Redrawing the Line

by krycekasks

Summary

"So, I was at the Met like talking to my primo about this crazy story I heard about my best friend’s co-worker's brother's neighbour who she thought was an accountant for some office paper supplier but turns out he was actually super rich like in undercover boss with fast cars and slick suits EXCEPT that it turns out he wasn't either and was actually a super secret government spy this whole time. But he quit his job and now lives in a studio with his boyfriend next to an ice cream shop in Red Hook. And the boyfriend? Well turns out he's that artist we went to see two weeks ago at the Cube gallery in Dumbo, you know the really awesome little dude with the touque who puts like secret messages into his work, like commentaries on economic inequality and diversity or social justice, but all subtle and shit, like you don't know what you're looking at until you see it. Anyways, dude also made the menus for that coffee shop on the corner of 1st near the park, the one where Tio Beto installed that kick ass old school espresso machine that was like a hundred years old, Shawshank's? Shawkeyes? That place. Holy shit bro......is that...Snowden in that Monet??" -- Luis, Inaccurate Recounts of Real Life Events.
This story was brought about thanks to Pathulu's beautiful painting of Steve for the Cap RBB (go look now in Chapter 2. Go!). They very generously shared their immense knowledge of the art world (and beta'd like a pro!) THANK YOU

Steve here is based on the artist (and forger) Eric Hubborn - I recommend his autobiography 'Drawn to Trouble' - guy had an amazing sense of humour.

Bucky is based on my ideal super spy who yearns for the good ol' pre-digital days.

Apologies for all the [ancient 80's/90's] pop references and, yes, I was watching the NBA playoffs while writing.

Can't have a story about artist!Steve without ARTIST CAMEOS: Pathulu! Frau Argh! and LittleBlackFox! - many hugs and thanks for your help and cheerleading <3<3<3
“It’s not how it used to be, you know? I mean, a coupla years ago all I needed to get a job done was a nice suit and a winning smile. Learn a few different languages, drive on both sides of the road, just….life skills. Nowadays, you need like specialized equipment built by narcissistic geniuses hopped up on too much Redbull that’ll fit into your socks or some shit. And the physical training! Oh my gaaawwwwd I’m telling you, all my money goes into massage therapy. And not like relaxing ‘fun’ massage, but like hardcore, Swedish grandma down on Atlantic massage. I’m wound so tight, feel that trap! And that’s just from sitting in those damn wooden library chairs! Built from the forests of Hell, I tell ya. But gotta do the research! Ya know, another thing that’s changed. Everything is so complicated nowadays, everybody trying to be so special, so unique and ‘authentic’. I never thought I’d hate a word, but I do, and that’s the one. Worse than ‘pure’. And maybe it was never black and white per se, but at least you knew you were a good guy. But now?” Bucky takes a long sip of his black coffee, draining the cup. He sets it down, pushing it forward none too subtly, “I just don’t know anymore. You know?”

Hawkeye refills his cup from the ever present pot in his hands, shaking his head, “Dude. Being an accountant sounds …. this is why I have a coffee shop, bro.” He gestures towards the bank of drip percolators behind him. A crooked shelf dubiously pinned to the wall probably with scotch tape and a thin string of hope sags precariously over the machines under the weight of at least a hundred mismatched coffee mugs. The long narrow room is filled with tables and chairs plucked straight from a DMV waiting room, complete with stray decade-old magazines and community newspapers. A sign by the door reads ‘--> Bring your own bakes <--’. “I like to keep it simple.”

Bucky nods and holds up his cup to clink it with Hawkeye’s in a show of solidarity, “To keeping it simple.” He lets the fresh brew burn his tongue, that’s just the kind of mood he’s in. Of course, it’s not because of the accounting job, that’s just a standard cover. He’s always been good with numbers and is the only special agent at Shield who would deign to go to a day job at an office paper supply company in Newark. Maybe he’s a masochist? But, yeah, he can’t talk about his so-called ‘real’ job as you can’t exactly blab about being a super secret undercover agent at the kind of place where no one knows anyone else’s real names, and the watercooler chat consists of the fastest way to disable a rent-a-guard with a ballpoint pen. I mean, it used to be trading tips about how best to charm the pants off some rich kid of a mafioso with delusions of grandeur. But things have gotten so violent and now it’s all where to shoot someone so they don’t spurt blood all over you and ruin your eleven billion dollar carbon fibre tac suit, yet leave them conscious enough to tell you where the fucking data drive is. Data! That’s it. No more precious ancient relics or big ass stolen rubies, it’s all electronic fucking data. I mean why does he even need to leave this coffee shop if all he’s gotta do is retrieve some lost bytes? If HR would take his professional development request seriously and let him take those network hacking courses he wanted but nooooooooooo….

“You look like you’re having an existential crisis. Must be the weekend.”

Bucky looks over at the woman currently poking him in the ribs with her elbow. Agent Red. She was so lucky, and not just in the name department. She’d found this place, called it her “safe haven”, shared it with Bucky after that mission they’d worked together in Peru. Said anyone who would hold her hair back after half a dozen pork tacos and let her puke on their havaianas instead of ruining her Armani was someone she could trust. He could hang out here but there was one rule: no work talk. Seemed a fair trade for the best kept secret in Brooklyn. “Hey, Red.”

She hits him with a soft smile that crinkles her eyes, letting him know it’s genuine, “Hey, Mags.”
That’s him, Agent Magenta. ‘Mags’ for short. He’s come to terms with it. Used to be he would wear a slick magenta silk tie with his custom tailored suits for his jobs. Now he has to content himself with a hot pink sports bra. The daily sprints and back alley parkour routines just to stay competitive really take a toll on his nipples. The only time he can show it off is when he wears one of “Hawkeye’s Coffee Pot” slouchy crop tops. But that’s for special occasions, and the only thing special about this day was new Peruvian roast the man himself was brewing.

Bucky looked at his watch. It was too late for lunch and too early for dinner. He took another sip of his coffee and tried to ignore the way Hawkeye talked to Red about the origins of today’s beans as they avoided direct eye contact. Red flipping her hair just so to make it seem like she wasn’t really interested, even as she lowered her bedroom eyes at the disheveled coffee slinger. When Hawkeye presented her with an elaborately decorated gilded cup from his elderly Russian neighbour he was saving just for her, Bucky had had enough of their lovey dovey PDA. Thoroughly grossed out, deeply embedded in denial that his disgust wasn’t from envy that he didn’t have anyone he would bother having awkward interactions with, he launched himself off his stool, grabbed his cup, and headed to the stack of NatGeo’s at the rack near the back table. *Gawd*, get a room.

As he perused the covers, he listened to the conversation flowing from the small crowd slumped around the back booth. The Poker in the Park Club, a group of local elderly business owners who met every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday afternoon at a picnic table in Prospect Park to play cards and shoot the breeze. If the weather was unfavourable then they met at the back of Hawkeyes. Bucky knew them all, had files on all of them, though he had yet to interact beyond holding the door for Mama Rumlow carrying the Club’s bakes. Her grandfather ran an underground whiskey supply chain during prohibition through the family bakery, still used as a front for moving illicit goods to this day. Or so it seemed from Bucky’s surveillance. He was loathe to bust open the operation. Mama Rumlow’s coffee crumb cake was phenomenal and don’t you know that the secret is sour cream, but not just any cream, it’s gotta be from Rollins Deli in Bed Stuy. Luckily her darling grandson brought it to her every Sunday, wasn’t that sweet.

Bucky picks up an issue from the ‘90’s showing some of the first Hubble images and settles in two tables away to peruse the stars and listen in to the invaluable source of underground gossip that was the Poker Club. As Joe, the second son in Erskine & Sons Apothecary, went on about how the new shipment of medicinal THC was even better than the stuff they had smoked back in the sixties, Bucky contemplated his new assignment.

It had seemed exciting at first. High end international art dealers caught up in intrigue and the murder of a French diplomat on US soil. When the Boss had handed him the dossier he could feel his Calvin Klein calling to him from the dusty corner of his closet. Infiltrating fancy parties, retrieving priceless stolen art, maybe a conspiracy amongst a nameless organization that secretly ruled the world behind closed doors of their Baroque knock-off châteaux. Things were looking up!

But no. It was data. Some sensitive files, probably on some ancient IBM Thinkpad from 1998, were hacked into and stolen. Now they were floating around on some cheap 256k thumbdrive - another word to hate! They could embarrass the government or someone in the government, honestly Bucky had zoned out at the mention of electronic data. Shield knew enough that the murdered diplomat had some connection to an American art dealer named Alexander Pierce. Pierce’s latest protégé was none other than local blowhard Brock Rumlow, neighbourhood hotshot and sweet little grandson of Dolores Evelyn, aka Mama Rumlow. Wasn’t Agent Magenta originally from Brooklyn? He’d be perfect, already blended in. Find Pierce, retrieve the data, destroy all evidence, completely undetected. Don’t forget your 9mm auto-loaded plus silencer and your tactical gear in these completely inconspicuous duffel bags, Mags! Because when we say « destroy evidence, undetected » we mean people. You know, just in case. *Blech.*
He’s just about to give up on the Club when Pepe, real name José Eduardo Guerrera Salinas, mentions that Dot’s grandson had stopped by the shop the other day looking for some oil paintings, just like all those other hipster kids who’re taking over the neighbourhood. These so-called artists with their obsession with authentic experiences. It wasn’t enough to pilfer the shops for antique decor, they insisted on making it using the old ways. His shop hand had a nice side business making charcoal sticks and paints. If they knew how much piss was required to make one ounce of white lead they’d upchuck their avocado toast all over their soy lattes.

The subject quickly changes to the ever popular complaining about how the neighbourhood has changed. For the worse, obviously. Bucky finishes the article on deep space imaging before draining his cup and getting up. He gives Hawkeye a high-five on his way out and tries to shove Red off of her stool but she barely sways just to annoy him. Abs of steel that one.

Outside the shop he pulls up his hood to protect his carefully maintained raven locks against the late Spring shower. His watch tells him he still has an hour or so before the Poker Club will break up. Plenty of time to check out Rumlow’s shopping habits at Emporio Pepe, an antiques shop down towards Red Hook, where the term “antique” includes everything from a discarded walkman complete with Rap Trax 3 cassette tape to custom fit legal-ish mods for your street racer. And, apparently, “authentic” art supplies for the discerning amateur. What that had to do with “piss”, Bucky would find out the hard way.
The sheer force of the sneeze just about blows his brains out through his ears. Great. Let’s add pneumonia to the list.

Steve closes the door to Emporio Pepe against the surprise Spring rain currently running in fast moving streams, rapidly terraforming the cracked pavement of Commerce Street as it flows towards the Bay. He only hesitates for a second, exhaustion threatening to overrun his sense of responsibility, before flipping the sign hanging in the window to OPEN. His sneakers squelch as he navigates the labyrinth of old stereos and furniture towards the back of the room and dumps his messenger bag on the bench at the worktable. Heavy glasses mottled with raindrops and fogged from the overheated shop hit the wooden surface with a dull thunk. He sheds his denim jacket, heavy with rain water and clinging to his arms, thankful that it was at least barrier enough to keep from soaking his shirt. He grabs the least grimy dust cloth from a pile under the table, shakes it out and rubs at his hair, trying to dry it as best he can. His bangs flop back over his eyes, but at least they’re not plastered to his skull anymore. He dabs at his jeans stuck to his legs and sighs in resignation. He’ll have to go change but won’t leave the shop closed for longer than necessary. Pepe should be back soon enough. The Poker in the Park Club meetings may run a bit longer when the crew huddles at the back of Hawkeyes, but Steve had taken longer than usual to collect supplies from around the lake. He made up most of the time by hightailing it back to the shop when the surprise downpour started. Sure, he’d had to pause once, leaning against the wall just inside an alley to catch his breath and take a puff from his inhaler, but he’d got back only 5 minutes later than he told Pepe he would, so he counted it as a win.

A corner of his shirt suffices to wipe off his glasses, leaving a dull smudge behind warning him that he can’t put off doing laundry forever. He turns to the fire hazard of the so-called kitchenette, a counter running along the back of the shop that boasts a hot plate, a kettle and a radio all plugged in to a power bar chained to an ancient extension cord that disappears around the corner to the back room and the only modern electrical outlet in the place. One aching hand, knuckles already starting to swell with arthritis brought on by the damp, quickly flips the kettle on while the other furiously rubs over his chest, trying to warm up.

As he waits for the water to boil he grab his afternoons work from his messenger bag, pushing it to the floor and collapsing on the bench. He upends the dirt spattered plastic bag and a dozen feathers get shaken out. Scrunching the bag into a tight ball he lays up for a shot to the wastepaper basket by the cash and lets it fly. He indulges in a celebratory fist pump when the bag unfurls, hits the edge of the can but still makes it in. Naturally, a crick in his shoulder reappears at the sudden movement, but hey, he’s still got what it takes on the court so life ain’t that bad.

Steve pulls over the desk magnifier, switches on the ring light and gets to work stripping the barbs off the pinion feathers he’d spent an hour in Prospect Park collecting. He starts with the dark goose feathers, putting the hard won swan feather to the side to dry off a bit more. It had been a close call, the territorial bird not liking Steve stealing feathers, which it had already moulted and left unwanted in the reeds so what was the big deal, anyways? There had been a bit of a chase, but only some couple making out under the trees had seen him, so he wasn’t too humiliated. Steve put a cool hand up to inflamed cheeks and hoped to hell that it was from the residual embarrassment of almost running straight into the couple and not a fever coming on. Even a single day in bed was a day he couldn’t afford.
The kettle gurgles with boiling water and Steve makes himself a mug of peppermint, daring to scald his tongue in favour of warming his insides as quickly as possible. When the feathers are stripped to his satisfaction, he twists backwards, reaching for his jacket. He fumbles the old utility knife out of the pocket and settles back on the bench. Despite the risk of nostalgia, Steve puts the tool under the light and inspects the sides, worn smooth over the decades. It had been a gift from his mother’s best friend, his godmother of sorts, Peggy. If he looked close enough he could still see her name, Carter, etched onto the side. She had given it to him years ago, right before she had set out on what would prove to be her last foreign assignment. He hadn’t really known what she did for the government, all he knew was that she was fierce, always in control, always told him the truth when it came to his art, and that he and his mum were the only family she had. He’d popped the penknife and instantly cut himself the first time she’d handed it to him. But Peggy had just smiled, said, “Now you’ll never make that mistake again,” and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. He was to take care of his mother while she was gone. Though her features had grown vague in his memory over time, he’d never forgotten her eyes in that moment. The darkness and intensity would have seemed out of place, except that she was always kind of intense. A stark contrast to his mother’s laughing blue-green eyes.

Steve pops the knife out now, the swoosh and click effectively knocking him out of his reverie. He’s indulged enough in the past and it’s time to get to work.

One by one, he pulls the feathers under the microscope and precisely shortens the staff and cuts a diagonal curve across the tip. He repeats the cut pattern, but shorter and closer to the end, spinning the edge around and shaping it with the point of his knife until he is satisfied. One by one, he shapes the quills to be added to his ever expanding repertoire of tools used by the “Old Masters”. He saved a scant few for himself, but the rest would go to the affluent, by Steve’s standards anyways, artist clientele who frequented the shop. He tried not to get annoyed at them, really he did, but he couldn’t help but resent their carefully put together clothes, always new but made to look old. The quest for authenticity made with carefree spending, without realizing that nothing original could ever be that clean, deliberate and shiny. Steve wondered, not for the first time, if he would transform into one of “them”, forget the value of hard work, if his own artistic endeavors ever became financially successful. He scoffed at his optimism and quickly caught himself. He was thankful, truly, for what he had: a roof over his head, a job and a place to work on his painting in peace. Sure, all these blessings were all in the same cramped storage room cum art studio attached to the mechanics garage out behind the shop, but it was at least his. And he had some online presence that he maintained through an old laptop of Pepe’s. If he sat close enough to the west end of the shop, sandwiched between the faded and worn upright Steinway and glass fronted case stuffed with old books, he could get a few bars of free wifi from the ice cream shop two doors down. It was slow but worth it and over the years he gained enough fans to support his meagre food bills and part of his rent. If only Patreon had a health plan. Right on cue another sneeze exploded from his chest, scattering his remaining feathers and leaving a sharp ache behind. Fine. He strips off his soaked sneakers and socks and hastily dries his feet on the pile of rags. Hopefully a customer won’t make him move out from behind the desk to help them out. He ignores the twang in his lower back and hunches over his work once more.
The chime above the door is the only warning his calm was about to be stamped out until, “The chalk is running all over your sign outside.”

Steve sighs heavily. He’d completely forgotten to bring in the sign advertising Create like the Masters - authentic drawing and paint materials sold here. He’d have to drag it back to his studio and redo it later.

He looked up and instantly frowned. If the snide deep voice hadn’t tipped him off, the close cropped hair and all black suit designed to look important and intimidating but completely offset by the boy band haircut and ever present can of RedBull: Brock Rumlow, neighbourhood bully and gangster wannabe. Yeah, ok, maybe not as bad as when they were kids, but still, “You could of brought it in, Brock.”

An ugly sneer broke across the other man’s face as he closed his umbrella, letting the water pool on the floor. What a dick. “Nah, times are tough. Wouldn’t want to take any work away from you, Rogers.”

Steve rolled his eyes and went back to the quills. “What can I help you with.” He hoped it sounded as unhelpful as he felt.

Brock wandered over to a stack of ornately framed paintings leaning against each other and started looking through them, “I dunno, Rogers, what can you help me with?” Before Steve could snap back at the frankly lewd tone, Brock went on, “Saw you a couple of weeks ago over at the Cube gallery in DUMBO. The boss had me looking at the work of what’s his name? Gavin? Greg?”

Steve’s heart dropped into his stomach as he froze mid-cut, listening to Brock’s words. “Gabe. Gabe Jones. It was his last show.”

Brock kept flipping through the paintings. If he’d heard the icy tone in Steve’s voice he was ignoring it. “Yeah, Jones, whatever. The boss was lining up a sale. Huge! Five pieces at least for a fancy lobby downtown. We’re talking Wall Street money, so, naturally, he wanted me to have a look first. See if the work would be, you know, relevant.”

Steve was fully frozen now, staring down at the knife in his hand. Gabe was his friend, had been since they were kids running around their neighbourhood tagging whatever surface caught their attention. As they got older, Gabe took the love of the world as his canvas to heart and began creating street art. He was an incredible muralist with a gift for catching the voice of the community. He had walls painted from the community garden on 7th to the run down factories at the old docs. Everyone and their grandmas knew Gabe and how much he’d done to transform little pockets of urban wasteland into spaces that gave hope and fed dreams.

Gabe didn’t like to talk about money, but Steve knew he had been struggling. He’d known vaguely about the deal. It would have been enough to pay off most his school debt, start to make a name for himself outside of Brooklyn, work full time on his art, maybe get larger projects lined up. But the buyer had reneged, and Gabe had been crushed...

