. He wondered if the bottom bunk, the one he and Archer shared, would feel any warmer.

“Doc,” Jayhawk grabbed his attention before he went into his office.

“Jay, aren’t you supposed to be with Flash?” Doc asked, wondering what the medic was doing here.

“Roach is with him, I got a call from the Captain: he wants me on Archer’s evac team and you on standby.”

“What happened?” Doc asked curiously, these snipers sure seemed accident prone lately.

“Don’t know, just told us to be ready,” Jayhawk answered with a shrug.

“Well, I’m always on standby, so nothing new there… When’s evac?”
“Tomorrow at 1900 hours.”

“Really? How long has he been gone?” Doc asked, the snipers’ missions usually lasted several weeks.

“Just a couple days,” Jayhawk answered.

Doc nodded, “Alright, we’ll be ready.”

“He, Alex?” Roach started, he had been helping the Irishman get back on his feet.

“Yeah, Roach?”

“You know after Archer gets back with that map we’re going back to Rio to mop up the militia,” Roach said simply, “It got me thinking… People died last time… Meat and Royce were nearly killed too, and I took a fall and had the militia hunting me down… I don’t know, I’m… scared I guess…”

Alex tensed at the mention of Rio.

“You okay?”

“I-yeah, yeah, I-I’m good,” he said simply, staring at the floor, more specifically, at his feet, “That’s just feckin’ great…” he added under his breath.

Roach chuckled, momentarily forgetting his fear, “You know, your accent gets a lot thicker when you’re mad?” he pointed out, “What’s got you?”

Alex just looked at him evenly, Roach waited patiently for an answer and Alex looked away with a sigh, “I don’t want ta talk about it…”

“Hey,” Roach spoke softly, cupping Alex’ jaw and bringing his face back towards him, “What’s wrong, Alex?”

“It’s nothing… Don’t worry about it, bug…” Alex said, grabbing Roach’s hand and taking it away from his face, “I gotta go talk ta Doc…” he turned to leave.

Archer patiently looked through his scope again, then back at the map he was drawing. This ended up being harder than he originally thought, and he’d had a few close calls with patrols. Archer was too used to having Toad be able to watch his back.

Archer made the last few marks before looking into his scope again, making one last sweep to make sure he was clear to move and get to the LZ to wait for evac.

He saw movement in the trees, sniper. He shifted his scope over his target and adjusted his NPA accordingly. He was too slow, the other sniper shot first and a bullet bore into his scope, making the rear sight blow up in his face. Archer couldn’t stop the shout of pain as shrapnel tore into his face. His head dropped and he didn’t move, he was unconscious. The enemy sniper, having seen the scarlet spray from the shrapnel wounds, assumed his target was dead.

Hours later, Archer woke up, he stood on shaking legs and picked his rifle up, inspecting the ruined scope before slinging it across his back. He touched light fingers to a large shrapnel wound on his cheekbone, but drew his hand back with a sharp his as the wound stung. The shrapnel was probably still in his face, but he couldn’t safely remove it himself. The rifle on his back felt unnaturally heavy as he knelt down and rolled up the map, sliding it into the map sheath slung next to his rifle.
He stood with some difficulty and steadied himself on a tree- the sun was setting- “Got to get to the LZ…” he told himself quietly and trudged forward.

He came into the clearing and tried to stay standing and stay awake, but sat down against a tree anyway. He fell asleep there, waiting for the evac that would get there the next day.

The chopper landed, but the noise of the rotors didn’t rouse Archer, he didn’t move from his spot. Toad spotted him and went over to him, shaking him awake. Archer was the lightest sleeper he’d ever known, the fact that he hadn’t woken up even before the chopper landed was cause for concern.

Blood had dripped into his right eye, forcing him to keep the eye closed as he looked up at his partner.

“Archer, what the hell happened?” Toad questioned, inspecting the shrapnel wounds that still had bits of metal or glass in them.

Archer reached around and grabbed the barrel of his rifle and started bringing it forward. Toad stopped him and unclipped the sling, leaning Archer forward, and took the rifle from his back. His eyes widened at the state of the scope.

“Damn it, Archer, I thought you said you’d be fine on your own!” Toad snapped, he sighed angrily, “Jayhawk!” he called behind him.

The medic ran up and stopped at the sight of Archer’s injuries as Toad pushed Archer’s hood back and pulled the mask down to hang around his neck, “Damn…” Jayhawk cursed under his breath, “Get back Toad,” he ordered quickly, kneeling in front of Archer as Toad shuffled back, “When did this happen, Archer?”

“Yesterday morning…” Archer answered, his voice quiet and rough.

“And you didn’t tell anyone you were hit?” Jayhawk questioned.

Archer shook his head, but the action made him dizzy and his breath got heavy, “Didn’t wake up ‘till sunset…”

“You passed out?” Jayhawk asked for clarification as he inspected some of the wounds.

Archer shrugged, “Don’t remember falling asleep…” he answered with a rough cough.

“Archer, look at me,” Jayhawk said, looking him in the eye and noticing Archer was having trouble focusing, “A good few of these are infected, and the shrapnel is still in most of them.”

Archer grunted in reply and moved to get the map sheath off of his back. Jayhawk stopped him and unclasped the sling that held the tube in place, mirroring Toad’s actions from earlier as he took the tube. He passed it to Toad, who hooked it over his shoulder, next to Archer’s rifle, and walked back to the chopper. Toad loaded up, securing the rifle in a weapon rack and keeping the map sheath on his shoulder while Jayhawk worked at removing the shrapnel from Archer’s face, cleaning the wounds as he worked.

Back at the base, Jayhawk was helping Archer into the infirmary, having already told Doc what happened.

“What’s with Toad?” Doc asked as he took a second look at the wounds.

Archer sighed, “He’s pissed… Told him I’d be fine on my own,” he explained simply and
gestured to his face, “and I wasn’t…”

Doc chuckled lightly, “Oh you’re fine, the infection isn’t bad, so long as you keep the wounds clean it’ll go away on its own and none of the cuts are too serious.”

Archer hummed in response, only half listening and not really in the mood to talk. Toad was mad at him, his scope was trashed, and he had shrapnel in his face. An hour later Doc had finished his work and Archer wasn’t really paying attention to anything.

“Hey, you still with me, Archer?” Doc asked, bringing Archer’s attention back to him with a snap in front of his face.

“Yeah, yeah, I was just…”

“It’s not like you to space out like this, Archer,” Doc pointed out, a tone of concern edging his voice.

Archer sighed, “Yeah… I know… It’s just… been a rough couple days…”

Doc nodded, “Well, you’re done here, if you want to go back to your bunk and get some sleep.”

Archer nodded and stood, feeling dizzy at the sudden movement. Doc steadied him.

“Just take it easy and get some rest…”

Archer waved his acknowledgement as he left, he had his mind on other things. He lay down next to Toad, whose back remained turned to him. Archer sighed, assuming Toad was asleep. Archer coaxed himself to sleep though it took him longer than usual to get there.

Toad was awake when Archer started thrashing and mumbling in his sleep. He was worried that Archer hadn’t woken up from the nightmare yet. He waited a moment and wrapped his arms around his partner when he turned over. Chris held him still against his chest, rubbing soothing circles on the older man’s back.

Archer stopped moving and relaxed slowly. Toad sighed, it’d be a cold day in hell before he could stay mad at Archer. He couldn’t really blame him anyway, it wasn’t like Ian had tried to get shot, and the injuries weren’t even that bad. Archer woke up and looked up at him.

Toad kissed him quickly, not giving him time to react, “You were having another nightmare…” he spoke softly, “You want to talk about it?”

Archer closed his eyes and pressed his face into Toad’s chest, “I lost you…” he summed it up quietly.

Toad tightened his grip around Archer, “It’s okay, Ian… I’m here, I’m not going anywhere…”

“I know, Chris… I love you…”

“Love you too, Ian,” Chris replied quietly.

Ian shifted to be able to put an arm around Toad. Chris brought the sheet further over their shoulders. Both snipers quickly fell back to sleep, comforted by each other’s presence.

The next day found Flash running down an alleyway, evading gunfire as he tried to find a flanking route. Jayhawk was chasing after him, Doc speaking to him over a separate comm line from the rest of the team.
“He’s headed in a bad direction, Jay, get him turned around before he gets to the open,” Doc spoke quickly, knowing exactly what Flash was running towards, he was monitoring their positions in the command room.

“I can’t get close enough, he’s too damn fast,” Jayhawk responded quickly.

“You were varsity baseball in high school weren’t you?” Doc asked randomly.

“Yeah, what’s that got to do with anything?” Jayhawk responded, still running after the speedster.

“Pitch him a flashbang,” Doc suggested.

Jayhawk was prepared to question Doc’s sanity, but he’d never been wrong before, so he pulled a flashbang from his belt and primed it. He stopped, digging his feet in and chucked it towards Flash. As it passed him it hit the dirt. When it went off, it was a few feet behind him. He tumbled a bit at the bang but was otherwise unaffected.

Jayhawk cursed under his breath, “No effect, Doc.”

He heard Doc swear under his breath as well, “Too late to try anything else,” he commented, noting that Flash had entered an open area.

Flash skidded to a halt, recognizing his surroundings. He spotted the old iron fence, still missing a spire and still stained with blood, his blood. His breath caught in his throat. Years later the blood stains were still there. He felt his legs give out as his rifle fell from his grip. He could still hear his team and the militia yelling, could still feel the pain, the sudden inability to breathe, all the feeling gone from his legs. He fell over to his side.

“Shit!” Doc cursed, scanning the readings on his screen, he had a direct hook up to each team member’s vitals, and Alex’s had just changed drastically, “Jayhawk, you need to get to him yesterday!” he was going into shock.

“I’m working on it!” Jayhawk responded, he had never stopped running after the Irish sniper, “What happened? He’s not hit,” Jayhawk pointed out as he approached the downed sniper, and not seeing any sign of being hurt.

“He ran into a bad memory, he’s in shock,” Doc explained, “Just get him out of there, Jayhawk, you gotta move fast,” Doc spoke quickly.

A shot came down next to Flash and Jay looked over to see militia on the rooftops. He got Flash on his back and ran.

He found an open door and ran into the abandoned home. He closed the door behind him to give himself and Flash some cover.

Jayhawk set Flash down, breathing heavily with exhaustion, “Any chance of snapping him out of this?” he asked, “We’re pinned down in here.”

“Find a vantage point, Jay,” Doc instructed, “You have to let him work through this one himself.”

“No,” a voice cut through the gunfire from beside Jayhawk, “I’m good…” Flash stood up carefully.

“What the fuck happened back there?!” Jay demanded.

“It’s a long story, Jay, we’ll explain later, you both need to get to the roof, get on with the
mission,” Doc said simply.

“Come on,” Flash grabbed Jayhawk’s arm and pulled him along.

They ran upstairs and climbed a ladder. Once they were on the roof, bullets rained down around them. They ran for it, making for the rest of the team was engaged in a firefight on the ground.

Flash stopped, pivoting around to fire at the approaching militia. He turned and caught up with Jayhawk.

“Distract them, I’ve got an idea,” Flash spoke quickly.

“Is it a stupid one?” Jayhawk asked curiously as they ran.

“For anyone but me, yes,” Flash answered with a smirk.

Jayhawk sighed and shook his head, “Can’t believe I’m doing this…” he muttered, then looked at Flash, “Do it.”

Flash nodded and broke off to the side as Jayhawk turned and shot at their pursuers to draw their fire. Flash stood to the side of the group of militia and started picking them off. By the time they noticed him there were only five left. They fired at him and he leaned to avoid the line of fire.

Flash ran forward and slid under them, managing to get a shot off on two before rolling back to his feet and pivoting back around on his knee to take out the other three in three rapid shots.

“How did you…” Jayhawk stared at the scene, fifteen enemies, dead in less than a minute… it was unreal.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Flash answered, “Let’s keep moving, before the rest of them catch up.”

