Summary

Bucky, Danny, Wanda and Robbie have all run away from their homes at one point, now they are trying to survive on the streets together.

Steve, Luke and Daisy are popular High School kids from rich families but they all have their secrets that they are hiding from the world or themselves.

One night, worlds collide and things will change forever. But maybe, change doesn't always have to be bad.
Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Bucky looked up at the second story of the abandoned factory building. There was a gallery inside, the stairs leading up broken for years.

“Rapunzel, let your hair down.”, he sighed, shifting on the spot.

He heard an annoyed sound, before a knitter was pushed down. Bucky looked around the factory, checking again for intruders or strangers in here, before he started climbing up.

“Thank you.”, he took the hand, Danny offered him to haul him up. He crawled a little over the cold, dirty metal ground, before he had steady footing and remained seated.

“How was it?”, Danny asked, as he pulled the ladder back up, tossing it somewhere aside and looking Bucky down curiously.

“I didn’t get caught, if that’s what you mean.”, Bucky shrugged and poured some money from his jacket pockets onto the floor. The coins made some rattling sounds, before they stopped moving.

“That’s most important.”, Danny sighed, looking at the coins, before he ran a hand through his blonde, curly hair.

“I’m not a good pickpocket, I guess.”, Bucky muttered. He always knew, that he had to work in that department. That was Robbie’s speciality, Bucky was better, when it came to breaking and entering. He wasn’t good at being sneaky.

Danny shook his head, making those curls bounce, “No, no, it’s fine.”

Bucky shook his head, mirroring the other boy, “The others here yet?”

“No.”

“That’s good, I guess. I mean, the aren’t supposed to.”, in their life, the more regular things were, the better. Problem was: Their life wasn’t regular.

“Probably.”

Bucky tilted his head. His friend was unusually quiet again and he didn’t like that, “Come on, let’s go inside.”

Well, inside was the wrong word. They already were inside but not inside of their “Home”. Home was the old control room. The group had settled down here a few months ago. It was nice. The roof didn’t leak into the room and the height and window to the gallery allowed them to live safely. They had hauled their mattresses from the streets and under the bridges up here along with a lot of stuff, they had gathered before this.

Before they became a group.

“It’s cold.”, Bucky said, sitting down on his mattress.

“I didn’t want to start a fire alone. Not yet. I kinda want to but... If cops or firefighters come here-”

“I know, it wasn’t meant as a criticism.”
“Oh, sorry.,” Danny said, sitting down on his mattress, petting Groot, who was sleeping there, as always.

Keeping the dog in here was hard. They had to pull him up and down with an improvised cable. But the dog wouldn’t leave them alone and they wouldn’t leave Groot either. He protected them and he was a part of them. A friend in a way.

“I can get us money again.,” Danny whispered.

“No.,” Bucky sighed. He didn’t know, where Danny tended to get the money from, but he probably didn’t wanna know. Bucky and Robbie were older than Wanda and Danny and they hated seeing them compromised like this. Their childhood stolen from them.

At least, Wanda could still go to school.

For her, there was hope in the world. Danny, Robbie and Bucky couldn’t afford that. The risk of the police finding out would be too big.

“I’m going out tonight. Try to steal something for us. We need to save the money, we currently make.”

“I can go o--”

“No.,” Bucky said again, this time with a tone, that shouldn’t be mistaken.

“Sorry.”

“Just, let me handle this.”

Danny nodded, “Alright.”

Bucky sighed. He hated fighting like this. Well, if you could call this fighting. But he cared about the other kids. Enough to make himself feel bad for even the tiniest argument.

“So, you wanna go out with Wanda this weekend, onto the streets.”

Danny bit his lips, “I think, a girl like Wanda is probably gathering much more money, without a guy sitting next to her.”

Bucky chuckled, “True. Are you bored?”

“What? No.”

Bucky was sure, that this wasn’t entirely true. He had to admit, that Danny had a bit of a boring job here. He was mostly there to keep a lookout. He was a good fighter and if someone came here, he could fight them off. Defend their little belongings. At least against simple street thugs. And they couldn’t leave their base alone, the one, who should defend it then, was the youngest one of them, the one who couldn’t go to school.

“Do you want to go out?” Bucky offered. There was something off about Danny today. Not that this wasn’t normal for him…

“No, no, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked again. They were walking in circles here but maybe, he could find something out of he just kept pushing.
Danny shrugged, “Yes. Just worried.”

Bucky petted Goot, as he pressed his head against his thigh, making him chuckle, “About the money?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”, Danny sighed, “I can get us some money.”

“Where from?”, Bucky asked.

“Does it matter?”, Danny let Groot lick his arm

“Yes.”

Danny shook his head, “No, no it doesn’t. I mean, I can help you guys with that. I can help us to survive.”

“Just, don’t okay. I don’t know, where the money came from in the past but I know, that it was dangerous. That much money doesn’t come to people like us without danger. I know that, everyone here knows that.”

“Buck…”

“No!”

Groot raised an ear.

“He doesn’t mean it.”, Danny whispered.

“Great, now you are letting me stand here, looking like a douche.”, Bucky chuckled, looking at the dog.

“Sorry.”, Danny whispered, chuckling, “He is super nice actually.”, he leaned down to whispered again into the dogs ear.

Bucky giggled and leaned back onto the mattress. The tension had slightly loosened at least, that was something.

“How was your day?”, Danny asked.

“Yeah, my day…”, Bucky sighed and ran his hands down his face, “Not good, I mean, as I said, this is all, I got.”

“It is… But, that’s just it?”

“In a way.”, Bucky shrugged, “What else should be there?”

“You. How are you.”

Bucky chuckled, “You are cute.”

“Awww, don’t get cheesy with me.”

Bucky chuckled and leaned back against the wall, “I don’t know?”, he adjusted his hair band that was keeping his long hair in control. He was thinking about a man bun, if he was being honest.

“You don’t even know?”, Danny asked, “That is… bad.”
Bucky shrugged again, he felt uncomfortable, when other people cared about him. He was still getting used to this. This… living together. He had lived a few years on the streets after being thrown out by his father, he had met Robbie first. His parents had been deported back to Mexico and had decided to leave him behind. Robbie still wasn’t sure, if this was for the best or not. Wanda didn’t talk much about where she’d come from. She had run from a mental hospital at some point but there were still parts, Bucky didn’t know about. Danny had run from his abusive foster father. He was somewhere from the mountains and just jumped a train one day.

They had met, fighting for a spot to sleep. It had been ugly for a moment, until Wanda had a psychic breakdown, screaming and crying for almost an hour. Afterwards, they had sat down together, trying to calm her and they grew on each other during this time.

“Buck?”

“Right. Yeah, I’m just a little stressed. Winter is coming.”

Danny chuckled at that and Bucky rolled his eyes. Yeah, even, if you don’t own a TV let alone HBO, some memes and references couldn’t pass you by.

“Seriously, we’ll be fine in here. Even in winter.”

“If, we can stay here.”, Bucky looked out through the semi see through windows and sighed, “I hope it lasts at least a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Danny, you really aren’t out here for long. I mean, there could be other people like us coming here and then, we’re screwed. Or some kids from the town wanting to have fun. Or even some people buying this place.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic.”

“I’m not. I’m a realist, Danny. There’s a difference.”

Danny rolled his eyes again, “Whatever.”

Bucky nodded and grabbed a piece of paper from an old newspaper, tearing it apart and crumbling it together.

They needed money.

There were a few gangs living around this area and they had sort of a rent to pay. At least, that’s, what they called it. Bucky was sure, that this was blackmail or protection money but he wouldn’t argue with this guys and neither would the others.

The problem was, that these gangs would require more and more money and it was already much…

“Bucky…?”

“Hm…?”

“Do you miss it? A normal life?”, Danny looked at him, blue eyes wide, while he absentmindedly petted Groot’s head.

“I miss my life. My old friends and the apartment. I’m happy to be away from my Dad.”

“Me too. My Foster Dad and my Foster brother. When I was sitting on this train… I thought, I would
regret this one day. But I don’t. I’m living on the street and… Nothing’s worse than it was back there.”

Bucky nodded, he knew, that Davos, Danny’s foster brother had bullied him in a lot of ways. One day, he had just jumped onto a cargo train and ended up in New York somehow, “Yeah.”

“I hope, we can get an actual home though. But together.”

“Me too. That would be really nice, but a little unrealistic.”

“One can dream.”

Groot made an approving sound and looked from Danny to Bucky and then back. Danny looked at his friend, “See, even Groot agrees.”

Danny smiled at Bucky and yawned.

“You had shift the whole day?”, Bucky asked.

“Well, Robbie left early, so yeah.”

Bucky sighed, “Go to sleep then.”, he looked at Danny and gave him a pat on his head. He must be tired by now.

“Really?”

Bucky nodded, watch shifts could be exhausting because of nothing happening the whole day, “Yeah. I’ll wake you, when Wanda or Robbie are back and then in the evening, we discuss our, well, let’s call it budget.”

Danny didn’t need to be told twice, he settled down on his bed in the back corner and turned around.

Bucky sighed and stretched his legs. They really needed money. The leader of a local gang had stopped him on the street a few days ago. He had demanded money. A lot of money, more than he could afford.

He hadn’t told the others. They didn’t need to worry more, than they all did all the times.

Bucky needed to take care of this. He needed to get money. Maybe from pickpocketing or he could break into a house.

He had done this a few times, before he met the others. Broken in a few houses. He stole technique and money mostly. Not jewelry. Jewellery could have an emotional value. And he only broke in at rich peoples places. Yeah, it sounded pretty Robin Hood but Bucky didn’t want to fuck other people up.

He had stopped ,when he met the others though. He was too scared that he would be caught now. Now, that he had something to lose. Now, that he had a family.

He looked over at danny and sighed. He was so small, so fragile like this.

And it was similar for Wanda and sometimes even Robbie.

Bucky sighed, looking out of the window into the hall. He needed to be the lookout now. He could worry about the other stuff later. Maybe, he could ask Danny. Ever since a few months ago, he had come back with a lot of money a few times, whenever it was needed.
While Bucky was thankful, he didn't trust this. Danny had been acting a little weird ever since that day too.

Maybe, it was nothing to worry about.

Maybe, he was just a born beggar, or pickpocket.

He needed to talk to Robbie about this, when Wanda and Danny were asleep. He didn’t want to put anything on them. They had enough to worry about. Too much for kids their age. Bucky knew, that this sounded pretentious, with him being just two years older but still.

“Buck?”

“Yeah.”

Danny turned around, “Are you scared?”

“Of what?”

“You just seem to be.”

“I’m okay.”

Good, because you are the bravest person, I know, and if you were scared, we are all in deep shit.”, he whispered.

Bucky laughed, “I’m not brave.”

“You are.”

“No, Robbie’s brave. Wanda. You.”

Danny sighed, “I’m tired and don’t want to discuss this.”

“You stated this.”

“Jerk.”

Bucky chuckled, laying down on his mattress, he loved his pillow. It was a lot softer, than he could actually care to admit. Fluffy and Soft. So unlike anything else on the street and in his life. Maybe except for Danny and Wanda, who were both pure and soft.

Bucky was almost asleep, when he heard the others come in. Robbie was with Wanda, carrying her guitar. He always liked to accompany her, when it was late and it was already getting dark outside. Wanda was pretty with her long dark and slightly curly hair, she often wearing a red beanie which somehow made her look even younger, by rounding her face.

Bucky smiled at them from up on the gallery, before he let down the ladder, “Hey guys.”

“Hi.”, Robbie helped Wanda pulling up the guitar, as she climbed, “How was your day?”

“Okay. But we have money issues.”, better to tell them right away, that they were once again screwed. Or even more screwed.
“When isn’t that the case?” Robbie laughed.

“I mean it. Unless you guys haven’t found a gold mine…”

Wanda frowned, as Bucky pulled her up and leaned back down to help Robbie, “I only made a few bucks.”, her Eastern European accent was strong but still charming.

“You deserve more.” Robbie mumbled, while he climbed the gallery, “I get my payment in a month?”

“A month?” Bucky asked.

“It’s almost like a normal job.” Robbie shrugged.

“Normal enough, that you wanna tell us?”

Robbie shook his head, “Where’s Danny?”

“Sleeping.”

“He got us a lot of money last time.” Wanda remarked.

“No.” Robbie joined Bucky.

“Why?”

“We have no idea from where.”

“Money is money.”, Wanda shrugged.

Bucky shook his head, there was a lot of naivety in her voice. Just how she and Danny were but that couldn’t keep them from being reckless.

“No.” Bucky said again looking at Robbie, who repeated Bucky’s answer a little firmer and louder.

“Okay, okay.” Wanda pulled her homework out of her bag, handing it to the others to look at it. They all learned that way. It wasn’t like actual school but at least they had some sort of education that way.

Bucky had only realised, how important that was, after he dropped out of school.

“Danny, school’s on.” Bucky knocked on the wall next to the door to the control room.

“Hm…” Danny grumbled, turning in his bed.

“You look like an idiot.” Bucky smirked. Danny’s hair was all ruffled up.

“Still better, than you, hipster.”

Bucky laughed, giving him a slap on the back of his head.

Wanda raised a brow in amusement, “When you boys are done…”

“Right.” Bucky shook his head, handing Robbie matches for their improvised campfire. They made it outside of the factory on the backyard in between old machines.

“Shall I preheat?” Robbie said in overdone politeness.
“Of course, kind sir.”, Wanda grinned.

“We’ll be right there.”, Bucky searched through a drawer.

“Good.”

“Buck.”, Danny said, looking at him with big eyes, “Do you think, we’ll ever be in a relationship?”

“Wait, What?”

“Not us… I mean ew. I mean, with someone ...you know…?”

“Maybe?”

“Have you ever been with someone not just physical, I mean…?”

“Danny?”

“What? Just I was curious.”

Bucky sighed, “Yes.”

“Really?”, Danny asked.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t you think this?”

“I don’t know, never took you as the relationship kind of guy.”, Danny shrugged, looking down onto the ground.

“Really”, Bucky raised a brow.

“Well, you never dated someone, as long as we know each other.”

“That is different. Now is different.”

Danny nodded and jumped from his bed,

Bucky took this as a silent cue to get moving.

Downstairs, Wanda and Robbie had left the door open. The factory was directly by the dock.

While fire wasn’t ideal, the wind carried the smoke away.

Mostly.

Today, it was lucky the case.

“Hi.”, Wannda greeted.

Robbie nodded, chopping some food.

They got it from small markets, where they stole or from asking for leftovers.

Sometimes, they’d raid a community garden.

It wasn’t friendly but they’d stopped caring a long time ago.
“Looks good.”, Danny said, looking at the food.

“I know.”, Robbie grinned smugly.

“It does.”, Bucky nodded.

“Do you have the pan?”, Wanda asked, lighting the fire.

“I'll get it.”, Danny sprinted inside.

“You got your homework done?”

I literally just arrived.”, Wanda rolled her eyes.

“Still.”

“No.”

Robbie sighed, “Buck give them time.”

“I am.”

“Obviously, you aren’t.”

Bucky put his hands on his hips. Occasionally Robbie and he had these little fights.

They were both basically leaders and it was bound to happen.


“Do them later, Wand, will you?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky laughed and smiled smugly at Robbie, who just shrugged, pulling his black leather jacket a little tighter around his chest. A gesture, that reminded Bucky of the approaching winter again. Soon, it would be harder and harder to ignore that. He had already spend one winter on the streets, for Danny and Wanda it would be the first. It was harder to imagine, than people believed. It wasn’t just cold, like after a long hike, when you came back inside. That was maybe two hours? This was almost 24/7. And fires were giveaways for their hide out, so they couldn’t always light them. Now was good, with the fog hanging low and the sky being this cloudy, but the situation may look different in a few months.

Bucky shifted a little closer towards the fire and met Robbie’s eyes. Both of them knew, that this was just a cold evening and nothing compared, to what would come.

They were interrupted by a loud noise, Danny was coming back with the pan but had accidentally let the door fall shut.

“Sorry, guys.”

“It’s okay.”, Bucky sighed, looking over at Robbie, “We are chopping the rest of the veggies.”

“We can help.”, Wanda said.

“No, You two do the cleaning after.”, Bucky waved Robbie a little away from the group, handing
him the rest of the veggies stolen from the market.

“We need money.”, he said after a while.

“No shit.”

“Danny’s meds are low.”, Bucky said, turning around. Danny had been diagnosed to be bipolar a little before he ran away.

“If hell breaks loose, he’ll have to do without.”, Robbie sighed, putting more force, into chopping the tomato.

“I don’t like this a bit.”, Bucky, looked at him.

“Me neither but it’s better, than not having anything to bribe the gangs. We’ll have to shorten Wanda’s school supplies before that, I guess.”

“Ugh.”

Robbie shrugged, “I mean it sounds harsh, but she has friends. They will be able to borrow her pens.”

“They are kids. Shouldn’t have to live like that.”

“So are we.”

“We are different. Already screwed up and all, they… are too but I don’t think beyond saving.”

Robbie laughed, “We are hopeless cases, are we?”

“Yeah, you think, you can find a job?”

“Someone’s looking for a driver.”

“No. We don’t do crimes beyond stealing. No drugs, robbery’s or physical harm. And you don’t need hired drivers for a theft.”

“I know. Won’t take it.”

Bucky shoved the vegetables into the pan, “Good. I’m gonna go dumpster diving. See, if something valuable comes up. If not, I’m pulling a night shift pick pocketing on fifth avenue.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep my eyes open. See, who’s hiring.”

“We can do this.”

Robbie nodded, “Wanda isn’t listening, I think, she’s getting a little moody. Puberty and all.”

“She’s been in that, since we know her.”, Bucky chuckled.

“Stubborn, I mean.”

Bucky nodded, he knew, what Robbie meant. Wanda was slowly starting to wish for things, most girls her age wished for. Certain clothes, a phone, boys.

He could understand that. He really could. This was stealing their youth from them but Wanda knew, that she could have this. The price was the foster system, she had made bad experiences with.
Danny was a little different. Most likely, because he didn’t go to school and had no contact with other kids his age. Maybe, it was because as long, as he didn’t have a depressive episode, he was a cheerful, happy and optimistic person.

“She knows, what’s best for her. And when she thinks, that this isn’t it anymore, we won’t stop her from leaving.”

“I know, I know.”, Robbie muttered, “I would miss her here in the factory.”

“Me too.”

Robbie wanted to say something but Wanda and Danny walked up behind them, “Hey, we are hungry.”, Danny said, “And you guys look kinda done.”

Bucky turned around to them looking at him with big eyes, Danny was balancing on the balls of his feet and Wanda had her way too long sleeves hanging down, completely covering her arms. They looked so fragile.

“Yeah, yeah, we are.”

“Good.”, Wanda beamed.

Bucky looked at Robbie trying to give him a, ‘There’s time to discuss this later’ gesture, which was basically shaking his head and a shrug.

They sat down around the fire, putting the vegetables in a pan and covering it, so that it didn’t lose moisture. The veggies were cooking in it, boiling to become a stew-like misch masch.

“This smells good.”, Danny sat up, leaning a little over the fire.

“Yeah.”, Robbie nodded, running a hand through his hair, “Not so bad now, huh?”

Wanda chuckled quietly, pulling her beanie down over her ears. She was freezing a bit. Bucky leaned over and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “I can go inside and get our blanket.”

“No, no, it’s okay.”, Wanda gave Groot a pat on the back.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”, Wanda nodded, “I’m fine. Not cold.”

Bucky looked at her and shrugged out of his jacket, handing it to her.

“I said, I’m fine.”

“Okay, sorry”, Bucky nodded and looked at her, “It’s just…-”

“I’m a tiny girl?”, she asked a glimmer in her eyes.

Danny stared at them with wide eyes from across the fire, his blonde curls almost looking golden.

“No, no!”, Bucky said, it was really not, what he had thought,”It was just your sleeves... and your body language. It looks, as if you’re cold and I know, that you always think about us first.”

She nodded, “Okay.”
“We are fine now?”, Danny asked.

Bucky sensed the worry in his voice. The worry, that the group would break apart. As if, something like this could break a group like them. As if paper could break diamond. Because, if anything, they had grown together over the past few months. They were fighting together for survival. No better team building exercise.

“We are fine.”, Robbie said, scowling at Bucky.

“Yeah.”, Bucky nodded, looking at Wanda, who did the same.

“Good.”, Danny reached out to pet Groot.

“So, I was thinking.”, Danny said quietly, “You talked about me needing something to do in my… manic episodes and I think, sport works best. I mean, I’m not exactly artsy. I want to improve my fighting.”

“You are already good.”, Bucky said, “And there is no--”

“Yeah, but I can get better.”

“No idea, how you can improve yourself, when we aren’t a challenge and there is no way we can get equipment or even a trainer.”, Bucky finished.

“Wanda has her guitar.”

“That earns us money.”, she said smugly.

“I… I know but… I could smash stuff laying around.”

Wanda huffed, “Find something that isn’t broken already here.”

“You could hurt yourself.”, Robbie said.

Danny sighed, “I was just hoping some physical activity would help me sleeping then… But I can think of something else.”

Bucky nodded, “I know.”

Robbie looked over towards Bucky and shrugged. Focusing Danny’s energy on something would do them all a favor. He was too much to handle otherwise but it was hard to find something. They had a way too long list of problems and Bucky felt, as if they were all his responsibility. He had fully embraced the big brother role, Robbie still hesitated with. The result was him feeling left alone.

“He could try my guitar?”, Wanda suggested.

Danny chuckled, “As I said no artsy talent and you know that, Wand.”

“You can learn.”

“I think, that requires talent.”

Bucky shook his head laughing, sometimes, he could just forget. When he was sitting by the fire like that, he could forget, what their life was. The reality, that they used these pretty flames, illuminating the night sky to survive. And that these people sitting by his side weren’t just his friends but also his camarades fighting to stay alive.
“We can also find you work. Someone else can watch.”, Robbie, put his food away offering Bucky the leftovers. He shook his head, gesturing towards Wanda and Danny. Robbie handed them the food, before he went back to scratching Groot behind his ears.

“We owe the pink tigers money.”, Bucky said, without really thinking. Yes, he wanted to keep the trouble away from his people but he also didn’t want to lie to them. They deserved the truth.

“What?”

“For camping on their turf.”

“But this was purple velvet, I thought…”, Danny said, “And we paid them. Lots.”

Robbie shook his head, glaring at Bucky, “They don’t think so. And we have no business siding with either of them.”

“And we pay both.”, Wanda rolled her eyes.

“We don’t have a choice.”

“Yeah, because our life already sucks! I go to school and have to ask other students for a pen and then never return it! I smell and wear ugly clothes, that are always the same and rarely washed!”

“I know.”, Bucky said calmly.

“This is our reality.”, Robbie added dryly, “You can always leave but there is no real guarantee, as to what will happen to you.”

“I would miss you, Wand.”, Danny said, using a stick to move wood inside of the fire, watching, as it slowly burned before dropping it into the flames.

“We all would.”, Bucky sighed, “But that isn’t the point. You should be able to decide freely for your choice.”

“I know.”, Wanda said grimly, “I know, that I won’t leave but I don’t like this either.”

“None of us do.”

Robbie sighed, “Coming back to the topic. The pink tigers. We need the money. All the money, we can get.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“So are the tigers.”

Danny nodded, looking at Wanda, “He’s right.”

“I can skip some school?”

“No.”, Bucky, shook his head, “Just, no… Stay there… I can try to steal from a house.”

“If they catch you, you’ll be arrested.”

“I know.”

Robbie shook his head, “We have to take this risk. I’ll look out for jobs.”
“How much time?”, Danny asked.

“A week.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not much.”, Danny said with the attitude of a kicked puppy.

“No shit. We’ll figure it out. You two have deserved some sleep.”

“It’s not late.”, Wanda stated.

“Are you tired.”

“Yes.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.”, Bucky smiled at them, as they left, “Good night.”

“Good Night.”, Wanda replied.

“Sleep well later.”, Danny followed her inside. Bucky watched them, as they closed the gate behind them. He knew, that they were only a little younger, than him but he felt more protective of them, than he had felt about anything ever before. His heart ached a little from seeing them being this close to becoming like him. Bucky didn’t want that. It was the last thing, he wanted. He didn’t want them to become criminals or addicts, always struggling to stay clean. He pulled the sleeve of his shirt down at the thought. Covering up the scars from needles again. Covering his biggest shame.

“So, we are fucked.”, Robbie stated after a while of watching the fire burn down.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe, we should leave. Go back somewhere else. We are a group and as long, as we stay just that, we are kinda safe. But we could just leave the turf, you know?”