“It was redundant, overused social commentary. The world has moved on from such sentimental visuals, you know? We’re looking for something with balls now, not pandering to all the pc crap. So, yeah, suggested some high concept ironic sculpture from Johann Redscull. Fuckin’ stupid name but he’s already got more of a buzz on the scene than Jones, even if it ain’t all niceties, there’s no such thing as bad press. So yeah, Pierce agreed and installation begins next week.”

SNAP
Steve looked down passively at the broken quill in his hand. He was still lost in Brock’s words. He’d known that Gabe’s deal had fallen through but hadn’t known why, only that it had been the last straw and he’d finally given in to familial pressure and accepted a job at his uncle’s furniture store down in Baltimore. He’d left his home and life, dejected and resigned. Time was up.

Redundant. Overused. Brock wouldn’t know a Rembrandt from a Picasso, what the fuck did he know about Gabe’s art, about how it speaks to people. It had been Rumlow and Pierce. Goddamn Alexander Pierce, big time dealer and self proclaimed expert who let Brock decide that Gabe wasn’t what was needed anymore. And just like that, potential stopped in its tracks. Because Brock Rumlow said so?

The wrongness of it, the injustice, burned within Steve’s gut and it was all he could do to not blow up at Rumlow and tell him in no uncertain terms the damage he had done, to a good man, to the neighbourhood. His own damn neighbourhood. Steve had been told many times that he had a way about him, a look of such severe disappointment that it would make the Devil itself repent. Steve rolled his eyes at the dramatics, but he knew. What a super power, eh? The ability to make people feel bad about what they done with nothing more than a strategically placed eyebrow. He also knew that it only worked on those who knew they had done something wrong to begin with. And bullies like Brock, egoists like Alexander Pierce? Well, they were never in the wrong. There was no self reflection, couldn’t be taught. They could only be stopped.

They wouldn’t recognize the real thing if it came up and bit them in the ass.

Steve carefully put down the knife. He thinks about his own situation and comes to a decision. Something akin to a plan was forming, the only question being if Brock would bite. He musters all the energy he could spare to suppress the rage, “Congratulations. So what’re you doing hanging around here?” He glances over at Brock who continues looking through the paintings, his scowl turned down into a deep frown.

“It was one sale, Rogers, not exactly the Mona Lisa either.” He was definitely annoyed now and Steve chuckled internally with petty joy. “Even one of these estate sale specials can catch a couple hundred bucks, maybe a grand. Early bird catches the worm and all that.”

Steve doesn’t even bother holding back the eye roll. The shit that comes out of Brock barely makes sense on a good day, and he’s not even looking at Steve anyways. What a waste. “You know, Rumlow, there are easier ways to expand your customer base than reselling pawn shop art.”

Brock scoffed, obviously irritated, “What? Your work, Rogers?”

Steve suppressed his annoyance, and simply raised an eyebrow and smiled knowingly, “Yeah, but not in the way you might think.” He held up a quill, but it only caused Brock to furrow his brow in confusion. He used the quill to point to a hutch by the window stacked with tin cans labeled as oil paints. “Charcoal black. Yellow and red ochre. Lead white. Do you know what those have in common?” Steve could literally see the wheels turning in Brock’s mind as he thought about what Steve was saying. Steve decided to have mercy before he busted a blood vessel or worse, “They are the colours used by Master painters. I made the pigments myself, the old fashioned way.”

Brocks confused scowl freezes on his face as Steve can visibly see the cogs turning in his mind. “Didn’t you do some impressionist stuff back in school, Rogers? Won some art scholarship at some big fancy school.”

Steve swallows his grimace and nods, “Flemish Baroque, but close.” He spun the quill in his fingers, “It’s pretty easy to recreate the past, if you have the right materials. And the right artist. I doubt even your boss would know the difference.”
Brock narrowed his eyes but his scowl was tipping up into a grin. The cogs were spinning a bit faster now and Steve’s suspicions that Rumlow is already having aspirations of clawing his way to the top are all but confirmed. It would certainly fit his MO from their school days. No one back then believed that the star quarterback getting his knees bashed in the night before the final game just in time for Brock to rise from the ranks and win it all was just some Cinderella story. Brock took out his phone, “What do you need, Rogers?”

Now Steve allowed his own smile, “Some period appropriate wood. Just junk, nothing fancy, but age matters.”

Brock just nods as he taps into his phone, “I may know a guy. Period renos.” He finishes typing, slips his phone into his breast pocket and opens his umbrella, “Get something ready, Rogers. Nothing too fancy, a demo or whatever. If we’re going to do this then I got to make sure you’re legit. Impress me.” Without a word of farewell he leaves the shop.

A humourless grin splits Steve’s face as he mechanically gets back to working on the quills. He barely has a moment to consider What did I just do? When the bell over the door rings again. Steve schools his expression and looks up, fully expecting it to be Rumlow again, having left behind his power drink sitting on top of some vintage vinyl or something equally as thoughtless. Oh! Oh. It’s pretty far from a Rumlow.

A hood is pushed back and dark hair tumbles around the clearest, stained glass blue eyes Steve has ever seen. A man in a faded running jacket and soaked sweat pants, wet shirt clinging to broad, clearly muscled chest, is just standing by the entrance dripping rainwater and Steve is just staring, holy crap he had better stop doing that. He is about to ask, “Can I …” when the guy hits Steve with a bright, lopsided smile, “Hey.”

Steve falters, mouth hanging open. When he realizes he is staring again he berates himself internally Get it together, Rogers, this isn’t the first man you have ever seen, jeeeezus. Maybe the first with a chin dimple like that, but come on. He’s a customer, nothing more.

The man’s smile wanes as he starts to look around the shop. Steve seems to gain some sort of equilibrium now that the customer is not looking directly at him, “Looking for something in particular? I can help.” I can help you out of those wet clothes oh my god simmer down. Steve puts cool hands to his flushed cheeks. I think I do have a fever induced delirium.

The customer starts to move towards the shelf of oil paints and picks up a can. Steve notices that said hands are big, strong and way too clean to be a painters hands. When he looks back over at Steve, he does everything he can to look back calmly. Don’t be stupid Rogers, he’s just a customer, and probably not even a serious one. A customer that is speaking to you, pay attention!

“The sign outside is pretty washed out, but it mentions something about volunteers needed? 10 bucks.”

Ah. Right. Supplies. Steve nods in affirmation, “Yeah, that’s right. I need raw materials to make art supplies.”

The guy raises an eyebrow and looks at the paint can, “Paint like the Masters, authentically made art supplies” He puts it back on the shelf and faces Steve fully, shoving his hands in his pockets. He has
a playful little smile that just makes Steve … suspicious. No one just smiles nicely at him. “Is it still volunteering if you get paid for it?”

Steve narrows his eyes, “Oh we got a smart guy here.” He starts to get up when he realizes he’s barefoot. Typical, Rogers, ugh. Just uuuggghhh. He moves around the table regardless. Who’s he got to impress anyways? The guy just wants to make some cash, like everybody else. Probably more harshly than is warranted, he continues, “Look, you want the 10 bucks or not?”

The man bites down on his bottom lip, looks like he’s considering for a moment, then breaks out into the same bright smile he first hit Steve with, “Yeah. Why not?”

Steve grabs an empty jar from under the worktable and holds it up, “This’ll be the easiest tenner you’ve ever made, Buddy.” If the guy is confused then he’s good at hiding it. Steve smiles internally at his stoic expression and slight hesitancy as Steve leads him towards the back room. Guy’s gonna learn that the only way to make 400 year old paint is the hard way.
“Yo, Steve! You gotta watch this, man, take notes! This is All-Star Weekend quality dunk magic now, right here.”

Sam “the Falcon” Wilson, highly decorated military special-ops veteran, VA counselor at the BVSJ over on Willoughby, basketball enthusiast and the bravest man Bucky knows. Well, has a file on, anyways. The man is confidence on legs. Long muscled legs in short shorts and high socks that call on the legendary age of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Smedium tank, terry cloth headband and a pair of worn out but well loved purple Jordans complete the outfit that Wilson wears a variation of rain or shine. Bucky scribbles a note in his mission logbook: [18:47] Wilson starts showing off for Rogers. Pretty sure he would win the dunk contest. Rogers refuses to participate as prop and remains seated on bench hunched over sketchbook in a way that will give him trouble getting up later, what a punk.

Bucky furiously underlines the word punk but can’t help an impressed grin. He’d identified Rogers as a potential mark after watching him at Emporio Pepe’s two weeks ago talking to Rumlow. He wasn’t anywhere near as good at lip reading as Agent Red, but he was good enough to get the gist of their conversation through his pocket scope from the roof of the abandoned storage building across the street. Unless he was mistaken, Rogers had just talked Rumlow into art fraud. Why? He still had to work on motivation, but got the impression that Rogers’ reasons would be more complicated than purely financial. His inner secret agent rubbed his hands in anticipation: things were starting to get interesting.

The more Bucky watched him, the more he was convinced that Steve was clever as hell while simultaneously having no idea what he was getting into. It had all started with spying the little blond nutcase dressed head to toe in drenched denim shuffle up to the pawn shop door at top speed weighed down heavily on one side by a messenger bag that was at least half his size. He’d watched with the calm, practiced observation of a consummate professional as he mentally noted details of the shop and it’s apparent keeper. The blond was on the leaner side of slight and Jane Austen pale, cheeks spotted pink like they’d been pinched. The damp must be getting to him, though he seemed to push on with whatever he was working on. Whatever it was, it was obscured by a chest high bookcase of junk blocking his view of the work table where the Subject - yes, the Subject, Barnes, keep it professional. Scrappy-but-adorable Ferret is decidedly not professional - was sitting. Bucky grinned at what he determined must be an innate stubbornness to let nothing get in his way. Either that or he was looking at a workaholic. There were no other explanations to tolerate wet jeans - they chafed in all the wrong places. The Subject’s blonde fringe flopped over thick rimmed glasses. The smooth skin of his stomach and side revealed as the Subject reached sidewards for a …. knife? Interesting **scribble scribble**

That first stakeout had continued on in much the same vein as Bucky observed Rumlow come, unsurprisingly be a complete dick, get convinced that the Subject, Rogers, could help him fool who exactly? Some art folk? His own boss, Pierce? and make them some real money. Rumlow had left and Bucky had gone with his gut (read: piqued curiosity) and decided to make first contact.

Whatever part of him thought Rogers would be an easy mark had misjudged pretty decisively with the complete shutdown of his most charming smile. Rogers had frowned at him. That had never happened to Bucky before and he had found himself not scrambling exactly, but tactically assessing alternative strategies. He’d managed to at least asses the shop quickly enough: an eclectic mix of old, very old, and made to look very very old stuff. Rogers himself was obviously an artist judging by the amount of paint smudges on his jeans, stuck in the bed of his fingernails, even a streak of blue in his
hair just behind one ear. He also considered his body a canvas as evident by the colourful sleeve tattoos that ran along his exposed arms. They were fascinating, like watercolour and graphite on parchment and he wished he was back in his sniper perch all of a sudden looking through his good scope so he could study them in detail without being watched himself.

The longer Bucky was in the shop the more Rogers seemed to be closing himself off to him. Unwilling to admit defeat he needed more information on the old school art supply production that he was pretty sure was in Steve’s purview. Pepe was smart, but definitely not the one to get his hands dirty, in the literal sense. He’d seen the shop owner obsessively wipe cake crumbs off of each individual card from the official Poker in the Park Club deck. He brought up the volunteering he’d read from the almost illegible sign outside the shop, it would be a good excuse to stick around a bit longer, maybe even to come back. Rogers certainly hadn’t shut that down, seemed to even appreciate a little smart-assery on Bucky’s part which he’d thrown in on instinct. It had certainly gotten this perpetually frowning artist to perk up, even if it was just to sass back at him. That empty jar though, that one had given Bucky pause for a nanosecond as he was forcefully brought back to mandatory substance testing at work. He quickly made the connection to the Poker Club discussing Emporio Pepe’s side business. Well, at least he’d drunk a fair amount of coffee that morning, maybe he could impress Rogers after all.

It was pretty anti-climatic and Bucky drew on all his training to suppress the inherent embarrassment that comes with pissing in a jar and handing it off to a stranger. To his credit, Rogers was extremely businesslike, despite his barefoot damp kitten appearance. He’d taken the jar to another room and without another word went over to the till and yanked out a ten. Bucky had thanked him and tried another smile but Rogers never looked back at him so it remained unappreciated. He seemed lost in his own thoughts by that time and just responded to Bucky’s *See you around* with a *Sure* and a wave. He returned to his perch on the roof and soon after Pepe returned. Bucky could definitely work on his Spanish, but he gleaned enough from Pepe that Roger’s first name was Steve. Rogers himself disappeared through the back of the shop. He didn’t reappear in the next several hours on the street or come out the alley behind Pepe’s so he must have been staying somewhere close. Bucky added ‘check Google satellite maps’ to his list of things to look up later, just behind ‘Brooklyn art scene’ and ‘how to make your paintings look really, really old’.

The next week was filled with research, recon and, of course, accounting. The last one he could get away with ‘alternative work arrangements’ - everybody had satellite offices in the corner Starbucks these days. He went old school for the research, spending a few hours every night at a library, never taking out a book and never the same place too often. He learned about modern reproductions, methods of making materials and media in the fashion of the Old Masters’. He even read a very amusing biography of a modern day art fraudster with a profound distaste for professional pomposity while lying around on the roof of Pepe’s listening to Rogers’ comings and goings (mostly stayings and coughings - the Subject had some health issues, to say the least). This one he’d bought at a second hand bookstore for cash, would probably leave it behind in Hawkeye’s, Red would probably find a use for it too.

Rogers had a routine of sorts: [10:13] *Subject emerges from the storage room / art studio / nest and uses bathroom off the office of the garage.* [10:30] *Subject enters Emporio Pepe to begin shift.*
Subject alternates between minding the shop and making art supplies, including but not limited to: scavenging the blank front pages of antique books, carving duck feathers into pointy sticks, scaling the white stuff off of lead pieces sealed in vats of volunteer piss (authenticity smells baaaaaaaaad), etc. [14:00-16:30] Subject leaves Emporio Pepe. Tuesdays and Thursdays Subject attends free Tai-chi at the local rec centre (Note: members of Poker in the Park Club also present), Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays visits massage and holistic health clinic. Saturdays Subject chases birds in park and steals feathers. [16:30-18:00] Subject returns to work at Emporio Pepe. [18:16] Friend (bff?) Sam Wilson requests Subject join a pick-up game of basketball. Subject refuses but agrees to attend game. Every. Day. [18:30 - variable, latest 20:30] Subject seems to stay out as long as physically able, but no more than 2 hours. Mostly drawing the entire time on a terrible bench. (NOTE: Does subject never eat??) [21:00 -Dawn] Subject in studio. There are no windows, a hard plastic skylight and poor ventilation. Recon on the studio suggests Subject stays up all night painting then curls into sleeping bag like the adorable ferret they are. (NOTE: Leave food out in dish for cute ferret, maybe with a little brush for paint stuck in fur?) [SUNDAYS] All day in studio working with trips to the shop (food in the shop?) and bathroom.

One thing was for certain: Steve Rogers was prickly, seemingly impervious to the charms of the local hipster clientele and **gasp** Agent Magenta’s considerable skills. Rogers was however completely the opposite with his friends: warm, funny and generous. To. A. Fault. According to the official records that Bucky had amassed on the Subject, Steven Grant Rogers (full name from, interestingly enough, a bio in the local arts scene newspaper lying around at Hawkeye’s), it was a miracle that Rogers was alive at all, what with his heart conditions since infancy. The medical records stopped as of a few years ago, but you don’t just get cured of arthritis, scoliosis, and asthma. That was some serious stubborn will and Bucky could admire (read: crush on) that.

Bucky closed his log book and silently packed up his surveillance equipment. He slipped unseen through the apartment building overlooking the basketball court, emerging from a little used side door. He stashed his stuff into the trunk of his nondescript Civic and grabbed his basketball. One of the nice things about this assignment was that he didn’t have to get any specialized undercover disguises. He loved to play a pick up game here and there but barely had the time what with missions, training and maintaining his covers. If the possibility of playing ball had been a bit of an influence in choosing Sam as his in to Steve as his in to Rumlow and Pierce, then so be it.

He jogged lightly around the block and slowed down when he got to the court. Bucky had already established himself as a game regular ‘new to the neighbourhood, looking to shoot some hoops, blow off some steam after working all day’ with Wilson (talk about friendly), but he always waited until Rogers had left. Tonight was the night he would ‘get off an earlier shift at the IKEA warehouse’ and make contact again with the Subject.

Sam spots him first as he lands from a failed dunk and raises his arms in greeting, “Jamie! Finally, my man, I need some help here. Please tell me you got air in that ball, Morita forgot the goddamm pump again.”

Bucky laughs, “Would I let you down, Wilson?” He draws closer to the group, dribbling as if to prove that yes, indeed, his ball is not flat. It gives him time to assess the group. In the time it took to get down from his surveillance perch, another two regulars had joined the group. Sharon Carter, one of Brooklyn’s finest, and a big lumbering fellow named Tim Dum-Dum Dugan, her partner, had
joined the rag tag group of mostly Wilson’s old army buddies and neighbours. Jim Morita, Monty Falsworth and Jacques Dernier rounded out the group. Steve was seated cross legged on the side of the court head buried in his sketchbook so he doesn’t see Bucky approach. A few hand slaps in greeting later and Wilson throws his arm around his shoulders and turns him towards Rogers.

“Yo, Steve! This is the guy I’ve been talking about.” Bucky had been practicing a toned down version of his winning smile in front of the mirror for a week now. Smile deployed, he raises a hand in greeting as Rogers looks up though his fringe. Sam slaps him on the chest, “Jamie’s the one kind enough to fill Gabe’s spot now that he’s left us for greener pastures.”

The introduction just makes Rogers frown at him and Bucky tries not to take it personally, just as interesting info to look into later. If Rogers recognizes him from volunteering to piss in a cup at the shop a couple weeks ago then he doesn’t show it. Bucky isn’t about to bring it up in front of Sam. Wilson calls the others for a game of three on three starting with the fresh meat and Bucky is about to turn away when Roger’s surprisingly deep voice stops him. “Nice shirt.”

Bucky looks down at his Hawkeye’s slouchy crop top then smirks back at Rogers, “Thanks, it’s a special occasion.” That earns him a soft chuckle at least and Bucky feels like he’s won something. The others start calling for him to get his ass into the game so he starts to walk backwards, enjoying the mirth in Rogers gaze while it lasts, and only spins around when he walks right into Sharon and earns himself an elbow in the ribs.

