

Every day cycles back to the same goddamn thing. He sits in Grace's office, now decked out with shit IKEA furniture and bland paintings of rural landscapes that feel too artificial to muster up any feeling at all. Instead, he focuses on the window, watching the drizzle bleed down the window and blur the horizon into an indistinguishable mess. It's a fucking dreary day, as was every day leading up to it.

Feels like everything's just fucking miserable at the moment.

His fingers twitch, a familiar want lingering in the back of his mind. Grace was clear that smoking in here was as banned as smoking anywhere inside on base, which seems like bullshit given that she seems all over him about stress-relieving techniques.

"You going to speak to me today?" She asks. It used to be pointed; now it's just tired.

"Sure," Ghost says and pays no notice to her surprise. "Your advice was bullshit."

"Which bit of 'advice' are you referring to," she says neutrally but he sees her reaching for a pen in his periphery. Wanker.

"You told me to talk to Soap. I did." He looks away from the window long enough to glare at her before turning his head back. Something about watching the singular slow trail of a raindrop feels somewhat meditative against the storm inside him.

"And it didn't go to plan?" She asks.

"He chased me across a field, screamed at me and then I ordered him to leave," Ghost lists. It's reductive, sure, but sue him, he's not feeling chatty today.

"Right," Grace says. She detects the bullshit but it's not like he was trying to hide it, he's just trying to get one last dig in. Jesus Christ, thirty six and he's still pulling this shit; the world really has gone to shit.

"You said I should talk to him, there you go, I did and it was shit," Ghost repeats like somehow reiterating the point might make her remorseful.

It doesn't.

“Right, so you had an argument with Soap and you think that means you should never talk to him again?” Grace asks, arching an eyebrow with a condescending level of sass. Fuck this.

He’s choosing silence.

“Oh great, silence again. You know, you act like a child sometimes,” Grace spits.

“And I thought therapists weren’t supposed to have tempers,” Ghost spits back, unable to help himself.

It’s a stalemate.

They’re having a fucking lot of them recently.

— [redacted] —

He knows how to act. He knows how to lie prettily, to make it believable, to make the fuckers eat out of your hand.

He knows control. He knows order. He knows what happens when it falls apart.

After all, he’s been the one breaking it.

He also knows when the others are creeping in, when they muddy the head with distortions he can’t push away. He knows when the control is slipping, when it’s running right through his fingers and he’s fading right along with it.

Usually it’s quick, always has been for them, but this is taking its sweet fucking time.

“Ghost? Are you with me?” Grace asks quietly. Or maybe he’s just not hearing her properly. He doesn’t fucking know.

His foot *thud-thud-thuds* against the floor, a staccato theme song to an already miserable experience.

He keeps a straight face, he’s good at that, but he knows he looks a mess. His vision keeps coming in and out and he’s starting to sweat buckets, even though he’d opened the window five minutes ago and it’s cold as balls right now.

He's going to fucking kill someone.

They're- He's- He's got to calm down. *Fuck.*

“ -deep breaths- ”

Oh fuck, she's saying shit. He's got to focus. Smile? No, no, that's going to look awful. Just ignore her. It's not like it's fucking out of character.

He can't do this right now. This- this fucking *fight* to stay in reality, where the line between the world and his own fucking insanity is paper thin and all-too-easily crossed.

If he could just let go it would be so much easier but something's tethering him today, like concrete moulded around his feet. He can shove and shove *and shove* but nothing's going to fucking happen.

He digs his nails into his knees, trying to *feel feel feel* but it's barely a pinch, nevermind the bloody sting it should be, even though *someone* has let them get too long and made them into mini talons.

They look a little girly, honestly, but that's not inherently the worst thing. Can't imagine anyone agrees with him on that, though.

*Not the fucking point.*

He uncurls his hands just to stare at the grooves cutting through his hands, to try and find the lingering pain that should be there.

There's none.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, something lands in his hand. He thinks it's a marble at first, but the more he rolls it between his fingers, the more it comes to life. Its shape is strange, not quite square, not quite cyclical and has tiny sharp edges that graze against his fingertips.

The smell hits him all at once; a sweet but sickly orange smell. A part of him revolts violently at it but he brings it up to his nose regardless, smelling cautiously.

He looks up to see Grace staring intently at him, a plastic wrapper in hand. She nods. He doesn't know what it means but seemingly on automatic, he puts it in his mouth.

The flavour is sharp, almost overpowering, but what starts as a tingle in his mouth soon seems to spread across his body, an awareness coming back to him in chipped, jagged edges, cutting but present as they piece together.

It eventually dissolves to a fizzing sherbet in his mouth, familiar as it is strange, and he looks up at Grace, still dizzy but steadier and asks, "What was that?"

"An orange sherbet." She smiles at him, warmer than he thinks he deserves after that pathetic show. "Did it help?"

He cocks his head, heart pounding a dull but rapid beat, and asks, "Did it help what?"

"With the panic," she says, like it's normal to break like that. He has to withhold the urge to scoff.