They kept moving, but, with the militia closing in on them, picked up the pace. They were being pushed towards a large gap between two roofs.

“We can’t make that jump!” Jayhawk exclaimed, already slowing down.

“Oh yes we can!” Flash responded and grabbed him, “Hold on to me!”

He slammed his foot down on the edge of the roof to push off. He turned to fall hard on his back on the other side and curled around Jayhawk to keep him from getting hurt.

“You okay?” Flash asked, letting go of the medic.

“Yeah, I’m good…” Jay answered as he got up, “You?”

“I’m fine,” Flash replied, standing up and cracking his neck.

Jayhawk looked back at the other roof to see a dent where Flash had planted his foot. There was another dent where they had fallen.

“How did you…” Jayhawk started but was cut off as a bullet hit the roof next to him.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Flash repeated his earlier statement and pulled Jay forward, “We gotta keep moving. Oh, and before I forget, we will be talking about that flashbang too…” he added somewhat crossly, sending Jayhawk a sideways look.

“Captain, you got militia reinforcements coming in, I’ll thin them out as much as I can, but there’s
too many of them, you need to pull outta there,” Toad advised quickly, taking shots at the incoming militia.

“Copy that, Toad, Do what you can, I’ll see about getting some close air support,” MacTavish responded.

“Flash and Jayhawk are coming up on your nine high,” Toad informed, noting the form streaking over the tin roofs and the other form trailing behind him.

“Got eyes on those reinforcements,” Flash cut in, “We’ll see what we can do from up here.”

“Flash where the hell have you been?” MacTavish demanded.

“Had some militia on my tail, had to shake them; it took longer than I thought it would,” he explained, taking a grenade and tossing it into the middle of the mob of militia, “Frag out!” he called a warning to the team.

“My friend, I hear you are in need of air support,” a Russian voice cut in on the comm.

“Good to hear from you, Nikoli, we’ll mark the enemy with red smoke, danger close,” MacTavish replied, tossing a red smoke grenade, “Flash, Jay, I suggest you two get down from the roof.”

Flash jumped down from the roof, half way between the militia and his teammates. He covered Jayhawk as he jumped down. They were working their way back to the team when a grenade blew up near Jayhawk, wounding the medic severely.

Flash saw Nikoli’s chopper lining up for the strafing run.

“Flash! Get out of there now!” MacTavish yelled over the comm link.

Flash looked over to the motionless medic and quickly made up his mind. He knelt down and quickly got Jayhawk over his shoulders in the fireman’s carry.

Flash dug his feet in and used the leverage to lunge forward and give himself a little extra speed as he sprinted towards his teammates.

He skidded to a halt behind them, almost certain that he’d hit a new speed record as he set Jayhawk down. He was panting now, he’d pushed his limits to move fast enough and had made it away just as Nikoli fired on the enemy.

Alex patched into the frequency Doc was on, “Flash, what the hell is going on over there?!” Doc demanded.

“Frag landed way too close to Jay, he’s hurt bad,” Flash answered, removing the medic’s protective vest carefully to get at the wound, “Patch into my helmet cam and walk me through this, Doc…” Flash requested at the sight of the large piece of shrapnel between Jayhawk’s ribs.

“I see it,” Doc responded, “Looks pretty bad… the shrapnel will have to stay where it is for now, do what you can to slow the bleeding.”

“Doc, you and I both know what really needs to be done here,” Flash spoke calmly, he was still exhausted, he wasn’t sure he was up for it.

“Don’t do it, Flash, the strain would be too much on you, more likely than not, the metal’s pierced his lung,” Doc reasoned, “You know your limitations, this is too much, Flash.”
“I’ll be fine, Doc!” Even if it is too much for me, I’ll be fine, but if I don’t there’s no guarantee that he’ll make it,” Alex was already pulling his gloves off, “I’m doing it,” he added stubbornly and carefully pulled the metal out.

“Fine, but I can’t help you when the others start asking…” Doc stated simply, watching the process.

The metal was coated in scarlet blood. Doc grimaced, the shard was larger than he’d thought it would be.

Flash covered the injury with his hand, he put pressure to it to help slow the bleeding, however little it helped, as the nanites did their jobs, mistaking the blood on his hand for his own and moved through his pores and into Jay to repair the damage. He was already close to breaking point when any progress had been made.

He managed to stop the bleeding before he had to stop. Jayhawk hadn’t woken up, but Alex was sure he’d be fine. Flash looked up to see a good portion of the team staring at him.

“I’ll explain later…” He said simply, breathing heavily, he was exhausted and needed to rest.

**Holy shit what is this?! I finished it in the same week?! OMG!!! This makes me happy :3 I’m sure it makes you happy too ^_^ I’m gonna try it again xD Enjoy!**

*Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher*

~Spitfire out
Chapter 7 - Truth be Told

Heyo I’m starting this the morning after the last chapter was posted, it was around two in the morning when I did that. I’m a night owl, I go to bed at like 2:30 xD. So anyway, here’s this, going to try to finish it within this week, we’ll see how that goes :P Forewarning: this is the last chapter that I have pre-written, so from here on out, the chapters might take a little longer because I have to write them from scratch, but I have an idea of where I want this to go, so I’ll try not to take too long on it. Thanks for sticking with me all this time guys!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

“Flash, answers, now,” MacTavish demanded quickly as they put their gear away in the armory.

Alex’s back was to the Scottish Captain. He sighed and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing the metal spine-like thing running the length of his back.

“I’m supposed to be paralyzed waist down… This… thing… bridges the gap, has artificial nerves that react faster and stronger than natural ones. It goes all the way down to my feet, the braces on my legs let me reach seventy-five miles an hour without hurting myself, a set of things called nanites keep my heart rate under control to let me keep the speed,” he explained, “Another group of nanites, there are millions of them, are basically like white blood cells, only better, they accelerate the healing process and I can trick them into doing the same for other people.”

MacTavish nodded, he wasn’t sure what to think of this. Having what was basically a machine on their team could be an advantage, but he was still human, he still clearly had his limits. Alex had all but passed out on the chopper ride back to base.

At the extended silence, Alex knew the Captain was judging him, considering him a machine, a tool, just like so many others had. He pulled a clean shirt on and hid his back again. He really wanted to punch something now. He began walking away, quickly, but MacTavish caught his arm. Alex avoided looking at him.

“Where does Doc fit into this?”

Alex scowled, “It’s classified,” it was, technically, but he had discretion over who knew and how much they knew, seeing as it was part of him now.

He shook the hand on his arm off and walked out as Ghost entered. The Lieutenant watched Alex leave, he could feel the anger and frustration coming off of him in waves. He looked at MacTavish curiously, waiting for an explanation.

“I’ll explain later, Ghost,” MacTavish said simply, turning back to his own gear locker.

Alex headed, against his better judgement, towards the infirmary. He had a lot of explaining to do for Jayhawk. The medic deserved that much at least.

“Hey, Ian?” Toad asked, passing Archer the screwdriver he’d been looking for, “When I passed the locker room, I over-heard ‘Tavish and Ghost talking about promoting me so that you’re not over both the armory and the range, take a little work off your shoulders.”

“Oh?” Archer asked, more focused on his rifle than anything as he removed the ruined scope,
“That’s great, love.”

“We’ll be the same rank…” Toad pointed out, Archer was looking through a drawer for the spare scope, Toad rolled his eyes and went around Archer, opening a cabinet and grabbing the necessary parts and the scope, “Maybe we should just tell people about us,” he suggested, giving Archer the scope.

Archer froze, “Chris, have you lost it? What about Meat and Royce, and those like them?”

“What about them? They can’t do anything about it if we’re the same rank, Ian!” Chris argued, “I don’t want to have to fight with you to try to throw someone off our tails, I hate it.”

Ian was silent as he thought about it for a second, he set the scope down next to his rifle, “You’re right, Chris. I love you and I don’t want to have to fight with you.”

Chris smiled, “You’re such a sap,” he teased.

“Yeah,” Ian agreed with a smile, “I know.”

He turned and picked up the scope. He lined it up on the rail and tightened the screw. Toad passed Archer the cleaning rag and watched simply as Archer cleaned the barrel of his rifle.

Toad picked up the broken scope and looked at it, “Y’know, I think we should keep it,” he commented.

“And why’s that?” Archer asked, checking the action and cleaning the dirt and grime off.

“It’ a reminder of how much you need me,” Chris answered with a smug grin.

Archer laughed and dropped the rag over the barrel of his rifle before facing Toad.

“And you call me a sap?” he asked sarcastically.

Chris grinned and set the scope down. He stepped closer to Archer, trapping him between him and the workbench.

Archer heard someone coming and put a hand on Toad’s chest, sending him a wink and a mock glare.

When the door opened he saw that it was Meat and Royce, he spoke up, “Back off, Toad,” he spoke with faked harshness, pushing Toad back.

Toad gave an ambiguous grunt and turned, shouldering past Meat and Royce, and stormed out.

Meat and Royce stared after him as Archer turned back to his rifle and set the rag aside before going to look for something else.

“What’s with you and Toad?” Royce asked curiously.

“Nothing,” Archer answered gruffly, “He’s being a twat. You two need something?”

“Oh uh… I was wondering, if you and Toad were fighting, who’s going to spot for you?”

“A: Who says I need a spotter? B: This doesn’t stop him from spotting for me. C: Alex,” Archer answered simply.

“Oh yes, because we can all see where not having one got you,” Royce muttered to himself,
addressing Archer’s first point.

“I heard that,” Archer remarked plainly, still searching for the barrel cleaning kit, “I didn’t miss, the other guy shot first.”

“Because you didn’t spot him in time,” Royce said pointedly.

“Face it, Arch, you need a spotter,” Meat put in before Archer could respond, “And I know for a fact that Flash can’t shoot sitting still.”

“Yeah, well, fuck off. None of your business anyway,” Archer shot, giving up in his search and picking up his rifle in favor of getting away from these two, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a scope to sight in.”

Archer left the armory and made his way to the indoor range, no extra variables to throw his shots off. Toad was waiting for him there, their positions already set up.

“Sorry about that, love,” Ian apologized, walking up to him.

“I know, Ian, don’t worry,” Chris smiled, pecking Ian on the lips, “I love you, Arch, and these douchebags aren’t going to do a damn thing about it.”

“Love you too, Chris,” Archer laughed, “Now, help me sight this thing in.”

Toad chuckled and gestured to Archer’s position, “After you.”

Archer smiled and got set up. Toad got down beside him and picked up his scope, ready to spot Archer’s first shot. When the shot appeared on the target he let out a low whistle, “Way off, put about fifteen clicks right on it.”

Archer made the correction and fired again.

“Three up, two right.”

“So, explain to me, how the hell am I alive?” Jayhawk asked, sitting up in the bed.

Alex was leaning against the wall and Doc was standing between them, to the side with his arms crossed.

Alex sighed and straightened up, turning around and lifting his shirt partway, “The nanites that got me back on my feet so fast are small enough to fit through pores, but I get worn out really quickly when I use that to my advantage. I tricked them into thinking I was the one hurt, but since they didn’t receive a pain signal, they traveled through the pores and accelerated your healing.”

“Uh-huh… Well that’s not something you see every day… and you know about this, how, Doc?”

“They hired me as a doctor post-enhancement and psychologist,” Doc explained simply, “Made sure injuries, both physical and mental,” he looked discreetly at Alex, “were taken care of.”

“Right… so this thing is how you run so fast and make those jumps without getting hurt?”

Alex faced Jayhawk again and nodded, letting his shirt down again, “Yeah… This thing’s got a line of artificial nerves, bridges the gap in my spine…”

“Wait... What? Gap in your spine?”

Alex sighed, “And we’re back to that… did you notice the bloodstains on and around that fence?”
when Jayhawk nodded he continued, “That was my blood. I fell and it punched through my spine…”

“So, that thing is the only reason you’re walking…” Jayhawk clarified for himself.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” Alex shrugged, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, he didn’t look at Doc or Jayhawk as the younger man took the time to process the information.