Bucky lets himself get into the game, letting situational awareness become a secondary function running in the background. Other people come and go, strolling down the street or letting their kids play in the park. No one else comes into the small park that wants to join the game, so Bucky ends up playing for a good hour before he looks tired out enough to take a break and tag Dum-Dum into the game. He collapses on the ground at the side of the court next to Rogers and spreads out lengthwise. This way he can still keep an eye on the court and the street beyond and not just so he can feel the cool ground along the length of his sore, aching, not getting old at all so don’t even think it muscles. He can hear Rogers chuckling, maybe at the antics in the game but more probably at Bucky’s current impression of a beached jellyfish. He lets himself catch his breath before re-establishing contact with the Subject.

As his breathing evens out he watches the game. The evening is perfect. A warm late Spring breeze ruffles the leaves above the court. The park lights had switched on awhile ago bathing the area in a yellow-orange glow but there is still enough light in the sky from the sun as it dipped beyond the horizon. The people, his marks if you had to be technical, were open, friendly and fun. He wondered if he could keep this going indefinitely. He’d kinda already used a version of his real name for his cover, reasoning that keeping as much truth in the deception as possible would be the only way to get in with a bunch of ex-special forces and police detectives. Maybe he could even bring Red here. He imagined her small frame darting around the other players. What she lacked in height she made up for in speed. Bucky smiled to himself, she’d probably take on Monty and Sam’s competitiveness to a new level.

His smile fades as he remembers what he’s there for, that nothing he builds could be permanent. As soon as he finishes the mission, wherever it leads, and let’s be honest, it always ends in blood, he’d have to disappear, lay low for awhile. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. *Enjoy having a normal life while you can, Barnes. Now get on with it.*
Steve’s gaze darts back to the game when Bucky looks up at him. Steve was a smart guy, his trained artists’ eye making him unusually observant. He’d have to be more careful around him - if anyone would find holes in Bucky’s cover it would be Rogers. He rolls over on his side and props himself up on one elbow. The sketch Steve had been working on is …. Bucky doesn’t know how to describe it beyond simply awesome. It’s a drawing of Sam flying through the air towards the net, the ball on the tips of his outstretched fingers. Sharon and Morita are coming up on either side for a block that will never come. The way that Steve has brought light into the drawing, the players rising out of the darkness, their upturned faces lit by an unseen courtside lamp, it is at once dynamic and a moment frozen in time. The players look beyond just his friends playing a pick up game of basketball, they look like avenging angels mid battle. Bucky lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, “Wow.”

Steve brushes away some non-existent dust on the paper and looks anywhere but at Bucky, “Thanks.” He starts flipping his pencil between two fingers, “I’m working on some ideas for a larger piece for Sam’s birthday.” He looks sharply down at Bucky, the pencil coming right into his face, practically poking his nose, “So, don’t say anything, got it?”

Bucky crosses his eyes focusing on the sharp end of the weapon that has been thrust into his personal space. His entire body is tense and he forcibly releases each muscle reminding himself that Steve Rogers is not actually a physical threat to him and he does not need to tackle anyone into a chokehold right now. His eyes refocus on Rogers’, “Got it.” Wow, those are some tropical sea baby blues right there, I could just dive right in. Steve turns back to his drawing and Bucky pushes himself all the way up to a seated position.

“I remember you from the shop, you know.” Steve looks over with a smirk and Bucky just raises his eyebrows and shrugs.

“Yeah, I remember you too. I don’t just go around volunteering bodily fluids for cash to anyone you know. Kinda hard to forget.”

Steve tries to hide his chuckle but Bucky knows he’s got him. “Ew. That’s gross …”

“Jamie.” Bucky reminds him.

Steve raises his chin in some sort of defiance, as though it’s Bucky’s fault he couldn’t remember Sam telling him his name. “That was disgusting, Jamie. You’ll fit right in.”

Holy shit, there it was, the elusive Rogers smile and directed right at Bucky too. Finally! “Good to know. I’ve got more where that came from.”

Rogers shakes his head, like he can’t believe Bucky is real. After a moment, they both look back to the game. Bucky lets a few beats go by then, “I noticed your tattoos that day in the shop. They looked really cool, don’t think I’ve seen that style before.”

The sleeves go up before Bucky can even blink. Steve is obviously proud of them as he shuffles around to face Bucky, holding his arms out between them and slowly rotating them back and forth. Bucky notices but does not comment on the series of crackles and pops from Steve’s joints as he emerges from his court side vigil pose. He also notices the grimace of pain that flashes across Steve’s expression and is quickly smothered. He vows to get this guy standing soon.
Steve smooths a hand over his left arm and starts explaining, “The bit you can see here is a reproduction of one of my favourite drawings from Paul Rubens, aptly named ‘a nude man seen partly from behind’. There is this artist I know, Pathulu, works out of a shop in Williamsburg. They took this idea I had and made it just … so much more. Do you know the original?” Bucky shakes his head in the negative. He vaguely recalls Rubens’ name coming up during his research. Steve just runs his fingers over the muscles of the tattoo’s image and goes on, “Well, it’s a line drawing on paper. Pathulu made it photorealistic and coloured it as though I was parchment. I almost argued for black ink, but Pathulu convinced me the sienna would be amazing. They were right, of course. The other colour is white to give it shape and depth. I was shocked it worked considering I’m so pale.”

He gives a self deprecating chuckle before sticking out his right arm next. Before he can go into specifics Bucky blurts out, “The Fibonacci spiral!” He’s just about to grab Steve’s arm and pull him closer when his hand freezes just above skin. Steve has gone rigid and Bucky immediately feels embarrassed, “Sorry, I’m, uh, ….” The hair raised on Rogers arm tickles his palm as he slowly pulls it back to rest on his knee. “I’m a bit of a math and science nerd.” He shrugs, a bit sheepish, he doesn’t admit this part of himself out loud. Not even Red knows this part of him. That he’s seen every episode of Cosmos a million times, about his secret subscription to Symmetry magazine.

Steve relaxes his arm and just nods, “I guess I’m an art nerd, so I get it. It’s the golden ratios that do it for me. You should see the Vitruvian man on my back, stretches right across my shoulders.” He ducks his head and speaks to his knees, “Sometime.”

Bucky has to tip his own head down just to try and catch Steve’s eye again. “I would love to, Steve.” And he really does, no innuendo or anything. His own sincerity shocks him for a moment, “They are really beautiful.”

Steve peeks up again from under long lashes and flopped over bangs, “Thanks.” His eyes dart around before landing on the south western bit of sky not blocked by trees. “So, if you’re such a science nerd, then what is that bright star over there?”

Bucky follows where Steve is pointing and immediately grins, “That is actually a planet, Jupiter.” He looks sidewards at Steve who is looking right back at him, “Have you ever seen 2001: a space odyssey?”

Steve looks like he’s searching back through his memories unsuccessfully, “Yeah, like a million years ago. Why?”

He looks at Bucky with an open expression waiting for him to go on, so he does. They sit like that for the next half hour or so, moving eventually to a picnic table a little further back from the court in the shadows, the sounds of the game going on in front of them. It is surprisingly easy to talk to Steve, and Bucky can’t seem to give a damn about letting his own walls down, even just a little. For a few minutes he isn’t an agent on a mission, Steve is Steve and not the Subject, and there are absolutely no ulterior motives behind Bucky making him laugh by nit picking the science behind any movie Steve throws at him.

It ends too soon as Sam collapses onto the grass at their feet and tags Bucky back into the game. He keeps one eye on the table and Rogers and dismisses the disappointment he feels when Steve begs out and takes off not long after that. He joins the chorus of farewells as Steve takes off at a fast shuffle down the street, and if he tries to catch his eye before he leaves then it’s just because he’s got to make his mark. Steve doesn’t make it easy as he turns away without meeting his eyes, but since when did Bucky ever like doing anything the easy way.
Under the magnifying glass the fine linen fibres formed a scattered pattern lightly pressed with what was once a fine wire mesh. Steve nodded to himself, satisfied that the paper he was inspecting was indeed seventeenth century. The bookseller he’d found in Soho had been worth the trip after all, even for the pains in his lower back from dragging a dozen old books across the city. He flipped over the page looking for a watermark and instantly frowned. $10.50 was scrawled in pencil across the top right corner of the page, large enough that he’ll have to spend time erasing it before moving on to size the paper.

It took him a good ten minutes to get rid of the booksellers messy scrawl, then another twenty to go through the last of the old books that had been beyond repair. Their worth lay in the scavenged inside covers and opening blank pages. The original handmade paper before mass production and wood pulp.

Pepe is in the shop going through a new collection of vinyl someone had traded earlier for an old dvd player. He pulls one out and holds the cover up to Steve for inspection: a black and white photo of a mariachi singer adorns the cover, resplendent despite the scuff marks. Steve nods in agreement and Pepe looks pleased as he slips the vinyl from its cover and places the disc on the turntable he has set up by the piano on the far wall. Before he sets the needle down he pauses and looks over at Steve, “What are those papers, hijo? Another thing to sell to these artists who buy your old paint?”

Steve shrugs, he hated lying to Pepe, “Not yet, they still need to be worked on.”

Pepe sets the needle down, “I noticed Dot’s grandson coming in pretty often. He a friend of yours now?”

Steve wrinkles his nose at the suggestion, his poker face is non-existent. Pepe just laughs at him in that teasing way he gets when he’s feeling particularly grandfatherly and switches the power on the record player. Steve goes to stand when a cacophony of horns blares from the speakers set up around the shop makes his heart skip a beat in shock. One of these days Vicente Fernandez was going to kill him. He grabs the short stack of paper he’d collected and brings it out to the mechanics shop in the back that doubled as his laboratory.

The papers get set next to a shallow basin once used for developing photography. He fills a pitcher with water and adds a good ounce of gelatine powder. Sheet by sheet, Steve carefully brushes the mixture over the front and back, replacing the original glue that has faded over time. He hangs each paper to a line he’s strung over the table, paying careful attention that they do not overlap each other. He’s just cleaning up the mess when he hears the rumble of a car engine coming down the alley between the pawnshop and the mechanics workshop. The engine stops and he can hear two doors opening. Rumlow, complete with his usual scowl, comes up to the window, shading his eyes from the late afternoon sun so he can see in. It’s too late for Steve to avoid being seen, though he tries valiantly by imitating a deer caught in headlights. Rumlow is not expected and Steve does not like surprises.

The door swings open before Steve can even reach for it. Rumlow steps inside and glares down at him, jamming his lips together like he wants to say something but is forcibly stopping himself.
Steve digs out a wad of loose bills from his pocket and thrusts it at him, “The change from the bookseller.”

Rumlow gives him a nasty smile that makes Steve pull back involuntarily. He all but growls at him, “Keep it, Rogers, I don’t want that loose change.”

Well, someone’s in a bad mood. Steve repockets the money and is about to close the door when Rumlow’s hand shoots out to keep it open.

Steve throws him a quizzical look but his confusion is soon replaced by another surprise: a tall, older man with light red hair and the kind of suit expensive enough to not have a label comes through the doorway, preceded by a light clacking of barely broken in leather shoes over the threshold. The man looks around the room until he finds Steve then smiles holding out his hand.

Something about the man’s expression seems a bit off, warm and parental, but with the coldest eyes. Steve feels his insides freeze as he reaches out. The man shakes his hand businesslike, then leans back with fists in his pockets, like he’s here for a casual friendly visit. “You must be the artist that Brock here commissioned.” Pierce’s gaze is sharp when he glances over at Rumlow. Steve doesn’t miss the pained, almost chagrined look on his protégé’s face.

Steve looks back up to the man, raising his chin because he just can’t help himself when he feels like he’s being held down, and parrots his laid back pose, “You must be Alexander Pierce.”

Pierce’s smile widens, shark like, “Ah, so you have heard of me. Perhaps not so much to know that I can see through a Van Dyke replica, but that’s neither here nor there. Brock and I have settled that particular question between us and I don’t think we’ll have to revisit it.” He looks to Rumlow then, still with the fatherly smile and cold stare, until the other man nods tightly. Goddamit, Rumlow. Steve could picture it: Brock restless in his impatience using the demos Steve had made him to try and fool his own boss. They were good, but Steve had been holding back a few details that he still would have bet would get by Pierce. The man himself was here after all, his drawings must have made an impression. Steve doesn’t do regret, but he still can’t see the board this game is playing out on so he waits.

Pierce turns back to Steve, rocking on his heels, “But it does bring up another more interesting possibility. I am impressed by your work and I’d like to see your studio.”

Pierce heads back out of the workshop without waiting for either of them. Rumlow jerks his head for Steve to follow. His stomach churns unpleasantly - something tells him that Pierce isn’t interested in buying one of his pieces.

It feels like he’s in some kind of purgatory. It’s not odd for a dealer to want to look at an artists work, there’s just something about Pierce that sets off the internal alarm bells. Steve unlocks his studio and holds the door open, gesturing for the two men to go ahead. Pierce walks around the room looking at Steve’s work, spending more time on the oil paintings than the ink drawings and watercolours. Rumlow stands by the door, arms crossed and stance petulant, eyes scanning the room.

Steve moves to his work desk and perfunctorily starts to tidy the mess of paint tubes, brushes and rags. He sets his few quills in a drawer along with the bottles of ink and a book on watermarks and seals. The soft clicking of Pierce’s shoes along the concrete floor sets his teeth on edge. The part of
him that wants to hide the mess of his sleeping bag, clothes from the night before and the myriad of pill bottles scattered across every available surface wars with the part of him that refuses to feel ashamed.

When the clicking stops for too long Steve looks up to find Pierce standing in front of his easel, a large sheet covering the canvas he’d been working on. Pierce looks over to him and gestures at the sheet, “May I?”

“How can I say no?” A surge of protectiveness swells up inside him and he wishes there were an actual answer. Steve goes over and carefully removes the sheet. It is the realization in oils of the drawing he’d been working on for Sam’s birthday. He watches Pierce carefully.

Pierce’s eyes widen minutely as he inspects the piece, but other than that he remains inscrutable. Finally, “It is very impressive. Your style is …. classical.” He looks back to Steve and smiles jovially, “If Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio had had basketball players instead of Saints and Angels, then it might have a place on a Chapel wall.”

Steve honestly does not know if it is a compliment or not, so he mutters a curt thanks and waits for Pierce to reveal himself. Rumlow has not moved from essentially blocking the door.

Pierce does not leave him waiting for long. The older man clasps his hands behind his back and turns fully towards Steve. “Mr. Rogers, I have a feeling you will appreciate a straightforward approach so I will not beat around the bush. I have been on the lookout for someone with your abilities with the techniques of the Old Master’s, and now I am convinced. I would like to commission a piece from you, a very specific piece. I have in my possession a Rubens and I would like you to make a copy of it. An exact copy. I’ll give you a moment to think about your answer.”

Steve doesn’t really have to think about it, trying to teach Rumlow a lesson was one thing, whatever Pierce was suggesting was … something else. “No. Thank you, but I actually have a lot of work coming up, a show in a couple weeks …” He trails off as Pierce purses his lips and looks at him like he knows differently.

“Steve, may I call you Steve? I know you’re not interested in money, though it’s apparent that you could use some, and I’m not referring to your current sleeping conditions.” He picks up a bottle of his heart medication and Steve involuntarily reaches for it. Pierce tosses it to him, “I know these aren’t easy to get on a shop keepers wages. I also know you think you have nothing to lose.” He slips his hands in his pockets, again the casual visitor, and slowly gazes around the studio, “Except your own life, though perhaps that is just an incidental thing.” Pierce’s gaze stops on the painting of Sam, Sharon and Morita and Steve is suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. Rumlow looks grimly pleased at Steve’s discomfort while his boss just goes on in his friendly tone, “You’d be wrong, though, to think you have nothing to lose.”

Steve feels frozen in place as Pierce just smiles that friendly fucking smile with his clear, cold gaze. Steve is suddenly reminded of the solid, blank gaze of a marble statue and irrationally a laugh starts to bubble into his chest.

“You have things, Steve, things that must be valuable to you even if this place,” Pierce gestures around the studio, letting his hand rest pointing towards the shop, “isn’t worth consideration. A family, even if it’s a found one.” He turns to consider the painting on the easel again, “Samuel Wilson. Former Special Ops with a record that is largely missing.” He turns back to Steve and now his expression matches his eyes, “I wonder what would happen to him, his unit, if it suddenly reappeared.”

Steve’s mind was racing. Sam did not talk about his service time as para rescue beyond explaining
that the reason he wore shorts all year long was because he was still cooling off from the heat in the desert. There was a reason he didn’t talk about. Morita, Falsworth, none of them did. But they carried it with them wherever they go, Steve could see that much in the shadows in their eyes, the lines of tension that pierced through them, in how it wasn’t as easy to laugh as when they were kids running around the neighbourhood. His protectiveness went into overdrive, “When do we start.”

Again the friendly smile and relaxed pose, “Rumlow will bring you by the showroom tomorrow.” He heads towards the door which Rumlow immediately holds open for him. “I look forward to your show, Steve. You’re bound for great things.”

As the soft clicking from Pierce’s shoes fades towards their parked car in the alley, Rumlow turns on Steve with a snarl, “You have one chance, Rogers, or I’ll go after the girl first.”

Anger flares in Steve’s gut and snaps him out of his freeze. He turns on Rumlow, “That woman would flip you on your ass, Brock, so please go and embarrass yourself.”

Before Rumlow can do anything he’s called out to the car by Pierce. “See you tomorrow, Rogers.”

Steve has no idea how long he stands there in the middle of his studio as the sounds of the car pulling away are replaced by the faint rise and fall of the ranchero music still coming from the shop. Eventually, he stoops to pick up the fallen sheet and carefully covers the painting.

“Hey.”

Steve looks up from his position crouched over a canvas laid out on the floor of the studio, tubes of red, white, blue and black paint scattered within reach. He rubs at his eyes, sore from working in the half-light as night fell unheeded during the hours since Pierce and Rumlow had left. Jamie. “Hey.” When it seems like he’s waiting for something Steve gestures for him to come in.

Jamie’s eyes roam around the room in a measured arc, “Wow. I’ve never seen any of your stuff besides what you deign to show me at the court.” He’s smiling, obviously teasing, but Steve feels like he’s forgotten how to react.

He drags his paint brush across the canvas pulling a streak of colours on the verge of mixing through a swath of black, “I missed the game, didn’t I.” He starts to gather up his brushes, “Sorry, I just…” Steve kneels on one edge of the large canvas and gestures to the painting beneath him, streaks of red and blue over a background of dark shadow bleeding into pools of light.

Jamie holds out his hands in an abortive motion as Steve creakily moves from bent knee to standing. Steve quickly gestures to his scattered paints, “If you want to help, get those for me will ya.”

By the time Steve has gotten over to the sink in the corner, Jamie’s hands are filled with the used brushes and mostly empty tubes. He puts them carefully on the draining board and Steve starts the water going.

“You didn’t miss much, only yours truly winning the three point line contest.” Jamie lifts a cloth up to Steve’s face but stops before touching him. He just shakes his hand until Steve takes it from him.