It's never happened to him before and it won't happen to him again; he'll make sure of it.

"Sure," he agrees, mostly because he knows he should. If it did help, it doesn't matter.

Grace nods and her smile grows. "I'm glad. This could be helpful. Not just if you're panicking but..."

"But what?" He asks. It sounds more accusatory than he intends.

"Well, it seems that sometimes it's not just panic that's pushing you away," she says with only a modicum of hesitation.

He stares at her.

"What I mean is," she explains, "there's more than just panic that can pull someone out of being in the moment. Do you know the term dissociation?" Her face remains blank and he's forced to shrug, if only because he doesn't know what she wants him to say.

"Okay," she says with a nod. "To put it simply, dissociation is the sensation of being disconnected from reality. Does that resonate with you?" She asks guilelessly.

He shrugs again.

“Well, if at any point it *does*. If you ever feel a disconnect or even a sensation that you may be in a dream, or some sort of unreal state, I want you to focus on sensation, okay? I think to some extent you’re already doing it naturally,” she says, pointedly looking down at his hands, the crescent shaped gouges burning a bright red, “but I’d like to instill some healthier methods in you as soon as possible, hence the sweets.”

“The sweets?” He asks.

“Yes. Smell is a very strong sense and can be extremely helpful. I like to use sherbets because they smell and taste strongly, usually orange or lemon. The dual sensory input can be very helpful in bringing you back to reality,” she explains. The no-nonsense approach is surprisingly persuasive. Seems simple enough. Even though he won’t need it.

“Okay,” he says. “You got any spares?”

— [redacted] —

The monster stares him down.

He stares right back.

“What you want isn’t going to happen,” he tells it. “It’s already failed. I’ve failed,” he admits.

“Then what will you do now?” It asks, like it knows he doesn’t have an answer.

But there is an answer. It’s just not one the monster is going to take lightly.

He sighs and doesn’t look into the fathomless darkness that steals its eyes.

“I’m going to do the one thing you don’t want me to.”

— [redacted] —

Grace stares him down like how people face down death in the movies and the movies alone: with terrified dignity.

Their session hasn't even started, the clock hand barely past the hour, and already Ghost can feel that this one's going to be a fucking shit-fest.

"I need to talk to you about something," Grace says. She's composed but her eyes are too wide and they keep darting down to her desk like there's a bomb ticking underneath the table. The only things sitting there are her laptop and notebook, nothing different to normal.

He stares back at her silently but today she doesn't even look annoyed, which cuts deeper than it should. Instead, she swallows thickly and peels open her notebook, taking out a small piece of paper that's been tucked inside. It looks like it's been ripped from something else, indecipherable printed text on the back, and the faint impression of ink on the other side. Messy, rushed, and completely unfamiliar.

"We need to talk about the note," she says and lays it on the table like he's supposed to know what he's looking at.

"The note?" He can't help but ask. He can't read it from this far away; the handwriting is small and cramped, curving awkwardly where it's clear the writer ran out of space.

"Yes. Do you remember writing this?" She stares at him intently, her nerves barely masked by the intensity of her gaze.

"I didn't write a note," he says automatically.

"Then who did?" She asks.

"Well I don't fucking know! I haven't even seen the note before. It could be anyone's." The anger is all too easy to reach, even above the stubborn refusal to speak. False accusations have always cut him too easily, and he's been the victim of a lot.

Grace's surprise should scare him but it only becomes the torch to his flames and he blunders forward to grab the note and reads it over once, twice, again, again, *again, again.*

*Grace,*

*I know you may not believe me but I've been backed into a corner so it's time I told you the truth.*

*You have been holding sessions for two different people. One of them is Ghost. The other has not given you a name but they are called James.*

*We have hidden this for our safety. If not for James pushing us, I would never be writing this. But it looks like I have no choice. There is no going back to our life before and it seems without you, there is no going forward to anything in the future either.*

*I will not allow you to put our safety at risk but I am willing to cooperate if you would be kind enough to take this note seriously.*

*Tell Ghost I'm sorry.*

*Sam.*

The words start to blur together and if Ghost didn't know better, he'd say there were tears in his eyes.

"What the fuck," he whispers, crushing the note in his hand like somehow hiding the words will stop them from existing at all.

"So you don't remember writing that note?" Grace prompts, looking frazzled now. They're both rapidly losing control of this situation and they both fucking know it.

Ghost had forgotten what this sort of fear felt like. Fear with no escape. The knowledge that there's absolutely *nothing* you can do, no matter how much you scrape at the dirty, crumbling walls.

Ghost is watching everything he'd ever known about himself fall apart.

The denial is automatic, but even that can't battle through the suffocating poison of panic that's choking him.

"Ghost, breathe with me," Grace orders, sucking in exaggerated breaths.

He can't. He *can't*.

Instead, he breaks.

He breaks like he's always broken.

He starts to laugh.

Low at first, barely a chuckle, but it grows quickly into a monster, the descension into madness quick and painless. Broken cackles escape him as he keels over, wrapping his arms around his waist like a makeshift straightjacket. Full-body laughter wracks his body to the point of pain, brutal screams followed by agonised wheezes.