Meat and Royce watched as the two snipers spoke. They ‘overheard’ Archer calling his partner ‘love’, saw the brief kiss they shared before getting in their positions.

There was no doubt anymore that they were more than best friends or brothers. They were so much more than that. They continued to watch as the snipers sighted in the new scope.

When they started getting up, Meat and Royce stood out of sight. Unfortunately, they were also out of earshot when Captain MacTavish walked up to them and spoke briefly with them.

They shook hands and the officer left. The snipers faced each other smiling widely. Archer looked like he might be laughing. He hugged Toad tight and kissed him on the cheek.

Meat managed to get a picture of the action before he and Royce snuck out of the range through the armory, they’d prove it to Scarecrow and Ozone that they were right.

Ozone froze at the picture, Archer and Toad had been caught, Archer kissing his boyfriend on the cheek.

Scarecrow was calmer about the situation, “Are you two really that daft? Everyone knows that’s a normal thing for British.”

“But it wasn’t!” Meat insisted, “They were,” Meat paused, unable to find the right words, and gave an exaggerated sigh of aggravation.

“What Meat-head is trying to say is that it wasn’t that kind of kiss, they’d just finished talking to MacTavish after sighting in Archer’s new scope,” Royce explained.

“So?” Scarecrow questioned matter-of-factly, “It doesn’t mean anything,” he lied, “Get the fuck over it, there is nothing between them.”

“And how do you know?” Meat questioned.

“Because there’s no real proof,” Ozone answered simply, “Just give it up,” he added as he and Scarecrow left.

“That was a little too close,” Scarecrow commented once they were out of earshot.

“Yeah…” Ozone agreed, “They need to be more careful…”

“We should tell them about this,” Scarecrow suggested.

The snipers were found in the armory, once again cleaning their rifles before they were put away.

“Hey, Archer, Toad, you guys might want to be a little bit more careful. Meat got a picture of you kissing him on the cheek,” Ozone advised rather bluntly.

“It’s alright Ozone, Toad’s being promoted soon. We won’t have any reason to hide it anymore,” Archer shrugged.
“That what the Cap was talking to you guys about?” Scarecrow asked curiously.

“It was,” Toad answered with a smile, “Archer and I are gonna have the same rank. They want me over the armory so that Arch doesn’t have to double up so much,” he explained with an excited grin.

“And, having the same rank, there’s nothing they can do about our relationship,” Archer added, putting an arm around Toad’s shoulders, “It’s a win/win/win situation.”

“Right, so in other words: you two are nuts,” Ozone said with a raised eyebrow, “Just because they can’t officially do anything doesn’t mean they won’t try something anyway.”

“And who’s to say that we can’t handle them on our own?” Toad questioned, arms crossed and defensive.

“Thanks for the help, mates, but we can handle those two,” Archer assured, turning and grabbing his rifle to put it away.

The two shrugged and left the snipers to their business.

Archer moved back to the workbench as Toad put his rifle up. Toad faced him with a smile and moved carefully towards Archer, trapping him against the workbench. He wrapped his arms around Archer’s neck. He kissed Ian softly and felt him smile into the kiss. Ian put his hands lightly on Chris’ hips. Today was a good day for them. He kissed Chris back. Chris’ arms tightened around his neck, pulling them closer together. Ian let his hands trail back so that his arms wrapped around Chris’ back.

Chris broke the kiss but kept his forehead pressed against Ian’s, staring into Ian’s cool blue eyes.

“It’s a wonder why anyone would want to cover up your eyes,” Toad remarked softly, “I could stare at them all day…”

Ian smiled back, “Sap,” he accused lightly.

Chris laughed softly, his accusation from earlier having been thrown back at him, “Right back at you, ‘love’.”

Ian laughed and shook his head. He kissed Chris once more. Chris chuckled along with him and returned the kiss. It was a short one, but he could feel his heart pounding in his chest so hard he was surprised Ian couldn’t hear it.

He pulled back only slightly, his fingers ghosting over the faint scaring under Ian’s eye.

“Why would Shepherd agree to send you out on your own?” He wondered aloud, “He knows you’re colorblind doesn’t he?”

Archer hummed in response, covering Toad’s hand with his and kissing his palm, “As far as I know, he does,” he answered, “It’s best not to question the General, love.” Archer looked over Toad’s shoulder briefly, “Someone’s coming,” he warned simply, turning towards the table, making it look like he was working.

Toad stepped away from Archer and opened a supply cabinet, putting away the rifle cleaning kit. He closed the cabinet again to see Shepherd on the other side, he jumped but quickly snapped to attention and saluted.
“As you were, gentlemen,” he said politely, “Richards, how’s your eye?”

“Fine, sir,” Archer answered quickly.

“Good, the team is heading out to clear an oil rig SAM sight and I want the two of you in a chopper ready to provide sniper support for the second stage of the mission,” he explained shortly.

“Understood, sir, when do we leave?” Archer responded.

“You have twelve hours to get ready, rest, and gear up, the chopper will take off from the north landing pad at precisely 0900 hours with or without you,” Shepherd spoke quickly.

“We’ll be there at 0800 then,” Archer confirmed.

“Good,” the General replied with a curt nod, “The rig is being used as a SAM sight, so the chopper will hold at a safe distance until the deck team gives the signal. Until then, you are cleared to provide long-distance support only if you have a clear shot.”

“Understood,” both snipers spoke at the same time.

“Any other questions?” the General asked, looking them both in the eye.

“No, sir, we’ll be ready,” Toad replied quickly.

“Staff Sergeants,” the General nodded to Toad and Archer in turn, acknowledging Toad by his new rank, “I’ll see you boys out on the helipad in the morning to go over the mission once more before dust off,” he said, leaving the two snipers to their work in the armory.

Toad waited until the General was gone before slinking back over to Archer and wrapping his arms around the Brit’s waist.

“So, when and how are we gonna tell them?” Toad asked curiously.

Archer hummed thoughtfully in response, “Maybe just sit in the rec room for a while, sit a little closer than usual maybe throw a couple jokes back and forth, laugh a little.”

Toad smiled, “I like that idea,” he agreed, kissing Archer lightly.

Archer returned the kiss, “Good. Now, let’s get ready for the op tomorrow.”

Toad nodded and backed away from Archer, “Make sure you don’t forget that little med-kit, Jayhawk won’t be joining us this time.”

“What makes you say that?” Archer asked curiously, taking the small pack down from the shelf that held the rest of his gear so that he could check it.

“Frag landed way too close to him in Rio, he’s okay, but I highly doubt that he’s good for an op right now,” Toad explained simply, clicking rounds into the magazine for his rifle.

He set the full magazine on the workbench and turned to take his vest down from the rack, passing Archer his as well. The two snipers busied themselves, checking for major flaws that would need to be repaired.

“You see my glove, Chris?” Archer asked, checking over his gear.
“I think you left it on the range,” Toad answered, filling the extra magazines for their rifles.

“Alright, I’ll be back,” Archer set his vest on the bench, “Don’t worry about guile suits, if we’re gonna be in a chopper, it won’t matter,” he added, leaving the armory to retrieve his glove.

He entered the range and instantly felt like he was being watched. He paused a moment, but continued slowly to his position where he spotted his glove laying in the middle of the mat. He knelt down at his position, picking up his glove. He only wore one, to hold the rifle without hurting his hand. He didn’t wear a glove on his trigger hand, he needed to be able to feel the trigger. He stood slowly, suspicious of his surroundings as he made his way back to the armory.

He stopped at the open door and leaned his shoulder against the door frame. Toad’s back was to him as he checked over Archer’s guile suit for holes and flaws.

Ian smiled and shook his head, “Love, I thought I told you not to worry about those.”

Christian looked up and over his shoulder, “I had everything else ready, thought I might as well make sure it’s ready for the next op,” he shrugged.

Archer shook his head, smiling, “Come on, love, let’s get something to eat and get some sleep before the op.”

Toad smiled and put the suit away. He met Archer at the door and laced their fingers together. Now that they were the same rank, it didn’t matter if anyone saw them.

Well, since I posted that last chapter at 2 in the morning, and it’s only 9:20 now as I’m typing this, this counts as two chapters in one day! Surprise! Three chapters over the course of two days! You’re welcome! That’s the last of what I had hand written, so now I begin Chapter Eight, might take longer than these last few :/ But hey, having so many chapters back to back was fun!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
The ride on the chopper was long and quiet, but mostly cold. Archer and Toad sat in silence, their weapons secured in the single weapon racks between the seats. They had the luxury of a larger chopper than the others, a Blackhawk, while the others all infiltrated from the water and other teams loaded up in Little Birds waiting at a distance. Archer did not envy them; Archer had Toad to sit close to for warmth.

They waited patiently for the signal, occasionally lifting their rifles to scan the portion of the rig they could see to provide sniper support through the enemies’ smoke screen. Toad used a thermal imaging scope to look into the room that needed to be breached. He keyed his comm link to command and informed them of the hostages and explosives he’d seen.

“Acknowledged, Sierra 2-1, the deck team has been informed,” Command replied after a few moments that felt longer than they were.

“Sniper Team One,” Command spoke after a few moments longer, “the deck team has been pinned down in the smoke screen and is requesting support, do you have a visual?”

Archer lifted his scope and scanned the deck, “No, sir, the building’s in the way. Is there any chance of getting closer and changing angle?”

“Not if you don’t want to get blown out of the sky,” Command replied, “If you have a clear shot, take it, otherwise the deck team will handle it themselves.”

The sniper duo did not like the decision, but had no say in the matter, “Understood, Command, Sniper Team One out,” Archer said calmly and sighed a little.

He looked over at Toad and shrugged, lifting his rifle to his shoulder and peering through the scope.

“Archer, I have eyes on, twe-“

“Take the shot, Toad,” Archer cut him off, “You’re capable,” he kept scanning as Toad hesitated, but took the shot.

“Target down…” Toad informed simply.

Archer had seen it, “Nice shot.”

Toad’s lips curled into a smile as he looked over at Archer, who looked at him in the corner of his eye. Focus, Toad scolded himself silently and looked back through his scope. Five minutes of watching nothing later and the signal was sent. The helicopter started forward and Archer and Toad lowered their rifles and glanced at each other.

It was another twenty minutes before they started approaching the Gulag. The pair moved to the edge of the chopper and hooked up their safety harnesses to the repelling anchors in the floor and
sat on the edge with their rifles in their laps.

“All snipers, this is MacTavish, standby to engage,” the Captain spoke over the all-team link, “Stabilize,” he addressed the chopper pilots who guided their birds to give the snipers shots on the SAM teams, “All snipers, cleared to engage.”

Archer took the first shot, Downing two in one hit before they could pull the tarp off of the SAM, while Toad took two rapid shots to take out the other two who hadn’t lined themselves up quite so nicely. The chopper moved around to the next site and again the sniper team took out the enemy soldiers before the tarp could be pulled off of the SAM. They took out three stations in total, the others being taken out simultaneously by the other teams.

Archer and Toad’s helicopter hung back a little ways, the snipers providing support as the ground team pushed to the gulag’s entrance. Their chopper would be used for evac once it was over, the Little Birds were already waving off to RTB. The snipers kept the yard clear while the team was inside.

What felt like hours later, a jet flew by, dropping bombs. Archer and Toad held onto each other, the chopper, and their weapons all at once as the pilot momentarily lost control. Toad could feel searing heat from the bombs as the chopper tilted slightly and lifted away from the flames.

MacTavish came over the comm, sounding angry as ever, “Shepherd what the hell was that?! Get the Navy to cease fire!”

“The Navy isn’t in a talking mood right now, standby,” Toad chuckled, careful to not activate his comm and let the others hear that he found the situation humorous, normally the hard-faced General seemed intimidating, even scary, but over the comm it seemed the older man had a somewhat of a sense of humor, “Bravo Six, they’ve agreed to stop firing for now, keep going. Out.”