He takes off his glasses, wets the cloth and gives his whole face a scrub in the cool water. Having Jamie in his personal space is …. nice, but he’s pretty sure his neck is starting to flush. He peaks
around the cloth, “Oh yeah? Bet Dernier had something to say about that.”

Jamie tosses him a towel, “He had plenty to say, I learned some new names in French that’s for sure. Especially since I just repeated ‘Je suis le champion!’ over and over in my best Brooklyn accent.”

The thought of the latest addition to their evening group cheering with his arms in the air, undoubtedly showing off a few muscles, reminds Steve how to smile. The look on Dernier’s face reminds him that laughing is actually an ok thing to do. He reaches for his glasses but finds that Jamie already has them, holding them out between them. Steve flushes again, “Thanks. Oh my god I sound like a mouse with a crush on a lion.”

“I’d have cleaned them with my shirt but it would probably make it even harder to see. I came straight from the court.” He sounds unsure all of a sudden, “Sam was worried and I told him, you know, I’d just check in.”

He trails off and Steve finds himself staring into clear blue. Warm, he thinks, so unlike the chill from his guest earlier. The thought of Pierce threatens ice in his veins. Think of something else. He gestures to the sheet covered painting almost desperate to reassociate it with something good again, erase the spectre of the last people who stood before it. “Check it out. Please.”

Jamie seems reluctant to look away from him, worrying his lower lip as he obeys Steve’s plea. He carefully pulls the sheet up and over the canvas and takes a step back as if pushed. Steve’s vision narrows in on Jamie, his opinion suddenly the only thing he cares about. At least a minute must tick by but before Steve can lose his patience altogether, Jamie lets out a breath he must have been holding, “Steve, this is … so … gawd, sorry I’m not usually so dumb with words, but this is beautiful.” He turns to Steve, a soft smile plays on his lips, nothing but conviction in his eyes, “Sam is going to love it.”

Steve nods as some tension pulling inside him releases. A heat, sudden and inevitable, threatens to rise behind his eyes and he quickly turns back to the sink to get control of himself before he starts bawling all over, confessing who knows what. Jamie either doesn’t notice his state or is kind enough to ignore it. He leans his hip on the counter next to Steve and together they finish cleaning the brushes and plates serving as makeshift palettes. Jamie talks almost non-stop about the antics on the court that night and Steve absorbs it all, playing it out in his mind and letting his thoughts linger on each of his friends faces. Found family.

When they are done, Jamie convinces him to come out to get something to eat and Steve introduces him to the Mexican palerita a few doors down from the shop. The late evening is warm and they sit on the curb, letting the frozen jamaica drip carelessly in the warm night air, staining their lips and tongues a deep red. Steve talks about his upcoming show and Jamie needles him until he lets him come to the opening. As if he needed permission. As Jamie gets into stories of his coworkers from his warehouse day job Steve is struggling to keep his eyes open. He doesn’t let Jamie carry him, though it is tempting to let his beefy friend take control, he does let him walk him back to the shop to make sure he doesn’t fall down any manholes.

When Steve finally collapses into the nest of sleeping bag and wool blankets his last sight is of the furious painting that had come out of him that night. The last streak he’d made, deep red mixed with a bit of brighter blue and white cutting through the swirl of dark beneath, leaves him feeling hopeful despite what he’s gotten himself into. His last thought is of warm blue eyes before falling into a dreamless sleep.
One of the things Bucky liked most about driving himself around in a platinum grey Civic was the almost complete anonymity it gave him. It was such a common car and yet not eco-friendly enough for an Uber, obviously not a cab, unobtrusively mid-size, easy to park, and deceptively boring. If you looked under the hood at first glance you wouldn’t notice anything special, no one but a seasoned DIY street racer would know that this car had the agility of a street cat and would absolutely kill it on a straight-away.

As he wove down side streets on his roundabout way from his accountant cover apartment in midtown to the art gallery in Brooklyn Heights via Flatbush, he thought about His Mission. Specifically, how His Mission had rapidly been crushed by the weight of whatever he was continuing to do with Alexander Pierce. When exactly His Mission had changed from *Infiltrate Pierce’s Business via Steve Rogers to Save Steve Rogers from Pierce’s Business At All Costs* he couldn’t pinpoint exactly. *What a fucking liar*, he knew exactly when it had been. It had been right after that visit from Rumlow and Pierce that Bucky had watched from his perch on top of the three-story condo building behind the mechanics shop. Steve had been working on making some soggy old paper, radiating his usual *I Dare You* to the world at large, when Rumlow and Pierce had shown up. By the time they’d gone, Steve didn’t radiate so much as collapse in on himself. And he hasn’t come out of it for weeks.

When he wasn’t around the neighbourhood, collecting information and trying to cheer up Steve, he kept pushing on the research front. According to the media, the French diplomat, Baltroc, had died peacefully during the night in his apartment, much to the complete mystification of his family. The French government had wasted no time repatriating the body, but there was still the autopsy report. It was a simple matter to break in to the Coroner’s office and have a perusal through the stand-alone lab computer. He had discovered years ago that municipal security was lax, and since it had seemed like the man had died of natural causes there had been no call to escalate the matter to the Feds. Indeed, the records did show Baltroc had died of heart failure in his sleep. However, they also showed a file creation timestamp of a full day after the body was on its way over seas, including voice recordings. Bucky listened to a few: they were pretty standard fare, something you might hear on one of those TV crime shows. Someone had gone to the least amount of trouble to cover up the real cause of death, at least enough to satisfy most prying eyes. It had felt amateurish, which left Bucky with an uncomfortable disquieted feeling as he’d snuck out of the office and proceeded to scale the side of the building next door. Was it deliberately amateurish? Or simply the work of a true criminal novice? Nothing cleared his head quite like leaping rooftops, so he’d proceeded to make his way back to his apartment from ten storeys up.

Baltroc himself had been quite boring on the surface. The typical public servant attending to France’s interests in the US. He didn’t seem to partake in any regular nightlife and didn’t have a family to keep him busy. He had been, however, a bit of a collector of French painters. In the cursory examination of Pierce’s public business dealings, it seems as though they had known each other many years. Pierce had brokered more than one deal for Baltroc on the auspices of returning the paintings back to their native country. Superficially, everything seemed legit, down to Lemurian Shipping, which Baltroc used to transport the work. The only thing that raised a red flag to Bucky was that Baltroc was the one arranging the shipping, and not Pierce himself.

Bucky had reached out here and there to his underground contacts but so far nothing had turned up. Pierce’s business was infuriatingly squeaky clean. The accounting was immaculate, which was another red flag. No one was that well organized. He spent some time daily combing the media outlets, looking for news or connections, but came up empty. He was *this* close to covering his walls
in photos and news clips, lacing them with string and following the physical connections. That way lay madness, and Bucky refused to admit that this was that hard. If he didn’t find something soon, he’d have to start actually using Steve to get to Pierce. Now that way was truly mad.

Before desperation could truly set in, Bucky had had a lucky break in the form of Scott Lang, IT support guy at Fury Office Paper Supply and sometime lunchroom buddy of Winston Soldadovich, the accountant from Finance. Bucky went in to check the books, oversee paperwork and troubleshoot twice a week. The remaining days he tends his “other” clients, a few other legit small businesses and a few aliases for which he maintains a paper trail in case of emergencies. This particular lunchtime, yesterday in fact, had found Scott and Winston rating who, from a scale of Baymax to the T1000, was the most likely to be a robot: their manager, Maria Hill, or the owner and CEO himself, Nick Fury. Scott himself claimed Major from Ghost in the Shell for himself and Bucky whined in all honesty that he hadn’t thought of it first. As they slowly finished their vending machine sandwiches, Bucky steered the conversation towards how cool it would be to upload one’s consciousness to the Net. Scott, he knew, was a brilliant network technician who was absolutely wasted in a mid-size company IT department. There was the pesky little matter of grand theft in his past which prevented him from being hired by larger companies with more complicated problems to solve. Bucky’s file on Scott was impressive in it’s variation, everything from cyber to cat-burglary. Scott himself was a bit socially awkward, putting his foot in it more often than not, but he was also good in a way that Bucky admired. His past crimes, though illegal, always had some altruistic purpose whether it be whistleblowing some company’s evil practices or just trying to get ahead so he could pay child support for the daughter he didn’t talk about.

Scott had immediately agreed how awesome it would be to live forever on the Internet, the sheer amount of information was a veritable all-you can eat buffet. Bucky commented how it was almost impossible to keep something completely offline and Scott had just looked at him like he didn’t know the half of it. I mean, even things from before there was even electricity had a life online nowadays, right? You could practically walk the globe with interactive online maps, live someone else’s life with seemingly endless vlogs, there were Virtual museums you could walk through and see whatever work you could think of. Scott had pointed out that those were just the roads most travelled, it was the back alleys and unbeaten paths connecting all the visual content where the real interesting stuff was. Yeah, Bucky had agreed, it was wild. I mean, pick some random words like foreign diplomats, art history, top wealthiest people and secret corporations, ridiculous spy movie shit, I mean who knows the connections. They laughed at how funny it would be, but Bucky could see that the seeds he was planting were starting to sprout. He knew he’d wait a few more weeks to see if anything came from it before giving in to his last resort. He kinda felt bad about indirectly dragging Scott around even the periphery of anything nefarious, but he could see the guy was bored out of his mind in IT. Who knows, maybe he could get Scott a gig at his actual office - it would at least pay enough to visit his daughter more often.

As Bucky neared the gallery he pushed away his swirling thoughts about how to get to Pierce’s “real” business, and focused on the task at hand: finding a parking spot. As it turns out, he needn’t have worried. As he draws up to the gallery front, Sam, resplendent in an all-red version of his usual shorts and tank, this time with a matching blazer and shiny new Jordan’s, is aggressively waving on any other car that deigns to try and pull into the empty spot he’s occupying. Behind him, sat on the curb, are Morita and Falsworth. Bucky lays on the horn to get their attention and three pairs of arms rise in the air in a cheer. In a single smooth backwards curve, Bucky fits his car snuggly into the spot, barely waiting for his friends, Jamie’s friends, to vacate it. He steps out and joins them on the
Sam gives him a wolf-whistle, “Damn, Jamie, you clean up good, bro! Is that a man-bun?”

The three snicker at him and Bucky just nods, taking the teasing. He knew he looked good, shaved smooth and hair tied back to show off his jawline. Oh how he’d wanted to see Steve’s face if he’d shown up to the show in his full black tie Calvin Klein! But there was no way Jamie could have afforded that. However, he could get away with his fitted jeans and deep blue fitted button down shirt. He left the top few buttons undone and pulled a few strands of hair out of his bun to artfully catch any breeze that might be about. Sure, he’d spent an hour in front of the mirror perfecting his look, trying on a few smiles, but it was all for the greater good and not just to catch the eye of one hard-to-impress artist. He slaps the hand Sam proffers and just smirks knowingly, playing it up, “Yeah, unlike you reprobates, I know how to attract the good kind of attention. Steve inside?”

“Yep, along with the champagne. Feel free to bring out a tray.” He’s sure Morita is only 10% joking.

Bucky heads toward the open door of the gallery and the rising sound of chatter over music coming from inside. He doesn’t question the men’s reluctance to enter into the heat and noise of the crowded room and promises to bring out some snacks later.

Bucky stops short at the entrance and quickly looks over at Sam who is absolutely beaming at him. On the wall directly facing the entrance and shielding the rest of the gallery from passerby’s is the painting Steve had made for Sam. The frame is ornate and perfectly suits the classic Baroque style of the painting. Sam thumps a hand over his heart and Bucky instantly knows how much it means to him. He can barely control the look of glee on his face as he heads past the painting and into the gallery.

Though Bucky is perfectly at home in a gallery, discussing meaning and intention with anyone from artists to collectors, he’d already decided that Jamie would be way out of his comfort zone. He moves around the room, looking at Steve’s work but never lingering too long in front of one piece. He loads up with a bottle of beer and a plate of snacks before finally finding Steve.

The artist himself looks like the past few weeks never even happened. He’s smiling and chatting with who look like artist friends. His eyes are shining and he has more than a little colour in his cheeks, though Bucky doubts it’s from drink. When his eyes find Bucky across the room his smile goes from pleasantly buzzed on life to beaming from ear to ear. Bucky helplessly throws out all of his practice smiles and just lets himself show how happy he is to be there. He sets down his plate, takes a swig if his beer and heads over to Steve’s side.

Steve moves to his side and if Bucky isn’t imagining things, he seems to be restraining himself from going in for a hug. Bucky decides to go for it and throws his free arm around the smaller man’s shoulders, practically enveloping him whole. Steve is absolutely vibrating beneath him and turns his face up to Bucky, adjusting his glasses. “You made it.”
Bucky gives his shoulder a squeeze and reluctantly lets go, “I think you’re the one who made it, pal. This place is really buzzing.”

Steve’s artist friends had moved off, deep in discussion about the social issue Easter eggs Steve had hidden in a Van Gogh replica. Steve’s smile turns shy, “I’m glad you came.” Before Bucky can respond he changes the subject, “Did you see Sam outside? I presented him his gift before the doors opened. He’ll deny it, but I saw tears. Says it’s inspirational and he’s going to hang it outside his office at the VA.” He’s shaking his head like he can’t believe it.

Bucky nudges him hard in the shoulder, “It’s an amazing image you should be proud of. Get used to changing lives, punk.”

Steve rubs his arm and punches Bucky in his bicep, “OK, you jerk, I guess I can accept that Sam actually really does like it.”

Bucky rubs his own arm, surprised at Steve’s strength, though unsurprisingly he wasn’t afraid to use it. “You owe me another beer for that.”

Steve chuckles and grabs his arm to pull him towards the small pop-up bar. On the way, Bucky asks questions about Steve’s pieces and his friend enthusiastically explains the show, the mix of old styles and materials with modern themes. As they move through the room, Steve’s arm hooks comfortably into Bucky’s as he pulls him around introducing him to his friends. Bucky is enjoying Steve hanging off his arm more than he’d like to admit to himself. He finds himself pleasantly chatting, only mostly pretending he doesn’t quite fully understand the art jargon. It’s a pretty different crowd than, say, attending an auction under the guise of a wealthy heir to a Fortune 500.

Eventually, he finds himself alone with Steve again and they’re just standing by the side wall looking over the room when suddenly the grip on his arm turns vice-like making Bucky grimace, “Jesus Steve, are you all right?” He looks down at Steve worriedly, the artist’s eyes are like saucers and he’s gone pale as a ghost. Bucky puts his free hand over the white knuckled grasp currently cutting off circulation in his arm and tries to catch his eye, “Just breathe, Stevie.” Steve take a shuddering inhale, but it’s better than nothing. “Now what’s going on?”

Steve lets go of him and Bucky immediately regrets the loss. He turns away from the door and looks at Bucky with a mixture of panic and excitement, “Trish Argh just walked in. Jamie, Trish Argh is in Brooklyn and just walked in to my show.”

Bucky was at a loss. Obviously his research methods were failing him when he needed them the most. “Who’s Trish Argh?”

Steve looks apoplectic. He takes a slow calming breath at Bucky’s insistence, then launches into a hushed whisper, “Trish Argh is the one who revolutionized oceanic environmental commentary installation art. That’s, like, social justice for sea creatures. She’s got dozens of guerrilla murals on fishing factories and exploitive Sea Worlds across Europe. There’s this giant Kraken sculpture that she and her team built overnight, without getting caught, anchoring an old oil tanker in port. It took the company weeks to undo the welding and by then the government had passed legislation to prevent the company from using it. There were probably like a hundred welders.” He stops to take a breath, “It was awesome.”
Bucky is watching the front door where the group of newcomers are standing in front of Sam’s painting, “Does she have bright pink hair? Because someone who has bright pink hair is beelining straight towards us.”

Steve’s eyes grow impossibly larger, “It’s her.”

Bucky smiles reassuringly at him and rests his hands on his shoulders, “Steve, take a deep breath then turn around and say hello, OK? I’m getting the impression here that you’re kinda a big deal yourself, so you’re gonna have to accept your professional awesomeness and just roll with it.”

Steve smirks up at him, effectively calmed down enough to tease him, “My professional awesomeness?”

Bucky looks at him incredulously, “Stop laughing at me, punk, and say hello to your friends.” He pulls Steve around by the shoulder just in time for the pink haired woman to introduce herself as, indeed, Trish Argh, and what a pleasure it was to meet Steve, and what a great show and so on. Bucky leans back against the wall and listens to Steve slip into art talk. When he takes Trish around to show her a particular piece he looks first to Bucky questioningly, but Bucky waves him off explaining that Morita is probably dying of hunger by now and he’d better bring some snacks out to the guys.

Bucky watches him go for a few minutes as he finishes off his beer. It was like the Steve he’d first met - full of life as he passionately discussed dismantling systematic oppression or eliminating misinformation and ignorance surrounding depression in society. Bucky found himself, what? Happy? Like he could spend the rest of his days contentedly playing Jamie, a guy who plays basketball with his friends and hangs out at art galleries? The thing is, he did want those things. He just couldn’t have them.

Before he sinks into a deep, dark hole he pushes away his flaring desires and concentrates on his next task: fill up a plate with a precarious mountain of canapés and snag a few bottles of beer to bring to his, Jamie’s, buddies outside.

Out in the sidewalk, Bucky is immediately met with cheers of victory as he delivers the snacks. They lounge against Bucky’s car and polish off the fancy snacks in no time. The chat inevitably turns towards the upcoming NBA season and the mandatory optimism for the Nets this year. Bucky sinks easily into the familiar sports talk, all the while keeping track of the cars and pedestrians that come within the vicinity of the gallery, more out of habit than anything. However, when a familiar dark SUV with the vanity plates X-B0N3S pulls into the no parking zone in front of the gallery doors Bucky’s heart plummets, quickly turning to ice when Rumlow comes around and opens the door for Alexander Pierce.

Sam leans in and asks none too quietly, “Who’s the suit?”

Bucky turns back to the group who had stopped their talk and now stand at what Bucky can only describe as at the ready. Sam crooks his eyebrow crooked in question.

Bucky shrugs nonchalantly, “Some rich asshole who thinks he can park wherever the fuck he wants.”

Falsworth rolls his eyes, “Some people are under the false impression that they can do whatever they
want without consequence.”

Morita gives a mischievous grin as he takes out his phone and starts dialing, “My cousin has a tow truck,” he explains. At everyone’s questioning look he just shrugs, “Just doing my civic duty.”

Falsworth goes to read off the license plate and the group dissolves into a round of laughter at the ridiculous moniker. Bucky grabs the empty plate and heads back inside to ostensibly get more snacks.

Once inside he sets down the plate on the nearest table and scans the room. Pierce is talking to Steve by one of his pieces in the middle of the room, enough people around to avoid anyone making a scene. Rumlow stands on Pierce’s side effectively blocking anyone from interrupting their conversation. Steve’s posture is ramrod straight, chin tipped upwards and eyes narrowed but gaze darting around, looking for an escape.