No tears come. He's too old for tears. He's been too old for tears since his father held him in the doorway of a bathroom stall and told him to *laugh, laugh, laugh* as a seizing hooker choked on her own spit.

Laughter is what proper men do; men at the top of the pile, men with nothing to fear. Men who see the bodies of their dead family and *laugh and laugh and laugh and-*

It suddenly doesn't seem so funny anymore.

He shuts his mouth, breathing raggedly, and stares at Grace with wide, blurred eyes.

"Ghost?" She asks, nervous, slow, *trepidacious* if you want to bring out the big fucking words.

He says nothing. Right now, he's not even sure he has control of his mouth. Fuck, maybe he doesn't even have control of his body. Maybe he's watching his body. Maybe he's three steps outside his body. Maybe, maybe, *maybe*.

"Ghost, are you okay?" She adds, serious now, eyebrows drawn into a flat line as she leans forward like she's going to reach out but knows she can't. He'd fucking *bite*.

A smile grows on his face that he barely feels, eyes vacant as they focus on everything and nothing.

"I'm fucking *fantastic*, Grace," he says, trying to find her in the sea of colours, "how about you?"

She says nothing.

Then a crinkle, a clatter, and something held in front of his face. A hand and a small little sphere in it. He blinks — once, twice — before the smell hits, a putrid orange that makes him want to gag.

“Jesus,” he says as he recoils, the world crashing in like an avalanche. “What the fuck is that?”

“An orange sherbert,” Grace explains like he’s a fucking child. “Like we discussed.”

Ghost wants to snap her hand in half. He doesn’t.

“I fucking hate orange,” he says, glaring at the offending sweet like he can somehow incinerate it with his eyes.

“You didn’t seem to mind it the other day,” she says calmly.

“Well then I was fucking bullshitting, wasn’t I,” he says and swipes her hand away. She moves it easily, clutching her hand into a fist.

She looms over him like this but she’s hardly intimidating, with her tiny kitten heels, short blue dress and blonde waves that make her look more like a fifties housewife than a therapist.

“How about lemon then?” She asks, maintaining the same neutrality. It only builds Ghost’s ire.

“Lemon’s fine but what the fuck do you want me to have a sweet for?” He asks incredulously.

She stares at him for a moment too long before he hands sag to her sides and she shoots him a confused look.

“To help ground you.” When he gives her a blank look, she rephrases. “To keep your head clear.”

“I’m fine,” he refutes automatically. He’s not fucking fine. Even he can fucking see that, but it’s not like he’s going to admit that.

“Okay then,” she says, rounding her desk and smoothing down her skirt as she retakes her seat. “Why don’t we talk about the note?”

*What note?*

He sees the crumpled note in his hand and it all washes over him again. How the fuck did he-

"No," he spits. He's not fucking touching the note with a ten foot pole or so help him God, he's going to-

"Okay," she agrees easily. "Do you often laugh like that?" She asks instead.

It's almost worse.

He shrugs. "Sure. I'm a funny guy, so what," he says, narrowing his eyes.

She settles him with a flat look; he doesn't bother to look cowed.

"You're giving me shit for laughing now?" He challenges, knowing full-well that he's just digging this hole deeper than it needs to be.

"No, I'm just asking about it," Grace says neutrally, face unmoving.

Ghost's rage simmers, burning hotter by the second.

"You're prying," he accuses.

"Why do you think I might be doing that?" She asks, tilting her head like a confused, irritating puppy.

"Oh fuck off. I'm not doing that fucking bullshit question thing," he gripes and swipes his hand at her.

"I just want you to be honest," she says simply with a barely-there shrug.

"Fine? You want honesty?" He snaps and leans forward in his seat with an intensity he usually saves for lying on the right side of a sniper. "Honesty is I'm laughing because I'm fucking falling apart, bitch. My life has gone to *shit*. My career is in the gutter and from the looks of it," he says, waving about the note, "I've had a schizo fucking break, so, fuck it, why wouldn't I be laughing? It that's or fucking let myself get buried under the utter shit that's piling down on top of me. Is that what you want to hear, huh? You want to hear me fucking break, bitch? Bet you'd fucking love that wouldn't you-"

"Simon-"

"It's fucking Ghost and you know it!" He roars.

Silence descends. Lingers. Permeates the space between them with something vile.

*Look who's turning into their father.*

Ghost recoils from the thought, even as guilt grips his throat, even as it squeezes, even as it digs in its nails and draws blood. Denial is safer. Denial is easier.

"I think maybe we should end our session here," Grace says. Her hands are trembling. Her face shows no fear but her eyes do.

Good.

"Yeah, I think so too," he spits and storms out of the room.

— [redacted] —

The monster looms. The monster curls smoke around his ankles, his wrists, his neck. The monster stares him down with the black void of its eyes and Sam thinks this might just be the end of him.