Archer heard another bang, this time over the comm, it was a breaching charge; someone had left their comm open. It was accompanied by gunfire, lots of it. Archer and Toad shared a look, unable to help from their place in the chopper. The sound cut-out. The sniper pair could only hope that it wasn’t because the operator had been killed, but that they had noticed and turned their comm off and back to the closed comm link that the ground team was on.

The moments dragged on into what felt like several minutes, but was probably only one or two.

“Drop it!” the voice of MacTavish cut in faintly, it wasn’t coming from the officer’s comm but someone else’s.

The snipers shared a humored look, it seemed the ear piece was simply malfunctioning, and they knew immediately that it belonged to Roach, who ended up getting the hell beaten out of him and his equipment every op.

“What?” The expression the two sniper’s shared quickly became quizzical, this was not a voice they recognized.

“What?” MacTavish spoke again, and it only brought on more confusion, “This belongs to you, sir.”

Toad’s head was starting to ache from the confusion until Worm’s voice cut into the comm, “Who’s Soap?” he questioned.

Toad allowed himself to laugh at how nonchalant Worm sounded in the middle of a warzone and surrounded by people who wanted to kill them.
Archer grabbed onto the chopper with one hand and wrapped the other arm around Toad’s waist instinctively as another jet flew by to drop another bomb. The pair knew their safety harnesses would keep them safely inside the chopper even if it were to go horizontal, but there was no stopping reflex, and that moment of reflex was all it took to doom them. Luckily, it had no such effect this time, but Archer would not let himself make a risky move again, not during an op, not when he knew the move was unnecessary.

“Bravo Six, be advised, they’ve started their bombardment early! Get the hell outta there now!” Shepherd shouted over the comm, clearly less than pleased with the Navy’s decision.

Archer and Toad moved only slightly to brace themselves and get ready to help their teammates aboard as their ride swung around to a tunnel opening into the cliff. The tunnel collapsed before the team could make it and the pilot lifted them back into the sky before debris could knock them out of it. Archer and Toad watched, nearly panic stricken as the tunnels collapsed, all they could do was hope that their team hadn’t been crushed.

“Six-Four, where the hell are you, over?” MacTavish came over the communication system linked to their chopper.

The snipers relaxed, realizing the team was okay, MacTavish was not one to leave a man behind, if they were running for it, he stayed at the back, so that he could pick up any who fell.

“Bravo Six,” their pilot responded, “There’s too much smoke. I can’t see you!”

“Roach is down! Roach!” MacTavish yelled.

Toad rolled his eyes, every mission, the bug got himself into trouble. He was called Roach for a reason.

Then there was a flare, and Toad moved first, unclipping himself from the anchor and clipping himself, instead, to Archer's harness. Toad attached a rig to the anchor he’d just detached from and sent it down through the hole.

“Bravo Six, I see your flare,” the pilot informed, giving a thumbs up back to the cabin, addressing the snipers with it, “SPIE rig on the way.”

Fire shot up through the hole, a result of the Navy’s artillery bombardment, just as the last man, Worm, made it clear. Archer and Toad made fast work of helping everybody up and onto the chopper. Archer looked briefly over Roach’s head, he was bleeding slightly, but was otherwise okay, and Worm’s burns, which were only first degree, painful, but not all that harmful. And then there was the matter of the new addition, ‘Price’, as their Captain had called him.

MacTavish called attention to himself as he stood in the middle of the chopper, but requested that everyone remain sitting, seeing as they’d just completed a difficult op and were probably tired, then his tone changed, became more serious and commanding as he gestured to Price, “This is Captain Price, I expect you all to show him the same respect you show me and to follow his orders as if they were my own.”

“But, sir,” Worm raised his hand sheepishly, “I respect that you trust him and all, but… I don’t know, is this a good idea? The people on this team have a history of trust issues,” he pointed out, “Do you really think they’ll follow the orders of someone they don’t know?”

“Yes, I do. Price is an old friend of mine, and I can assure you all that he’s trustworthy and wouldn’t do anything to harm the team,” MacTavish, ‘Soap’, Archer would never get used to calling him that, insisted, sending a dangerous look to Worm.
Worm raised his hands in mock surrender and didn’t say anything further. Archer and Toad unclipped themselves as the doors were slid closed and secured. The snipers allowed the members of the ground team and Price to occupy the benches, they simply sat on the floor against the hull. There was little room now that there were seven people aboard, not counting the pilot, co-pilot, and crewmember, their shoulders brushed and they settled with leaning against each other to get more comfortable for the ride back to base. Hours later and one bumpy aerial refuel later, they team disembarked from the Blackhawk and marched themselves to the armory to dump their gear and then to the showers. More than half of them were covered in dust and dirt from the collapsing tunnels. Worm and Roach were promptly escorted to the infirmary by Doc himself, who released them to the showers only minutes later, after making sure they were properly taken care of.

The hot water pummeling Archer’s back felt like a massage, it felt great after being stuck in the cold with little to no moving around to keep his body temperature up. The hand on his shoulder made him jump. Toad laughed. Archer rolled his eyes with a smile as Toad walked away, still chuckling over his accomplishment. Archer finished washing himself and dressed in comfortable pants and a loose fitting t-shirt. He made his way to the rec room and flopped down on the couch to watch the football game the Captain and Ghost were currently arguing over.

Odd, Archer thought, they should be in debrief or with Price… The thought was soon forgotten as Toad appeared next to him, smiling and sitting closer than was really necessary. Archer gave him a small smile and rested his arm around Toad’s shoulders.

Meat looked dumbly at them for a moment, then at everyone that was evidently ignoring them, he gestured widely at the pair, “How do you guys not see this shit?!” he questioned.

Everyone stared at Meat a solid second before they glanced at Archer and Toad then went back to what they were doing, “Oh, we see it Meat, we just don’t give a shit,” Worm commented.

Archer, however, saw money changing hands and whispers of all kinds, “You guys were betting on us?” it was his turn to question the entire team in disbelief.

Toad just laughed. The whole predicament just seemed funny now, they’d tried so hard to keep it hidden, and the others were betting on them. Meat looked dumbfounded and Royce just shrugged, if the others were cool with it he didn’t see a problem so long as they kept it to themselves.

“Meat, Toad and Archer are the same rank now,,” MacTavish commented plainly, “it’s perfectly legal. The whole ‘formalities’ bullshit was supposed to happen tomorrow, but Shepherd and Price are drawing up plans for an op for tomorrow…”

Meat frowned, but didn’t say anything else as he left. Alex watched them with narrowed eyes for a moment before turning back to the screen where his Bohs* were playing.

After a while Archer decided he was tired and left to turn in early, while Toad stayed to watch the game for about half an hour before getting bored and getting up to join Archer in bed. Archer didn’t move when the door opened. Toad smiled a little and leaned against the doorframe.

“How would you do if I were an assassin sent to take you out?” he questioned.

Archer grunted, “I heard you open the door and I knew it was you,” he answered, turning over to face Toad, “I know everyone on this Task Force by their footsteps,” he added matter-of-factly as an afterthought.

Toad chuckled and entered the room, closing the door behind him. He joined Ian in the bed and curled into the man’s chest as he turned over to wrap an arm around him. Of course, ten minutes
later, before either man fell asleep, there was a knock at the door. Heavy, but not rudely so, three knocks… It was MacTavish.

Archer stood first and crossed over to the door and opened it, “Sir?”

It was, indeed, MacTavish, “Shepherd wants you two for a demonstration on the range, get dressed and get down there.”

“Yes, sir, we’ll be there in five,” Archer replied, Toad was already getting up and dressing when Archer closed the door.

They entered the range together to see most, if not all, of the Task Force gathered around their positions. Their weapons were already set on the positions and Shepherd stood nearby, observing, not instructing, it seemed. Archer had been set up with his Barrett Fifty Cal for the demonstration, while Toad had a spotting scope and his M14 EBR. Archer was too tired and impatient to notice that someone had replaced his muzzle brake with a lower quality one.

Archer approached MacTavish, “What is it we’re demonstrating?”

“How you two operate in the field, without words, and your position in general,” MacTavish answered, gesturing widely at the snipers positions, “Now if you would?”

Archer nodded and the two snipers got into position, checking their rifles and equipment. MacTavish popped the first target and the snipers set to work. It was down in a matter of seconds and MacTavish popped two more targets. Toad looked at Archer, who communicated that Toad was to take the one on the left, only he did so without actually saying or doing anything.

The targets were down and one more came up. Archer saw it in his sights and he adjusted his position to get the shot. His lips parted ever-so-slightly in his focus. Meat took the opportunity to shove Archer with his foot, causing the buttplate of the rifle to shift in his shoulder. Archer’s eyes widened with pain as the rifle kicked back into his collar bone. He rolled onto his back, clutching his shoulder, face scrunched up, and groaning in pain.

“You fucker!” Toad shouted jumping to his feet as he rounded on Meat.

“Toad!” MacTavish warned, “Stand down. Archer, go see Doc, Jayhawk, go with him. Meat, my office, now. Toad, continue the demonstration.”

Shepherd watched with an appraising eye as Jayhawk helped Archer to his feet and Toad examined the rifle the senior sniper had been using before getting back into his own position. Archer was guided out of the range and towards the infirmary. Toad was now only following MacTavish’s orders as an excuse to blow off steam by shooting his targets.

Shepherd called off the demonstration, claiming that that had been enough excitement for one day. Toad put away their rifles and equipment, pocketing the muzzle brake from Archer’s rifle, along with the one that should’ve been on it. The proper muzzle brake had been sitting in the middle of the work bench…

Once he finished his work in the armory, he ran to the infirmary to check on Archer. He entered to find Doc helping Archer get his arm into a sling.

“What’s wrong?” he questioned, a tone of panic underlying his voice.

Archer frowned and looked down at his feet.

“Broken collar bone,” Doc answered, “It’ll be about six weeks before he’s shooting again.”
“That’s not so bad…” Toad commented with a comforting hand on Archer’s good shoulder.

“That’s… not all…” Doc’s voice took on a more serious note, “It strained the tendons in his shoulder and a few muscles in his back… He won’t be able to take that kind of recoil, even dampened, for a long time, he’ll have to work back up to it, which can take years.”

Archer felt his heart shatter for the second time that day at the look on Toad’s face. He sighed, there was nothing he could say to make this better, but he wished desperately that there was. So he did the next best thing and hugged Toad close with his good arm. He wanted to cry, but nothing was going to change what had happened. Meat had fucked his shoulder up and that was that.

Toad left quickly when Archer released him.

There were three, angry knocks on the door and MacTavish sighed in irritation, “In a minute!” he called, he was still dealing with Meat.

Toad opened the door slightly, “Sir, it’s important… and relevant…”

MacTavish sighed and dragged one hand down his face before gesturing for Toad to come in, “What is it?”

Toad pulled the lame muzzle brake from his pocket, it was cracked from the recoil and completely useless now, “This is what was on Archer’s rifle,” he set the weak, plastic muzzle brake on the desk and pulled out the real one, “This is what was supposed to be on it,” it was a perfect look alike, had the fake not been cracked, “I’m betting someone snuck into the armory sometime when it was empty to switch them out.”

Meat was staring nervously at the brakes.

“And?” MacTavish questioned, “You think it has something to do with Meat?”

Meat stiffened and looked up at both of them.

“Yes, sir. Meat is our best lock-pick next to Ghost, and clearly has it out for at least Archer,” Toad explained, “He is the one that shoved Archer. I bet he did it because the recoil didn’t look like it was actually doing anything to him…”

“And how is Archer?” MacTavish asked curiously.

Toad frowned, “Broken collar bone, strained tendons and muscles… Doc says he won’t be taking the recoil again any time soon…”

MacTavish nodded and handed the form he’d been filling out since he’d sat down to Meat, “Pack your bags,” he instructed, his face hard.

