**Summary**

After moving to Hell’s Kitchen, settling down and somehow winning the sympathy of the Devil, Vera is happy. There were sure more than a few bumps on the road, but now they are all overcome and she has an amazing (a little reckless and a little much heroic) boyfriend, couple of good friends, steady job and relative non-bloody calm.

But this is Hell’s Kitchen: its guardian angel is called the Devil and he has issues of his own. There is no non-bloody way of doing things there – after all, she learnt that in a hard way before.

**Notes**

Heya guys! I’m back! I don’t even know what I’m doing, but I’m doing it….
Kidding, of course. There is a storyline ahead. I just need to fill in some blanks and think it through thoroughly so I wouldn’t post nonsenses O:-) So yeah, basically, I don’t even know what I’m doing.

Duh, the summary might be a little too dark. Sorry about that. I suck at those. I’m no gonna jump right into a bloodbath.

*Rated for language, (mentions of) violence, sex and…stuff. It’s rated on purpose, alright?*

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Her breath hitched. And that was only a kick. Jesus. She would not want to be on the receiving end of that. She thought it would get easier for her to be here. It didn’t. She still watched him in awe, jaw almost in her lap as she sat on the edge of the ring, her (or Matt’s) favourite spot. She might be drooling a little. But just a little.

It became their habit. Once Matt came to terms with the fact Vera would be observing him during his training (even managing to focus on his workout technique rather than his muscles moving under the not so tight, but gradually soaking-with-sweat t-shirt from time to time), they spent almost every other night at Fogwell’s.

Vera had been thinking for a while now: Watching Matt was nice enough, but she would like him to teach her a little something – not the back flipping and all the nonhuman stuff he was able to do, obviously, but something. She had no idea how to bring up the topic, though. She was determined to finally ask him tonight – she chickened out many times before. So far, she had already found courage to speak up four times tonight. The first time, she had changed her mind and said No kicks today, huh?, ignoring his confused expression as he changed his series of punches and added a kick indeed. The second time, she teased him about flipping, her heart beating agonizingly fast as she swallowed her question. The other two times she wanted to ask she just bit her tongue. Aaand third time right now.

Matt delivered an extremely strong blow with a huff and turned around to make his way to her – or she thought so, until he reached for the towel and water instead. Vera allowed herself to exhale slowly, releasing the breath she had been holding since he spun to her.

Now would be a good time to ask – things were quiet lately. The Avengers released Matt with their contacts, satisfied only with the fact that they knew where to find him in case of a real emergency (or in a need of a lawyer different from Stark’s sharks). They hadn’t contacted him since Tony sent her the photos – not that she knew of. Matt seemed to be content with his day job, sometimes receiving payments in currency other than bananas. His night job kept him occupied as well, but not in the very bloody way. It didn’t change the fact Vera arranged several meetings with Claire to teach her the basics of necessary medical attention for Matt Murdock – she knew few things from college (and everyday life, she grew up in relatively small town, spending time outside, in nature, climbing trees and falling down, thank you very much), yet they never got to learning stitches there and, let’s be honest, Matt always needed stitches. Vera wondered if he knew about their sewing sessions – he hadn’t say a word about it.

Hot breath tickling her nose snapped her back to reality. Matt framed her sides, hands leaning in the edge of the ring, face close.

“So…are you gonna say it or not?” he demanded, lips almost touching hers.

Despite his proximity, she stayed perfectly focused. Her eyes went wide, mouth opening just to close again. She gulped. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
Vera was sure he would recognize her lying even without hearing her heartbeat. She felt his lips twitching against hers, gingerly taking her lower lip between them, caressing. She returned the kiss lazily, tasting the salt from his skin. It never failed to astonish her, how quickly he could change from the violent, dangerous vigilante to the tender, loving boyfriend. Then again, she couldn’t deny she enjoyed when the line between them occasionally blurred – in the best way possible.

He withdrew too soon and she opened her eyes discontentedly. The corners of his mouth were up, eyebrow rising. “So? Don’t pretend you don’t want to say something. I would be probably able to tell even without hearing you heart and breathing.”

She huffed. “Show-off.”

He smiled wider, extending the distance between their faces as if he could observe her better from there. He waited.

She opened her mouth again, no sound coming out for a while. “I’ve been…thinking,” she said eventually, and Matt raised his other eyebrow as well.

“That’s not surprising. You tend to do that.”

She rolled her eyes, mentally smacking his chest – she actually had enough will not to do it for real. She remained silent and he whined.

“Vera. Whatever it is, just say it,” he pleaded, expression clouding as if he anticipated trouble. Well…

She decided she would ease into it “I would like to get a fit-box coach licence,” she blurted out and he blinked several times, confusion all over his face. “Uhm… I mean… I like fit-boxing. Maybe I could teach it. I don’t know if there is any centre hiring, but I thought I might handle one or two lessons a week. Actually I was wondering if Mr. Fogwell would be willing to give it a try here…” she babbled, unable to look at Matt’s face, because what she told him was only a part of what she wanted.

He was quiet, too quiet, so she turned her face to his. Matt looked absolutely taken aback. Like did-you-just-told-me-the-Devil-of-Hell’s-Kitchen-is-blind taken aback. He kept blinking like her statement would make more sense after that. Apparently it worked, because he finally returned to reality.

“That…doesn’t sound bad at all,” he offered with small smile and her lips spread at the honesty in his voice. She could tell he was still confused though

“You think?”

Matt shrugged. “Sure. You’d be great.”

Vera bit her lip, trying to figure out how to share the rest of her thoughts. “I would like to be better than that.”

He tilted his head curiously, sensing something odd in her voice. She knew she sounded nervous. And her heart sounded nervous as well. “Meaning?” he prompted when she didn’t continue.

“Meaning I want you to teach me.”

That did it. He tensed, face freezing in an unreadable expression. She carefully lifted her hand, touching his cheek, brushing his wet hair from his forehead. He didn’t move. She swallowed against
the lump in her throat, gathering her thoughts to explain.

“I…I need the certificate, okay? It’s a necessary evil. But I don’t care about some piece of paper. The courses will be fine, but I want to know how to throw a punch, alright? And… and something more. I’m not talking about your flipping and other crazy gymnastic stuff you can do, I’m not that naïve to think I can learn that. I’m talking about defending myself. I’ve been here in New York for what? Four, five months? I had a gun at my head twice, almost got mugged and got kidnapped. I’m getting into trouble once a month.”

Vera examined his features hardening and then turning somewhat hurt. “You don’t think I can protect you,” he whispered, sad eyes on her chin.

And what? She frowned at him, decoding his words. What was he talking about? “What? Why would you—” Oh. Oh. She let her hand fall. He was such an idiot. And she was such an idiot. “That’s-- don’t be ridiculous. Of course I think you can. Jesus, Matt.”

“I couldn’t. Too many times for now. I get it.”

She whined desperately. She didn’t consider Matt’s everything-is-my-fault attitude. She needed to choose her words more carefully. She reached for his cheek again, this time framing his face with both her hands, making him level his sightless gaze with hers.

“Matt. Stop doing this. It wasn’t your fault, whatever situation you’re thinking about now. You can’t protect every single person in Hell’s Kitchen 24/7, and you’re not my personal guardian. That wasn’t the point, anyway. I trust you, okay? I trust you, and that’s why I want you to teach me. Because I know you’re the best. Because I believe you can take at least some of the amazing things you’re capable of and pass it on me. Which would probably be a nightmare for any teacher, really. I want to be able to defend myself against some stupid mugger, so you can actually help people and you don’t have to keep saving my trouble-magnet ass,” she finished her speech, waiting for his verdict, expectantly examining his expression.

She could see his emotions changing – from the guilt to hesitance to slight amusement. “It’s a very nice ass,” he noted and returned to seriousness. “Vera, I don’t think… I don’t think you would want me as your teacher. I’m… I’m not good at that.”

“I literally just said I would. You’ve tried it before?”

“No.”

Vera let go of his face just to throw her hands in the air. “Then how could you possibly know?”

He shifted uncomfortably and didn’t answer.

“Okay. Matt, look—“ His eyebrows shot up. Smart-ass. “-dammit- I don’t care, okay? If you don’t want to teach me --fine. But if the only reason is the fear of you failing, then… Oh. Unless you think I’m a lost case. Then I understand. Even though I thought Catholics had a soft spot for lost cases-“

“Vera? Shut up.”

She did, watching him as he considered his options. If he was smart about this, he would know that there was no person in Hell’s Kitchen who could better teach her to protect herself. And he would be aware of the fact that there was no way fit-box courses would provide her any useful defensive moves. She bit her cheek from the inside to keep from explaining all of this to him, respecting his wish and keeping her mouth shut.
Matt sighed in resignation and Vera couldn’t help yelping “Yes.” Her fist twitched, but she managed to stop from punching the air in victory. He ran his hand down his face, suddenly looking exhausted.

“Done for tonight?” she offered in small voice, not sure she was allowed to speak again.

Matt eyed her unhappily, before he tucked her hair behind her ear, expression torn between tender and miserable. “You’re going to be my death, you know that?” he breathed, bringing his lips to hers once more.

Vera didn’t like the kiss. Well, she loved all of Matt’s kisses but this time there was a sadness in the way his lips moved against hers, a certain desperation she wished would go away. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist, pulling him closer, hands weaving in his hair. He didn’t react as she expected. He took her around her waist, his other hand holding the back of her neck, keeping her in place as his lunges became more aggressive, his lips, tongue, teeth demanding. With no words spoken, she heard what he was saying.

You’re going to be my death…and I’m gonna rush in its arms willingly with a smile on my face.

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“Two words, Mechy: Double date.” Terri’s words shocked Vera in the middle of preparing a hazelnut latte and Vera almost burned herself hearing them. She calmed her hands and finished the drink, handing it the customer before she considered what her friend said.

Double date? As in Terri and Victor and her and Matt? In one room? At the same time? As in her crazy best friend who wouldn’t shut up, a scary teddy bear who Vera barely knew, a girl who would be nervous the whole time so she would be putting her feet in her mouth (unless she would run away) and a man she just couldn’t describe in a single sentence. That was a perfect recipe for a disaster.

“No.”

An astounded gasp made Vera to turn around. Terri’s face was pure hurt. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

Vera was slightly ashamed of her quick negative response. But she… she didn’t do double dates - they were awkward. No one ever did them again. But seriously, what kind of a date would it be? They couldn’t even go to watch a movie, dammit! So what, dinner? Talking? Matt would probably be tense, not letting his guard down for a second, because he would be afraid he would somehow gave himself away? Hell no.

“Just… no. I mean, can you imagine it? A double date? You, Victor, me, and Matt?” Her friend of course had no idea Vera’s blind boyfriend was in fact the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, a kick-ass ninja vigilante with basically superpowers (no matter how much he kept denying it) and extraordinary ability to make Vera’s knees turn into jello with a single kiss – preferably in a dark alley, mask on, his body pressing against hers, whispering love declarations in Spanish. And yeah, maybe her kinks were showing with too much intensity given the circumstances, but she had a point. She returned to the right train of thoughts and snapped back to reality. Terri was speaking. Focus.

“Yeah. That’s pretty much the definition of a double date. Two couples hanging out together,” Terri said mockingly, baffled and insulted by her lack of enthusiasm at the idea.

“And what exactly do you imagine we are gonna do? Where would we go? I hate to remind you, but we are four different people who don’t have a common interest. I mean, apart from coffee. I can talk about preparing it at least…” She really didn’t want to sound too sceptical, but her reasoning was…
reasonable. Vera smiled professionally at another customer, ignoring Terri’s huff – Terri took care of the next one. Once she took his order, she bugged Vera again.

“Then we can do something together and talk about that to break the ice! I don’t know, a movie? That’s a normal thing to do! Why are you being so negative about it?” Terri complained, preparing an Americano on autopilot. Vera looked at her significantly, eyebrow raised, waiting for her to realize. Terri didn’t notice until the silence lasted too long. Only then she frowned and Vera eyed her expectantly.

“Oh. Shit. Not a movie then.”

Vera’s lips twitched as she served another person.

“A rock concert?”


“Then something else!” her friend burst out, hands thrown in the air. There were no more customers. Becky took her break. Shit.


“I don’t know. You tell me. Hey, we can adjust. What do you guys usually do on a date?” Terri asked tactically, changing her expression to a patient one.

And Vera just…froze. ‘What do you guys usually do on a date?’ The problem was not only that Vera didn’t do double dates. She and Matt…didn’t do dates. They just didn’t. Which might look kinda weird to any outsider, but Vera was incredibly happy with concept. She didn’t need to go to restaurant or to movies or whatever. Sure, it would be nice to have a little piece of normal, but she liked their normal. The fact Matt climbed up to her window almost every night and they talked and snuggled… or more. Unless he came at ass o’clock and she was already out cold. Their meetings in Fogwell’s, electricity in the air, something hot and delicious, yet ungraspable. Their lazy mornings if time allowed. All of it.

Fingers snapped in front of her face. “Vera! Earth to Vera. Jeez, girl. You still got it bad…” Terri murmured and Vera wondered for just how long she had been zoned out. Apparently for too long.

“Seriously. Tell me.”

Vera shrugged. “We…uhm….” What the hell was she supposed to tell her? There was literally no way to say any of this without screaming my boyfriend is the Devil. Or at least my boyfriend is not so blind and can see in a manner of speaking. Shit. Maybe the Fogwell’s sessions were acceptable? With few alterations?

Terri’s eyes went wide with shock. “Do you ever go on dates? You never talk about them! Are you telling me you’re not- what the actual hell, Vera?!”

Oh no. Oh god no. “Look, it’s…” Her mind was racing, trying to come up with a valid excuse. It wasn’t like she didn’t have plenty. “It’s… we didn’t exactly have time for that. I mean, we got together in October, after I was discharged from the hospital. We went out and then there was the mess around you-know-who almost dying and then-- Aha! We went to the benefit-“

“That was in November, Vera!” Terri blurted, horrified. But Vera wasn’t finished.

“AND then someone was taken and I got shot while helping him and I couldn’t even walk! So I’m
Thinking about it like that, they actually were kinda too busy to have an actual date. And she wasn’t complaining. Matt was… Matt. He was smart, easy to talk to about anything from music, movie and food to freaking World War II., dorky, cute, loving and hot and suggestive which usually ended up in only one possible way. And to be honest, he was a woman’s dream — strongly intuitive — who was she kidding, the senses had something to do with it too — he just knew what to do. And they were both quite bendy…

“Oh my god, you have the I-just-had-sex expression,” Terri complained and the approaching customer – an elderly lady, with a cute little boy by her side, looked extremely offended. Vera ran her hand down her face, screaming internally. She hated Terri’s I-can-see-right-through-you ability. Vera pulled her aside, leaving Becky – who had just come back- to deal with the pissed off woman. “That’s it, isn’t it? You two waited for too long and now you’re like a couple of horny teenagers…” Terri continued and Vera gasped, feeling her cheeks reddening. It wasn’t like she was completely wrong.

“That’s- that’s…not exactly wrong, but dammit, Terri! We spent Christmas at Nelson’s and right after that, the letter came and I knew I would have to testify and somehow, I wasn’t in the right mood for a date, and I assure you the only thing I did at night apart from sleeping occasionally was crying,” Vera protested, slightly insulted by Terri’s assumptions. The memories were unpleasant. Matt’s empty eyes still haunted her from time to time, the nauseous feeling of the fragments of his skull moving under her fingertips was still quite vivid. She felt sick all over again. How did they start talking about this again?

Terri gave her a sympathetic and, surprisingly enough, a guilty smile. “Sorry. I know that…that was hard. And I’m sorry I wasn’t there. Just… it’s been a while-“

“It’s like two weeks since the trial, Terri,” she deadpanned, unimpressed.


Vera sighed, refusing to play the little repeat-after-me game. “Yes, fine, I’ll ask, okay?”

“YES!” Terri’s fist hit the air, almost knocking cups from Becky’s hands as she passed them on her way to the counter. Terri didn’t even apologize to Becky and threw her arms around Vera, who immediately regretted her promise.

Jesus Christ. What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter End Notes

So, this story is being slowly reposted. I’ve got myself an amazing beta sleepstagram
and I just wanted to let you know that she's the best and that I owe her an enormous thank you.
You can check out her profile: https://archiveofourown.org/users/sleepstagram or her tumblr: lizziebennet.tumblr.com
2) Of sharing and caring

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera stood in front of the hardware store hesitating. Right above it, there was an office of Nelson and Murdock, attorneys at law, as the sign read. She stared at the sign, still unsure whether she should come in – she had never been there before. After her shift ended, she made tea for herself and coffee for Matt, determined to pay him a visit, ask about the double date thing and just… see him. She almost left the café, but changed her mind in the last moment, returning to make coffees for Foggy and Karen as well, because it felt rude to leave them out. On her way (using the GPS, because, *dammit*, she didn’t even know where her boyfriend worked), she spun on her heels twice, always deciding it would be a waste of good coffee if she just walked back home, so she continued. The drinks were most likely cold by the time she arrived and started wavering over her actions again.

Maybe Matt had a reason to never show her his office (or his flat for that matter, but she did not want to think about that). Maybe it was something… private, their thing with Foggy and Karen. Or he simply didn’t want Vera to be involved in every single part of his life, the office being his refuge from their relationship, that might become too intimate too quickly in several different ways. His very own space. She wouldn’t want to intrude, she could respect that. On the other hand, it wasn’t like he actually had any reason to show her so far, she was probably overthinking it.

Vera turned around with a huff, making her way back home. Or she wanted to.

“Vera?” a baffled female voice sounded behind her shoulder and she mentally cursed. *Dammit, Karen!* She turned back, attempting a smile. Karen was smiling, face surprised, but not unpleasantly. “Hi! What are you doing here?”

Vera opened her mouth just to close it again. She held out the holder with four cups instead of an answer. Karen’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, you are a *treasure*. I think we all need some caffeine today, this was one of the worst Mondays we had like ever. It was exhausting…” she sighed, and Vera couldn’t help feeling a little relieved. Apparently, whatever she was doing at the moment, it wasn’t a complete faux-pas. She handed Karen her cup with an apologizing expression.

“Sorry. It’s probably cold by now…”

“I don’t mind,” she reassured her, accepting the cup gratefully. Vera fought the urge to lower her gaze to the ground, as Karen eyes observed her curiously, reading her face easily. “Are you gonna go upstairs? It’s not Forbidden Forest, you know.”

Vera bit her lip, eyeing the sign again. She sighed. “You think Matt’s got a minute? I mean, you said you were busy-“

“Trust me. He will appreciate some cheer up. I’m finally getting lunch and I think Foggy was heading out as well any minute, so… doors open widely. It’s really nice of you to stop by and not forgetting about us poor people who have to put up with your cranky boyfriend…”

Alarm bells in Vera’s head set off. Alright. Back pedal. Not the right time to ask him about Terri’s stupid idea. Then again, he might refuse and Vera kinda wished he would. “Is he …cranky?” she asked cautiously, suddenly aware that he might actually listen to them the whole time. And that he
probably knew she was standing outside for what could be minutes. Great.

Karen laughed, eyes glimmering. “No. God no, Matt has a patience of a saint, seriously. Just go!” She shoved her lightly in the direction of the door and yelled bye over her shoulder. Vera huffed and came in, walking up the stairs. She reached the right office in no time, hesitating whether she should knock. She did.

Foggy greeted her with a bright smile, reaching out his hand as if he already knew about her gift. “Which one is mine?” he blurted the second he opened the door and examined the cups one after another. “Awww, there you are, sweetheart, come to daddy… Anyway, I’m heading out. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Bye!” he winked at Vera and squeezed past her to disappeared down the hall, leaving her standing in the door awkwardly.

Vera peeked in the office, finding Matt leaning onto a desk (Karen’s probably?) casually, small smile on his face. She stood there for few more seconds, before she took careful steps, finding herself in the forbidden space. She couldn’t help herself – she looked around - plain room, table and a printer, cabinet with files, door and windows to another rooms covered in slats. Vera knew Nelson and Murdock weren’t exactly exclusive – well, like not expensive – but it surprised here how…ordinary and low-budget their base looked. And then, in the middle of the room, a single man, sticking out, yet belonging there in any way possible, who was giving the office more than just a hint of extraordinariness. He tilted his head as she stopped in her track, just watching. She wasn’t even trying to be subtle about it anymore. She had every right to be curious. She discovered a small kitchen too – coffee pot full, giving the impression of not being used very often though.

“Uhm… hey,” she said eventually, very intelligently of course, taking several more steps and offering him the holder – she was sure he would recognize his coffee. One of the corners of his lips rose higher as he took the cup, placing it next to him on the table.

Vera had no idea what to say. “Foggy was…talking to the coffee earlier, right?”

The other corner shot up as well. He reached for the holder in her hand, putting it down too. Vera was baffled, but let him – he extended his hand, touching hers lightly and then wrapping his fingers around her wrist firmly. He slightly pulled and she obediently crossed the last distance between them as his other hand traced the line of her jaw, stopping at her chin, guiding her to his lips. The kiss was hesitant, but sweet, tender. She smiled into it, all worries of crossing any lines fading away.

Matt leaned back just a little and she opened her eyes again, almost shocked when meeting his glasses instead of the warm brown colour of his irises. Shit. She wasn’t used to that. “I hope so. No one gets to call you sweetheart but me. I’m not sharing. Not even with my law partner,” he exclaimed, unspoken threat in his words.

“Uh-uh…” she hummed, unsure how to react. “Possessive.”

He smiled smugly in response, arm around her waist pulling her closer, making her wedge her knee between his legs. Vera didn’t mind. Neither the position, neither his possessiveness. More like the opposite. So she leaned into him and kissed him on her own as silent mine left his lips. His thumb drew small circles on her waist under her undone coat as his lips answered her eagerly, which made her smile even more. Then as if she snapped her fingers, he stopped, pecked her on her lips and let her go.

“So… what can I do for you? Give you a grand tour or…?” he asked, head cocked to his side, tone teasing.

She chuckled. “Oh, so this is how you usually greet your clients before you’re giving them a tour,
huh? Maybe I should be the one talking about sharing…” She handed him his cup again. “Also, drink. I think it’s already cold anyway.”

“Not each client. Only those who are guilty of falling asleep while having a half-naked me in their bed and are incredible cute and beautiful,” he shot back, obediently sipping his no doubt cold coffee.

“So every other client then…” she mocked him again and he gasped, palm over his heart, pretending to be wounded. She sighed. “Anyway… I’m here to ask the most stupid question ever—“

His eyebrows shot up. “I doubt it. You once asked me if I ever want to sleep with you. I don’t really think anything can outdo that.” Vera felt her cheeks burning at his words. The memory was still quite fresh and it never got less awkward.

She cleared her throat. “You might be surprised. And just for the record, it’s Terri’s idea and I’m aware it’s stupid and it’s totally okay if you say no.”

He reached for his glasses, putting them off, suddenly much more vulnerable… and open. And absolutely confused. “Alright.”

“It’s… uhm,” 1, 2, 3… “she wants us to go to a double date.” There. It was out.

He blinked in surprise, clearly taken aback, letting out something between a chuckle and huff. “And why is that such a bad idea?”

And oh. She did not see that coming. There were no hints of a lie or resistance on his face. Just the confusion. That was… interesting. “I just… I wouldn’t think you would… want something like this. I mean, you’ll have to pretend that you’re… you’ll have to hide certain things, not being able to relax, not really… and it will probably be awkward as hell anyway. And… and… uhm, we don’t really have time for the dating thing, like going out thing even just the two of us and that’s totally fine with me,” she added quickly as his gentle smile fell, “I don’t mind, I love every single minute with you. We probably would find one evening to… I don’t know, go to movies or whatever, the movies are a stupid example, but honestly I thought that part of the… us meeting the way we do is that you can be yourself, not just a blind guy, a brilliant blind guy who I absolutely love, because he’s incredibly smart and funny and dorky and hot and good, he’s like everything, but you can also be something more, and don’t have to hide the part of you that can do a different kind of good and—“

“Vera, Vera, slow down, I’m barely following,” he demanded with a silent laugh and she noticed he was no longer holding the cup, instead he held her wrists gingerly, thumbs stroking the thin skin there. So she shut up. His expression was soft.

“Ignore…ignore the babbling, please.” She shook her head, shaking off the embarrassment of what she just let escape her mouth. “So you would go… to a double date? Us. With Terri and Victor?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Also, you’re- you really are cute, you know that? That little blush here…” He lifted one hand to touch her cheek (which reddened even more, naturally), then moving to her lips and she parted them subconsciously at his touch, exhaling at the pleasant feeling. “And so thoughtful. I was serious when I said that you tend to think. You think a lot and I appreciate that you’re considerate of me. It’s true I’m more of a… homebody I guess, partly because of what you said, but I can step out of that comfort zone. And I would like you to answer one question truthfully now.” His eyes were seeking, examining her face seriously and Vera feared the question as he leaned his head slightly in her space.

She encouraged him by kissing the top on his finger fondling her lower lip despite needing some courage by herself. His lips spread into wider smile at the affection.
“Would you like me to take you on a date? A proper one, that doesn’t involve punching bags and me climbing up – or down, depends - your fire escape?”

She chuckled at his little joke, until she realized he wasn’t joking and he in fact watched her expectantly, his fingers moving rather to her cheek, resting there. Oh. Would she?

Her tongue tangled as his big honest eyes observed her, hints of guilt in them never leaving, his features soft, telling her any answer was right or wrong. Her heart fluttered at the sight. She didn’t deserve that.

“I…I guess. If… if you want to,” she stuttered and he sighed.

“I do, if you let me. But this is about what do you want now. I like spending time with you, no matter how.”

“Alright. Yes. I would like you to take me on a proper date sometime.”

“Great. Now, is lunch considered at least an approximation of a proper date or not? Because I’m starving and you didn’t get any lunch either,” he grinned and her stomach grumbled at his exclaim, which made him grin even wider.

“Show-off. Also, I’m still waiting for the grand tour…”

“Sounds good to me. We have to wait until someone comes back anyway.” He pecked her lips and taking her hand, he led her to what could be a conference room.

The tour was too short. Low budget, she reminded herself. They finished in Matt’s office and Vera was slightly taken aback when he closed the door behind him. She turned around just to be pinned against the said door, hot lips demanding opening her mouth.

“What are you-“ she forgot her protest the moment his fingers find their way to her hair and his hips pressed against hers.

“Just passing time,” he breathed and silenced her gasp with his tongue as his hand slid under her shirt. Jolt of warm run down her spine and she let him in her mouth more than willingly, her own hand fighting to get under his shirt. She was totally on board with that.

She didn’t know how much time passed, when he suddenly whined silently and started making himself presentable. Karen was apparently returning and Vera couldn’t really be mad at Matt for paying attention to his wider surroundings, because she sure didn’t and Karen lips were twitching anyway as she entered the Nelson and Murdock office. She handed Vera her full cup of tea she found on her desk, together with Matt’s glasses - she was barely containing laugh.

“That was awkward…” Vera noted as they left the building and Matt shrugged.

“She said that herself. I needed a cheer up.” She rolled her eyes, but laughed anyway.

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Terri was delighted. Vera called her the minute she got home from her lunch date to announce her they would do it. Vera and Matt settled on a movie. Vera never felt more embarrassed than when they did.

“Why was the movies a stupid example?” he questioned her earlier exclaim and Vera stared at him, baffled. Was he asking for real? Did she miss something?
“…a movie?” she repeated sceptically, just in case he didn’t realize what that was. Moving pictures. On a flat screen. *Sight* required.

He raised his eyebrows expectantly as if he was waiting for her moment of clarity.

“Alright, fine. How do you watch a movie?” she asked, face already reddening at the stupid question.