It's skeletal today, sharp angles cutting through the smog that encases it. A black suit, a perfectly done tie, bared teeth in the false illusion of a smile. It's danger in a body-suit. It's fear made humanoid.

It's evil.

The smoke paralyses him like they're physical shackles, squeezing tighter and tighter with every moment. A snake around his throat, prying the life from him. Sam lets out an involuntary wheeze as he struggles but it shows no mercy.

Instead, the monster leans in close and only utters two, carefully placed words.

*"Fix this."*

— [redacted] —

Time is a monster. Time gives you time to *think*. Time to fucking dwell on the bullshit. Time, above anything, makes you *curious*.

The letter lies flat on his desk, a glaring anomaly in an otherwise spotless room.

Ghost can't look at it for long; the headaches are blinding. Yet he can't quite ignore it either. Every time the silence is too loud, time too long, his mind crawls itself back, bleeding, scorned and all too desperate.

Nothing about the note makes sense.

It's not his handwriting. It's not his name. If it's planted, someone truly is out to get him — a fact he thought he'd long since dealt with, at least under his real name. And if it isn't...

Well.

He's fucked.

That's it. He's just fucked. There's no way around that fucking fact. It's a glaring, burning, *raging* fact. It's the horrible reality that even if he doesn't fucking understand the note, he knows exactly what it means.

He's mad. Insane. Cuckoo crazy. Fucking put him in the asylum already and be done with it.

He grits his teeth and fights against the frantic beat of his heart as he puts the letter out of sight again, staring at the ceiling and blinking back half a dozen fucking *feelings* that he can't even begin to deal with.

This isn't going to end, is it? This is *never* going to end.

— [redacted] —

He smiles at the monster, even as he struggles to breathe. This is too familiar to scare him anymore, even as he pries the fingers from his throat.

"No."

— [redacted] —

It walks straight into Grace's office and slams the note onto her desk, then looms over her with every ounce of intimidation it can find.

"You never saw this," it says, eyes wide. "I don't care what you think, you never saw this."

"Ghost-" She tries but the fear blinds it to pity. This human body is weak, fragile, and all too prone to emotional outbursts. Panic has a grip around his heart and he can feel the pressure building. There's no stopping it now.

"No. This? It never happened. If you pursue this, you will not make it through the week. Do you understand?" It barks.

She nods weakly, cowering like the infinitesimal *speck* she is.

"Good," he says and nods back, eyes locked with hers. "I shall see you soon."

— [redacted] —

Grace looks terrified of him. He can't for the life of him think why, but he can make an educated guess. There have always been monsters hidden in them, it's about time they came out.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he says. He doesn't put a reference of time in there. He doesn't have a fucking clue what day it even is, nevermind when they fucked this whole thing up.

But he knew when he pushed this that the others would start to push back. He just didn't think it would be so... palpable.

"Did you mean it?" She asks. He's not sure if it's out of her own desire for safety or some way to pry into his own psyche but neither feel good. None of this fucking feels good.

“Of course not,” he denies. This would be easier if he could know what the threat was but maybe it’s just safest to assume the worst. They’re a strong man with a specialised skill-set; she could be dead within a minute if he wanted her to be.

He wouldn’t. He’d fucking *never*. There’s a reason Ghost deals with all that shit; most the rest of them can barely fucking stomach it. It’s a shock Ghost can, given the shit they’ve been through.

But someone had to keep going, he guesses. He just wished it would have been him.

“You know I have to report this,” she says. Fuck, it was recent then.

“I know,” he agrees. He knows fucking shit all.

“This letter really seems to have hit a nerve,” she adds.

He frowns. What fucking letter is this?

Oh god. *Sam, no.*

With an instinct that drifts up from nowhere, he digs his hands into his pockets and finds the letter balled up in there. It’s crinkled, torn and discoloured around the edges like they’ve been holding it for long periods of time.

He reads it in a few seconds, heart pounding in his chest. This is it. He pushed far enough that Sam fucking *stopped pushing back*. He even had the fucking gall to stick his name in there. Jesus Christ.

“I bet it did,” James mutters and puts it back in his pocket, trying to reset his face as he looks at Grace.

They stare at each other for an interminable second before Grace cocks her head and asks, “Who do you think Sam is?”

It’s not what he expects to hear. Maybe that’s why he’s so god-awful at hiding his expression. Sam doesn’t exactly inspire happy, bubbly feelings in him.

“I don’t know. I don’t understand any of this,” he says, feigning naivety with all the skill of a four-year-old in their reception nativity.

“Right,” Grace says. Then there’s just silence.

For once, neither of them break it.

— [redacted] —

Price discharges him.

In the space of about five minutes and one cigar, the final lifeline Ghost had is gone.

“I’m not kicking you out of the base too,” Price says. “You know I wouldn’t. You can stay as long as you need, fuck what the brass say.”

He knows. It doesn’t change shit.

“Why now?” Ghost asks instead.

Price sighs. His moustache twitches and he opens his mouth twice before any words come out.