“You want to leave home?”

“Buck.”, Robbie furrowed his brow, “It’s not really home. Just a temporary place.”

“You really think so?”

“What do you think? Is this your home?”

“No… But… I mean, the thing is… It’s steady. We know, that we can stay here-”

“- As long, as the police stays away, or other homeless people, or as long, as it isn’t sold.”

“We can stay here.”, Bucky continued, “I mean, for Wanda it means, that she has a fixed place to come home to after school. There is a public bathroom five minutes away from here to clean ourselves. The wind carries the smoke away and we have the lift. It’s perfect.”

“Except, that it’s a crappy neighborhood.”

“Well, we can’t exactly move in an upper east side apartment.”

Robbie sighed, “You know, what I mean.”
“Yeah.”

Robbie took a stick, pushing the burned wood around, the fire was just a glimmer now, wordlessly, Bucky handed him a plastic bottle with water and watched, as his friend poured it over the pit.

Bucky pulled his jacket tighter.

“It’s getting cold.”, Robbie commented.

“Yup.”

“We could go to a shelter.”

“You really mean that? I mean, you know, why we can’t.”

“I know… And I wouldn’t risk goin back to my old life, getting deported but… Wanda and Danny…”

“You know, why they don’t like the idea either.”

“They haven’t been through a winter on the streets yet.”

“I know.”

Robbie looked at Bucky, “Are you afraid, they will leave.”

“I want them to be happy.”
Steve sighed, setting his bag down next to his chair. He was tired, last night had been a little intense. These days, he felt, as if he was just been dragged from party to party and it was taking its toll on him. He wanted to be with his friends but at the same time, it didn’t make him happy. He didn’t take any satisfaction from something, he should very much enjoy. And damn, he was tired today. Most likely, he’d end up falling asleep, the moment, he got home.

“Yes!”, Steve looked up from his disgusting cafeteria food and smiled at Daisy. As always, she was emitting energy like crazy. That had been different during her short emo phase. That had been a weird time. These days, Daisy didn’t like to talk about it. Just brushed it off as a difficult time, where she still had to find herself.

Steve was sure, she was actually embarrassed.

Now, she was a bit of a punk girl. Colored highlights in her shoulder long dark hair, and short colorful clothes.

“What is it?”, he asked, bracing himself on his elbow.

“I need to ask you something.”, she let herself fall down on a chair next to Steve and blew a strand of purple and turquoise hair away from her eyes.

Steve was sure, that her hair color was changing on a daily basis by now. He was sure, it had been pink just a few days ago. Personally, he preferred her with these colder colors.

“And that would be?”

“Are you free this Saturday?”

“Why?”, Steve sighed.

“A party.”, she grinned. Steve had suspected that. Of course… Because apparently, there was nothing else, other High School students liked to do.

He tried to act surprised though. Daisy didn’t deserve his bad mood, “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you ask me? I thought, your Dad didn’t want you to throw parties since the beer pong incident.”

“We don’t talk about this.”, she looked around the cafeteria, lowering her voice.

“Right, sorry.”
She cleared her throat, “Anyway, Luke wants to throw it and the wanted to make sure, that his best buddy would be there.”

Steve sighed, “That is cute.”

“Cute?”, Daisy smirked.


“Hey, I wasn’t criticizing you for breaking through toxic masculinity.”

Steve sighed, “Why doesn’t Luke ask me himself?”

“He’s uhm… making out with Claire.”


“And he doesn’t have time to tell me.”

“Well, she’s leaving for the nursing school program at this camp soon.”

Steve smirked, “I see.”

“Yeah… So, can you give me an answer? Cheerleading starts soon.”

Steve sighed, He didn’t want to go to yet another High School party. With a bunch of sweaty idiots, drinking and screaming. But it was Luke’s… His best friend. He couldn’t leave him hanging. Especially, if his girlfriend was leaving town soon. He might need his support then.

“Come on, Steve, I’ll be there… And Sharon,…”

“Okay.”, Steve nodded, “Fine.”

“Nice, I’ll tell him, first chance I get.”

Steve nodded, “Daisy, wait?”

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t you text me.”

“Funny coming from you, Mr. I don’t need What’s App.”

Steve shrugged.

“Well, he was sure, you wouldn’t read it anytime soon.”

“Really?”

“Come on, we both know, that he was right there.”

“Maybe.”, Steve smirked.

“See?”

“What?”, Steve rolled his eyes.
“You can smile.”

“Funny.”, he looked after Daisy, as she walked away. She didn’t know, that he was feeling empty inside. The thing was, with football being more work than fun for him recently, he had started to lack things to look forward to. Lack motivation for anything really.

He sighed, trying to enjoy his meal in silence, when he was interrupted again.

“How are you doing, cap.”, Tony Stark sat down on the opposite side of the table. he was accompanied by Stephen and Thor. Steve smiled, Thor was from his football team and not nearly as arrogant, as the other two could be. At least something.

“Oh are we ignoring me now?”, Tony asked.

“Seemingly.”, Stephen smirked, setting his biology book down, before pouring himself a tea. He was kinda weird too, but Steve guessed, that it was made up for by his charme and cleverness.

“Where’s T’challa?”, Steve asked.

“Wow, that is one warm welcome.”, Stark rolled his eyes.

Steve didn’t look up from his food, “He’s on my team, if he’s sick, I need to know.”

“He isn’t. Would be easier to keep you up to date, if you would finally enter the 21st century.”

Thor watched the conversation amused, looking between the three others.

Thanks for the help, pal.


“Yeah.”

“That is great, Stephen, T’Challa, Thor, Nat and Clint will be there too. And of course, the star guest: Moi.”

“Did you just have french lessons?”

“I’m a genius. I don’t need High School lessons to practice my language skills of such an important lang-”

“Yes.”, Stephen interrupted and Stark looked at him offended.

Thor beamed between the two, before his eyes rested on the jello.

“You can have it.”, Steve sighed, pushing it over towards the blonde.

He smiled happily.

“So, where is T’challa?”

“They have a class trip.”

“Oh, right, he told me about it…”

Stephen nodded, “He did. Are you distracted recently?”
“What? No.”

“Just a question.”, he raised a hand in defeat.

“Don’t let him bother you, Stephen, our captain is just a little confused because of Sharon.”

“Hell, I am.”, Steve muttered.

“If that isn’t a yes.”, Tony smirked.

“Stark, you better shu-”

“Steve and Sharon sitting on a tree, K-I-S-S--”

“Shut it.”

Steve hated swearing but some people actually managed to make him cross that border. “Woah.”

Thor continued eating his jello, like other people ate popcorn during a good, intense movie at the cinema.

Luckily, there was some sort of calm after that. The conversations luckily went past Steve. Tony and Stephen were talking about some science stuff and Thor and Steve could eat in peace. School was exhausting enough and Steve was thankful, that at least the break could be somewhat peaceful now. He didn’t want to think about the stupid party. He wasn’t one for loud dance music. Maybe, he was old fashioned that way but the beats and many people always made his heart jump in the worst way. Funnily enough, his friends were a little different there. Most of them actually enjoyed these kinds of events and being with his friends was usually one of the few joys, Steve had.

Usually.

“Steve?”, a deep voice next to him asked after a few moments.

Thor had finished his second and third jello and was looking at him, “Hm?”, Steve asked, trying not to sound too grumpy right now. Thor wasn’t responsible for his mood. Actually, no one here as responsible for it. Not even Tony or Stephen. It was him alone. He was the downer here. He always had been. Deep down, he knew. Even back in kindergarten, he had been the reasonable one. If there was an idea, to do something reckless, he’d say, that they shouldn’t do it.

“Do you think, you can handle training currently?”, he asked, brushing aside his long blonde hair. Steve knew, that he was thinking about cutting it for a while. He would talk about it and tell everyone about his plans and never do it.

“Why would I be worried?”, Steve blinked confused, setting his fork down next to his plate. He was so close to finishing his salad. He could already be at the classroom, doing the homework, he forgot yesterday, if it wasn’t for them interrupting him.

*They are doing nothing wrong.*

“Rumlow.”, the name pulled Steve back to reality. No, that was putting it wrong. It was pulling him to reality, before slamming him down on gravely ground, over and over again, until his cheeks were bloody and cut open.

Brock Rumlow was his biggest rival. He was the backup quarterback but actually too good to be just a backup. Which was the main problem, he was always there threatening Steve’s spot on the squad. He was there hovering above him, threatening his career, his future at the college and all.
“What is with him?”, Steve asked.

“He made some rude comments.”, Thor frowned, as if it pained him to say it, “Mean ones. Insulting you. I only heard them, but if I had been there, I would have stopped that from happening.”

Steve smiled, “Of course, you would. But you don’t have to worry. I can handle this.”

“Okay, I have to leave now.”, Thor nodded and grabbed a juice pack before leaving the cafeteria.

“See you at the party.”, Steve muttered, so quiet, that there was no way, Thor would have heard him. He wished, he had said ‘No’ more clearly before. Now, he was stuck, basically having to go to the damn party. He owned it in a way. He had gently declined some invitations recently and he felt, as if he was betraying his friends. He hated lying to them but saying, that he just didn’t want to was something, he didn’t want to do either. Usually, he made up excuses. Studying for example.

It wasn’t nice but it worked.

Now, he had no real option, as most exams were still a little away and he had just been sick, so saying, that he had caught a cold was weird too.

Steve left the table, as soon, as he was finally done eating his lunch. He waved the others goodbye and left the cafeteria, before any of them could have the idea to walk to the class along with him. He wasn’t sure, why he was like that? One day, he had just started to feel...Disconnected from his friends. As if they were living in one world and he in the other. It was, as if there was a rift between them, threatening to swallow his whole world. The rift was getting bigger and bigger, wider and wider. He could still hear them, see them but they were too far away to understand, what they felt. And too far away for them to understand Steve. Too far away to connect to Steve. Just… there but not present to him.

Steve sighed opening his locker. There were still drawings he made pinned to the inside. From back, when he had still been drawing. When he had still spend his afternoons scribbling and proudly presenting the results. They were of his friends. Luke, flashing one of those smiles, that was so damn popular with the girls. Stephen, Tony and Bruce in the lab. Thor and T’Challa on the field. There they were, all happy. The thing was, back when Steve had drawn these, their happiness had been enough to make him happy too. But now… Now, that wasn’t the case. Was he an asshole for that? For not being happy for them? With them? He still liked it, when they were happy. The emotion just didn’t seem to be contagious anymore.

“Earth to Steve?”, a familiar deep but warm voice asked next to him.

“I... uhm...”

“You were just daydreaming. The usual.”, Luke leaned against his locker next to Steve’s. Red lipstick from Claire still smudged at his neck.

Steve tried a smile. If he was daydreaming it was probably closer to nightmares currently, but that wasn’t Luke mistake. It was Steve’s. Steve’s alone.

“Steve...?”

“Right, uhm,... You have lipstick, just here...”, Steve reached out to wipe the remains away, before he awkwardly retreated and mimicked the spot on Luke’s skin on his own neck.

“Thank you.”, Luke smirked and rubbed his hand over the red spot, before looking at his fingers, where the color was still visible. If he had noticed Steve’s earlier portrayal of pure awkwardness in
the attempt to show him the spot, he didn’t show any sign of it, “Heard, you are coming to the party?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Daisy already texted you?”

“Damn right, she did?”, Luke was always the kind of guy, you wanted to be around. There was this positive energy, or aura, if you wanted to call it that way. And it was everywhere. Luke was different from Daisy, energetic but yet calm and focused. It used to do wonders on Steve, when he felt bad or was nervous before games.

“And the question is…?”

“Are you bringing someone?”

Steve rolled his eyes. He hated that question. Yes, he barely clicked with people. That was the case for most people at High School. He started to feel, as if he was being treated different for being popular though.

“Oh, look, Steve. Handsome and all, bet he has a gorgeous girlfriend.”

“What the quarterback is single?”

“No, I’m there alone.”, Steve answered.

“Right. Sharon will be there though.”

“Thank you for the information.”, Steve smiled, ignoring the obvious implication behind this statement.

“Come on, man.”

Steve tried to manage a smile. It wasn’t so hard, thinking about it like that. Just look down to the floor and pull the corners of his mouth upwards. Steve stared at the tips of his shoes for a moment. Tried to memorize the pattern of the mud and dust on the red converse. Hopefully, looking downwards would be enough to mask his fake smile from Luke.

The other boy chuckled, “See, you are looking forward to her.”

Steve looked back up, relieved, looking at Luke’s mustard yellow hoodie, he was the only person, he knew ho could actually pull of yellow, “Yeah.”

Luke smiled pleased, “Look, I’m just happy, you are there, You are my best friend and I need you.”

“It’s a party.”, Steve shrugged, looking at his sleeves that were just a little too long. This was the only shirt, he owned with that problem. But he liked it. Maybe, he liked it because of that. It felt safe in a way. Being in a sweater, that was just a little too wide. It felt a little like a safe place, especially, now when the winter was slowly coming to the town and the days were getting shorter and colder.

“I know, I know. But it means a lot to me, when you are there. And so does it, when you aren’t.”, Luke shrugged, his wide shoulders looking a little awkwardly doing that gesture like that. Luke was a big guy. But the longer, Steve knew him, the easier it was to forget that. How he looked for others. Luke was kind and calm. His biggest flaw was probably, that he could be a little of a womanizer.

Steve sighed at the words, “Okay, okay.”

“I thought it was sure, that you’d come.”
“Consider it sure-er now.”, Steve tried another smirk. Back, when he was a kid, he used to remember situations from his past that triggered a certain emotion to be able to portray it accurately. Now, it felt as if it didn’t work for a while. At least, with happiness. Steve had a hard time remembering happy moments and when he did, they didn’t seem so happy now.

It was, as if a layer of gray had tilted memories, that used to be colorful and lively just a moment before. If anything, all of this made him even sadder now.

“Look, I have to go.”, Steve sighed, “Class and stuff.”

“Oh, right.”, Luke sighed and smiled at Steve. Usually, it was hard to resist his happy grin but right now, it had lost its magic on Steve.

He tried for a smile again and held his hand out for a fist bump. Another smile flashed over Luke’s lips, as he returned the gesture and again, it was ineffective on Steve.

He knew, that Luke was concerned. His friends were aware of his state for sure. They weren’t idiots. Steve was worrying them. Hurting them.

He sighed, walking into the direction of the class room, once again realising, just how ugly the hallway was. Sand colored ground and an ugly green on the walls. Probably meant to be calming or ensure a good learning environment. Blah, blah, blah. It didn’t matter. If you had to spend years at a place with bullies, mean teachers and early hours, there was nothing, that didn’t make you hate it.

No color could make up for this.

Steve slammed his locker shut.

He needed to get to the class. History with Mr. Coulson. It was one of his favorite classes. Mr. Coulson was cool. Not just, because of him being Daisy’s father. He just got along well enough with Steve and basically every other student. He had this aura about him, that made everyone feel appreciated and valued. But recently, even his favorite class wasn’t something Steve was looking forward to. He hated it. Hated it all.

Steve sighed, shoving through the hallways. He sat down in the back of the room, one of the perks of being pretty popular was that there was always someone reserving you a spot in the last year of the room. He smiled over at Clint and sat down next to him. He liked Clint. He wasn’t part of his core group, probably mostly, because of him not being in the football team. He was an archer, which to be honest was pretty cool. Cooler, than football for sure. And besides him not being on the team of the “New York Avengers”, he always hung with his girlfriend Natasha. He rarely talked to Steve but when he did, they got along. That didn’t mean, that he wanted to talk now, so Steve was pretty happy, that Mr. Coulson started immediately.

He was interested in history but still, he didn’t care about what he had to say. No, didn’t care was the wrong word. He was just too tired and too… meh?

Instead, Steve pulled out his notebook and started scribbling on it. It looked enough, like he was actually working and writing down notes.

When he scribbled, it was always something, that was crossing his mind. Landscapes, animals and often enough portraits. He didn’t draw people, he actually knew. Mostly, it was just a generic guy. He preferred drawing men for some reason. It seemed to come easier to him. It was easier to notice actual details on male faces for him. And it was easier to put great care into it there to.

So, as always, he just started scribbling and scribbling, until he was completely lost in it. Drawing
worked like that for him. He lost track of time in it. There was no future, no past, just the present.

Soon, the bell rang and Steve looked up from his drawing. The others were leaving the room and Steve checked his watch to make sure, that the lesson was actually over. Indeed.

He looked down at his drawing, actually realising, what he had scribbled for the first time. A guy. Middle long dark hair and the beginning of a beard. Not bad looking.

Steve looked at it, before tearing it out and stuffing the drawing into his backpack.

“Hey!”, Thor waited outside of the door.

“Hi.”, Steve looked at him raising a brow in a silent question. what was he doing here, waiting for him. It was time to go home. He wanted to go home. Well, maybe not home, but he wanted to leave the school.

“I have a question, Stece.”

“You do?”, Steve asked. This couldn’t be good, right? He couldn’t expect this to be good. It would be some sort of obligation.

“Can you drive me home?”

“Home?”, Steve asked, he wasn’t really listening and needed a few moments, before he could finally answered, “Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Steve? You are weird.”

“I… maybe…”

“What?”

Steve blinked, “What did you ask?”

“That you are weird.”

“No.”

Thor rolled his eyes, “Steve, I…”

“I have to leave.”, Steve said dryly pushing past his friend, he hated treating him like this. He hated pushing his friends away. It was the same thing as always with them. They asked him, if he was okay. That was nice and they probably meant well. But then, there was the problem: Steve being mean. he could just be honest with them. They deserved that, didn’t they? But imagining to tell them the truth… It was something that scared Steve. He would scare them maybe? Maybe, he would annoy them? Maybe, they would care too much and get lost in themselves too? Pity him? Or maybe, Steve would be vulnerable then. No, not maybe. Certainly. That had to be the main reason. Back to the egoistic explanation. Saying, that he cared about them would be a lie. It was all an excuse to hide it from himself. His egoism. Egocentrism. Steve didn’t care about them. Did anyone actually care about anyone? Probably not. At least Steve couldn’t remember anyone ever openly carin about him. Well, except for his friends. But was that even real? Steve had always threatened them like shit, why would they care about him then? They had each other and a bunch of other friends. Plus, they were nice and perfect. Would they bother with him? Again, why would anyone?

Steve pulled his jacket tightly around his body, as he left the school. It was cold outside. They wind
blowing through leaves, that were slowly starting to turn red and orange. Steve liked that season and summer the most. He liked drawing these landscapes. The colors so different from the usual palette. Difference? Maybe, that was, what he was lacking currently.

Steve took a deep breath, before blowing the air out again. Breathing in deep helped. Feelin the air rush through his lungs. Tracing it. Wondering, where it had been before, where it would go. Maybe, Steve was lacking difference… Maybe, he was just bored? Bored…

“Hey!”, a guy ran into him. His hood pulled up until far over his head. He didn’t even turn around when he muttered at Steve. Would he himself do that? Turn around for an asshole?

Probably yes, but Steve was weak. Steve raised his hand, running it through his hair. He could stop here and start a drawing. For a moment he hesitated, stilling and looking over the entrance to the small park. The orange trees were here, a hint of fog was hovering just above the ground like an UFO prepared to land on unknown ground. The scene was so peaceful and calm, almost zen. So different from Steve’s mind, which was more like the ground of the ocean, when it was disturbed. Billions of dirt particles, hiding whatever beauty might be beneath. Or not. In his case, that was probably it. There was just the dirt and then nothing. Or even more dirt. Maybe, that was why his friends bothered. Why they kept staying with him. Maybe, they were searching for shells or a beautiful scenery behind all the grey dust. Th ey were waiting for it to settle, trying to get it out of the way, but all there was, was nothing. They would leave him the day, they found that out, he was sure of that and Steve wasn’t even mad. He would leave himself too. His father had once said, he would. Regretted, that he hadn’t. Steve remembered that conversation. His father had been invited to a counseling. And he had said that to Coulson. His teacher had been shocked of course, “Mr Pierce, how can you say that?” , his father had shrugged. Steve wiped away his tears. He needed to hurry. He was stalling. Wasting time. He needed to get home to… to-- To what? To his father, who hated him and his boring life. He didn’t want to stay at school. See his friends, who he was sure actually hated him and leave him anyway. But being home was worse. And now, there was this party. Another thing, he would be happy to avoid. If he could. But he could, right? Luke didn’t care. Maybe, he should end the friendship now. But, maybe he just wanted to keep this up and running. This illusion. This beautiful illusion of a peaceful and normal High School life. He wanted his biggest problems to be girls and maybe occasionally grades.

Steve sighed and reached into his pockets to unlock the door to his house. His Dad must be here already. He could tell by the expensive german car parked in front of it.

He tried to walk in quietly and in silence, not wanting to make any sound. He told himself, that this was, so that his father wouldn’t remember he even existed, because sometimes, Steve felt, as if that was the case.

No such luck.

“Steve.”, his father’s voice always had the ability to make his skin crawl. In a way, it was like scratching on a chalkboard, only, that no one except for Steve could feel the discomfort. The pain.

“Dad.”, Steve sighed turning around, letting his bag fall to the floor with a soft thud sound, before he turned around and looked into his father’s cold eyes.

“How was school?”

“School.”

“Yeah.”
“That wasn’t a question. It was my answer. School just was school.”, Steve knew, that he’d be pissed about an answer like this but he was too tired to care.

“Don’t sass me, boy.”

“I would never.”, Steve sighed, avoiding his fathers eyes, as best, as he could. But they were hypnotic, always drawing the focus of him.

His father raised a brow but ignored Steve’s nervousness, “Anyway, I need you to accompany me to a dinner soon.”

“When?”, Steve tried not to sigh.

Steve kind of hoped, that is might conflict with Luke’d party. He would avoid both and that was a way only to have to attend one.

“Erm, under the week. Wednesday, I think.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I can excuse your from school for a day.”

“That’s not it, I---”

“No!”

“No?!”

Steve shook his head, nothing was worse than home. He was sure of that now. School was boring but home made him anxious.

“Okay, then, not.”, his father nodded.

Steve wondered, if their relationship looks normal to outsiders.

Probably.

“I’m invited to a party this week.”

“Oh.”

“It won’t collide with any of my duties.

“Sure.”

Steve looked at his father, “Can I go upstairs?”

“Yeah.”, he turned around and left.

It usually wasn’t his conversation as in the content than upset Steve. It was the ewa, his father spoke. Calm and threatening.

Like a snake ready to attack.

“Steve?”
“Yeah, Steve turned around.”

“Next time ask me, before you make plans with your little frens.”

“Of course, Dad.”, Steve smiled at him, hoping, that he couldn’t see through the fakeness of it all. If he did, he didn’t comment on it. His father turned around after mumbling something and walked towards the study.

As soon, as the heavy metal door fell shut, Steve released a breath, he didn’t know, he was hiding. His hands instinctively went to the spots around his ankles, where his father would regularly hold him and jerk him around.

Not today.

The thick, plushy light blue carpet swallowed the sound of Steve’s steps, as he walked towards his room. It was like walking on clouds, or as if he didn’t really exist. Didn’t impact the world. Whatever you’d want to hear. For Steve it was probably the second option. It fit him more and besides, he always wanted to be invisible. Who wouldn’t?

He sighed and opened the door to his room, making sure to close it behind himself. He wished, that he could lock it. To shut the world out, or even better create his own world in here. Just this room and the view of the garden, he liked to draw. But sadly, his father had taken the keys from him years ago and he couldn’t lock the world out. Couldn’t lock his father out.

Steve let his jacket drop to the floor. It looked a little weird there. In the middle of his tidy room, that was furnished in pastel blue and light oak wood, without a single detail out of place. And yet, there was his dark blue jacket laying in a puddle on the floor. Almost like an alien. Steve watched it for a moment, before he heard a sound in the hallway and snatched the jacket from the floor, putting it into his wardrobe. His father would scream at him, if he found it on the ground.

But he didn’t come in.

Had there been a sound on the hallway at all? Had he just imagined that? Was he going crazy?

Steve ran a hand through his short blonde hair and walked over towards his desk. He had his pencils inside of a box, inside of a drawer.

His papers and scribbles in a notebook. It was all neatly stashed away, so that the table was completely empty even empty from dust and dirt.

It had to be neat or Alexander would scream at him. Would punish him.

Steve shuddered at the thought and opened the drawer, pulling out his notebook and pencils. Painting helped him.

He started with black pencils and simple outlines. Just letting his mind wander. It was the structure of a face. Then, Steve choose some colors and drew a frame made of flowers. He liked the contrast of it. Colorful nature, black and white man.