He looked like he bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing. “With audio description.” The smile on his lips was…kind. Indulgent.

Oh. Audio description. She heard of that before. She just never really paid attention, because at that time it never seemed important. And they never planned a movie night with Matt, because it didn’t occurred to her that there actually might be a way to make it happen, simply because despite his all super, he was still blind. She was a fucking ableist. A terrible person. And the worst girlfriend ever.

“Oh my god,” she whined, squeezing her eyes shut, letting her fork fall in her plate and covered her face with both palms. *Jesus.*

“Or Foggy’s description. Those are more fun anyway,” he added, tone light and she whimpered to her hands, feeling even worse, because it sounded like he wanted to make her feel better. He was cheering her up and he remembered she didn’t like vietnamese – she was sure of it, they passed one place and he seemed to be on board with going there until he wasn’t and Vera wasn’t aware of doing anything that would hint him that please don’t. And she wasn’t able to do some research about blind people and their everyday life despite dating one. She fought the urge to bang her head against the table. Idiot, idiot, idiot.

“You okay?”

“No,” she mumbled, confident he would hear her. How was he so calm? How the hell was he still so nice to her after she just practically confessed to be a total ignorant?

“What’s wrong?” he sounded a little worried. He was probably frowning. The urge got stronger, but she fought it bravely, letting her hands fall. And yeah, he was frowning. It was evident despite the glasses.

“I’m a terrible human being.”

Eyebrows shot up. “Because…?”

“Because I never thought about something like audio description!” she blurted out, keeping her voice down as the people at the nearest table shot them a look. “I never thought of blind people watching movies.”

He was definitely containing laugh. “Vera, you can’t know everything,” he explained her gently, corners of his lips twitching. How the hell he found this funny?!

“I date a blind guy, for god’s sake!”

“I know,” he noted and took her hand, which fell to their table from her face, “the one who happens to know exactly where your hand is despite not seeing it with his eyes. I’m not… a typical blind. I get that it’s hard to keep tracks of everything, okay?”

How was he so understanding? She huffed. “Alright. Doesn’t change the fact I’m an awful girlfriend. So, would you like to go to movies then? Are you willing to suffer through one movie
with Terri and Victor?"

“…and you. It would be a pleasure in fact. And you’re not—“

“Let’s… not fight about that. We both know the truth. What kind of a movie you’re up to?” she interrupted him, wishing she could sink through the floor – while still holding his hand, because it was a very nice feeling.

“…one with audio description?” he offered lightly, teasing her and Vera withdrew her hand to continue eating her pasta with a sigh.

“Fair enough.”

So yeah, Terri was a little bewildered too, but she had every right not to know about audio descriptions so it didn’t really make Vera feel better. They would watch a movie in a cinema and then they would go to someone – Terri immediately offered her place – and ordered some take out. An ordinary nice evening with friends. Vera was actually starting liking the idea. She wouldn’t admit it to Terri though. They agreed to check their schedule (and the cinema programme) and let each other know about possible date dates and said their goodbyes, Terri with too much enthusiasm. Vera just rolled her eyes and smiled inconspicuously herself. It wasn’t like Terri could see that.

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That night, Vera went to Fogwell’s alone. She wanted to start her training as soon as possible, but after making an ass of herself and asking Matt to sacrifice himself to be part of a double date, she really didn’t push her luck and didn’t mention it. So she cleaned up and worked out in her own tempo, wondering how different it would be with Matt. Stretching and changing in some non-sweaty clothes – it was January and she liked not to be ill, not taking any risks unlike someone she knew – she walked home.

She couldn’t help feeling like someone was following her. Every time she turned around though, there was no one. She was getting paranoid. She buried her hand in her purse, finding her pepper spray, grabbing the bottle firmly and quickened her pace. She was still far from home. She needed to get there faster. She took the first right, well aware that alleyways sucked, but always meant a shortcut. Main street again and then another alley, she pressed her back against the cut out entrance, hiding in the shadows. The steps she might only imagined fell silent and then paced away. She sighed in relief, peeking out as subtly as she could.

Arm pushed her against the door again, hard and she let out the scream – or she wanted to, until a hand covered her mouth to muffle it. She pulled out the spray quickly - before she could press, the attacker knocked it out of her hand in one fast motion. Her heartbeat was loud in her ears as she tried to prod him with her knee – vainly - and jerked violently to free herself. No effect.

“Vera, stop it,” too familiar voice demanded and she snapped her eyes open - she didn’t realize she squeezed them shut - and this time the hand didn’t silence her scream – if muffled her gasp as she recognized her attacker.

You gotta be fucking kidding me. She felt dizzy, her knees almost giving up, her vision becoming scarlet in its edges, anger boiling in her chest. He was wearing a fucking black mask. She stopped fidgeting despite wanting to prod his groin with her knee even more than before. Recognizing she wouldn’t alarm whole neighbourhood with her yelling, the hand from her mouth disappeared – the pressure of his body didn’t though.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Matt?!” she hissed in his face – half-face anyway – barely finding her
voice. That *motherfucker*. What the hell was he thinking he was doing? Sneaking behind her, ninja-appearing, alright, but this?! “You scared the shit out of me!”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. And why didn’t he release her already? “I’m not… kidding you. You’re the one who wanted me to teach you,” he exclaimed calmly, not bothering with apology and she gasped, shock freezing her brain. *You’re the one who wanted me to teach you.* That meant-

“This is a lesson?! *It was* you the whole time? What the hell, Matt?” Seriously, what the hell? She felt her fear finally leaving, anger slightly fading away as well. *Jesus.* He wasn’t joking when he said he wouldn’t be a good at this…on the other hand… “Well, whatever the point is, I’m sure I won’t forget that,” she admitted, focusing on her breathing, trying to slow it down. She found the way to control muscles in her legs again, realizing she would probably fall down if it wasn’t for Matt’s weight on her.

“Yes. It is. What exactly do you expect to learn, Vera? Honestly?” he demanded, but gentler than before. She was pretty sure her body was definitely telling him that this experience wasn’t pleasant and he *did* feel sorry for scaring the shit out of her. She thought about his question.

“Uhm… to fight off someone who would do the same you just did to me, for example?” she offered, suddenly uncertain - he licked his lips and clicked his tongue disapprovingly. Freaking mask. It was hard to actually read him.

“You knew someone was following you, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer and continued. “Which was exactly the moment when you should stay on the main street, possibly run away from the person. Not hiding in such an unsafe place. God forbid, getting ready for a fist fight. Lesson number one: when you can, you run.”

Vera opened her mouth, bewildered, wanting to protest – she didn’t get a chance.

“I would like to clear things out. This,” he gestured his free hand between them, “only has one purpose. You learn how to fight your way out and then you’ll *run the hell away from the danger.* Do you understand? Defending yourself and escaping. I’m not teaching you so you could join some kind of a fight club. Are we clear?” His voice permitted no objections, his question sounding more like an order, but it was also a plea. Vera realized how much Matt cared – how much he worried about her. How desperately he wanted her to *be safe*, a wish she kept working against more often she would like herself. She nodded and his lips formed a small smile as he let his arm fall, letting her go – almost. He still stood in her way from the cut out.

“So. What’s the first and most important rule?” he asked, deadly serious.

She couldn’t help it. It just slipped out. “Of a fight club?”

Sharp intake of breath, lips parting, then becoming a thin line, his jaw so tense she was afraid he might tear a tendon; fists immediately clenching and he looked a little more like the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen - who was *not amused.*

“Run if you can! Got it! *Jesus,* Matt….” she murmured and he sighed, running his gloved hand down his face.

“I swear to God, Vera…” he whispered weakly, not finishing whatever sentence he had in mind. She felt a sting of guilt - he was taking it responsibly, no matter how crazy his methods were. And she was teasing him.

Vera carefully took his hand in hers and he let her, squeezing lightly, before pulling her in his
embrace. She rested her head against his shoulder, kissing his bare neck. “I’m sorry… but you totally walked in this one.”

He stiffened, but didn’t say a word. She withdrew a little, looking at his… half-face. He was pouting. Honest to god pouting. It was adorable. She kissed the loveable lips as gently as she managed. It didn’t help much, but there was a slight change in his posture – he drew her closer, relaxing partly.

“Come on. It was a little funny,” she tried out again and succeeded – his lips twitched, before returning to its position. “Alright. You know what? Karen was right. You’re cranky. I’m sure Foggy would appreciate that reference.”

At that exclaim, he smiled genuinely. “Yeah, he would. Maybe you should be with him,” he offered and shrugged as if he didn’t really care if she would. Vera could tell he was joking and the storm was staved off – the smile was a permission to kiss him again. Which she did, softly, opening her mouth easily as she let him, tongues meeting. Violence and tenderness. Anger and forgiveness. Brooding and brightness. God, she loved him.

He moved his hands to her face, leaning back, freeing her lips. “It’s good that you don’t share, remember?” she whispered. He grinned.

“Let’s get you home. I’ll make sure no one is following you.” He kissed her forehead, I care for you, and released her.

She raised an eyebrow, amused. “You mean anyone else apart from the Devil?” she asked sceptically, but smiled gratefully. She would now probably be freaking out at the smallest sound, thinking someone less friendly is tailing her, attempting to hurt her. It was totally Matt’s fault.

“Well, you can always hide in a church. Father Lantom once told me that nothing drives people to the church faster than the thought of the devil snapping at their heels,” he noted while jogging away, tossing her the pepper spray (she barely caught it, dammit) and casually jumping on a fire escape, climbing higher and higher, until she couldn’t see him anymore. She would probably never get over the fact Matt had a very casual relationship with his priest, who apparently knew – and didn’t mind – what he was doing at night and that he was being called the Devil.

His words made her laugh though. She knew she could speak in normal volume, no need to yell after him, even though it felt weird, talking to air. “Ha! I’m sure he’s a wise man, but I know better. The church is one of the most likely places to meet him. I heard he’s catholic.”

His silent laugh echoed somewhere above her head and she shook it and walked home, goofy smile glued to her face.

Chapter End Notes

I feel my chapters are fluff or blood. There is no between. Is that wrong? :D

Also, I think I never mentioned it, but I post the same stuff on Wattpad, where you can find me as Anika_Ann_M. Me personally, I prefer AO3 reading format, but hey, just wanted to let you know. If anything, you can check out the cover “art” for my stories :)
To be honest, Vera was glad Terri wasn’t on her shift on Tuesday. She really was, because she wouldn’t shut up about the upcoming date and leaving her a message in case they were both free with Victor - her and Matt were on board with doing it on Saturday evening - was much simpler. And gentler to her ears. Unlike her, Terri was ridiculously excited. Knowing Matt agreed calmed her down significantly, but there might be a huge gap between theory and practice – even though he didn’t seemed to mind, he could change his opinion quickly after like few minutes in Terri’s company, her chatting and her freaky I-know-stuff-just-by-looking-at-you thing going on. Yet, she couldn’t deny she was at least curious about how the night would go.

Olivia and Lyla were on her shift, so she managed. In fact, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that Olivia had been shooting her murderous looks less often then she used to. It was a freaking miracle and Vera wondered if it had something to do with the court with Collins - Olivia liked to know about things happening so she could spread rumours - there was no doubt she knew about her colleague testifying. Whatever the truth was, Vera was grateful.

The typical day it was, the crowds disappeared between nine and ten, girls taking their breaks gradually. Lyla was with her when the woman came in, wrapped in grey scarf almost covering her face – what the wool didn’t manage to hide, the huge sunglasses (completely useless, unless they served as a shield from curious looks) did. Black hair muffled in fresh-out-of-bed shape, leather jacket and jeans, bag over her shoulder. She sure was one interesting figure.

“Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you?”

The fact Vera couldn’t tell whether the woman eyed her was slightly disturbing. “Hey. Americano? Double shot. The middle size or whatever to the biggest cup you have,” she mumbled, voice a little hoarse as if she indeed just woke up. Vera was absolutely baffled.

“Middle sized Americano, but in a tall cup? Double shot?” she repeated, reassuring and the woman nodded.

“Problem?” Her voice was mixture of annoyance and threat. Vera sure didn’t have any problem. She wouldn’t want any problem. The woman was giving a dangerous vibe. Vera was confident she was hangover if anything.

“Nope. To go?”

She actually cracked an approximation of a smile. “Yep.”

Vera, astonished by the display of emotion, told her the price and asked her to move left. When she turned around, she saw Lyla’s eyes popped. Vera shrugged inconspicuously and prepared the special order.

“Want name on the cup?” she asked casually, not really expecting a positive answer. That woman needed caffeine. She didn’t care about a name.

To her surprise, she smiled wider, somehow mysterious.

“Laser eyes,” she replied smugly and Vera obediently scribed it on the cup, wondering whether she
should add a smiley face. She didn’t.

“I got the glasses now. Nice of you to spare us from your murderous glare…” she murmured and the woman snorted as she reached for the cup – only to remove the cap, pulling out a flask, filling the empty space in the tall cup with something. Which was probably very alcoholic. “Is that whiskey?” she asked incredulously, unable to stop herself.

The woman checked her work and apparently satisfied, she put the flask back. “Well, it ain’t apple juice…”

“Yes. That would be disgusting.” Jesus, Vera, shut up…

But the woman snickered, taking her cup. “Whatever. Thanks.” And she was gone. Vera stood there for a while before she shook her head, and returned to the counter, finding Olivia back already. She took her break, still baffled by the strange encounter. On the other hand, she saw weirder – they once had a guy who ordered double shot espresso and decaf, drinking both in what could have been three minutes. Starting day with coffee with shot of whiskey (or whatever it was) didn’t seem that extraordinary. People were weird just because they did drink coffee in general.

Her shift ending, she found a text from Claire, offering her an afternoon embroidery session – Vera wanted to tidy up her flat, but offer like that she couldn’t refuse. She called her back, preparing latte and grabbing a muffin as a thank you, buying few pig trotters (the butcher already knew her by name, from time to time having a bag prepared) on her way to Claire’s place.

Claire was a saint. She not only had a place to sew up, but also provided the material, needles and different kinds of sutures and needles, sneaking out with it from Metro General, somehow undetected – she also helped Vera to equip her first aid kit, the amazing person she was And since Vera always helped her clean up and tossed the biological material in the dumpster outside, she didn’t even complaint about any smell in her apartment (there wasn’t any, not really, but if they would be meeting at Vera’s place, Matt would probably noticed…and mind).

Claire showed her a new style of stitching up, this time for muscles, not used often, but sometimes vital. She actually managed to photocopy few pictures of the wounds from the hospital, to show Vera in which cases she would use it rather than just simulating the injury on the trotter. Vera wondered what else should she buy her to thank her properly – Claire, guessing her thoughts, told her that the possibility of Matt visiting her less frequently one day as a result of this would be satisfying enough. Vera grinned at that and continued her work of art under her attentive surveillance.

Vera arrived home around five, too late for lunch, too early dinner – but she ate anyway - and cleaned up at least lightly. Planning to spend evening with a book, she snuggled in her bed, receiving Terri’s confirmation of their date. Great. She couldn’t focus on the words anymore, so she gave up and muffled in her covers, hoping to fall asleep early.

Funnily and scarily enough, Matt stopped before she did. He kissed her forehead lightly, sensing she was only half awake. She blinked, switching the bedside lamp on, curious about his visit. Was that blood on his face?

“Sorry. Didn’t want to wake you up. How was your day?” he asked lowly and she reached for her glasses, examining his face with full sight. And yes. There was a small cut on his temple. And it was still bleeding.

“Are you seriously asking me about my day while you’re bleeding?” she questioned his sanity, kicking the covers away and heading to the bathroom, leaving him there.
“It’s nothing,” she heard him mumble as she came back with her first aid kit, dragging him to her couch by his hand – he let her, obediently sitting down. She pulled a pair of gloves and frowned at the wound. He was right, it was nothing by his measures. Just a small cut. Relief washed over her when she realized she wouldn’t need to do the stitching thing just yet – she could definitely use a little more practice before that. Plus, it was on his face, she really wouldn’t want to screw that up.

“Yeah, nothing until it gets infected… I’ll just clean it and band-aid it, okay? This is gonna sting, sorry,” she warned him, probably totally uselessly. It felt right though. “What happened? Is there anything else?” she demanded, slightly worried – the cut was small, but if that didn’t mean there was no serious damage inside. Not mentioning any possible wounds she couldn’t see. The one on his face was kinda outstanding.

He actually smiled gently, just like the very first time he came to her place (not to her, noted, alright), injured a little, cursing, because she noticed he was hurt – or rather wanted to do something about it – and she seated him on the very same spot, taking care of the things that didn’t required Claire aka medical worker extraordinaire.

She placed the butterfly band-aids with a sigh, still waiting for his answer.

“I’m fine otherwise and I don’t have a concussion, if that’s what you’re asking,” he responded evasively and she rolled her eyes, putting the gloves off. He took her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I guess… You’re heading out again, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. You have the morning shift, right?”

“Aaand you’re not coming back to me. Shame…” she whispered as he gave her an apologizing kiss, sweet and loving with no heat.

“Sorry,” he sounded genuinely regretful. “There are things I need to take care of.”

“I know. Go, save the world…” She waved her hand, hush, hush, and he kissed her again. “Don’t let them hit you to your face though. You have a date on Saturday,” she announced and his eyebrow shot up – on the other side than his cut was, smart-ass – and he grinned.

“I ask them to aim it lower. Don’t worry,” he promised, putting on his mask, heading to the window. She jumped to her feet, following him, catching his hand before he put the gloves on. He turned back, head tilted.

“I would prefer if you didn’t let them hurt you at all. Be careful, please,” she squeezed his hand and from what she could see of his face, she could read sympathy.

He squeezed back, giving her one more kiss on her forehead and one to her hair. “I always am. Good night.”

And with those words, he was gone. Vera sighed, cleaned up the supplies and lied down to her bed, probably more awake than before. However, she fell asleep in no time.

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Wednesday they confirmed her registration for course she applied the very same night Matt supported her decision to get a licence. She got lucky – originally, they replied that the capacity was full already (and really, it was expected since the course was about to start next Wednesday), but someone apparently bailed on them last minute, so they offered the place to her. Like hell she would
decline. Once she found the e-mail, she walked back to the café, discussing it with Mrs.Walker, who promised to try some magic shifting with the shifts. Vera was sure everyone was going to love her for making it messy – she promised herself to take extra shifts after she would come back from Allentown.

Vera kinda hated the fact she needed to leave – to different state, for god’s sake -, but this was the earliest opportunity to gain the licence, she wouldn’t waste it and the accommodation they were offering wasn’t that expensive – it was sure cheaper than taking a bus twice a day. Faster too, plus spending six hours a day travelling was not exactly her dream. Not to mention that some lectures and possible extracurricular activities took place later in the evenings. No real choice there. She applied for the accommodation, content smile on her face.

She talked to her mum that day as well to share the news – she did not like the idea of Vera being alone in an unknown city, but Vera’s enthusiasm about the course probably convinced her it was worth it. The reminder of New York being practically unknown place as well once and her having company that would miss her if she disappeared, probably helped too.

“Marky stopped by. She brought wedding mince pies and an invitation,” her mum noted as if incidentally. Vera sighed, seeing what she did there. Of course.

Vera was too happy. Vera might not come back from US. Let’s remind her why she should.

“Yeah, she mentioned they were baking. Well, her mother and company, of course. She wouldn’t want bad luck…” Vera replied, hiding the anxiety that wrapped her coldly, unpopular reminder that she indeed had to decide at some point what to do next.

“The date is nice. Autumn equinox…”

“Mum! I get it, alright? Yeah, I’ll be there,” she blurted out, fighting the urge to punch something. She didn’t want to think about September. It was far, far away…

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t want to upset you,” she tried out gently, traces of guilt audible, and Vera sighed again. Didn’t want to my ass. She wisely didn’t say that out loud.

“I know mum. How are things at home?” she asked, immediately noticing mum’s face lighting up at her choice of words. Not Czechia. Not Trutnov. Home. Vera felt her, alright? She missed her home, she missed her friends, her family, but she loved it here and she would miss it too dammit.

“Good. Good, lots of snow, you would love it. Petr and Lenka are taking short vacation, Friday-Sunday stay in the mountains-“

“As in more in the mountains then they already are?” she couldn’t help snorting and her mum gave her a look.

“You know they spent most time in Prague. Be nice.”

“Yeah, yeah… tell them to enjoy it, okay? I gotta go, talk to you soon? I have a double date on Saturday, so maybe then… Good night, mum.”

Her mum wished her the same and Vera dramatically closed the laptop without bothering to turning it off. It was a blatant lie what she said. She had nothing to do, not really. But she was pissed. The memory of Nelson’s Christmas – the less appealing part – appeared in her mind again, making her want to scream to her pillow. Nope. She would not think about leaving. Not yet. She still had plenty of time, plenty of things to do. She opened the laptop again, complimenting Marky’s wedding invitation she stubbornly refused to react to earlier as she posted it in their group conversation and put
a very loud music on, finishing her clean up from yesterday.

At the end, she decided to bake too. She found one of her mum’s receipt – the one that seemed to be the most complicated, because she needed something to do and Fogwell’s wasn’t an option since she secretly hoped to score a lesson with Matt soon – tomorrow, if she got lucky enough. She didn’t want her muscles to be exhausted for that.

Vera baked, she prepared her dinner, took a long shower – and once again she had nothing to do. Jesus. She should have gone to punch something. But she didn’t. Her bad. She would go tomorrow, Matt or not, afternoon shift be damned.

Her sleep was restless; she kept shifting her positions with no satisfying results, pros and cons of coming home popping up in her mind in furious staccato, not allowing her to rest. When she heard the quiet opening of her window, she almost cried in relief.

“Thank god,” she muttered under her breath and jumped to her feet, making her way to the living room, switching on the small light. Matt seemed little baffled, the tousled hair and big unfocused eyes not really helping, as she approached him rapidly, stopping in the last moment. “You hurt?”

Perplexed by her rashness, he shook his head. “No. You ok—

“Good.” She collided with his body, face burying to his chest, breathing in contentedly. He let out a surprised noise (and she would deserve a medal for surprising him), before he returned the hug, gentler than her though, arms enclosing her safely.

“Did something happened?” he whispered to her hair, adapted to the confusing situation, offering his comforting embrace. Vera heard the unspoken cliché question. Do you want to talk about it?

“No,” she mumbled, answering both, and he squeezed her tighter, stroking her lower back.

‘Kay.”

He held her, no other questions asked and that was all she needed, relaxing and finally feeling actual sleep coming knocking.

“Will you stay?” she asked timidly, vainly trying to hide her pleading tone and felt him becoming stiff. She raised her head, not seeing much more than his chin. He kissed her forehead, humming in what she hoped was agreement.

So she took his wrist, wanting him to follow her to the bedroom – but he took roots in her floor, hesitating.

“Uhm… I should probably… shower.” He gestured vaguely around his body she had to admit that was most likely a good idea. Or would be. Except she refused to let him go anywhere.

“How do you feel about the couch?”

They ended up there, wrapped in one blanket, Vera falling asleep the moment he hugged her from behind. She only woke up at tender touch in her hair, vaguely remembering something like sorry, early meeting, and she was out cold again. She got up at ten o’clock, from her bed, with I love you in her phone. It was the last contact she made with Matt that day, ending up at Fogwell’s alone, finding a text about him being alright, coming home at four a.m. She didn’t like it, but there was nothing she could do about it.
In Czechia, we always deliver wedding invitation with small paper basket with minces. I’m not sure if it’s a thing anywhere else. The bride is not allowed to help with baking, unless she wants to bring bad luck to her marriage and future family. If it’s known that the invited person is in a relationship (and not married), there is one special “corner mince” added – it is believed that if you share the mince under a table with your loved one, you’ll get married soon as well. (It doesn’t work. I shared like five of those with my boyfriend in about last three years, because everyone is getting freaking married, and he still didn’t pop up the question. But I think the tradition is kinda sweet. If anything, it’s fun and the fact alone - that someone is willing to crawl under a table to eat mince with you-, gotta count for something, right?)

Also, just wondering, how exactly Jessica gets her coffee with whiskey? I thought about it when watching the defenders (best introduction from the four main characters ever, by the way :D ).

TLDR: Sorry for the slow start and relatively short chapter. Stuff will happen. Promise.
Friday was a blur. Terri chatted excitedly about the upcoming event, offering time and place of meeting, almost singing about the movie they were about to attend – and Vera was lost, because she didn’t look it up. It was Terri’s task to choose since Vera and Matt already decided what they wanted to do and Vera remembered Terri texted her the name of the piece – she just didn’t feel a need to know everything about it before watching it; she just made sure they were screening with audio description provided and let it go.

She was honestly surprised when Matt entered MDDC minutes before her shift ended. Terri gave her a significant look and Vera fought urge to shrug, unpleasant feeling sinking in her stomach. But Matt wore his charming smile, so charming that Caroline didn’t protest when Terri practically talked Vera into leaving few minutes earlier and didn’t kept Matt waiting. Vera gave them both a hesitant wave and left the café hanging to Matt’s arm.

They walked slowly, in silence for a long time, thin layer of snow crunching under their boots. Vera could tell something was bothering him – the smile he was trying to keep on was fake as her hair colour, but she didn’t push – he did her the same favour yesterday, after all.

“You feel better?” he broke the silence eventually, expression somewhat blank.

She sighed, nodding. “Yeah. It was… it was stupid. Just a call from mum, there are things we don’t seem to agree on…” she hummed indifferently and the corner of his lip twitched, not amused though. “I got an e-mail. I’m getting the lessons next week,” she added, sneaking some delight in her voice and his lips indeed spread, honestly this time.

“I’m glad,” he offered kindly, expecting her to continue.

“It’s in Allentown though. Wednesday to Sunday. I’m gonna stay there.”

To her shock, he seemed to relax. “That’s good. Good. I mean… you won’t have to worry about anything else, focus on the lessons. And you meet someone outside Hell’s Kitchen…” he said, not really making sense, so she just nodded again and tried her best not to be offended by his positive reaction for her leaving.

“Yeah.”

The silence prolonged, the feeling in her stomach getting more urgent with each minute. They were almost at her apartment and there was still something hanging in the air, something what made her heart ache.

“Matt, I… Are you going to tell me what’s happening last few days? You don’t have to,” she added quickly as she felt the muscles in his arm tense, “but you can, you know. If you want to. You seem a little troubled.”

Tired huff was her only answer. He did look exhausted – considering he came home so late, barely staying at her place, she wondered whether it had something to do with his other life. On the other hand, it wasn’t like that until they talked him down to the stupid double date thing. Coincidence?

“It’s not about the date, is it? Because if it is, we can totally cancel…”

4) Little piece of the acceptable normal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
He chuckled, stopping in his tracks and she realized they she was already home. “It’s not about the date, Vera. I’m glad we’re doing it, we deserve something more…normal. You deserve it. It’s just…don’t worry about it, alright? I discovered someone new on the scene and I don’t like it very much, but I’ll handle it. Promise.”

She examined his face and she found nothing but honesty. Someone new. The shiver that run down her spine had nothing to do with the cold – she was afraid. Worried about him. He didn’t sleep enough. He was overstretchesing himself.

“There’s nothing I can do to help, is it?” He froze for a second, then relaxed again. She hesitantly cupped his cheek and small smile played on his lips, leaning into her touch slightly.

“No, not really. Be careful and enjoy your time in Allentown and I promise I’ll teach you when you come back, hm?”

Vera couldn’t help smiling too. “I would like that,” she admitted quietly, hesitantly raising her head, kissing him lightly. He deepened the kiss, certain desperation soaking through it, before he rested his forehead against hers, glasses clinking to her nose.

“You’re free tomorrow?”