“The reports aren’t good, Ghost,” he says simply. He even manages to look somewhat sorry about it.

“Thought you weren’t allowed to know shit about what went on with Grace,” Ghost fires back. It’s not like he’d really listened to Grace’s opening speech but he knows that confidentiality is like... a *big* thing.

Price flattens him with a look. “I’m not allowed to know anything, no, but I do get told when you start throwing around death threats.”

Ghost’s stomach drops. No, Jesus, it doesn’t fucking drop, it plummets down into the hellfire and doesn’t fucking return.

He doesn’t ask what Price means. He’s smarter than that now. However unsalvageable this is, his dignity can still take a hit. And fuck, maybe some small part of him still thinks they can fix this. Price wouldn’t just let someone like him go. Ghost is his fucking *pet*; if Price needs someone, it’s him. Price can’t fucking *afford* to let him go.

And yet...

*And fucking yet.*

Ghost's leg bounces rapidly, out of his control; he clenches his hands together so tight it feels like the knuckles might pop out.

"So what happens now?" He asks, eyes locked on the floor. Leg *bouncing, bouncing, bouncing*.

"We make accommodations. You stay here until we can get something else organised." It sounds so simple coming out of Price's mouth. It's not. It's far fucking from it. This is a pile of shit that he can't even start to shovel.

This is-

— [redacted] —

"I fixed it," It says simply, shuffling its papers and setting them aside. "Whilst you had solidified the impossibility of returning to normality, I have gotten us as close to. Hopefully Grace will leave soon."

Sam stares, opens his mouth, shuts it, and then storms out without a word.

— [redacted] —

Ghost couldn't tell you how he ended up at Soap's door, boots polished, mask in place, though it all feels somewhat performative, like he's trying to put the pieces back together and they're just not sticking. He just needs-

He needs to fucking *talk*. He's sick of the silence and the stalemates and the fucking games. Grace is at the bottom of his fucking list and Price has shown his hand, which just leaves...

He sighs. The bitterness of their last encounter still lies in the back of his throat, threatening to rise again, but, well, maybe it's stupidity, maybe he truly is just desperate, but he could always trust Soap in the field. It feels like if this talk was going to happen with anyone, it would have to be him.

Ghost knocks twice in rapid succession, hands practically shaking, and waits, desperately ignoring the frantic ball of *something* vibrating in his chest.

There's a squeak of boots, the thud of hesitant footsteps and then Soap is there, door barely cracked open, looking Ghost up and down with more hesitation than he's ever shown for *anything* before. Soap, the man who would burn the world down and ask questions later if he was allowed.

"Ghost." There's something there. Something that lands between anger and respect, the dangerous tightrope that's always plagued... well, *them*. Everything about them. The bizarre force of two opposite objects colliding when they're both heading in the same direction.

"I-" He chokes, shutting his mouth and frantically trying to find words that never appear. The awkwardness stretches to breaking point between them but neither makes the final tug. Soap stares at him and he stares back.

With a ragged heave, Ghost asks, "Can I come in?"

Soap doesn't move for a long second before opening the door silently, ushering Ghost in with a stiff hand and shutting it behind them with an air of finality.

He stands by the door, arms folded, brows furrowed as Ghost takes in the room like he hasn't seen it a thousand times before, tracing over the ubiquitous military decoration that's poor even by his dismal standards, focuses on the little messes, the stray bits of individuality Soap has left scattered across the room. Anything that means he doesn't have to face this head on, really.

"What do you want, Ghost?" Soap asks, sounding softer than Ghost expected, but the anger is there, he can see it, thrumming along Soap's arms, the tension in his shoulders, the almost sneer on his lips.

Ghost gives a faltering shrug and tries to find the right way to put this. In the end, there is no soft way to put it.

"Price has kicked me out. For good," Ghost says, turning to Soap's bunk and running his fingers down the metal, tapping his nails against it a few times to try and eject his twitchiness. Helps fill the deafening silence he's left.

"Shit," Soap eventually mutters and it only takes a glance to see the complete change. Anger is displaced for worry in a heartbeat, that pissy look on his face replaced by something closer to care. Some part of Ghost shudders at the

thought. Another horrible, evil part of him wants to ask for something as insane as a fucking hug.

“You alright?” Soap asks, stepping forward and raising his hand like he’s going for some awkward back pat before letting it fall to his side.

Ghost chokes out a wet laugh, more of a gasping *ha* than anything else. “Doing just fine,” he lies sweetly, because if he admits to it not being, he’s going to fucking snap. And these days, he really doesn’t fucking know what will happen if he does.

“What happened?” Soap sits down on the bunk to look at Ghost’s face, flicking between Ghost’s eyes like he’ll find the answers written out.

“Had to go and threaten my therapist, didn’t I?” Ghost lets out another humourless laugh, ignoring the burning behind his eyes and the incoming headache that threatens to turn into a migraine. He looks down at Soap like there’s salvation in putting these words out loud but he finds no relief, just the incoming emotional storm that will be the end of his life.