Only, that the man was just a shape. He went back to that, adding details and hair. The finished drawing looked familiar. A little like the guy, he’d already drawn at school. For a moment, Steve hesitated. But it was all logical. Maybe, this guy was someone, he’d seen, he had scribbled him and the face was still there in his brain, explaining, why he’d drawn him again.

Steve looked at the face. There was something missing. More color.
He took several more pencils, all the color of the rainbow and drew him a flowery crown. It looked neat on him on his long hair. A little like a fairytale prince. But not from the disney movies. A little like these old fucked up original fairytales.

Steve closed the book. He felt settled down a little. Less nervous about his day, less anxious and sad about his life.

It was a good feeling.
“Hey.”, Wanda turned towards the voice, coming from behind her. A boy was standing there, she had seen him here before. At school. She didn’t have any classes with him but he was uncanny. A little weird looking. He had sharp facial features, not in a model way. It almost looked like a plastic mask. Wanda wasn’t sure, if it was some sort of disease or genetic defect, that made him look that way. Apart from that, she didn’t know much about him. Not even his name. She knew, that he was good with tech but that was it.

“Hi?”, Wanda smiled at him, adjusting her beanie. For some reason, she was very conscious of her looks. She always was. Despite her singing and playing in public, she was shy. She felt weak and vulnerable without her guitar.

The guy smiled a little shy, “You are Wanda, right?”

Wanda nodded, “Yes… Have we met?”

“No, not in person, I just heard. I’ve seen you playing on the streets, you play very nice and have a great voice. I work at a tech shop in the city. Close to your spot.”

“Oh,... I thank you… I play there just to get some money, because my parents won’t give me much to buy stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get that.”

“It’s still very nice of you… I’m so sorry, I don’t know your name?”

“Victor.”

“Nice to meet you, Victor.”, Wanda offered him her hand. It was a little weird for teenagers but she always wanted to be polite and maybe, she cared, what he thought. Victor always kept to himself, which was something, she could relate to.

“So, was complimenting my music, all you wanted to talk about?”, Wanda asked, Victor seemed to be about to say something more and she wanted to help him a little.

“You, uhm, there is a party this weekend. And I wanted to ask, if you would come.”

“Oh, wow.”, Wanda shifted nervously, she didn’t really do parties, “Why… Why me.”

“Because you, uhm… you sing nice and are very pretty.”

She looked down to the floor, blushing, “Is it your party?”

“No.”

“And you can just invite people?”

“It’s one of these, you can bring whoever you want things.”

“Oh.”, Wanda nodded, not that she knew much about parties but here the description was kinda self explaining.
A party sounded tempting. After all, she wanted to be normal, a normal teenage girl and parties were part of this sort of life. But at the other hand, she was scared that people would find out about her life. That she would slip and reveal herself.

“That’s not really an answer.”, Victor looked at her, staring down towards the round and rubbed his neck. He was cute in a way. So scared of her answer. So scared, that she would reject him. She… This was about her. As a girl and not as a survivor, a beggar, or a surrogate little sister.

“Right.”, she held on a little tighter to her books, hugging them, “I’d like to come. But I’m not sure, if that’s possible.”

Victor looked disappointed, “Oh,... okay.”

“I mean, I want to, but I have to talk to my bro-- you know, I’ll try to make it work. If he doesn’t catch me sneaking out.”

“Really?”, Victor looked at her with big eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Great.”, he made a little jump on his feet, making Wanda chuckle, he was a little dorky, if she was being honest. But nonetheless adorable.

“See you there.”, Wanda smiled.

Victor stopped smiling for a moment, “Uhm, right... Do you, uhm... maybe want to come to the cafeteria with me? I mean, if you don’t mind.”

“I... I would love to... But I have class now.”

“Right.”, Victor chuckled, scratching the back of his awkward looking head again, “Stay in school.”

Wanda gave him an honest smile, “You too.”

She turned around towards her locker and listened to Victor’s disappearing steps. She fidgeted with the lock. She didn’t want anything from her locker but she just wanted to keep her hands busy, while her thoughts were racing around Victor, having to lie to Bucky about the party and the money problems.

What, if someone there asked her, where she lived? She could use the answer, she went with everywhere else, but if she got drunk?

She knew, that she didn’t have to drink but what, if she couldn’t avoid it?

Wanda sighed, turning around, her hands shaking slightly. She hoped, that this would stop eventually, she had to play later. And there, she was back to the money problems... It was hard to think about anything, that didn’t trigger fear these days.

Maybe, she could just leave now. Screw the stupid lesson. She could just go earlier, play now for the people. That was more money for her. For them. She nodded to herself, grabbing her guitar.

Wanda pulled her jacket tighter around her body, not because it was cold. She was still inside of the school, after all but because it helped to feel safe, secure and protected. Wanted too in a way. She held on tight to her guitar case, not wanting to let it go. Music was an escape for her. Not just a way to earn money. Her guitar was more than a tool, it was a friend, a companion to her.
Wanda turned around, to make sure, that no one was watching her, before she sneaked out of the building, leaving the school yard.

“With your feet in the air and your head on the ground
Try this trick and spin it, yeah
Your head will collapse
But there’s nothing in it
And you’ll ask yourself
Where is my mind
Where is my mind
Where is my mind
Way out in the water
See it swimmin’ ”

Wanda stopped, turning around, when she saw a familiar face, it was Victor again. She had sensed someone watching her. More intensely, than the usual audience, she had. If anything, she had people watching her for a minute, before tossing a coin or not. Sometimes, there were creeps, who were more interested in her, than in her music. She was okay with them, as long, as they gave her money. With Victor it had been different. That feeling, that she was being watched, was something, that Wanda had felt for minutes now. But only now, she had felt the courage to turn around and look at him. He was leaning against the entrance of the tech shop, that was basically exactly behind her.

“Go on.”, Victor said, “I mean, your voice is so beautiful.”
“I… How long have you been there?”, Wanda asked. She knew, that her accent was very present, whenever she was distressed. And she was self aware enough to know, that it was there right now.
“A few minutes… A few songs ago.”
“Ah.”, Wanda said, not sure, what to do or say about this. She liked this guy. Wanted to talk to him, but she wasn’t sure how. She had this awkwardness, she always felt during these conversations.
“I’m sorry, if that’s creepy.”
“no, no, it’s not…”
“Good… Do you mind, if I stay a little.”

“No, I don’t?”, Wanda wasn’t even sure herself, but there was something about this guy. She had little crushes before. Guys at elementary school. Usually, the kind of boys, everyone had been into back then. Handsome and popular. Then, there had been the homelessness. Running away from home, and suddenly the boys had become unimportant to her. It was just survival now, pure survival and now… there was this Victor, who was weird, with a weird face and a little awkward. Not that, she was fallen head over heels for him but it was,...something?

She had never thought, that she would fall for someone, while she was living like thi-- No, she wasn’t falling for him. All she knew, was that he was a little awkward and kind of kind, but that was it.

“Do… do you have a dog?”, Victor asked all of the sudden.
“What?”

“I have a cat… You have hair on your jacket and it doesn’t look like cat, so I took a guess, I mean, I know that cats can have different hair but…”

“I have a dog.”, Wanda smiled amused.

Victor nodded, stepping out of the door. Wanda realised, that he was in the uniform of the shop. It was pretty ugly, green and pink and purple. For some reason, it suited him. He looked good in it.

“What are you doing in there.”, Wanda pointed at the shop, the sign the same color, as Victor’s ugly uniform.

Victor pointed at the shop, “There? Tech stuff.”

“You told me.”, Wanda grinned tilting her head, “But you are just a student, what do you do there? What do they let you do?”

“Oh. Officially, I do some saleswork. but I kinda do some repair and stuff too. Consulting, you know?”, he shrugged and his awkward eyebrows rose upwards to his hairline, almost meeting it. Wanda had to chuckle at the gesture. He blushed at that, his cheeks getting as red, as a strawberry.

“I’m sorry.”, Wanda raised her hands in defiance.

“No, no, I know, that my gestures are weird. And my mimic. I can’t change that.”

“I wasn’t laughing at you.”, Wanda shook her head, “I wasn’t making fun. I just think, that you are adorable.”

“You think so?”

Wanda nodded, “Yeah and I would never make fun of you. I mean, I speak weird.”

“It’s an accent and it’s…”

“It’s what?”

“Cute.”, Victor shrugged.

Wanda nodded, “Okay? Then, so are you. All of you. You are unique. And that is, pretty cool, I guess.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s just the truth.”

Victor looked at her, “I have a break now. Can I sit with you?”

Wanda knew, that some people gave money for her looks and that a boy next to her, no matter how awkward, wouldn’t be good. But for some reason, she didn’t really mind right now. She nodded and patted the stone next to her legs. Victor sat down, crossing his legs, looking at Wanda with big, expecting eyes She took a deep breath, trying to remember the lyrics of “Where is my mind” but for some reason, they didn’t come to her, she dug deeper, searching for another song.
“My head is filled with ruins
Most of them are built with you
Now the dust no longer moves
Don’t disturb the ghost of you
Mmm.”

Victor looked over at her and smiled. Wanda smiled back, stuck in the moment. This was nice. All of it. The atmosphere, the day for some reason, it just was. She barely knew this guy and yet, he had somehow brighten her day.

“They are empty, they are worn
Tell me what we built this for
On my way to something more
You’re that one I can’t ignore
Mmm”

This time, Wanda was the one looking over at Victor while he was looking across the street in front of them. A young couple was sitting there on a bench, holding hands and laughing together. Wanda always had trouble realising, that these kinds of people were living in a different world, than her. But now, it was a little different. She felt, as if there might be a way. To have a boyfriend and be happy.

“I’m gonna miss you
I still care
Sometimes I wish we never built this palace
But real love is never a waste of time
Mmm”

But would he like her, if he knew about her living on the streets. For all she cared, he could be one of these people, wanting to clean the streets of “scum”. A guy walked by, dropping some money into her mug and for some reason, that made Wanda stutter during the song. It wasn’t the guy or the money. It was Victor sitting next to her. He was completely unaware, that this was paying her food, her life. And for some reason, her mind had trouble dealing with that.

“Are you okay?”, “Victor asked.

“Yeah, yeah...thanks. Just gotta head home.”, Wanda stuttered, closing her guitar case. She had sung for hours, due to leaving school early, this was enough for today. Well, not enough, there was never enough in their situation but it was okay.

“Oh, really?”
“Yeah.”

“Did I do something wrong?”, he was so cute like this.

“No, no, just… busy, you know.”

He nodded, “See you at the party.”

“Yeah.”, Wanda smiled at him, before she got up, walking down the road back home. She had her hands tightly squeezed into fists, her nails almost digging into her own flesh.

_He doesn’t want to be friends with you. Who would?_

Wanda shook her head. No. She sighed, looking at her guitar she shouldn’t have left the spot just like that. It was stupid and egoistical. They needed the money, they needed it bad. She wanted to turn around, when she saw a boy sitting behind a dumpster. Dark hair, dark skin, a denim jacket, his face buried in his hands.

For a moment, she considered, if she should kneel down and help him. He couldn’t be much older, than her and she was a woman all alone on the streets. But what, if he needed help. She had heard of these cases of people collapsing on the streets and other people just walking by…

“Hello?”, she went to her knees to be on eyelevel with the guy but kept her distance, when she slowly reached out to touch him.

The boy looked up, eyes, wide and dark but also telling of nights without sleep and most importantly, they were familiar. A friend of Bucky’s, he never outrightly said it but Wanda knew, that they did heroin together back then, which was also, why they had ended contact. To stop corrupting each other. Didn’t seem to have worked out perfectly.

“Malcolm?”

“Wand-- Da?”, Malcolm slurred, his eyes unfocused. His brown pants looked even dirtier with all the mud and wetness sticking to it and his shirt under the jacket had definitely seen better times too.

“Yeah.”, Wanda said, she was leaning in more now. Malcolm may be high but he was a nice guy. Of course, people could react out of character then, but she was also sure, that she would be able to fight off an unfocused, high Malcolm.

Malcolm tried to reach for her hand and take it, but his depth perception seemed to be effed up enough to miss her.

“It’s okay.”, Wanda whispered, helping him reach her and helped him up. She knew, that Malcolm was like them… Homeless. But she, wasn’t sure, where he was living currently, she needed to bring him to their place because for now, he wasn’t safe out here. Not like this.

“Where?”

“To our place. You remember the factory? Bucky?”

“Hmm…”, Malcolm slurred, “Boyfriend.”

“You and Bucky dated?!”, Wanda asked. She had never seen them _together_. She was sure, she would have known.

“No! Home. Boyfriendsssss home.”
Wanda raised a brow “And where… Where is home?”

“Home.”, Malcolm laughed. Damn, he was high.

Wanda sighed, “Look, I’ll bring you to my place to sober up and then, we can talk it all through tomorrow.”

Malcolm grumbled something but it sounded agreeing.

Carefully, Wanda hooked his arm over her shoulder, half carrying him. If this was reversed and a black guy would be carrying a white girl through the city, he would have a lot of trouble.

Like this, they got some weird looks but at least, they weren’t immediately shot at sight.

Malcolm was warm and Wanda realised that she missed that. Warmth. Not necessary in a literal sense, although this would be an issue eventually, but in a metaphorical sense. She missed human warmth.

“Malcolm, come on.”, she whispered, “You have to help me. I mean, I know, this is hard and you can’t do everything right now but you need to try.”

Malcolm grumbled something and Wanda tightened her grip. He wasn’t going to be any help. She should try to heave him into the subway and hope, that they wouldn’t be seen sneaking past the gate

Luckily, they arrived at the factory without any cops up their asses. It was more, than Wanda had expected at some points of the way. There had been a cop on the subway, glancing at them and especially Malcolm but luckily, he had let them go without saying anything.

Wanda pushed the door open, looking up towards the gallery, Danny must have seen her through the window, because he was out of the control room, before she said anything.

“Wanda, is that Malcolm?”, he glanced down at her, frowning a little at the sight of the boy. Wanda knew, that it was because he associated him with Bucky’s addiction.

“Yes, found him like that on the street.”

“Oh-okay.”, Danny walked up towards the ladder and their makeshift lift, kneeling down on the floor.

“We need to get him calm… Or at least better, than he is now.”

“Yeah, but I can’t pull him up.”, Danny had his hands buried inside of the pockets of his hoodie, pointing his head towards the lift.

“Yeah, I don’t think, it’s worth the risk either.”, Wanda nodded, they had never used the lift to pull up a human and Malcolm wouldn’t be able to climb up the ladder.

“I can come down and help you make a bed for him.”, Danny shrugged, looking at Groot, who was walking up to him from the control room.

“Thank you.”, Wanda set Malcolm down on a crate and looked at Danny, as he pushed down the ladder. Groot walked up towards him, pushing him with his nose.
Danny chuckled, “okay, okay.”, he picked the dog up and handed him to Wanda. luckily, Groot wasn’t the heaviest dog and therefore, this could work this easy. She set him down on the ground. The dog walked over towards the unconscious black boy and sniffed at him.

“You know him, right.”, Wanda smiled.

“He should.”, Danny walked up next to her, “So, what’s the plan?”

“Just make a place, we can lay him down without pain or cold and it should be enough. He can eat with us tonight and then, hopefully leave.”

“You know, that we have food problems.”

“I do.”, Wanda sighed, “But… I want to help him.”

“Me too but maybe, he won’t be hungry.”

“We’ll see.”

Danny nodded, “What do you think, Bucky is gonna say?”, he looked a little concerned and worried.

“I don’t know?”

“I can’t imagine it being good.”, Danny walked around the factory, grabbing a metal bowl.

“I don’t care. I mean, it can’t always be about Bucky. What do you want to do?”, Wanda looked at him.

Danny opened the door to the back exit of the factory, “That was mean. Going to get to the dumpster and see if I find any cardboard boxes to use as pillows or cushions”.

Wanda nodded, looking after him, before she focused back on Malcolm. He was lalling something that resembled a pop song which name she couldn’t remember. The solution to keep him here for now wasn’t optimal but it was something.

Danny came back, carrying a cardbox, he had ripped apart at some places. It should be enough to stabilise Malcolm’s head, when they laid him down.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.”, Danny sighed, “Bringing him here was right. I mean not for us. But in general from a moral point of view.”

“Thank you.”, Wanda said softly.

“But you have to explain that to Bucky and Robbie.”

Wanda chuckled, “Okay, okay. Speaking of trouble with Bucky and Robbie…”, she lowered her voice despite them not being here and Malcolm certainly not able to register, what she was about to say, “I want to go to a party this weekend.” Wanda felt a little nervous about that idea and she was sure, her little as good, as brother wouldn’t rat her out to the others.

“A party?”

“Yeah. A guy, I met at school invited me there and I really wanna go, because it’s, you know,
“Normal.”, Danny said, continuing to fold the cardboard.

“You can come too.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I mean, we are both young and we can live a little, right?”

“That sounds like a good idea.”, Danny seemed to consider the decision for a moment, “But I mean, I don’t know anyone… You know what, I’m coming too.”

“Good. It makes me feel safer too.”

“Were you expecting for them to pull a Carrie on you?”

Wanda frowned, “Well not until you just mentioned it just now, thanks.”

Danny chuckled, “Sorry. So… a guy? Buck and Rob won’t like that.”

“Oh come on, they sleep around all the time.”, Wanda rolled her eyes, “Besides, it’s not like that. Not at all. he’s just… a friend? Well, to be honest I’m not sure, he is even that.”

“Hey, as long, as he treats you well, I like him.”, Danny gave her a nudge.

“I can take care of myself.”

“I never questioned that. So, how do you want to sneak out?”

“At night?”, Wanda asked, “While we have shift, we can go out and be back before the others wake up.”

“And leave guard.”

“There’s still Groot. besides, there haven’t been any people coming to the factory at night in a while. And the last were bored rich kids anyway.”

“Right. Graffiti.”

“Yeah.”, Wanda sighed, “I feel bad too but let’s be honest, they are a little paranoid.”

“They are.”, Danny nodded, “I’m looking forward to this, I think… Are High School parties like in the movies? Booze, red cups and music?”

“You’ve never been to one, before you ran?”

“No, never got invited.”

Wanda frowned, “Well the few I have been to were like that.”

“Okay?”, Danny nodded, “I’m already nervous.”

“Just don’t let it show.”

“Easier said, than done.”, Danny leaned back, after they had made Malcolm lay down somewhat comfortable.
Wanda shrugged, “Yeah, I know.”, she looked at Malcolm, who was half conscious in a way, “We need to keep an eye on him. Make sure, he stays okay. Bucky will know, what to do with an overdose.”

“Yeah.”, Danny said bitterly.

“This was the main reason you don’t want him here?”, Wanda tilted her head, leaning back onto her hands.

“Yeah, keep those influences as far away from him as possible. No offense to Malcolm but he’s in a bad place, from the looks of it.”

Wanda nodded, “I’m worried too.”

Danny ran a hand down his face and then through his curly hair, “Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure.”, Wanda smiled, reaching into her jacket’s pocket, “The money, I made. It’s not much but a lot for me, I guess.”, she didn’t make as much money, as the boys did with crime or work but it helped.

“Nice.”, Danny smiled, “And I have this.”, he tossed her an apple. It was shining beautifully red in the light, that was coming through the dusty windows, before Wanda caught it elegantly, “Where’s that from?”

“Robbie brought it earlier from the community garden along with more food. He gave it to me but after carrying Malcolm through the city, you might need it.”

“Good. The food I mean.”, she pulled a pocket knife from her purse and cleaned it with her jacket.

“Yeah, what are you going to wear for the party?”

Wanda chuckled, “You are thinking a lot about that”. She cut the apple in a half and handed one of the halves to Danny.

“Thank you.”, he smiled at her, “Yeah, I mean… I don’t have much to think about otherwise--”

“It’s cute.”, Wanda grinned, “The overthinking bit.”

“Thank you.”, Danny shrugged, biting into his apple half.

“I’m thinking about a pink dress? I think I have a longer top… I just need to wear a leggings underneath that and it will work.”

“Don’t…”, Danny had started speaking while chewing and had to use his finger to wipe an apple piece from his lip, “Don’t you just have pants with holes in them?”

“It’s called fashion, Dan”! It was one of the upsides of being poor these days, clothes could easily look like designer clothes, even if they were second hand or years old.

“Okay, okay.”

“Do you have anything?”

“No? I think, I will just wear, whatever looks least like my normal clothes, that should be fine?.”
“I can help you dig through your clothes.”

Danny shook his head energetically, “No, no, it’s fine. I will find something. Besides, I can always borrow from Rob or Buck.”, he made air quotes around borrow.”

Wanda chuckled, “True.”

The door to the factory opened and they turned around.

“Hey, guy--”, Bucky stopped, when he saw Malcolm, there was visible shock in his eyes, “What is he doing here?!?”

“I found him on the street.”, Wanda put her hands on her hips, standing in front of Malcolm and Danny.

“And he looked like crap.”, the younger boy added.

Bucky frowned for a moment and then nodded, “Is he high again?”, the brunette looked between his friends. He probably knew, what they were thinking now. At least, Wanda was thinking just that. That Bucky used to be high on drugs too. Regularly. And that this could be Bucky as well.

“Yeah.”, Danny nodded.

“We don’t have any room here.”, Robbie looked at them, furrowing his brow and crossing his arms in front of his chest. His stolen skull shirt made him look more like an edgy teen, than a young man. To be fair, he wasn’t an adult yet but usually, Wanda could forget that.

“I know… I know…”, Wanda sighed and looked down at Malcolm, “But I couldn’t just leave him on the streets.”

“He would have done the same.”, Robbie rolled his eyes.

Bucky cleared his throat, “I know, him and I think, he would have helped… But Robbie is right, we can’t bring more strays here.”

“We are strays.”, Wanda shrugged.

“And who took us in?”, Robbie’s voice was louder now. Just a little but knowing him, Wanda noticed.

Seemingly, the same was the case for Danny, he looked between them shifting away a little from the center of the room. He hated fights between them and had hinted a few times, that fights had always meant violence back home.

Bucky sighed, “We will just throw him out, once he’s sober. No food or anything. Just put him out on the streets, and we’re okay?”

Robbie sighed, “I don’t like this.”

Bucky tilted his head, “Neither do I but it’s right. We don’t have a choice.”

“I think, that is good too.”, Danny whispered silently, looking to the ground.

“See.”, Wanda smiled.

“Fine.”, Robbie agreed, “I have a small job now, I will be back soon.”
“You’re leaving again?”, Danny asked.

“You.”

Bucky looked between the two youngest of them, “You can do homework now.”

“Fine.”, Wanda rolled her eyes but smiled at Bucky.

“See you guys.”, Robbie waved, leaving again.

“Thanks for having my back.”, Wanda looked at the older boy.

Bucky nodded and tilted his head, “I still wish, he wasn’t here.”

“He won’t be for long and you would have helped him too.”

“I would.”, Bucky sighed.

“See?”

“I hate it, when you kids are right.”

“You are like one year older.”, Wanda smiled. It was a bit of a running gag.

“See, what difference it makes.”

“Yeah, this close to being an idiot.”

Bucky gave her a pat on the head and smiled, “Homework.”

“Right.”

Wanda took Danny’s hand and pulled him towards the ladder, before she turned around, “You gonna look after Malcolm, Buck?”

“Yeah, of course.”, Bucky called back. For a moment Wanda was worried but then, she remembered, that she would have noticed, if there were any drugs in Malcolm’s pockets. There would be nothing to steal for Bucky.

Wanda gave Danny her hand, “You or me?”

“You.”, Danny replied, going to his knees to give Wanda a lift. He wasn’t much heavier, than her… well a bit, but he still suffered under her weight. Strength wasn’t his strong suit, when he fought, it was mostly about agility and speed.

Wanda used a metal pole, to pull herself up, she crawled onto the floor, until she had her feet up onto the platform, then, she pushed the ladder down.

Danny climbed up after her, “Thanks.”

“Thank you.”

Danny smirked, “So, what’s for homework?”

“Biology.”, Wanda said dryly, as they walked to the control room, where Wanda had left her school bag.
“Ugh.”

“Come on, you are good at biology.”, Wanda shrugged, well, good was relative. He was good, considering, that he hadn’t been to an actual lesson in years and had to learn from Wanda, who was average at best, as well. She wished, she could give them more to work with. A while, Wanda had hated herself do this. But it had started to become routine. It had started to become normal. She had learned, that she couldn’t please everyone.