He did it partly because he knew neither Archer nor Toad would be watching out for Meat anymore, even after Archer recovered. Mostly, though, he did it because he would not tolerate the idea that it was okay to hurt someone because they were different from you, and Meat didn’t seem to regret what he’d done, even admitted, a few seconds of silence later, that Toad had been right in assuming he’d switched the muzzle brakes out. Probably only in attempt to lessen the punishment when they reviewed the security footage to make sure he wasn’t covering for anyone.

Toad went back to the armory and found Archer looking longingly over his rifle. He sighed and went over to him. He put the proper muzzle brake back on the rifle and pulled Archer into a hug, careful of his injured shoulder.
“It’s going to be alright, Ian…” Chris comforted, “You’ll recover and be back on it in no time… You know Doc, he… he always over-exaggerates the recovery time…”

He didn’t. Well, rarely ever. Ian appreciated the sentiment though, and hugged Chris back.

The next day found half of the Task Force assaulting a sub base and the other half training on the range. Archer, being the Range Officer, had to be there, however much it pained him to observe and not be able to participate. Out of sympathy, Toad stayed off of the firing line as well, but played it off as simply assisting the crippled sniper by demonstrating where he couldn’t and helping to fix the others’ positions. He knew Archer would not approve of him not doing something he wanted to do just because he couldn’t join him.

Most of the targets made both snipers want to cringe. It really wasn’t all that bad, but, by the snipers’ standards, they might as well have missed the target all together.

An hour later, the team left at base were all about, doing various things, either job related or fun related, though mostly the later. Archer and Toad sat in the rec room, playing cards with Scarecrow and Ozone. Archer, of course, was winning. Toad wasn’t trying to beat him after all. Royce and Chemo were playing a video game while various others sat around watching and betting. Jayhawk was in the infirmary with Doc. They were going over the x-rays and scan results from Archer’s injury, hoping to find a way to get the melancholy sniper back on the firing line faster.

The sun was going down before the field team returned, all bruised and battered and looking rather indignant. Save for Price, who looked like he could care less what the others thought. When questioned, MacTavish only commented that they’d talk about it later.

Later, it turned out, was the span of half an hour and in the briefing room. Price, it seemed, had launched a nuke without informing anyone of his plan, and detonated it in the atmosphere above downtown Washington D.C., causing an EMP and resulting in the Americans taking back their capitol.

There was a stunned silence in the room. Price had only just returned from the Gulag, and already they had come closer to winning the war in a single day than they had in several years.

* - 'Bohs' is a nickname for the Bohemians, an Irish football club and Alex's favorite team

Okay, yep, odd cut ending, but eh, I’m lazy, it’s 1:03 in the morning and it’s been about a week or so. I don’t know, I think I’ve done pretty good for myself, the word count is up to average, I hit all the things I wanted to hit even if I did gloss a little too briefly over the Gulag op. Could probably have used some more Alex and Roach, but I felt like it was becoming their story more than Archer and Toad’s and it is supposed to be their story, not Alex and Roach’s, so meh. I wonder how Arch is going to provide sniper support in Loose Ends with a bum shoulder...

MHWAHHAHHAAAAA!!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Down Time

Okay, guys, I done fucking goofed. The TF hearing about the retaking of the White House was supposed to take the two months it would take Archer to (mostly) recover because of the EMP knocking out communications. The entire story’s time-line was riding on it working out that way. So now, I have to give you two chapters of improv to get back to what I need (little reminder that this is cutting before Loose Ends happens then picking up in another story). Sorry guys T_T just… hang in there a little longer, we’re almost done… (Also I was about a thousand words into this chapter when my computer updated without my permission and deleted everything I’d done on it even though I saved it so… fml…) Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

P.S. I’m so sorry this took so long guys. It was one problem after another and my family’s going through a kind of rough patch right now because of something our dogs did and life is just a mess right now. I’ll try to stay consistent though. Sorry.

It was a waiting game now. The Russians were losing the fight in the States, the Task Force and an American detachment had cut off their supply lines (although they still seemed to be pretty damn well supplied from some unknowable source), and they had Price, who Makarov apparently hated with the burning passion of a thousand suns. It was only a matter of time before he made a mistake and led the Task Force right to him.

For now, a few of the members had been sent on leave, including Alex, Jayhawk, and Worm. Alex had seemed especially excited to get back to Ireland to see his younger sister. Jayhawk had claimed that the relationship between him and his stepfather was rather tense at the moment, Archer could related to that-though on a much different level—and wished him luck. Worm was just happy to get home to his wife and young son he’d yet to meet.

The rest of the Task Force, in their bored waiting state, resorted to seeing who could pull the best pranks. Which turned into a lot of annoyed officers and an unfortunate Roach in and out of the infirmary for minor things. MacTavish put a stop to the pranking before it could get out of hand by announcing that, if they all behaved—god he felt like he was talking to children—that they would visit the local bar every Friday.

That was where they were now, some enjoying themselves by means of copious amounts of flirting and drinking and dancing horribly, others, like Archer, Toad, and the three officers, preferred to enjoy their drinks in relative silence, with a bit of small talk thrown in randomly.

Toad slipped off to the dance floor as a song he liked came on, but Archer didn’t really pay attention. His arm was still in a sling, of course, it had only been a week, and he could feel the crowd’s eyes burning holes in his back. More specifically, the back of his wounded shoulder. They were wondering what had happened to him, no doubt. He took a long drink and tried to focus on something else.

Toad slinked up behind him as the song ended and wrapped his arms around him, “What-d-ya say we get outta here?”

“You’re drunk,” Archer could smell the whiskey on his breath.
“So?” Toad questioned, “You are too.”

Archer shrugged and stood up. Toad grinned and they paid for their drinks before exiting and starting the walk back to base. It wasn’t a long walk, and it was starting to warm up, it felt quite nice, actually.

The next week, somebody had apparently tried their luck, and they would not be taking a trip to the bar again that Friday. Instead they entertained themselves with movies and games in the rec room.

It had been Scarecrow’s bright idea to put in a cheesy old horror movie filled to the brim with gore.

“Oh now that’s just uncalled for,” Toad commented as one guy was stabbed at least sixty times, he was well past dead after the first three.

Archer grimaced in agreement and wrapped his good arm around Toad’s shoulders. Archer, Toad, Ghost, and Chemo all occupied the large couch. MacTavish and Roach took up a smaller one, while Price sat comfortably in a reclining chair. The rest were sitting all around on the floor. Doc had opted out of the ‘team movie night’ in favor of doing whatever it was he’d been so busy with the past almost two weeks now.

It was Thursday, Jayhawk and Alex would be coming back Saturday, while Worm had opted to take his retirement and stay home to help his wife raise their son. Worm had told them all over a video call that they were welcome to visit him in Ohio any time and the team had told him that he and his family would always be welcome on their base and wished him well.

Archer was drawn from his thoughts by a blood curdling scream that was not from the movie, but rather Chemo as he watched some chick getting hacked to pieces by the serial killer. Archer rolled his eyes and looked over at Toad, who was now pressing closer to him.

A half hour later the movie was over and the mass murderer was dead and Prophet suggested something much less horrifying. He pulled up a chick flick and everyone groaned.

MacTavish stood up and pushed Prophet away from the laptop, “No way are we watching that,” he declined, pulling up a different movie, a Bond one.

There were murmurs of agreement and Prophet shrugged and took his seat again. The movie started and Archer yawned, he was getting bored of the movie marathon. He would much rather be on the range. He sighed quietly and leaned more into Toad for comfort.

The next morning Doc pulled Archer away from the range during training, leaving Toad, who had wanted to go with Archer, in charge. MacTavish, Ghost, and Price, were all with a group training outdoors.

MacTavish came in half an hour later to Toad standing where Archer should’ve been, chewing his lip, “Where’s Archer?” he questioned.

“Doc pulled him,” Toad answered immediately, not taking his eyes off the firing line.

“For?”

Toad shrugged, “No idea.”

“I’ll take over here,” MacTavish offered, he could almost feel the nerves and anxiety coming off the younger sniper, “You can go check on him.”
Toad nodded and stepped back, “Thank you, sir.”

He left quickly for the infirmary. When he entered he was informed by one of the nurses that Doc was busy with Archer and that he couldn’t go back to see them until they were done. Toad took to pacing restlessly. He nearly tackled Archer when they came out into the front room.

“Ian!” Chris hugged him carefully, then looked at Doc expectantly, “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s looking good, healing nicely,” Doc nodded.

“Then why’d you have to pull him in the middle of practice and scare the shit out of me?!?” Toad questioned.

Doc laughed a little at his reaction, “There was something I wanted to test, couldn’t wait.”

“And?”

Doc shrugged with a sly smile, “He can begin training on a weapon with minimal recoil after his collar bone heals.”

“And by ‘minimal recoil’ you mean?” Toad asked curiously.

“What’s that gun you use? The um… ah help me out here,” Doc did not shoot or use weapons, there was no reason for him to know what they were called.

“Rifle,” Toad corrected, “The M14 EBR.” He nodded and carefully kept himself cool, it seemed he would be the one teaching Archer for once.

“Yes, that’s the one. He can start training on that after a physical,” Doc smiled.

Toad smiled and wrapped an arm around Archer’s waist.

“Toad!” MacTavish called as he entered the infirmary then his eyes locked on the pair of snipers as they separated a step to turn and face him, “Thought I might find you both here. Alex gets back in the morning, Toad, the next morning you and him have a lead to follow. I’ll give all of you the briefing tomorrow.”

Toad frowned and put a comforting hand on Archer’s back. He could tell from his posture, which had barely even changed, that he was not happy about this situation.

“Sir, Chris is perfectly capable of following this lead on his own. Alex isn’t exactly covert,” he argued.

“It’s Shepherd’s order, Archer, not mine. He wanted you on it first, but with you out he’s selected Toad. Toad is going as Flash’s back-up,” MacTavish sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, “Look, we’ll go over it in the briefing tomorrow.”

Archer’s brow knitted tight as MacTavish turned to leave, Shepherd had wanted him… without his spotter… Shepherd knew about Archer’s colorblindness, and how Toad was the only one that could spot for him because of their history. It made no sense as to why Shepherd would want him and not Toad.

“I’m gonna be fine, Ian,” Toad insisted, stepping in front of Archer, “Why don’t we just go grab somethin’ to eat then…” he was going to say hit the range, but… he shrugged, “I don’t know watch a movie or something.”
Archer looked at him a moment before nodding, “Yeah, alright, I trust you.”

The rest of the day consisted of food, comfortable naps, and rec room card games. Alex and the others, save for Worm, would be returning in the morning, and that would mark the return to active duty for the entire Task Force. Which mean training, coupled with more training, and even more training to follow. They had a long and difficult week ahead of them.

That morning, Jayhawk and Alex arrived back on base as planned. After a quick rest the three marksmen were found in the command room with MacTavish and Ghost.

“Alright,” MacTavish started as Ghost handed Alex and Toad each a file, an extra was set open on the table for Archer, “This is suspected to be one of Makarov’s safe houses,” He said, drawing attention up to the projector, “We’d drop a bomb on it, but we can’t confirm that he’s there or that there are no civvies there. That’s what you’re going in to find out. Alex, you’ll be going in undercover as one of Makarov’s personal bodyguards. Toad, you’ll cover him from the roof of a nearby building. Archer, we want you here, in the command room, helping to coordinate the op.”

“Yes, understood,” all three men answered at once.

Archer was frowning. He’d much rather be on the op than on the sidelines, unable to do anything in the case that something went wrong. It bothered him, the helpless feeling. It reminded him of his childhood, when there was nothing he could do but watch everything around him go to shit. Of course, with a broken collar bone, he’d only make things worse, so he cursed Meat and tried to be okay with the position he was given.

Toad noticed the change in Archer’s attitude and put a hand on his back as the officers left the marksmen to their plans.

