

Chapter 17 - First step

It took a few minutes for my companions to recover enough to talk. By then Agent Coulson had whittled down his old knife to nothing and Clint was looking mildly disappointed that even when the blade was out he couldn't cut anything with it.

"How difficult are things like this to make?" Agent Coulson asked eventually, folding the knife away and putting it in his suit. "How much would you charge?"

"Unfortunately it is impossible to predict. For new things I mean. If I know the recipe already then the effects are repeatable." I explained, raising my hand to stop the next question. "I will not be mass producing anything. I would be open to making each agent more than one object, but I will not be handing over a briefcase full of super soldier rings. That is non negotiable. If you try to push that I will vanish and you will never get this offer again."

"You realize that people aren't going to like that." Agent Coulson pointed out seriously after a long pause. "Every capable government and business giant on the planet is involved with some sort of super soldier project. It's been that way since Captain America. The fact that there is someone out there who can actually make a super soldier, repeatedly and with resources that I assume you gained from your two excursions? If what you've said about your abilities is true, everyone is going to be after you. Everyone. Quite a few of those groups won't care if you come willingly."

The lot was silent, even the normal background noise of the city seemed hushed and muted. I stared silently at the normal looking man who had basically voiced my deepest fear since I realized what kind of power the Conceptual Deck gave me. I leaned forward, elbows on the table, rubbing my face, taking care not to touch my nose.

"Then what do you suggest, Agent Coulson?" I asked, letting my emotions leak through. "I am perfectly aware of what my ability means. I know what the less than honorable would do to get access to my ability. I had hoped that partnering with Shield would offer me a modicum of protection, or at least a warning. But I am beginning to feel a lot less confident in that plan. So, what do you think I should do?"

"I think you should let us take you somewhere safe. We can't keep an eye out for threats if we don't know where you are. New York is too big of a place for us to completely lock it down." He explained. "If we set up some sort of safehouse for you, give you some bodyguards, you would be able to work as a Shield consultant, making tools for Shield agents. You would still be able to interview the agents you're making tools for, and you'd still be able to bind them to those agents."

I looked at Clint then back to Agent Coulson, my mind racing. The offer was tempting of course, I was already starting to notice the stress getting to me. Having Shield at my back, keeping me safe would be helpful, and a massive load off my shoulder... If I wasn't pretty sure that Hydra had already infiltrated the organization.

"Are you attempting to scare me into being more compliant?" I asked bluntly, once again focusing on my belt.

"No, I truly believe what I said."

I nodded, rubbing my face and leaning back in my chair. The honest truth was that I would love to have more support. A group like Shield could provide me with a lot of stuff I wouldn't otherwise have access to, as well as back up if I ever needed it. But even with my belt weeding out anyone who wasn't completely loyal to Shield the threat of Hydra would be ever present. The second I joined Shield, even just as a consultant they would know exactly where I was at all times. Eventually I sighed and sat up straight.

"As much as I would like to accept your offer, I can't." I answered, playing with one of my cards. "My greatest protection is that no one has any idea who I really am or has any way of predicting when I will show up. Like I said, if you figure out who I am, knock on my door and Ema and I will gladly accept your protection. Until then, I can't accept it."

"Very well, I won't try to force you." Agent Coulson said, clearly disappointed. "How will we get in touch to purchase objects? You said you needed to be able to talk to them and bind them to their objects personally. Assuming our tests on your gift go well."

"Give me a phone number to call. I'll check in in a few days. From there we can set up a meeting where we can discuss what I am making for the agent. "

"I take back what I said earlier." Agent Coulson responds, pulling out a card and handing it to me. "You are even less trusting than Agent Barton said you were. Very well, I'll pass this information onto the Director. He will have the final say on whether we take you up on your offer."

"Fair enough, you can fill me in in a few days."

"Are you sure there isn't anything we can do to convince you to come with us?"

"No. I won't say that won't change eventually but for now, we prefer to be on our own."

Agent Coulson stood, and extended his hand, prompting me to do the same. I shook it with a firm grip, making sure not to hurt him or Clint when he stuck his hand out.

"I hope you reconsider, but I look forward to working with you." Clint said as we shook hands. "I know first hand that even the smallest advantage in the field can be the difference between life and death. And from what I've seen your creations are anything but small advantages."

"Make sure your bosses know that." I said with a smirk, turning around and flicking out a card. The truck appeared a moment later and I climbed in, giving the two Shield agents a small wave as I pulled away.