Bucky barely takes a moment to consider before making a decision. He grabs another couple of drinks from a tray, some champagne or wine, he barely even notices. As he approaches the group he hears Pierce asking about his ‘commission’ and Steve giving some vague response regarding difficulty getting the right materials. He sounds evasive which only serves to aggravate Pierce, the tell being a slight tightening around the coldest eyes Bucky’s ever had the displeasure of seeing, and he’s taken down many the narcissistic megalomaniac.

He slips in beside Steve around the other side of Pierce, avoiding Rumlow altogether. “Hey, Steve, I finally found the refills.” He puts a glass into Steve’s hand. Steve for his part takes the drink as though expecting it, only raising an eyebrow slightly towards Bucky. Bucky ignores his look and straightens as he faces Pierce and holds out his hand, “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m Jamie, a friend of Steve’s.”

Pierce’s bemused grin never falters though fails to reach his eyes. His handshake is firm but doesn’t linger, a man with nothing to prove. “Alexander Pierce.”

Rumlow remains impassive and Jamie gives him a nod in greeting, which he pointedly ignores, going back to looking around the room. Bucky offers his drink to Pierce, “I didn’t think to bring any more over.”

Pierce declines with a raised hand and only a faint look of disgust which disappears as quickly as it had appeared. “No, thank you. We won’t be staying long, just wanted to congratulate Steven here on his success.” He looks back at Steve, smile tightening, obviously displeased at what Bucky is guessing he perceives as defiance in the man before him. “In fact, I was just about to inquire about a purchase. That piece in the entry is stunning.”

Steve stiffens and Bucky unconsciously closes the distance between them. Steve’s voice is razor sharp, “It’s not for sale.”

Pierce rocks back on his heels pleasantly and smiles down at Steve, “Oh I think you’ll find everything’s for sale when the price is right.”

Bucky can’t help it, he wants that cold gaze away from Steve. He stares unflinchingly into Pierce until whatever power play the dealer is trying to establish is broken and he looks towards him. “Dude, he said it ain’t for sale.” God, he wished he was flipping a hunting knife casually in his hand
right now! What was the point of all that training if he couldn’t use it to intimidate power hungry assholes. And probable murderers, Mags, don’t underestimate him.

Pierce looks between Bucky and Steve with amusement, backing off for the moment at least, “Well, that is a shame. We’ll be in touch, Rogers. I look forward to our collaboration.”

Pierce turns away and moves towards the exit without another word. Brock follows with only a parting shot, “Pretty paintings, Rogers.” before disappearing outside.

Bucky shakes his head at the pair, “What a couple of douchebags…” He trails off as he looks down at Steve who is positively fuming at him.

“What the fuck was that?” he whispers furiously at Bucky.

Bucky is honestly perplexed, “What? The guy was an arrogant dick, what was I supposed to do?” Not to mention a sociopath who I don’t want anywhere near you.

Steve’s lips jam together as his face heats up in anger, “I don’t need you defending me, Jamie.” He take a deep breath and closes his eyes. When he opens them again they are piercing with absolute resolve, “I can get by on my own.”

Bucky is shocked into silence and Steve must take it as a sign that their talk or fight or whatever is over because he starts to turn away. Bucky reaches out and holds his arm, not letting go until Steve turns back to him. Steve looks passively at him, and Bucky feels he’s lucked out that Steve hasn’t ripped his arm off. He sighs heavily and moves his hand up to his shoulder and looks Steve in the eye so he gets what he’s about to say, really gets it, “I know you can, Steve, and maybe you can do everything yourself, but the thing is.” His hand grips the back of Steve’s neck and he pulls him in a bit closer, never breaking eye contact, “The thing is, you don’t have to.”

Steve looks down and for a moment Bucky is afraid he’d gone too far, pushed himself in too close. But when Steve looks back up at him he’s got a crooked, shy grin and is nodding at him, “OK, Jamie.” and he leans his head in to touch his forehead to Bucky’s just for a moment before pulling back.

He’s just about to spit out It’s Bucky when he stops himself short. Realization of how gone he is on this guy hits him like a sledgehammer to his sternum. He is so fucked.
If anything at all could be called lucky from his latest venture into the world of high stakes art fraud, it’s that somehow Alexander Pierce had gotten his hands on some sufficiently old unpainted linen canvas complete with original, though crumbling, stretchers. Steve can handle many things, but having to carefully strip an existing painting from its ground would have turned his already delicate stomach and likely washed away whatever was left of his soul.

As promised, Rumlow had delivered some wood slats old enough to pass for original that had essentially been stored in the well-ventilated workshop of some renovation associate. The normally dour Brock had been in an unsettlingly good mood when he’d dropped off the wood to Steve’s workshop along with a few tools he’d needed. Apparently he’d found out the exact figures that were involved in Pierce’s deal with the Rubens, and he just couldn’t help but brag about it. The amounts sounded ludicrous, far beyond the price of a painting, even a masterpiece, but Steve kept his mouth shut as he fashioned the templates he would use to help guide him when making the joins for a new “old” stretcher for the canvas. Brock thankfully left as soon as Steve offered to let him sand the rough hewn pieces lazy bastard and he lost himself in the work to keep from thinking about how there was much more to this mess he’d gotten himself into than a copy of a painting.

It was the afternoon after his gallery showing, which had turned into an impromptu party lasting into the wee hours of the morning. He was paying for it now with a headache from lack of sleep, but needing to get a move on the ground for the canvas if he was going to be able to let it dry long enough. He took a last deep drink of his black tea, about as much caffeine as he could handle, and pulled a filter mask over his mouth. He switched on the makeshift fume hood over the work surface, the canvas he was working on stretched out beneath it. He let his mind wander as he fell into the routine of spreading the base layer over the linen, preparing the canvas with a mixture of flake white and linseed oil.

Last night, spending time with art, mingling with friends from all parts of his life, with Jamie at his side or on his arm the entire time … it had been amazing, fun and scared Steve to his core. Steve didn’t actively avoid romantic relationships but he didn’t seek them out either. He had a hard enough time taking care of his own business, basic survival, that he just didn’t have the energy to handle the potential drama that came with dating.

It was a damn lousy excuse to be lonely and he knew it. The truth was he was scared to care about someone just to lose them. Love seemed just way too risky, which was ironic considering the current extremes he was going to for that exact cause.

Then there was Jamie. There was something about him that made Steve want to take the chance. Open and easy to talk to, like he’d always been a part of his little found family. Then there was his broad shoulders and blue eyes perpetually warmed with humour or fiery with anger like last night with Pierce.

Was it just him or was workshop was becoming uncomfortably hot? He holds up the canvas in the sunlight filtering in through the windows of the mechanics shop looking for the telltale sparkle of the perfect amount of ground. Somewhat satisfied, he decides to apply another layer tomorrow. The canvas gets set down to dry and he strips off the mask and practically runs right into a wall as he bounds out the door towards the Studio.
“Oof!” The wall’s surface is soft and starts to cave in, wrapping around him. Glasses already skewed Steve looks up and sees multiple images of Jamie’s face smiling down at him. He can’t help but smile back, arms locked to his sides as he’s trapped by strong arms. There is absolutely no bite in his voice as he admonishes, “Jerk! I can barely see anything, you take up so much space!”

A laugh rumbles through Jamie’s chest and Steve can honestly say he’d like to stay there forever. “You can’t see period, Stevie.” His arms tighten around him further sending his glasses right off his face.

Steve pinches his sides just over his hips in revenge and Jamie yelps and jumps away, deftly reaching out a hand and saving Steve’s glasses from falling to the ground. “Punk, I’m ticklish! And now I’ll have to take you out ‘cause you know my weakness.”

Immediately missing the feel of Jamie around him but not knowing how to fix it, he reclams his glasses and playfully pushes the other man towards the Studio, “C’mon, I’m taking a break.”

Jamie looks suddenly subdued, the high spirits of the moment drastically toned down, making Steve quickly go over the past few moments for a reason for the shift in mood but coming up empty. He nods and follows Steve inside.

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Steve busies himself tidying his paint, pride and embarrassment warring with each other as he watches Jamie slowly move around the room looking at his work. It’s not like it’s the first time the man’s been in his personal space, but that was before Steve had decided to maybe try for something more. When he can’t rearrange the tubes of pigment anymore he takes a steadying breath and turns to face the room. Jamie turns towards him, smiling away whatever seriousness had seemed to come over him outside, and Steve bites hard on his lip to stop anything dumb from spilling out. It’s the crinkle around eyes that shine, the way one side of his mouth stays hooked in a grin even as he relaxes. Pay attention, Rogers, he’s talking to you.

Jamie gestures around the room, “These are amazing, Steve, really. Every time I’m in here I could spend all day.” He turns to a particular piece, a reproduction of Van Gogh’s bedroom with tiny white tablets spilled around the glass of water on the desk, a copy of Weapons of Math Destruction on the rumpled blankets. Bucky is bent over looking around the painting, “It’s like treasure hunting.”

Steve swallows and looks skyward, trying not to ogle his friend. Words fail him and he only manages a weak, “Thank you.” Steve blinks against the bright contrast of the clear corrugated plastic in his ceiling that lets in the afternoon sun. For a moment he thinks his gratitude was not only directed at Jamie, but at whatever forces brought him into his life, whatever is out there that let the constant ache in joints ease up for one day, the clouds in his mind to part for a while to let him enjoy just … being. It’s the closest he’s come to something like praying since...

“Who is she?”

Steve’s attention is snapped back to Jamie who is now standing in front of a drawing hanging near his work table. It is a line drawing, black ink on cream textured paper, simply framed. “That’s my mother.” Steve looks at the smooth lines that shape her hair, her eyes, the short strokes that cross and mingle to form depth and shadow. He is vaguely aware of Jamie watching him, but he’s lost in the
detail of his mother’s eyes. *Is that a reflection of something? I never noticed before…*

“It’s beautiful. Did you…?”

Jamie’s voice snaps Steve back from his thoughts. When he looks over Jamie is gesturing to the drawing. They are standing only inches apart, Steve must have moved forward unconsciously. Jamie nudges his side and gestures back to the drawing with a nod of his head.

“Uhhhhhm….me? No! No, I wish. I’m not very good with ink. Friend of mine drew her for me, just before she...died.” Jamie’s face immediately falls. His eyebrows shoot together with a look that can only be described as a repentant puppy. Steve is desperate to change the tone before an apology or regret comes tumbling out of Jamie’s mouth. “Fox! My friend, that’s her name.” Steve spins around to a shelf bowing under the weight of all the books and papers piled on top of it. He grabs a large art book with glossy pages, the words *Art in Society* seemingly spray painted across the cover. He balances the book on a bench and flips through the pages “She is a great artist.” Jamie ambles up beside him, leaning close over his shoulder as his eyes flick over the photographs of outdoor art installations fly by.

Freshly ground coffee and soap... Steve thinks vaguely. “Besides drawing in ink she does these amazing crochet sculptures.”

Jamie’s breath ghosts across his ear and Steve shivers, imperceptibly, he hopes. “Like covering sculptures in crocheted tea cosies or something?”

Steve can’t help the embarrassing giggle that escapes. He quickly covers it up with a teasing tone, “No, you jerk.” He settles on the page he was looking for and unfolds the centre spread. It is an aerial photograph of the Gherkin office building in London. Along one side long, dark tendrils belonging to what one can only imagine is some Eldritch horror appear to stretch out from beneath the city. “I mean that she can sculpt just about anything you can think of by using crochet and stuffing. It’s mostly fantastical creatures, though RDJ, uh Robert Downey Jr., once commissioned her to do a portrait of sorts.” Steve’s fingers trace along a tentacle that snakes around the building below a bank of windows, as though squeezing and pulling it downwards into the dark, “This is the project that really got the most attention so far.”

Jamie’s arm slides across Steve’s middle as he reaches for the page. His body practically curls around Steve’s as he leans in to get a better look, “That is incredible! It’s crochet? By one person?”

Steve flips to the next page where a series of close-ups from sidewalk level were made of the impressive structure.”Yes to the crochet, no to the just one person. Fox designed it but outsourced most of the work. She organized thousands of caretakers, stay-at-home parents, the great untapped and unpaid workforce. Those who didn’t already know how to crochet learned pretty quick from some online videos and local workshops. It was a huge social project. Each piece was made from recycled plastics. Just garbage that would otherwise be sitting around in landfills or blowing around on the streets. The millions that went into the commission were spent on making the materials and paying for the work to be completed. It was … awesome. A bit of a logistical nightmare, you can imagine.” Steve chuckles as he thinks back to the days when he could travel, “I actually helped out a bit, you know.” He looks over at Bucky who is already looking at him with something undefinable, but soft, in his eyes. “I was in art school over there. Volunteered for the assembly.”

Jamie worries his lower lip with his teeth and Steve swears his eyes drop quickly to his mouth, lets out a breath he had been holding, “That must have been amazing.”

Steve nods, “Yeah. Yes, it was.” He looks back down to the book, “It was up there staring into the souls of CEO’s and scaring the crap out of money makers for almost two years before the sun and rain degraded the plastic enough that they had to take it down.” He looks back up to the sketch of his mother, “By that time, ma had gotten real sick.” He closes the book and looks back up at Jamie. His
mouth stretches into a smile, even if he can’t feel it, “So, I came back. Haven’t left Brooklyn since.”

Jamie is quiet in a way that makes something solid in Steve’s chest start to contract. Something has changed, but he he can’t think what. He closes the book and puts it down on the table before looking back up. Jamie looks...stricken, warring with himself, “What are you doing, Steve?”

The solid dread in his chest drops into his stomach, “Why do I get the feeling that we’re not talking about art anymore.” He looks at Jamie questioningly when his friend just bites down hard on his own lip, glaring into the space above Steve’s shoulder. “Or are we?”

Those warm blue eyes snap back to Steve, an unrecognizable fire, a fury, burning within. Jamie adjusts his stance, back straightening and head back, no longer himself somehow. The tension pulling his shoulders back, lining his brow, is unrecognizable from the kind, laid-back jokester he’s come to know. “I know what you are doing for Pierce. I know about the copy.”

The walls of the Studio warp, closing in around Steve as the dread starts to curdle into horror. Jamie cannot know. “What?”

Jamie stalks over to his easel and flips through the paintings there, finally pulling out a canvas from behind a stack of half-finished works. He looks miserable as he holds up the practice Rubens.

Steve rushes forward and snatches the canvas out of his hands, panic sending adrenaline flooding through his system. I can’t let him get dragged into this! He replaces the painting and pushes Jamie away from it, “You don’t know. You don’t want to know. Pierce is…” He runs a frustrated hand through his hair. What can he tell him to get him to forget about it, “He’s dangerous, OK? The only reason….look, just drop it. I don’t know how you…”

How did you know?

Steve’s mind races over his memories of the past several weeks. He had been so careful! It’s not like he exactly had frequent visitors at his studio. He looks up at Jamie, now standing taller in that unfamiliar gait, face framed in hard lines, his mouth a grim slash. His eyes hold a look of what? Sadness? Steve’s confusion was already turning to angry resolve, “Whatever you think you know, you can’t be involved. Jamie, listen to me, I can’t risk you…”

“My name is Bucky.”

Steve felt the weight in his chest turn to ice, but Jamie, Bucky? continued faster than he could absorb the information, leaving his mind spinning.

“My name is not Jamie. It’s James Buchanan Barnes, but my friends used to call me Bucky. No one calls me that anymore but that’s my real name.” The upright stance is failing fast as he runs both hands through his hair in an effort to control his rambling. It does nothing but confuse Steve further. Then, “I’m an agent, a secret agent, for the government, sort of.”

This was too much, “A sort-of government agent. You.” Steve can hear the sarcasm dripping in his own voice, a defence mechanism he’d developed since he was a kid as he tried to process the bigger shit life threw at him. And this? Definitely counted.

Jamie, Bucky, whoever, looks like he can hardly believe it himself. “Look! I first came here because my bosses got wind of something bad going down and Pierce and his business is involved. And you’re right. He is dangerous, and I get the impression that he doesn’t let go of what he considers his. Not without a high price.”
Steve can barely process *An undercover maybe-government agent named Bucky?* He takes a step away, then two, but Bucky follows “You are already paying, Steve, I can see what this is doing to you. And I don’t think you know the half of what Pierce will take.”

Steve is backed into his work table, nowhere else to go. Bucky reaches out for him, like he knows him, needs him. And that, *that* is not possible. He hits his hand away and pushes this stranger back with two hands against a broad chest, “Don’t touch me.” He can feel the blood start to pulse behind his eyes, “Maybe I don’t know exactly what Pierce is involved in, though apparently you do.” He can’t keep the venom of accusation out of his voice, and tries to ignore the growing desperation that he sees in the man in front of him, “But I know exactly what Pierce will take if I don’t work with him. And there is nothing,” He pushes the man he thought was his friend, was hoping could be more, away from him again, “Nothing I will not do to protect those I care about.”

The man called Bucky, who’d drawn himself up taller, harder, with every blow from Steve, visibly deflates before him. He sighs heavily but Steve can barely hear it through the sound of his pulse pounding behind his ears. Bucky’s arms flap at his sides, he looks lost. *He’s probably lying to you now, pretending as he’s been all along.* His voice is soft, “C’mon Stevie, just breathe OK? You’re going to give yourself a heart attack or something. I know,” and now he tries to move forward again, “I know about your heart.” And for a wild moment Steve thinks he’s talking about his feelings until, “I know that the meds can be hard to get.” His voice trails off but Steve hears what he was going to say anyways *Hard to say no to the kind of money that would make his health problems go away.*

And that punches the fight out of Steve as much as the air from his lungs. He can barely rise above a whisper, “Is that what you think? That I jumped into this hole with Brock and Pierce because of the money?” When he’s met with helpless silence Steve just nods, resigned. He rubs a hand over and over his chest, but he just can’t loosen it up.

Bucky reaches out for him again but Steve evades him and stalks to the studio door, throwing it open, “Get out.” When Bucky doesn’t move and starts in with another pleading *C’mon, Stevie* he summons every ounce of command and chill he can muster, “Now.”

He leaves without another word and Steve waits until his footsteps are out of earshot before closing the door and sliding to the floor.

He dribbles once, twice, lines up the shot and let’s the ball fly through the air. It catches the rim and circles a few times before finally succumbing to gravity and falling through. The muscles in his arms are screaming at him, almost as loud as his lungs as he draws in the cool dawn air. He doesn’t even remember fetching the ball before he’s back in front of the net: one, two, set it free.

This time the ball catches the rim and bounces off towards the street. He pushes his glasses on top of his head and uses the inside of his collar to wipe the sweat from his brow. It’s getting harder and harder to find the energy to drag himself to chase after it, but it seems he needn’t bother this time as his ball materializes in front of him, rolling into view and lightly bouncing off his foot. He looks up and half expects to see Jamie No, *Agent Bucky*.