Archer sighed, “I’m alright, Chris…”

“No you’re not…” Toad called him out on the lie, “It’s bothering you; I know it is. No one knows you better than I do.”

Archer shook his head, “Yeah, okay, it bothers me, but there’s nothing we can do about it, I’d just make things worse if I was on the op…”

Toad hugged Archer carefully, “We’ll be okay, Ian.”

Alex nodded and broke his awkward silence, “I won’t let anything happen to ‘im.”

Toad wanted to argue that he could take care of himself, but it was for Archer’s piece of mind, so he said nothing of it.

Archer nodded to the Irishman, “Alright, come on, we’ve got an op to plan.”

“Something about this doesn’t seem right,” Ghost commented as he and MacTavish walked back to the rec room, “it’s too easy…”

“I don’t know, Ghost, it’s been two weeks and he’s desperate. I feel pretty good about our chances here,” MacTavish replied simply, sticking his hands in his pockets.

Ghost made a sound in the back of his throat, “I’m not convinced…” He let the silence drag on for a moment then dropped his chin with a sigh, “I’d probably feel better about it if we had our best on it…”

“Ghost. McKay is a good kid and he’s skilled. He can get the job done. Besides, he’s got one of
our best watching his back. Even if something does go wrong, Toad can handle it.”

“McKay?! McKay is a fuckin’ machine from what you told me. We can’t know what he’ll do. For all we know he belongs to the enemy and doesn’t even know it, or he does and he’s playing us.”

Alex had been just leaving the command room when he overheard MacTavish and Ghost talking. So they really didn’t trust him. They thought he was a machine, just like everyone else.

“Toad. Can. Handle. It.” MacTavish responded, “Besides, don’t you think if he was one of Makarov’s he’d have pulled something by now?”

Maybe he should’ve just stayed home… Alex needed to run, just stop thinking and run. So he did. He ran through the halls, flying past anyone in the way and right outside. He was crying now. Alex shook his head and tried to stop. The tears blurred his vision and his thoughts distracted him. He tripped over his own feet and stumbled, rolling several more feet before stopping. He didn’t move for a while, until he saw feet in front of his face.

Alex pushed himself up slowly and looked up, it was Ghost; he shoved away the hand offered to help him up. “I heard you talking to MacTavish… You don’t trust me, you think I’m all machine, you don’t think I’m human.” He accused harshly.

“McKay-“

“I don’t know why I thought you people would be any different,” Alex scoffed, cutting him off and running again, as fast and as far as he could get from Ghost.

He ran and ran and ran straight into Roach. He’d slowed down to a normal pace from exhausting himself and didn’t have the force to knock either of them over. Roach caught him regardless.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong, Alex?” Roach asked holding his arms. Alex shook his head and pulled away. Roach held him tighter, “C’mon, Lex… you can talk to me…”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Alex mumbled, looking away from him Roached roomed with one of them. If Alex talked to him about it then he’d talk to them about it. That’d bring up even more trouble, he was sure.

“Alright… we don’t have to talk…” Roach assured, rubbing Alex’s arm comfortingly, “We can just… go back to your room and relax for a while…”

Alex nodded, “Yeah… alright…”

They spent the rest of that day together laying in Alex’s bed with Roach carefully avoiding touching Alex’s back. He had the feeling that his back had everything to do with this.

“I have to go on an op in the morning…” Alex commented randomly, tracing patterns on Roach’s chest.

“Yeah? You only just got back, and they’re sending you out already?” Roach questioned.

“They don’t trust me…” Alex ignored the question.

“They wouldn’t send you if they didn’t trust you,” Roach commented, running a hand through Alex’s hair.
Alex hummed his response and hugged Roach close to him.

He stepped onto the Russian base with a breath. Alex had never been undercover before. Surely there was someone better suited for this, he couldn’t even speak Russian dammit! ‘Toad can speak Russian’, he reminded himself ‘Toad is going to feed me lines.’ Alex took another breath and started forward, he had to find that intel and get out before he gave himself away. He walked through the base, making a show of looking like he was inspecting the base’s security. Alex made sure to create a mental map of the place in case things went sideways and he had to run.

“Go right,” Toad instructed as Alex approached a crossroads.

Alex obeyed and turned right, inspecting the walls on either side of him. His grip tightened on his rifle as he saw someone walking towards him.

“Keep walking. Ignore him.”

Alex walked right past the man, who said nothing and kept walking. He let out a breath of relief as he kept walking.

“Intel center should be the building on your left.”

Alex paused a moment where he was, looking like he was simply on patrol, before turning left and walking up the steps to the building Toad had designated as the Intel center. He opened the door and slung his rifle across his back.

“I can’t direct you in there. You’ll have to find your own way around.”

Alex walked down the halls with his hands in his pockets. He found a mostly quiet room of computers, more than half of them were unoccupied. He checked his watch. The local time was 11:45, most people would be at lunch. It gave Alex the time and privacy he needed to get the intel undetected and get out. He sat down at one of the computers and plugged in the flash drive he’d been given. The virus program that had been downloaded onto it automatically began scanning and downloading files. Alex just had to make sure it looked like he was actually supposed to be there. Easier said than done, he didn’t exactly look Russian… or sound it for that matter… If he had to talk the mission was as good as over.

He didn’t notice everyone leaving the building. He was too distracted by his thoughts and concerns over Ghost not trusting him.

“Alex! Get outta there! They’re locking down the building and heading right for me, they knew we were coming!” Alex winced as Toad effectively screamed in his ear.

He stood up and unplugged the flash drive. He slipped it into his pocket and started heading for the exit. He ran for the exit. Alex wasn’t fast enough, the door was barred closed when he got there. He struggled with it and tried to kick it open as gas filtered through the vents. It wouldn’t knock him out but it’d sure as hell slow him down, thanks to the nanites.

“Chris! Get the hell out of there now!” Archer shouted over the com, effectively breaking his radio silence, “Alex, those doors are mechanically locked. The mechanism is linked to a computer outside of your building. We’re doing what we can to break through it, but I can’t make any promises.”

Alex coughed roughly as his lungs rejected the gas filled air, “Understood. I’ll be fine. You just worry about Toad for now.”
There was a grunt of pain over the open com.

“Christian!” Archer screamed, “Chris! Chris?! Can you hear me?!”

There was a hand on his shoulder. Archer looked up to see MacTavish. He turned back to the monitor and kept screaming for Chris to respond.

“Archer…” Alex spoke softly once Archer calmed down and let the realization that Chris had been taken sink in, “I’m so sorry…”

He was getting light headed from oxygen deprivation now. The gas was binding with the oxygen in the room, making it unbreathable.

Archer ripped the ear piece out and shoved away from the desk. He stormed out and started heading for the armory. Broken collar bone be damned, he was not going to sit by and be useless while the Russians interrogated his boyfriend.

He was testing the grip on a pistol and figuring out how he was going to reload when the time came when Ghost walked into the armory. They stared at each other a moment before Archer went back to checking the sights on the handgun. Ghost stepped up to him and Archer stopped again and looked up at him. Ghost took the weapon, checked it for ammo, and then slipped it into the holster on his thigh.

“Don’t try to stop me,” Archer protested, motioning for the weapon to be returned to him.

“You’d do more harm than good, Archer, you’ve only got one arm.”

“Stop reminding me!” Archer hadn’t meant to shout, he was frustrated, and confused when Ghost moved to take his vest and start putting it on, “What are you doing?”

“It’s my fault they’re in this mess, I’m gonna get them out,” Ghost explained simply as he secured his vest and walked over to his locker to grab his customized ACR.

“I’m not gonna just stand by and be useless while this is going on, I’m sick of being useless,” Archer protested, “Let me come.”

“You’ll do more harm than good,” Ghost repeated, “Best thing you can do is stay here, and stay safe. That way, when I bring them home, they’ll have one less thing to worry about,” he was already leaving the building before Archer could respond, but he paused before he left, “Just… keep in mind it’ll take me a couple days to get there and a couple more to get back, alright?”

With that, he left. Leaving Archer in the armory, alone and helpless and frustrated and angry. Archer slumped down in the chair at the desk at the back of the range and held his head in his one good hand. He heard a shot and looked up at the firing line. There was no one there. The lights weren’t even on. It was his imagination, he missed shooting. Archer sighed and stood up. He left quietly, locking the door behind him. He stood outside for a moment. He didn’t know what to do. If he went to the rec room it’d be loud and be quiet when he walked in as they all stared at him. His bunk would feel cold and empty without Chris. Doc and Jayhawk were probably busy. The command room was probably buzzing with the activity of trying to get Alex and Chris back safe. Definitely not a good idea to be there, he’d just make his own matters worse. He leaned against the wall of the building and slid down to sit on the ground and sighed again. He felt lost for the first time since he met Chris.

Archer didn’t talk much for the next week. Simply went on with his business, which wasn’t much with only one good arm, and only spoke when he had to. He fell in to a sort of depressive state. Doc had tried talking to him, only to be met with short and cold responses. Archer had told him he
was fine. He would be better when Chris was home. Doc didn’t doubt the truth of that and hoped Ghost and the team that had insisted on going with him would hurry up getting the two lost marksmen home.

The op was black. Shepherd had denied their request to go after them. Said that if Makarov had been there, they’d know now. Shepherd had told them to just forget about the operatives. That angered the entire Task Force. They were not ones to leave men behind. So they went behind Shepherd’s back, only taking a small team, to minimize risk.

“No!” Alex screamed and thrashed as they secured him, face down, to a table.

They’d been experimenting on his back all week. Trying to figure out what he was. That’s how Toad had translated it, anyway. Alex was pretty sure Toad was sparing him the details of what these Russians wanted with him.

(Note that all dialogue in italics is in Russian until further notice)

“Quiet,” One of the Russian guards commanded, slamming a crowbar across his lower back.

Alex screamed in pain. With the artificial nerves that responded faster and stronger than natural nerves, that hurt. He bit his lip and fought the screams down to whimpers. They’d been doing this often. Too often. Alex was sure there was some sort of damage. He could barely feel his legs, and that terrified him like nothing else. He could take the pain, he could even deal with hearing Toad’s screams, but being paralyzed again was not something he was prepared to deal with or recover from.

He felt tears dripping down his face as the scientist entered the heavily guarded lab he was being held in. He made sure the restraints were tight and that Alex could barely move before moving away. Alex felt a surge of panic as the scientist started poking and prodding his back. They knew by now that this thing was all that kept him on his feet. They’d done plenty of x-rays and scans to be able to know that there was a gap in his spine. Alex thought maybe they wanted to figure out how it worked so that they could replicate it for their own men. He winced when he felt a large needle pierce his arm. They were drawing blood again. More specifically, the nanites. They had drawn a lot from him and it was making him weak and tired. The nanite count was down to at least half, and, unlike his blood, they couldn’t make more of themselves. If he was going to get more it had to be done through a series of rather painful injections.

The needle left his arm and the scientist didn’t bother covering it up as he left to run his tests.

“He’s all yours,” The scientist offered distractedly as he walked off.

A different scientist walked up to him. Alex could see a yellow trim on the bottom of his white coat. Alex struggled fiercely against the restraints when something very cold touched his back. They knew now that this thing was all that kept him on his feet. They’d done plenty of x-rays and scans to be able to know that there was a gap in his spine. Alex thought maybe they wanted to figure out how it worked so that they could replicate it for their own men. He winced when he felt a large needle pierce his arm. They were drawing blood again. More specifically, the nanites. They had drawn a lot from him and it was making him weak and tired. The nanite count was down to at least half, and, unlike his blood, they couldn’t make more of themselves. If he was going to get more it had to be done through a series of rather painful injections.

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There was a little pressure, then a wave of pain, and then complete numbness as his back shut down. EMP. Alex groaned as his body started shutting down too. That thing had been tied into the nerves running down his back. When it stopped functioning, so did everything else. He counted himself lucky it’d only last a couple minutes before automatically resetting and restarting. It didn’t run off of a battery, Alex wasn’t entirely sure what it ran off of. An EMP simply scrambled its processes and forced it to shut down for a few minutes. The Project had programmed it as a failsafe.