----- *The Next Morning* -----

I woke up the next morning surprised at how quickly I had fallen asleep. The meeting with Shield had touched on a lot of my fears about how this would all work out, and my mind had been racing the whole trip home, including the hour or so I spent making sure no one was following me. Somehow though the second I crawled into bed my exhaustion reared its head and I was out like a light.

With a deep breath I started the day, going through my morning routine like usual, plopping down on the couch with a plate of eggs and toast, putting a cup of coffee on the coffee table. Ema floated down around me as I slowly ate.

"That was an intense meeting." She said after a moment. "They seemed... Interested in your offer?"

I couldn't help but laugh, almost spilling my coffee in the process. When I eventually recovered I smirked at Ema, her frame spinning and shifting in a way that showed she was happy.

"Thanks, I needed that.." I said with a smile, leaning back into the couch. "Yeah, they seemed a little interested. They were also clearly worried about me getting snatched up. Which makes sense. Me getting captured and used to make stuff could really upset the balance of power on a large scale."

"So, what are we going to do?" She asked after a few minutes of quiet. "We spent most of our money on our preparations for yesterday."

"How much do we have left?" I asked, wincing as I went over how much money I had spent in my head. "We should have some left, right?"

Ema floated over to the chop shop cash box, where I had stored our funds when I was clearing out the Deck the day before.

"Two hundred and thirty six dollars in bills, another twelve in change." She answered. "That body armor store was extremely expensive."

“Yeah, but worth it I think.” I assured her. “My armor is getting more and more impressive with every addition, and you can't put a price on good protection.”

“That's true.” She said, bobbing in agreement. “Unfortunately the prospects for cars in that price range is not encouraging.”

“What about motorcycles?” I asked after a long moment of thought. “That might be the way to go, especially since I will be able to set it up to repair in the apartment.”

“That... that might work.” Ema admitted, floating to the laptop, the screen starting to flash through websites.

While she worked I finally started disassembling the computer we had taken from the chop shop, breaking it down and carding different parts to see what concepts they held. I was happy to find that they felt the same way that the spare engines, mufflers and tires had felt, in that they were parts that would be additive instead of altering the function of the item I combined them with. I ended up taking the ram, the hard drive, the central processor and the fan out, keeping them carded while putting the rest of the computer into a pile and tucking it away. After I waited for Ema to finish her research, mostly by watching TV.

“Okay. I think I found a few good places to buy a motorcycle for cheap. There is a junkyard about an hour away from here by bike that should have one or two wrecks we could buy for very little money.” She said, going through her opened list. “I also found a few craigslist posts selling old, motorcycles. We would only be able to get one of those.”

“Alright. Let me see them.”

We scrolled through the website, tabbing through examples. The junkyard was mostly advertising spare parts for cheap but buying a busted up old motorcycle wreck was definitely possible. The craigslist ads were for various types of bikes for a range of prices. Eventually I settled on one that had been harvested for parts but was still intact enough to be recognizable.

“I think we should go with the Craigslist option, that one in particular.” I said, still sitting at the edge of the couch. “While we could double our money going to the junkyard it's going to be much more difficult to sneak the cycle away from a business than it will be someone's front lawn.”

“How do you plan on doing that by the way?”

“I'm going to tell them someone is going to be by later, maybe even at night to pick it up, so they should just leave it by the curb. Then I'll just come by and snag it.”

“That... Seems risky.”

"Maybe, but we need to do something. Having some random guy be a bit suspicious of where his junk motorcycle went is the least of our problems. Besides, you are going to be scanning to make sure we aren't being watched."

"That would minimize the risks, very well. Are you going to call ahead?"

"Yeah, what's the number?"

I dialed the numbers on my phone as she read them out, standing up from the couch to pace while the phone rang. It took a few rings for someone to pick up, a male voice answering on the other end.

"Hello, My name is Jack. I'm calling because I'm interested in your Craigslist ad, the old Harley Davidson softail." I asked, reading off of the ad itself. "Is that still available?"

"Hello Jack, name's Andrew." He responded before continuing. "And yes it is still available. I have to warn you though, it's missing a lot of parts and the frame is crooked."

"That's not a problem." I assured him, trying to sound confident to prevent him asking questions. "I'm looking for a challenge. If it's beyond me it's only two hundred bucks."

"Alright, if you're sure." He responded. "Do you have a trailer or a truck?"

"Uhh I have a truck to transport it, yeah." I lied, cringing before I realized I wasn't wearing my belt.

"Do you have a place in mind to hand it off?"

My mind froze for a moment as I tried to figure out what he was asking. Ema, who had floated next to me and was listening to the conversation, nudged me.

"He doesn't want you coming to his house. That's normal for Criagslist stuff." She explained. "Just say a random parking lot, nothing too close."