“Yeah, well I don’t think so. Did you do much new stuff?”, Danny looked over at her, tilting her head like a puppy. Sometimes, it amazed Wanda, how they didn’t really want to go to school. Yet, there was this difference, in how they valued their education. It wasn’t normal or given for Wanda and deep down, she knew how important this was… If only, by seeing how important it was to Bucky, Robbie and Danny but that didn’t change, that school was boring. She could feel about it in both ways. Bored but happy to have it. She knew, that the boys understood just that. Yet, she tried her best to take as much knowledge home, as she could bear. She felt obliged to that.

“No, no,... not that much.”

“Good.”, Danny smiled, before he whispered, “Can’t wait for the party.”
Danny looked around the street nervously. Next to him Wanda was walking way more confident. At least, she knew people here. Maybe, he should have stayed home… maybe, the party had been a stupid idea. Maybe, he should have stayed in his comfortable shelter. Far away from the real world.

The house, they were walking up to was big. They had needed some time to get here, the house was by the coast, almost in the Hamptons.

“This really the place?”

“Yeah.”, Wanda nodded, looking down at a piece of paper.

“Wow. Your friend is rich.”

“This isn’t his place.”

“I know but, then his friends are rich.”

“I don’t think, that’s how it works.”

Danny chuckled and then shrugged, “How should I know?”

Wanda laughed at that. It was a bit too sad for Danny’s taste, if he was being honest. But as always, he would ignore it. The two of them walked through the gate. A classic white picket fence. The older he got, the more ironic, he found it that the symbol of American suburbanism was a fence. Something to keep unwanted people outside. White picket fence and red door. Don’t let anyone in, you don’t want to have close to you. Usually he was that someone, he and Wanda and Bucky and Robbie.

Today, the fence was open, so was the door. No one asked them for their names or invitations. They just pressed past everyone. For a moment, the thought, that this would be perfect to steal something crossed Danny’s mind. They were invited here… Well not really them. Wanda. And she wasn’t invited by the host, so technically not even that. But her friend probably was… unless he wasn’t invited by a friend, who was invited by a friend and so on.

Besides the fence and door, the house was big, with pretty light blue wooden panels and a veranda in the front. Danny could already hear sounds coming from the garden. Music and laughter. People’s voices. There was also some weird smell.

No. Several smells. BBQ, cigarettes and alcohol and some other sweet smell, Danny couldn’t entirely identify.

They walked through the door, when Danny spotted a door sign, “Cage”

Inside, the house was furnished modern and looked clean. These places always scared Danny a little… Well, not exactly scared but they were unsettling. He always thought about how much work must have went into keeping it this clean… He knew, that Robbie had worked for a rich family once, cleaning rooms. He hadn’t worked long in that job and the stories he had told were scary.
He felt a little lost, standing in the middle of the large living room next to Wanda and that was probably also, how they looked. Pressed together almost touching hands, awkwardly looking around.

Danny wondered, if Wanda was asking herself too, what she was doing here. Maybe not, she was a little more extroverted. Just a little… And she was here to meet people… A friend… Yeah, even, if it wasn’t just a friend, Danny was happy for her. There was some protective urge in him but he knew, that Wanda was tough and smart. More, than capable of looking after herself.

She was ready for this.

Danny just wasn’t sure about himself.

“Wanda!”, a voice called from somewhere around a corner.

Great.

“A friend.”, Wanda said, “I will be right back, okay?”, Wanda said to Danny, giving him a push, “Meet people.”

Ugh.

The voice had been female though, so probably not Wanda’s friend… friend. He felt a little uncomfortable, now that Wanda had left his side. He had liked that to have someone to rely on and stay close to. Like this, he was vulnerable. He knew, that this shouldn’t be a thing at parties. People shouldn’t feel vulnerable there. Shouldn’t be scared of being amongst people. But this was their expectation. The expectation of most people. It wasn’t the first time, Danny couldn’t meet them. Maybe, the best thing to do here was to keep a low profile and wait until the party was over, so that he could go home with Wanda. Danny looked around the room. There was an aquarium in the corner of the living room. A few tropical fish swam in there. The kind, Danny only saw in zoos and in aquariums before. They were swimming around happily, ignoring the party and its guests around them. Watching fish seemed like the least scary thing to do. He kept his eyes to the ground, walking fast, trying to avoid contact, when he ran into a guy. He stumbled a little and spilled some of his pudrink.

Shit.

It was all over Danny’s shirt, covering parts of the floor, including the expensive looking carpet, although to be fair, almost everything looked expensive to Danny, and the guy’s shirt.

“Sorry!”, Danny was frozen, shit. This was the opposite of low profile… a high profile, was this a thing?

The guy turned around. He was handsome. Very handsome. Shit. Tall, black and with calm eyes, that seemed so much older, than he probably was.

“’It’s okay.’”, he said a question in his eyes.

“Oh. Good.”

Not cool, Danny.

“I’ve never seen you, right?”

“No…”, Danny said, quietly… so much for this.
The guy looked at him, as if he was expecting an answer.

“Oh, Danny… I’, a friend of Wanda.”

“Wanda?”

“From Shield.”

“Oh, Shield High.”

“Yea… her not me.”

He nodded, “How do you know each other then?”

“Childhood friends.”

“Ah. The guy nodded, “I’m Luke by the way.”

“Hi Luke.”, Danny smiled, scratching the back of his head. Truth was, he was very attractive. Danny was sure, that he liked both guys and girls, although, he never really had been in a relationship, there had been…-

“Yeah, I’m just surprised, you didn’t know, since this is my house and all.”

“Oh, as I said, a friend.”, Danny looked down to the floor.

Luke smiled, “Yeah, sure… Do you wanna come outside, into the garder?”

Danny looked around the room, Wanda was standing somewhere in a corner with her friends, talking and drinking from a cup. She seemed buys enough.

He nodded.

“Great.”, Luke smiled and walked ahead. Danny considered, telling Wanda, where he was but there were a few people dancing between them and it didn’t seem so important.

They were both almost adults.

Bucky and Robbie would probably disagree on that though.

Outside of the house, the picket fence continued, cutting away the crappy outside world from the suburban heaven.

And damn, what a heaven it was. There was a fucking pool. Of course trees and stuff too.

But a pool.

Danny couldn’t remember the last time, he’d been to one. He had learned to swim but then.

Then, he couldn’t remember. Lie Kung had never bothered.

“Jump in.”, Luke said, looking at him. He had probably followed his eyes.

No Danny felt stupid. These people probably all had pools at home.

He didn’t have a shower. He didn’t belong here.
“I… I don’t have any swimwear.”

“You can keep the clothes on.”

Danny looked up at Luke and raised a brow, “Just like that?”


“I… I didn’t see them, that corner was dark.”


Danny walked past some of the dancing guests. he noticed, that some were smoking pot.

didn’t like drugs, he had seen, what they did to Malcolm and Bucky first hand.

It was enough to turn him off forever.

But he didn’t care about these people, so they could do, what they wanted.

He sat down at the edge of the pool, dangling his feet in the water.

For a moment, he was worried, that the filth would wash off.

Be visible to the others.

The party.

The world.


But luckily, he had put on fresh clothes and bathed himself in a public toilet today.

“You can jump in, you know?”

Danny looked up, noticing, that Luke had followed him.

He continued eyeing him curiously, as if there was something fascinating.

“I know.”

Luke sat down next to him.

He let his legs dangle in the water and looked at Danny. It was weird, why he was here with him.

This was his party and he should get drunk, smoke weed or make out with girls. He should at least spend time with his friends, just do anything… But he was sitting here by the pool with a complete stranger and, as if this wasn’t weird enough, the whole situation had a romantic touch to it.

But that would be ridiculous. Why would this e romantic? This had no right to be romantic and he would probably screw up, if it was..

Danny wanted to say something, but then he sneezed. Luke looked at him amused.

So much, for screwing up.

“Sorry.”
Luke chuckled, “Nah, it’s okay. Are you cold?”

“A little.”

“You know, getting out of the pool might help.”

Danny chuckled, “I like this and it’s not my feet, that are cold… Actually, they are warm. Is this pool heated?”

Luke shrugged, “In the fall and spring, yeah. At winter, we usually don’t use it because it’s a good way to get sick.”

Danny nodded, “I see that. must be nice though. The pool, I mean, but I have a question to you. Why are you so nice to me?”

“I didn’t know, that was an issue.”

Danny continued to look at him, “I mean it… You are so… I’m a stranger, the friend of a, no offense to her Wanda is amazing, but the friend of an outsider, who’s a wallflower to you and was invited by a friend herself… And you are the fucking host and member of the football team.”

“How do you know that?”

“Wanda has mentioned it once or twice… I mean, I think your name has come up in a story…”

“I… I just want to be a good host make everybody feel welcome, but if you want me to, I can just lea--”

Danny smiled at that, looking down into the water and watched the waves, he made with his feet. They were sparkling in the light coming from the lightbulbs of the party decoration. Danny usually didn’t like house music. He preferred the songs, Wanda played on her guitar, slow rhythms and emotional lyrics. But right now, he got the appeal of dance music. The bass seemed so energizing, making him want to jump and dance. He had never really danced. He wouldn’t do it now. It was just, that he felt like it.

One of Luke’s guests dancing behind them had lost balance and stumbled onto Danny, who had been knocked into the pool, by the sheer force.

The cold water felt good. For a moment, Danny was worried about the filth again, but then he enjoyed it. The coolness, the gentleness of the liquid surrounding his every piece of skin in that moment.

It was probably the cleanest, he had felt in a while.

Then, he remembered the necessity to swim. For a moment, worried, that he would have forgotten how it worked. It’s been a while after all, but then, he remembered. The moves came back naturally and he was reaching the surface.

To Danny’s surprise, Luke was there next to him. He must have jumped in the pool too. To help him.

Danny blinked, blinking the water and confusion away. This couldn’t be it, why would he care.

Why would anyone care about him?

“I’m so sorry.”, Luke said concerned, tilting his head, “Are you okay, should I call an ambulance?”
“What? No! I mean, yes! I mean, I am okay and no ambulance.”
“I know it seemed hurried but you were under pretty long.”
“I’m fine. Thanks.”
Luke nodded, “Come on, I will give you something to put on.”
“What?”
“Clothes?”
“I know, I mean, why?”
“You are soaked, my guest and my pool was this.”
Danny blinked confused, “Okay…”
“Ohay.”, Luke smiled, “Come on, my room’s behind the kitchen.”
Danny nodded, following him.
He walked across the terrace, water dripping down from his body, people looking at him left and right. Danny immediately looked down to the floor. The dance music, he had felt filling him with energy earlier was just a background noise now.
No want to dance.
But he still felt good somehow.
Still felt warm.
He followed Luke into his house and tried not to look at the other party guests, who of course were staring at him funny. The weird new guy and the host, walking inside, soaking wet. That was drawing some looks and Danny hated that attention. Hated being the center of attention.
Inside the house, Luke walked through the spacious kitchen and opened a back door there. It led into an own area, that was presumably a former garage or had maybe even been a separate own house, once.
To Danny’s surprise, no party guests were here.
As if he could read his mind, Luke smiled shyly, “Don’t like people messing with my private stuff.”
“But your parent’s…”, Danny said, before realising, what he had said, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It was disrespectful bullshit.”
Luke smiled, “No problem, I like people saying their opinion. There are a lot of asskissers out there.”
Danny nodded, still looking down to the floor ashamed.
“As for my parents… I’m protecting them, or better said their privacy by keeping the second floor, with their bedrooms clear from the guests.”, Luke pulled clothes from his wardrobe, handing Danny a shirt and sweatpants, “I hope this works.”
“Thanks.”, Danny smiled, “I guess it will look like a dress on me.”
Luke chuckled, “I don’t think so.”

“So, I guess, your parents know about the party?”

“Partially.”, Luke replied, “They know, that there’s a party. They know, that I invited people from school. They don’t know about the size.”

“Oh, at least something.”

Luke nodded, still looking through the wardrobe, “Yeah, that way, I won’t get into trouble, if things go south, since they didn’t ask.”

“Great idea.”

Luke smiled and slipped out of his wet shirt. For some reason, Danny hadn’t been prepared for that. Now, he was confronted by Luke’s naked chest. Well defined muscles, still wet from the shirt, that had soaked through the fabric. Quickly, he turned away, before he started to drool over him. Danny looked at the trophies and prices on the wall. Luke must be pretty successful. Suddenly, he realised, that looking away from half naked dudes probably wasn’t something, High School students usually liked. And for some reason, he wanted Luke to like him. Danny turned back, luckily in time for Luke to pull his shirt on.

“You like the trophies?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“You should see my father’s trophy room.”

“What did he play?”


“Yeah…”

“He was a famous NFL player, James Cage? He is a manager today.”, Luke eyed Danny, as if he wasn’t entirely believing him.

“I don’t know much about football.”


Danny shrugged, “Well, they are trophies, so kinda impressive.”


Danny shrugged and slipped out of his soaked shirt, the cotton had already started to stick to his wet skin and pulling it of proved to be difficult.

“I can wash your clothes here, if you want to.”, Luke said, looking over at him.

“I… I… I need them.”, Danny stuttered, as he put on the hoodie. That was an understatement He almost had no other clothes, at least not for the current season.

“I will give them to Wanda at school… If you tell me, what she looks like, or what class, she’s in.”

“That would be great.”, Danny smiled and peeled his wet pants off of his skin.
“No problem.”, Luke slipped into his own sweatpants.

“You are so damn nice.”, Danny sighed and looked at him, “I don’t know, why you do this.”

“I guess, I’m just that and I’m happy, that you are here. That I met you.”

Danny wanted to say something but then the door opened and a girl walked in. She was wearing pretty casual clothes, had brown skin and her hair was tied into a braid. She looked over at Luke and smiled at him, “There you are, babe.”

Something twisted in Danny’s stomach, he wasn’t sure why he cared so much.

“Hey.”, Luke smiled. He hugged the girl and gave her a quick kiss, before he turned to look at Danny, “Do you know Claire?”

“I… no.”

Only now, the girl seemed to have noticed Danny, “Who is your friend?”, she didn’t really look happy saying this and Danny felt bad.

“That is Danny, met him here. Danny, this is Claire my girlfriend. She actually wanted to go to a nursing camp but decided against it.”


Luke smiled sheepishly, “She’s great, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess.”, Danny smiled at him, adjusting his sweatpants and hoodie on his wet body, maybe he should have dried off before getting dressed.

Luke leaned down to pick Danny’s clothes off from the floor, throwing them into a basket in the corner.

“I should probably leave you two.”, Danny rubbed the back of his neck.

Luke answered, before his girlfriend could, “No, no, it’s okay, you are my guest here.”, he smiled at Danny and took Claire’s hand, “And besides, you got thrown into my pool at my party, so I still owe you something.”

“You gave me fresh clothes and there’s free pizza here, I think, we are even.”

Luke chuckled and tilted his head, “I…”

“Babe.”, Claire whispered, “I need to talk to you for a moment, okay.”, she pulled him into a corner of the room.

Danny sighed and looked around the room again. There were lots of trophies and framed photos. Photos of Luke and his friends, photos of various sport teams, some professional some from High School with Luke on them.

Danny wondered, if his room would look like this, if he was still living with Lei Kung and Davos. If he hadn’t run away.

Luke cleared his throat, as he walked up behind him again, Claire by his side, “Uhm... Danny, listen, I think, it would actually be better, if you left us alone in here. You can stay at the party, no problem.”
“Okay.”, Danny nodded.

“I’ll give Wanda your clothes, just gonna ask around about her and you can give her my clothes.”

“Okay.”, Danny nodded again, “Been nice meeting you.”, he smiled at Luke, who was already getting kissed by Claire.

“Yeah.”, Luke smiled, before leaning into the kiss.

Danny let the door fall shut behind him. He wasn’t really sure, if he wanted to stay here now, he had found an interesting person here and now, he wasn’t sure, if he was up to finding a new kid to talk to. He sighed and looked around the room, Wanda was talking to a guy in the corner. He was looking a little weird, his face formed more like a machine, than a human and his skin looked like plastic. But he was making Wanda smile, making her smile sincerely even, which was hard.

He was okay in Danny’s book.

Danny walked up to her and softly tipped her shoulder, she turned around, her smile widening, “Hey.”

Her friend looked at Danny weird.

Danny tried to smile, back but he was sure, it was just an awkward upwards curl of his lips, “Hi, Wands. Look, I think, I’m gonna go home. You can stay but only, if you are careful.”

“Of course… What are these clothes?”

“Long story. You sure, you are okay?”

“Yes, Danny. Go.”

“See you.”

“Yeah.”

“Have a fun night.”, Danny smiled.

Wanda nodded and looked after Danny, as he left the house. The cold night air was refreshing, although it was still quite cold, maybe too cold with his damp hair and wet skin. Danny just wanted to turn towards the direction, that led him home, when he saw a familiar face. Robbie.

Danny froze, they must be searching for them. And they would be mad… Danny hated fights, hated being yelled at and both seemed likely in that scenario. He could still walk into the other direction. But that would just push the fight back to a later time.

Unless… they needed money and if Danny came home with much money, they couldn’t be mad at him.

He pulled the hood down, so that it was covering his face and headed towards the city on another way.

He just needed to take a bus or something, hope for no ticket control and be away from here for now. He might have stayed longer, if it wasn’t for Luke’s girlfriend walking in. Danny would have liked to talk to him some more.

The bus stop was not too far away, Danny had a look at the plan and sighed, he had to switch lines
one time and the service wasn’t good that late at night but it beat walking all the way. He sat down on the bench and looked around. It was this beautiful upper class suburban kind of quarter. Again all of the white border fences and red door. There was light behind some of the windows but behind most it was dark. It was probably families with small kids, that had to be in bed right now.

Danny didn’t belong here. He never had and if he was honest, it looked like, where Lei Kung and Davos used to live with him. Maybe, Danny hadn’t belonged there back then and hadn’t realised it. Maybe, his past had been the reason, this felt so wrong to him. Like Davos could emerge from any door at any moment and make his life hell.

Danny shuddered and pulled his… Luke’s hoodie tighter. He turned towards the direction of Luke’s house, wondering, what he and Claire were doing… Well, to be fair, that was obvious. He shouldn’t think about that.

The hoodie made him feel warm or at least warmer.

He hoped, that Wanda and Robbie wouldn’t head his direction, when he grabbed her from the party. He wanted to come home with something to show and he hoped, that Wanda wouldn’t be mad. Danny had already left the party, when he saw Robbie and he couldn’t warn her. Besides, they were nice, it wasn’t like they would get into much trouble. It was mostly them being concerned for their safety. But they could overdo it. Especially Bucky, which was stupid, since he was reckless himself.

Danny sighed and looked up at the bus pulling up at the station. He smiled friendly at the driver and the few other guests, while he walked towards the back and sat down.

Nothing to see here.

No non payer.

Danny sat at the window spot and watched the lights outside, keeping an eye on the doors, if a controller walked in, he had to get out and pretend to have that planned along. But it was late. Not much to control, not much profit to make.

The lights outside of the windows danced, houses rushing by, some with the lights on, some not. All of them houses. A luxury that wasn’t as given, as these people probably thought. A roof over the head. A roof they owned… Or at least a place, they actually had a right to stay at. Danny wondered, if some of the people in there suffered and thought about running away, like he did. He had thought about it a long time before and didn’t regret it. Well, not completely, he didn’t regret leaving the two people, who hated him but he regretted choosing the life, he had right now.

He could have done it different. He wasn’t sure, how but he was sure, it was possible. Maybe, jumping the train hadn’t been right. He wondered, what would have happened, if he travelled into the other direction. He wouldn’t have met the others… Big minus… Maybe, this wasn’t so bad… For a moment, Danny actually believed that, then, he remembered, where he was driving to and what he was about to do.

Danny looked around the corner, before he pulled off his hoodie. It wasn’t the best way to dress for this but shirtless was the best he could offer right now. Not that most clients here were particularly picky. This was a dirty street corner, a lot of hookers but most of them homeless like him.

He had started this on his journey to New York. He had sleep on the ground in a train station somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Eventually a kind man had come by, taken him home, gave him soup and offered to drive him to another town. The next morning, it had turned out, that the man hadn’t been so kind. That he expected a bayback for his generosity. It had just been a blow job but it
had been the first time, Danny had sold himself.

He never told Bucky and the others They would be worried or disgusted but he earned well. He knew, that his prizes were low compared to other whores but it was more, than the four of them were used to. He profited from being young, a minor. Creeps, liked paying boys on the street for sex.

That was actually the worst part for him.

The creepiness of some of the people.

Their glares.

Danny sighed and put his hands further into his pockets. Danny raised his shoulders, trying to make himself as thin, as possible and attempted to cover his ears.

Maybe, he was lucky and no John would show up tonight. He could go home and get into trouble with Bucky and Robbie for sneaking out. He would have no money, then but at least, he would know, that he tried. It would ease his bad conscience, that had been omnipresent ever since they had gotten into financial trouble. Well, more financial trouble, than before.

Than they had always.

Danny sighed and looked at a car, that slowed down close to him. The window was rolled down but the man looked at one of the girls next to him.

Good.

Danny let out a shuddery breath of relief.

Maybe, he would just have to give a blow job tonight. It would make money, not as much, as sex but at least something, and more importantly, it would be over soon.

The wind blew a cold breeze of air into his direction and he shuddered again. The cold felt like daggers on his naked chest. But there was something in the wind, that made him think back to the party.

The smell of weed and alcohol from somewhere across the street.

The smell of food coming from restaurants, that were mostly little run down places in this area.

In addition to that, there were the smells of the city. Gas, garbage but also that of strange woman’s perfume and dinner being cooked in the apartments above him. But, if Danny took these away, it smelled like the party and he couldn’t help but think about Luke.

He knew, that he shouldn’t. He had been nice, yeah. But that was it: He had been nice. Truth was, Danny was so desperate for friends or a social life at least, that he was searching them everywhere.

And even, if Luke wanted to be his friend… There was a reason, Wanda only had few of them. They couldn’t take them home. Couldn’t take them home, since they had no home at all. What would the people at the party think about him, if they knew, that he was homeless. What, if they knew, that he was selling his body on the street. Kids, who Danny was sure of, were just reaching their first time in their sexual development.

He sighed and turned around to look down the street. They were emptier, closer to winter Danny wasn’t sure, if that was just a coincidence, but it was something, he had noticed. In summer, the days
were longer and more people were out on the street.

In winter, they were home with their wives and kids, instead of paying a sixteen year old boy for their pleasure.

“Hey.”, Danny turned around but it was only another girl working the corner, “You have fire?”

“No, sorry.”

“Aw. Slow day, right?”

“Yeah.”, Danny nodded, looking down to the floor.

“I’m thinking about getting myself a pimp. Protection, better spots, more money.”

“I don’t know.”

She sighed, putting her cigarette back into the pocket of her short skirt, “I know…”

“It can probably work, if you pick the right one.”

“I just want to get out in general.”

“You don’t have a choice?”

“No.”

Danny sighed and nodded, “Yeah, me neither.”, he stared at her.

“How old are you kiddo?”, she looked a little concerned but her concern just looked like a mask instead of a sincere emotion. She must have been through a lot already. At least, Danny had some escape. Had Wanda, Robbie and Buck. He wondered, if she had someone. He hoped, she did. Everyone should have someone to fall back to.

“Are you a cop?”, Danny joked, he didn’t want her pity or to hear her saying, that she had been this young too back then, when she started.

Another car slowed down the driver looked towards them. The girl pointed at herself, raising a brow. The man shook his head.

“Seems like you have business to do.”

“Yeah.”, Danny sighed, he put on a smile walking over to the let down window. He hated, how the man eyed him.

“Hi.”, he smiled and leaned down.

“How much?”, the man had grey, greasy hair but was small and thinly built.

“Depends 50.”

“50 without gummy.”

“What? No!”

“How old are you, boy.”
“Sixteen.”

The man nodded, “Okay, 50.”
Daisy looked at the guy, while she put on her top. It had all escalated a little. He had walked in, searching for his sister or something. Just, that she hadn’t been at the party anymore. She had offered to help him search and somehow, they ended up here in her car, naked. Okay, she had an explanation for the last part. Daisy looked over at him, he was still asleep, it wasn’t comfortable on the backseat of her small car, she wouldn’t have dozed off, if it wasn’t for the booze earlier.

“Hey.”, she tipped on his shoulder.

He blinked a few times, before looking up at her, “Hey,... uhm…”

“Daisy.”

“Right.”

She laughed, searching for her slip, “It’s okay, I forgot your name too and I was drunk.”

“Robbie, and I’m sorry, for hooking up, while you were, you know… that.”

Daisy smiled and shook her head, palming her face, “Yeah, I remember, that I started it and I wouldn’t have said know, if I had been sober.”