The Russian interrogating Toad had given him a moment to catch his breath and was just stepping towards him when the alarms sounded.
Ooohh cliffhanger. Okay, honestly? Who didn’t see that coming? This is me we’re talking about. So, anyway. I finally finished this. I’ll try to finish the next one sooner than I did this. Umm… You might be getting another Another End update before the next chapter? Uhh… Yeah… So… That’s it I think. See you guys next time, don’t forget to review pretty please!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out
Big thanks to Coffee Monsta and lisa.dewaele.581 for your reviews. Well, anyway, this is the last chapter. It’s gonna be a long one. I’ll delete the Reader Appreciation chapter the day after this goes up so that this’ll be a good, clean ten chapters. So, without further ado, here it goes! Chapter Ten! I’m excited, I’ve been working on this thing for so long, and now it’s almost over!

Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher

~Spitfire out

Toad tried to tune it out. They’d been playing it on a loop for hours, tormenting him with Ian screaming for him to respond using his name, not his call-sign. Then the alarms sounded and drowned it out. He let out a breath of relief. Then the interrogator punched him in the stomach as hard as he could.

The force of the hit forced all of the air out of his lungs and left him coughing and sputtering for a breath. The interrogator seemed satisfied and ran off to see why the alarm was going off.

Toad sat in silence for a long while, waiting to see what would happen. He was sure it was the team, come for him and Alex, he just hoped Archer hadn’t managed to sneak his way into that team.

They found Alex first. He was unconscious with a scientist that had a yellow trim on his coat poking and prodding at his bleeding back with odd looking tools. They cleared the room, taking the scientist hostage, and untied Alex. Jayhawk checked him for vitals.

“It’s weak, but it’s there,” he commented, “I’ve got him, you guys go on ahead and find Toad.”

Ghost nodded to him and left Roach with him to watch his back while the rest of the team moved on to find out where they were holding Toad. They found him beaten bloody and the recording of Archer screaming still playing.

“Somebody turn that damn thing off,” Ghost ordered, approaching Toad.

Toad looked up at him and gave a small smile, “Man am I glad to see you guys…”

Ghost gave him a smirk that was hidden under the mask in response and cut the ropes holding Toad to the chair. Toad rubbed his raw and bleeding wrists and stood up slowly. He wobbled a little and walked with a limp, but seemed okay otherwise.

Ghost activated his com, “Jayhawk, we’ve got Toad and are heading back your way.”

“Got it,” Jayhawk responded, “Alex is waking up now.”

Jayhawk eased Alex into a sitting position, keeping a careful eye on his back. Alex grimaced as it caused him pain and Jayhawk nearly laid him back again. Alex resisted and sat up under his own power.

He turned to sit properly on the table, with his feet on the floor, and motioned for Roach to help him stand.
Roach took his arm, and took some of Alex’s weight as he slowly started standing up.

He got upright before taking a breath, “I’m okay…” he said slowly, taking a very shaky step forward, and then another, and then his knees gave out and he collapsed.

A strangled cry of pure panic and fear left his throat as he tried to get up again, only to the same result.

Jayhawk knelt down beside him and touched light fingers to Alex’s back, checking for damage other than the obvious. Alex whimpered in fear and used his arms to try to move away from Jayhawk and his prodding fingers.

Jayhawk caught his arm, “Easy, easy, I’m not gonna hurt you, just hold still.”

He whined when Jayhawk’s fingers brushed over the damaged metal on his spine.

“Does it hurt?” Jayhawk asked curiously.

“N-not badly…” Alex answered.

Jayhawk nodded and looked at his back again before making a face and shaking his head, “I don’t… this uh… thing… is beyond me,” He admitted sheepishly, “Do you think you can walk with help? You seemed to be able to move alright, I’m not sure what the problem is.”

Alex nodded slowly and turned over on his back, sitting up for the most part, and reached out to Roach for a hand up. Roach grabbed his arm and pulled him up with a small, hopeful smile. He pulled Alex’s arm all the way around his shoulders, taking the Irishman’s weight, which wasn’t a whole lot compared to the others. Alex took a cautious step and Roach followed, helping him forward. It seemed Alex simply couldn’t hold his weight, he was moving just fine. A little slow and shaky, but honestly, who wouldn’t.

He took a deep, shaky breath and looked up as the others came in. He didn’t want anyone seeing his back and tried his best to take a step away from them.

Jayhawk saw the problem and took the sheet from the table Alex had been strapped down to. He wrapped it around Alex’s shoulders, effectively hiding his back from the others. Maybe it wasn’t the most sanitary thing, but it was what they had.

Alex gave him a thankful look and held the sheet in place with his free hand.

“Alright, now, let’s get the hell out of here before they send in reinforcements,” Ghost ordered, already taking point to lead them out.

Nikoli was waiting outside with a small team of his own.

“Have you been taking your pain meds?” Doc asked curiously, making a note on his clipboard.

“No,” Archer sighed, already knowing he was about to be lectured for it.

Doc stopped and looked at him, “And why not?”

“I don’t need them.”

Doc gave him a pointed look and moved Archer’s shirt aside to examine the shoulder, “It’s swelling again, you need to take them or it won’t heal properly.”

Archer nodded and looked over at Doc’s radio as it beeped.
Doc sighed and picked it up, “Go ahead,” he spoke into the receiver.

“We’ve got them and are on our way back,” Jayhawk’s voice cut over the channel, “There’s something wrong with Alex’s back, but its way over my head.”

Doc looked at Archer, who was staring at the radio, “I’ll take care of it when you get here. How’s Toad?”

There was a pause and Archer felt his heart sink, “He’s alright, a little bruised and battered, but alright,” Jayhawk finally answered.

Archer let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and Doc gave him a look.

“Got it. See you when you touch down, Doc out,” he set the radio down again and turned to Archer, “Better?”

Archer nodded and turned to walk away.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Doc questioned, “We are not done here.”

Archer rolled his eyes and turned back to Doc and motioned for him to continue with the exam.

The chopper arrived back at base in the wee hours of the morning, when everyone was still asleep. Everyone save for Doc and Archer, who waited on the helipad to welcome their lost friends home.

Archer didn’t waste any time pulling Chris into a tight hug, completely ignoring the pain it caused his shoulder, “I was so worried…” he admitted very quietly against Toad’s shoulder.

Toad smiled and wrapped his arms, being much more careful than Archer about his injured shoulder, “It’s okay, Ian. I’m here. I’m okay-“he rubbed soothing circles into Archer’s back-“Let’s go get some sleep, you look tired.”

Archer pulled back from Toad and nodded.

“Oh no you don’t,” Jayhawk stopped them, “You-“he pointed at Toad-“are coming with me.”

Toad and Archer both frowned heavily at him.

“Don’t you give me that look,” Jayhawk protested, “I just gotta make sure he’s as okay as he seems, it won’t take long.”

They reluctantly went along with him. Doc and Roach were behind with Alex, who had absolutely refused to sit in the wheelchair they’d brought out for him. That was okay, Doc guessed, he seemed to be moving okay, better than he’d expected. Maybe the wheelchair wouldn’t be necessary. Maybe. Doc worried about what it would do to him mentally, rather than what it would do for him physically. He’d do everything he could to keep Alex out of the chair.

Doc was still working on Alex when Jayhawk finished fussing over Toad and released both him and Archer to their own room. Doc was no biotechnical expert like the people who’d created the ‘exo’, but it wasn’t terribly difficult to figure out, it had been designed to behave like a natural spine, aside from the enhanced capabilities of it. It would repair itself over time, even the damaged ‘nerves’ would be repaired by the nanites, but Alex’s blood seemed to be low on the nanites that kept him and his ‘exo’ in shape. Doc was lucky he’d decided to have a bunch of them sent to him once he’d found out he’d be working with Alex again. It was now only a matter of administering
the injections. He would do the first two now, while he was unconscious and couldn’t feel it.

Toad flopped down on his and Archer’s bed with a sigh, “It’s good to be home…”

“Chris… are you okay?” Archer asked cautiously, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Toad sat up slowly, “Yeah, I’m alright… What makes you ask? Jayhawk already told you I’m good to go.”

Archer shook his head, “That’s not what I’m talking about, Chris.”

Chris paused, oh, he moved closer to Ian and wrapped his arms carefully around him, “I’m okay, babe, promise. They didn’t do anything too nasty, they were waiting for Makarov to get there.”

“Makarov was going to be there?” Archer questioned.

Toad nodded, “I overheard the Captain of the base on the phone when he thought I was out-cold. I don’t think they knew I speak Russian either,” he chuckled, “Makarov had been heading towards the middle-east, I think, but once the Captain told him that they had a couple members of the one-four-one, he had the chopper turned around and was insistent he was the only one to interrogate us.”

Archer nodded, “So… what they did to Alex…”

Toad shook his head, “I don’t know anything about that, I heard him scream and shout at the scientists, but that’s about it… I’m assuming, from what I heard about myself, that Makarov ordered the experiments, else they wouldn’t have done them,” he shrugged, “but I don’t know.”

Toad yawned and Archer chuckled a little, “Alright. Let’s go to bed, you must be exhausted.”

Toad smiled and nodded as they laid down, Archer on his back to protect his shoulder and Toad curled into his opposite side. They both fell asleep quickly, aided by varying levels of exhaustion and pain medications.

Alex didn’t wake up until the next day, a little while after lunch. He tested his legs, moving his toes around, then rotating his ankles, and then bending his knees. Satisfied that he could still move them and feel them, he sat still and waited. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was waiting for, but he didn’t have to wait long. Doc came in a little while later, carrying the next, and hopefully last, injection Alex would need.

“Alex,” Doc greeted, “How are you feeling?”

Alex shrugged, “Alright I guess. I can still move, so that’s a plus.”

Doc nodded with a chuckle, “Your back is repairing itself rather quickly,” he admitted, setting the nanite injection aside for the moment.

Alex eyed the large needle and made a face, “Is that really necessary?” he asked warily.

“Yes,” Doc answered, “I know it’s not exactly the most painless shot you could get, but hopefully this’ll be the last one you need. I did the first two while you were out.”

Alex nodded, he supposed he should be glad for that, and sighed, “Alright, get it over with then…”

Doc gave him a sympathetic smile and cleaned a spot on Alex’s arm with peroxide. Alex took a
deep breath and tried to relax as Doc pressed the needle into his skin. He winced and grimaced as Doc pressed down on the plunger.

Three days later, Alex was on his feet with minimal help and Toad had given his debriefing to Shepherd, informing the General that Makarov had intended to go there to interrogate him.

Shepherd hadn’t been exactly happy with that news. He claimed that if the team had done as they were told and forgotten about them, Makarov would’ve been caught in some elaborate trap involving Shadow Company. Archer doubted there was any trap at all. He wasn’t the only one that had doubts about this new ‘Shadow Company’ Shepherd had formed. Someone had done some digging on some of its members that they’d met very briefly. They typically dealt in espionage and black ops. Unlike the Task Force, which dealt in full-fledged battles, stealth ops, and black ops. Something about that struck Archer as suspicious. Why would the good General need two black ops teams? Why separate them, when he could’ve brought Shadow Company’s members into the Task Force’s fold? It made no sense.

Archer supposed it wasn’t his place to question the General. After all, he was a General, someone trusted this man to make these kinds of decisions. Maybe Archer couldn’t see the reasoning behind it, but he was sure there was some, somewhere. Archer pushed his doubts aside and went about what work he could.

Alex was recovering quickly, and was back to running within four more days. He spent his time on the track and in the pit, sharpening and polishing his now rusty skills. Toad spent the same time on the range, with Archer watching him carefully, taking any excuse to be closer than what was really necessary.