Soap is shocked, every line of his face sharpening as he shifts forward, but Ghost doesn’t let him speak, not before he’s got this out.

“I’m going insane,” he admits frankly, breath coming quicker. “Like, I’m not joking, I’m actually going fucking insane. Jack Nicholson style, you know. Proper whack.”

*I’m becoming the monster my father always thought I was.*

*Maybe he’d just been right all along.*

*Maybe the monster was always there.*

“Ghost-”

“Just... I don’t remember threatening her,” he says, the words being ripped out of him by a force he can’t name, but it looms over him, or maybe it’s tugging him back, maybe he’s the one fighting it. It’s all so-

His mouth snaps shut and he takes a step back, shaking some invisible *thing* off him. Terror grips him in its ever-present vice and Ghost doesn’t know what to fucking *do* with this. There’s a familiarity in lashing out, but then there’s just shame. Always the fucking shame.

But what are the alternatives? Because if he does nothing, he’s going to explode, and it’s either him or Soap in the fallout. Likely both. *Probably* both.

This is all just so fucking *fucked*.

“You don’t remember?” Soap repeats incredulously.

“I don’t remember shit!” Ghost shouts, hands tearing at his mask as he starts to pace the floor. “I don’t remember fucking... *anything*, and I-” He drags in a desperate breath but it isn’t enough. His lungs won’t fucking fill. He’s going to die.

He’s going to die.

And Soap’s staring at him like he really is mad.

Ghost doesn’t really know what happens after that, he thinks he might have calmed down maybe. Sat with Soap on his bed, tried to talk, failed. Panicked maybe. But by the time he’s clear-headed again, he’s fucking exhausted.

He smiles at Soap as best he can, though the fucking mask doesn’t help. Soap doesn’t seem to mind, though; he smiles back.

“You know,” Soap says, “It’s kinda...” he trails off.

“It’s kind of what?” He presses, leaning against the wall, bringing one foot up onto the bed, the other planted on the floor, attempting to look relaxed when he’s anything but.

“Sometimes when I’m talking to you, it’s just...” Soap shakes his head and winces. “I don’t think you want to hear this,” he admits.

“I do,” he pushes. He doesn’t, but he thinks he ought to. Better Soap tells him than the others anyway.

“You just flip-flop a lot, you know. Like, your moods, they’re all over the place and I just thought... well, because...” Soap shoots him a look that says enough.

“Maybe you’re, like, bipolar or something,” he tacks on and then grimaces. “I mean, not to diagnose you or anything but-” He cuts himself off *again*. When did Soap become a coward?

“I don’t think it’s that,” he says, because he knows it isn’t. He knows what it is, he just knows better than to share with the class. He’d wanted to push the others, sure, but even he knows they have limits.

“Well, I mean it has to be *something*, right,” Soap tries, eyes soft, but all he can feel is the heavy weight of pity.

“Yes, something,” he says listlessly and stands up. “I should go,” he says.

“No, wait, sorry, I’ve fucked this up.” Soap stumbles over the words, reaching out but he’s already at the door, smiling placidly.

“I’ll see you later, Soap,” he adds before slamming the door shut between them.

— [redacted] —

Ghost doesn’t remember returning to his room. He barely remembers talking to Soap. He looks at the clock. It’s been hours. He’s taken his boots off, his phone is out on the desk and there’s a faint smell of aftershave in the air.

None of it was him.

Ghost expects panic; he’s used to panic now. Such a familiar, cruel friend, relentless in its pursuit. But the panic remains distant. No, no, he knows what to do, there’s no panic in that.

He knows exactly how much he’s willing to put up with, and this is crossing a line.

He should have been dead a decade ago. *More*. He should never have come back to the military, should never have let Price convince him, should never have fucking dug himself out of the sand. Should have suffocated down there. Should have died. Over and over and *over* again. Should have died with *them*, or at least on the field since. So many opportunities, so many times he escaped by a hair’s breadth.

Why should he still be alive?

Mind set, he tugs the boots back on, laces them up with military precision and storms across the base to find the armoury.

Private Jeffery Smith, known predominantly as Peasant within the 141 poor bastard, sits at the desk, leaning back in the creaky desk chair, arms folded over his stomach, eyes lidded like he’s about to fall asleep. He jumps into position when Ghost opens the door, smiling brightly. Peasant always was a little star-struck.

“Lieutenant,” he says politely. “Going to the range?”

Ghost nods silently.

“Right. What do you need, sir?” Peasant asks, that smile still plastered on his face like a stain.

“Glock,” Ghost grunts. He doesn’t need anything fancier than that.

“Got it.” Peasant stands up and disappears out of sight for a moment before coming back with a standard sidearm and two magazines. “That enough?” He asks, still fucking *smiling*.

“Yeah.” He only needs one bullet anyway.

The door slams open behind him and Driver appears, another one of Bravo team’s Privates, yelling with the usual South African gusto, “I am here to free the peasant from his post!”

The moment it leaves his mouth, he spots Ghost and turns beet red, fumbling into a salute.