“Still, it’s been a rough few days...weeks.”

She shook her head and reached for her purse, handing him a small bag.

“Dope?”

“Yeah, helps with shit being difficult.”

He seemed to consider something, but then nodded “Thanks, do you have a lighter?”

“Yeah, yeah,...”, Daisy looked through her purse, where was the damn thing? At least her phone, money and cards were still there, “Lost it.”

“Uh.”, he handed her the bag.

“No, no keep it.”

He looked at the bag for a moment and then put it back into his jacket, “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Hey, uhm,...How late is it?”, he asked.

“Look at your phone.”, Daisy shrugged.

Robbie looked at her and there was some nervousness in his eyes, “I forgot it, can I please use yours... Or can you tell me.”

She sighed and grabbed her phone, the lock screen showed a few messages from friends and in groups, as well as mails, mostly newsletters, “9am.”
“Shit.”, Robbie gathered his stuff.

“What?”

“I gotta go.”

“Okay…”, Daisy looked at him, as he searched through his stuff, “It’s been, uhm nice.”

“Yeah.”, he leaned over and pressed a kiss onto her lips. Daisy smiled, this was a one-night thing, both of them knew it but it was nice, that he had given her that gesture.

She watched, as he jogged down the street and out of sight, she should probably go home now, maybe call someone else before, talk about their night.

Yeah, that seemed about right. She searched through her contacts and dialed Steve’s number, she had only seen him once yesterday, at the beginning of the party.

“Hi Stevie, how are you?”

She could hear Steve sigh fondly through the phone, which forced a smile onto Daisy’s lips too, “Fine, but I hope, there is more of a reason, you are calling me.”

Daisy leaned back in her seat and stretched, “Yes and no, I guess. I was wondering, how the party was for you.”

“Of course, you were.”

“So on a scale from typical Steve Rogers ‘I went home early and drew stuff’ to ‘I’m in bed with a certain blonde hottie’, how did it go.”

“Closer to the first.”

“Of course. Why did I ask?”

“Look, does it matter, how are you?”

Daisy smiled, “Satisfied, I’d say.”

She could almost hear Steve grimace through the phone, and had to chuckle, he was kinda cute, when he was like this, “Ew.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“Look, why don’t you come over here and we play some video games.”

“If you wanna get your ass kicked, sure.”

Steve chuckled, “Great. Didn’t expect a different response.”

“Just let me go home first to have a shower.”

“Ugh, right.”

Daisy chuckled, “See you, Stevie.”

“Bye.”
She put her phone back into her purse and searched for her car key to start the engine. She lived a little away from Luke’s and Steve’s absolutely high class areas. She was living in a more grounded neighborhood. Still with a pool in the backyard. But a smaller pool in a smaller backyard. Not that she minded, her parents were honest working people, often on business journeys. She was used to be alone and it had made her independent. At least, this was, what she told herself.

Daisy got out of the car, slamming the door shut. Her parents were in Europe again and she didn’t mind that much currently. She liked parties as much, as the next gal but she didn’t like throwing them. Their house wasn’t as spacious, as the others and it was the one thing, her parents were strict about. No parties here.

It was probably for the better. Less to clean up, less stuff getting broken.

She quickly walked through the living room and kitchen upstairs.

Daisy’s room was a mess, a bunch of make-up stuff was covering half of her bed, as well, as her night stands and cupboard. The other parts of her room, were occupied by cd’s or vinyls. She was a bit of a hipster, she had to admit that.

Daisy quickly shrugged out of her top and took a sniff, as much, as she hated doing laundry, this wasn’t good for another wear.

She sighed and grabbed a fresh top and a short skirt, as well, as ripped up leggings from her wardrobe. This seemed to be fine. She didn’t have to worry about it being too sexy. Steve was a friend. One of her best friends and as long, as she could think back, he had never looked at her ‘that’ way.

She put the clothes on her bed and went to the bathroom to take a shower, washing the night with an almost stranger off of her. She hadn’t always been like this. Hadn’t always been one for one night stands. But then, Grant, her first boyfriend and childhood crush, had cheated on her and she had sworn to never ever trust a guy again. It was keeping her from being hurt, and that was good.

She still had the guys, she met at parties to have fun with. And she figured, that parties and flirting were, what she needed. Her big dream, was it to be a DJ one day. It wasn’t the most realistic thing, but other kids wanted to be actors or singers, so who knew.

She knew, that she had talent, loved mixing songs and working with music. She would just like to have more experience in clubs. Even though, Daisy took every job, she could get, those weren’t many for underaged girls. Mostly at some High Schools in the area or other festivities for kids and teenagers.

Daisy used a towel to dry herself, before she reapplied some make-up in the mirror. Luckily, most of it was waterproof but it was a day old now, anyway.

She wanted to head to Steve, immediately after, when her phone buzzed. It was a message from Natasha.

> home now

Natasha had been visiting her family in russia and she…. was expected back today. Shit. How could Daisy forget.

- Aw welcolme back <<<<3

> Gerry’s diner?
Daisy bit her lip, tell the truth or lie, tell the truth or lie…

Truth.

Natasha was crazy good at calling people’s bullshit.

- *Look, forgot about u being back. going 2 Steve, kicking his butt, wanna come 2?*

> *yeah*

Daisy sighed, that was good. No trouble with Nat at least.

- *Great c ya*

> *don’t think, I will forget you forgetting me tho ;)*

Daisy chuckled and put her phone away again. She grabbed her purse and went back outside, walking to her car. Steve was living a little further away from her. It was a quarter of mansions and big houses.

Steve’s father was something of a big deal around here. He got rich somehow, and no one knew why. Then, he had started to get even richer by buying small businesses. Night clubs, restaurant, bars, you name it. He fired employers, making them run, as efficient, as possible. Sometimes, they were actually there to stay, customers kept coming, but other times, he changed too much and the guests changed. The popular café next door turned into a fine dining restaurant. Other times, he gutted the places and sold them for profit. Destroying everything.

Daisy knew, that Steve didn’t like it and tried to keep out of his father’s businesses, he had his paintings, even planned to make a living out of them one day. He was good but honestly, she wasn’t sure, he’d make it as an artist. His paintings were good enough but it was big competition. There were a lot of talented artists out there but not many artists, doing it as their sole profession. And even then, most of them were animators or something, this sounded interesting to Daisy, but she knew, that it wouldn’t fit Steve. Not enough creative freedom.

Daisy, grabbed her purse, as she used one hand to pull into the driveway of the mansion. There wasn’t another car, so Alexander wouldn’t be here. Good.

Natasha was already standing at the fence. She lived close to Steve and had probably walked the distance in the time, Daisy had driven here.

“Hey, there russian Sun!”

“Don’t ever call me that.”, Natasha ran a hand through her perfect red hair and pursed her exactly as red lips.

“Okay, okay.”, Daisy sighed, “How was Mother Russia though?”

“No.”, Natasha laughed but it was friendly. It was kinda adorable, that her accent was even thicker this day, that she had just returned home.

“I heard, there was a party.”

“Yeah, at Luke’s.”, Daisy walked next to her towards the door, she was one head smaller, than Nat, who was pretty tall, like a model basically. Daisy herself wasn’t small but she always felt so next to her. Maybe, it was also the confidence, that radiated off the russian red head.
“How was it?”
“Met a guy.”

Natasha smirked at her, “Nice.”

“Yeah.”, Daisy blushed and shrugged.

“Was Clint there?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Did, he … uhm… flirt with anyone?”

Daisy smirked the weird will they, won’t they between them was legendary. They were both so clearly into each other but didn’t pull through with it, “No, no, mostly hanging with the guys. So unless, I missed him swinging that way, no.”

“Good.”

“You, know... dating is a thing.”

Natasha rolled her eyes and knocked on the door

“Hi.”, Steve opened, messy hair and rings under his eyes.

“You look like shit.”, Natasha bit her lips. She had the kind of lipstick, that didn’t mind. Daisy had to ask her about the brand.

“You said, you went home early yesterday.”, Daisy smirked, “Doesn’t look like that.”

“I was up painting.”

“Wow, look at you being wild.”, Nat smirked and pushed past Steve, “Oh, hi. You here?”

“Who?!”, Daisy, pushed past Steve.

“Hi, girls.”, Shuri walked up from behind Steve. Daisy sighed, looking down disappointed, Shuri wouldn’t be interested in Steve. She had hoped for him to have hooked up with someone.

“Shuri was helping me with math.”, Steve rubbed his neck. It was funny, how Shuri was well three years their junior and could still help them out. Tony and Stephen could do that too but Shuri was way easier to handle as a person and explained better, than Bruce did. They had a lot of geniuses at their school. It as a curse and a blessing. Daisy knew, that she was clever but she felt like she looked stupid next to them. Even in programming, which was where she excelled.

“Wow, paint and math, you have to be careful you don’t overdo it, you beast.”, Nat grinned, “You can stay Shuri, the more people to kick Steve’s ass, the better.”

Shuri raised a brow, “We’re playing Rainbow Six?”

“No, no, no. You are a kid. Mario kart.”, Daisy smiled, ruffling her hair, despite Shuri being only a little smaller.

Shuri raised a brow, “Says you, who’s been watching slashers, since she was thirteen.”
“I’m messed up. There’s still hope for you. Your future shines bright, little one.”

Steve cleared his throat, “I’d prefer Mario Kart too.”

Nat shook her head, “Little Steve doesn’t want to shoot at pixels.”

“That’s not…”

“We know it is.”, Daisy and Shuri said at the same time.

“If that isn’t a confirmation.”, Nat shook her head again.

Daisy looked between them and smiled, “Come on guys, we should leave him alone, he’s as red, as a tomato.”

They walked upstairs to Steve’s room. It was the only room in the house, that wasn’t furnished with modern black and white furniture. Steve had wooden shelves, desks, chairs and a wooden wardrobe and bed. His room was messy otherwise, other, than Alexander’s house. Paintings, canvases and paint spread all across the room.

Steve turned on the TV and looked at them, “Grab yourself some chairs, okay. I’m gonna go to the kitchen and get something to drink.”

Daisy looked after him and then back on the TV, starting the game. She was sure, that Steve never used it, when his friends weren’t there. He was old fashioned and didn’t even have a laptop or computer on his desk.

“So the party?”, Shuri asked.

“So, T’Challa kept you from going.”, Nat smiled.

“He asked me too. Didn’t keep me. I only didn’t want to go which was, because it’s stupid. I could have gone there, if I wanted.”

“Sure.”, Daisy smiled.

“I heard it was lame anyway.”, Nat winked.

“It wasn’t.”, Dais crossed her arms.

“It has, when I am not there.”, Nat smirked.

Daisy rolled her eyes and grabbed a small statue from Steve’s desk, twisting it in his hands. She set it immediatly back down on the shelf, after she realised, that it was more fragile, than it looked.

That moment, Steve came back with a bottle of water and a bowl with fruits. He looked at them a little sheepish. It was kinda cute like this, he knew them almost his whole life. He knew Shuri exactly his whole life and yet, he was always this nervous.

“You ready, to have your ass kicked?”, Daisy smirked.

“We can just talk?”, Steve grimaced.

Nat shook her head, “I was promised games. I demand games.”

“Okay, okay.”, Steve raised his hands in defeat. It was so easy to push him into a corner like this but
sometimes, Daisy wondered, if that was so good. If Nat was maybe overdoing it. She was good at reading people but bad at recognizing boundaries.

“We can order in Pizza later?”, Shuri asked.

“Don’t you have to be home then?”

“Don’t you have to be home then?”, Shuri mocked Nat, before showing her the finger. Natasha chuckled at that., before looking at Daisy and raising a brow, “You’ve influenced her, Coulson.”

“I don’t know.”, Nat winked.

“Anyway, I pick Boo Hoo.”

“Why not peach?”, Nat teased and ducked from the pillow.

“You know, I hate pink.”, Shuri shrugged, selecting the tiny ghost.

Daisy chuckled, “You are all idiots tho, because Yoshi is the best choice.”

“Oh, they are different?”, Steve asked.

“No, but what’s better, than an adorable tiny dinosaur in a car?”, Daisy asked.

Natasha crossed her arms, “A skeleton turtle obviously.”

“Debatable.”

Steve looked at them and picked Mario.

The game went, as expected. Daisy kicked the others asses, well… maybe, that was the wrong word. She won but it was a close call between her and the other girls. Steve was mostly turning in circles, which was kinda adorale.

“Another cup?”, Daisy asked.

“No.”, Steve replied quickly, “Please.”

“Okay, okay.”, Daisy chuckled.

Nat opened her mouth to protest but then set the controller down, Shuri pursed her lips and sighed, “Maybe, I should go home…”

“Really?”, Daisy asked.

“Yeah. My brother is probably waiting.”

Daisy nodded and looked at Nat, who nodded, they waited until Shuri had left the room, before they turned towards Steve.

“Are you okay, Stevie?”

“What?”, the blond asked.

“Don’t act stupid.”, Nat sighed,” You aren’t.”

“What do you guys mean?”
“You are sad.”

“Weird.”, Daisy added.

“We are worried.”

Steve rolled his eyes and buried his face in his hands, as he sighed, “I’m fine guys, it’s nice, that you worry, but really, I’m fine.”

“You know, that this doesn’t work with me.”, Nat raised another perfect eyebrow, “Tell me the truth, darling, or I will bother you, until you do.”

Daisy looked between them and nodded in a way not to feel to useless.

“I’ve been feeling sad lately.”, Steve sighed.

“Sad?”, Nat asked. It was amazing, how fast her tone could change from threatening and jokey to serious and concerned. There was a reason, she had the nickname Russian Chameleon for some time and it hadn’t been her questionable clothing during one phase.

“Nothing too bad, it won’t affect the team.”

“Screw the team.”, Daisy rolled her eyes, “The team doesn’t matter. You are sad and that matters. You are more important, than the team, Stevie. You are more, than our quarterback.”

Nat nodded, “Yeah.”

“I don’t know, I’m just… meh on everything. Sport is meh. Class is meh. Even good grades are just… meh. Drawing is better it helps me but even then, it’s just… It’s not the same, as it was before.”

“Before what?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, when it started.”

Daisy looked at him concerned, brushing a purple curl out of her face, “This sounds serious. You should seek therapy.”

“Yeah...no.”

“Why?”

Steve shrugged, “I don’t know, okay?”

Daisy looked over at Nat, who furrowed her brow. She was thinking the same. Steve was a bad liar, which was partially because he didn’t like it. Do it had been easy to tell, that he had an idea, why.

Nat just nodded at Steve, “Okay, look if you need help, we’re here.”

Daisy was actually happy, that she didn’t call him out on his lie. Steve had just opened up and revealed a big secret and vulnerability. That was enough for today and pushing him too far would lead nowhere.

“Thanks. I think, you should go.”

“Oh, we can stay.”, Nat smiled.
“Yeah, we don’t mind.”, Daisy added.

Steve shook his head, “I do. No offense but I need to draw and get my mind focused again. You know?”, he smiled weakly.

“Yes.”, Nat nodded, “But please, we’re here for your dumb ass.”

Daisy nodded.

“Thank you. I appreciate it. Really do.”

Steve led them to the door and smiled at them, turning around in front of the door, opening it for them, “See you at school.”

“Yeah.”, Nat hugged him.

“Glad you’re back.”, he whispered, “And you.”, He hugged Daisy, “Thank you.”

“No problem. Ring me up.”

Daisy walked side by side.

“So, he was lying.”, Nat tilted her head.

“No.”, Daisy walked dover to her car, sitting down on the trunk.

Nat sighed and looked to the floor, “We shouldn’t push him too much.”, she wiped some of the dust on the ground around with her shoe.

“Yeah, I know, but if we--”

“Don’t find out, we can’t help.”, they finished in unison. Nat smiled at her, “Yeah, I know.”

“I wish, we could help him but if he really seeks a therapist, it’s probably better, than anything we can do. And he will hopefully tell them the truth then.”

“If he seeks a therapist.”, Nat sighed, “You know Steve.”

“He’s stubborn.”, Daisy nodded, “In his own way.”

“Exactly. In a self loathing way. Stubborn in the believe, that everything is his fault and his fault alone. That he deserves bad.”

“Slow down there, Freud.”

“You don’t need to be that to know.”

“I know. I could have done that analysis too.”

“See?”, Nat smirked.

“Funny.”

“I know. Look, I have to go. See you at school?”

“Yeah, bye.”, Daisy watched Nat leave, leaning against her car. She wasn’t sure, what to do, she looked up towards the windows and wondered, if Steve had been watching them from there. If so,
he had probably figured, they were talking about him. She wasn’t sure, what to do now. Well, she
knew that she should go home, but she didn’t want to. Anyway, wherever, she wanted to go now,
she needed to get into her car. She closed the door quietly and sat down, grabbing the steering wheel
tight.

She bit her lip, before steering out of the parking spot and driving down the road.

It was kind of instinct, that led her to the small diner. She had no real destination on her mind.

But then, she remembered, how hungry she actually was. Party, sex, drugs and psychoanalyzing
your friends could be quite straining.

She parked in front of the rundown building and jogged towards the door.

The diner had always been some kind of meeting point for her and her friends. Not one of the fancy
restaurants, where people knew their names and families but one, where they could talk about
everything, no one else should know about. They hadn’t been here in some time and Daisy wasn’t
sure, why.

To be honest, she was lucky that the place was still open… And not shut down by the health
department.

Okay. It hadn’t been that bad.

It had just been… simple. Simple and sometimes a little greasy.

She had missed uncle Sam’s pizza. And yes, the cook really called himself uncle Sam. On top of
that, he was a fat, old greek man specialised in pizza.

Inside, it was just, how Daisy remembered it. The air was stuffy but filled with good smells. Garlic
and absurdly enough, peanuts.

The chairs and tables still looked run down, with some of the fabric torn of and wood chipped at
various places.

“Hello?”, Daisy asked.

“Hi, little girl.”, Uncle Sam appeared.

“Uncle Sam!”, Daisy smiled and walked over towards him. To be fair, no one knowing their name
wasn’t accounting for Sam but that was okay.

“It’s been a long time.”, the old man smiled at her, “The last time, I saw you, you were like this tall.”, he
showed her a height that was almost reaching his hip.

There was no way, Daisy had ever been this small.

Well, okay. She probably had been but not, when she had come here with her friends.

“I don’t think so.”, Daisy smiled but let the small man pull her into a hug. He smelled of grease and
fond memories.

“How have you been?”

“Hungry.”, Daisy told the truth. She didn’t feel like talking much. not now, when her hunger had
finally settled down as such in her thoughts and the air was smelling like a dozen dishes at once
“Of course, of course. This is, why you’re here. For you, for free today.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But I want to.”, Sam smiled.

“Thank you, Sam.”

“The usual?”

“You still remember that?”

“Of course.”, he smiled proudly.

Daisy grinned, “Then that and a beer.”

“I don’t think, you are old enough, young lady.”

“I’m not twelve anymore.”

“But not twenty one either. I can’t serve you alcohol, not only because of your health but because of me not being imprisoned.”

Daisy sighed, “Okay, the usual then.”

He shouted something in greek towards the chef in the small kitchen, that was almost as greasy as he himself.

“And where are the others? Luke, Natasha and Stan?”

“Steve.”

“Right, sorry, it’s been such a long time.”

Daisy smiled, “No problem, and I’m sorry, but I think, I have to be enough for now, Sam. They are busy.”

“Are they doing good?”

“Yes.”

“Then, that is fine, I’m happy, you found your way here again.”

Daisy smiled again, “Always.”

“Can I get you something to drink?”, Daisy opened her mouth, “Something none alcoholic, little lady.”

“Of course.”, Daisy winked, “An energy drink would be fine.”

“Of course.”, Sam grabbed a can from the counter, opening it, “Two bucks.”

“You said it was for free.”

“The food. No food.”

Daisy rolled her eyes,”Great.”
“And you insisted on paying.”, Sam joked.

“Fine, fine, you are a shred business man.”, Daisy joked.

“I know.”

Daisy smirked, as she watched Sam walk back to his kitchen. She really missed the old times.

When she would come here with the others. Sit here for hours and talk, joke about everything. Their dreams and hopes for the future. Future careers and what they wanted their lives to be.

It was different now, now that things were actually starting to take shape. The dreams of the future had to make place for reality. The reality, that getting into college wasn’t as easy, as they had thought back then.

That maybe their dream jobs were unrealistic, that they were unreachable and childish.

That the childhood crush didn’t like them back and that relationships usually ended in pain, rather than a fairytale wedding.

Daisy sighed, yeah, it had been easier. She was smarter today. She still followed her dream. Maybe her heart a little too often. But today, she had a plan B. A boring office job as a backup plan.

It wasn’t perfect but it was the right thing to do.

Daisy had always wondered, what her friends would be one day. Natasha always wanted to be a ballet dancer. It was embarrassing for her today. Now, she wanted to be a cop, which was something Luke, T’challa and Shuri liked to throw shade for. But Nat wanted to be better and that was honorable.

Steve always wanted to be a professional artist. Nowadays, he was talking about too many already there. He talked about jobs in his father’s office, which was bullshit to Daisy, knowing that he hated his work. She wasn’t sure, what he really wanted to be now though.

Then there were the geniuses, Tony, Stephen and Shuri. They all came from rich families and were way too smart for their own good. Shuri didn’t care about jobs, Stephen wanted to be a surgeon and probably would be one day. Tony always wanted to be an astronaut. Then, one day, he stormed into elementary school, talking about the physical requirements and him not wanting to let that dictate his life.

It was one of the most Tony things to happen.

Clint was funny. Clint was jumping from one job idea to the other faster, than the speed of light. He always had. The most returning wish was architecture but usually, he was sitting at school, whispering, that’s what I wanna do during every remotely interesting topic.

Luke wanted to follow his fathers footsteps always had wanted that, since he was a child. The more heartbreaking it was for Daisy, to see that dream failing. Luke was good but probably not good enough to play a role in the NFL, at least not a big one. Of course, this could always change but his development was pointing into that direction. He had won a lot of awards as a kid and they were starting to become more and more rare.

Daisy wondered if her DJ dreams looked like that from the outside too.

Probably.
She sighed and leaned back into her chair.

“Here young lady.”, Sam put the plate down in front of her.

“Thanks.”

“You look sad.”, he remarked.

“No, no, just a rough day.”

“It’s weekend.”

“Well, a rough night before.”

He put his hands over his ears, “Don’t wanna hear.”

Daisy chuckled, “Okay, okay, fine old man.”, she smiled, as Sam shrugged and walked back to his kitchen. The food immediately brought back old memories and Daisy closed her eyes to take them in. She let the flavors carry her back to those easier times. Maybe, she should ask the others, if they wanted to meet here again. She could already imagine Tony’s reaction. He would probably choose some fancy café over this. Except, if she could manage to bring him here. That would change his mind.

Daisy quickly finished her meal. A lot faster, than she wanted it to be done but it was getting dark outside and she wanted to be home soon. In case, her father called her and heard the background noises around here. He would get mad, knowing, she was out this long. Well, it wasn’t too late. He would get mad, finding out she was out, period. Daisy didn’t mind that, he was protective of her. It made her feel loved and valued.

Daisy paid Sam regardless of his offer and left the place. She slammed her car door shut loudly behind her and opened her purse, pulling out the aux cord and connecting her phone to the car radio. She turned up the volume and drove back home. She loved these nights, when it was getting cold outside and she as cozy in her car, the music giving her energy. The heavy basses, lining up with her heartbeat. Yes, she fucking loved music. It helped her, when people or words just couldn’t. The right songs could make her feel happy, when she was sad and awake, when she was tired. Right now, it helped her think. Her thoughts were racing and she wasn’t even sure, what they were about. Mostly the past but some of the present and the future. When she arrived home, Daisy remained a little inside of the car. Sitting there and letting the music play on. Probably, until the neighbors complained about it. Or at least, until they complained the second time. It still wasn’t dark but it could only be a matter of half an hour. Daisy reached back and grabbed her jacket, she kept in the car, pulling the fabric around her body. The warmth spread immediately. She reached for her weed, when she remembered, she had given it to that guy from last night. Damn. Why did she have to be so damn generous? Instead, she leaned her head back and watched the night slowly unfold in front of her eyes.

She woke up to the ringtone of her phone later. Must have fallen asleep. It was probably Dad calling her. Daisy searched her purse, pulling out the buzzing phone, “Hi, Dad.”

“It’s me.”, Steve’s voice said. It was shaking something was wrong.

“Steve? Are you okay?”

“I… I Daisy, there’s something that happened here. I’m scared.”