Vera felt a sting of disappointment. She could have been – but she took extra morning shift to compensate her later absence. “No. Morning shift. Need some hours ahead,” she murmured miserably and he took over her lips, tasting the sadness.

“Then I guess we’ll meet in front of the cinema then?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll try to be there earlier, make sure you won’t get abducted by my scary best friend and her intimidating boyfriend,” she hummed, lighting up at the idea.

His lips twitched. “I’ll take your word for it. Even though he’s not that terrifying…”

“You met him?” she blurted out, withdrawing to shot him a surprised look.

He shrugged. “Not really. But he was tailing me once…”

Oh. Right, Terri’s spy mission after the benefit. Meeting Victor would be embarrassing as hell. “Right. I forgot about that one. I guess you’re going out tonight?”

He pecked her lips for the last time. “Yeah. I’ll text you. Have a good night.”

She sighed, returning the plea with a small alternation. “Have a safe night…”

“I will.”

---

Vera made it through her shift without fully realizing what was happening. She walked home on autopilot as well, not really thinking about her outfit – she grabbed the first thing that seemed decent enough, lunch-snacking and heading out to keep her promise. She was late anyway. Matt was already being questioned by the time she arrived, so she kissed him on his cheek apologizing, gaining an eye-roll from Terri.

“You can kiss him for real, you know. We’re not your parents…”

Vera huffed, but met his lips as she was encouraged to do more than willingly, lingering for maybe
“Okay, you don’t have to exaggerate—”

“Make up you damn mind, Theresa,” she hissed at her, more teasing than anything else. Matt grinned and they all came in so they could buy tickets and seated themselves.

“Say one word and we’re out of here, if you want to,” she whispered for Matt’s ears only and he kissed her ear to cover his answer.

“I think we can make it through…”

---

“So…what are the plans for the next week?” Terri asked casually as they were all standing in the tiny space of the corner pizza place, waiting for their order. Somehow, they managed to agree on three pizzas, planning to share. Vera wouldn’t admit it out loud, but she was so hungry her brain was probably very low on sugar.

“Uhm…none?” she answered unsurely, trying to make her mind working. It was a hard thing to do – firstly, Matt kept playing with the hem of her coat, fingers tracing her thigh inconspicuously while wearing an innocent smile and secondly, she really was hungry and she couldn’t think.

Terri gave her a dubious look. “Seriously?”

Vera frowned at her, mind finally racing. What would be happening next week? She mentally checked her organizer, trying to remember whether there was some significant date for Americans – like Independence Day or whatever, but she couldn’t recall any. It wasn’t even Valentine’s Day – that would be two weeks from now. “Did I miss something?”

She rather turned to Matt, but he shrugged, obviously confused as much as her. Terri seemed to hesitate, eyes rolled up like recounting something in her head. Then she frowned as well. “Today…it’s the 30th of January, right?” she reassured and Victor, not engaging in their weird conversation until that moment, nodded.

“Yeah. Why?”

Terri measured Vera suspiciously and then examined Matt’s baffled expression – the longer she did, the lower her jaw kept falling. She seemed scandalized.

“Vera. How is your math?” she demanded, watching her expectantly, like waiting for light bulb lighting up above Vera’s head. So she thought harder. Saturday, 30th January. Next week - 1st, 2nd, 3rd… she was freaking lost. Terri raised an eyebrow, impatient. 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th - oh.

“Oh,” she let out silently and Terri grimaced. Her mum didn’t mention it when they were talking last time. Back at home, she would be reminded because they would plan their relatives visiting. Before they broke up with David, he would ask her which evening she was free so he would take her to dinner. Her mum would ask her what kind of a cake she wanted her to order in her favourite bakery. Not here. Here, no one knew about her upcoming birthday. Except Terri, apparently – she knew better than Vera herself.

“Yeah. Oh. Are telling me you forgot about-”

“No. Of course not!” Vera interrupted her quickly, before she could say the word out loud. Holy
shit. Her anxiety was back. It would be 7th February already. That meant… only a little over six months were left before she had to head back to Czechia. She was almost in the middle of her stay and she did not want to think about her departure yet. Truth to be told, she didn’t want to think about it at all. Which was one of the reason she decided not to celebrate a while ago.

Matt fingers pulled the hem of her coat lightly. When she turned her head to face him, his expression was curious. He couldn’t know, they had never talked about it. But he heard her frantically beating heart as she claimed she did not forget – she lied through her teeth. It didn’t seem to be important. She was focused on planning the course for fit-box licence, alternating her MDDC shifts rather than actually thinking about the dates.

“Really? Cause it kinda looks you did.”

Vera shot her a murderous glare. If she said it out loud, Vera would kill her. Or eat her pieces of pizza. Or both.

“How much cheese, meat-lovers and peperoni? “ the guy behind the counter called out and Vera loved him for that distraction.

“Oh, thank god,” she breathed and at the glare Terri gave her, she quickly added “I’m starving.” It was funny, because it was the truth. The fact her relief was more due to the interruption didn’t change it. Matt’s lie detector wouldn’t notice that.

Too bad Matt would. As he offered her his arm, she could tell he was waiting for an explanation. She sighed and followed Terri and Victor – and the smell of delicious food.

“Anything you want to share?” he asked lowly, walking only few steps behind the other pair. She would shake her head, but the brilliant idea hit her. For the first time in her life, she was actually happy her name day collided with her birthday. No one ever envied her, because some families (like hers) celebrated name days as well, even though it was usually not a big deal – it meant she missed one opportunity to get a present, at least a small one though. She never really minded, but at the moment, she was even grateful.

“Uhm…it’s nothing. The 7th February in Czechia stands for the name Veronika,” she mumbled, her heart hammering in steady beat. She was telling the truth and he could tell. Ha!

“Oh,” he seemed surprised, stroking her arm lightly. “What do you usually do on your name day? You celebrate?”

She bit her tongue. Damn, she needed to stick with the truth. But lying in omission was permitted, right? “Not much. Grandparents come to visit, usually bringing a box of chocolate or something. Maybe flowers from my father or brother. It’s not a big deal.”

“…but you rather wouldn’t celebrate at all,” he guessed and she had to laugh.

“Is it that obvious?” she wondered, finding a small smile on his lips as well. She stopped in her tracks, pecking those kissable lips. Vera was pleasantly surprised by the outcome of their double date so far. Matt seemed content, relaxed in fact, despite her expectations. His smile warmed her heart and she regretted not seeing his eyes happy as well.

He hummed, lost in thoughts and they reached Terri’s apartment building. Vera had never been there before, but Victor was confident, which was understandable. She knew Terri lived alone, unlike Victor, who had his brother as a roomie – or he was his roomie? That part was a little confusing.
“Alright, come in,” Terri invited them uselessly and they followed her up the stairs, passing the mailboxes.

“So no celebrations on your name day. When is your birthday?” Matt asked quietly, absolutely unexpectedly. Vera almost stumbled over her own feet when he did. Good thing he actually held her, and not the other way around. But shit. She was busted. “Vera?”

She gaped silently, unsure how to put it without looking like a complete idiot. Terri and Victor were engaged in their own conversation, not really paying attention. They stopped in front of the door on the first floor and Vera was saved for another few moments.

She was happy to find out Terri had no shoes policy as well, offering them slippers. She gratefully accepted, Matt doing the same – and frowning. Dammit, Theresa, this is completely your fault…

“Knock yourselves out. Anything to drink? Water, juice, beer?” she asked them and gestured to what Vera guessed was a direction of a living room. She liked Terri’s flat – long hall led straight to bedroom, doors to kitchen on her right as well as the ones to the living room, bathroom opposite to them. The living space was cozy, red couch and armchairs facing TV, orange pillows thrown around chaotically. It reminded her of MDDC and it was very Terri. She had a thing for orange colour.

“Water’s fine,” Matt murmured and Terri nodded as a sign of noting his request as if she forgot he couldn’t see it.

“Juice, maybe? I’ll help you!” Vera quickly grabbed the opportunity and walked with her to the kitchen, wickedly leaving Matt to sit down on the couch alone. She knew she had to tell him at some point - he was okay with not celebrating the name day, he could do the same with her birthday, right? There was literally no reason for them do so.

“Thanks. Plates,” Terri noted as she handed them to her together with a box of juice and two glasses. Vera spun on her heels to go back, but her friend’s voice stopped her. “You seriously didn’t tell him about your birthday?” she asked in disbelief and Vera closed her eyes, whining internally. Or maybe out loud. Damn you, Theresa. Damn you, Murdock, and your super-hearing.

“No, I didn’t. It never came up, okay?” Vera explained and defended herself at once. It didn’t. Until now. “It’s not like we celebrated his birthday anyway. It’s only fair.”

“When his birthday was?”

Yeah, that was a good question. She sighed. “I don’t know. I told you it never came up. For all I know, it could be today.”

Terri snorted and followed her with two other glasses, one filled with water, beer under her arm. “You are quite a pair, aren’t you?”

When they entered the living room, finding Victor halfway through his fair share, Vera couldn’t help chuckling as Terri raised an eyebrow at her boyfriend, who grinned innocently.

“You’re the one to talk. Terri. You’re the one to talk…”

“Game time,” Terri announced, clapping her hands and Vera eyed her, confused. They were all done eating, empty boxes on the coffee table, Terri and Victor each in one armchair, Vera snuggled to Matt’s side. The movie was a good idea, because it was just like Terri said – it broke the ice and they had something to talk about. Listening to the discussion about the hottest actress was actually quite
interesting, because Matt only heard a description and judged partly by the voice, while Victor, naturally, relied on his sight. Action sequences were a little tougher subject, Matt was little quieter at that part, but he didn’t seem to mind listening to others, expression thoughtful. He never mentioned her birthday again.

They were resting now, Vera wondering whether they should head home, when Terri came up with the idea – shocking Matt as well, if his fingers suddenly stopping their movement in her hair were anything to go by. (And she was pleased that his obsession continued even in presence of the other pair, openly expressing his affection.)

“Game time?” Vera parroted sceptically, unsure of the meaning of the words. If she was about to pull out Spin the bottle, Vera would be leaving immediately. She doubted that, but it was Terri. She was unpredictable.

“Yep. Problem? Come on. One round of Activity,” she offered cheerfully and Vera’s heart jumped in excitement as she heard the name of her favourite game. They used to play it a lot back home with her friends. It was fun, no matter what non-gaming people were saying. It only had a small catch.

“Activity? Seriously?” she questioned her choice and sat up straight, leaving the warm of Matt’s arms unwillingly. Terri already headed to her bedroom, followed by Vera’s and Victor’s dubious glare. Apparently, Victor knew Activity too. And he could see the problem as well.

Terri came back, box in her hands, eyeing them with raised eyebrow. “What? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Vera checked; Matt wasn’t sceptical, rather curious.

“Ter, don’t you think your plan, no matter how brilliant it is, has a few shortcomings?” Victor asked and Vera was glad it didn’t have to be her who whipped the smile from her face.

“Like what?”

Matt tilted his head, sitting up behind Vera. Vera beckoned to him, hesitatingly pointing out the imperfections. “I love the game, I really do. But Matt might have a problem with… drawing? Recognizing drawings and guessing pantomime?”

“Don’t be such an ableist, Mechy. We adjust the rules,” Terri shrugged and Vera rolled her eyes, Matt hugging her waist from behind gently, sensing her uneasiness at the insult. It was a little sore subject. Vera still felt like an idiot about her lack of knowledge about blind people.

“You’re not,” he whispered only for ears and continued out loud. “Anyone cares to share the rules with me?”

Victor did, while Terri cleaned up the table for them, laying out the board and other necessities. They bickered about teams for a while, Terri wanting to be with Vera – girls against boys, while Vera pointed out it would be unfair – before she could be called an ableist again, Victor supported her, claiming they knew each other for too long unlike him and Matt, so they had better understanding between them. Terri, offended by his betrayal, refused to be on his team and choose Matt instead. Despite all odds, they had a real fun.

(“Murdock, stop lying with the enemy.”

“You lie with the enemy as well.”

“Not right now! See? No touching. Stop harassing her!”)
“I’m distracting her.”

“Oh. Good. Continue.”)

(“Come on! That wasn’t on the card! Vera, you’re just making this up so you could win!”

“Then see it yourself!”

“Unbelievable. How the hell should he pantomime lexicon?”

“Hey, not my problem! I just tell him what his card reads. I wouldn’t lie to him only to win.”

“She wouldn’t. I could tell if she would.”

“What, you’re a human polygraph?”

“I can tell from my girlfriend’s voice, Terri.”

“Uh-huh…”)

(“Ha! Still lost, Vic!”

“I let you win, Ter.”

“Liar. Hey, Matt, can you tell if he’s lying or not?”

“I think he does.”

“Aha!”

“Children, all of you…”)

They left around midnight, Vera still wearing wide smile on her face. Matt walked her home, kissing her good night – it was the first time he tasted like beer, the sensation strange for her. (He demanded one when he found out he would have to team up with Terri, asking for another when he realized that the quantity of her talking often overtook the quality – which was serious problem since it was the only way he could be on the guessing side in their team.) She liked non beer Matt better, but beer being pretty much national Czech drink, she was used to the taste no matter how much she dislike it and she thought Matt felt easier making things like pantomime when affected by alcohol at least a little. In fact, she thought he might have actually enjoyed it the same she did. He could be dorky after all. She loved the sight of him, relaxed, happy, her heart growing in size.

“-was nice,” she heard him breath to her lips and realized she zoned out, too absorbed in the kiss and her own thoughts. What did he say?

“Thank you for coming, Matt. It was an amazing proper date,” she exclaimed, moving up his glasses, his face was too close and her desire to finally see his eyes too strong. Small sparks were in them, alcohol and merry, warm and laugh.

“I’m glad. Plus I got to beat you in one of your favourite games That’s gotta count for something.”

“You could totally tell what we were doing when pantomiming, weren’t you?” she guessed, sure his smile grew wider and getting smug without looking.

“Yeah, I could tell.”
“Cheater.”

“You’re just grumpy because you lost,” he mocked her and any possible protest was silenced by his lips again, Vera not really minding. He pecked her lips several times and walked away – she had a morning shift the next day, again, so he decided to sleep at home. She couldn’t blame him. However, it didn’t mean she would miss him in her bed. She fell asleep fast nevertheless, colourful dreams full of laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Activity is the best game *ever*. Fight me. Maybe except for Dixit, that’s a strong competition.

And there is still too much fluff, right? That usually happens before the blood is spilled. Just saying.
Keep calm and- never mind, just keep calm (Terri)

Chapter Notes

And here comes the part in which the actual chapter numbers will be different from my numbers. Sorry not sorry. The first intermezzo is here and there will be more of those, because I enjoy occasional POV alternation.

I'll be away from my keyboard for few days, so I'm posting this chapter rather soon. It's probably for the best - I kinda expect there will be flood of Punisher fanfics, so at least this won't stick out O:-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Terri liked to think there weren’t many things that could take her by surprise. She thought she saw it all. Her sister died at age four, when Terri was only two years old, that being before she could fully realize she had one (all Terri had left after her was a weird feeling of missing something she couldn’t really grasp) and she learnt that there was a congenital heart defect that can apparently fully manifest after four years of living and kill instantly. She also found out that such an experience like losing a child can separate two people who love each other unconditionally, especially if bottle of Jack is involved. She found out that gaining a new-born stepbrother and a stepfather at age fourteen really sucks, despite the fact you can be the bridesmaid and the groom is really sweet. She learnt that sweetness can be suffocating and make you want to run away from the picture of perfection. She saw in her friend’s life story that getting pregnant at age 17 sucks as well. She tasted college life in Cleveland, immediately deciding it was not what she wanted. Leave the nest and say goodbye (or see you soon) to people you like the most on the other hand, is not as bad as she would anticipate, especially if you move few states over.

Working in a café and meeting different people with various stories bint to them gave her more pearls of wisdom than she would gain in twenty years - it would take a lifetime to retell all the stories she heard. The most important thing she ever found out though was that the world was crazy – and the best thing she could do was to adjust and be crazy as well if she wanted to stay sane, no matter how ironic it sounded. Bottom line - she was convinced she was quite experienced.

And then, of course, an alien attack happened. Freaking aliens were raining from the sky and bunch of superheroes kicked their asses. She saw some of their fights. She only had two words for it – holy shit. Funnily enough, that level of craziness she took quite well; it didn’t change the fact that she was shocked by it, obviously.

Then the rumours of a man in a black mask helping victims of various crimes appeared. In the café, she overheard people talking about him quite often. Then he was accused being a bomber (which, ridiculous) and a terrorist and then he took down Wilson Fisk – who was the one to blame and who apparently corrupted half of a city (and that knocked her breath out her chest) - and brought him to justice. Yet another thing she did not see coming.

After that, she was like ninety percent sure nothing can throw her out of balance. That was until a certain girl coming from some no-name place they called a state entered the scene, which would be alright – if she wasn’t a fucking trouble magnet and wasn’t saved by the aforementioned vigilante (who kept patrolling the streets of Hell’s Kitchen for a while, Terri not meeting him once) three times
in a row. That was new. Oh and she saved his life as well after Terri found him bleeding half to
death. She developed some kind of feelings towards him and he had some serious hots for her as
well. But hey, no worries, she was already in love with a blind lawyer. At that point, Terri’s level of
certainty of nothing-can-really-surprise-me-anymore reached ninety four percent. Then Vera saved
his ass again, with the help of the freaking Avengers, sending Terri a selfie with them. Ninety seven.

And Terri arranged double date with Vera and Murdock. She found out Murdock was much more
fun than she thought and he could be a total dork, especially after two beers (he was a freaking light-
weight, seriously). Ninety nine.

Sunday evening, she decided she needed to extend the scale. And she had to stop taking out garbage
in the evening – to her defence, it was raining (or was it snow?) all day, so she simply kept the pizza
boxes and garbage bags in the corner, waiting for the right moment. Which happened to be as late as
around nine p.m., sue her.

She was already coming back home, escaping the drizzling and cold, when a voice behind her made
her jump.

“Theresa.”

“Jesus Christ!” she cursed, her hand shooting up to her chest as she quickly turned to the man who
addressed her, finding him few feet away. (Why the hell didn’t she run back home? Right. She was a
curious idiot so she spun on her heels instead.) Her frantically beating heart she was trying to keep
inside with her palm skipped a beat when she recognized him. Honestly, his look was quite
unmistakable.

All black. Including the mask.

“All black. Including the mask.

“Not quite,” he noted, a very weak approximation of a crooked smile on his lips, standing out since
the other half of his face was hidden.

“You- you’re an asshole. What the hell do you want?” she choked out, startled and shocked. Why
would he come to her? They only met once – and she was still unsure whether she didn’t quite like
him, or tolerated him. “Is Vera okay?” she blurted out, coming to only logical conclusion she could.

His mouth created a very strange grimace. “I… hope so. Is there a reason why she shouldn’t be?
How would I know?”

Truth to be told, Terri was unimpressed by his how would I know. She wasn’t stupid. She knew
Vera. And she was more than sure he was still keeping tabs on her if anything.

“Uh-uh. I might believe you lost her number, but since she organised the rescue mission – making up
the ridiculous story about your S.O.S. call, which I’m totally not buying – she definitely didn’t lose
yours, so I kinda expect you to still have it despite my-,” she hesitated, trying to put it somehow
gently. There was no way, not really, she remembered her very justified outburst few months back
quite vividly. “-wish.”

His half-expression screamed guilt as she said those words. She wasn’t certain which part upset him
the most, but she guessed it was the memory of her getting hurt despite all efforts of the superhero
team.

“I’m sorry. I’ve never wanted her to get involved in that. Ever. I made a stupid mistake and trust me,
I won’t do it again. I’m not gonna let her get hurt because of me. Never,” he declared, voice low and
deep, heavy with solemnity.
Terri deadpanned. His relationship with Vera was something she would probably never understand. As far as she could tell, he was head over heels for her, very protective, trying to be a hero, consumed by his guilt complex, not really caring his love (if it could be called love) was unrequired. For Vera, he was something like a celebrity crush that got strongly out of hand, maybe not in emotional, but definitely in a very bloody way. Either way, there was not a chance they would get together, she was sure of it. Was he, though? Christ, someone needed to explain him how relationships worked. Why she had the feeling it should be her?

“So you’re still crushing on her? Great. That’s… whatever you have together, it doesn’t matter. Even if she runs to save your ass without hesitation. Okay? You know she has a boyfriend, right?” she pointed out.

She couldn’t believe she used Matt Murdock as her crutch. That guy was a case for himself. Terri was sure it was a little knowing smirk she saw. His mood changed as if she snapped her fingers. It was kinda scary. “Trust me. I’m well-aware.”

“Good. Because she loves him. Leave her alone,” she added, just to make it more obvious. She understood him less and less though. So what, he was enjoying that weird bond they had, knowing it would always stay only platonic? Or was he patient enough, waiting for the second Matt and Vera would fight over something and break up, so he could run to comfort her and… what? No, she wasn’t following. Anything. What he wanted with Vera. What he wanted with her. “Which brings me to why the heck you’re not leaving me alone?”

Deep breath. “Because I need your help.”

COME AGAIN?! she wanted to scream, her eyes going wide, slowly calming heartbeat spiking again. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen needed help? From her? Why the hell would he- oh. Of course.

“Aaaaaaand it’s about Vera, isn’t it?” Clearly. Jesus Christ. Was he about to make a move despite the conversation they just had? Because she would not participate in that. She explained him Vera was love-unavailable. She would not give him love advice.

“I just need an information-“ he started and Terri’s jaw fell on the pavement, something cold and sleazy creeping from the base of her spine.

“I am not giving you any info on her-“ she let out in disbelief, hoping it sounded at least half disgusted as she felt.

“-About a group formed recently. Operating in Hell’s Kitchen,” he continued and she examined him for a few moments, before she realized he was telling the truth. No creepy spying on her best friend. He better be meaning it. Because her dinner just rolled over in her stomach. “They call themselves The Devil Worshipers. They are trying to practise vigilante justice – they are not very good at it.”

“I assume you want to tell them to stop playing heroes, because that’s your job…” she understood quickly, not really surprised something like this would catch his interest and possibly pissed him off. He might have a guilt complex and hero complex, but there was one more thing about his personality he couldn’t deny. He was a man. Men tent to nurse their ego.

“People are getting hurt, Theresa – both sides. It has to stop, before someone does something he wouldn’t be able to take back,” he pleaded, taking a step forward, shortening the distance between them. That she didn’t expect.

Uh-huh.
“Okay. I’m listening.”

He gave her a small smile, exhaling as if he was relieved. “You work in the café – people are coming in, talking – if you catch something, please let me know. Here-“ he shoved his hand to his pocket, pulling out the dinosaur phone she remembered from their last encounter (and she had kinda hoped it was their last encounter ever; fool’s hope, really, considering his whatever with Vera).

Terri stared at him as he extended his hand and had to refuse when she realized what he wanted her to do. Nope. Not gonna happen.

“Whoa, whoa, wait. Hold on a second. I am not giving you my number. I’m not in your phone when some supercriminal grabs you-“

“Right. Sorry.” He hesitantly returned the phone to its original place. “I’ll only give you mine. I promise every message or call will be deleted instantly.”

“Okay. Okay. You better keep your word.” That sounded better. He nodded to reassure her and she observed him as he stood there, tentative. Terri thought he might even shift uncomfortably. He didn’t like the fact he was talking to Terri, he looked like he didn’t plan it or think it through. What exactly was he asking her to do? Gather info? Eavesdropping in MDDC? Why her? He could have asked Vera. He would have a perfect opportunity to talk to her – Terri had no doubt he knew where Vera lived, the creeper he was. Then why didn’t he? Was he feeling so guilty that he indeed decided to keep his distance, worried he might put her in danger? That was unlikely. It wasn’t like he was asking Terri to risk her life.

“I hate myself for asking that – but why exactly are you asking me? You could be asking Vera - DON’T do that - but why don’t you? She would be happy to do it.”

His tense posture stiffened even more.

“I know,” he exclaimed and sighed. “That’s the problem. She would be too dedicated. She knows no limits, has no sense of self-preservation. You, on the other hand... You are sober enough. I don’t want anything from you but listening and letting me know if something interesting happens. Please?”

Terri considered his words and had to admit he was completely and utterly right. Vera was the kind of a girl who would sprint to donate blood to a stranger who saved her life. A person, who would contact the Avengers, put herself in harm’s way, if it meant she would help the man she was in the weirdest of relationships with. The Devil didn’t want anything like that to happen again. Because he cared for her. Big time. Nothing new. Jesus.

“Wow. Just...wow. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, who’s crushing on my best friend, is asking me a favour.” What was her life? “Fine. I’ll do it. Just because you’re right and once Vera would find out, she would do some stupid shit.”

“She can’t find out,” he blurted out immediately, voice somewhere between startled and threating. Terri didn’t even know that combination existed until now.

“Well, I won’t tell her. Be so kind, keep your distance and don’t tell her either.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised.

“No, you’ll do better,” she shot back, irritated by the fact his lips were spreading into a smile once more. And they spread even wider at her words.

“Sounds good.” He took another step closer and repeated his number several times. Terri nodded, the
numbers echoing in her head.

“Thank you, Theresa.” His voice sounded hoarse, honestly grateful for nothing. At least she thought he was grateful. Terri was usually good at reading people; she didn’t know if it was the mask or her reluctance to actually try to figure him out, but he was a freaking enigma to her. Also, the Theresa addressing. Weird.

“It’s Terri. Jeeez,” she complained and he grinned.

“I know. You told me before.”

Yeah, she did. Before she chewed him for endangering her best friend, she remembered it well. Asshole. “Sure. This is just more fun, isn’t it? What do I call you?”

He shrugged, walking backwards slowly, clear indication he was about to leave. “Pretty much anything. Most people call me Mike. But you can go for Richard. I heard it’s a popular opinion on my name these days…especially among the cops.” Right. Claire and Vera did call him Mike. It didn’t feel right. Terri was hundred percent sure it was a fake name. Vera came up with it, didn’t she? Terri would not give him the satisfaction. She liked his other proposition better.

“So you’re basically a Dick?” she reassured herself and he grinned almost boyishly, the expression contrasting with the deep bass of his voice and mostly intimidating posture, so surreal on his face. Half face.

“Yeah.”

She couldn’t help it. The corners of her lips rose too. “I like it. See you around… Dick.”

His lips twitched in amusement one more time and then he just took several quick steps, jumping up to the nearest fire escape and he was gone.

Terri was baffled, alright, but she did have enough reason to check out that ass this time. She was not disappointed.

The first thing she did when she entered her apartment was closing her window. She had a hunch the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen might use it instead of her door and she didn’t like that idea. Only then, she saved his number. From that moment, Dick with sweet ass was part of her contact list (later, she deleted the characteristic in his ID, because Victor).

So… Terri was going to be Devil’s eyes and ears. Jeeez. She had no idea how would she keep something so big from Vera. But she would try her best.

No. She would do even better.

Chapter End Notes

For ElisaC, because she asked about Terri and the Devil’s butt like 12 hours after this chapter was written. (Yeah, I wrote some moments before I even completed the first
chapter of this fic, because I knew this I wanted to happen.) Thanks for sticking around, putting up with me and commenting ♥
5) The punch right in (your) face

Going on a date and getting up for morning shift next day was not a good combination. Vera was endlessly grateful it was Sunday, which meant the shift didn’t start until seven (and not quarter past five) - she managed to get up only due to that fact and her memories of yesterday – truth to be told, she didn’t even had to force smile on her face. Hannah and Michelle were in MDDC that day, so she didn’t even have to put up with annoyed looks. Almost like a dream.

In the afternoon, Terri called her to evaluate their double date, pleased by the fact Vera complimented her movie choice once again and admitted that the game was amazing as well, congratulating her to her victory. She thought she blew Terri’s ego so much it might actually burst. But hey, she deserved it - they did have a great time.