“Sam.” He doesn’t bother to hide his relief.

Sam jogs lightly onto the court, “I could see you shooting hoops from two blocks away.” He looks over to the sun starting to peak above the low buildings surrounding the park. “Sun’s coming up, just
about your bedtime, ain’t it?”

Sam is teasing him and he knows he should laugh back, make a sarcastic joke, change the subject, but he can barely bring himself to smile and his chuckle sounds hollow in his own ears. Steve is a shit actor and Sam immediately picks up on the lie, “Hey, “ he says softly, “What’s on your mind, Cap?”

The old childhood nickname brings back a flood of memories. Steve had always been a bit of a bossy one when they’d been kids. Always with some plan to protest some neighbours houses being knocked down to make way for a fancy condo, or organizing the kids to stand up to some delinquents who’d been messing around trying to break into Erskine’s drug store. Something that would inevitably get them into trouble. He feels heavy all of a sudden, pushing out a sigh like the world is pushing down on his lungs. Sam herds him over to the picnic table and he grabs his hoodie, already starting to get chilled from the lack of movement in the cool morning air.

Sam had always been a great listener, endless patience that could outlast an ice age, which was good because Steve could sit and stew in his own anger for about that long. His friend waited him out now, sitting relaxed, spinning the basketball balanced on one finger, not showing off, just needing something to do with his hands. Sam hadn’t really been able to sit still since …

He doesn’t think before blurting, “Sam, what happened in the desert?” The ball stops spinning and Steve immediately regrets his bluntness, “I mean, I’m not asking details.” Sam arches an eyebrow, “You don’t have to tell me anything, I’m sorry.” Steve shakes his head, disappointed in himself and Sam starts spinning the ball again, waiting. Steve tries to gather the words for what he really wants to say. He knows he should tell his friend the truth about Jamie, or at least whatever story Agent Bucky had given him. But then he may have to explain how he knows it to be true, the truth about him and Pierce, and Steve just can’t risk that. Sam is waiting for him to say something, so he starts slowly. “I thought I had a line I wouldn’t cross, and I was so sure of it. I could see it clear as anything, like dark ink across a blank page. But then it starts bleeding into the paper and now I’m not exactly sure where it is. I’ve been pushed to the other side, I thought, but how do you know what side of it you’re on after being spun around?” He looks over to Sam who is gazing back at him, the ball still and unmoving in his grip.

Sam lets out a little huff, “You are shit at analogies, Cap.”

The laugh bubbles out of Steve before he can stop it. He’s about to say forget it when Sam continues, “Stop, stop. I do know what you mean.” Now it’s Steve’s turn to wait. Sam turns his gaze forward, looking off as though he is seeing straight through the trees and tenant buildings and straight out to the horizon. “Keeping with your apt analogy,” he elbows Steve in the ribs, but he doesn’t smile and he doesn’t look away from the horizon, “When I was on the job overseas, I redrew that line so many times I figured I broke the damn pen altogether.” Steve shuffles closer and leans into Sam’s side. He looks over the same trees and buildings and tries to see what his friend sees, but all he sees is a path leading to ice cold blue. Sam leans back into him and his voice is just about a whisper, “Sometimes life throws you in some pretty fucked up situations and you find out exactly what you would do for those you care about.”

Steve nods, that is a sentiment he can understand, and gets the feeling that Sam’s words on the subject are final, at least for now. On silent consensus they return to something resembling normality, playing a few friendly one-on-one’s until Steve’s warmed up again. Sam claims it’s time for breakfast but Steve’s pretty sure it’s just because his breathing is starting to run just a little too fast. He doesn’t mind the excuse, and they bounce the ball between them as they head over to the bagel shop. Steve wonders if Jamie will show up anymore, if he should tell Sam over breakfast or wait and see if he just disappears. He wonders if secret-ish sort-of government agents have a line and what it
would look like. Probably something thin, a piano wire that they could pick up and twist any which way to suit their immediate need. He thinks about the first time Agent Bucky had come into the shop and smiled at him, how different he’d seemed than the Jamie who came out to play ball, who talked for hours with Steve at the park or in his studio. The Jamie who’d stood between him and Pierce at the gallery. C’mon Stevie, the familiar use of his name coming from Bucky had felt like that line had been laid around him, drawn taught and pulled.
Hawkeye’s Revisited

“Remember rule number one? I’m about to break it. Please don’t stab me.”

Red’s sigh of resignation is so powerful it temporarily blows Bucky’s bangs off his face letting in a painful amount of daylight to sting his bleary, sleep deprived eyes. “There’s only the one rule, Mags. However, considering your moping has been getting progressively worse for a week now, just spill it.”

Bucky looks around to make sure they are relatively alone. Hawkeye is in the back refilling the Poker Clubs cups and entertaining them with some story about his dog and some misunderstanding about pizza or the pizza guy? Bucky could hardly concentrate what with the rain pounding down on the walk outside, the eighties new wave on repeat pouring out of Hawkeye’s old stereo, and the thoughts of his idiocy with the Steve situation tormenting him. He knows he looks pathetic, he can barely sleep, dark circles around his eyes, unshaved, unconditioned hair. He hasn’t been Jamie for days, just keeps working the problem with Pierce in isolation. When he’s not on surveillance or recon he’s thrown himself into his accounting cover, working overtime. He couldn’t leave Jamie completely, such was his desperation for that life. He’d cautiously played a bit of street ball with Sam the night after his fight with Steve, an evening he knew the artist wouldn’t be there, feeling out if Steve had mentioned anything about him. Nothing had been different, nothing at all. Steve hadn’t said a word and Bucky couldn’t decide if he was relieved or gutted that he could be easily forgotten. He gave Sam a story about a sister in Indiana he was going to visit for awhile. Sam had pulled him in for a hug and told him to take care of himself. Bucky had left wondering if Sam didn’t know something after all.

Red is giving airs of bored impatience but her eyes look worried. He takes a gulp of coffee, then another, then pushes his cup out of arms reach. In second thought he grabs Red’s cup and moves it as far from her as possible. The boredom has turned to annoyance, so Bucky bites the bullet before she murders him, “I have fallen for my mark.”

A perfectly sculpted eyebrow arches upwards minutely, “Your mark has fallen … off a roof? Mags, we have cleaners for that.”

Bucky drags a hand roughly over his face, this is harder than I thought. “No, no. My mark hasn’t fallen. It’s me that fell.” As Red’s gaze scans up and down his body looking for injuries Bucky knows he’s failing at this. Time for full disclosure. “Red, stop. I’ve fallen in love with my mark.”

Red looks at him with such pity Bucky slumps further over the counter in defeat, he can barely stand it. “No, Mags, that’s rule number one.”

Bucky laughs without humour, “Why is every rule rule number one ?”

She smacks him hard on the arm, “Rule number one of what not to do. Fool.” Bucky fidgets under her intense searching gaze, “There’s more.”

Bucky swallows, his mouth suddenly dry. He tries to take a drink but his cup is empty. Without meeting her eyes he speaks to the bottom of his cup, “I kinda also told him who I was and why I was there.”

He flinches for a hit that never comes. When he dares to look back up at his friend and colleague he expects to see anger, disappointment or more pity. He is shocked to find Red laughing at him instead. A full-bellied, bent over, wheezy, knee-slapping laugh. Bucky looks around but there is decidedly
nothing funny on either side or behind him. He leans over the counter propping his head on his hand and waits.

Eventually the belly laughs give way to cackling which in turn gives way to giggles every time she meets his ever so patient gaze. By the time Hawkeye has returned and refilled their cups Red has returned to some semblance of her usual poised self, “Are you done laughing at me?”

Red glances quickly at Hawkeye, who is waiting for a carafe to fill to bring to the Club at the back. Over his shoulder he gives her a grin and a wink before succumbing to the calls for more coffee from the borderline rowdy group. Bucky watches the pair with undisguised misery. Red reaches out and takes his hand in both of hers, “I am not laughing at you, Mags. It’s just when the universe insists on throwing the same fuck ups together there’s literally no other reaction. Except weeping, and I don’t do weeping.”

Bucky tried to pull his hand free but Red’s grip is like a vice, “What could you have possibly ever done to even remotely qualify as a fuckup of my caliber, huh? You’ve been agent of the month, like, I can’t even count, you’re always agent of the month!” He relents his struggle to free himself and settles back down in a slump, staring back at Red not even bothering to cover how pathetic he is feeling. The part of him that had no trouble betraying the rest of him couldn’t help but note that Red’s hands were just about the same size as Steve’s. Steeeeeeve.

Red was facing him but markedly looking over at Hawkeye, who’d returned to his machines to brew another pot while whistling along to some romantically broody song about how great it was to be with the person you loved, the bastard. Who played new wave love songs when their friends were obviously pining? Red looked back at him, made sure she had his attention by squeezing his knuckles, then looked back at Hawkeye. She repeated it five more times before Bucky was about to burst into tears from confusion. Just because she was a super spy didn’t mean everything had to be so cryptic, you know?

When the coffee slinger slapped a towel over his shoulder, gave Red another wink as he headed over to clean up some tables and she smiled all heart-eyes at him, then Bucky finally got it. Holy shit. He yanked her hands forward and whispered furiously, “You and Hawkeye!?!? You told him.”

Red gives him a little shrug and lets his hand go gently back to his lap. He doesn’t think he’d ever seen her shy before, but her voice wobbles a little bit, “Life is short, maybe even shorter for people like us. Love, trust, these are very rare things, Mags, too rare to let go of.”

Bucky nods and rubs a hand over his face again, wishing he could just wipe it away. Had he had those rare and precious things and fucked it up for good? He frowns into his coffee and thinks morosely I don’t think I can take any more surprises.

His phone chooses that moment to start vibrating out of its casing. He stares at it as it migrates across the counter and hits his cup before he reads the caller ID: Scott Lang.

Bucky picks up the phone and looks at Red in silent question Are you in? Please please please please. Red purses her lips, briefly looks as though she regrets all her life choices that have led to this moment, then gives him a curt nod, and a silent Fiiiिऀीिलीििे.

Bucky answers the call and holds the phone between them, practically knocking heads as they listen
in, “Scott, what’s up?”

“...two, with everything. Oh hey! Winston, dude, you will never believe what I’ve found.”


“Yeah, we’re just getting something to eat.” In the background comes a Best tacos in the barrio, yo!

Bucky shares a concerned look with Red, “We?”

Obviously talking around the food in his mouth, “Yeah, my buddy Luis, we go way back.” From before the Rock comes from behind and Bucky is pretty sure he means prison. He doesn’t have a file on this Luis which makes him uncomfortable to say the least. Scott keeps chewing and talking, “So, remember a while ago when we were talking about how cool it would be to upload ourselves to the Net and how everything has a second life online?”

Bucky barely suppresses his internal glee that the seeds he’d sewn may indeed produce fruit after all, “Yeah, like how everything is connected no matter how random they seem.”

The sound of chewing makes Bucky cringe, but Scott continues regardless, “So, I found something chew chew and I think I need an chew accountant.”

There’s a sound of scuffling and Bucky strains his ears, “Scott? You still there?”

He exchanges a worried look with Red when a new voice comes on the line, “Yo, hey, Winston, Luis here, I just had to save you from having to suffer through Scott trying to talk around his food like he grew up in a barn. Let go Scott and chew your damn tacos, I ain’t doing the Heimlich again brah!” Red arches a brow and Bucky just shrugs. He barely gets out a Hey, Luis before the guy launches into their story.

“So like Scotty said we found something that’s not so much like online resurrection of old shit but more like the living dead bro, I’m talking something that the world thought was dead and buried but in actuality its heart is still beating. And before you go thinking oh sweet that’s nice, this thing is like the embodiment of pure evil. Like if we had a metaphorical wooden stake I’d be going all Buffy on it’s ass, know what I’m sayin’? Though for reals I’d be Willow with all the magic n’ shit but like Dark Willow when she had to avenge her true love Tara, but in this case my true love is all that is good in this world and I would NOT feel bad about flaying this particular asshole, so like I can totally skip the redemption arc and we can just party.”

Bucky is blinking rapidly trying to process Luis’ rapid speech. Meanwhile Red is just nodding along like she gets every word. Luis seems to be waiting for a response so Bucky just goes with it, “Can I be Angel?”

In the background Scott pipes up I guess I’m Xander . Again.

Red interrupts the digression, “What did you find exactly?”

There is a moment of silence before Luis comes back to himself, “Oh hey another member of the Scooby gang, cool cool cool. Right, oh man this feels like He Who Must Not Be Named you know? Like invoking the boogeyman. Stop slapping my arm Scott! I’m getting to it.” There is what can only be described as a dramatic pause before Luis stage whispers into the phone, “Hydra.”
Bucky’s eyes snap to Nat, whose brow is furrowed. “Hydra? World War II era secret Nazi science division Hydra?”

“Shhhhh keep your voice down bro, damn. But yes, and it is totally messed up. We were just messing around looking for connections in the news, especially those low key newsreel stories that scroll across the bottom of your screen, the ones that have like actually super important implications but the newscasters are like forced to talk about celebrities n/ shit, when Scott, uhm, stumbled completely unexpectedly upon a hole in the optimization software from the logistics department of this shipping company and found some seriously questionable international routing. I’m talking the least efficient scheduling I have ever seen bro, but like produced by some serious kick ass machine learning algorithms, this is like Skynet quality AI dude! But what kind of a HAL program keeps ships going between Brooklyn and Nice fuckin France before going on their merry way down to South America, ya know? Hopping the pond is just a saying, homes. And the shipping manifests brah, like super normal crates of mopeds or cars or whatever but then like a whole crate for a single 16-core IBM supercomputer from 10 years ago? That may sound like one of those Cray’s that take up an entire room but you’d be wrong dawg! it’s more like, a desktop, bro. The art is kinda weird too, but who knows, they probably need special environmental conditions ya know? Like special archiving crates. But why wouldn’t you fly that shit around? Anyways, so like we thought you could take a look at the numbers, see if they speak to you.”

Bucky’s heart sinks. He ignores that highly improbable accidentally super illegal discovery of some network back door, “Which shipping company?”

“Star something, what was it Scott?” Bucky holds his breath as he waits for Scott to stop chewing, “Lemurian International, the Lemurian Star was the name of the ship.”

_Shit. Stevie what have you fallen in to?_ Bucky has never felt panic before. He’d trained for years to suppress emotions in the face of danger before even being assigned his first solo mission. This _thing_ blooming in his chest, accelerating his breathing and making his eyes sting, was the unfamiliar feeling of fear. He looks to Red for some stability but she’s looking away, distracted.

Red gestures behind him towards the front door, “I think Buffy just walked in.”

Bucky whips around practically losing his grip on the phone, “Steve.”

Bucky makes a plan to meet up with Scott and Luis later that night at the Public library so they can show him everything they’d found. Bucky is close to offering them a job recommendation for Shield already but the small blonde in the doorway looking straight at him is a bit distracting. He hangs up, puts the phone away in his pocket and swivels to face the music. Yet another unfamiliar feeling, nervousness, sends useless energy into his hands so he sits on them to keep from shaking. He ignores the little chuckle Red gives behind him and waits. Steve is hesitant at first but tips his chin up and beelines for Bucky.

He stops short just out of arm's reach, “Ja...Bucky. I need to talk to you.”

Red’s head pops up around his shoulder and she stage whispers, “Who the hell is Bucky?” Bucky has the sudden _oh shit_ realization that Steve has just inadvertently outed him to his super spy best
friend, when said superspy thrusts her hand out and introduces herself, “Hi, I’m Nat.” Nat??? Oblivious to his carefully constructed life crumbling all around him, Red continues “This is Hawkeye. He makes coffee.”

As Bucky quietly suffers a mild existential crisis, Steve reaches out and shakes Reds hand then Hawkeye’s, introducing himself, “Steve.” Hawkeye holds up a mug and Steve shrugs apologetically, “Can I just have a cup of hot water? I have my own tea.”

Hawkeye breaks out into a smile, obviously pleased, “I like a man who comes prepared. For you, one of my special big mugs.”

As Red leans back into her seat and Hawkeye fills the large Coffee Goddess mug with water, Bucky squashes his hands down a little harder under his thighs and risks opening his mouth, “How did you find me?”

Steve raises an eyebrow and looks at him with a disappointed like it’s so hard and points towards the Poker Club where Pepe can be heard regaling his audience with stories from the shop. Ah, yes, Steve’s employer and landlord. Minor oversight, he convinces himself so he doesn’t add gross incompetence to his list of miseries. Steve is biting his lower lip now, holding back laughter no doubt, and Bucky can’t help but stare. He hopes the longing isn’t too obvious. Steve gestures to a table on the other side of the room, “I need to talk to you. It’s about Pierce.”

Bucky nods and follows him over to the table, carrying Steve’s mug of water and his own coffee cup which Hawkeye had pointedly filled with decaf. He takes a deep breath and forcibly steadies his hands. Steve just needs to talk business, so to speak, and Bucky should be happy he was reaching out. Disappointment blooms in his chest regardless, but makes Bucky doubly determined to keep focus and get Steve out of this mess.

As Steve rips open a packet of peppermint tea and places it in his mug, Bucky takes a fortifying sip of his drink and makes a decision that Steve deserves to know as much truth as he can give him, “Pierce’s business likely goes deeper than ripping off some well-off art collector.” He lowers his voice a bit more and leans forward over the table, “I don’t know all of the details yet, but there’s reason to believe that Pierce is involved in some high-stakes political power grab that runs deep and has been gearing up for probably decades.”

Steve’s brow furrows as he takes in Bucky’s rather vague suspicions but ends up nodding like he’s not all that surprised, “That could explain why the meet with the buyer took place in an abandoned warehouse surrounded by a bunch of armed suits who looked less like hired guards and more like a small army of homeland security.”

Bucky started in surprise, “Pierce brought you along? Why?”

Steve sighs, “I don’t know.”

He rubs the inside of left forearm and Bucky narrows his eyes at the likely subconscious gesture. He restrains himself from reaching out to confirm his suspicions, “They hurt you.”

Steve laughs self-deprecatingly, shaking his head, looking anywhere but at Bucky, “Just Rumlow trying to make a point.” He looks up at Bucky, the conviction unmistakable, “It doesn’t matter what they do to me. I can’t let them hurt anyone, do you understand?” Steve leans forward, his whispered voice lit instantaneously in its fury. They are inches apart and as uncomfortable as the sudden intensity is he cannot look away, “This isn’t my job, Bucky. I cannot afford to lose sight again that I’m not alone in this, that they will hurt people, my people. I have to do what they want.” And the fury suddenly changes to desperation and Bucky hates it, but he can’t reach out, he can only listen.
“But I can’t let them get away with it either, especially if you’re right and this is somehow something bigger that can hurt more people.” The solid conviction seems to flow straight up through Steve, brightening his eyes and lifting his chin. “I can help you to bring down Pierce.” Then he repeats the words Bucky hates the most, “It doesn’t matter what happens to me.”