“Look, I’m on my way. I’m just gonna pick up Luke and be right there.”
“Thank you.”
Steve watched the girls leave, leaning back against the wall. They were intense. He loved them but damn, they hard to handle. He knew, that they meant well. That they wanted to help him but he just couldn’t talk.

Not about Alexander and all of this shit. Maybe, he actually needed a therapist. He had even called one but kept cancelling the appointment. Alexander would find it weak and maybe, he was just being that. Weak. How big could his problems be?

He sighed looking at an empty canvas. It was usually, what helped him get by. What helped him with his...moods.

What could he draw?

Steve pursed his lips, leaning his head back against the wall. His thoughts were racing, almost too loud for his head. He sighed his mind kept going back to the conversation about his psyche.

He needed help. Maybe, he was denying it but somehow, he knew that now. His head was aware but his heart was fighting the truth. The thing was, he usually listened to his heart ,maybe today was the time to change that and listen to his head. Even,if it was just this once Tony and Stephen seemed to be doing alright.

Why shouldn’t he?

Steve looked over at his mobile phone. He had a number of the psychiatrist, he had called a few times, saved in there. She had times, when she had no appointments and was just there to consult on the phone. Of course, this was only for wealthy privately insured patients. Steve bit his lip, flipping the phone in his hands. He knew, that one of these days would be today. That he could call, if he wanted to. That help was just a call away. But making this call would mean admitting it all to himself.

He looked at his empty canvas and scrolled through his contacts, his mind blank and eyes unfocused. Do it.

Do it, you coward!

“Do it you coward!” , Alexander’s voice echoed inside of his head. Calling him a coward, as he often did. Coward. Failure.

“Dr. Burnstein?”

“Hello.”, Steve replied, the Doctor sounded nice enough. Her voice soft and calm, why was he so afraid of this, “My name is Steve. Steve Rogers.”

“Oh, we’ve had a few appointments, didn’t we?”

“Yeah.”, Steve blushed, he walked up and down his room, taking a paint brush and twirling it in his finger, “I cancelled them.”, he painted the brush in red, before putting it on the canvas.

“I know… This happens.”, he could hear her smile through the phone, “People with problems are
often scared to face them, even though they can recognize them.”

“Tell me about it.”, Steve put another line of red paint onto the canvas eyeing it critically, before he realised, how salty his comment might have sounded, why was he like this…, “I’m sorry, Doctor.”

“It’s okay.”, she chuckled, “So, what is your problem, Steve. You never told me before and I be you have decided to call just now, because you feel bad.”

“I’m sure other people have it a lot worse.”, Steve sighed, feeling guilty, putting the red paint rush aside.

“There is no quality to suffering. No better and no worse. And besides, just because other people have it bad, doesn’t mean, that you have to suffer too, Steven. You are a worthy person.”, Dr. Burnstein sighed.

“But they-”

“No they, You.”

“Ohay, I… I’m sad. No, sad is wrong… I’m just blank.”, Steve looked at the canvas, dipping another brush into blue, “Just… there.”

“You aren’t looking forward to anything?”

“Yeah.”

“How about your future?”, Dr. Burnstein asked.

“I don’t care.”

“That is concerning.”, she sighed and paused for a moment, “Nothing, you are looking forward to at all?”

“Getting away from my father.”, it was out faster, than Steve had wanted it to. To be honest, he didn’t mean to tell it at all.

“That is interesting.”, Dr. Burnstein commented, “Can you elaborate?”

“No.”

“Steven…”

“No. Look, I gotta leave. I have an appointment. Thank you and Bye.”, Steve hung up, before she could say something.

Wow.

That had been bad. Steve knew, that he wasn’t good at lying and pretending, that everything was okay but he rarely noticed it himself. Just now, he had which meant, that it had been terrible.

He sighed and looked at the painting. Well, ‘painting’ was the better word for it. It wasn’t really anything, that deserved any attention. Just bullshit. Like everything, he produced. Like everything, he touched.

Steve looked out of the window it would be getting dark soon. Alexander wasn’t there, which was good for now. Maybe, he was spending the night at the office or was checking out some real estate he
wanted to suck out… buy. like a club or restaurant.

The thought alone made Steve calm down. He was fine here okay. In this big house and all alone. It was better, than the alternative.

Anyway, he should eat. Sometimes, he had to remind himself of that. But he knew, that he needed to eat for the football team.

He didn’t care about football. But about the team.

If he let them down, they’d be sad.

And they didn’t deserve this.

Steve walked down the big staircase and into the kitchen.

It looked exactly like the rest of the house. Shining tiles in black and white with chrome between.

A pure pool of joy.

From an artistic point, he hated that. He wanted colors and shapes and forms. He had those in his room but whenever, he came out it was just… clean.

Sterile.

It felt a little, like Steve felt on the inside. He didn’t need that.

Steve opened the fridge, looking at the ingredients.

As always, healthy food. Low carb food.

He remembered the days at Sam’s with the gang. The memories were just pale now but still, Steve liked to hold on to them.

He remembered, how Luke had once bitten into three lemons in a row, before he had been manipulated into giving up by Tony.

Well, lemons were healthy too.

But not the giant Pizza, they’d shared afterwards.

Maybe, they could go over there some time.

Pizza.

Pizza at Sam’s.

Yeah, they should go over.

Steve grabbed some oatmeal.

It was boring but it would do. Not, that there was much he cared about beyond just eating something for now.

He opened one of the damn ugly drawers and reached inside for a bowl, when he heard a noise. Shit.

Steve turned around, walking towards the open living room, “Hello? Dad?”
There was no response. Instinctively, Steve reached for his phone, grabbing it tight. Just to be sure, that he could always call the police.

“Hello? Anybody there?”

Of course not, you idiot. It’s not like thieves, rapists or whatever are just gonna show up here and announce themselves after a friendly question. Steve was pretty sure, that this was just another Hollywood clichee.

Steve tried to move quietly, which was exactly as stupid, after calling out loud just moments before. The noises had stopped anyway now. Maybe, he should just go back to the kitchen and eat instead of--

There was a breeze. Someone must have left a window open.

No, you idiot.

Steve looked up and saw the open window, the wind moving the ugly white curtains but Steve only cared about the person standing there in the light.

A man with a hoodie, pulled deep over his face. Merely a silhouette but something about him was mesmerizing. Then, it hit Steve. He should stop looking at him, he had broken or tried to, he needed to stop him.

Or at least, not get hurt.

“Hey!”, Steve screamed, raising his phone.

It was as if a spell between them had been broken. The man turned and jumped over the fence.

“Shit.”, Steve breathed but then, he started to run. After the guy. He had broken in here, yes, Steve hated the way Alexander earned his money. And he didn’t care about the wealth ut this was still his home.

A cold and hated home. Yeah.

But it was still a safe place for him.

Steve was fast and he knew, that he could catch this guy, but it was dark and the man was moving gracefully. Like a cat. Or even better, like a shadow.

Steve tried to catch up, jumping over fences and running through backyards. On his way, he hot his toe against a stone, but he continued.

Continued, until he found himself in a dead end. Steve looked around, How could he have lost him. He had him in his sights.

When Steve returned home, he was filled with regret. He had left the garden door open and had decided to follow the asshole, instead of waiting for the police. Stupid. Stupid. The police could have arrested him.

Now, the police just told him, that they would send someone to take in the complaints but that was all, they could do.

Steve sighed, running his hands down his face. He needed to talk to someone. He was scared being here now. In this house, that has never felt like home but at least it had been safe. Felt safe.
Until tonight.

His hands were shaking from fear and shock and maybe from the adrenaline after the manhunt. He was shaking, opening his contacts on his phone.

He needed to talk and he needed some good vibes. There was only one person, he could talk to then. At least one person, that was cheery enough.

“Hi, Dad.”, Daisy greeted.

“It’s me.”, Steve swallowed not sure, what to say right now. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“Steve? Are you okay?”

She sounded concerned like this, she was there for him. Was he? Steve swallowed, “I… I Daisy, there’s something that happened here. I’m scared.”

“Look, I’m on my way. I’m just gonna pick up Luke and be right there.”, Steve had to smile at that, they were such a sworn team, that it was given for Daisy to call Luke and bring him and he was certain, that Luke would come in the middle of the night. How did he deserve these people?

“Thank you.”

“Boy?”, one of the cops asked.

Steve turned around, raising his brow, “Yes?”, his voice was shaking slightly. It was kinda embarrassing.

“We are leaving you now.”

“Oh, okay.”, Steve shrugged.

“Is there anyone, you can talk to. It’s not so good, to be at one place alone at a time like this.”, the cop smiled.

“My friends are here soon.”

“No relatives?”

“My father. but calling him is a stupid idea.”

“Something wrong?”, he looked concerned.

Steve sighed, “Yeah.”, he frowned, wait what did he just say, he couldn’t tell him about this, “I mean, yeah someone broke in. I don’t want my father to get upset while at work.”

The cop shrugged, “Well, you gotta know it. We’ll get back to you.”

Steve nodded, “Thanks.”

He looked, as the man left the house and the car pulled away.

All of the sudden, he felt helpless and frozen to the spot. The house being in the dark was scary but with the lights being turned on, he was visible from the outside. The thief could see him. If he was still here.
Steve remained like that for what felt like eternity not daring to move and his eyes glued to the windows and doors. Eventually, he saw the headlights of Daisy’s car pull into the parking lot and heard the engine.

They were here, he wasn’t alone.

When he saw them get out of the car, Steve felt as if some of his restraints had been loosened, he moved He walked to the door and opened it.

“What happened?”, Daisy walked over to hug him, Luke remaining there in the background smiling softly at him.

“Someone broke in.”


“No.”, Steve returned his handshake.

“Shit.”

Steve nodded silently, while Daisy rushed past him, “What did they steal?”, she looked around the room.

“Nothing.”


“Yeah, I disturbed the guy.”

Daisy bit her lips, “So it’s just, you being scared. Which is a big deal, don’t misunderstand me here.”

“I wouldn’t and yeah.”, Steve nodded, he knew, that Daisy wasn’t trying to downplay the situation, she was just straight forward. But yeah, the thing was him being scared. Because of the breakin itself and all but also because he knew, how his father would react. That was, what scared him too.

Scared him more, maybe.

“Steve?”, Luke asked, looking at him with wide eyes and tilting his head. He was worrying too and Steve immediately felt bad.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m just… a little shaky, I don’t know, I know, that I’m a big guy and strong but I...I feel scared.”

“Oh honey.”, Daisy said, “You poor sweet thing. Poor little thing. Of course, you can be scared, no matter the amount of muscles.”

Steve smiled weakly, “Thanks.”

Daisy looked at Steve again, crossing her thin arms, “You look like shit.”

“He literally said that.”, Luke smirked.

“I know, I know…”, Daisy replied dryly, then she raised her hand and headed towards Steve’s kitchen.

“What is she-?”, Steve asked.
Luke just shrugged and followed her.

Daisy was tiptoeing to reach for the upper closets, barely managing to balance a jar out of the top shelf.

Steve recognized it. It was cocoa powder. He hadn’t had a hot chocolate in ages. Alexander didn’t like unhealthy things and he didn’t want Steve to eat them.

“Are you really--?” Steve started.

“Sh!”, Daisy interrupted.

“Daisy, I don’t need--”

“You are stupid and don’t know, what’s good for yourself, so shut up.”, she commented dryly, while getting milk from the fridge.

Luke chuckled, shoving Steve in the side, “She is the boss.”

“She is.”

Daisy nodded, humming something, as she heated the milk, “Luke, get a blanket from upstairs.”

“Guys, I’m not eleven.”

“Let’s agree to disagree on that.”

Luke shrugged, “I like her idea.”, he gave Steve a pad on the back, before obeying and jogging upstairs.

Steve rolled his eyes, before he turned to Daisy, “Thank you though.”

“I thought, you didn’t want the cocoa.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean coming over.”

“Pft. Of course, we came here.”

Steve shook his head, it was hard for him to believe, that someone would come over here, because they actually cared. Cared about him. Maybe, it was just because they liked being here in his house.

“Thank you.”, Steve repeated himself.

“It’s no trouble. You’d do the same.”

He would, but would he do the same for himself?

Daisy poured some of the cocoa into the pot and used a spoon to swirl it around, the smell of chocolate was already filling the room. Steve’s mouth was starting to water, he hadn’t drunk cocoa in ages. All there was, was water or coffee. Coffee was great and all but it was so adult. Cocoa was liquidated childhood.

Luke jogged up behind Steve, throwing a blanket over his shoulder, “Guys, I’ve been chasing after a thief. I didn’t fall into a river or something.”

“It’s a shock blanket.”, Daisy said in a british accent.
“I understood that reference, but--”

“No but.”, Luke interrupted, “It helps, makes you feel warm. When I screw up in a game, a blanket helps me too. Got that from my Dad. Just can’t let the press see you like this. Bad for the tough guy image. Although that wouldn’t be an issue for me.”

“That’s not true.”, Daisy and Steve said at the same time.

“You’re great.”, Steve added.

Luke shook his head, “You know, just keep the damn blanket over your shoulders, okay? Let’s not discuss this.”

“So…”, Daisy poured the cocoa in a mug and shoved it over to Steve, there was almost some of the liquid swapping over.

“Thank you, but you didn’t have t--”

“Shut up and drink.”

Luke chuckled and gave Daisy a thumbs up. Steve sighed, such dorks. But they were his and that was enough to make him feel warm on the inside.

Well, that and the cocoa, which was delicious and brought back some major childhood feelings.

“How is it?”, Daisy asked.

“Smells like the past.”, Luke said with a sad smile.

Steve nodded.

“You know, it’s funny.”, Daisy started, “After I met with Steve and Tash and Shuri today, I drove to Uncle Sam’s. Just on a hunch, gut feeling, whatever and I ate there, damn, do I miss these times.”

“We can revive them.”, Luke shrugged.

“If the others still wanna go there.”, Steve shrugged.

“Tony swears, he got food poisoning there.”

Daisy shook her head, “Probably got it from fancy rich people food.”


“They always ate these weird stuff.”, Daisy added.

Steve chuckled, the warm cocoa and the talk was making him feel light and fuzzy.


“Says you.”, Daisy muttered.

“Oh come on…”

“Your father is a former NFL player and current coach!”

Luke sighed and threw his head back, “Right, okay? But we don’t live in a giant ass mansion.”
“It is a big house and the money is somewhere.”, Daisy shrugged and hopped onto the counter, letting her legs dangle.

“Fine.”; Luke shrugged, “Not like I can do anything about that. And besides, being rich isn’t bad. The problem is, that there are poor people. The gap between rich and poor, it what’s worrisome. Besides, I don’t waste my money, unlike other people.”

“Wow, listen to you sounding like a politician, who’s also earning lots of money under the table and doesn’t know, what he’s talking about. And dragging Tony in this makes everyone else look like saints.”

“Says the upper middle class girl.”

“Guys.”, Steve chuckled, “You are idiots.”


Steve shook his head, his friends were the biggest idiots in the world. Maybe, that meant, that he was as much of an idiot. That was how these things worked, right? Either the same went to same or opposite attraction. And Daisy and Luke were eerily similar… Maybe Steve was so too. Hell, in a way Tasha, Stephen, Tony and T’Challa were similar to Daisy too. But they were all happy people and Steve wasn’t… Or was everyone just holding that facade up. Was everyone just pretending like him? Maybe, they were asking themselves the same question now. He could solve this, if he told them… but that option was so far out of the window, it felt like a fairytale to Steve.

“Listen man, I just remembered, how we got to this. To Daisy tryin to shame me, Uncle Sam’s sounds like a good idea, right? It’s even better, than hot cocoa.”

“And not much beats hot cocoa.”, Daisy jumped down from the counter again.

“True.”, Steve nodded, still in thoughts from earlier.

“Just hope, that you can sleep eventually, I mean, it’s-”, Daisy looked at her phone, “Wow, 4 am. Time flies by.”

“Yeah, had to sneak out.”, Luke shrugged.

“Badass.”

“Yeah, but I should be home in a few hours. I mean no need to test my luck.”

Steve shrugged, “You can leave now, by the way.”

“Really?”, Daisy asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine… And you guys… You really helped. Thanks.”


“Don’t test your luck.”, Steve smirked.

“Oh, we won’t. You drivin me home Dais?”

“Sure.”

Daisy leaned forward and hugged Steve tiptoeing to press a wet kiss onto his cheek, “Sleep well.”
“I will.”

Luke nodded and gave Steve a smirk, “See you at training.”

“Sure.”

Steve watched after them, as they let the door fall shut. They were good friends. He hated lying to them, hated pulling up this act.

It was stupid and they deserved better.

He sighed and took a sip from his cocoa.

The warmth was still there. even after Daisy and Luke had left his house. Maybe, Steve wasn’t all that lost.

Steve fell asleep on the couch in the living room.

He had been sure, he couldn’t sleep tonight. So sure, that he had decided to lay down on the soft cushion and just close his eyes for a moment.

Great.

This wouldn’t be an issue, if he hadn’t been woken up by a rough calloused hand on his shoulder.

“Steven!”

Steve blinked a few times, trying to sort together the reality, fitting the evening with Daisy and Luke into either past, present or future.

Too clear for future, Daisy’s hair color had been her newest.

So, it had been recent past.

Now, now there was this hand, that was early familiar.

Alexander.

“Steven?”

“Yeah.”, Steve croaked finally. The cocoa mug was still standing next to him on the table and he hoped, it didn’t smell still.

“What are you doing here?”

“Sleep.”, Steve answered. Something in his still tired and confused head knew, that this was a stupid answer but he wasn’t sure, why.

“Don’t sass me.”

Oh, that was why.

“I’m not.”

Alexander shook his head, letting his suitcase fall to the floor, he had a bunch of papers already in his hands but Steve wouldn’t ask, what those were.
He wasn’t this stupid.

“Get up.”

Steve sighed and obeyed, looking at his father, his face must still be sleep worn and he probably had imprints of the pillows on his face.

“You look like shit.”

Steve ignored the insult and kept looking at his father.

Alexander sighed, shook his head and then reached into his suitcase, pulling something out of there. A gun.

“Next time, some motherfucker breaks in. I want you to be able to defend yourself. Shoot that son of a bitch.”

Steve looked at the gun, not moving, “Isn’t that a little... hard?”

“How?”

“He didn’t steal anything. He ran from me and didn’t attack. Shooting him seems like overdoing it a little.”

“He broke in. This is about honor.”

Steve knew his father long enough to know not to argue. He could just take the gun and never touch it again.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Hey, you are my son.”

Steve nodded and swallowed, taking the gun from his father. Where should he keep this. His room probably but he wasn’t sure, if he could sleep with that here. He hated guns so much. One of these things, he kept a secret from his father. For a long time, he had done his art in secret too. Now, fifty percent of his room were canvases, paint and finished pictures. It had gotten hard to hide. His Dad didn’t approve of his hobby but that wasn’t the kind of power, he’d give him.

He wondered, what his father would think, if he found out what Steve did with most of his paintings. He wanted Steve to become a businessman. So, his favorite option would probably be to sell it for the highest bidder. But it wasn’t who he was and probably not, who he’d ever would be. Steve trashed most of them, because most of the time, he hated them, if he didn’t, he donated them to charity. There, they’d either be sold and the profit would be donated, or they would be used in places like children’s hospital or homeless shelters as decoration.

But yeah, most of the time, he hated them anyway.

The problem with the gun was, that he could hide that away from his father. Hide away, that he wasn’t using it.

“We should go to the shooting range next week.”, Alexander was searching through his suitcase.

“Yeah.”, Steve nodded. Someone had broken in, while he had been here alone and his father was taking it surprisingly well. No need to risk it by being stupid and disagreeing with him. Next week was far away by Alexander standards. Maybe, it was enough for him to forget until then.
“Just you and me on the shooting range. Father and son. Nothing better, than that.”, Steve’s dad beamed.

Steve nodded again, avoiding eye contact.

“And if that asshole comes here again.”, he made a pistol with his hands, “pow!”

Steve shuddered but continued the nodding.

“Self defense, son.”

“Don’t you think, we should get better alarm system and just be done with it. I don’t know, seems better.”

“No, no. People need to be scared. Alarms systems are like a challenge. But if these rats know, that one of them has been shot here. They won’t come back.”

Steve shuddered again, “Alright, I… uhm, can I go upstairs.”

“Of course.”

The boy didn’t waste a second, until he was on his way upstairs.

He needed sleep, that was it. Sleep.

Steve sighed and looked at his nightstand, where his phone was laying.

Steve?

Daisy had sent him a message. Tbf, just writing his name wasn’t an actual message.

Yeah.

That wasn’t either.

How are you?

Steve smiled at that she was so caring. Basically a perfect girl. he always wondered, why he didn’t like her as more, than friends.

Better.

It was the truth.

U sure?

Steve sighed, he loved her to pieces, but…

Yeah. G2g

He laid his phone aside. Once again, he tried to remember the thief’s face. He hadn’t really seen it but he knew, that it had made him feel something. Something beyond fear. So, he had to have seen something. You couldn’t feel something, beyond the obvious fear when you weren’t seeing parts of the face. Right?

And more scary than that was, that Steve had felt something positive. Had felt warm for some reason. While looking at a fucking thief!
Steve blinked, staring at the ceiling. He wished, any of this would make sense to him at all because now, it was just some weird mish mash.

Steve sighed and ran a hand down his face. Everything had been bullshit, since Peggy and he broke up. It had been worse, when she had moved away. The break up itself had hurt but what was worse now, was that Steve realised something then.

That he had liked Peggy the same way, he liked Daisy now. And that was confusing, because, it should be different. She had been his girlfriend but he had felt the same about her, he had felt about Daisy… And now, he wasn’t sure, what to do, because he clearly was supposed to feel for Peggy more intensely.

The explanation Steve wanted to be true was, that he liked Daisy secretly as much? Because that would certainly suck but it wouldn’t be as bad, as the alternative. The alternative that would also explain, why he always looked away from the other boys in the locker room. He always thought, that it was just shyness, but if not… It would explain, why he was always bored, when the girls were on close ups in porn and was more interested in the guys. He always thought, that it was because he wanted to learn, how to do it. But if not…

If not Alexander would kill him. He might be kicked from the team. Might be hated by his friends.

No it had to be another explanation. There had to be something. Maybe, he was just overthinking and therefore malfunctioning.

Steve jumped from the bed and walked over towards his canvases.

He needed to draw and let all of this out.

He made angry strokes and points. Trying to find shapes and figures, that were starting to express his feelings. Or at least attempt to.

He choose different colors.

All the colors of the rainbow. Jusz trying to represent the feelings on his inside. The mess there was.

He made a few steps backwards looking at it.

It was beautiful.

And messy.

Pure chaos.

He had never drawn anything more accurate, than this,

Steve cleaned his paint stained hands on his pants. he didn’t care about them. He had way more pants in his closet, than he cared for.

Maybe, he was actually getting a psychotic break.

Maybe, he was going fully insane.

It wouldn’t surprise him.

Steve hid his face in his hands and leaned back against the wall. He slid down the wall and closed his eyes, calm breaths. He needed to take calm breaths. Slowly inhaling. Holding the breath and
then, exhaling slowly.

Steve sighed, it didn’t work. Did he hope for it to work faster, than possible?

“Steven!”, his father growled from downstairs.

What now? Steve wasn’t sure, if he really wanted to know what it was this time.

“Steven, the police is here again.”

“Did they catch the guy?”, Steve screamed from his room. Screw manners now.

“Steven. Come down.”, his father’s voice was barely audible but the threatening undertown was easy to spot.

Steve pushed himself away from the wall, again slowly jogging down the stairs. Two cops were standing in the door frame, looking at him. His father pointed at Steve, before going back to the kitchen.

Thank you, Dad. Steve thought quietly. Thanks for the emotional support, Dad. To be fair, he hadn’t gotten any emotional support from his father in years. Why should he expect this now of all moments. After he had allowed a guy to break in here.

“Are you Steven Rogers?”, one of the cops asked, a big black man. Not the one, he had seen here earlier.

“Yes.”

“We are here to question you.”, the other cop, a pretty brunette woman, shrugged and gestured towards the hallway, “May we come in?”

“I… I already talked to some of your coworkers.”, Steve furrowed his brow.

“Yes but we are sent here again, because our colleagues didn't have all the information. There have been a bunch of break ins here recently. We are investigating those.”

“Oh, can I see your badges.”

“Clever boy.”, the black man smiled, he and his partner obeyed.

Steve smiled at the, “Thanks.”, he walked aside, letting them in. He wasn’t in the mood for more questions but at least, it was a distraction.
Bucky sneaked back into their home, he was still pissed at Danny, Wanda and Robbie. Mostly Robbie.