“Sir,” he says, eyes wide, intermittently glaring at Peasant, who’s barely hiding the laughter that threatens to come out. Ghost is already fucking sick of both of them.

Ghost just waves him off and doesn’t even bother with a reprimand, taking the Glock and stalking towards the exit.

“Wait!” Peasant calls, just as he makes it to the door. “I mean- Sorry, sir, it’s just that I was going to go to the shooting range too and was hoping you could help me out? The Captain says I’m lagging behind.”

Ghost needs to say no. He needs to be alone. He can’t- *Fuck’s sake*.

There isn’t an obvious reason to sound no. Maybe he could just play up being a dick? That sometimes works but he’s still fucking smiling and he just-

*Fuck.*

Ghost is still looking for words by the time Peasant and Driver have swapped shifts and now he can’t walk in the other direction without looking suspicious as fuck. This is all going wrong already.

Maybe he could just do this tomorrow-

*No. That’s a coward’s decision.*

He'll just sneak off, somehow. He's good at that. So he waits patiently for Peasant to collect his things and walks with him to the edge of the base where the firing ranges lie empty.

Ghost isn't breathing right but he hides it well. It's an outdoor range, which doesn't give him much to work with. He idly thinks about going to the bathroom and trying to sneak out the back but the windows are too small. Maybe he can feign seeing someone- no, *no*, he can't fucking act to save his life.

He's getting desperate now, hands shaking with anxious anticipation.

*Run.*

Yes, maybe if he just-

He takes one last look at Peasant, though he can't seem to see better than a vague blurry outline, and fucking *runs*.

Ghost runs fast; faster than most people expect. He may be big but he's also got long legs and can outpace almost anyone. He's been lax on his training recently, sure, but that's never held him back before.

He diverts at the last minute. Peasant will be expecting him to go somewhere obvious, probably, if he suspects what he's doing at all. So he pivots away from his own barracks and towards the abandoned barracks across the grounds, empty since the 141 took the base as their own.

The front door is locked but Ghost knows he can get in through the third window from the door. He's always kept it unlocked for emergencies, usually just to get a moment's peace.

It's not exactly an easy or graceful entrance but the moment he's in, he can breathe easier. No one will find him here. No one at all.

At least until the shot rings out.

He makes his way to the top floor, as far from any entrance as he can get, and barges into one of the communal rooms, rows of mattress-less cots lining the walls, floors clean of anything but dust. The cleaning crews still come through this building once a week; Ghost knows because he comes every week to make sure the window stays unlocked.

Then he's faced with nothing. No more distractions. No more idle thoughts. Just he, himself and...

A gun.

It had felt so easy up until now, he thinks, the path forward so clear. But as soon as he untucks the gun from his waistband, his hands start to shake.

He's just so tired. He doesn't want to do this anymore. Doesn't want any of this. Doesn't want to *live* like this, or die like this, or stay trapped in this hellish limbo where he can't even fucking-

He can't breathe. God's unforgiving fists clutch his throat and he's wheezing. Never enough oxygen, never too little. Endless limbo.

*I was never supposed to live this long*, he thinks. It's pure luck he even got this far. It's no injustice to cut it off now.

*Death can be peaceful*, he knows. Rarely, of course. And not usually when you put a gun in your mouth. But, well... He can hope, can't he?

*Dying is what I deserve*, he thinks like a chant. Like if he gives enough excuses, he can make this work.

*Even if it's painful, at least this time it will be quick*, because last time was so fucking slow and he can't do that again. He *can't*.

*We deserve the pain anyway*. Which is probably true because nothing good suffers this much pain. This sort of pain is designed for the bad people.

Yes, this is for the bad people. For the people who don't deserve to live. He lifts the gun up and releases the safety, shaking so violently that he almost pulls the trigger too early.

He spins the gun around slowly and slips it past his lips. He gags once and swallows desperately, hand hovering over the trigger. His whole body is shaking now; he can't even see, the whole world a vibrating blur of monochrome.

If only he could have done this outside.

He would have liked to see something pretty one last time.

He doesn't want to do this.

*You do, he thinks desperately. You want it over.*

*Peaceful, this time. A quick exit.*

“Fuck!” Ghost screams, ripping the gun out of his mouth, a trail of saliva stretching out before snapping in a gelatinous glob. He feels utterly repulsed with himself.

He tries to move but he can’t feel his own body, pins and needles melting into a strange nothingness that feels somewhere between floating and melting. He feels heavy and yet he’s moving up, up, up-

*We need to die.*

Yeah, he fucking *knows*. But he can’t do it. He’s a goddamn coward. A sickening, repulsive, *coward*.

He just needs- He needs- He’s got to-

*Soap*. Yes! Yes, Soap. He needs Soap. Soap can fix all of this, he thinks deliriously. Soap always does what he asks. Or, no, he can make it an order. Soap has to follow orders. Give him the gun and the order and it will all be done. It will all be over.

He doesn’t remember getting out of the building, or crossing the field, or entering the main barracks. He doesn’t remember knocking on the door. But he remembers Soap’s face.