“Well it matters to me.” Bucky was probably done calculating his moves weeks ago, so the desire to blurt out his feelings shouldn’t really surprise him, but he draws back in shock regardless. As Steve starts to raise a skeptical brow he decides he needs to repeat his own message until it gets through, “You matter to me, Steve. You don’t have to believe it right now, I know I never really stood a chance with you, for you to trust me.” Bucky runs a hand over his face and really regrets that he hadn’t at least tried to shave. He drops his hand and looks back into that open gaze trying so hard to look disbelieving, but Steve couldn’t be cruel if he tried, not on purpose. “But you don’t have to trust me. In a couple hours I’m meeting with the computer geniuses who found a connection between Pierce, this shipping company and some other nefarious shit that to be honest I am getting real sick of dealing with. You can come and hear straight from them what’s up. I am this close to retiring, Steve, I swear to god I was not meant for this working in the shadows crap.”

To his surprise Steve laughs, “Let me guess, you’re more of a fast car, fancy party kinda secret government-ish agent. I’ve seen your Honda, Buck, you must be suffering indeed.”

Bucky pouts, “Hey, I’ll have you know the Civic can go 0 to 60 in 4.5 seconds. You’ll find out what she can do if you come with tonight.” He tries to keep the hopefulness out of his tone, he really does.

Steve doesn’t stop scrutinizing him, even as he drinks from his ridiculously huge mug, as though he has all the time in the word to dissect Bucky with his eyes. Bucky summons all of his super spy training to keep from squirming uncontrollably and melting into a puddle of goo on the table. Finally, “Can you pick me up at the shop later? I need to wrap up a few things if I’m gonna be out all evening.”

Bucky’s heartbeat starts to speed up in anticipation but he reminds himself that they have actual serious potentially life-saving business to attend to. “Yeah, yeah of course. I should probably shower or something.” Steve laughs at him again but otherwise nods his assent and starts to re-buckle his messenger bag, getting ready to go. Bucky can’t help a last hopeful, “Are we good, Steve?”

Steve nods again, this time looking up and biting his lip which just makes Bucky’s heart flip flop damn it all! “Yeah, we’re good.”

Steve gets up slowly and at first Bucky thinks that they are done and he’s leaving and his heart leaps like it’s going to reach out and keep him there. Maybe it works or maybe Steve’s intention never was to go because he comes to stand beside Bucky, pushing into his space until Bucky instinctively pushes his chair back to give him room. Bucky tries to breathe normally as Steve steps over his legs and slowly lowers himself down until he is straddling him, settling into his lap and resting sure hands on his shoulder and neck. Bucky can’t keep the slight tremble out of his hands anymore as he raises them to gently encase Steve’s hips. Steve eyes him with that earnest look of his, “I have been accused of being pushy before.”

Bucky reaches up and nudges Steve’s nose with his own, testing, “I like pushy.”

Steve draws back and pins him with his steady gaze and Bucky feels himself clinging to it like an anchor. “I can tell when you are pretending.” Now it’s Bucky’s turn to look skeptical but it just makes Steve laugh again, a deep chuckle that Bucky can feel through his hands, “Yeah, super spy, you heard me.” His gaze dips down to his mouth, “It’s that mouth of yours.” Bucky gets a light slap on the neck for his lewd smirk but it was so worth it to see the blush starting to creep up from under Steve’s collar. Steve ignores it, “Looking back I can pinpoint the exact moment your smile went
from something you’d use to something you … felt.” He trails off and looks back up.

Now Bucky was curious, “Oh yeah, when was that?”

Steve just grins, cups Bucky’s face in his hands and swoops in for a teasing kiss that lights up Bucky’s nerves despite its brevity. Bucky’s face instinctually follows those lips as Steve just hums, leans back and starts to get up. Bucky lets his fingers trail up, grabbing his hands as he steps away. Steve gives him a parting smirk, squeezes his hands before letting go and walks towards the door. “Pick me up at 3.”

Bucky nods dumbly, “See you,” and watches the front shop window until Steve is out of sight. What just happened? He sighs happily and looks over to the front counter where his friends are grinning madly. Hawkeye raises the coffee pot in his hand in salute and did Red just wipe away a tear?

Bucky is about to take a step forward when a firm grip on his elbow holds him back. He twists his head around to find Pepe regarding him seriously, the table of faces behind him all turned towards Bucky with identical hardened looks. “If you hurt him, hijo, you’ll have to answer to us.” Bucky can feel the blood drain from his face as he nods in understanding at the Club. This was worse than that time he was caught out by those mobsters in Moscow. Pepe beams at him and slaps his shoulder none too gently before returning to the table. Bucky feels like he somehow just escaped by the skin of his teeth.

It was like all of his childhood fantasies were coming true.

They were sitting around an old wooden table in a gloomy corner of the basement of the Public Library on 42nd, surrounded by the old card catalogues on one side and floor to ceiling shelves stacked with obscure medical journals on the other. He half expected to look up and see an ethereal spectre floating among the stacks. Considering the group discussion subject matter, he could be forgiven for his imagination going a bit wild.

It was just like when he had first become an agent, with the intrigue and recovering priceless art. Sure it was actually standard data recovery, and not the art itself per se, but Bucky couldn’t be happier. They were going to get Steve out of this and then he would see about possibly retiring, blowing his savings on an apartment in Brooklyn, taking up another skill like...well he was good with knives, maybe sushi chef?

A sharp elbow to the ribs was enough to burst him out of his reverie. Steve was looking at him with a raised eyebrow, bemused. Luis, across from him at the table, spun his laptop around and pushed it toward Bucky, “See anything that catches your eye, bro, besides the Art Boss and that French dude from the news?”

Bucky pulls the screen closer and scans the cargo manifest. The dates were around the time of Baltrocs murder appearing in the news feeds. Pierce’s art business was listed with some works being shipped to what appeared as Montevideo ... via Marseille, as per the twisted pond hopping route that Scott and Luis had sussed out. However, Baltroc was not listed as the recipient, nor any other French government agent, but rather a private citizen, name unlisted. Bucky was willing to bet it was a smokescreen and that the real merchandise was being delivered along the way, and if that were so …. Bucky’s suspicions are confirmed soon after as he scans down the pages of manifest and finds Baltroc himself as the contact for some tech cargo, probably matching that of Luis’ description of the
old computer if he followed the document trail. He scans over to the recipient and the name immediately jumps out at him.

He looks sharply up at Scott who is looking back at him, smiling and nodding, “Weird, right?”

Bucky readily agrees, though is definitely not in the mood to smile, “Weird. Definitely.”

Steve and Luis are looking back and forth between them. Luis breaks immediately, “What what what? Don’t leave us hanging bros.” Scott pulls back the laptop and points to a name near the bottom of the list. “Schmidtcorp e.V. for Fury Office Supply Europe Inc. Ooookayyyy.” Luis looks up and wags a finger between Scott and Bucky, “Yo, ain’t that where you two work?”

Bucky and Steve share a look. During the ride on the way over Bucky had explained Scott, Luis and his cover job to Steve. They didn’t know about Bucky’s real job, and he wanted to keep it that way, at least until this thing with Pierce was over. Steve, for his part, had seemed to take it all in stride only remarking, “Accountant, huh? That explains your hands.” He’d refused to explain and only cackled mercilessly when Bucky had attacked his middle with his so-called accountant’s hands. But he could hardly complain especially when the giggles had petered out and Steve's hand had remained in his, fingers comfortably twined together as Bucky shifted gears. Steve takes his hand again now and gives it a squeeze. Bucky heaves a sigh, “Yeah, yeah it is. But I have never seen mention of this European supplier in any of the accounts.”

Scott types furiously on the keyboard, “Good thing we didn’t stop at Lemurian Shipping then.” He turns the laptop so everyone can see it and starts scrolling through online articles, “Schmidtcorp’s presence online is pretty low key, but there are definite mentions between them and security agencies of several governments, including our own.”

Bucky starts reading a piece about lobbies in Washington from several companies, Schmidtcorp just being one of dozens when Steve asks what had apparently slipped their minds, “What about Hydra?”

Scott and Luis immediately barrage him with a resounding Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!! But Steve just looks disappointed, “It’s just a name, guys.”

“Name of the devil,” mutters Luis.

Steve is adamant, “The only power a name has is that which you give it.” Luis nods in agreement, but still looks spooked. Scott takes back the laptop and pulls up a folder.

“This,” he spins the screen back again showing a grainy photo of a group of men and women and what looks like a conference, “is the only photo we could find in all of the Net of the CEO of Schmidtcorp, Johann Schmidt and colleagues, according to Dr. Adam Wallers Facebook memories from 2008.” Scott opens another file, “I took the liberty of enlarging and cleaning up the shot as best I could. That one, there, is Schmidt. Looks familiar, right? Like he’s in a photo from totally the wrong decade.” He zooms in a bit more, “Look what’s hiding under the lapel of basically the coolest leather trench coat I have ever seen.”

Poking out from the darkness of the fabric was about half of what could be misconstrued as a stylized octopus pin, but when lingered on had the unmistakable menacing curves of the symbol of Hydra, long since relegated to the Mythos of one of the darkest chapters of recent history but somehow finding its way onto the sweater vest of some supply chain middle man?

Steve reaches over and clicks on the slightly zoomed out photo, studying the faces.
“Steve?” Steve’s scrutiny was making Bucky nervous, and he wasn’t the only one. Scott had started fidgeting and Luis looked plain spooked.

“What do you see, man? Are there like, more of those tentacle pins or something?”

Steve points at the face of a shorter man just showing between the shoulders of those in the front row. Beady eyes behind round glasses under the brim of a Fedora looked off to the side, “That man. He was with the buyer at the meeting with Pierce.”

All faces around the table lean in and look closer. Luis starts nervously tapping the table, “You sure, dude?”

Steve nods and leans back, confident, “I’m sure.” He looks back to Bucky, “The next meeting to hand over the painting is tomorrow night. On the Star.”

Bucky’s mind raced. Twenty-four hours wasn’t much, but he’d worked with far less and on his own too. He’d have to check the Fury accounts, gather his gear, scout the location of the Star … it would be tight but doable. He could probably outsource CCTV surveillance to Scott and Luis.

He held tight to Steve’s hand and smiled reassuringly to the room, “Looks like we have the beginnings of a plan.”
The Yards

Chapter Notes

**Warning for violence**

Vermilion.

The way it coated his hands in crimson and stained his sleeves you’d think he was back in his studio working on a particularly vivid painting. But no, Steve was on the deck of the Lemurian Star fighting off the nausea from what he was pretty sure was a concussion while frantically switching between compressing the wound in Bucky’s side and whatever was left of his left arm after the fight with Rumlow. Bucky moaned, a soft pained sound, and Steve had really thought that he’d forgotten about praying all together after his Mum, but the words came without conscious thought.

He was having trouble concentrating though and his gaze kept drifting over to Rumlow, body lying prone facing the sky with wide, unseeing eyes. To say that Steve’s knife buried in his chest had taken him by surprise would be an understatement. It was only in that moment, Steve thinks, that Rumlow realized that there was a bit more to Steve’s “low-life boyfriend” than he’d assumed. It was little surprise to Steve, now that he knew who Bucky was, that he’d known about the knife, knew which pocket Steve kept it in. That he’d risked taking the almost point blank shot to his arm in order to get the advantage for the killing blow was more than Steve could process at the moment. His heart couldn’t seem to choose between furious anger for idiotically putting his life at risk for him, and immense gratitude for the exact same action. For now, Bucky’s moans of pain pushed away the shame that he, Steve, was not worth such trouble. Apparently, he’d been informed on several occasions leading up to the stand off with Rumlow, that his worth was not only not up to him but also non-negotiable. Bucky proved to be even more stubborn than Steve himself, and he might just love him for it.

Steve kept talking to him as he ripped the shreds of his left sleeve away from the wound and used them as a makeshift tourniquet. He realized that staying where they were was dangerous, that others would be alerted by the noise of the fight and the ensuing gunfire, but there was nothing he could do. He could not risk moving Bucky, even if he was physically able. His phone was back in the Captain’s office when the buyer had insisted that all personal devices here dropped in a lock box for the duration of the meeting. He only hoped that Scott and Luis were continuing to monitor the CCTV network and would spot their position among the labyrinth of crates. He looked around for a camera but the movement quickly set the world spinning. He grabbed his head and waited for the motion-sickness to stop.

He tried to think back over the night so far, tried to place everyone to gauge how much time they may have before being discovered. It was a big ship and they were somewhere in the maze of stacked crates, though he was unsure how far they’d wandered from the Hydra crates after being caught out by Rumlow and the ensuing chase. An hour probably hadn’t even passed since he’d arrived with Pierce to meet the buyer.

Pierce had been...chatty during the ride down to the docks. Obviously in a good mood, he had explained to Steve that his work would be a very worthy addition to his enterprise. When Steve had
responded with cheek, “I have always aspired to be a contributing member to the business of art theft.” Pierce had only smiled, a knowing look in his piercing cool gaze. Steve had refrained from giving away their suspicions that Pierce was involved in something more along the lines information trade, but only just. Keeping his mouth shut had taken so much of his energy, that he’d felt profound relief when they’d finally reached the dockyard, even though he knew that his role was far from over.

As he’d followed Pierce up the gang plank, he couldn’t help a quick scan of the area, wondering in which shadow or which rooftop Bucky was patiently waiting to make his way on board. When he caught Rumlow considering him, he switched to looking only straight ahead and trying to observe his surroundings passively.

The plan had been for Steve to go to the meeting as planned and, if possible, prolong the time and provide distraction. Bucky, meanwhile would be listening the entire time through a microphone that looked like a little sticker with a short antenna powered by the smallest battery he’d ever seen. The entire thing was attached to the back of one of his denim jacket buttons. His instructions were to ditch it immediately if it looked like he would be scanned with anything more sophisticated than a metal detector. The intent was to get the location of the crates so that Bucky could sneak onboard, steal the information back, and sabotage Hydra’s means of passing data. Scott and Luis were on surveillance duty and would be in contact with Bucky until he boarded the ship.

As they had approached the meeting room, more and more of the Homeland security-esque guards appeared along their route. As they entered the cabin areas and approached the meeting room, one of them gestured to a large metal locker, instructing them to put their cell phones inside. Pierce seemed to expect it, phone already in hand. Steve gave his over without a fuss and got a good look at the guards uniform. A small flat black crest in the shape of a shield was imprinted on the shoulder of the tactical suit, but no name accompanied it. Wasn’t Bucky’s agency part of Shield? He tried to remember the official government logo but he was immediately distracted by one of Pierce’s entourage, the guy carrying the painting was unable to hold both the frame and fish his phone out of his suit pocket. Rumlow yanked it out none too gently and gestured impatiently for the man to get into the room. Despite the guards, it seemed as though the group was not expecting much trouble if locking up cellphones was the extent of their precaution.

Steve should have known that at the first sign that this may be easier than they’d thought they were already doomed.

Bucky’s breath was becoming rapid and shallow and he hadn’t made another noise in over a minute. The blood flowing from his arm wound seems to have slowed to a trickle, which had to be good, right? Steve’s eyes snapped open as soon as he caught himself giving in to the fatigue. He could not afford to pass out, so he bent low near Bucky’s right ear and kept talking to him while scanning the passageways around the crates surrounding them. Steve wasn’t good at false hope, but he needed to keep things positive, so he talked about the first thing that popped into his head when he’d seen all the blood: colour and paint, what it felt like to craft them with his own hands, taking the raw materials from the earth and transforming them on the canvas.
Steve’s mind drifted again as he thought back over the night. Everything had seemed golden. That is, until Steve had pushed them a bit too far and it turned out that Bucky’s employers were on Pierce’s side.

When they’d entered the meeting room, the buyer, Sitwell, had been unaccompanied by Zola this time, although Steve couldn’t tell if he was on the ship or not. Couldn’t say he’d felt particularly disappointed at his absence - the guy gave him the creeps to say the least. Though it would have been good to confirm his suspicions from that grainy zoomed in photo Scott had found. The Rubens Steve had copied had been revealed and scrutinized and Steve had had a hard time holding back the eye rolling as Sitwell had examined every square inch of the painting with his nose barely an inch from the canvas. The humming and hawing had been irritating to Pierce if his tight lipped grin plastered to his face had been anything to go by. Steve proceeded to point out just about every feature and technique that he had employed in great detail so as to prolong the meeting and give Bucky as much time as possible. Pierce indulged him and actually seemed pleased at the attention to detail. Rumlow stood in the corner, arms crossed over his chest and eyes narrowed at Steve, probably bored out of his mind, though Steve had no sympathy. It was the little things in life that made it so enjoyable.

He moved about the room as he pointed out this and that about the painting, casting furtive glances to the papers and books strewn over the desk. There was nothing of interest at least from his cursory glances so he tried another tactic despite the fact that he knew Bucky would be simmering with anger at him taking unnecessary risks. That in itself was motive enough as Steve had yet to forgive him completely for how he’d confessed his deception. Mostly, he wanted more than anything to help bring down Pierce.

Steve stepped back and raised his chin, “I trust that you have the appropriate storage facility for the piece? If you insist on transporting it by sea, I shouldn’t have to point out that exposure to the humidity would be disastrous.”

Sitwell put an affronted hand to his chest, “Of course!” He looked to Pierce with confusion, though Pierce was looking at Steve, eyebrow raised in question. Rumlow’s eyes narrowed further, if that were even possible. Sitwell continued, now addressing Pierce, “We haven’t had any problems with the modified storage crate. The portable power source for the atmospheric conditioner has been performing perfectly for weeks on end.” He’d turned back to Steve, “It’s amazing technology, really, have you not seen it? Completely unaffected by the weather conditions for such long travel. It even keeps the computers from corrosion, old as they are.”

Steve shook his head and was about to get Sitwell to elaborate when Pierce cut him off, “Well, Steven, perhaps Brock can show you our capabilities while we get on with the dull part of our business here.” He fixed him with his cold, piercing glare, smiling all the while.

Despite the ball of dread forming in his belly Steve plastered on a sardonic smile, “You’ll forgive me if I suspend my disbelief until I can see it with my own eyes.” Perhaps that had been a bit too far for the appearance of the egotistical artist, but honestly? Luis and Scott hadn’t mentioned anything about some strange power source and he’s pretty sure that if they hadn’t noticed in the records, Bucky would have.

Brock pulls him by the arm none too gently and practically pushed him out the door with a surly “Sure thing boss.” As they’d headed down to the deck of the ship he motioned to the closest guard, “Go check out the crates.”

Steve had had to stifle a laugh when the strange guard, more like a soldier really, just looked back at
him stone faced, “We don’t take orders from you, Rumlow.”