Wanda and Danny had snuck out last night, okay. It happened, they were fucking kids. And maybe, trying to keep them away from social life had bitten them in the ass just then. But Robbie… Robbie should have known.

Bucky and he had searched for the others last night and it turned out, Robbie lost track, getting distracted by a girl.

Bucky had searched the whole night for the two, Wanda had returned sometimes at night and Danny had been here at dawn with money.

Once again, he had been a little weird and unfocused. Bucky really hoped, that this wasn’t about drugs. Yes, Danny hated them and all but it was the answer that was on hand.

Now, he had left them behind for the night, breaking into some rich douches house. House, was the wrong word. Mansion.

And of course, there had to be someone home, who had spotted him.

At least, Ducky was sure, that he hasn’t been followed here and hopefully, he didn’t leave any clues for the cops.

I he was responsible for them all getting caught, he’d never forgive himself.

He glared at Robie, as he pushed down the ladder and climbed up, “Look man…”, the latino started, looking at Bucky with sincere regret in his eyes.

“No, don’t even start.”

“Mph.”, Groot looked up at Bucky tilting his head.

“You neither. Shouldn’t have let the two run away late at night. One guard dog, you are.”, he extended his hand ruffling his head.

“I talked to them.”, Robbie said, crossing his arms.

“And…”

“And they said, that they are sorry for not telling us.”

“Well, they shouldn’t go to these High School parties at all.”, Bucky muttered.

“I know.”

“Too dangerous and not the people, we want to hang out with.”

“I know.”, Robbie repeated, empathising the ‘I’, “They don’t. They are kids.”
“I know. Did you tell them, that we don’t want to have this shit again.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on man, do I have to squeeze every word out of you now? What did they say?”

“That we can’t tell them anything. We aren’t their parents or guardians and we are together because, we want to.”

“Yeah but the moment, they take unnecessary risks, they endanger not just themselves ut all of us from being brought back to our parents.”

“Yeah. Wanda said something about us stealing and that they live with that risk too.”

“Well, that is necessary.”

“Hey, don’t talk to me, like you have to convince me. Tell them all of this. Speaking of stealing, what did you get?”

Bucky sucked in some air, not the best current topic for that question, “I got caught. Well, not caught interrupted.”

“Shit.”

“I was careful, it was just that--”

“Hey, you don’t have to apologize to me. I know how hard this is. It happens. As long, as you shook them off.”

“I did.”

Robbie nodded an opened the door to the control room. Danny and Wanda were nuzzled up on their mattresses. It was cute, how they were a little curled up and hugging the thin blankets. But Bucky knew, what that meant. Coolness.

The cold was coming.

He looked around the room and saw the money, Danny had brought on the counter. He still didn’t tell them. Didn’t talk. But they’d need the money. No matter, how hard they tried to ignore the possibility of using it.

Bucky grabbed a few bills and slid them into his shoes, so that he wouldn’t forget them tomorrow. Danny had placed the money on the counter, so that they could all use it and Bucky intended to do so now.

He’d go to some shops tomorrow and buy something, they could use in the winter. More blankets, food and clothes.

By now, he knew the spots, where you could get things cheap.

He needed to have enough to prepare for the real deal. Not just this cold breeze. Winters in New York could be a real bitch. From cold weather to blizzards everything was possible. Although it was more likely for extreme weather conditions to occur. Bucky had already made it through one of the cold winters here and he was worried about the others.

It wasn’t just the cold itself. Also the problems it could cause with people in similar situations to
them.

Bucky didn’t think bad of these people. Most of the other homeless people he knew would never hurt anyone. Maybe, they would steal like them, and even that was actually an exception. But there were few people who mostly had been close to violence before. Ex-cons, sometimes addicts or sometimes veterans even. They were trying to survive, like them. And extreme conditions could make some of them willing to rob or hurt even kids.

Bucky had never encountered them but he had heard stories from other kids under the bridges.

The more, he thought about them, the more they sounded like urban legends and horror stories but he still wanted to be careful.

What was it, they said?

Every story has its true core.

Bucky sighed and sat down on the ground.

“She was cute, you know?”, Robbie said.

“Huh?”

“The girl, I slept with. She was cute, I know, you don’t like girls but she is.”

Bucky laughed, “That’s not, how it works. I can see, that a girl is cute.”

“I know, I know, just never mind.”

“Look, man, she could be the cutest chick in the world. You were supposed to search these idiots.”, Bucky pointed at Wanda and Danny.

“I know, I know but I can’t believe, we have to babysit teenagers.”

“Well, look at us.”

Robbie shook his head, rubbing his hands together to create heat, “It’s getting colder.”

“Hm… gonna need to buy gear.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, yeah…”, Bucky looked to the ground, using a stick to draw patterns in the dust on the metal floor.

“Are you okay?”

“Just tired.”, Bucky shrugged.

“Oh…”, Robbie said slowly, “Is it drugs?”

“Huh?”

“Are you thinking about starting again… or did you already… “

“No! I’m not on withdrawal.”
“That’s not, what i meant was, that you are considering it or are in a phase, where you are shortly before showing signs of withdrawal. Because, I’ve seen people being directly in that shit. And that isn’t you right now.”

“Thanks.”

Robbie raised a brow, “But it isn’t too far away either.”

“It’s not drugs, okay?”

“Sorry.”

“Good.”, Bucky raised his arms.

Robbie chuckled and looked to the ground, “You should sleep, I’ll keep watch.”, Robbie gestured towards the others.

“Don’t run off sleeping with girls again.”

“I would never!”, Robbie smirked.

“Right…”

“It wasn’t girls. Just one girl.”

Bucky shook his head, laughing and walked over to the others, laying down on his mattress and smiled at Robbie, “Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Bucky woke up to the sound of heavy machinery next door. He looked at Robbie, who was already…or still awake.

“What’s going on?”, he groaned.

“Good morning, sunshine.”

“My question.”, Bucky groaned again.

Robbie sighed, “They are tearing down a building a few blocks away, Danny already checked.”

Bucky nodded and sniffed, “Is someone cooking?”

“The little ones.”

Bucky chuckled at the nickname for Danny and Wanda, “Good.”

“Eggs and veggies I stole from the market yesterday.”

“Better.”, Bucky heard his stomach rumble.

Robbie laughed and shook his head, he had been in a great mood, since he’d slept with that girl. Must have been some sex, “You are always hungry,aren’t you?”
“Aren’t we all. Did you sleep?”

“Yeah, woke Wanda a few hours into the night.”

“Good.”

Robbie nodded and Bucky looked back down onto his mattress, he was kind of tired still, he wanted

to sleep a little longer. Wanted to stay inside of this warm cocoon, that was his mattress in here. It was

an unlikely place to feel comfortable at. A run down mattress in an abandoned factory hall.

But it worked.

Bucky had always wondered, what made a place a home. He had always thought, that it was just a

safe shelter. Now, he was sure, that it was more than that. A warm feeling. A general feeling.
Friends. People who care about. People, who care about you.

“What are you thinking about?”

“You guys.”

“Explains the grim face.”

“Funny. Can you wake me up, when the egg is done?”

Robbie shrugged, “It’s egg… Won’t take long.”

“I know, keep the fire on. So, that I can reheat it.”

“Sure. You deserve some more sleep.”

Bucky smiled, “Thank you.”

“Hey, you broke in last night.”

“Yeah. Failed.”

“Still.”

Bucky shook his head and laid back down, he heard Robbie leave the room, heard the door shut.
Then there were the familiar voices of Wanda and Danny downstairs, the soft thud, as Robbie leapt

from the gallery and the paws of Groot onto the concrete floor. He heard the muffled noises of their

talk, before they left the factory.

Bucky smiled into his dirty pillow, closed his eyes and fell asleep. He had learnt to do that fast, not

staying awake in bed for long, before he finally let go of the day.

Bucky was at the factory at home, just waking up, when he heard the noises. They came from
downstairs, loud and angry.

He looked at Robbie, who gestured for them to stay quiet, holding Groot’s nose, so that he wouldn’t

make any sound. Danny and Wanda were tense, holding each other’s hand, suddenly a stone

smashed through the window, Bucky was about to be hit and dodged the projectile but he couldn’t

help make an instinctious sound.
“We know, you are up there!”, a deep male voice with russian accent screamed at them. Russian still made Bucky’s skin crawl, it wasn’t the language itself, or the country or people, it was the memory. The memory of hearing that accent, when he was being hurt.

“Come out, little ones.”, Another voice mocked.

Robbie grabbed a bat from the corner and positioned himself in front of the door. There was a voice of something being shoved. They must be building themselves a way up here.

Bucky got up from his mattress, reaching for something to hit them with…

These ugly chairs, that had been left behind in the factory for good reason.

Danny was taking one of his stupid stances next to him and Wanda shoved a cupboard in front of the door.

“Come out of there and maybe, we won’t take that girl of yours to have some fun with me.”, one of the voices shout.

Bucky felt blind rage filling his veins.

He wanted to get out there, hurt these people. Beat them, strangle them, just fight them but he had to stay in here and wait for these assholes to come in. If they jumped through the smashed window, they wouldn’t have their fall softened by anything underneath.

But maybe, they had better chances that way.

Danny moved over next to Bucky, not breaking the stance. For a moment Bucky wondered, what he was doing.

Then he realised it.

He was close enough that their shoulders were brushing.

He was seeking comfort.

“Kids…!”

Wanda reached for a bottle and smashed it on the table. Clever. Better, than the scars from the window, She’d only cut herself with those.

“Good.”, Bucky whispered.

Wanda smiled weakly at him,” ’s for the bad guys.”

Bucky smiled back, trying to transmit some confidence.

Suddenly, the door opened, Robbie hit with his bat but only hit flesh of the slightly chubby dude. He didn’t seem to mind.

“Hey, there!”

Bucky tossed the chair and felt stupid, the moment, he let go.

The chair fell to the ground with a soft clutter, blocking Danny’s way.
He stumbled and fell.

For some reason, Bucky couldn’t move then, couldn’t prevent anything from happening to his friends.

Robbie was being smashed against the wall by the big muscled dude, who gave him a good punch, to knock him out and just left him there.

Another one of them kicked Danny, who was already laying on the ground, his eyes met Bucky’s a moment, before he lost his conscience.

Wanda was being picked up by one of the men and carried outside of the control room, “Bucky, Bucky help!”

But Bucky couldn’t move.

The door fell shut, the last man in the room kicked Bucky, before spilling gasoline on the floor and pulling his match to set the room ablaze.

Bucky screamed, when he woke up. He felt hands on him, on his back and pushed them aside, he could move. He had to save the others get them out of the room.

He was in the room. No fire.

“Buck?”, Danny whispered, pulling back his hands insecurely.

“Yeah, yeah…”

“Are you okay?”

“Just a bad dream.”

Danny tilted his head sympathetically, “From… From before…?”

“Yes.”, Bucky lied.

Danny nodded, biting his lips, looking down on the floor. He knew, what this felt like. None of the kids here were strangers to nightmares, “We have food left.”

“Give it to the dog.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, not hungry.”

Danny nodded, “Really, I mean, maybe we won’t get so much the next few days.”

“We certainly won’t, but yeah.”

Danny shook his head but then downplayed his sorrow. The fact, that Bucky could tell, he was, was saying enough about his acting skills, “Groot will be happy.”

“Yeah.”, Bucky nodded.

“Are you still mad at me… at us?”, Danny asked after a moment.
“A little.”, Bucky groaned, sitting up on his mattress.

“We just wanted to meet people.”

“Meet people, doesn’t sound like you.”, Bucky smirked.

“Wasn’t my cup of tea to be honest.”

“So, you regret it.”

 Danny thought for a moment, “Wanda had fun, so no.”

 Bucky raised a brow, he could tell, that there was more, and maybe, it could endanger them,

 “And…”

 “Nothing and…”

 “Sure?”

 “Yeah. I have to go downstairs.”, Danny got up quickly and left the room.

 A terrible liar.

 Maybe, Bucky should ask Wanda about this.

 He smiled weakly, before getting up, the sun was shining through the windows of the factory, it had to be noon by now. Wanda was probably at school. Or not? What day was it anyway?

 It was hard to keep track of time, when you didn’t have to care about mundane things like weekdays or something.

 Bucky had a break yesterday and he usually broke in weekends...Which meant, it was either monday or sunday. He groaned running a hand down his face.

 He remembered yesterday.

 Remembered failing. It could have been a good evening. The house had been huge and fancy and all, but he must have been sloppy, checking it out because that man had been there. No. Man was the wrong word a boy. Somewhere inbetween Danny and his own age, probably closer to Bucky himself in age.

 He had only gotten a short glimpse at him. It had been dark and he had that hoodie pulled deep down over his face. But for a moment, Bucky had seen the boy. For a moment, the light had fallen right to illuminate his face, while Bucky was still protected by his hoodie and the dark.

 He had seen the golden hair, different from Danny it had been smooth and light, not curly and dirty-blond. And Bucky had never seen Danny’s hair shine in light, like this guys had, as if it was its own lightsource.

 Then, there were his eyes, as blue as the ocean and even in that short moment, Bucky had stared, he could tell, that there was some sort of deepness to him. Him and his beautiful squared jaw and well defined cheekbones

 Bucky needed to get laid. That was the only result, one could come to after this line of thoughts. He shook his head and tried to get Mr.Blond, Muscular and Tall out of his head for now.
It had been a while, since he slept with someone. Mostly random guys, who were also on the street.
The amount of LGBTQ youth, that ran away was scary but at least, it prevented from feeling too lonely out here.

And at least, New York wasn’t too judgemental of them. Here, most people were okay with them. Well, with LGBTQ people much less with homless folk in general. It was sad, how vulnerable groups like them or mentally ill people often ended up on the street as well, as if the normal struggles weren’t enough.

Bucky sighed and got up following Danny outside of the room, he was already downstairs, his nose stuck in a book with Groot curled up by his feet.

“Where’s Robbie?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know?”
Danny shrugged, “Not his babysitter.”
“Yeah, that would be the other way around.”
“Funny.”
“Seriously, how do you not know?”
“Left to ring Wanda to school, and said, he’d do some stuff in the town after.”
“Thank you. next time, tell me that immediately.”
“Next time, tell me that immediately.”, Danny mocked, a grin on his lips.
“Jerk.”, Bucky jumped from the platform and grabbed a graffiti can.
“Can I watch?”
“Can I watch?”, Bucky mocked in return.

Danny rolled his eyes but took it as a yes and sat down next to Bucky with crossed legs, to find a wall or at least a spot on a wall around here with free space to spray had been hard, but Bucky tried to save up free spots here and there. Spraying was one of the few luxuries, he allowed himself. He sometimes bought cans, when they had some money to spare. The cans, he had right now were a few months old and would be empty soon. As of now, he wouldn’t be able to afford new ones anytime soon.

Maybe, he shouldn’t do that anyway. He had bought these cans after a fight, when he had seriously considered leaving the group, it had been stupid and selfish. Now, with the money this sparse, he regretted not saving it. To buy themselves some freedom from the gangs.

He looked down at Danny, before he made the first spray onto the brown brickstone wall and stepped back. He wasn’t sure, what he wanted to spray right now. Just some colorful patterns and that should be it.

He actually had a tag back then, before he ran away from his… no, home wasn’t the right word, from where he had lived.
Back then, he had spent nights on the streets too but with his friends, they’d done a lot of bullshit and these days were also the reason for his drug addiction. Maybe, these people back then weren’t actually his friends. But back then, it had seemed like this. Bucky had been alone and the people he hung with were the only ones, who accepted him the way, he was.

It had blinded him. Sometimes, he was worried, that he was maybe doing the same to the others, especially to Danny and Wanda, who were younger and easier to influence. But he wasn’t pressuring them into drugs or anything.

It was, what Bucky kept telling himself, hoping, it was working out.

Bucky opened another colored can and started to spray another shape onto the wall next to the other one.

“What are you drawing?” Danny asked.

“Dunno.”

“Looks like a flower.” Danny smiled.

“Well, okay, then I’m drawing a flower.” Bucky rearranged his hair into a tight man bun again, before looking at the wall.

Danny was right, it looked like a flower.

A pink and purple flower.

“It’s pretty.” Danny tilted his head.

“Aready?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky frowned, “It’s just shapes now.”

“But you can imagine, what it will look like eventually.”

“Man, I want to have your imagination and fantasy.”

“You are the one drawing here.” Danny smiled, “Needs creativity, I guess. I mean you are an artist.”

“I’m not.”

“Of course, what else?”

“I… spray things on buildings.”

“You make art.”

Bucky shook his head, “Picasso made art.”

“More than one person can make art, you know?”

“Smartass.”

“Says the biggest one in the world.”
Bucky shook his head and laughed, “Okay, okay, so I am an artist now. And now what? You want me to start a gallery or something.”

Danny petted Groots head in his lap, “I mean, no… But telling yourself that, it helps.”

“How?”, Bucky made another addition to the painting.

“Self Validation. Learnt that through Wanda, who learned it somewhere at school.”, he shrugged.

“Whatever.”

Danny smiled and watched Bucky, as he made other shapes.

In the end, the painting turned out to be a flower. Purple and pink leaves and petals. Bucky drew a little ladybug next to it. He knew, it looked childish but he liked these little happy pictures with no meaning behind it. Back in his gang time, it had been mostly tags or more adult stuff. He liked looking at children’s drawings though. It was so innocent and hopeful, gigantic butterflies and suns with smileyfaces. Bucky liked these visions of a world, maybe because it was so different from his life.

From their lives

Bucky stopped, putting the can away, he had already emptied another one and there wasn’t much else left in the others. And he wouldn’t be able to afford any soon. Maybe, he shouldn’t ever buy them again. He could still steal them, or let the spraying be for good. It only distracted him from what was important.

“It looks good.”, Danny said, gently shoving Groot away from his lap, “I like it a lot.”

“Then, you can put it up at home.”, Bucky joked.

“Consider it done.”

Bucky smirked, “I wish, I could make money out of this.”

“Wow, you went from, ‘Oh, no, I’m no artist’ to let’s make money real quick.”

“People buy shit, doesn’t have to be by an artist.”

“Whatever.”, Danny whiped the dust off of his worn out and way too large jeans, not that it did anything good. Bucky was certain, that the pants were mostly held together by dirt now.

“Hey, how late is it?”

“Last the bell rang about 4pm…. maybe 4:15?”, Danny shrugged.

“Mhm…”

“Wanda should be home soon.”

Bucky shook his head, “not what I meant. I’m a little confused, that Robbie isn’t back yet. He should be by now.”

“You think, he got into trouble?”

“That or a girl. Although, it is often the same with him.”
Danny chuckled at that.

“Stupid asshole.”, Bucky muttered under his breath.

Danny frowned, “You think, we should seriously worry?”

“We have debts with the purple velvet.”

“Yeah, but we have time.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, I’ve heard of them, hurting people, to show how serious, they are.”

“Really?”, Danny asked with wide eyes.

“I’ve heard stories.”

“Oh.”

Bucky nodded and looked down towards the ground, “We’ll be okay, I can make sure of this, Danny.”

“I can try to make more money.”

“No!”, Bucky frowned at him again, “No dirty money, okay.”

“It’s not dirty.”

“This amount of money has to be.”, Bucky sighed.

“It. Isn’t.”

“Then tell me, where it’s from.”

“I...I can’t.”, Danny whispered.

“Then,--”

“Oh shut up!”, Danny said and jumped to his feet, storming out of the factory. Buck blinked confused and looked after Danny, this wasn’t normal for him. He wasn’t this impulsive. A little childish, yeah but not as angry, as this. And he wouldn’t just run away. Shit. Bucky had to fix this. He couldn’t let Danny run out there alone like this.

He jumped to his feet and wanted to leave the hall, when he realised, that he’d leave it alone like this then. Shit. He needed to stay here.

Danny was responsible for himself. If he wanted to run out like an insulted child, he should do just that. Bucky needed to protect, what they had here.

All of this wouldn’t be a problem of course, if Robie was here and not out. Jerk.

Bucky turned around, when he spotted Groot looking directly at him, “What?”

The dog kept staring.

“I know, I’m a jerk.”

Groot walked over towards him and licked his hands.
“Love you too, bud.”

Bucky sighed and sat down on the ground, when the door opened, he looked up, expecting Danny but it was Robbie with Wanda.

“Hey, Buck.”

“Where were you?”

“School…”

“Not you.”, Bucky looked at Wanda, “Robbie.”

“You weren’t here?”, Wanda asked.

“City. Pickpocketing.”, Robbie poured some coins on the table.

“You should have been here, or told me.”, Bucky grabbed his worn out jacket.

“Since when am I your child? And where are you going now?!”

“Oh, now you care about informing others.”

“Boys.”, Wanda said.

“Buck, where?!”

“Danny ran away, gotta find him.”

“Why did he run? Danny doesn’t run.”

Bucky shrugged, “He does now. Not so mad about being concerned now, huh?”

“Stop it.”, Wanda said quietly.

“He is different.”

“Well, we had a fight and he ran.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t.”, Robbie sighed and raised his hands, “Okay, look, you screwed it up, you’ll get him, Wanda and I stay here.”

Bucky sighed too, “Okay, let me take Groot with me. Would be one thing, he can help me with for once.”

Wanda smirked, “Hey, he is good dog.”

Bucky nodded, “I know, just kidding. Come on.”, he whistled and left the door, the way, Danny had taken off.

It was late afternoon and with the winter being this close, it was already getting dark fast. Bucky wasn’t exactly sure, where to search Danny. Maybe, he was already on his way home. He had taken off pissed. Maybe, he’d just wanted to get out and walked to the city, to blow off some steam. Or he
was trying to steal, which usually wasn’t really his talent. Hopefully that wasn’t the case, Bucky didn’t wanna try to get him from the police. They weren’t really in the system and all of this could be a huge clusterfuck, endangering both of them.

Bucky wasn’t really sure, where Danny went usually. It was weird, how they lived together on such close space and had still so much things, they didn’t know about each other. Bucky let Groot guide him. He was usually out for walks with Danny. Bucky didn’t expect Groot to be able to trace Danny by his smell, but he’d probably walk the way, they usually went, besides a park seemed like a good place to go after a fight.

Running off had been so stupid. He’d kill Danny, once he’d found him.

Bucky followed Groot, who was visibly enjoying the walk. That made at least one of them. Bucky hated the way, people looked at him on the street. He was a hobo, yeah, he knew. No need to rub it in.

“Danny?!”, Bucky started to ask, “Look man, I don’t care about the money. Danny?!”

He felt like an idiot. Or like the guy in a romantic movie, who was out to search the girl, that had run away from him after he’d been a jerk.

Serves you right.

Well, not Bucky, because in this case, Danny had acted wrong.

Bucky narrowed his eyes, “Danny, come on, let’s get home.”, Groot tilted his head and looked at Bucky, “Come on boy, search Danny, where’s Danny?”

Groot tilted his head.

“Yeah, right I figured, where’s Dan--”, Bucky stopped. There was a guy walking on the way a few feet in front of him, his head fixated on a notebook in his hand. he was scribbling something there.

But that wasn’t the interesting thing. Bucky knew the guy. It was the boy from the break in. The boy, he tried to steal from.

Beautiful blonde hair, muscular body and blue eyes. Bucky was stuck looking at him for a moment, before he realised, that looking at him, well looking was the wrong word, staring at him, wasn’t the best idea.

He quickly looked away, first towards his right, then to the ground, while he walked past him. For a moment, Bucky was sure, that the guy tensed next to him, but then they both walked on down the gravel path.

The boy left a scent of flowers lingering in the air. Eau de toilet probably, but damn, it smelt nice. Bucky liked this fancy stuff. Of course, he couldn’t afford it but he liked smelling it on boys.

Damn it had been some time.
Luke was once again lost in the moment. It was always like this, when he walked the streets of Harlem. He was born long after his father had gotten rich and after his mother’s pleas to move to a safer neighborhood had been heard, therefore, he’d been born in the suburbs. That being said, he knew that this was, where his family was from, where his parents met and that alone was something, that made him feel oddly at home. He had always been able to navigate the streets without any effort and had always felt welcome. He liked coming here. The place was different from home. It felt real. It felt honest.

Luke remembered times when his real home in the suburbs had felt strange to him. He had been a kid, when his father ended his active career. There had been days, when reporters had blocked the streets. Sometimes, his father had pulled him out in front of the cameras and he had been asked questions by interviewers.

“As the son of a legend, you probably want to follow your father’s footsteps.”

“How is it when your daddy is a star?”

“Do you play football, Luke?”

“What will your career plan look like?”

“Who do you support?”