I nodded and started listing off a few places we could meet, eventually settling on the parking lot of an abandoned shop, one that was about an hour away from the apartment by bike. He wanted something closer to himself but I managed to convince him to drive more, but only after I agreed to pay for his lunch as well. When we finally hung up I looked over at Ema.

"How did we not remember that's how Criagslist works?" I asked, shaking my head. "I mean I've had to do this before when I got this couch!"

"I suppose we just got caught up." She offered before giving her equivalent of a shrug. "Either way, you need to get ready to go. That lot is about an hour away."

I stood and stretched, flexing and working out any of the remaining fatigue from the night before carrying my breakfast plate to the kitchen sink. Afterwards, I quickly got dressed and prepared to leave, stopping by the living room as I pulled on my sneakers.

"It's probably best if you stay here." I explained. "It's too bright out for you to be flying around and I'm already pretty sure there aren't any cameras there."

"Alright, I'll hold down the fort." She said, clearly not happy about it. "But if you don't answer your phone when I check up on you, I'm calling Agent Coulson."

"That... Is not a bad idea." I admitted. "Tell him to check his tracking devices if you do."

Emma nodded and followed me to the door, watching as I shut it behind myself and locked it. Not long after that I was on my way, pedaling my bike through the streets. I couldn't help but revel in just how easy it was to pick up speed, weaving in between cars. As I stopped messing around and focused on my destination I made a mental note that an accessory that enhanced my reflexes might be a good investment.

"Emma has spoiled me, no way am I going to remember this." I mumble to myself.

It took me an hour and a half to get to the lot, mostly because I stopped for hot chocolate and a bagel. When I finally did get close to my destination I made a short detour into an alleyway to put on my face changing mask, carding my bike as well before walking the rest of the way. The abandoned shop had a few cars parked in its parking lot, probably from a nearby business, but it was mostly empty.

After a quick look around I settled in, playing solitaire on my phone for a few minutes before I noticed a black truck pulling into the parking lot. I stood and took a closer look, smiling when I saw the busted motorcycle in the bed. The truck slowly pulled through the lot, turning and stopping before a man climbed out. He was probably a bit older than I was, dressed in painter's clothes with brown hair and glasses. We greeted each other and chatted for a few minutes, mostly bullshit about me wanting to challenge myself in repairing the motorcycle. Eventually he waved me over as he walked around to the back of his truck. I got closer as he pulled down the tailgate. As I did I pulled out the roll of cash, my last bit of funds, and handed them over to him. He took it with a smile.

"Two hundred and thirty dollars." I explained. "For the bike and your lunch."

"Great!" He responded with a chuckle. "Grab a side and let's get it off of my truck. You need a hand getting it up into... Where's your truck?"

“Oh it will be here, my friend is just doing some errands.” I explained, once again glad I wasn't wearing my belt.

The man nodded and together we pulled the motorcycle to the end of his truck bed before pausing. It was heavy, but with no tires and plenty more missing parts I probably could have carried it myself with my cuff of strength. Together we slowly lowered it to the ground, letting it drop the last inch. After a short conversation about what parts he knew were missing we walked back around to the front of the truck, where he grabbed a folder and handed it to me. Inside was the motorcycle's paperwork.

Transaction now completed, we shook hands and he got into his truck, pulling away with a wave. I watched him go, making sure he was completely out of sight before I carded the folder. I spent a few minutes checking around again, making sure no one was watching before I carded the motorcycle as well, pushing out my bike in the same movement.

I rushed a bit on the way home, making great time, pushing my runners band to its limit. My only break was when I pulled into an alley to take off my mask. When I finally got into the apartment building I climbed the stairs two at a time, rushing into my place, almost forgetting to lock the door behind me.

“Ema? How goes the fort?” I called out with a smile as I kicked off my shoes.

“Sufficiently held down I think.” She answered, meeting me halfway into the living room. “How did the handoff go?”

“Fine, I had to convince him I had a truck coming to pick me and the wreck up.” I explained as I walked around, carding the coffee table and anything else in the way.

I pushed the motorcycle out, the dirty wreck almost falling before I could grab and stabilize it by leaning it against the couch. I pushed out the repair tablet next, hooking it up and pressing repair all.

“Damn, almost eighteen hours.” I said as Ema came to look over my shoulder. “Guess it really is fucked up. Well, not much we can do but wait.”

I balanced the tablet on the motorcycle's frame before climbing around it, laying down on the couch, not able to sit because of how the motorcycle is leaning against it. I grabbed the remote, turned on the tv and settled in. I had a lot to do in the coming week, so I may as well enjoy what down time I had.