Rumlow had looked like he’d wanted to punch something but just walked ahead not letting go of Steve’s arm. Steve caught a snatch of a mumbled, “Fucking government assholes.” So, they were government, Steve had thought, though he still hadn’t recognized that symbol on their suits.

As they had moved through the crates towards the centre of the stacks Steve grew more and more wary. Rumlow had never let go of his arm and hadn’t answer any of his questions about where they were going. Steve cast his gaze about constantly looking for any hint of Bucky. Finally Rumlow started talking, “Never seen you so chatty before, Rogers. And curious. Thought you didn’t want anything to do with us, but wouldn’t know it the way you were going on and on.” He’d stopped in front of a dark grey crate, as nondescript as all the others. Steve read out the number on the side out loud in a quiet mumble, but Rumlow heard him which was enough for him to turn around and punch him right across the jaw. Steve reeled and fell backwards, slamming his head against the crate opposite. He’d struggled to get his bearings, but the world was spinning. He’d managed to get into a crouch with his fists held defensively in front of him. He’d marvelled at how he suddenly appeared to have six arms, but Rumlow’s cursing brought him back to focus somewhat.

Rumlow was looking around, “Who the fuck you talking to Rogers, huh? Or you always talk to yourself?” Steve stumbled to his knee again as his head spun and his stomach roiled from nausea. Rumlow turned around with a mumbled Crazy fuck and slid a small panel on the crate in front him off to the side revealing a keypad. A small click and then a slight woosh as a section of the side of the crate came loose and slid open. Steve managed to get to his feet but when he took a step away from Rumlow the world spun again and he leaned into the crate behind him to keep from falling over. The crate opposite was illuminated by a faint blue glow coming from somewhere near the floor, illuminating what appeared to be mostly crates and a few paintings covered loosely in drop sheets. A ladder ran against the opposite wall up towards a hatch that must lead to the crate above. The hatch was open but revealed nothing but darkness from above. Steve thought fleetingly that that must be where the computers were. Rumlow was moving again and Steve tried to focus on him as he reached into one of the crates and and pulled out a nondescript handgun.

This time Steve managed to back away several hurried steps before his foot got caught on one of the deck bolts and he stumbled. His bad knee, well worse knee, chose that moment to give out on him and he fell on his ass. Rumlow walked out of the crate and pointed the gun right at him, “You always were a pain in my ass, Rogers.”

Steve’s vision seemed to clear instantly as he stared down the barrel of the gun. He could only hope that Bucky had been able to listen in after all and would find the crates and destroy their operation. He’d said he would take care of Sam and the others, he had promised Steve! A wave of irritation rose through him and he glared up at Rumlow, chin raised, daring. That’s when he caught the bit of movement from the hatch inside the crate. The dark shadow from above started to elongate and drop downwards, forming into a …. leg? Steve swore he’d recognize those thighs of betrayal anywhere.

The sound of Rumlow cocking the gun snapped Steve back to his immediate situation. He spat out, “You’re such a dumb fuck, Brock, seriously.” It was enough of a shock to stay his trigger finger, so Steve continued, “You think a nobody like you can play with the big kids? Do you even have any idea what Pierce’s business is? I mean, really is.”

Rumlow pushed the gun forward but stalled. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Rogers.” But he looked unsure and Steve realized that maybe he really didn’t know the depth of the situation he was in. But Rumlow’s piece of mind was a moot point as Bucky had silently dropped from the hatch and materialized behind Brock. Steve was so impressed he smiled, which had spooked Rumlow enough that he’d whipped his head around and directly into Bucky’s fist.
Well, that was how the fight had begun and Steve was now trying to hold together what had remained.

**Carbon and ink as dark as night.**

The flood lights shining down over the crates from the docks disappeared one by one, as though the light was being absorbed by the darkness. Steve looked up and found that they were being blocked by the same guards that had been standing outside the meeting room. He hunched protectively over Bucky but they were more interested in Rumlows body and securing the open crates. They finally seemed to settle into a loose formation blocking every way out of their current spot. There were only about six of them, which were of course six too many for Steve to handle himself. He was about to ask them what was going to happen next when one did a double take after he’d glanced down at Bucky’s face. He looked to his companions, “I didn't think they were sending in any of the Specials.”

Another crouched down to get a better look and started to reach out when Steve spat out, “Don’t! Don’t touch him.”

She ignored him but withdrew her hand, fishing a small flashlight out of a side pocket, shining it over Bucky’s face. The guard, or whatever they were, backed up immediately and returned to her position raising her weapon, “It’s Magenta.”

The group tensed as one but before they could act the sound of approaching footsteps clicking on the cold metal deck echoed between the crates. Pierce walked through the guards to stand above Steve. He thought vaguely that Pierce mustn’t know about Bucky or the so-called “Specials” as he completely ignored him focusing on Steve instead.

Pierce wore the look of a disappointed parent with the exception of his eyes which shone in the deck lighting like hardened ice. Steve glared back, chin raised and spine stiffening. He noticed a gun in Pierce’s hand but he refused to let his fear show. Pierce’s frown deepened, “To say I am disappointed would be an understatement. Look at you, even now with your useless boyfriend dying in your arms, your rage is palpable. You could have been a real asset under my direction.”

Steve snarled, “And what direction would that be? Art theft? Or is it Hydra?”

Pierce’s eyes widened slightly then narrowed as he considered Steve. His sudden chuckle was unexpected and startling, “Rogers. Always the surprise!” He looked over at Rumlows body and sighed, shaking the gun back at Steve, “That’s going to cost you.” He went over, gun trained on Steve the entire time, and crouched beside Rumlows body. In one swift movement he pulled on the knife and it came loose with a sickening squelch. Steve swallowed his disgust at the show of callous disregard for his employee. Pierce tossed the knife back over to him, “Can’t have any trace of you, after all.”

Steve looked down at Bucky, whose pale face was beaded with sweat, breath seeming to quicken as their situation escalated. Steve felt a surge of desperation and rage. His only hope was that somehow Scott and Luis could still see them. Maybe if he just kept Pierce talking, “It’s too late you know. Everything you’ve built here has been destroyed.”

Pierce snarled and Steve thought this was the first time he’d ever seen him angry, “You have no idea
who you are dealing with, none at all. Hydra has survived over decades. We are patient and we are everywhere. Cut off one head …”

Steve had had enough himself, “And two grow back. How original.” He rolled his eyes at his own snark - could he not keep his mouth shut even in mortal peril??

Pierce seemed to have decided that their conversation was over and raised his gun once again towards Steve, but timing was everything and Pierce had run out. At that moment a series of explosions rocked the ship. Pierce stumbled as Steve was thrown back against the crate. The guards scrambled, shouting into their comms, leaving them without a backward glance. Pierce found his footing and rose up over Steve, re-aiming his gun, “Goodbye, Rogers.”

A sharp wedge poked out of his breast pocket, startling with its sudden appearance, a dark stain immediately surrounding it, rapidly spreading and staining Pierce’s suit. The hand holding the gun dropped, letting the weapon clatter to the deck. Steve looked into his eyes, whose cold light no longer glinted with ice but receded to lifeless stone. “Goodbye, Pierce.”

Indigo.

Well, if he was honest he’d have to classify it as purple. Hubba bubba grape to be specific, which he supposed fit with the pop theme of a Hawkeye’s Coffee Pot special edition mesh crop top. He’d be lying to himself if he thought it wasn’t secretly super badass to be shooting arrows like a machine gun while wearing that shirt.

Hawkeye stands atop a pile of crates a good 50 feet away, the fire that was rapidly spreading from the explosions flickers in his reflective goggles and illuminates his frame. They came... Steve’s eyes water, heavy with emotion, as Natasha materializes out of the shadows and slides to her knees beside Bucky. She looks up at him while sliding a small backpack off her shoulders, “Steve, tell me exactly what happened.”

Her brusque and efficient tone effectively gets Steve back into focus and he blinks back the tears of relief, “There was a fight. He got shot, close range right into his bicep. The bullet must have ricocheted into his side because he’s bleeding there too.” His voice cracks and he gulps down a breath. Having an asthma attack now would be disastrous. He can’t let his arm go from around Bucky’s shoulders but as Nat gently pushes his hand back from staunching Bucky’s side wound he fishes around in his pocket for his inhaler just in case.

Nat takes a black band out of the pack along with several large pads. She works quickly, ripping open Bucky’s shirt and applying the bandages. As she fits the band around his arm up near the shoulder, Bucky moans and sucks in a breath through his teeth. “Sorry Mags, hurts like hell, I know.” Steve grimaces as she rips the shirt off his arm and tightens the band. Steve is trying to be soothing but Nat pulls out the largest needle he has ever seen and he just can’t help the instinctual terror. She looks calmly into Steve’s shocked expression, “Get the rest of his shirt off.” She holds the needle up, pushing a drop of clear liquid out, “We’re going to fake his death but he’s going to have to walk out of here first.”

Steve blinks, not sure he heard correctly, but starts following orders, ripping the cloth of Bucky’s shirt from the tears around his side as gently as he can manage, “Wh-what?”
Hawkeye comes bounding around the corner, “Let’s pick it up guys, reinforcements and probably all of the law enforcement we can think of will be on their way. Not to mention that this place is gonna blow when the fire gets to the fuel tanks.”

Steve and Hawkeye both cringe as Nat raises her arm and stabs Bucky in the chest with the needle, depressing the plunged needle with alarming speed. Bucky sits bolt upright dragging in a huge breath, eyes bulging. Steve follows him up, brushing sweat drenched hair off his face, “Bucky! Bucky, say something.”

Bucky’s eyes roll around in his head before he finally focuses on Steve. The corner of his mouth turns upwards even as he grimaces in pain, “Something.”

Steve scoffs at the joke, “You fucking jerk.” He lets his forehead fall against Buck’s, tired with relief, ready for this night to be over.

Bucky puts his good hand against Steve’s cheek and admonishes him between breaths, “Punk. I told you not to take risks.”

Nat clears her throat and holds out a pair of pliers between them. At their look of confusion, she asks, “Do you have the info?” At Bucky’s nod she continues, “We’re destroying the operation along with the ship, but it’s just one of probably many Hydra information flows. Pierce is out, but we’ve got bigger problems. Looks like we’re out of a job, Mags.”

Bucky nods and takes the pliers. Steve holds his hand back in alarm but Bucky soothes him though his voice is still shaken from the adrenaline or whatever Nat injected him with, “We don’t have much time Steve. Shield is government, our department,” He gestures between himself and Nat, “and now we have proof that they are involved with Hydra.”

Nat stands and helps Hawkeye free his arrow from Pierce’s body, talking all the while sounding to Steve like she were tying her damn shoe, “I’ll take care of the exposure, but you’re gonna have to die, Mags. The inferno when the fire reaches the fuel will be enough to destroy even bone, but just in case better leave the tracker behind.” Steve is about to ask what tracker? When Nat beats him to it, “Shield has one embedded in all their agents molars, better to recover us from missions gone wrong. Or so they say.” She says with no small amount of bitterness. She grins back up at Bucky, her gaze steady but wild enough that Steve is simultaneously excited and really, really scared, “We’re about to be unemployed, Mags. You ready?”

Azurite. Like a tropical waters warmed by the sun.

Bucky’s eyes struggle to open but once they focus on Steve and he breathes out his name Steve just dives in and surrounds himself in the warmth of that blue.

It had been days since the Lemurian Star. Nat had taken them to her safehouse, alluding that it was just one of many. Once inside, Bucky had collapsed again and it had been a dicey several hours while Hawkeye’s neighbour, a gentle-voiced but disheveled ex-emergency room doctor named Bruce, took are of him. Steve never asked why he was an ex-doc, as long as he saved Bucky. Which he did, though it was touch and go for awhile what with the massive blood loss. His arm would take months to recover and he would never regain full mobility, but it seemed a small price to pay in the moment for his life and possibly even freedom. Steve had thrown himself on Bruce when he had
declared that Bucky would be all right and returned his awkward hug. When Nat and Hawkeye had joined in, Bruce had stiffened but bore their gratitude with no small amount of long suffering impatience.

Between the pain meds and exhaustion Bucky had been sleeping almost the entire time, Steve a permanent fixture at his side. Hawkeye, who’d turned out to be a ‘civilian’ like Steve, kept them fed and caffeinated along with news from the neighbourhood. Pepe had assumed that Steve and his new boyfriend were on a trip and told Hawkeye to tell him how happy he was that he’d found someone to put up with his “stubborn like burro ass” - probably his words. The Poker Club were helping Mama Rumlow in her mourning and part of Steve felt terrible that things with Brock had ended so violently, though according to the news he had died with his employer, Pierce, in a tragic car accident two states over. Steve had to wonder if it had been the government or Hydra that had managed the cover up, though he rather dreaded these days they were one and the same.

Nat kept him up to date with the news: a massive leak of classified government documents from an anonymous hacker collective, Black Widow, had lead to the exposure of the clandestine government task force, Shield, along with a host of activity that breached international laws. It was a massive political embarrassment and Congress was immediately holding an emergency session to bring whoever was left to justice. Steve had scoffed at the word and Nat had given him a little smile, “Don’t worry, Steve. We’ll find our own justice.” Steve was equally scared and a little bit in love with her at that moment.

Bucky reached up with his unbandaged hand, sliding his fingers through Steve’s hair and tugging him forward. Steve places a hand over Bucky’s and lets his other fingers trace over Bucky’s cheek then brow before leaning in the rest of the way for a kiss. The embrace deepens until Bucky pulls back, rubbing his jaw, “Ow.”

Steve chuckles and kisses his cheek tenderly. “You might be feeling that emergency dentistry you performed for awhile. That was really gross by the way.”

Bucky lies back against the pillows, his eyelids drooping from exhaustion, but he won’t stop staring at Steve as much as he tries to get him to rest. He sighs but acquiesces, closing his eyes but resolutely entwining his fingers with Steve’s. “I guess being dead is almost like being retired. I’m just Bucky now.”

“My Bucky.” Steve whispers, laying a kiss over each eye and his brow until he keeps his eyes closed and falls back asleep.
“So, let me get this straight. The office supply where we work…”

“Worked, bro, pasado, know what I’m sayin.”

“Sorry worked. It was a front for a corrupt arm of a covert ops branch of a government security department. You are a former, excuse me, deceased special undercover agent and your name is not Winston, it’s Bucky. And you paint pictures so that they look really, really old and got sucked into an underground art theft ring that was actually a cover for information trade for the purposes of global domination.”

“Evil global domination, brah, that’s like the most important part.”

“Right. Evil. But then all you guys took down the baddies. And blew up a ship.”

Bucky rests his good arm around Steve’s shoulders and looks down at him. Steve is beaming back at him and damn it all it makes his heart soar. He looks over to Nat, who is leaning into Hawkeye beside her, nodding, “Sounds about right.”

Nat looks up to Luis and Scott, who are standing at one end of the picnic table beside the basketball court. Luis is bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet while Scott has his hands tucked under his arms and is swaying back and forth, visibly trying to accept the situation. Luis stops jumping and looks from face to face sitting at the table, “You guys are smiling, why are you all smiling? Scott, they’re freaking me out dude. Holy crap, Bucky, please blink OK, let me know you’re not a cyborg from the future or whatever.”

Bucky stands up and holds out his hand, “Come with me if you want a job.”

Luis looks like he’s about to faint but Scott catches on quick, “Are you serious, man? You want us to work with you?”

Realization dawns on Luis’ face, “Oh my gawd you guys, you want us to join your super hero squad, don’t you.”

Bucky bALKS at the description but Nat holds up a hand, “Now wait a minute, I like the sound of superheroes. But no, more like a detective agency. Except we only have one client.” She gestures between herself and Bucky, “Ourselves. And we want us to go after Hydra. Pierce was just the tip of the iceberg and there’s no way that the government will be cleaned up anytime soon.”

Hawkeye’s arm shoots up into the air but he doesn’t wait to be called on, “Uhm, excuse me, but I think I deserve to be considered for this detective agency as well.”

Steve pipes up, “Me too.” Bucky turns to him, worry laced through his features but Steve won’t give in, “What? I want to help.” He takes Bucky’s hand, “We’re in this together now, no more solo missions.” Hawkeye holds out a fist for Steve to bump as he laces his arm with Nat’s.

Bucky turns to Nat who shrugs, a look of It’s not like we can stop them in her eyes. He can’t help the smile as he shakes his head and settles his arm back over Steve’s shoulders, pulling him in closer,
“All right. What are we going to tell Sam and the others?”

Steve looks stricken, “I don’t want to drag Sam into this.”

“Drag Sam into what?”

Everyone at the table whips around to find Sam dribbling his ball, Sharon on one side, Morita on the other, and the rest of the Howlies behind them. Bucky’s mouth drops open but nothing comes out and Steve is speechless for once, hands waving meaninglessly in the air. Sam narrows his eyes, gesturing at the assembled group, “You guys forming a team without us?”

-- Barton Flats --

As it turned out, Hawkeye owned the six-story apartment building that sat on top of the Coffee Pot and there just so happened to be a small one bedroom apartment in the middle of the fourth floor facing the back alley that had been vacant yesterday, but today was leased to one Steven Grant Rogers, artist, who lived there with his partner, Bucky Buchanan.

Every morning they went down to Hawkeye’s where Bucky supplied various baked goods, a talent he learned from sheer perseverance and the helpful, though occasionally brutal, feedback from the Coffee Pot’s regulars. During the day, while Bucky helped out behind the counter, Steve could be found either in the shop or in their living room turned art studio sketching and painting. He still made art supplies from scratch in the workshop behind Emporio Pepe’s but he no longer worked the cash, that job going to a young man named Peter from the neighbourhood. Most evenings were spent at the basketball court, the group having grown by four new members and at least ten-fold in rowdiness from the combination of Luis’ pathological aversion to silence and Nat’s pathological aversion to losing. Every night, Hawkeye would lock up the shop, close the blinds and the real work would begin. Laptops and hard copy would cover every available surface. The large canvas that Steve had hung at the back of the shop would be flipped over revealing a world map covered with marked locations and sketches of suspects and players: Sitwell, Zola and a slew of others surrounding Johann Schmidt at the centre of it all. Sharon and DumDum would arrive from their precinct with fresh intel and doughnuts, or the doctor would come with fresh fruit, always claiming they’d get scurvy if they were left to their own devices. Sam and the Howlies would hash out strategy as Scott and Luis scoured the Net for intel.

Sometime in the night when things would wind down, Bucky would take whatever documents or tablet Steve was reading out of his hands, entwine their fingers and say goodnight to their friends. He would lead him upstairs and lock the door to their apartment, activating his minimum perimeter countermeasures, something that Steve had taken a while to get used to. Sometimes Steve would be in the mood to listen to music which always activated Bucky’s dance training. Once in awhile Bucky would even get Steve to dance with him. Sometimes they would be content to hold each other in the darkness and safety of their home and sometimes they would each lose themselves in the other’s body, safe and together in that moment.
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