Luke had answered the questions mostly because his father wanted him to. And he had answered them in a way, that he knew would please the reporters.

Luckily, his father’s time as a coach drew less attention to them now. When Luke and his Mom watched away games from home it was somehow even worse these days. Sometimes, when the camera would linger on his father, the commentator would talk about James Cage’s son and how he was struggling in High School football.

“His father must be disappointed.”

Worst thing. Luke wasn’t struggling. He was above average but that was just not good enough for realistic chances of an NFL career. And what was even worse was, that he couldn’t really say that he didn’t mind. Because he felt like he really was failing his father by not meeting his expectations.

It wasn’t a secret, that he wanted Luke to be like him. The first thing, they’d dressed him in as a baby was a tiny jersey.

James wanted Luke to be like him. Meet the love of his life early, make a career in football, marry and move to the suburb with his beautiful wife and at least one child.

Everything at home reminded Luke of all of this. Not here though. Here in Harlem, he felt free of that burden. He would like to say, that he could be who he really was in this environment but he wasn’t even sure, what that even was.

Who he was?
Where did the Luke he wanted to be end and where did the Luke he was start. He knew, that they were different. The realisation was painful enough, but he wasn’t sure, how they were different.

Harlem helped him to clear his heads, he stared at people going on about their lives. Was this him? Was this, who he would be?

Suddenly, Luke ran into something soft. He stopped and realised, that he had run into a guy. A familiar blonde head of curls looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Oh.”, Luke said.

The lips of the boy curled up into a smile. Danny. That was his name.

“Hi.”, Luke smiled, after the other boy just looked at him with wide eyes. He looked a little different from a few nights ago. His hair was wilder and darker in broad daylight. He was wearing an oversized KARO flannel shirt and dirty denim pants, that were way too long for him. Upon closer inspection, Luke noticed, that his face, no his eyes were a little red. Did he cry?

“Hey…?”

“Luke… from the party.”

“I...I know.”, Danny stuttered.

“Are you okay? You, you look ...upset.”

“I’m n-not.”, Luke noticed, that he was seemingly avoiding eyecontact.

“Really? Look man, we barely know each other. But I want to help...so…”

“Had a fight with a friend, okay, so I went out to get some fresh air and get away from him, nothing big.”

“Okay, so you live close?”

“Yeah.”, Danny said after thinking a moment.

Luke wasn’t sure, what was drawing him towards this guy but he liked his presence for some reason. He seemed lost. Physically but in a way also similar to Luke, just lost as in, not sure, what to do. And there was something mysterious there.

“Listen, I was just around and wanted to get a coffee in a small shop around the corner.”

“I don’t think, that’s a good--”

“Come on. You fell into my pool at my party and I gave you my clothes, consider it a late warm up after your involuntary swim.”

“I...”,he reached into the big pockets of the oversized pants, and moved his hands around in there, “Forgot my money at home.”

“Oh, I’ll pay. Thought, I made this clear.”

“I...I… okay.”, Danny turned around, as if he was worried someone was following him.

“Great, then come on.”
Luke walked a little ahead, Danny was walking pretty close to him maybe too close for it to not feel awkward but Luke ignored it. The other boy had seemed insecure enough and Luke was smart enough not to push.

“So the fight… You wanna talk?”

“Nope.”

“Good.”, Luke smirked, “Not a good talker.”

For a moment, both of them were silent, “I don’t believe that.”


Again, they were silent for a few minutes.

“We had differences… about me…”, Danny said suddenly a few moments, before they were at the café.

“What do you mean?”

“I...If I do stuff, that might bring me into trouble but can help… I wanna do them. And my friend wants me to do, what he ...wants me to do. But I know… I know myself and I can take care and decide for myself.”

“I don’t know, what this is about. But I know a thing or two about not wanting to do, what other people want for you.”

Luke could see Danny chewing on his lips, “How?”

“Never mind.”

Danny nodded and Luke was happy, maybe talking to a complete stranger had been bullshit. But it had helped someway.

“Here we are.”, Luke held the door to the small coffee shop open for the other boy. He loved this place. It was small, a reminder, of what Harlem maybe had been one day, long before Luke was born. The interior was yellow and red, every chair and table unique though and some probably older than him. The radio was always playing a weird mix of Raggea and Jazz, that was fitting oddly into this place. And the air always smelled like coffee and freshly baked pie.

“This is nice.”, Danny said quietly. Something was weird with the way, he moved around the room, like he didn’t belong here.

“It beats Starbuck’s.”, Luke said.

Danny chuckled, something about that made Luke look at him and smile too.

“You get served here, so let’s sit down.”, Luke said steering towards a small chair in the corner with just two chairs. He knew, that it was known as the date table here but it was good to talk, with just one person, so?

“Oh, okay.”, Danny followed him.

“So,... “,Luke started, “When you live close, do you go to Harlem High?”
“I...uhm...yeah. Go sparrows.”, he said fumbling with his sleeve.

“You play football?”, Danny asked.

“Yeah, not really good.”

Danny looked at Luke, his eyes wandering, “I bet that isn’t true.”

Luke could feel the redness flushing into his cheeks, “Eh... It is. What about you, doing any sports?”

“Not at school. I have a brother, I sometimes play basketball with him, which is nice, I guess and also is sport.”

“Definetly. Same brother, you got in a fight with?”

“Yes and no. I play with all of my… siblings sometimes.”

“How many of you are there?”

Danny it his lip, “4 with me and a dog.”

Luke smiled, that was cute, “Four wow. Sounds like trouble.”

“You have no idea.”, he looked to the table, “What about you?”

“What?”

“Any siblings?”

Luke shook his head, “No, just me.”

“Explains your giant room.”

“It’s not so big.”, Luke said, looking at the menu. He knew it by heart but for some reason, he was really nervous.

“I think, it is.”

“Is your house small?”

“No… not really… Just… very different.”

“Good or bad?”

“Bad, deifintly bad.”


“No, no, it’s okay. Just a mess.”

“Mess doesn’t have to be bad.”

Danny smiled, “In my case it is, but hey.”

Luke smiled, “Do you wanna order something? Because you kinda need a menu for that.”
“Yeah, yeah, I just… Can you choose something for me? I don’t wanna choose how much money you spend.”

“Oh, sure.”, Luke skimmed over the pages, “Got any allergies?”

“No.”

“Hm… Okay, Lemon Cheesecake and a Latte?”

“Sounds nice.”

“Good.”, Luke sat the menu down and waved the waitress over.


“Danny.”, Danny said quickly.

“Oh, nice to meet you, Danny.”, she offered him her hand to shake it, “I’ve known Luke for a while friends of him are friends of mine.”

Danny shook her hand quickly, “Nice to meet you.”

“So? Your order, boys?”

“Two lattes, two slices of lemon cheesecake.”, Luke said after Danny was silent for a moment.

“Okay.”, she eyed Danny funny, before leaving towards the kitchen.

“Are you okay, still the fight?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m just.”, Danny held his head, as if he had a headache, “I’m just a little tired and… I don’t know a mess.”

“The coffee will help with the tiredness.”

“Yeah,… You seem popular around here.”

Luke chuckled, “Well, I like to come here and all.”

“You are nice too.”

“Really?”

“We met once at your party, I walked through your living room soaking wet, you had to give me clothes and then met me on the street to invite me to a coffee, yeah that is nice. Nicer, than most people are.”

Luke blushed a little, “I’m trying my best.”

Danny looked at him, meeting his eyes, “I think, you are doing well.”

“Thank you.”, Luke said quietly, “You are nice too.”

“I am?”

“Hm…”, Luke hummed.
“How?”, Danny tilted his head.

Luke bit his lips, “I don’t know, I can just feel it.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“It’s just people skills.”

Danny huffed, “Never had those. Is the same as magic to me.”

“Just look at the eyes and their behavior. Usually enough.”

“That easy?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, looking people in the eyes is usually making me uncomfortable.”

“It’s a thing you have to get used to.”

Danny bit his lips, “Like training?”

“Yeah.”

Danny smiled, “Okay, I’ll try.”, he looked Luke in the eyes, Luke holding the contact, trying to keep it natural. Had the other boy’s eyes always been this blue? Danny broke the eye contact and looked down at the table, his lips twitching up in a shy smile, “Sorry, made me nervous.”

“It’s okay. You gotta practice this. Good for jobs later.”, Luke looked at Danny, who was still looking at the table tracing the pattern of the wood with one finger.

“Right. Jobs. That will be a problem anyway.”, he shrugged looking back up, not quiete locking eyes with Luke but at least looking at his face.

“You bad at school.”

Danny fidgeted with the sleeve of his shirt, “You could say so.”

Luke sighed, “I can try to help but I’m not that good, maybe, I can set you up with some tutors from my school, who are relatively cheap.”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

“Really?”


Luke knew, that he was trying to switch the topic back to something else, avoiding him offering help but he didn’t comment on it, “Yeah, yeah, she is… Do you have someone? A girlfriend?”

“That would be a boyfriend for me and no.”, Danny’s eyes went up to look at Luke’s face, obviously studying his reaction. So much for not being good at it.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”, Luke cleared his throat. There was a flush of red rushing into his cheeks and some sort of happiness filling him. It was there for a moment and then vanished. Funny.
“Do I make you uncomfortable now?”

“What? No?! Why?”

“Because you and me at a café, now it looks like a date, doesn’t it?, Danny pulled the sleeves of his shirt over his hands.

“It doesn’t. I have a girlfriend and we are just friends going out.”

“Friends?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve known each other for a few days and met twice…”

“But I like you. I don’t know why.”, Luke smiled and Danny smirked at that.

He took a shuddery breath, “I just don’t have many of these…”

“Well, now it’s not many plus one.”

Danny looked at Luke, in his eyes and smiled, “I like that.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“But you barley know me.”

“I want to get to know you.”

“I don’t think, you want to,”, Danny looked at the table.

Luke shook his head, “Doubt that.”

Danny opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something, before he smiled at Luke, “So what do you do, when you aren’t going to cafés with strangers or fishing them out of pools at parties?”

“See, you’re funny. Football, school, friends, the usual. You?”

“Yeah, friends, well my siblings mostly…I have my dog…”

“Nothing more.”

“Yeah.”

Luke frowned, “Well that doesn’t sound so exciting.”

“Trust me, it’s exciting enough.”

Luke sighed, sitting down in front of the school the next day, he was thinking about Danny, something there was off.

“Hey, Lukester!”, Luke looked up at Tony Stark. Not really, what he wanted right now but if there was one thing, Stark was useful for, it was to distract yourself.

“Can you keep a secret?” he slumped down next to Luke.

“Well, I can, but I know you can’t… so whatever you tell me, you probably will tell the whole school in an hour.”

“Woe.”

“Tell me, it aint true.”

“Well,”, he took a deep breath, “It is true.”

“Thank you…so?”

Tony took a deep breath, “Look, you should better sit down.”

“I am sitting.”

“Right… Stephen and I are dating.”


Tony looked, at where he just sat, well this was unexpected.”

“You are…”

“Yeah.”

“Hy how? When?”

“I don’t know, I mean we were drunk and all and then we started barking out and it was pretty cool.”

“Yeah but you don’t date.”

“That is what you’re hung up on.”

“Luke shrugged, “Hm…”

“I mean it’s Stephen he’s cool.”

Luke shook his head, “So you want to keep it secret.”

“That’s the plan.”

“I know you. No way, this will work.”

“Yeah. Do you think Stephen will be mad?”

Luke laughed, “He knows you even better, than I do, so no.”

Tony breathed nervously, “Good.”

“You are scared.”

“Yeah.”
“It’s an unfamiliar emotion on you.”, Luke said softly.

“Is it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, I’m really good at hiding.”

“It’s good I guess, not the hiding thing. being scared. Means he’s important to you.”

“He is.”

Luke smiled, “I’m halyy.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, why shouldn’t I be happy for you.”

Tony sat down on the floor next to him, “Do you think, the others will be cool with it? I mean, it is something big.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, I mean… I am someone else, right? Someone they didn’t know that way before and now… they have to accept that.”

“I don’t think, you’re someone else…”, Luke said, looking at his hands in his lap. There was the slightest hint of tension to them.

“Really?”

“Would you think you were different, when you had a new girlfriend. When you were dating, let’s say Natasha?”

“No. And never.”


“It’s not the same. It should be but it’s not.”, Tony said quietly, “You just don’t understand this. This could change my entire life. Because people will see me different. My friends, my family. Everyone will. If I’m gay or bi, or whatever, I don’t even know… But it’s different. Luke this is my life that’s changing. I mean, shit...Everyone will look different at me, when I walk down the street, holding my s.o.’s hand.”

Luke nodded slowly, his hands playing with a stick now, he was right and he couldn’t help imagining being in the situation, he was in. How would his environment react?

“You’re right.”

“Thanks.”, Tony breathed nervously.

“But I’m here. I can guarantee that. For you and Stephen.”

“Thanks.”

“And I’ll try, treating you idiots the same as before.”
“Good.”
Luke took a deep breath, “Also, good catch.”
Tony winked, “Oh, I know, I’ll tell Stephen.”
“Not what I meant.”
Luke waited, until the other boy had disappeared inside, before he wiped the dirt off of his pants and got up from the stairs. He didn’t feel like school and for some reason, his mind kept wandering to Danny. Maybe, because he’d mentioned being gay too and because his mind made the connection in topics.

Maybe.

He sighed and opened the door, almost running into Misty, he smiled and waved at her, before walking to his classroom. He saw Steve talking to Sharon. He had that same empty look in his eyes, he had the last few weeks.

Mood.

Luke could actually relate today. To feeling lost in thoughts, he still gave Steve a quick smile, before heading to his room. Chemistry with Doctor Simmons was always something, he could actually enjoy.

And not being in the same class with Steve today was also good to keep his mind off of white boys with blonde hair and blue eyes.

And amazingly pink lips.

Luke shook his head, grabbing his phone to text Claire before class.

Hopeing, it would help. She didn’t answer immediately and Luke sighed, putting the phone away.

He walked over towards his classroom and sat down at his spot. Luke decided not to focus on the class right now. It wouldn’t work anyway, he needed to sort his thoughts. And to do that, he had to be honest with himself.

He liked Danny.

He liked him as more than friends, if they even were this, for some reason. Which meant, that he liked guys too? He’d slept with girls, so he was either bi or pan. But he had a girlfriend and he liked someone else. He wanted Danny more than Claire, wanted to be with him more than with her. There had been some weird tension between him and his girlfriend lately.

But he didn’t have the guts to end it. And then, there was him liking guys…maybe. He had been honest with Tony before, he didn’t mind gay people. But he knew, that it was different with his parents. And what about his career, if he’d be with a guy, he’d be gay for the media and being gay is something that would ruin the rest of his chances for a big career, as if there was much left.

Luke rubbed his temple. Not to mention, that there was something wrong with Danny. He didn’t have a phone and the only way, he gave Luke to contact him was over his sister, who didn’t look like his sister. Well, not his biological one.

“Mr. Cage?”
Luke looked up at the british voice of Ms. Simmons, she had written something on the blackboard and the rest of the class was turned around staring at him. Waiting to fail and make a fool of himself.

“Excuse me?”

“I bet, you can solve the chemical equation, I wrote down.”

Luke couldn’t. He had two options. Humor or sincerity.

Why not make the people laugh.

“3.”

“What?”

“My answer is 3.”

“Funny, it’s uranium.”

“Oh.”, Luke nodded, “I’m sorry Ms, I was distracted.”

“First warning.”

Luke nodded, there were still a lot of thoughts racing his head.

Blonde curls. Blue eyes. Pink lips.

Again and again.

Luke rubbed his temple and looked at the table. He should start to scribble something.

Make it look like he was paying attention.

He had to find Wanda and make her ask Danny…

Ask her for what?

To ask him on a date?”

He still had a girlsfriedn.

He needed to talk to Claire first. He needed to be sure, that he didn’t want her.

And he had to soften the blow.

“Hey, I’m leaving you for a guy, I don’t know.”

Would sounds stupid.

They had problems.

And Luke needed to figure them out.

In the big break, Luke sat down by one of the tables close to the window, those, they usually sat at.
Daisy was there, chatting with Tony and Stephen. Luke was sure, the others would come here too eventually. He sat down next to Daisy, looking at Stephen and Tony next to each other, he wondered, if they were holding hands.

Since the topic wasn’t the relationship between the two, Luke figured, that Daisy didn’t know about them dating. A quick glance from Tony, that was almost daring confirmed this.

“Hi, Luke.”, Daisy finally interrupted her dia- well, monologue, “What do you think about the ball?”

“The school ball?”

“No the Met ball. Of course, the school ball.”

“I don’t know, kinda… I don’t care.”

“See!”, Tony sighed and pointed at Daisy, “No one here cares. Well, at least no one from our gang. We are all too cool.”


“Since I am in the committee.”

“You are what?!”, Luke was lucky he hadn’t taken a sip from his water yet, because he would have spit it all across the table. Daisy was a bit of a punk rebel girl. Not really the kind of person, that would organise the ball. Luke had actually expected her to mention the ball to plan to attack it with eggs.

“Yeah, why are people so surprised?”

“Because you are...you.”, Tony said.

“Wait!”, Luke tilted his head, “You are hoping to DJ there, aren’t you.”

“Ding Ding, we have a winner.”, Daisy smirked.

Stephen put his head in his hands, “We are geniuses man, how did we not get that.”

Luke smirked, “You are also socially awkward.”

“Hell, we are.”, Tony squinted his eyes.

Daisy shook her head, “Can we focus on the topic?”

“You selling your soul for your career?”, Tony asked.

“Funny. I mean it, I need your support here.”

“And you have it.”, Luke nodded.

“So I can count on you and Claire being there?”

Luke bit his lips, “Well about that…”

“Do I smell trouble in paradise?”, Tony leaned over the table.

“Tell!”, Daisy screamed.

“Well, it’s not trouble… Not yet…”
“No way!”, Daisy said in her best gossiping voice, making wide eyes looking at Luke. He shouldn’t have said that.
“You are gonna dump her?”, Stephen asked.
“What’s wrong with you?”, Tony said.

“Tony…”, Daisy sighed, before turning at Luke, “I mean it though, What the hell is wrong with you. She is a catch.”

“I know… I know.”

“But…”, Daisy said.

“It’s… hard.”

Tony giggled and Luke rolled his eyes looking over at him, he could be such a child sometimes, despite his intellect, “Really?”

“Sorry.”, he said quickly.

Daisy glared at Tony, before turning towards Luke, “So you want to break up?”, she eyed him intensely.

“Yeah.”, Luke said, “I mean, I don’t know… I… I don’t know and I feel like this is enough of a reason. If I’m not a hundred percent sure, we should be together… I’m not committed to her then, right?”

Daisy nodded, “She deserves better. Deserves clarity. You two seemed so happy recently, it’s just weird.”

“We had a fight. The night of the party… Well, the morning after and it had been weird before, like we were both only giving fifty percent of everything for the relationship.”

Daisy bit her lips, “Then do it.”

“I can’t… I mean not on the phone?”, he looked over towards Stephen and Tony, “Right?”

Tony laughed, “Don’t look at me. I’m bad with breakups.”

Stephen nodded, “Yeah same. Not exactly tactful.”

“You shouldn’t do it at the phone.”, Daisy sighed.

“See.”

“Can we change the topic to something less depressing now.”, Tony sighed.

“I have an idea.”, Luke looked over towards them.

“Not that.”

“Not what?”, Daisy asked, smelling gossip.

“Nothing.”, Tony said.

Stephen rolled his eyes, “Luke saw Tony at his party having a dick drawn on his cheek, I think he just doesn’t want to talk about it and Luke does. I think, it’s nothing worth to discuss, I mean what
else is new.”

“Oh.”, Daisy said disappointed, “Yeah. Nothing new.”


“Thanks.”

“We should do that again.”

Luke nodded, “Not at my place though. The season is getting into the hot phase and my Dad needs the house to be calm. No trouble.”

“Not even, when he’s on an away game?”

“Yep, we could trash the house.”

“Lame.”, Tony sighed.

Stephen looked between them, “Maybe, I can try to talk my parents into allowing us to do that, but probably not this week.”

“Fair enough, I have a calculus test.”, Tony muttered.

“As if you need to study.”, Daisy grunted.

Tony smirked, “True.”

Luke looked between them, “Did you see any people at my party, you didn’t see around before?”

Daisy frowned, “Why had something been stolen?”

She looked a little stunned.

“No, no nothing, just… I saw some people and…”

“Creepy?”

Luke pursed his lips, “Not exactly that. I mean, it’s normal, that people, you don’t know show up at High School parties, right?”

“Yeah.”, Daisy shrugged.

“Well, it is at mine.”, Tony smirked, “The ladies love my parties, and well, you know me. So they come in hordes.”

“They love your money, the house and the expensive snacks more than anything.”, Daisy said raising her brow.

“If this was true, why aren’t they at Steve’s?”

“Steve never throws parties.”

“True.”, Daisy nodded, “I--”

“Guys, can we focus back on the topic.”, Luke ran a hand over his head, Stephen giving him a sympathetic look. Pure dude had a lot to put up with.
“Right. The strangers. What about them?”, Daisy said.

“Do you know a Wanda?”

“Wanda who? Is she hot?”, Tony asked, “Did you cheat on Claire with her? She’s gotta be hot. What’s her number?”

“None of the above and the question was meant for Daisy.”

“Oh sorry, thought you were talking to me.”, Tony said.

“You always do.”, Danny put a hand on his arm, and looked at Luke,”Why do you think, I know her?”

“Well, you do some stuff in student council and know people.”

“Some.”, Daisy shrugged.

“A Wanda… I think, she’s a year under us.”

“Phew.”, Daisy leaned her head back, “Anything else?”

“Not much.”

She sighed, “I can try to find something but I don’t guarantee for it.”

“Thanks.”

“So… you like her?”

“No.”, Luke said truthfully, “There’s just something at the party and I want to have it figured out. I might need her for it.”

“Care to elaborate.”

“No.”

“You will.”, Tony leaned over the table staring at him.

“Yeah.”; Daisy said slowly, eying Luke.”

“Guys, stop bothering him.”, Stephen put a hand on Tony’s arm, “You coming to class with me, Stark?”

“Yeah, yeah. See you guys.”

“See you after school.”, Stephen smiled.

Luke watched after them, if he didn’t knew, he wouldn’t be able to tell, hell he wasn’t able to tell right now. Maybe, this had been a prank. Daisy didn’t seem to notice anything either and if she didn’t… No Tony had been telling the truth.

What reason, would he have to lie?

“So, wanna talk now?”, Daisy asked.

“No.”
“Oh.,” she looked down.

“No offense.”

Daisy shrugged and looked down at the table again, “It’s okay. I mean, this is pretty much to handle, which is why I get it but also, why I don’t want you to be alone here.”

Luke smiled, “Thank you.,” he looked at her, before she got up and left the room without a word, Luke shook his head. He was sure, she was up to something. A moment later, she returned.

“What was this?” Luke asked smirking at her.

“I just remembered, that I had the yearbook, we designed in my locker.,” she tossed a book onto the table, “But it’s not officially released yet. So don’t tell anyone, you saw.”

“Couldn’t you have told me that before you left the table?”

“Nope. Less fun.”

Luke smiled and looked at Daisy, “So, we gonna search for this Wanda?”

“Yeah.,” Daisy opened the book. Her finger skimming over the names in the register, they were sorted by last names, which made it harder, “You know, my picture this year is great.,” Daisy mumbled, “How’s yours?”

“I hope not too bad.,” Luke sighed, why were they even searching for Wanda, he didn’t even know, what exactly she looked like.

“Bullshit.”, Daisy said, “You always look great. I don’t think, you are physically capable of looking bad on anything.”


Daisy shrugged, “Hey, I’m just stating the truth. Okay, we have a few Wanda’s only two that are younger, than us though.”

“Oh.,” Luke leaned forward and looked over her shoulder, her hair smelled like lily and she was warm but it wasn’t really doing anything for him.

“And one of them is too young.”, Daisy sighed.

“That’s good, right? Who is she?”

“Wanda Maximoff.”

Luke nodded and looked down at the table and smiled at something. He wasn’t even sure, why he was smiling to himself. He was feeling happy all of the sudden just happy for no apparent reason.

“What are you gonna do now?”, Daisy leaned over the table tilting her head.

“I don’t know.”
So... I wanted to do a very long fic with multiple characters/pairings and several plotlines. This is my shot at it. Other than that, there is not much to say about this, besides, that thewonderginger is perfect and the best co author/advisor, there is?
I also wanted to say, that the first two chapters are pretty slow and mostly an introduction, and that the actual plot starts in Chapter 3.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!