“Oh, you’re back,” Soap says, frowning.

Ghost nods rapidly and barges past. He feels like he can see *everything*, eyes so wide they can take in the entire light spectrum. He feels... He feels...

*Ask him.*

Wait, yes, of course. He’s supposed to- to-

“I can’t do this,” Ghost whispers, listing to the side and then scrambling back upright. He’s not sure he’s in control anymore.

“Ghost, what the fuck is-”

“No,” he spits. “No, no, no. I need you to do this.” He looks up, deploring. “*I need you to do this.*”

“Do what?” Soap asks, fear edging into his voice.

Ghost stumbles forward and grabs Soap’s hands in his own, clutching them so tight. The skin feels nice. *Soap* feels nice. Clumsily, he captures Soap’s wrists in one hand and draws the gun back out of his waistband and uncurls Soap’s fingers to give him a proper grip. With a small smile, he brings the barrel to his head.

“You can do it,” he whispers. “You can do this for me, right?”

Soap tries to pull away but Ghost keeps Soap’s wrist in his hand, holding steady.

“Ghost, stop,” Soap says, panicking now, breaths coming fast and heavy, eyes darting around the room like a cornered animal. But it will all be okay. This will be over soon and then Soap won’t need to be scared.

“Do it,” he begs. “I don’t want to be like this anymore. I shouldn’t be here,” Ghost explains desperately, eyes blurry. “I was never meant to be here.”

He feels loony, dizzy with desperation, as if the path forward has just been cleared and all he can do is stumble towards it in a drunken haze if only Soap would just *do as he asked*.

This is the end of hopelessness. It’s power.

For once, his head is silent, in perfect alignment.

“Let go of me,” Soap hisses but Ghost only grips tighter, clarity coming all too quickly.

“I order you to shoot me,” he says, voice level, authoritative in a way that he didn’t know he was capable of.

“No, what the fuck are you doing-”

“I order you to shoot me, Sergeant,” he repeats, louder this time.

“I’m not fucking shooting you!” Soap screams and Ghost has to repress an eye-roll.

“You’d be doing me a fucking favour!” Ghost shouts back. “Now just do it!”

“Stop saying that, I’m not fucking shooting you!” Soap bellows.

Oh, right, Ghost knows what this is. He’s an idiot.

“We can make it look like an accident,” he promises with quiet intensity. “Or that I did it myself. We know how to do that, right?” He tries a smile and relishes in the quiet scratch of the mask against his skin.

“I’ll make sure you don’t go to prison,” Ghost continues. “Put it in my mouth,” he decides. “We can get the angle right, make it look like I did it myself.”

“This isn’t fucking funny,” Soap warns, still trying to untangle his hand.

“I’m not joking,” Ghost retorts, dead-serious.

“Ghost, get off me,” Soap says, struggling in earnest now, wriggling in a way that forces Ghost’s hand to bend awkwardly but he refuses to let go now; he’s got so far.

“Not until you do it,” he says, twisting with Soap until they look like they’re playing an awful game of Twister. If this was any other scenario, it would be fucking hilarious.

“I’m not going to- oh, for fuck’s sake!” Soap shouts and suddenly Ghost is blind-sighted by Soap’s other fist hitting the side of his head.

Ghost crumples instantly, head ringing. His thoughts are disjointed, messy, and the world doesn’t seem to make sense. He groans, curling in on himself. Is he going to puke? He thinks he’s going to-

No, no, he’s not safe. He needs to- There are footsteps approaching. He can’t let himself be-

He lashes out, grabbing onto the nearest ankle and tugging desperately, trying to topple whoever’s coming after him but he can’t even get a good grip. His head is spinning so fucking fast and he’s going to die and he-

He didn’t ask for any of this. He doesn’t want to be ill and he doesn’t want to live and he doesn’t want to die and-

“You don’t want to fucking die? Ey, boy? Good. Then let’s fucking live.” His dad cuts a terrifying figure, tall, broad, facial hair that seems to hide away his expressions so that his poor goddamn sons can never read them.

The band on the stage is screaming, paint smeared on their faces, teeth glaring under fluorescent lights. His dad is laughing and screaming along, one arm still

gripped tight around his bicep. He's squeezing too hard and there are people everywhere and he feels like he's suffocating.

"I can't- I can't breathe. Dad, I'm going to-"

"Shut the fuck up and enjoy the music!" His dad screams, tugging him closer, but the crowd is following suit, swallowing him in their mass. He can't see a thing. He can't breathe. This mask is suffocating him but he can't take it off. Why is he-?

The air is all but gone now. His lungs are burning and he's running out of time. His lungs keep going but there's nothing there. He's dizzy, desperate and-

There's laughter. *His* laughter. It's everywhere, loud and cloying, but then he hears the crowd and the screaming on stage and his dad yelling and Roba spitting in his face and-

Something bashes over his head and it's all gone.

— [redacted] —

She lies on the floor, head ringing, and waits to die.

How long must she keep waiting?