She stopped by Nina’s for a small talk and found a message from Marky, informing her that they were trying to figure out the seating plan – she was asking her whether she had any idea if Matt would attend the wedding with her. Vera stared at the words dully, heart racing, mind blank. What? She ignored the message and decided to deal with it later. She went to bed early, the slight lack of sleep and too many shifts in a row catching up with her. She fell asleep in no time.

Monday morning was brutal nevertheless. Entering MDDC at the exorbitant hour, meeting Olivia’s and Barbara’s eyes, she wanted to spin on her heels and head back to her apartment. She didn’t. She was freaking lucky she was allowed to work some hours ahead and the vision of herself being in Allentown in two days shone bright on her way. She had tea and chocolate that morning though, in short notice, to cheer herself up. The woman with whiskey (It's scotch, actually) showed up again, hiding behind her scarf and glasses just like the first time. Yet, none of those things woke her up as much as missed call from Matt.

Vera took her break, dialling him as fast as she could. He picked up after few rings.

“Hey, Vera.”

Her lips formed a smile absolutely involuntarily. It was a reflex. “Hey. What’s up? Everything okay?” she asked, trying her best not to give away her worries. She was concerned, of course, but she had no real reason – Matt texted her at night that he arrived home safe and he called her from his Matt phone, sounding tired, but that was understandable given his activities. Anxious girlfriend was the last thing he needed.

“I know I said I would teach you more once you come back, but if you’re free tonight and you would like to train-“ his voice was low (most likely in attempt to stay undetected by his co-workers, especially the one who didn’t know about his double life), timid. Hesitant.

Vera on the other hand, had no reason to be reluctant. “Yes!” she blurted out without thinking. She could only imagine the twitch of the corners of his lips at her harshness.

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“I thought so. Is half past nine alright?” she heard the smile, but the hints of reluctance as well – he still didn’t like the idea of teaching her. However, he was willing to swallow it and act against his conviction. She promised herself she would do anything to make it easier for him. Including going to Fogwell’s on Tuesday as well only to clean up, because she wouldn’t have enough time to do all necessities before he would come tonight.
“Sure. Anything particular I need? Should I be like… warmed up already or something like that?” she offered, anticipating it would be a good idea.

“Oh. Yeah, that would be great. The wraps might get handy. Maybe go through everything you know. Try it out.” She thought her request caught him by surprise. He sounded a little taken aback. Maybe she was pressing too hard.

“Okay. Moving on. How was your Sunday and how is your day so far?” she changed the subject and she could tell that this time, the smile she heard was relaxed and honest.

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She almost sprinted to shop and then back home. She felt like she was high on sugar or something, because she was like super-excited about the evening. Of course, quick lunch didn’t help her to pass her time and she was checking the clocks each minute for like half an hour, before she realized she could not be doing this for the rest of her day. She found an e-mail from their lecturer – Jake Dillard - informing them about the timetable of their lessons, necessary gear (she found the word funny, because it only meant the wraps and lots of determination, as he explained) and recommended clothes and shoes. Vera had nothing better to do than check she didn’t need to buy anything special and pack. Since he also sent directions to payment, she did that as well. Calmer, she spent the rest of the afternoon and the evening with a book, eating light dinner. At the end, she arrived to Fogwell’s five minutes after nine, which was exactly five minutes after she wanted to originally. (Or five hours – depending which version she counted as the original one.)

Vera quickly changed and put on two songs for a warm up first, and then moved to the punching bag. Alright. *Go through everything you know.* Obviously, she did all variations of punches and kicks she ever learnt – it wasn’t a long list, but she always repeated it several times, focusing on the right technique. Without music, it felt more severe, heavy, she missed the beat. Ever since Matt saw her fit-boxing, she kept in mind his notes about moving her hips and holding her arms up, pleased when she realized the movements were getting more natural with each day. She lost track of time, testing whether she remembered few sequences she watched on youtube some time ago – she usually didn’t do them, because they didn’t fit in the music, but hey, Matt said *everything.* She rather tried it now than later - for all she knew, he might ask her to *show* him and she wanted to be prepared.

The sudden stage fright made her gasp - and she realized she was going for too long. She needed at least a short break. Not to mention Matt would be here any-

Her heart stopped when she turned around and he just stood there casually in the middle of the gym, few steps from her. He didn’t wore his coat – she quickly checked and it was hanging on the coat stand by the door, his bag with his Devil outfit under it – already changed in work-out clothes. His head was tilted, expression focused. He was there for a while. Great.

She ignored him, making her way for a towel and water. He followed her footsteps, not saying a word.

That bad, huh?

She checked the time – it was only nine thirty four. He couldn’t be here for long. His silence was getting uncomfortable. She couldn’t chose whether she wanted to ask him about his opinion or about the amount of time he spent watching her lame attempts to train. She went for the latter.

“So, how long you had been here?” she aimed for nonchalant tone, failing miserably as she realized she was in fact ashamed.
Vera wanted Matt to teach her, sure, but she didn’t think it through – she wasn’t kidding when she
told him it would be nightmare to knock some knowledge and skills into her. She was a total loser
compared to him. She forgot to consider how the image of her would change in his mind. He would
see – or sense – how deeply below him she was. He must have feel it in society; lawyer and barista.
He must heard it from every corner – she knew some people found her pretty or at least not ugly,
average if anything, and Matt was…Matt. He probably made lesbians to reconsider their sexuality.
He knew she was not even a ridiculous opponent already – but actually meeting the raw reality like
that, it was different. This whole thing was a terrible idea.

“For about half an hour? No. Twenty minutes,” he noted indifferently and she almost choked on her
drink, sending a spray of droplets aside.

“Twenty-“ she choked out, watching his mischievous smile in disbelief. Twenty minutes?! He said
he would come at- oh, she was going to kill him. And how the hell she didn’t notice?! She put the
bottle down. “Just to make it clear. You told me to warm up and try out everything so you could
watch me?”

He had enough decency to look at least a little guilty, scratching the back of his head. “I thought you
would be nervous if you knew I was watching.”

“Yeah, no shit,” she blurted out, grateful her cheeks were already red from the exercise and he
wouldn’t know how embarrassed she was. Jesus Christ. He wouldn’t meet the reality – he already
did. She fought the urge to bang her head against the punching bag this time. Or punch him, because
he was a traitor. She huffed.

The corners of his lips rose higher. “You’re mad at me.”

Vera gaped at him, unsure of her answer. Yeah, she was and she angry with herself for having such
a stupid idea. Why was he happy about it? And was that a question or a statement?

“I can sense it, Vera. You are,” he pressed, taking a step forward, placing a hand on her forearm.

She threw her free hand in the air. “Yeah. Yeah, a little. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Well, now I’m pretty sure,” she exclaimed, indeed irritated by the fact he was amused by her
exasperation.

“Then hit me,” he said, perfectly calm and she gasped, confident she heard wrong. He raised one
eyebrow expectantly, letting her hand go.

“Come again?”

“You heard me.”

He was serious. How the hell was he serious? Was that another lesson? Resisting the urge to punch
him while he was supporting her to do so? He slid under the ropes bordering the ring. She followed
him hesitantly, waiting for the outcome of this surreal situation. They stood against each other in the
ring, the most ridiculous sparring partners in the history of the Fogwell’s gym (or history in general, it
wasn’t even like with David and Goliath, because in this ring, Matt was both – stronger and bigger,
faster and smarter), Vera totally baffled, anger slowly fading away, Matt awaiting her next move.

“Come on, Vera,” he whined impatiently and gestured her to make a move on him. She tried that
once, when he left her after their almost-first-time night without a note - he dodged all of her lunges
at that time, not getting punched once. Naturally. And she was not about to even try again, because dammit he had enough bruises already.

“No! I’m not gonna punch you,” she protested and he licked his lips before spreading them in arrogant smile.

“Don’t worry, you won’t. You can’t. But I would like you to try…”

And god, the way he said it. She got used to his cockiness, even found it appealing in some moments, but this. It was exactly the tone her schoolmates made jokes about her glasses when she was a child, that vicious self-importance soaking through Every. Single. Word.

*You’re not good enough. You’re different. You don’t with belong with us. You can’t.*

*You’re not good enough.*

He knew what he was doing. Somehow, he knew precisely how to press a button and this time, she didn’t fight it. She fought him. It was what he wanted after all. Like hell she wouldn’t score one punch to his body, best to his arrogant face. He could take it.

He avoided few first jabs and hooks with no trouble, barely moving, smirking. She huffed. If he wore that expression while fighting crime, there had to be a very long line of people who wanted to punch him in his face just to wipe it away. She incorporated elbows and knees. Absolutely no effect. Sometimes he at least ducked, looking less like he was honestly bored with her attempts.

Yay for her.

“Are you even trying?” he mocked her after he dodged another lunge and she huffed, aiming a proper side-kick to his ribs. He just jumped aside. Front. Side. Knee. Combination of punches and knees. He fucking flipped away, somehow appearing behind her, slapping her ass.

“Are you fucking-“ she gasped in disbelief, unhealthy mixture of humiliation and rage bubbling in her chest. She was getting fucking frustrated and he was- it wasn’t teasing, it wasn’t mocking, it was-

“It’s not my fault, Vera. You’re taking it easy on me. Don’t,” he challenged her as she turned to him, blood boiling.

Easy? She was panting, her muscles aching from the lack of oxygen, most likely glucose as well, working probably only due to the excess of adrenalin, because he was playing with her.

“What happened to god forbid fist fight?” she growled, remembering his first lesson in the alley, not seeing a point in this if he wanted her to run away instead of fighting. Yet, she went after him again, this time aiming the kick straight to his arrogant face, spinning. He was getting on her nerves. Hard. He dodged it again.

“Don’t use Lord’s name in vain,” he admonished her and she grunted as she lunged few more times. “I changed my mind.”

He changed his- she gasped, blinking against the red covering her vision. Jesus, he could be such a dick when he wanted to. Vera didn’t speak up anymore. She continued her attempts to wipe away the smirk from his lips with her fist. Or instep. Or sole. She wasn’t picky at this point.

Her body was getting freaking heavy, shades of grey and black replacing the red she saw. She inhaled wildly and her vision cleared again. His expression changed. The smugness disappeared.
“Alright, Vera, that’s enough.” He held out his hands in no harm gesture, but like hell she would took this bait. No way. He ducked when she spun and kicked out – if he wouldn’t, he would probably lose some of his teeth.

“Nice one, but you need to ease up,” he demanded, voice calm, persuasive. She barely heard him over the buzzing in her ears. She managed to get closer, going after him with fists again. He avoided it and sighed, expression somewhat torn. “Fine.”

He grabbed her hand firmly, jerking, then there was a push somewhere on her left leg and her breath was suddenly knocked out of her chest as her back hit the ground.

She fought for air, blinking, disoriented by the quick change of position. His forearm was pressed against her chest, the rest of his body pinning her down as well. She wanted to get from under him, to finish her mission, so all her effort wouldn’t go in vain, but then she decided that she really didn’t. She squeezed her eyes shut as she noticed the world spinning. *Huh.*

The weight from her chest was lifted.

“Vera, *breathe,*” he asked her gently and she obeyed, breathing in fiercely, and again, and once more, the world steadying in one spot. She blinked furiously, finding Matt’s concerned face hovering over her. She rather closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing, her mind getting clearer. Her heart was beating almost painfully, her muscles tingling with weakness.

“You were attacking me for about fifteen minutes, Vera. Something like this wears one up. You needed to rest,” he explained softly and she failed to follow his changes in moods. *Screw you, Murdock.*

She licked her lips, tasting salt. “Yeah, well…” she let out, not sure whether she should be laughing at her inability or cry. He was still over her, so she had a vague idea of his body. She lifted her arm heavily, smacking his bicep weakly.

“Ouch,” he complained, small laugh in his voice and her violently beating heart fluttered at the sound. She couldn’t help a tired smile.

“Gotcha.”

He kissed her forehead lightly. “Yeah, you did.” She tried to find a way to move the rest of her body. It was very, very difficult. “Anger is good, you know. You just need to control it and aim it the right way.”

Vera wanted to spit something ugly right into his face, but when she snapped her eyes open and saw his sincere eyes and honesty written all over, she just couldn’t. She swallowed the wry note. “Sure, Yoda.”

“Star Wars? Really?” he laughed, rolling over and releasing her completely. “Wanna sit up? Or not just yet? How is the head? Still spinning?”

Vera shouldn’t be surprised he knew what was wrong with her. But she was. She pushed herself up sitting up slowly – he helped her, offering his shoulder as a supporting point. She leaned onto it gratefully as the world swam in front of her once more. “How did you-"

“…You stumbled. You heart was beating really fast and with too much effort. I should have stopped you sooner.”

Was that guilt she heard? *Jesus, Matt.* It wasn’t his fault she had no stamina. “Pfff. I’m unstoppable,”
she exclaimed and pretended she didn’t notice how pathetic and weak her voice sounded.

“I should have given it a try anyway,” he played along, moving her few inches back, leaning her to the ropes, standing up. “I’ll get you some water, alright?”

“There’s grape sugar in my bag. I would appreciate one too,” she mumbled, resting against her new crunch gratefully. God, she really was pathetic.

He returned in no time, letting her to get the drink and take the sugar by herself. He sat down next to her, observing her quietly.

“You’re not pathetic,” he protested, spitting out the last word and she jumped as he voiced her thoughts. Or did she- “Yeah, you said that out loud. You’re doing great, Vera. I just wanted to see what you can do, how much you want to push yourself. I’m not surprised the answer is a lot. I admit I could have spared you the mocking, that was mean, but it worked for me.”

Finally regaining full consciousness, she examined him. He looked a little miserable by himself. He was squatting, arms folded on his knees, chin resting on them. His eyes were seeking other world, other time perhaps, and it occurred to her how hard it had to be for him not only because he was basically doing something he didn’t want to, but also because some of his bad memories rose to surface. His training and childhood in general - no fun. It truly was an awful idea, all of this.

“Is it hard?” she asked him quietly and his eyelashes fluttered as she woke him up from daydreaming.

“Why would it be hard?” he replied with a question, voice shaking just slightly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to bring back ugly memories. You know you don’t have to teach me. I can tell it makes you uncomfortable if anything. It was selfish of me to make you do something you clearly didn’t want to.”

He tilted his head even in that position, smiling lightly. “It wasn’t selfish. The thing is I do want you to be able to protect yourself. And at the same time I don’t.”

She sat up straighter, frowning. “Why?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again, no sound coming out.

“Matt? Do you think there is anything good about me being dragged to back alley and getting mugged - if I’m lucky?” she teased him lightly, puzzled what in world he was thinking about. Why wouldn’t he want her to be able to protect herself?

He pursed his lips, still not answering. Her mind raced. Before she could really think about it, he crawled to her side, taking her around her waist. Around her sweat-soaking t-shirt. “I’m really swea-“

“Yeah, and I don’t give a damn. Come here,” he mumbled, pulling her close despite her protests. She sighed and relaxed into his protective embrace, closing her eyes only to snap them open at her realization.

“You don’t… it’s not because you particularly enjoy saving my ass, is it?” she queried, already knowing the answer. Silence. “Matthew!” She turned her head to face him and smacked his chest. His cheeks flushed.

“I can’t believe you! You rather had me mugged, playing the knight in shining- oh my god, is this
about the Avengers rescue mission? About what Foggy said?” she vented her thoughts and saw his lips parting, gaping inconspicuously, as she was right to the hair. “That’s just ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Your ego just couldn’t take the hit, could it? A non-existent hit, by the way. You did everything you could. I did everything I could – which was calling for help in my case and that’s not heroic-“

“Vera, you got yourself shot in the process,” he reminded – like she could ever forgot that. And I was unharmed, as if remained unspoken - twisted logic, especially considering he got hurt too.

“Whatever…” she murmured, giving up. Talking to a brick wall. He was worse than a brick wall.

“I just… you won’t need me then,” he whispered almost too quietly. She repeated his words in her head for several times; it didn’t start giving more sense. His face was pure misery. Vera bit her lip, fighting bravely, but she lost. She burst out laughing. His expression became even more hurt.

“Jesus Christ, Matt. That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.” She didn’t give a shit if he would mind she tasted like sweat and salt. She grabbed his face kissing him hard, lunging until he finally gave in and kissed her back hesitantly, then properly and eventually almost enthusiastically, sinking his lips into hers, wanting. “You’re such a dork. I love you. And I need you.”

“‘Kay. Just for you to know, I didn’t change my mind. The first rule still stands.” Of course it did. He shifted their positions, hiding her in his arms again. She was getting cold, heat leaving her body as her heart slowed down and muscles relaxed. She was grateful for the gesture. “Are you gonna tell me when your birthday is and why don’t you want me to celebrate it?”

Shit. So much for relaxing.

“You know why. You heard that. We didn’t celebrate yours. And I don’t… I don’t want to think about time… it flies too fast,” she admitted, refusing to look up at him. It might be the only birthday she would spend with him. Oh god, she didn’t want to think about it. He sighed.

“Alright, I get the last part. And what if I told you I got a present from you for my birthday,” he offered mysteriously and Vera wondered when she ever gave him anything. Apart from Christmas. She really hoped they didn’t sleep together for the first time on his birthday – that would be weird, right?

“You did?” she shrieked, praying she was wrong. He didn’t seem to notice her embarrassment. When he spoke again, his voice was soft.

“Yeah. It’s on 21st October. You got discharged from the hospital. I got to kiss you about a week later, so…”

And oh. That’s…oh. That was good. Technically, she didn’t miss his birthday, because they were barely friends by that time. That thought made her grin internally.

“That was more like a gift for me, don’t you think?” she questioned, not fighting the goofy smile creeping on her lips.

“Hm…” he hummed thoughtfully, hand under her chin, pressing lightly to attach their lips again as if he needed to test it and find out she was right or wrong. “I guess it was for both of us then,” he whispered to her mouth eventually and she giggled, high on god knows what.
“So. The date?” he demanded, fondling her lower lip gingerly, making her weak from a completely different reason than working out. *Damn you, Matt.*

“It’s 7th February.” He froze. “I didn’t *lie*. It’s just the same day as my name day.”

“Cheater.”

“You’re just grumpy because I *did* hit you and you lost,” she parroted his own words from Saturday and he chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief, delighted though, just like her, rather silencing her the most beautiful and effective way known to the human kind.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure it was worth the wait for you. But, hey, new chapter! That's *something.*
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Now, are you gonna tell me how the hell did you get me on the ground?” That sentence started a series of quite effective ways how to throw someone off balance - literally. Vera was tired, but what Matt did to her earlier bugged her, and since he was showing her that, he added a few more cool, yet relatively easy moves.

“Matt, I’m not doing this to you,” she protested when she tried the trick for like tenth time, still refusing to cut out his core and trip him for real.

“Vera, you have to. If you won’t actually try it, you’ll never learn. You need to let your body, your muscles to remember it.”

“I’m not hurting you!”

Small smile on his lips. “You won’t,” he paused for a second and added: “I did it to you.”

Somehow, he ended up lying on the mattress without Vera being aware she did something. Shame was he probably allowed her to do it and didn’t put up a fight. It would be more satisfying if he did, but then he probably wouldn’t be on his back. Dammit.

They quitted shortly after eleven, Matt changing and graciously walking her home in the Devil’s way. Her whole body ached despite not being thrown on the ground multiple times (Matt was; he didn’t even flinch, but she was confident we would be sore tomorrow – then again, when he ever wasn’t). He stopped by her window, kissing her goodnight and she took quick shower, washing off the sweat and dust they whirled up, falling asleep with her hair dripping water.

In the morning, Vera understood that muscle memory can have a whole different meaning – her body sure remembered. She whined as she was getting up, cursing Matt Murdock while being incredibly grateful to him at the same time. She made it through the morning shift, holding back whimpers though. She hoped it would get better, because otherwise she was never going to survive her course in Allentown.

If she ever learnt something about sore muscles, it was that movement, taken easily, was the best cure – so after clean up at Fogwell’s, she did a little exercise, going over what Matt told her last night. To her surprise, he showed up, wearing his Devil of Hell’s Kitchen outfit, so she could practise on him, claiming he heard her. She appreciated his gesture big time, carefully asking him if he could show her just a little bit more. He did. He ended up teaching her… taking steps. When she pointed out that she could walk just fine, he laughed, explaining they would add something to those steps when she would come back. He noted he would miss her, then kissed her senseless, freezing out of blue and disappearing as his ears picked up some crime. She worried, alright, but she was leaving the gym smiling goofily nevertheless.

The next morning was even more brutal, but only due to the lack of sleep – her muscles felt more relaxed, possibly ready for any afternoon/evening work out she expected. Terri was a treasure, agreeing to coming to her own shift three hours earlier, so Vera could leave. So at eleven, Vera got on a bus, case, handbag and determination with her, heading hundred miles over. She was ridiculously excited.
The excitement slowly drifted away with each minute in over-heated bus with strong smell of gasoline. Luckily enough, lack of sleep caught up with her and she fell asleep, woken up twice by loud mechanical voice announcing the stop – Newark and Easton. After that, she only snoozed, checking the clock from time to time. Forty minutes later, the bus stopped again, reaching her final destination. Cold air welcomed her and she breathed it gratefully.

Of course, it took another half an hour to get to the hotel their meeting should take place – it wasn’t exactly in the centre of the town, which Vera appreciated – mainly because she checked the prices there. She still had some savings, café salary allowing her to get through without a need to touch them, but she wouldn’t want to spend most of it for accommodation. When she entered the hotel, she went straight to the reception desk, only to be directed to seat herself on one of the footstools. Vera found three people already sitting in the area, cases by their side, coats or jackets folded in their laps, all of them cautiously eyeing each other. She gave them an unsure smile, pleasantly surprised two of them reciprocated her gesture. Yet, none of them spoke, rather watching their phone screens – Vera let Terri know she was on spot, remembering she wanted her to do so. Terri was convinced that Vera travelling by bus automatically meant a car accident – Vera tried not to be too offended by her assumption.

She was just considering texting Matt as well, when another woman came in – fit and attractive, blond hair, big eyes, distinctive lipstick. Vera would swear at least two of her accompanies gasped. The guy, she expected, but one of the women, not so much. Huh. The blonde joined them after she was directed to do so by the man at the desk. She gave them a small wave, not speaking either though. The gasping woman stared at her blatantly, eyes wide. Vera wasn’t sure what that meant.

Vera decided not to bother Matt, who was probably still at work. In few minutes, a new pair appeared, a man and a woman, both wearing cheerful smiles, making their way to them immediately.

“Hello. Fit-box course anyone?” he offered, blue eyes twinkling, observing them one after another, trying not to linger for too long though, anticipating it might make someone (read Vera, for example) uncomfortable. All of them nodded or hummed in agreement. “Excellent. My name is Jake Dillard, I’m gonna take care of your lessons and this is my friend Delilah Kyles, she’s gonna give you more info about everything else. She’s gonna help you to check in and whatever. You can nestle, grab a lunch and such things, we’ll meet at half past three in a gym. Delilah gives you the address and so on and so on… See ya!” He waved and fleeted. Alright. Talk about ADHD. Vera grinned. This was going to be great.

The brunette woman who was standing by his side flashed them a wide smile. “Hi guys!” And she started talking and talking and talking, gave them several papers, pointed out that in the fitness centre they were going to train was various possibility to attend some other lessons, special prices for the participants, tipped them off for some restaurants and interesting places and talked and talked and talked. Jesus. How did she manage to breathe between her words?

“Alright, that would be all.” No way, really? “I’ll give you keys to your rooms, it’s two beds in each room, we already paired you. If you have any problem with your roomie, let me know, we can arrange some changes, but I’m sure that won’t be necessary, right?”

Uh-huh. Vera hoped so.

“First things first, miss Walker, I dared to call you a cab, which would take you to your hotel~“

The blond woman, who came in right before the couple of over-cheerful puppies (and three other people arrived after them, one more guy and two women or rather girls, giggling and apologizing), stood up from her footstool, looking outraged.
“My hotel?” Ms. Walker blurted out, slightly confused and irritated.

Delilah’s expression was pure confusion. “Yes. I was told this Inn is below your standards—”

Vera would thing the woman was a little snob, if she didn’t seem taken aback and angry. “By whom?”

“Your mana—”

“Just- sorry. Is there any way I can stay here, with others? I don’t want to be separated. If it’s too much trouble, then I’ll leave of course…” she offered, polite and kind, innocent smile on her lips, approaching the other woman. Vera was baffled. Ms. Walker was apparently someone and someone else wanted her to be treated better than she would wish. It kinda gave Vera the impression of a person, who was usually in the spotlight, desperately wanting to be hidden in the shadows for once. Should Vera know who this woman was? Apparently at least some of her accompanies did.

Delilah was all obliging – Vera thought she saw Ms. Walker rolled her eyes at her tone inconspicuously. “Of course. If that’s what do you want. For now, one of our participants has room for herself, because another one bailed on us unexpectedly, so... sure. You’ll be in room 21. Here,” she handed her the keys and Ms. Walker smiled at her gratefully.

“Thank you. Thank you very much. I’m sorry for the trouble, Julia is sometimes just… too eager. So I can head to the room? Who’s coming with me?” she looked around, her eyes going wide as the gasping woman (and dammit, Vera needed to learn her name soon, because that was just rude) lighted up like a Christmas tree, eyes hopeful.

“Mmmm, just a minute… miss… uhm. Machackova?” she read hesitantly and Vera jumped at her name. Ms. Walker apparently noticed, because she eyed her with a careful smile.

Vera awkwardly waved and stood up. “Hi.”

Pleased by her reaction – or maybe non-reaction? – the blonde smiled, taking few steps to her, extending her hand. “Hi. I’m Patricia, but people just call me Trish.”

Vera thought she heard someone behind her whisper Patsy. Trish bit her cheek as she heard it too. Yeah, Vera should probably know who she was. Dammit. She shook her hand, smiling as well. “I’m Veronika. People call me Vera.”

They let go. “You look familiar,” Trish noted, surprising Vera completely. Huh. She was like ninety-percent sure she never saw this woman in her life. Also, that should probably be Vera’s line.

She shrugged awkwardly, expression apologetic. “Sorry. Can’t say the same.”

But Trish didn’t seem to mind – one corner of her lip raised higher, eyes growing bigger. “I think we’re gonna get along just fine.”

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Trish was right. Vera only spent two hour with her, accommodating, grabbing lunch in the hotel restaurant (and no, she would not do that mistake again, it sucked), packing up a backpack for the rest of their day, heading to the gym. Vera learned they were both from New York, both from Manhattan, both actually pretty much from Hell’s Kitchen and she had to reconsider her certainty about never meeting her. Vera told her she was working at the café, so she might knew her from there – Trish eyed her thoughtfully, shaking her head, no, that’s not it, never mind. Trish apparently worked in a radio, having her own show (“I’m sorry…I never…uhm, never heard...” – “It’s okay,
seriously. You have no idea how liberating this is. Fans are great and everything, but it’s refreshing to meet someone who doesn’t ask you an autograph before he even says hi.” and was a former child star. Despite that, Vera found out Trish was down-to-earth person and a great company. Her wry, but not necessarily mean comments about food, her kind offer to Vera to choose her bed, her hilarious face expressions – she had a very distinctive mimics – and more details that persuaded her that they would indeed get along just fine.

In the fitness centre they changed, discovering they had one gym for their group, totems standing by the wall for the moment, foam mats in the middle of the room, arranged in a circle. They joined the rest of their classmates (she guessed), surprisingly seeing two other girls they hadn’t met before.