“Toad!” MacTavish called, entering the range and throwing off Toad’s next shot.

The captain earned two glares for it. He chuckled and apologized.

“Command center in five, we’ve got some new intel,” MacTavish instructed.

Toad sighed and Archer took his rifle, “Don’t worry, I’ll clean up here, you go ahead,” Archer assured.

Toad nodded and followed MacTavish out.

Archer watched them leave and turned and eyed the hand-gun that had been left out. He picked it up cautiously in his left hand and checked it for ammo, which was more difficult than it needed to be with only one arm. He sighed, it was empty. Archer set it back on the table and picked up Toad’s rifle, struggling a little to sling it over his good shoulder so that he could carry it back.

Then Ozone appeared next to him, “Let me help you,” he offered, moving to take the rifle from him.

“I’ve got it,” Archer snapped, getting the rifle properly slung over his shoulder, he sighed, “Sorry, that was a little harsh…”

Ozone shrugged, “No problem, you’re probably fed up with being down an arm, huh?” he chuckled.

Archer nodded his reply and stood up. He headed back towards the armory and Ozone followed after picking up the pistol and a few other pieces of equipment Archer hadn’t been able to pick up. Ozone put away what he’d picked up and helped Archer set Toad’s rifle on the table for cleaning later.
“From your report and some intercepted radio chatter, we’ve narrowed down Makarov’s location to two sites. A possible safe-house on the Georgian-Russian boarder, and an aircraft boneyard in Eastern Afghanistan,” Shepherd himself was giving the briefing, “I want them both scouted out and a full report detailing any and all enemy activity. Williams, I want you on the safe-house. McKay, take the boneyard.”

The two marksmen responded in sync, “Yes, sir.”

Ghost handed them both files containing the rest of the details of their respective missions.

“Dismissed,” Shepherd turned around again to study the map covering the wall.

“Aye, sir,” They again responded in sync, and left the room.

Toad sighed and opened his file. He was going in alone. Archer would not be happy about this at all. He made his way back to the range, then the armory. He found Archer there, cleaning, or attempting to clean, his rifle. Toad sighed and walked up. He dropped the file on the table next to his rifle. Archer stared at it for a long moment before looking at Toad.

“Chris…”

“I know…”

Archer hugged him.

“I have to, Ian. You know I do. This comes straight from Shepherd,” Chris said softly, rubbing Ian’s back.

Ian sighed and leaned back to look at Chris’ face, “I’m not happy about it.”

“I know,” Chris gave him a sad smile, then leaned forward to kiss him lightly, “I’ll be okay this time, promise.”

“That’s what you said last time…”

“And I was okay. Just took a little longer getting home.”

Ian sighed and kissed Chris again, “Just please, please be careful,” he begged, pressing their foreheads together lightly as he ran his thumb through the short hair on the side of Chris’ head.

“You know I will. Now, come on, I want you to help me look this over, I get to pick my over watch this time around.”

Archer nodded and Toad put his rifle away. They headed off to their room to study the map for Toad’s upcoming mission.

Toad left the next morning for the Georgian-Russian boarder. Archer saw him off and Doc appeared next to him on the helipad.

“You worried?” Doc asked curiously.

“Yeah…”

Doc put a hand on Archer’s back, “Come on, it’s about time to get you out of that sling and into a brace anyway.”

Archer nodded and followed Doc to the infirmary. He’d been told that, because of the strain to his
back and shoulder, he may end up having to wear the brace for many years, if not the rest of his life. It was discouraging, but didn’t necessarily mean he’d be out of the job.

Toad sighed as he peered through his scope. It was chilly here. He was just glad this would only go on for one day, then he’d fall back and be picked up by a helicopter and a waiting and probably impatient and grouchy boyfriend. The thought made him smile through the bone-chilling cold as he made another mark on his map.

Alex ran through the boneyard, using the plane carcasses for cover while he made notes on his map. This was tiring work, and the heat was really draining him. No one ever saw him, he moved too fast for that, but moving that fast burned a lot of energy and he could only pack so much in terms of water and rations.

The day moved on slowly for both scouts, but was eventually over and uneventful and both made their way carefully to their rendezvous points. Archer was on the chopper to greet Toad with a hug, now that he was allowed to use both arms, although minimally. Roach greeted Alex aboard the other chopper and both began the journey home. Toad slept on Archer’s good shoulder and Alex stretched out across the benches with his head in Roach’s lap as he slept.

The next afternoon saw both choppers and all four operatives home safe. Toad and Alex dumped their gear and Alex dashed straight for the mess hall, claiming he was *starving*. Toad and Archer simply laughed at him a little before Toad left to hit the showers and get warmed up. The day was spent resting and recovering, with a little of Toad fussing over Archer’s shoulder and the fact that he could now get at least some use out of it. It didn’t last long, though, as Toad had been awake for a little over twenty-four hours and was very, very tired.

Archer rolled his eyes at him as he finally passed out in their bed. He left to the mess hall, he hadn’t eaten today after all, and got his food. He’d take something to Toad later, after he’d had some rest. He looked up at the sound of laughing to see Alex scarfing down his food, practically inhaling it, and laughed as well. You’d think the man hadn’t eaten anything in weeks, but it had only been a day, and he had eaten.

Archer returned to his and Toad’s room a while later with food and water to set aside for when Toad woke up. He smiled at Toad, who was still very much asleep, and left the man in peace. He sat down on the couch in the rec room, watching Roach and Rook playing a video game.

Toad slept clear to the next afternoon, when Archer woke him up for his debriefing with Shepherd. The food Archer had taken him had gone bad while he slept and had to be thrown out, but he drank the water and a cup of coffee before getting dressed and heading down to the command center with Archer and Alex.

Both maps that Toad and Alex had drawn were spread out on the table.

Toad pointed a couple sentry locations on his map, “These are new. Were just getting in place towards midday. It looked like they were preparing for something. Increases in security at all possible entry points, nearly didn’t make it out undetected.”

Alex nodded, “I saw the same in the boneyard…”

The captain nodded thought fully, looking over both maps and written reports carefully, “We’ll take some time to go over these. Dismissed.”

“Aye, sir,” the marksmen responded and turned to leave.

“So,” Toad drew the word out, wrapping an arm around Archer’s waist, “How do you want to
waste the day?”

Archer chuckled at him and ruffled his hair, “Maybe hit the range?”

Toad laughed, “I just got back from an op, Ian, maybe give the range a break, huh?”

Archer shrugged a little, “Yeah, okay, good point.”

Jayhawk walked up at that moment, “Archer, Doc’s looking for you.”

Archer sighed, “Alright, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jayhawk nodded and walked away.

Toad frowned, “What now?” he questioned no one in particular, “He’s sure been pulling you a lot…”

Archer rolled his eyes, “Says it’s healing quickly. Check-ups went from weekly to daily.”

“That’s… good news… right?” Toad asked curiously.

Archer shrugged, “Hell if I know. Probably,” he stepped away from Toad and in the direction of the infirmary, “I’ll catch up to ya later.”

Toad nodded and left in the direction of the rec room, while Archer headed to the infirmary, and Alex to the track.

Doc greeted Archer at the door, “How do you feel?” he asked curiously.

“Fine,” Archer shrugged with his good shoulder, “Been better,” he gestured at his busted shoulder and chuckled.

Doc chuckled at Archer’s sarcasm, “Well I’m glad you can find some humor in this,” he commented, motioning for Archer to follow him.

Archer sat down on the exam table he was led to and carefully removed his shirt. Doc helped him take the brace off, he still wasn’t really used to it yet, and set it aside for the moment. Doc looked over his collarbone and shoulder carefully, pressing lightly in some places to test how well it had healed.

“Alright, now make a fist,” Doc instructed lightly, one hand resting on Archer’s collarbone, the other guiding his arm up to bend at the elbow, “Good. Now slowly raise your elbow.”

Archer complied slowly. He very cautiously followed Doc’s instructions and moved his arm in different directions. Finally, he was told to straighten his arm and lift it as high as he could. Archer took a steadying breath and slowly straightened his arm out and then raised it over his head.

Doc nodded appreciatively, “Looking good, Archer. I’d say you can go back to training now. You’ll have to keep wearing the brace because of the strain to your back and shoulder, but other than that, you’re good to go.”

Archer nodded his heart beating a little fast, he was excited, “So, you’re saying that I can shoot now?”

Doc sighed and nodded, “Yes, you can shoot now, but I recommend building muscle mass back first. You haven’t used that arm in a long time, so you’ve lost a lot of muscle.”
Archer rolled his eyes, “Yes, Doc, I know how muscles work, thanks.”

Doc chuckled and helped Archer back into the brace, “Alright, smart guy, you’re free to go.”

Archer hopped up and slipped his shirt back on quickly. He practically broke into a sprint to go find Toad.

Toad hadn’t been expected to nearly be thrown off his feet by an overly excited Archer. Archer hugged him tight and he chuckled, patting Archer’s back lightly.

“Good news I take it?” he asked curiously.

Archer pulled back, grinned widely, “Doc said I could start training again!”

Toad’s grin matched Archer’s as he pulled the taller man back into a tight hug, “That’s great, Ian.”

Archer grabbed his arm and pulled him in the direction of the range, “Come on! I want to get started as soon as possible!”

Toad laughed and followed. It was rare to see Archer this excited and open. It was a rare and great thing, because in these moments, Ian wasn’t thinking about all of the bad things to happen to him over the years. Normally he was plagued by them even if they were just in the back of his mind. But, right now, there were only two things on Archer’s mind: shooting and Chris, so, as Toad helped Archer fit an M14 EBR to his arm, he was arguably happier about this than Archer was. Maybe not quite as excited, but maybe happier.

They set the rifle on the table after adjusting the stock. Toad stared at Archer for a long moment, he wanted to kiss him, but it’d have to wait, now was not the time. Archer wasted no time in finding his shooting glove and sling.

Fuck it, Toad decided and caught Archer’s arm lightly, “Hey, Ian, hold up a sec.”

Archer stopped and set his things on the table next to his rifle, “Yeah?”

Chris simply smiled at him and hooked an arm around Ian’s waist, pulling them close, and kissed him. He felt Ian smile into the kiss before returning it.

They parted before long and just stood there for a moment.

“What was that for?” Ian asked curiously.

Chris smiled at him, cupping his face in his free hand, the other was still wrapped around Ian, “Nothing. I just haven’t gotten to kiss you in a while.”

Ian smiled back at him and gave him another peck on the lips, “Alright, we got a lot of work to do, let’s go.”

Toad nodded and grabbed the rifle while Archer picked up his sling and glove.

Archer was set up in a matter of minutes, with Toad kneeling next to him.

“Alright,” Toad started, “The recoil on this is next to nothing compared to your Barrett, so it’ll take you some getting used to.”

Archer nodded and snapped an empty magazine in before closing the chamber, intending to dry-fire until he got a feel for the trigger. They went through the process of sighting in and practicing with the rifle for a few hours, Toad showing Archer different ways to hold the rifle in each
position now that he didn’t have to worry about recoil control as much.

It went on for a week. Archer trained and practiced for hours on end each day until he was strong enough and accurate enough to handle ops again. Doc gave him the all clear and in that moment he’d felt like he could run laps around the base forever if he wanted to.

“Sounds like we gotta be in two places at once…”

“Impossible?”

“Not for the one-four-one.”

_Ho-ly shit bucket. (If you get the joke you’re a legend xD). I never thought I’d finish this! But here it is! Wow! Okay, okay. I know you guys are probably less than happy with me finishing it here, of all places. But, I promise, it’ll pick back up in the sequel to come, To Dust. Loose Ends and everything after will happen there. Wow… Okay… This is big, I’m excited. Please, please, please review and let me know what you think, this is by far my biggest and best story and I really need feedback. More feedback = Motivation = To Dust is published sooner rather than later. See you guys soon!_

_Thanks for Reading, Fly High Aim Higher_

~Spitfire out