Jake - please, call me Jake, not Mr.Dillard or teacher or whatever – wanted them to introduce themselves, tell where they were from, why they came here and add something they would like the others to know about them. Vera was relieved when she found out not all of them were already fitness trainers (experienced in tabata, TRX, jumping, bosu and some stuff she never heard about), gaining their first licence as well as her. Trish openly admitted she was not about to teach and she just wanted to be good at it so she could be training by herself properly. Then they had regular fit-box lesson, Vera sharing totem with Trish (and holy shit that woman was strong), gaining a murderous glare from her diehard gasping supporter – Nancy.

Jake released them early, offering a pub meeting later – Vera went there more to fulfil her duty if anything else, determined to leave early, because she was exhausted. It was nice though, learning more about the people she would spend the next days with.

Thomas was a charmer, real ladies-man, handsome, flirty and humorous, TRX and tabata (and women) obviously being his life. Dylan wasn’t exactly his polar opposite, but he was less extrovert, rather a silent type, kind listener – he was one of those who was gaining his first licence, being a sportsman on his own so far. Then there was Nancy, crushing on Patsy, the only fact that was worth remembering. Frankie and Paula came together, best friends since high school, always late and laughing, crazy people really, both aerobic trainers. Jill was a licence collector, healthy food maniac and sports freak. She was local, obviously knowing Jake in person before the course. Lucy lived in Allentown too, actually working in their fitness centre, bosu instructor. Vera liked her, because she only engaged in the conversation when it was on point, not excessively gesturing and laughing affectively to catch attention, smiling rather shyly, unlike some others. Erica and Allison were a little shy too, something that slowly drifted away with alcohol. Trish tried to lay low, not avoiding a short conversation about her childhood and show though – she seemed honestly relieved when they started talking about something else. (Thomas was her saviour, asking her whether she was single – she said no and he continued asking around.) It was about ten when Vera called it a night, gaining weird looks. She gently explained (with red cheeks) that she had morning shift at work, getting up at four thirty, last day off barely remembering when. Trish joined her, supporting her. It was nice.

Arriving at the hotel, she found a text from Matt, asking about her journey and well-being. She smiled goofily, texting him back that everything was pretty much perfect, wishing him good and safe night. The reply beeped immediately, her smile widening. If Trish noticed her expression over the You too, I love you, she wouldn’t say a word.

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The course started at nine, Vera finally getting a proper sleep. Jake kindly explained them he was watching their technique yesterday, giving them general reminders of the right posture and held, each person gaining some advice from him. He complimented them too though and Vera tried not to blush too hard when he pointed out he liked she kept her arms up properly, mentally kicking (and thanking) Matt.
Vera liked the structure of the course – they boxed, they paid attention to the technique, they talked about the attitude and approach to their potentials students/clients. They focused on work out too, strengthening particular muscles groups (Vera once corrected Jake when he misnamed a muscle – it was a reflex – and she was ashamed the moment it left her mouth – Jake took it as a champ and they both tried their best to ignore the raised eyebrows of the others). Early evening, they stretched out properly, something Vera was endlessly grateful for and got time to explore the city. Discovering there was an Aikido class after them in the room, Vera stayed, asking the lecturer whether she could watch – she had no problem with it, persuading her to join in fact, since they were beginners. (Trish was interested as well, until she found out exactly that, refusing, since she already had some knowledge from her personal trainer.) She got to know why Matt tried to teach her walk, astonished. Heidi – the lecturer – was really kind and enthusiastic, supporting her (and everyone else’s) attempts, praising a good work, gently correcting the wrong ones. Seeing her, Vera knew she would like to be that kind of a teacher.

She arrived at hotel late, after quick dinner at the corner diner, tired and satisfied she learned a lot of new thighs that day.

Friday was a crisis. After yesterday, her body protested with each movement, calling out for more rest. Vera was relieved they mostly focused on a warm up and lesson organization, afternoon actually playful as Jake offered them multiple ways of spicing the lesson so it wouldn’t become stereotypical after a while. He also informed them how he imagined the examining – each person would get some part of a lesson (the main block divided according to muscles groups the exercise would be focused on), showing him individually. To make sure everyone would create at least partially his own choreography, they would draw lots on both the part of a lesson and the song after Saturday lunch, having one hour to prepare (which was more than necessary according to Jake). He added that after the said hour, they would return to their regular lesson and performed Saturday evening. Vera sensed something fishy about that, but kept her mouth shut.

They quitted early, getting more time for themselves. Vera hit the city with Trish (meeting only two people who wanted the signature, which Vera found pretty impressive, given the fact Trish Talk wasn’t broadcasted outside New York – it had to be the child star thing), their ways separating as Vera wanted to attend another lesson with Heidi – she smiled widely as she saw her new temporary student, welcoming her warmly.

Vera returned to her hotel, staying in the hall, trying to reach Matt, hoping he wouldn’t be out already. Vain effort. She gave up after five minutes, leaving him a text not to worry, that she only wanted to talk to him with no real reason. She asked him to let her know he was okay though.

Entering her room, she found Trish on a phone as well, a glass of white wine in her hand, rolling her eyes at someone on the other end of the line, lecturing the person about his/her drinking problem. Vera settled at her, because Trish said Jess multiple times before Vera disappeared to the bathroom – only then she snorted at the fact her blond roommate lectured someone while drinking on her own.

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Vera found Matt’s text in the morning. He apologized for not being available when she tried to reach him, reassuring her he was fine and expressing hope she was having a good time in Allentown. Vera did not freak out over the fact his I miss you though was followed by a kissing emoticon. Matt never used emoticons. For him, colon was a colon (not eyes), hyphen was just a hyphen (not nose) and an asterisk or a parenthesis definitely didn’t stand for mouth. Sadly, if something was wrong, she had no way to find out before she reached him or came back to Hell’s Kitchen. Determined to call him in their lunchtime (not wanting to wake him up, since he texted her at five a.m., šmarja), she focused on her lessons. It wasn’t like would be able to help him.
I have too many things that desperately need my attention. So you know, here's another chapter :D

P.S. - You know something’s wrong when Matt sends an emoticon. Promise you’ll see in the next chapter; *intermezzo* is coming right up and I'm ridiculously excited about it :)
Alright. So this one is kinda gross I think. In case you have imagination at least at the same level I do, I don’t recommend reading this before you go to sleep. Like, really. It might be poorly written, but the image is quite clear, I believe. You have been warned.

Intermezzo no.2.

There was something calming about the city. He knew many would disagree, hating the traffic, the crowds, locals and tourists, the never-ending chatter and yelling, fights in the bar, loud music from clubs, the sirens. But for Matt, there were so many other noises, whispers and breaths, movements and rustling. Hell’s Kitchen was speaking its own voice. And the heartbeats – the city was sea of heartbeats, slow and frantic, calm and excited, singing its symphony, living its own life. Perhaps calming wasn’t the right word – familiar was. Every night he stood on rooftops letting the noise consume him, it was like meeting an old friend, a brother, a father and a son in one person, his own blood. People tent to love their family. They hated when someone was hurting it. They protected it. And so did he.

He was glad Vera wasn’t here. She wasn’t part of the family for long, but she made it very quickly to the inner circle, small one, but close, whose members he would protect at any cost – even though he believed that each soul, each live was precious and equal, if he had to make a choice between many, he knew very well he wouldn’t hesitate to pick one of his, no matter how selfish that would make him. She wasn’t there and that was good. Not that she was in immediate danger – none of his inner family was – but in his extensive family, there was something wrong, twisted, boiling, steam escaping too slow, the explosion about to burn and maybe leave some scars that would never disappear.

He first met them about two or three weeks ago – at that time, he thought it was a simple act against the wrong, almost glad it happened. A man, or rather a boy helped a girl in distress, hearing her screams, being closer than the Devil, knocking out the attacker and saving her from being raped. Matt followed them as the boy walked the girl home and then headed to his own home – he never approached him. He was carved to his memory though.

Few days later, it was a group of them; two boys (one of them being the one he encountered before) and a girl. The girl seemed to be the victim at first, honestly scared – later, it turned out she was just being the bait, leading her attackers right to her friends. The fight was brutal; the three of them might have superiority in numbers, but except for the boy he met earlier, they weren’t experienced in fighting. He heard most of the fight from the distance, before he finally got to them and saved the wayward kids playing vigilantes from being gutted. All five ended up in the hospital.

Matt waited this time for the three of them leaving together – he followed them and before their ways separated, he jumped down, appearing right in front of them. There was a startle, but then… no fear. Excitement. Their blood was excessively flooded with adrenalin, just like when he showed up to save them.

“Told you he would come after us,” the unknown boy poked the other, whispering to his ear.
“He can hear you, you know,” he growled back, taking a step closer. Matt straightened, leaning forward, trying to discourage him from his unwise action – he stopped, but there was no change in his heartbeat. “Devil. It’s an honour.”

His tone startled Matt, his head almost spinning at the awe in his voice. He had no idea what to do with it – he didn’t understand. What was he even doing here? He didn’t think it through; he didn’t have a clue how to handle them. They were what, vigilantes? If they were simply any other criminals, he would punch them and delivered them to police. But this? And how much did they differ from him, doing what they did, trying to save people? Were they wrong? Did their age make their action less justified?

They were taken back by the lack of his response. The boy sank to his knees, hiss of pain leaving his lips, and Matt remembered he got it bad to them, as one of the men scored a precise kick - yet, he kneeled. The girl and the other boy followed his example, scaring Matt shitless. Jesus Christ, what was this?

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“Devil. My name is Eric. These are my friends, Vlad and Lilith. For now, there are only three of us, but others will sure join The Devil Worshippers. We are ready to serve the bigger purpose. Would you accept us, became our master and guide?” he pleaded, head bended in humbleness.

What the actual hell? Worsh- They were what, satanistic vigilantes? Believing in the Devil? Believing he was the actual Devil? He held his jaw from falling down by power of his will, his stomach heavy as if he swallowed a huge stone, something cold creeping down his spine.

“You can’t do this,” he forced himself to say, keeping his voice as deep as he managed, suppressing the tremble in it.

Eric’s heart fluttered as he spoke to them, his body taken by pleasure, instead of guilt or disappointment. Then, realizing what the Devil said to him, he exhaled shakily.

“What do we do then?” he asked carefully, devotion in each word.

Matt was sure was he going to be sick. “Nothing. All of you got hurt. What you did was dangerous. It wasn’t right. Do-n’t.” He stopped himself before he could say please. And then he did something he rarely did. He ran away, leaving them clueless, himself confused, terrified and helpless.

That was more than a week ago. He hadn’t heard about them since, asking Terri, Vera’s best friend, to be his eyes and ears, especially by day, when he couldn’t run around and focus on them all the time. Until today, there was radio silence. Today Terri called him, hey Dick, telling him that it might be nothing, but she overheard a very obvious satanistic couple, both wearing button with a single sentence – In Devil We Trust - talking about a ritual. A ritual they would perform tonight. Matt hit the streets, or rather rooftops early, listening ever since. Like she said – might be nothing, but better safe than sorry.

“-king kidding me? With Jasmine?!”

“-weethart, you know we can’t afford-”

“-night, Sophie. Daddy loves-“

“-tea spoon, Kyle! Not a tablespoon of salt! Are you-“

“-like that? Come on, babe, let me hear-“

“-we trust. Shall this be the very first gift to him. Shall our blood be his drink. Shall the blood of the
Matt pricked his ear to the speech, already familiar voice making him tense.

Frantic heartbeats, excited, harsh quick breaths, whispers. One heartbeat slower than others. Whimpers making no sense. Drops falling slowly, trickling down, meeting a stone. Blade going through skin and meat.

He pulled his mask down, jerking up, setting in motion.

“Should we leave him a message? I mean, he might hear us now, but, you know… Yeah, I'll write it down. Put him up.”

Heavy breathing, huffs from effort. Thud. Wet sound of blood. Metal hitting metal, something going through meat and hitting wood. Silent cry, cutting through his ears louder than a scream.

Blood froze in his veins at the sounds. What exactly was happening there? Faster, come on. He picked up speed, jumping over the gap created by alleyway. His calves burned, knees protested painfully at the impact, but he had to go on. The pulse he was focused on spiked, myocardium tightened rapidly before giving up, working with the low volume it was offered. Faster!

Wet sound of paint – blood, it was blood – on someone fingers, smooth skin drawing a pattern on a stone. The noise he heard before, followed by another scream, muffled this time. Two more, metal hitting a bone on its way.

Matt was getting a vague idea of what was happening and the picture made his stomach roll over, his knees almost giving up. No, his imagination was too wild. No one would do something like that, no matter what they believed in.

So close, he was so close.

“We should leave. He could be here any second. He needs to find only the sacrifice. Let’s go.”

“In Devil we trust,” five voices in unison.

Then the five heartbeats separated, quick steps and running in different directions. He couldn’t follow them. He had to find the one who stayed. The one which was getting weaker with each beat, sound of abrasive shallow breathing covering it. Go.

He slid down the grounding of the abandoned apartment building, finding the right room, blowing the door open. Gentle wind brushed the space, making few candles flicker, exposing the image in all its horror.

Matt didn’t remember when something like this happened to him last time – it had been too long; he stopped dead in his track, fear and terror paralyzing him, mind cut off from controlling his body. Yet, all of his senses remained sharp, sharper than ever.

He jerked awake, running to the man, almost tripping over a bowl with more blood, his boots
slapping as he stepped in a drawing or a note.

The man choked as he hovered above him, but because he saw him - only reflexively; he wasn’t conscious. He couldn’t breathe. His heart stopped. Matt couldn’t do anything else – he couldn’t put him down from the cross, because the huge nails served as stoppers, keeping him from bleeding out. He kneeled to the cross, placing his palms on the man’s chest, his gloves smacking when meeting the wound. Oh my God. He started compressions, periodic and fast, hearing the myocardium squeezing as he replaced its function. Shit.

He stopped, pulling out his burner, dialling 911. He gave the address, already compressing again. There was less and less blood to distribute through the man’s body though. Despite the contraction of his vessels, centralization of the blood flow, all attempts of the body to save the precious fluid, he was losing his fight. If it wasn’t the blood loss, it was the sedatives, making the man’s breathing shallow long before he went to cardiac arrest, stealing his oxygen quickly.

He stubbornly continued, refusing to give up. No, no, no. “Come on!” His hoarse voice echoed in the half empty space, returning to his ears. The only sound in the room.

They did this. And they did this because of him. They did this for him. Jesus Christ. His hands trembled as the realization washed over him, poisoning his veins, his world spinning as he was losing firm ground.

Sirens reached his ears despite the loud buzzing of his own blood in them. Too late. He stumbled to his feet, weak like never. He needed to disappear. His conscience screamed at him to stay, to take responsibility, but that wouldn’t help the dead man – it wouldn’t help anyone. They needed to be stopped. There would be time for doing penance later. He left the room, climbing up, moving three rooftops over so he could listen. He hid behind a low wall, leaning his back and head against it. And he listened.

He listened to them as they entered the rooms. Their heartbeats spiking, fear and disgust, officer throwing up, paramedics pronouncing exitus without any attempts to save him.

“Fucking Satanists.”

“You don’t think the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen did it?”

“This looks like his work to you?”

“Not sure, I can’t look at it again.”

“This blood is a mess. There are too many coagulum. It’s... I think it’s actually a mixture of multiple different people. Gross.”

“Is that a pentagram?”

“Who the fuck crucifies a man?”

“Told you, Satanists. You don’t have to see the victim, just read the note, you idiot.”

“Eww, someone stepped on it.”

“Just read it.”

“Oh, someone tried to save him, there are imprints of hands – gloved maybe – on his chest.”
Matt was grateful he was sitting – his legs would give up. His gloves still had the man’s blood on it and he felt like it was etching through, burning marks into his skin, literal blood on his hands. The image of the man nailed to the cross was carved into his brain, never leaving. Tears were cold against his cheeks, but they provided at least a little relief.

He stuck around until they cleared the crime scene. Only then he headed to Eric’s house. He tipped off the cops, waiting nearby, hidden in shadows. As always, Brett did the arresting. Eric went willingly, confessing proudly on his way to the car. Matt followed them, making sure he didn’t miss a word. It was quite colourful narrating that made him want to throw up over and over again. The boy never gave up his friends.

It was in front of the police station, Officer Vildow taking Eric inside, when Brett waited by the car, looked around and headed to nearest alley. He called out for the Devil quietly; Matt felt too weak to actually resist and deny him a conversation.

“Sergeant.” Matt’s voice was too raw, too filled with emotions. He couldn’t seem to control it. Mahoney jumped despite being the one who demanded his presence. “Jesus. You’re like a ghost,” he complained, pulse rapid. He was scared. He was probing the Devil, his eyes burning through him, examining, considering. Matt let him. He was speechless.

“So…I guess it was you who called the paramedics. And us. And us again,” Brett muttered and Matt breathed in properly for the first time even since he found the dying man. If anything, Brett’s fear dissolved. He was only curious. He didn’t think the Devil did it.

“Yes… to everything,” he added, clearing his throat, working against the lump in it, failing.

“Boys from forensics said someone was trying to save him. Your work as well?”

“Yes.” Brett was brilliant. He understood things. He might even believe Matt was feeling the deepest regrets for losing the man’s life.

A man was dead. And he was the one to blame. “It was too late. I- I tried, I really-“ He sobbed, fist shooting up to his mouth to muffle it. The cross. The nails. The dripping blood. The screams. All in his name. In Devil we trust. He couldn’t breathe. His chest was squeezed in a vice.

Fuck, he was talking to a cop. He needed to keep his shit together. Mind controls the body.

Well, the mind is pretty much broken right now.

“Hey, hey there. I get it, alright? It wasn’t your fault. This kid is fucking insane…” Matt clasped at the words desperately, looking for a little comfort. It wasn’t Brett’s place to say, it wasn’t his place to judge, but if a good man believed him and didn’t blamed him, maybe- maybe… “Hey, seriously. You did what you could and it was the right thing to do. Let it go, call it a night.”

Matt didn’t know why. He listened to him, walking away, forcing himself to climb up for not being spotted; he didn’t feel the need since the streets were empty. It was cold and it seemed to be the first time after a very long time when there was no one. As if the city that never slept, fell asleep. Almost falling in silence. One minute’s silence for a lost life.

He didn’t know what time it was when he arrived to his apartment. He checked his phone out of a habit, finding missed calls and a text. He squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his jaw and swallowed the sob almost breaking through his lips. Vera. What would she tell him if she was here? What
would she think about all this?

He didn’t have to think about it too hard. She wouldn’t blame him. She never did and she would find a way to give him an absolution. She somehow always found the guilt sprouting in him, sometimes already grown to weed, tearing it out with its roots. Gently. She would comfort him, cutting out a little piece of herself and gave it to him. She was light. She was love. And that night was so, so dark… He would very much need some light right now. Just a ray would be enough – her voice, filled with her smile. He wouldn’t even need to tell her what happened, because maybe, just maybe she would tell him she loved him. He would only hinted he had doubts about himself and she would say she believed in him, believed he was good and that would be more than enough. And if demanded more, she would offered her embrace and if he got greedy, wanting to forget just for several moments, she would let him, she would give him anything he would ask for.

His clock claimed quarter to five. Even if he called her, she wouldn’t pick up. He ran his hand down his face and whimpered. Tomorrow, she would come back. He had to wait until tomorrow. He texted her back, reassuring her he was alright, because she worried. She always worried. She cared. Brightness and warm.

Matt didn’t go to sleep. He took a shower, washing away reminders of the horror he lived through, memories too deep to be wiped away so easily. Early morning, he went to confession, seeking forgiveness, letting Father Lantom’s wise words lift his heavy soul from the deepest pit.

After what could be eternity, he headed back, thinking a little more clearly. He couldn’t tell her. Vera couldn’t know, not everything at least. Apart from the fact it was her birthday tomorrow and he wouldn’t ruin that day, he must have keep the worshippers business secret from her, because once he would tell her, she would learn that he asked Terri to keep an eye on them and Vera would want to help too, and- no. Vera mustn’t find out.

Too tired to change, he just stripped his suit and fell to bed. With last effort, he rolled over, reaching the nightstand, opening the drawer. His hand found a small oblong box. He pulled it out, opening it, fingers running over the delicate chain. His lips involuntarily formed a small smile as he traced the charm. He bought it on Monday, unsure when he would need it, not learning the date just yet, only knowing it was that week. Now he knew.

He was grateful to Terri that she revealed that little secret. Matt understood Vera’s reluctance now, why she didn’t want to celebrate, not wanting to think about time she might had left, but her reason was exactly why he did want to do it. She deserved something nice. Memories that weren’t blood and pain, happy ones. Which was partly why he agreed to the double date thing, to give her another reason. A reason to-… he knew when her visa expired. He knew she had to decide at some point and while he didn’t press, he desperately wanted her to stay, painful knot in his stomach tightening every time he thought about her leaving, abandoning him. He finally had someone who knew about him and seemed to understand, who accepted him, hell, loved him even and he couldn’t lose it, not again.

So no, she mustn’t find out what happened. These were his demons and he wouldn’t let them to surround her. No. He would rather hearten the light in her and make her shine, because that was what she did the best and what he loved about her the most. He closed the box and put it away. He fell asleep in no time, lips still curved in a soft smile.
Chapter End Notes

The title – ‘Enmity or bitterness between individuals or groups.’ No Bastille or Taylor Swift please.

Matt’s POV is hard, but I actually kinda like this one. I also like to think he can be a freaking sap apart from being Mr. McGuiltFace (Yes, SignoraTed, I’m looking at you), hence the ending O:-)

Like I said, my chapters = blood or fluff. So this was… a bloody fluff? Bluff? Flood?

Also, sorry to any Satanists. I don’t know shit about this and I just read that Satanism is not unitary, so don’t take it personal…
Vera quickly forgot her worries about Matt – she couldn’t think about anything but her body aching. She thought Jake had a rough night or something, because he was trying to kill them, even sports freaks like Thomas or Jill violently flushed and panting. After two hours of fighting for breath, he gave them a break, releasing them for lunch early.

It was only around midday after her meal, when she remembered she wanted to call Matt. He would be awake by now, right? Even when he went to bed at five a.m.? She sighed and dialled his number. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Do not panic. Thirty seconds. Forty. Fifty. She wanted to hit the red button, when he finally answered.

“Hey,” his voice sounded very sleepy and she whined.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You can end this call and go back to sleep,” she babbled, feeling honestly guilty for waking him up. He stayed out late because some no doubt serious shit happened and he need to rest and-

“Why would I?” He yawned. That’s why. “I’m glad you called. How are you?” he asked gently, clearing his throat, obviously trying to sound like a normal person. She sighed again, fighting the urge to bang her head against the wall of the gym – they could wait there until their lesson would continue, Vera having almost an hour of free time to kill. She should have waited a little longer, dammit.

“Vera?”

“Oh. Good. Great actually. Except our trainer decided to destroy us today. He’s nice otherwise,” she said, wondering how much she should fill him in. How much he might want to hear and where was the line between talking to him and bothering him. “I like it here. My roommate is from Manhattan, practically Hell’s Kitchen actually, so that’s nice too. We have exams tonight.”

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” he reassured her, smile in his voice. Of course he did.

“Uh-huh. I’m not going for great, I’ll take what I get, I just don’t want to screw up. What about you? Don’t wanna be rude, but you sound kinda tired. I’m really sorry I woke you up. You’re hurt?” She didn’t want to sound anxious, she didn’t. But she probably did. And it was exactly the time when Trish walked in, expression baffled at her exclaims and question. Dammit.

“Someone’s with you.”

“Yeah, it is, now. You didn’t answer me. Should I take that as a yes?”

He sighed. “All good, living and kicking.” She frowned, not liking the expression he used. He didn’t usually use this one, that was more her M.O. Something was wrong. He was troubled. “I can hear you frowning, Vera, don’t worry about me.”
She rolled her eyes despite her best efforts. “No, you can’t. And I do, sue me. It’s not like I don’t have a reason to.”

“I’m alright, Vera. Promise. I admit last night was a little rough, but I’m not hurt. I swear,” he spoke gently, honest, but resolute. Strong voice. He wasn’t injured. He just carried the weight of the world on his shoulders and it was crashing him.

“Okay. Just… take care, okay? I miss you and can’t wait to see you,” she lowered her voice, well-aware Trish was probably listening despite her obvious focus on her phone screen.

“Can’t say the same, not about the seeing part, anyway,” he joked and she obediently chuckled. Dork. “I miss you too. Break a leg tonight. You’ll see me tomorrow, hm?” Vera had to smile at that idea. “’Kay. Love you.”

“Love you too,” he replied fondly and ended the call.

“Boyfriend?” Trish noted friendly.

“Yeah.”

“Cop or something? You had a-“ She gestured around her face vaguely. “-uhm I’m-worried-sick-about-you face.”

Eavesdropping should be one of the deadly sins. On the other hand, it was Vera who made a phone call in a common space. She was glad it was Trish and no one else. Like Nancy. Nancy seemed to be a gossip girl.

She tried to keep her tone light. “Worse. A lawyer. He sometimes sticks his nose where he shouldn’t and it pisses bad people off,” she answered truthfully, not wanting to lie. Technically, it wasn’t a lie. She was getting better and better at lying in omission. It was actually kinda scary.

Trish smiled sympathetically. “I have a friend like that. Adoptive sister actually. She’s a PI. Talk about sticking nose somewhere and pissing people off…” she hummed and Vera’s lips spread in sympathy.

“Happen to be the one with a drinking problem?” she probed and Trish laughed, the sound little uneasy as Frankie and Paula arrived, giggling, obviously.

“Trust me. Drinking problem doesn’t cover it.”

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Vera drew better lot than she would imagine. She didn’t get warm up, workout or stretching (she wouldn’t really mind, but she definitely preferred the middle of a lesson exercise to the other parts) and she kinda liked the song as well, even though she had never heard it before (she was pretty sure Jake went for unusual songs so no one could copycat their trainers or anyone really). Make Believe wasn’t exactly a beating song she would choose for mostly kicks, but it wasn’t the worst either. Jake sent everyone their song via phones and they went separate ways in the gym, each finding their corner.

It took her about ten minutes to create the choreography. The song was catchy as hell and she liked the lyrics. She cautiously eyed the rest of her classmates – everyone kept working, headphones in their ears. She huffed and pretended to work too. They quitted after half an hour, as they were peaking at each other, checking whether they were done. Jake seemed satisfied and decided to tell
them a little bit more about boxing – as in not fit-boxing, but boxing - and Vera lapped up at each word, because boxing and Matt were connected more than he would let most people know.

After an hour, he clapped his hands, offering (ordering, but he tried really hard to make it sound like they had a choice) they tried out their choreographies in front of everyone – alternating at the main totem, creating their own lesson with each of them taking their parts. The fishy feeling she had about the examination became stronger considerably, but they all agreed and truth to be told, Vera liked the idea.

And it was fun. Sure, it was weird to have people watching her, but that was something she had to get used to and she rather have them than some people who would expect her to be a professional. They always applauded to each one of them, Jake thanking, giving small advices and the process repeated. Of course, after Jill’s and Allison’s stretching, Jake announced them all that they passed the exam. Vera wasn’t even surprised, but she couldn’t deny she was relieved. They had done it. Yay! Celebrations were ahead in the evening and he let them go very early – which explained why he was wearing them off in the morning; there was simply no more workout planned that day.

Saturday didn’t provided much lessons to attend, so she decided to explore the city more, calling Terri while wandering (“So, can you officially kick ass now?” – “That’s one way to put it…”). Terri claimed nothing was happening in Hell’s Kitchen since she was gone (Vera rolled her eyes at that) and rambled about Victor – it turned out, that when it wasn’t Vera getting into trouble, it was him, because apparently some drunk idiot smashed glass bottle against his shoulder, missing his head probably only due to the amount of alcohol in his system. Vic was tough about it, of course, but it didn’t change the fact he needed several stitches and scared Terri shitless. Vera thought Terri should reconsider her definition of nothing happening in here, but swallowed her wry comment and expressed her compassion, sending her regards and wishes of health to Victor.

Vera texted Matt as well, letting him know. He replied immediately, offering his congratulation.

The night out was fun. Vera wasn’t much of a drinker, so it was a perfect opportunity to get to know things that only could have been labelled as a blackmail material. Trish confessed she took this course because her last three personal trainers tried to get in her panties – only two of them were men. Famous ladies-man Thomas admitted he was in love with his friend’s girlfriend, and that was why he acted the way he acted. Allison and Erica made out. Jill told them thing Vera probably didn’t want to know about her (or about anyone for that matter).

Yeah, it was fun and everything, until Trish (and Vera decided she did not like drunk Trish after that, like at all) – after like thirty minutes of constant staring at Vera - let out delighted yelp.

“I know where I know you from!” she exclaimed victoriously and Vera looked at her, shocked. She felt like a bombshell was about to drop.

“Do you?” she laughed uneasily, eyeing her drink as everyone examined her, their minds no doubt racing and comparing her to any faces they knew. Vera felt like an undercover cop whose identity just got revealed.

“Yep. You’re the girl from the Collins’s case, aren’t you?”

Her blood turned to ice and she froze, eyes widening in horror.

Oh no.

“What’s the Collins’s case?” Frankie challenged her and Vera fought the urge to flee.
“Collins was a dirty cop. Involved in some shady things. He-“

“Yeah, he was a douchebag. Now he’s in prison. Let’s leave it there,” Vera quickly interrupted Trish, before they could start analysing her kidnapping and her vigilante saviour.

“Touchy, touchy…” Paula complained and her gaze burnt through Vera’s head.

“Hey, she’s obviously uncomfortable. Let her be…” Lucy hummed, offering to get another round. Loud cheers sounded around her and Vera sighed in relief, shooting Lucy a very grateful glare. She would pay her for the drinks later. Lucy was her new heroine.

“So, wanna tell us about your love life instead? You didn’t give us any dirt on you yet,” Jill poked her ribs and Vera, not really happy about it either, was sure keen on telling them a little about Matt rather than discussing vigilante justice. Jake observed her thoughtfully though, phone in his hand, as if he knew there was something big to Trish’s note.

Vera left shortly after midnight. She fell asleep in no time.

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Morning was brutal; for most of them anyway. When Vera entered the gym, the slats were down, smallest light on, because hangover. She almost felt bad for being well-rested and sober. Almost.

They did train though – they repeated their choreographies from the previous day (what they remembered anyway), the music significantly lower than usual. The very bright side was that not Jake, not anyone, seemed to recall last night very sharply, not even Trish. They made it through, Jake handing them certificates with fanfare - the exercise obviously woke him up, because he beamed, shooting around jokes and even wished her happy birthday (Vera stared at him, startled, until she noticed the date was on the certificate – she recovered and thanked him).

Short goodbyes, few contact info exchanges and she was on her way home. It turned out Trish drove to Allentown, as in she drove her own car – she generously offered Vera a ride, and who was she to refuse. It was significantly shorter, cheaper (even though she offered Trish money for gas, and her new friend looked at her horrified with a big no) and more comfortable. And she had someone to talk to. They talked pretty much about anything, but Trish obviously did remember last night and apologized to Vera, eyes big and regretful and Vera almost felt bad for her since nothing really happened.

“I thought you forgot that,” Vera admitted, cheeks pink.

Trish just laughed it off. “Trust me. Few days with Jessica teach you how to hold your liquor…”

They arrived to Hell’s Kitchen over an hour earlier than Vera would if she took the bus. Vera offered her a lunch in return at least, but Trish apparently had to go to work, so she drove her in front of her apartment building, disappearing with a wave and let’s call sometime and hang out. Vera thought it was cute.

She made quick lunch at home, nestling with her laptop. She chatted with Marky and company, of course boasting of her new licence, Marky inconspicuously asking her about the attendance of her wedding in a different conversation – a private one. Vera promised to ask Matt, thinking no way that’s gonna happen, ever. Marky seemed to be satisfied though. Great news was Anna had a new love interest and this time he obviously felt the same and asked her out. Vera thanked god, because she was getting slightly worried about her best friend’s (former best friend?) lack of success, which made her not just bitter, but also quite depressed.
Vera texted her mum whether she wanted to call – knowing her answer ahead, but hey, it was a polite thing to do - and she finally texted Matt she was back and she wondered if he had a minute to spare. She took a shower while waiting for the answers, pissed at herself when she found a missed call from Matt.

She called him back and they settled at six, which gave Vera almost two hours to kill, luckily enough with an outlook of spending some of the time talking to her mum.

She wasn’t sure she was glad they called. Her mum congratulated her, obviously, inconspicuously probing whether the licence was international (Vera gritted her teeth, trying not to read too much in that question), asking how she was and what was he plan for the rest of her birthday, wishing her all the best (and sending some nice amount of money instead of a gift, hoping Vera would appreciate it better – and oh, she did). Vera admitted there were actually none, at least not that she knew of, mentioning that Matt was about to come over though. Her mum raised her eyebrows multiple times in presumably funny way and Vera rolled her eyes, laughing nevertheless. She forgot to watch the time, head snapping up when she heard a knock on her window.

Window. Seriously, Matt, I have door, you know.

“Uhm, mum, someone’s knocking. I guess it’s Matt. Call you soon, hm?”

“That’s great! Invite him in, I still didn’t get to meet him, you know… today is as good day as ever,” her mother noted and Vera’s eyes widened in horror. God no. She didn’t have a problem with Matt meeting her mum, mostly, she wouldn’t even need to translate, with her mum being an English teacher. But she had no idea how would that work, since Matt wouldn’t be able to see her (or sense her for that matter) and she still forgot to mention her mum that her boyfriend was kinda… blind. Not even talking about the fact he was wearing his vigilante outfit, which wasn’t that bad, but it wasn’t exactly ideal either.

“Uhm, you know what? I think he might actually make a reservation in some restaurant, you know, birthday dinner and all that, he’s that kind of guy who would do that to surprise me and I’m not ready at all, so there is no time to waste. Bye!” she blurted out, ending the call before her mum could he could be talking to me in the meantime.

She closed the laptop with a huff, Matt’s expression curious behind the window, mask rolled up. Her lips unconsciously formed a smile, heart fluttering. God, she missed him.

Vera opened the window for him and he crawled in, melting snow on his boots dripping on the floor. Instead of a welcoming, she got a question.

“Did you just lied to your mother?” he asked, traces of disbelief in his voice. She frowned at him, closing the window and he spun to face her, one hand strangely twisted behind his back – was he in pain? Hurt?

“Hello to you too. Yes. She knew you came and wanted to meet you,” she admitted truthfully, shrugging. His face turned a little hurt and she realized how that sounded. “I don’t have a problem with you two meeting, but I wasn’t exactly sure how would you feel about unplanned screen to screen encounter.”

“Oh,” he replied intelligently, spinning again as she wanted to examine his arm. His expression cleared, suddenly wearing a mischievous smile. Teasing. She raised her eyebrow, waiting for an explanation.

And then it struck her. It was her birthday. He did get her a gift. That was… well, truth to be told,
not exactly unexpected. He showed his hand the same time she realized what it was about – her heartbeat probably spiked. And it jumped again when she saw a single red rose.

“Just for you to know, this is for the new fit-box trainer in case you would think anything else,” he announced and she smiled gratefully – for the gift and for the note. It was absolutely sweet.

He handed it to her, but truth to be told, she didn’t give a damn about the flower. Instead she grabbed his hand, taking a step to him, meeting his lips. She felt him smile to the kiss and she couldn’t resist doing the same.

“Thank you. And just for you to know, the new fit-box trainer missed you very much,” she whispered to his mouth, pecking him once more and withdrawing to put the rose in a vase, smelling it on her way - it was lovely, natural, not added artificially. Placing the vase on the counter, she returned to him, glad he took his shoes off and gloves with mask as well. She couldn’t resist running her fingers through the messy hair. He grinned, pulling her to another kiss, sweet and deep, hand in her hair as well, another on her waist, caressing her lips thirstily as if… as if he hadn’t seen her for almost five days. She answered him with enthusiasm, delighted on her own, palm over his not exactly steadily beating heart.

He retreated without warning, kissing her forehead, hiding her in his embrace. She didn’t protest, relaxing in his arms as he buried his face to her hair, breathing in. She pecked his neck, air catching in his throat. They stood in silence, heartbeats matching, rather one person than two. She realized she didn’t just miss him – her body missed him too, longing for any touch.

He let her go, taking her hand, leading her to the couch. Vera once again didn’t resist, following him here, sitting next to him, eyeing him curiously, head tilting – his lips twitched at the gesture.

“So, how was Allentown?”

She shrugged. “Good. Great, actually.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, you said that already. Don’t want to talk about it?” he wondered and Vera rolled her eyes.

“No. I mean, yes. Ugh… I don’t want to overwhelm you,” she admitted and he stroked her hand.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Vera,” he said seriously, encouraging her. She huffed, unsure what to tell him.

“It was nice. Mostly likeable people, Jake was a good teacher. We trained, we played games or how else should I call it, we went to pub twice. The fitness centre we were attending offered us lessons with a discount, so I went to Aikido twice.” His eyebrows shot up and she grinned. “What, it was cheap. I would like you to check on what they tried to teach me though. Cause you know,” she hummed, leaning in, kissing his jaw lightly, growing stubble scratching her lips, “you’re the best.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” he exclaimed calmly, one corner of his lips up though. “So basically had a good time, huh?”

“Yep.” She examined him. She did have a good time, what about him? He didn’t seem to be hurt, just tired. Very, very tired. She didn’t have to ask out loud. She carefully traced the bruises under his eyes and he closed them, catching her hand delicately.

“I’m okay, Vera. It’s not ideal, but I’m trying to handle it, alright? Don’t worry,” he whispered, placing a small kiss to the inside of her wrist. Vera didn’t believe him, not entirely, but she didn’t press. She knew that if he didn’t want to tell her, there was no force in the universe that would make
“Just…if you want to, you can always tell me. And let me know if I could help somehow, which is ridiculous, I know, but… yeah,” she offered quietly and his eyes snapped open, hint of fear in them. *Fear?* It quickly disappeared, replaced by another emotion. He kissed her wrist again, before putting it down to her lap.

“I know. And I love you for that.” Out of blue, he smiled. “Which leads me to…” he exclaimed mysteriously, hand sliding to his pocket.

Vera was baffled for a second, before he *didn’t* pull out a phone. It was a small box, oblong, the kind of a box that was usually for…jewellery? She snapped her head up, meeting his timid eyes as he bit his lip. What the-

“Happy birthday, Vera,” he said softly and she looked at the box in his hand again, unsure how to react, her heart racing – outraged or excited? He *did* get her a gift after all. Despite their talk about it, the rose and the note, he still gave her something, celebrating her birthday. Of course she was pleased, she couldn’t deny *that*, and he knew it well. It was just… she was speechless.

To hell with it, it wasn’t like ignoring her birthday changed the fact it was 7th February already. She hesitantly took the box and he sighed in relief as if he half expected her to send him to hell. *Now come on*, he knew her better than that. She wouldn’t do that.

“Thank you.”

Mentally counting to ten, she gathered her courage, opening the box. Shaky exhale left her lips, heart sure missing a beat as she saw it. It was a necklace. Thin light chain with a charm – or rather two charms? Two hearts, fine outlines of them actually, locked together loosely, moving against each other slightly when she inclined the box on its side accidentally. She blinked furiously, waiting for the image to disappear. It didn’t. She raised her eyes to his face, lips parted.

“Matt, that’s- I can’t-” she couldn’t let out a single sentence which would make sense. It was *beautiful*. And whatever material it was, she was sure it was *expensive*. Maybe not by normal measures, but… She thought they had an understanding. That she didn’t really want to celebrate that awful reminder of time flying *at all*. It meant no gifts, or no large gifts at least, or whatever-

“You don’t like it?” he asked hesitantly, face falling a little at her reaction and she shot him an incredulous look he couldn’t see. He sure sensed that her silence was a good kind…sort of, right?

“What? No! I love it, it’s just…” He smiled contentedly, listening to her steady heartbeat as she said those words, eyes big, head tilted to his side. She opened her mouth to explain her train of thoughts, closing it again when she failed to find a way.

“It’s just…?” he encouraged her softly, hints of worry in his voice. What was he expecting her to say? Too cheesy? Not suiting her?

“…too much for me.”

“It’s just like the kiss. It’s for me too,” he protested and she examined his expression – surprisingly not taken aback, as if he half expected her protest. She was honestly confused. How was this gift for him too?

“How-“

He carefully pulled the necklace out of the box, holding it high, the charm hovering in the air. He
lightly flicked the hearts, his smile growing as they tinkled silently, soft noise barely audible for anyone’s ears – not for Matt’s though. She felt her jaw falling slightly, realization wrapping her gently rather than hitting her. Her eyes went wide.

“You will hear if I wear it,” she stated the obvious, astonished, touching the thin pieces of metal, light jingling resounding. His eyes twinkled.

“Yeah,” he breathed, low voice a little hoarse. “Can I?”

Seeing how delighted he was, maybe even more than herself, she couldn’t say no. So she nodded, brushing her hair on one shoulder, making it easier for him. He clasped it, the chain cold against her skin, pleasant feeling. He turned it around a little so the pin was on the back of her neck. She subconsciously passed her fingertips over the hearts, smiling, her own heart growing in size. Screw it if it was expensive. It was gorgeous and she loved it.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you, Matt,” she whispered when he withdrew, examining the outcome form distance as if he could actually see it.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Very much,” she admitted, letting the charm go and leaning to him, low sound reaching her ears. His breath hitching before their lips met indicated he could hear it clearly. And the way his lips moved against hers, eager and thirsty, assured her that he enjoyed that sound greatly. Hands on her hips and waist, drawing indefinite shapes on her body, leaving burning marks.

Then his lunges suddenly stopped and he retreated, leaving her frozen on spot, clueless. He pulled his shirt over his head, exposing his chest. He rested his hand on the back of her neck, drawing her closer and she obediently gave in to the pressure of his arm, crawling on the top of him. He hummed with satisfaction when she sunk to his lap, feeling his excitement, the sound in the back of his throat when their lips collided again sending a jolt of warm right to her abdomen. His hand moved rather to her throat, manipulating her easier. She thought he slid his thumb under the thin chain - only then she realized why he wanted her to be over him – the lovely charm made another small jingle when touching his bare chest and his mouth wedged in hers, smiling, certain part of his body enthusiastically responding as well. Holy-

She wanted to say she was never gonna take it off again, but her thoughts dispersed when his hand slipped somewhere else than under her new piece of jewellery and any possible teasing was forgotten as she was consumed by desire.

She said it to him afterwards, snuggled to him as close as she could. He chuckled and kissed her temple tenderly, approving of her plan.

Chapter End Notes

Fluffiest fluff to ever fluff. Kill me now. But hey, Matt (who IS a freaking sap, apart
from being just a little bit of a self-seeking bastard, not that I can really blame him, can I) deserved something nice in his life too.

The chapter titles – tiny reference to the CW series The Flash, in which episode 2x13 was named Welcome to Earth-2 (see chapter 6) and the following one Escape from Earth-2.

Also, I have Les Friction period. I have like six favourites and Make Believe is one of them. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3T27-awXIaY

Charm – probably the closest to what I imagined, I would wish for it to be much, much thinner though…
https://edwinnoveljewelrydesign.com/media/catalog/product/cache/1/image/0405201359b7a927ff1539f2b07a7e97/na_na-na-na-na_01_1.jpg
Matt didn’t stay. He tried really hard to make it look like he did - they spooned as always, and Vera thought his body went limp before hers did and when she was getting up to work (she had to wake him up too, so he could…jump home and she could close the window behind him – because Matt loved visiting her through her window), he was there - but she woke up in the middle of the night, finding herself alone, window in the living room closed only as much as he managed to do from the outside. She tried not to think about it too hard and not to come to conclusions that something really shitty was happening, something bad enough for him not wanting to share. They got up, him kissing her goodbye, fingers tracing her new necklace with a brilliant smile and he was out. She sighed and got ready to work.

Morning shift would be a pain, since she didn’t get much sleep, but it had Terri. Terri, who welcomed her with a grin. And a gift on a counter. Perhaps she should have done better job explaining people she did not want to receive any present.

“Don’t give me that look, Mechy. It’s not a birthday present,” Terri said flatly, gaining a weird look from Barbara and a sceptical one from Vera herself.

Vera approached the counter, poking the thing wrapped in a decorative paper, before she raised her eyes to her friend again. “Really, Terri? Because it sure looks like one.”

Her best friend grinned. “See? That’s where you are wrong. It’s not for your birthday. It’s a gift for your graduation,” she exclaimed victoriously and shoved the package her direction.

Vera gaped at her in confusion and disbelief. “A graduation gift?” She graduated almost three years ago. And why would Terri give her any gift for that anyway? Terri sometimes just didn’t make sense.

“Yes, you dummy. You graduated fit-box school. You’re a badass coach now!” she almost sang and Vera finally understood. Oh. She didn’t know if she should feel embarrassed or pleased - judging by Barbara’s face, embarrassed it was. Judging by Terri’s - definitely pleased.

“I…Terri, it was a four-days course. I don’t really think-“

“Hush!” she interrupted her rudely, expression exasperated. “Just open it, Vera. Please?” Terri didn’t make puppy eyes often – she usually had other ways to make people to do what she wanted, argumenting for so long that the other person just gave up after a while – but when she did them, it was a weapon of mass destruction. Vera did the mistake of meeting those eyes.

“Oh, dammit.”

Terri grinned innocently as Vera took the package in her hands. It was a size of a palm – maybe a little bigger, half-malleable, not light, not heavy. Vera had no idea what was inside and felt curiosity and excitement taking over her. Damn you, Theresa.

She carefully opened her present, feeling two pairs of eyes watching her closely. She peeked something violet inside – it was in a plastic bag, definitely looking like clothes. She gasped when she realized what it was – wraps. Violet-grey wraps for fit-boxing. She didn’t know what label it was – because instead of a logo of the manufacturer on the velcro, there was only four letters. Vera.
“Where the hell did you get this?” she breathed out, astonished, opening the plastic bag as well, examining her new gear.

Terri suddenly sounded humble and a little embarrassed by herself. “Uhm…I hope they are good quality. I’m not sure what kind you use, what label etc., so I guess it’s more symbolic than anything else-” she babbled and Vera eyed her incredulously, feeling the fabric. They were amazing.

“Are you kidding me? This is awesome! Thank you!” She hugged her over the counter, squeezing tightly. She might need to work on her acting skills – on one hand, she kept saying she didn’t want any gifts; on the other, her reaction screamed otherwise.

Terri chuckled. “Glad you like them.” She squeezed back and let go, wearing a satisfied smile. “Oh, and there’s one more thing,” she said mysteriously, reaching under the counter. Vera watched her cautiously, waiting for another bombshell. She wasn’t disappointed, even though she kinda was.

“Terri,” she whispered, not really outraged, more like resigned, as her friend pulled out small pie, one candle shoved in the middle of it. She lighted it up.

“Happy belated birthday, Vera. Don’t worry – or do worry, depends – it’s homemade. Make a wish,” she encouraged her, small smile on her lips. Vera sighed, but obediently bended down, leaning onto the counter, planning to do it fast, because she wasn’t sure how much the MDDC fire alarm could take before spraying them with water. She watched the flame, biting her lip. What should she wish for? Million things ran through her mind, from being happy to making the right choices (she rarely wished for something concrete, she liked the general wishes better), until she settled on one thought, deciding not to be selfish this year.

She blew the candle out, wishing for Matt. She wanted him not to worry too much, about her, about anything. She hoped she made the right call. Only time would show.

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Matt still did worry. But he probably got better at hiding it, because when he met her at Fogwell’s that night (after afternoon session with Claire, yay!), he seemed better. Vera wondered whether he somehow heard her wish, which would be ridiculous, because she didn’t even said it out loud. (And she was hoping he didn’t listen to any of her conversation with Terri that day, because Terri called him a freaking sap when she saw the charm. Vera was sure it was in the best meaning of the word since she awwwwwed after saying it, but she had a hunch Matt wouldn’t appreciate it anyway.)

They went over everything he taught her, she showed him the moves she learned in Allentown, letting him correct the mistakes, spending few moments with boxing. He was gentle that evening (Vera thought it might be due to the fact she put away the necklace for the training, claiming she was worried about it), guiding her, not pushing. He showed her more of some defensive moves – disarming a person, getting from someone’s grip…she asked him how to get from the weird position when someone twist her hand behind her back, making her to bend down – his cheeks reddened slightly and he tell her to do it to him. He made a freaking somersault-something to free himself and she gaped at him, asking him if there was any less crazy ninja way. He bit his lip, tentative and she rolled her eyes, letting it go.

She very much liked the next position though – he really was gentle that night, because he just asked her to lay down instead of cutting out her core by himself and he covered her body with his. Lying on the top of her, little sweaty, breathing slightly faster than usual, it made things to her, alright? It wasn’t her fault.

“Seriously?” he complained, as he sensed her body react to him (she wondered whether she should
be offended that he seemed to be completely untouched by their position), raising an eyebrow in disbelief and challenge. Smug smile appeared on his lips though, so she guessed he was as pleased by it as much as outraged.

Vera slid her hand under his t-shirt, tracing the hot skin (and the muscles, goddammit, those muscles) of his abdomen, smiling innocently. “What? It’s not like I can help it.”

He pressed his lips together before meeting hers lightly, finding her wandering hand and pinning it to mattress next to her waist, gingerly at first. “That’s… flattering. But you need to focus.”

“I’m focused. I just don’t mind this.”

“…but you would mind if anyone else was in my place, right?” he reassured himself, the corner of his lip twitching – it was hard to tell if it was from amusement or from irritation. She rolled her eyes.

“Yes. I wouldn’t enjoy being raped, Matt. That’s how it’s called, isn’t it? Rape position?”

His body went rigid for a second, shadow running across his face, eyes hard and she regretted saying it out loud. He gathered himself though, expression clearing.

“Yeah. I guess it is. Now, imagine it’s not me, alright. It’s some drunk you really, really don’t want to make out with…” he babbled, thwarting her attempt to kiss his neck in apology. She huffed. 

_Damn you, Murdock, and your responsibility._

“Alright. What do I do about it?”

…

Vera left around half past eleven, sensing Matt was getting more and more anxious and unfocused – he was more aware of his wider surroundings (read whole Hell’s Kitchen) than their training and she could take a hint. He gentlemanly walked her home, kissing her goodnight - she understood he wouldn’t come that night (she couldn’t really blame him, since she would kick him out before five a.m. again), promising he would meet her at the gym next day.

He didn’t. Vera really didn’t want to freak out, she did _not_. Except considering how secretive he was in last few days (while being incredibly kind at the same time, because that was just Matt), she kinda did. Matt never said what time he would come here – so technically he couldn’t be late – but she figured that at eleven p.m., he would at least let her know he wasn’t coming – unless he was in trouble. She would call his Matt-phone, but somehow she thought he was already out, so it would be waste of time. If that was the case, she wouldn’t want to call his Mike-phone either, because if he was busy fighting, her calling him would only distract him. She was toying with her phone for almost ten minutes, unable to decide. At the end she tried his civil number, trying to comfort herself with a thought that he might get stuck at work, too consumed by some case (which he didn’t bother to mention) to remember they should have met – it wasn’t like _that_ never happened before. On the other hand, he also once got kidnapped and saving him required the Avengers squat.

To her relief, he actually _did_ pick up.

“Hey. You’re okay?” she blurted out immediately as the dialling tone fell silent. Matt didn’t answer right away, taking his sweet time, letting her to work up her fear again, terrible scenarios already forming in her head. Concussed, stabbed, taken.

When he finally did, his voice sounded strange, rough, heavy with something she hadn’t heard before, making her heart and mind race. “Yeah. I’m sorry- something came up. I can’t see you tonight.”
Vera would at least smile at his choice of words if the tone he was speaking didn’t make her stomach roll over, the something clenching it painfully. She squeezed the phone a little tighter.

“That’s—that’s alright. You sure you’re okay?” she demanded again, knowing his answer before he could even take a breath in to answer her – no, he wasn’t. He would say yes, though.

“Yes. Everything’s- don’t worry. Just not a good time. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? Bye.” And he ended the call. Vera tried very hard not to overthink it. The fact he wanted to say everything’s alright and then changed his mind wasn’t scary at all. No, it wasn’t. And that he didn’t say her name once either (even though she did the same), that didn’t freak her out, not even a little.

She went home with heavy heart. She was scared to death, mind wandering in circles, his words echoing in her ears. Was he trying to tell her something? Something she should have read between the lines? What if someone did take him again? What if someone targeted Matt Murdock this time? It would explain why he was on his phone. Maybe it was something less dramatic – figuratively speaking. No kidnapping, just an injury – he might went out early and got hurt. Should she call Claire to ask her? If she was with him, another phone call would make them more nervous. It would make sense Matt wouldn’t want Vera to know, because he liked to pretend he never got hurt and things were always good, not wanting her to worry. Which might make things even worse.

Vera settled at the injured Matt possibility, deciding she would give him more time, hoping he wasn’t bleeding to death in his apartment with no help – he wouldn’t be that stupid not to tell her that, right? She had trouble falling asleep with that thought, anxiety making her shiver despite being muffled in covers, sweatpants and hoodie on – and it was pretty much Matt’s hoodie at this point, considering how often he wore it – it was somehow soothing.

Matt texted her around one a.m.

*Everything is gonna be alright. Don’t worry about either Matt or Mike. I love you - they both do.*

It sounded quite schizophrenic, but this time she did read between the lines – he was letting her know it was him texting her, he was alone, he wasn’t taken - the assumption he figured out she might get to. And Vera would believe him about the alright statement. Except each word felt heavy and bitter on her tongue, as she whispered them to the empty bedroom.

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Skipping proper sleep wasn’t good for her. Vera was tired and a little grumpy if she was being honest with herself, despite her attempts not to be. She drank two teas before the café got crowded as usual about eight, getting herself together. Meeting the woman who liked her coffee spiked with scotch – no, it was whiskey that day actually – made her smile, just like seeing the familiar faces, which seemed to be smiling, probably because of the weather. The sun rays danced over the tables and chairs, lighting up everyone’s day. Beautiful sunny day at Hell’s Kitchen – she did not see that coming.

Vera was also surprised, when she saw the man in the line. It wasn’t just because she didn’t recognize him – all the people coming to the café lately felt at least familiar if she didn’t knew their names already – but mainly because he was blind. She hadn’t met another blind person since Matt.

When he ended up being her customer, she wondered whether all blind people wore a genuine smile on their faces. This old man did. She tucked her hair behind her ear, his smile widening at her gesture as if he could see it. Or sense it.

*Sure, Vera. Because all blind people have fucking superpowers, don’t they?*
“Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you?” she asked him as kindly as she managed, yet not trying to treat him differently than other customers. She knew Matt didn’t like to be treated like glass either.

“One tall Americano, please. To go,” he answered in polite voice. She nodded and entered the order.

“2,80, please. Extra sugar, no sugar?”

He shook his head and held out a five. She wanted to give him the change, but he stopped her with a rejecting gesture.

Oh. That was a huge tip. “Uhm… you sure, sir? It’s-“

“I can tell you’re a good person. Loveable. Even a blind old man can see that. Keep it,” he pleaded and if she didn’t know better, she would even think he was flirting with her. The corners of her lips twitched at the ridiculous idea.

“Thank you, sir. Would you please take three steps to your left? The coffee will be ready in a minute.”

He did as Vera asked him and she got to work, preparing his coffee in a minute indeed. She hesitated whether she should query a name. As if he felt her confusion, he spoke. “No name needed. It’s not like I could read it,” he offered with a grin and he held out his hand over the counter.

“Of course. Would you like a holder for the coffee?” He shook his head again and she handed him his cup.

He misjudged and grasped her hand instead. Vera didn’t panic at the touch – it was expected. The way he traced his long wrinkled fingers over the back of her hand was weird though. She eyed him and saw a thoughtful expression on his face. And a split lip. And a bruise on his jaw. That freaked her out.

“Sir? Are you alright?”

He fucking tilted his head and then smiled. “Sure. …Oh, the bruise, right? Had an encounter with a friend. He had no respect for an old man.” Was he saying someone beat him up? Who would hit an old man? A blind one, for god’s sake! A friend?!” But what goes around, comes around. It will come back to him somehow, I’m sure. Justice is blind, after all.”

He squeezed her hand and took his coffee. She had no idea what to say. His words were just crazy. But old people tend to talk like this, right?

“Thank you, sweetheart. Have a good day… and a good life.” He left the café with rhythmic tapping.

Vera was baffled for another hour, vainly trying to get it together. But she thought she had it after a while.

And then Matt came. No, he stumbled in. He approached the counter skipping the line, breathing hard, face pale, drops of sweat oh his forehead. He looked like he just ran a marathon. Or jumped over the rooftops, which was impossible, because it was bright sunny day.

Well, at least she knew he wasn’t currently bleeding to death in his apartment, so that was nice.

“Uhm… Hannah, Michelle? I’ll take my break, okay?” she yelled in their general direction, not waiting for their permission, not giving a shit about the amount of people waiting. She circled the
counter, taking Matt’s arm and leading him to less crowded part of the café.

Once they had at least a little privacy, he let his cane resting against a wall, not caring it fell on the floor, glasses already gone, and took her face to his hands, examining her with his sightless gaze intensively, thumbs stroking her cheeks.

“Are you okay?” he demanded and Vera didn’t understand a thing.

He was asking her?

“Me? Matt...” She observed him too. He didn’t seem to be hurt; maybe she saw a shadow of a bruise on his jaw. He was definitely scared though. What could possibly scare him? She traced his face with her fingers carefully as well, searching for any clues. “What happened? Matt, you-”

He froze and his skin was now white as a sheet of paper. His expression terrified her. He slowly raised his hand taking hers – the one she had on his cheek. He slid over its lines with his fingertips, letting out a quiet growl.

“Matt?” she shrieked on the edge of desperation. What was happening?!

He let her hand fell to her side, bordering her face once again. “Did he threaten you? Did he hurt you? Vera, please,” his voice was frightened, pleading for answers she didn’t have.

“Matt, what the hell is going on? What are you talking about? I’m okay. There’s no reason for me not to be. I was here the whole morning. Nothing happened,” she explained him patiently, but losing her temper slowly.

He seemed to relax a little. He kissed her forehead, his favourite gesture for saying I care about you. “I love you,” he whispered to her hair, “you know that, right? I won’t let anything happen to you.”

No matter how much his words warmed her heart, she didn’t understand. And she couldn’t help feeling he was trying to reassure himself rather than her.

“I…I know. I love you too,” she whispered back, more as an automatic response than anything else.

He didn’t say anything. He stood with her in a weird half-hug, lips in her hair. It was nice. But she was at work. And she had fucking no idea what his sudden appearance and the strange behaviour meant.

“Matt? Would you please tell what was that about? You scared me to death.”

His posture tensed again. She placed her hand on his chest, right over his heart, just in case he would want to lie – it was pounding under her palm rapidly. “There was a man today.” He fell in silence again.

Okay, that was a start. “There were a lot of men today,” she confirmed, encouraging him to continue.

He clenched his jaw, teeth gritting. “We have a certain history together. He appeared in town yesterday.”

Now they were getting somewhere. He picked up his phone yesterday evening, telling her it was not a good time, the tone of his voice saying more than his words. That explained a lot. Except it didn’t explain anything at all.

“Okay. A man, who you have history with, came to Hell’s Kitchen yesterday and visited MDDC
this morning. I’ll take a wild guess and presume you’re not exactly on a good terms with him.” Vera would like to see his expression, but he slightly pulled her closer like anticipating her desire and not liking it.

“Yes. You can say that. He wanted me to help him with something, I declined. We had a disagreement. I never thought he would…” He paused, touching the back of her hand on his chest cautiously, mapping it with his sensitive fingers again.

It all clicked together as she remembered the strange touch of the old man. She gasped, watching her hand incredulously, in absolute awe. “The blind man. You know him. Oh my- you’re his so called friend? Did you punch him? Matt…”

Matt wouldn’t hurt a nice old helpless blind man, not even for any kind of a disagreement. He wouldn’t deny him help in a first place.

Unless he wasn’t as helpless as she thought. Unless he actually did sense her movement, led weird talk about her being so loveable even a blind man would see it to mess with her, touched her hand on purpose for leaving a mark. A message. A message only Matt could receive.

An impossible thought popped in her mind. “He knows who you are. What you can do. And he can do it too, doesn’t he? Is he- is he the one who trained you?” she asked him in disbelief, fighting to keep her voice down. She felt she was right, no matter how surreal it was.

Matt’s…mentor? In Hell’s Kitchen. In MDDC café.

Matt’s hand gripped hers tighter. “What exactly did he tell you?” he urged, pleading again. Vera tried to recall the whole conversation a little desperate from his freak out. Matt was not the kind of person who would freak out often. Who would freak out at all. She gulped.

“Uhm. He just wanted a tall Americano. Left a tip, almost doubled the price. Wanted me to keep it, claiming I’m… Uhm. I am a loveable person and even a blind man can see it…” And maybe she should leave that part for herself, because his grasp grew so strong it would bruise her wrists.

“What else?” he strained through his gritted teeth. The lump in her throat was growing very uncomfortably. He was pissed off. Like I-will-break-one-of-your-bones-for-each-punch-you-ever-landed pissed off. He might actually kill someone.

“…I noticed the split lip and the bruise… I asked him if he was okay. He said he had an encounter with a friend…who had no respect for him.” She did not want to tell him the next part. He wouldn’t like it. At all. But if he was in danger – and the idea horrified her, because he seemed to be afraid of the man, Matt from all people, and that meant he was really dangerous - he needed to know. He had to be prepared. “And that it was okay, because what goes around, comes around, it will come back to him and the justice is blind.”

That’s it. She was not telling him the rest. Knowing who he was or rather having a vague idea who he was, but mainly acknowledging Matt was afraid of him, she found his last words pretty scary all of sudden.

Matt looked like he was about to gag. His eyes were squeezed shut. “That’s not all. You want to say
something else. Say it,” he ordered and to hell with your senses, Murdock.

“It’s not important.” It’s probably important.

“Vera.”

“He wished me a good day,” she squeaked, not wanting to continue.

“And?”

“And a good life.”

His grip on her wrist loosened, hands falling. His face wasn’t white anymore. It was ashen. “What time does your shift end?”

What? “What?”

“Vera, please.” His voice was weak, barely a whisper, his figure crumbled as if someone drained him.

“Half- half past one.”

“I’ll wait here.” He bent down for his cane, using it automatically to reach an empty table. He sat in the chair heavily, expression partly hiding behind his glasses.

Vera’s head spun, dizziness taking over her. She never saw him like this. She felt like her chest was trapped in a vice, not allowing her to breathe properly. “Okay.”

“Vera? End of break?” She turned to the slightly irritated voice, seeing Hannah waving from behind the counter hesitantly.

“Sure.”

Her body returned to work; her mind wandered though. And the landscape she wandered in, it was for some reason bloody.

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title - Stick is a dick.
Matt is a poor precious baby, who just cannot be happy for a second.
When Vera placed a cup of coffee in front of him, he barely whispered thank you. Despite being in the same room as her, she never felt more distant to him – he was absent-minded, his thoughts everywhere but in the café. She kept glancing at him, worried, her own mind racing. Why did he want to stay? What was he afraid of? Was there something more to the words the old blind man spoke, another hidden message she couldn’t decode? The colour on Matt’s face was terrifying, making her slightly nauseous. She drank another tea, praying her shift to finally end.

Matt obediently drank his already cold coffee before they left – then they walked to her apartment in silence, each burdened with their own thoughts. He seemed to work on autopilot. The moment the door closed shut behind them, he pulled her in his arms with no warning or explanation. She returned the hug wholeheartedly, unsure of who was comforting whom. His heartbeat was unsteady, furious, scared, breathing deep and slow, inhaling her she suspected. She was confused and afraid as well. But mostly worried about him.

Still quiet, he put off his shoes, Vera following his example and letting him to carefully take her hand, navigating her to the couch. She kept his hand, both thumbs stroking the back of it gently, wordlessly encouraging him to start. His chin was directed down, sightless eyes on their hands.

“You were right. He’s the one who trained me,” he whispered weakly and she squeezed his palm reassuringly. I’m listening. Continue. He took a deep breath. “I was nine, shortly after my father’s death, when he found me – he claimed the nuns he worked with children with special needs – at that time, I was going crazy from all the sounds around me, voices never disappearing, nothing ever shutting down. I had no other option than to trust him as well; he somehow knew exactly what was wrong with me, despite the nuns being convinced I was showing symptoms of mental illness.” He smiled bitterly, eyes seeking the past, pain in them.

Vera listened, holding her breath. She felt bad for the excitement sprouting in her, curious about his past, about him – for Matt, it was clearly difficult to share any of this. Examining his expression, Vera realized that talking about this was hard for multiple reasons – remembering the time he lost his dad, when he got blinded, when he was alone. So no matter how impossible it seemed not to encourage him to go on, she didn’t push when he made a pause.

“He was helping a lot. He helped me to see my blindness as a… an advantage almost. Helped me to understand my other senses, training me in controlling them, using them to find out things I couldn’t by myself before. And of course…” he closed his eyes, falling in silence once again, “…he started teaching me how to fight.”

There was something melancholic in his voice – sadness, but with hints of a strange fondness for the man. Vera was getting more and more confused with each word. In the morning, she was sure Matt didn’t like the man, hated him even – now, it felt like he had a very peculiar bond with him. He was grateful to him if anything else. Hearing the story, or at least the parts he was sharing, she couldn’t be surprised. He took care of him – no matter how – when he had no one else.

“Started?” she wondered when he didn’t explain further, voice hesitant, worried he might shut her down.

“He left,” he said simply, emotions hidden under his eyelids.
When? she wanted to ask, but she didn’t. Whenever it was, it hurt him. A lot.

Why? She didn’t ask that either. It turn out she didn’t have to.

“He didn’t stay for long. He thought I was getting attached. He wanted a soldier. A warrior. They can cut out from their emotions. They don’t get attached to anyone, even when they are just kids.” He slowly raised his glassy gaze, voice low. “But I do. I always do.”

Her lips parted at the weight of his words – there were too many emotions in them, regret and shame, longing and honesty. He cared. Of course he did. She loved that about him. The man wanted him to be a freaking robot.

“But that’s not a bad thing,” she blurted out, his eyes burning through her face. “That’s what makes you human. You.”

He tilted his head in the painfully familiar gesture, one corner of his lip slightly raised in sad smile, fingers tracing her cheek. “I’m…glad you see it that way.” She wanted to scream of course I do, but he spoke up again. “I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t want to be like him.”

Vera smiled too and reached for his hand on her face, kissing his palm and took it to her lap as well. “Good. Because I love you the way you are.”

For a second, she thought his smile was almost honest and happy, before it faded away, gaze falling down again. He didn’t talk though. She had to.

“So… what does he want? Why is he here? … Or was?” she added hesitantly.

Matt sighed. “Was, I think. I couldn’t hear him whole day, but he’s good at hiding. He wanted me to come with them….to fight.”

Obviously. Matt was absent because he was pinching his ears, trying to locate his mentor. She did not like what he was saying. She licked her lips nervously. “Who’s them? Fight who?”

He grimaced, shifting uncomfortably. “I’m not sure I should- less you know the better. I myself don’t know much. They are crazy. Ancient organization, fighting another crazy ancient organization whose members believe in some weird things…”

“A cult?” she offered, sensing his hesitance. What did that even mean, ancient organization? What exactly was Matt’s definition of crazy? Also less you know the better?! What the hell, Matt?

He shook his head, lips tight. “It’s more than that. It’s dangerous, it’s evil. They’re fanatics. Stick, he-“ He fell silent, his expression screaming he said something he didn’t want to.

“Stick?”

“That’s what he wants to be called. It doesn’t matter. It’s not the first time he came to me, he…visited last year, demanding help.”

“After what, twenty years?” she questioned, unsure whether she was outraged by Stick’s behaviour or felt sympathy for Matt. Perhaps both at the same time.

“Yes. I wanted to decline by the time he pulled out the shit about some weapon, but he knew things. I fought Fisk at the time, one of his associates being a man Stick knew. Nobu. He claimed we could thwart his plan and it would help me. He was telling the truth and I knew he would try it with or without me. I made him promise me he won’t kill anyone if I help him – and myself as he asserted,”
he explained, Vera pleasantly surprised by the amount of information he shared all of sudden. She didn’t like what she was hearing, expecting something going to hell. If his face was anything to go by, it did. His breath hitched and she knew her suspicion was right. Stick broke his promise. “He ended up killing a kid.”

“He killed a kid?!” she burst out, horrified at the idea.

What the fucking hell?! A kid? Who the fuck kills a kid?

A fanatic. A member of a dangerous cult. Matt’s teacher obviously. She suddenly felt even more admiration for the man she loved, grateful he didn’t let the man poison him – selfishly grateful he abandoned Matt so soon.

“Yeah. I tried to- I stopped him the first time, but when I was fighting the others he just-“ his voice faded away, weak, broken, guilty.

Vera squeezed his hands tighter. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He breathed in shakily, returning her gesture. “And now he came back. He wanted me to leave here, but I don’t want to, I can’t.”

“They don’t.”

He chuckled – definitely not a happy sound. “I wish it was that easy. We fought the last time he was here and I was hoping I would never cross paths with him again. Now we fought again – about people I care about. I wouldn’t give a damn about him, but he came to you, Vera. He knows who you are and I don’t like it.”

Vera would be lying if she said that sentence put the fear of god in her, her heart suddenly too fast and loud. She gulped.

“How did you even know he came to MDDC?” she wondered, trying to distract herself from the cold shiver creeping down her spine. A man, who killed a kid, and despite being blind could break her neck without breaking a sweat, was probably not exactly fond of her. Jesus.

“He left a coffee cup on my table,” he murmured absently.

Her eyebrows shot up deliberately, weight lifted from her shoulders. She kinda expected a bloody note or something. Another fist fight. A death threat judging by the expression he had when he entered the café.

“He left a coffee cup on my table,” he murmured absently.

Her eyebrows shot up deliberately, weight lifted from her shoulders. She kinda expected a bloody note or something. Another fist fight. A death threat judging by the expression he had when he entered the café.

“So he knows where I work. So what? He bought coffee and led stupid talk.” She shrugged, her voice much stronger and braver than she felt.

Matt clenched his jaw, inconspicuously shaking his head. “You don’t get it. He wanted to mess with you, mess with me… everything he says has a meaning.”

“Alright. Well, he was clearly implying he knows that we’re together. I mean, loveable even a blind man can see it. He hinted me he knows about your nocturnal activities as well. Justice is blind. And then…” she paused, her mind racing, her next words forced. “What goes around, comes around. That’s… yeah, I don’t like that. Matt…”

“It’s not me, who I worry about,” he protested as if he read her mind. What goes around comes around and it will come back to him somehow. Vera would think Stick was suggesting Matt would get punched in his face soon. But he probably already was. So what? That must have meant
something worse. She pretty much hated the idea.

“Of course you don’t. But I think you should. Maybe… Since we don’t know if he’s still in town, maybe you should stay with the Avengers for a while?” she offered as the brilliant idea popped in her mind. That was good, right? Stick was a nut job, a dangerous nut job, but he couldn’t face a group of superheroes, right?

But Matt shook his head, disapproval all over his face, hints of fear. She fought urge to pout, insulted. It was a good idea. “No. They shouldn’t get involved at all…” he hesitated, looking at her as if he considered though, despite what he was saying. He freed his hand from under hers, stroking its back lightly. “Maybe you should. Just for a couple of days-“

“No,” she shut him down immediately, this time insulted for real. Excuse you? “Hell, no. You’re the one who was being threatened to and you think I should be hiding while you’re running around at night alone? That seems pretty hypocritical, don’t you think?”

Matt made an unhappy face and opened his mouth to speak.

“No!” she repeated and he shut it again, teeth clicking together.

“Vera, he wished you a good life,” he reminded her, straining the words through his teeth.

Her heart jumped as she recalled his special goodbye and she bit her lip, looking away, escaping Matt’s intense gaze. “What does that even mean, Matt? Is that a code or something? …If you’re not going under witness protection or whatever, me neither. Hm?” she challenged him and he whined, eyes rolled up to the ceiling.

“Not fair.”

She raised one eyebrow, dubious. “Oh, really?”

“Yes,” he complained, expression more desperate than furious, “I can take- I just want you to be safe, okay?” he changed tactics, eyes soft all of sudden. He brought his hand up to her jaw, and she leaned in. “You’re important.”

She couldn’t help smiling at the affection, forgiving his unfinished I can take care of myself. He could say I love you in many, many ways. This was probably one her favourites. Who was she kidding, they were all her favourites. “I love you too,” she whispered back and kissed his troubles away.

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“Are you gonna stand there all night?”

It turned out that shutting down his (originally hers) suggestion of Avengers protection meant the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen being on the watch all night. He wore Matt’s clothes, yes, but he stood by her bed like a guardian angel – or devil, depends -, refusing to even sit.

“Yes.”

“Matt.”

“No,” he protested simply and she rolled her eyes and huffed.

“I won’t fall asleep if you’re not going to lie down.”
He cocked his head to the side, eyebrow up. Ha! She wasn’t lying. A) she missed him in her bed. B) him standing there was creepy as hell. She untangled from the covers, walking to her wardrobe, finding some clean clothes, shoving it to his hands resolutely.

“Here. Change. Lie down with me. Rest,” she pleaded quietly, hoping that gently tactics would work better.

He made small indefinable sound and did as she told him, embracing her protectively, his body still tense.

“Rest, Matt,” she reminded him, as she kissed his knuckles, his fist unclenching under the touch, rigid posture indeed relaxing a little.

He rewarded her with a kiss to her hair. “Good night.”

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No matter how incredible it was, she actually convinced him to leave her alone since she was going to the café, using the argument of too many people being around. He considered it for a moment before agreeing and he walked her to her work, gaining Terri’s surprised look. He left home to get at least two hours of sleep - she was glad, because she was confident he didn’t closed his eyes for a minute last night (figuratively speaking). She fed Terri with some lie she forgot the moment it left her mouth. Terri eyed her sceptically – that she recalled – but didn’t say a word.

Matt was like a clock work – he showed up at half past one and when Vera saw him, she made another Americano, shooting it double. He went shopping with her, following her around, listening to their surroundings attentively.

Vera sighed whenever she caught him doing it. “Any sign of him?”

He shook his head wordlessly and she kissed him on a cheek, stroking his arm clenched in hers, comforting.

“I’m sure he’s long gone now, Matt. You don’t have to walk me home. Just go to sleep,” she whispered to his ear and another shake of his head was the only answer she got. She sighed once more, mentally making a note to count how many times she would do it in next several hours. She counted twenty four only three hours later.

It was at Fogwell’s, Vera cleaning up the floor, Matt sitting on the edge of the ring, ears pinching as usual, when his expression changed to something that was painful to watch.

“What is it?” she demanded, horrified, making her way to him. He seemed to be in serious pain, jaw tight, eyes squeezed shut, his whole body so tense it had to hurt him. He flinched as she touched his forearm, so she quickly retreated. What the hell was happening? “Matt, talk to me!”

His eyes snapped open. “It just… assault. Several blocks over,” he admitted, obviously forcing himself to relax his rigid posture.

Assault. Few blocks over. He heard someone else getting hurt. He had his bag at his feet. Why the hell wasn’t he changing already?
“Then go!” she blurted out, taking a step back.

“I can’t.”

Vera shot him incredulous and completely confused look. “Why?”

“I’m not leaving y-“

“Jesus Christ, Matt. Go!” No one would get assaulted, just because he thought she was still in danger, especially when she most likely wasn’t. God, she loved him, she was delighted how much he cared about her, but she wouldn’t let him do that. He wouldn’t forgive himself if someone got hurt while he just stood by, hell, she wouldn’t forgive herself. He hesitated. “I’m gonna be fine. Okay? Go be the hero you are,” she added gently, kissing his forehead, stepping away as he nodded and reached for his night clothes. Door clicked quietly as he disappeared.

Vera finished her tidying up slightly worried. It was about fifteen minutes since he left, so she figured he would be back any minute – or he would catch up on her any minute, because she doubted they would train that evening and she had no reason to stay. She didn’t bother changing from her sweatpants, putting on her coat and scarf, charm tingling quietly as she did so, making her smile. She took his bag as well, folding his clothes in it.

She really did love Matt – she was just getting more and more worried about him. He was paranoid. She got that, alright, she apparently had trouble-magnet ass and his mentor was obviously a dick, but that didn’t mean he needed to guard her every minute of her time. Including the time he should be sleeping – it bordered with anxiety. Trying to make him justice, she walked the streets with one hand in her purse, her grip on her pepper spray tight – she didn’t think it would help her much against Stick, but then again, he wasn’t longer in town and she was confident it would buy her enough time to escape if anyone else tried to hurt her. Not mentioning the fact Matt would join her any second by now, even if he only followed her around jumping from one rooftop to another. Hell, he might be already doing that by now.

Vera didn’t expect the hand on her arm, making her hiss and lose the grip on her potential weapon. She wanted to jerk away, but the fingers held her firmly, slightly shoving her aside. She knew who it was before she glanced at him, the realization making her heart almost jumping to her throat.

Doprdele.

“Walk with me?” he hummed conversationally, not really asking, leading her to the nearest alley and she would laugh at the irony and melodrama, if she wasn’t scared shitless. Her other hand reached for her purse to find at least the spray again, but he made a disapproving sound to her ear. “That’s really not necessary, Vera.”

She would argue about that.

To her shock, once they disappeared from everyone else’s sight, Stick let her go, lightly throwing her away.

“We need to talk, young lady,” he exclaimed, his addressing dripping with sass, face annoyed. He didn’t have glasses like the first time she met him. Standing few steps from her, he was just a little bit intimidating, his body well-built, but seriously touched by age. As he talked to her like that, she almost wasn’t afraid. Almost.

She gulped, working against the lump in her throat. She was pretty sure he could hear that. And her frantically beating heart. Jesus, she needed someone normal in her life. Someone who couldn’t hear
her heartbeat.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked, voice undeniably shaky despite her mental bravado.

He grimaced. “What do you think, princess.” Seriously. He was the king of sass. She was wearing sweatpants, hair tangled in messy bun, three bags on her. Princess indeed. She was more like damsel in distress if anything.

“I have no idea,” she admitted honestly, bewildered by this situation. Talk to her. Right. Come again?

“About Matty, you nitwit. He needs to fight the good fight. He doesn’t have time for your messy little feelings, you delicate flower.”

Come again, again? Also, how many of cute pet names he had for her? Matt didn’t need to do anything. Except showing up. Soon. Because his mentor might be talking for now, but he could beat the shit out of her before she would say blind ninja master. Time, she needed time.

Vera cleared her throat. “That’s up to him, don’t you think? He’s an adult, capable of making his own choices,” she opposed, mentally slapping herself for the wittiness. Great idea, Macháčková. Be a smart-ass. That’s a brilliant idea. “…Sir.”

He huffed, taking one step closer, tilting his head. Was that a blind man thing?

“Listen to me, doll.” And that was a little insulting. And intimidating. “You have no idea what’s in stake here. You let him go, or I’ll make you.”

She licked her lips, throat tight, loud buzzing in her ears. This was getting much scarier each second. Dammit, Matt, where are you? She took a step back subconsciously. “I’m not keeping him anywhere,” she squeaked. Very brave, Veronika. From one extreme to another. You just can’t settle in the reasonable middle, can you?

He smiled sweetly. “That’s debatable, darling.”

Yeah, she had no idea how to react to that one. Apparently, silence was reaction as well.

“You’re holding him back, he’s getting soft. Weak. He’s meant to do bigger things than putting on an outfit and being the knight in shining armour, while you’re the damsel in distress,” he spat out the last words, taking another step. She mirrored his move and her back hit the wall. Shit. She could use her knight right now.

The true was, it wasn’t even his words that scared her the most – it was the stoic calm. He was obviously exasperated, but his tone was flat, emotionless. Vera could see what Matt meant – and the fact he could have been just like this man made her nauseous.

“You mean him being human?” she suggested weakly and saw more annoyance on his face.

“Human, human... my dad died, boo, my heart is broken. Bullshit, lady. He wasn’t made for whining. Warriors don’t whine and he’s meant to be one. Did he tell you who I am?”

She blinked in surprise at his question. She sensed it was probably better to tell to truth. “Yes. Even though he didn’t really have too.”

Fake pleasure lighted up his face. “Good. It thinks. And you think how smart you are for figuring it out, aren’t you?” he mocked her, somehow measuring her contemptuously without sight.
“No, actually. That was an easy one. Just like the rest. You trained him, but you failed.” Alright, *that* was out of line. *Shut up, Veronika. Stop poking the sleeping dragon.*

And then there was another voice, reasonable as well - *keep talking. Matt would show up…*

“Is that so?” he questioned with his eyebrow up. *Talk, talk, talk…*

“Yes. It didn’t go according to your plan. You might have taught him how to fight, but you didn’t make him a fighter – he already was one. He learned the skills from you, but he never accepted your conviction. Thanks to you, he knows how to be a warrior, but despite all your efforts, he doesn’t want to be part of your war. You didn’t create a devoted brainwashed soldier you attempted and that pisses you off.”

*Jesus Christ, Veronika. Are you suicidal?*

“You’re almost right. Except one thing. He doesn’t know how to be a warrior – he has never been one. He doesn’t understand. He’s refusing to do what’s necessary.” His voice was still steady and calm – but she could see his fingers twitching, the small movement, the sign of irritation as he came closer to her. She was right to the hair. And it *did* piss him off.

And no pet name. That could *not* be a good sign, right?

She couldn’t run. He would get her on the ground before she would take a single step. “And what’s that?” she asked, throat tight.

“To let go everything. Fancy job, friends, *love* or whatever shit he believes in.”

The way he said the word *love* clenched her heart with cold fingers. He measured her once again, inches from her. *Matt, please…*

“Why would he do that?”

“They are distractions, *sweetheart. You* are a distraction for some reason and that’s very inconvenient.”

She gulped. She didn’t like this. She had to get out of here, *right now*. Screw if she had no chance. She needed to *try*.

Vera sprung to his left, the closest way out of the alley – he grabbed her arm and yanked her back before her feet even hit the ground.  She tried to jerk away, but he held her firmly, pinning her against the wall with his other forearm.

For an old man, he sure had a lot of strength.

She breathed in to scream – only a choked sound left her mouth as he crashed her throat, suffocating, wrinkled fingers around her neck, almost lifting her from the ground.

“*Matt,*” she squeaked, vainly fighting to take another breath, feet hovering above ground. She kicked out and she could *feel* his gaze – disapproving and a little bored if she was honest; she couldn’t see it. She couldn’t see almost anything, because tears appeared in her eyes, as the only desperate thought – *breathe* – occupied her whole mind. *Breathe.* She booted him again, with absolutely no effect.

And then the voice reached her ears.
“HEY! Asshole! Why don’t you let the nice girl go?” a woman challenged and for a split second, fear for her clouded Vera’s judgement. It was immediately replaced by relief – whoever she was, she was almost exactly what Vera needed. A distraction.

Except he didn’t react at all, only tightening his grip, making her silently whimper in pain. Vera couldn’t see the woman, but next thing she knew, she was on the ground, cold and hard against her palms and knees, while her attacker was tossed backwards. Vera had no idea where did he go, only that she was free. Her vision was swimming, dark dots on its edges and she finally inhaled furiously, filling her lungs with oxygen. She coughed it out, her windpipe protesting against her other attempt.

Somewhere on her left, someone threw a very loud punch – her eyes flickered there reflexively despite not being able to see a thing. Two blurry shadows stood against each other, before one of them lunged and the other ended up flat on the ground. Judging by the colourful curses, it wasn’t Stick who bedded down.

Vera wiped away the tears from her eyes, chest still raising wildly, climbing up the wall – only to see Stick being grabbed by his leg and land right next to the woman, everything but gracefully, nothing like she would expect from a ninja master. What the actual hell?

The woman – and she was vaguely familiar Vera thought – stumbled to her feet the same time Stick jumped to his - gracefully, this time. He pulled out some nonhuman move, but she caught him, shoving his body several steps back as if he weighted nothing. Of course, he flipped his way away. And to Vera’s shock, he disappeared. There were no traces of him in the alleyway as if he wasn’t standing in its middle a second ago.

Where the hell did he go? she wanted to ask, but all that came from her mouth was another cough. Shit. That really hurt.

The woman turned around, black hair flying, and walked to Vera. “Who the hell was that guy? He was what, seventy? A retired ninja?” she asked, outraged and maybe a little freaked out. She didn’t ask whether Vera was alright, but she scanned her.

The voice, the hair, the leather jacket and grey scarf hinted her who she was. Vera almost wouldn’t recognize her without the sunglasses. It was Laser eyes. Coffee with a shot of whiskey. Apparently there was more to that woman than she thought.

“I-…hav- …n- -dea,” she choked out, vision finally clearing, trying to focus on her miraculous saviour. Vera was out of it, okay? But she did know what she saw. And it was extraordinary. The woman was freaking strong. Who was she, lady alcoholic version of Captain America?

The woman suddenly snapped her head to look at something at Vera’s side. Vera’s gaze flickered there as well, recognizing the dark silhouette immediately.

“Great,” the woman exclaimed with a serious amount of sarcasm, “horn head with no horns. Any other ninjas joining the party?”

“Please, no more ninjas…” Vera whispered, still fighting for her breath, hand lightly massaging her throat as it could help. It really didn’t.

Matt tilted his head, probably unsure what to make out of the situation. Vera was positive he knew she wasn’t exactly alright, but he also understood that the woman wasn’t the one who attacked her - if he didn’t, he would already try to beat the shit out of her.

“Awesome. It was nice to meet you, not. You, big guy? Be on time next time, would you? I’m not
some hero fill-in. Take responsibility for your job. Jeeez,” she complained, stepping away, already moving to get out from this weird situation.

He inhaled sharply, breath catching in his throat, voice sharp and strict. “I’ll try my best. Believe me.” He took several steps in Vera’s direction, but didn’t touch her. He just… stared. “You’re alright?” His hand flinched like he wanted to take hers before he stopped himself.

Vera opened her mouth, no sound coming out – her vocal cords were quite sore and she had no idea what she should say anyway. So she nodded hesitantly.

Matt examined her the way she would probably never fully understand and relaxed his tense posture a little when finding out she wasn’t that bad. No blood or broken bones, that was a win, she guessed.

The woman’s gaze flickered between Vera and him, watching their exchange with a raised eyebrow. Then she shot him the strangest look and spoke in a little surprised voice. “Oooookay. Wow. You’re a crappy boyfriend. Screw the job – just protect your own at least. Jesus. I’m out.”

And with those words, she was.

Vera was watching her heavy boots clacking against the pavement, rapid steps, until she was pulled into a crushing hug, seeing only the black of Matt’s outfit.

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title - Stick is a dick no.2. I guess you figured out by now that in this fic, Stick is more dickish than he’s in DD…technically.
10) Were you careful what you wished for?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The fact she got almost strangled caught up with her once Matt let her go from his arms – she suddenly felt so cold and unprotected that she immediately collided with his chest again, making him gasp, obviously taking him by surprise - she was getting better and better at that. Despite his shock, he hugged her back once more, less desperate himself, more for her comfort. He kept stroking her back and hair gently, whispering I got you over and over again. Minutes could have passed, hell even hours, and she wouldn’t care.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” The moment his embrace loosened, she panicked. “I promise I won’t let you alone for a second, Vera. Not again,” he declared, voice solemn and honest, his chest vibrating with his words, heartbeat strong and steady. A promise. The truth. She took a deep breath and nodded, stepping away. He wore his mask so it was harder to read his face, but from what she could see, he was angry and miserable. And determined.

He pecked her forehead lightly. “Let’s go.”

The best thing about being followed by the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen was that she didn’t even know about it. Which was the worst thing at that time, really. She was shivering the whole way to her apartment, relieved when she got in and hid in his arms.

Out from the street, she was much calmer – even though she was well-aware her flat probably offered her zero protection, the fact she had walls around her was somehow soothing. Her mind cleared a little, allowing her to think and reflect her actions. Matt stood awkwardly in the middle of her living room as she made them both teas despite the fact she was no longer shivering – she was sure it wasn’t cold what made her shake earlier, only fear.

“I’m sorry,” she hummed tentatively, placing both cups on the small table in the living room as she sat down, lightly patting the seat next to her.

Matt didn’t obey – he hovered above her, looking somewhat taken aback by her apology.

“For what?” he asked, his expression as confused as his voice.

Vera sighed. She was honestly ashamed for her outburst. It wasn’t like she wasn’t entitled to freak out, but that was little too much. And he did not need that. He was stressed out enough already. “For the scene out there. I…I shouldn’t freak out like-“

“You gotta be kidding me,” he interrupted her, sitting down heavily, hand running down his face, then resting his palm over his mouth and chin, watching her with wide incredulous eyes.

She wasn’t sure what that meant. “I’m… very sorry?” she offered, not confident whether he thought she should be apologizing more or not at all. He didn’t react and she figured it was probably the latter. But she was sorry, alright? “Uhmm… anyway. Did you get them?”

“Get who?” he blurted out, looking honestly baffled, hand falling down. It was probably stupid question. Of course he did.

“The assailants? Muggers or whatever?”
He blinked as if he just remembered. “Oh. Yes. But that’s not important, I won’t do that again.”

“Do what?” Vigilanting? It was her turn to be lost. He clenched his jaw so tightly his teeth made a small click.

“*Leave you.* I’m not leaving for a second, Vera. I’m-” he ran his fingers through his hair, his eyes suddenly haunted, looking away. “He could have *killed you,*” he whimpered, voice on edge of desperation.

She would be lying if she said those words didn’t make her shiver and her stomach roll over. But then again, she had a hunch it wasn’t what Stick intended to do. “I don’t think so.”

His head snapped back at her. “What?”

“I don’t think he wanted to- *hurt* me. He wanted to scare me,” she explained. Once she was able to think again, she went over his words. He was threatening her, sure – but it had only one purpose. “He wanted to chase me away from you. Because he thinks I’m keeping you here. Which is ridiculous. It’s not just me, it’s Foggy, Karen, hell, it’s the whole city…”

Her voice faded away as he observed her, frowning miserably, his eyes big and sad. “That’s true. *Partly.* But he knows me, Vera. He knows that once I would lose someone, especially you – in any way possible -, I would run away, if not for anything else, then for protecting you and the others.”

Her lips parted at his declaration. Oh. Oh. She didn’t see that coming. Her heart quivered as the warm feeling spread in her chest. She watched him in awe.

“Does he… did he accomplish that? Did- did he?” She raised her eyebrow as he stuttered. “Uhm. Do you want me to leave?”

Vera felt her eyes popping, something light and easy washing over her, before she burst out laughing, quickly covering her mouth to muffle the sound when she saw his wounded face. She swallowed another outburst, only giggling, bringing her hand to his cheek, bravely fighting the urge to laugh. She leaned into his space, his face melting as she lightly kissed his lips.

“I love you, you *moron.* Of course I don’t want you to-* leave.*

The rest of her sentence was silenced by his mouth, drinking from her lips thirstily, quiet *thank god* reaching her ears. She smiled as he fondled her lips, slowly opening her mouth, tongue meeting hers. *Jesus,* what was the last time he kissed her like that? On her birthday? It was only four days, but it felt like *eternity.* She answered his lunge eagerly, delighted, *excited,* finding herself climbing to his lap deliberately, pinning him against the backrest of her couch. He didn’t protested, tiny moan escaping his lips as she sunk to his lap, one hand shooting to her hip to pull her closer while the other interweaved in her hair. Yep, it was too long. When she slid under his shirt to remove it, he helped her, shortening the period of their lips disconnected as much as possible, fingers quickly returning to its place, tracing the skin on her side and up, squeezing, touching even more than usual as if he wanted to make sure she was here. She tried her best to make sure he could feel and hear her charms – judging by his enthusiasm and what ensued, she did well.

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They were lying on her bed, both on their side, facing each other, one arm folded under their heads, fingers of his other hand playing with her hair gingerly, while she rested hers on his side, when he drop the bombshell.

“You need to leave town.”
She gasped, sitting up, him mirroring the move immediately, startled by her reaction.

“What?!”

He shook his head, returning to his previous actions, tucking the hair behind her ears. “I don’t know what his endgame is. I don’t like this. I think you shouldn’t stay here until I figure this out.” His eyes burned with intensity, pleading, worried.

“That’s… I can’t do that, Matt. I have work to do—”

“Not worth your life,” he growled, shadow running over his face. That was fair enough.

“I have nowhere to go,” she protested further. And that was the truth. She didn’t know anyone outside New York City. Except Edna, which, no, and few people from the course whose couch she definitely wouldn’t crush and they wouldn’t let her for that matter. They didn’t know each other that well. Trish might let her – but she was from Hell’s Kitchen. Terri definitely wouldn’t mind, but the problem remained the same. Not even mentioning the fact she would not want Stick to follow her. God, no. “Even if I had, I’m not leading some crazy blind ninja to anyone else.”

His expression changed for a second – from worried to hurt and she realized what she said.

“You know what I mean.”

Dubious expression, traces of hurt. “Sure.”

Vera huffed, rolling her eyes. She hoped he somehow noticed that.

“Matt, I never said you were a crazy blind ninja. You’re just a blind ninja. Sometimes actually very cute blind ninja. Who heroically protects the population of Hell’s Kitchen while handing criminals their asses to them. And who gives the best back alley kisses ever. Not that I had many back alley kisses in my life, but I’m sure if I did- I’m not helping, am I? I’m gonna shut up now,” she squeaked and for a very rare moment, she saw the sparks of amusement in his eyes, corners of his lips raised. Then it fell again.

“Alright. Okay. Then I’m staying with you. Like I said – you won’t be alone for a single moment,” he exclaimed, determined and confident.

She gaped silently. “That’s- Matt, you can’t keep monitoring my movements 24/7. You have better things to do—”

“Watch me. And I have no better things to do than keeping you safe, Vera. Don’t doubt that,” he said, voice serious, glaring to her face. He looked a little scary and like there was no force in the universe that would make him change his mind. Great.

“Can we start with sleeping?” she suggested, falling back to the covers, pulling his hand he used as his support to make him do the same. He reluctantly did so, hiding her in his arms.

“Of course. Sleep, Vera,” he whispered to her ear kindly, kissing her temple. She closed her eyes contentedly, relaxing, until she realized what he meant.

“You’re gonna sleep too, right?” she tried to disprove her hypothesis about interpretation of his words. “Because that would be insane if you refused to sleep.” Again.

His grip tightened with another lingering kiss to her hair.
“Then I guess I’m insane.”

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Friday was a nightmare. It was Vera’s day off, which technically meant no break for Matt – for Matt, who didn’t sleep at all. So she took her laptop and walked with him to his office, where there were at least some people and during meetings, she pretended to be an intern (they told Karen she just wanted to see how Matt’s day usually went, she thought it was really sweet), taking notes for Matt so they could be braille-printed later. Around noon, Matt was barely standing – they had a small fight over it with Foggy, while Karen went to pick up lunch. As Vera was listening to them, she sent text to Tony Stark, because she fucking needed to stay with the Avengers for a couple of days in case she didn’t want Matt to fall asleep while walking. Two hours later, she texted Natasha. Clint. Steve. And Bruce too. No one answered her and when she admitted Matt what she was trying to do whole afternoon, he wasn’t mad, actually encouraging her to rather make a phone call. No one picked up either, because they were probably all gone to a mission. A+ for timing.

So nothing changed, Matt being on her tail all the time. She liked to think that Matt napped while she was in the shower at least, but it was probably fool’s hope. She fought the temptation to slip sleeping pills to his drink or something, but that would be a dick move for many, many reasons. So she tried to shamelessly seduce him (using the freaking package in the back of her wardrobe she swore she would never open and use its content), hoping he would fall asleep after that – that was physiology, dammit, men wanted to sleep after sex, hormones and all that. She only half-succeed – Matt very much liked the lingerie and very much enjoyed ripping it off despite her belief he would be too tired to do so, but he didn’t closed his eyes, at least not as long as she was awake.

Saturday, she had the afternoon shift and she was never ever so grateful to have it, because it bought Matt several hours. Except the pipeline broke, water pretty much flooding the whole space and she was sent home four hours earlier with no bright prospects of having a shift the next day – she wanted to rip her hair off, because really? She wondered how much Matt would be mad if she just went home without him. She stuck around for another hour, until he actually came without her calling him – he claimed he woke up and listened. She sighed and took him to proper meal. Naturally he wanted pasta, because carbohydrates were easily digested, so his body could save energy. She tried to reach the Avengers again. Nada. She wanted to scream in frustration.

But that was nothing compared to what was about to come. Once they reached the apartment building, Matt froze in the middle of the stairs, refusing to take another step, gripping her hand tightly, yanking her back. Vera yelped, her protests caught in her throat when she saw his horrified expression.

“What?” she mouthed as silently as she managed.

He didn’t answer. He didn’t move. He didn’t even breathe.

“Stick?”

He took his sweet time before he nodded. Her heart probably skipped a beat, the fear she forgot she had coming back. He almost suffocated her - no matter whether he really intended to kill her or not -, so she was entitled, alright?

Then he breathed in shakily, deeply, going up. She hesitantly followed him, already going over any improvised weapon she would find in her apartment. Or Stick would. Vera had no idea why Matt continued his way to her flat, where a crazy ninja was awaiting them, but maybe it was something he heard that convinced him to do so. Not that he shared. Or maybe he did, but she couldn’t hear him over the loud buzzing in her ears. She never unlocked her door more slowly.
Stick didn’t bother with the light. Naturally. Vera switched at least the small ones in her hall, for sake of people who minded the darkness. That being only her at the moment. She had two blind ninjas in her apartment. Her life was a freaking action movie.

“My apologies to the housewife. Sorry about the boots. You know, I’m an old man, too hard to squat and untie them,” Stick noted sarcastically as they entered the living room – window open, lock probably picked, great –, finding him nestled in one of her armchairs. He stood up, giving an approximation of a bow, ironic smile on his lips. Jesus, Vera hated the man. This time she was the housewife?

Matt took off his glasses and coat, tossing them on the dining table, still somehow keeping Vera behind him, protective arm in front of her. She sure didn’t complain, but Stick watched his hand with what only could be annoyance. She stripped her coat too – she was at her home, after all. She wasn’t going anywhere.

“What do you want here, Stick?” Matt asked flatly, keeping his voice rather calm, but Vera could hear the suppressed anger. He didn’t come after Stick after he attacked her – he stayed with her. If Vera took a lucky guess, Matt wanted to strangle Stick at the moment.

“Come on, Matty, you know why I’m here.”

It really, really irritated her he called him that. Matty. It was a name his father would use, someone really close to him, who loved him - not this excuse for a man, who wanted him not to get attached.

“The answer is no, Stick. How many times you need to hear that?” he growled, his leg twitching as if he wanted to take a step forward, changing his mind in the last moment.

The old man threw his hands in the air in tiny gesture, shrugging. “Perhaps you didn’t understand, kid. I’m not asking. You go or I’ll make you,” he offered lightly, not so hidden threat in his voice. Matt shoved Vera behind his back just a little bit more.

“Really? How?” he challenged him, leaning in, his shoulders somehow growing in width. Something cold crept down her spine, making her hair stand on it ends. Fight. They were going to fight. Was that why Matt wanted to go upstairs? So he could have it out with Stick, hopefully once for all? She didn’t like it. At all.

“Matty, Matty…” he shook his head in pretended disappointment, “I told you so many times to cut it all loose, before it kills you. Cut them all loose, before they distract you so badly you’ll get yourself killed. If you can’t, I’ll do it for you.”

Vera gulped, Stick’s lips spreading in a suggestive smile. Matt clenched his hands in fists and so did Vera – except she did it so her hands didn’t shake, her whole body fighting a tremble, raw fear tingling in her fingertips. She just didn’t decided yet who was she scared for more; Matt, because he would do anything to stop Stick… or herself?

“You won’t touch her or anyone else.” His voice was low-pitched, coming deep from his throat, making her breath hitch. Jesus Christ, he was terrifying.

“Try to stop me.”

Next minutes were a blur, an awfully sharp blur though. Stick pretended a lunge, Matt immediately jumping at him. Punches were thrown, sometimes missing, sometimes colliding with a body. She hated to admit that, but it was definitely Matt who got punched more. His movements were worn, tired, the lack of sleep and eating catching up with him. She didn’t like the odds.
“Distractions, Matty,” Stick called out, dodging another kick. “You were so distracted that you didn’t notice someone’s listening the whole time.”

Vera had no idea what he meant and she didn’t fucking care, because Matt just backflipped to avoid a kick to his ribs only by inch, booting Stick to his knee. He slightly dropped and Vera allowed herself to breathe in, realizing she forgot that vital action while watching them.

Stick rose to his feet quickly, scoring a brutal punch to Matt’s side. She hissed in pain and sympathy, feeling completely useless. Matt stumbled backwards, while Stick continued his sassy lesson. Jesus, he was such a dick. “Thanks for the clue. I wasn’t sure I was right about her importance…”

Matt attacked him with another barely human sound, by some terrible coincidence ending up on one knee, arm twisted behind his back. Stick cut out Matt’s only support, letting his hand go as he fell to the floor.

“You let your fear to drain you so much that you can’t fight off an old man….”

Vera covered her mouth to muffle the shriek on her lips as he kicked Matt’s torso, making him to roll over, repeating the action. Jesus Christ, how the hell she should help? She wouldn’t score a single punch if she tried, only getting in Matt’s way, and throwing something was useless, because Stick would fucking dodge it – or catch it and throw it back.

She had no idea how that happened, but suddenly Stick was on the ground too. Served him right. They were a mess of limbs for a while, huffs and punches as they both struggled to push up on their feet while keeping the other down. At the end, they were both somehow standing.

Matt seemed furious, panting, getting ready to attack again. Angry. Anger is good, you just need to control it and aim it the right direction, she remembered his own words. Vera really hoped Matt was in control. Because otherwise they were doomed, both him and her.

Matt lunged. Stick blocking his punch and kick, throwing one of his own, making Matt stumble backwards once again. Dammit, Matt.

Stick snarled. “So distracted, Matty… that you missed a man with a sword, hiding close enough, waiting for his cue.”

In fraction of a second, Sticks voice still echoing in her ears, she heard Matt’s horrified scream, seeing absolute terror in his eyes. “NO!”

Before her brain could process what Stick was saying and why Matt was yelling, jerking in her direction, she felt a sharp pain in her chest. She let out a shocked gasp, making the ache worse. She saw Stick grab Matt, and he made incredible flip to free himself, sending his body to the ground though.

Then the agony caught up with her for real, throbbing, vision clouding with poisonous fog and she lowered her gaze to find the source of her suffering. Something very long and very bloody, dangerously resembling a blade of a sword – the one she only ever saw in the movies, the one all ancient ninjas were using – was sticking from her chest. The realization made her gasp again, her lungs protesting with the attempt to breathe.

She looked up from the picture of a freaking katana in her body, finding Matt fighting off Stick’s arms, as he tried to keep him on spot, keep him from running to her. Then the pain changed; somehow dull now, empty and her hands suddenly weren’t touching a blade – there was none
anymore. Only the wound, stopper out, open. She felt the flow get stronger under her fingers, her knees giving up. Her chest protested agonizingly as she tried to inhale.

Matt shot her a terrified glare, giving Stick an opportunity to take him down, grasping him in a vice, forearm crushing his windpipe for a change. Matt was jerking violently in his arms, attempting to free himself, but he couldn’t.

Vera wanted to tell him to fight. But the pain washing over her in waves when she tried to breathe in was unbearable. When she exhaled, wishing she could let out at least a single word, she coughed out blood. Ježišmarja. She was coughing blood.

Her lung. They must have punctured her lung. She sunk to the floor completely and curled up in the ball, hoping the position would ease up her pain while breathing at least shallowly. It really didn’t. The darkness on the edges of her vision widened, her head spinning from the lack of oxygen and too much hurting. Nociceptors overload. And too much blood loss. (She remembered their first anatomy lesson, when the professor asked them how long it would take them to bleed out if they cut an artery. Before they could answer, he laughed, saying it depended on the location and type and he would learn them all of those.) She wondered which of her arteries might got damaged with the katana and how long it would take her and how big part played the fact her lung was most likely collapsing. In the back of her mind, she knew it was insane to think about it, she knew it was a distraction from the pain, but she was okay with that.

Matt collapsed. He limbed in Stick’s vice, dropping. She thought Stick beckoned to the man who stabbed her, but she couldn’t be sure. She felt her body being lifted, unable to do resist, her chest protesting painfully with the movement and for a moment, she saw dark red and blue of her t-shirt, cold from outside biting her. For a second she thought if it was some kind of a ritual the cult did. Stripping their victims? But they didn’t carry on, letting her drop again. She fell to something wet. It occurred to her it was probably her blood. Her head spun.

Her attacker stepped over her, walking to Matt’s unconscious figure. Instead of her protest and yelling, she vomited something that tasted awfully like iron. Before her eyelids lost the fight, she saw the two men pick Matt up, drag him to the window, stopping by the table on their way and disappear to the night.

She didn’t even say goodbye before the darkness embraced her, pain floating away. She didn’t even manage to think about her family in her last moments. No. Her last thought was that the universe was a fucking ironic bitch – because Matt sure didn’t need to worry, not about her anymore. Her wish came truth.

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title - Stick is a dick no.3 and this time I mean it, aka In which Vera is killed.
Just… don’t kill me, alright? And don’t tell me you didn’t see that coming (I mean, Matt sure didn’t, but he’s entitled). For once I’m really glad I live where I live, because there is no way anyone can reach me.

Also, you know. Comments are love.
How can I see the light... when the darkness is so bright? (Matt)

Chapter Notes

Please, don’t hate me...
You know what? I take that back. Hate me all you want. This was the plan. Sorry not sorry. Let’s take a walk down the memory lane, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time is relative. He had no longer clock which would tell him what time it was, so he measured it on his own. He started with his own heartbeat. After he woke up, he counted each painful contraction of the muscle, each beat stinging his chest. When he passed across two hundred thousand, he switched to minutes instead. Not that it really mattered. Then to hours. Days. He ended up counting how many heartbeats he heard falling silent around him, not distinguishing between those who were supposedly fighting alongside him and those who fought against. It was sixty seven hearts stopping ever since the one that mattered did. It stopped and there was nothing he managed to do prevent it.

Now, when he was fighting, he still refused to be the one who would kill. But standing right next to a dying man and not doing a thing about it – was it so different? Stick was furious with him for not being able to cross that line, but he needed him and he figured he rather have him, murderer or not. He refused to train with katanas, the only activity that filled their time between cleaning up the New York City - fancy term for killing people. Just the sound of air being cut by the blade made him nauseous, punch right to his gut, air knocked out of him every time he heard a sword penetrating a human body. The scent of copper and iron. Blood rushing between her fingers. Choking. Heart failing. Dried blood coarse under his fingertips, so much blood on the fabric with light tones of vanilla, coconut and coffee. God have mercy. Eventually, he stopped counting even the hearts.

He thought the only reason Stick let him go to this trip was because he hoped he would be able to become the proper soldier he wanted him to be. ‘In war, people die, and if it’s not you, it’s the guy next to you.’ He had too many opportunities to verify that. Stick was probably hoping he would finally be able to kill.

He was wrong.

I need a closure, he said to Stick. It was a blatant lie. He didn’t need a closure. And he sure didn’t want one. The wound in his chest had its edges burning, caustic, opening the hole wider with every breath. He hated Stick. He couldn’t find strength to stay in his presence longer than seconds, grateful that during fights, he didn’t have to be by his side, despite fighting alongside him. He knew that man wasn’t really human – no, he was a monster and taking lives was what monsters did. The raw fury filling the emptiness in his heart hurt so bad it was barely beating. He would never want to be like that creature – he despised him. He would never take anyone’s life, but this man, who wasn’t even a man, he didn’t deserve anything better than dying in agony so tormenting he would wish for his life to be over. Matt certainly wished for someone to free him from his own misery, drowning in the heavy feeling of guilt. He couldn’t do it by himself. His faith and people he loved – those who were still among the living – wouldn’t let him. He would cheat, just a little. But he couldn’t let anyone to kill him just yet – he had to wait until they left New York since he couldn’t foresee Stick’s reaction for him dying in the battle. It was getting closer though – they were leaving tonight. Leaving to whatever bloody crusade Stick prepared for them.
He chased away those thoughts – he wouldn’t violate the place more than it already was. He opened the broken lock on the window easily, jumping in.

Standing on the holy ground, he breathed in, suffocating as his lungs filled with familiar scent mixed with the iron smell of blood. There was mixture of other scents, too many different people walking through the apartment, but hers still stood out. He clenched his fists to stop his hands from trembling, taking a step forward.

“Nah! Don’t you dare to make a single move. Or take your shoes off.” Her playful voice reached his ears and he gulped as it would help his tightened throat to relax. He obediently squatted, untying his shoes and leaving them there. She wouldn’t want her rules to be broken. He took few shaky steps towards the counter, tracing its lines, fingers hidden in his gloves.

“Put it down, please.”

“Why?”

“Turn around.”

“Why?”

“So I could kiss you, silly.”

He gasped at the stinging feeling on the edges of his wound, the tears he was so carefully hiding from his mentor escaping his eyes. He didn’t give a shit about it, ignoring the cold streams created on his bruised cheeks. It didn’t matter. Nothing really did. If he walked here, leaving dirty imprints of his shoes on the floor, it wouldn’t matter either. He could trash every single thing in her apartment and she wouldn’t mind. The dead didn’t mind anything. It wasn’t like she would come back.

He felt the air being knocked out of him at the thought, his arm wrapping around his torso on instinct, trying to hold it together in one piece. It was too late - it was already shattered. Claire might be right, he might be a martyr… or simply a masochist. He came here not for closure – he didn’t want to leave all of this behind – he came to torture himself with the memories, because that was all he had left of her.

He moved around like an old man, making his way to the couch, passing the dining table. He couldn’t resist running his fingers alongside it too.

“Did you just try to kill me with a tea spoon?”

“Yes!”

“You threw something on a poor blind guy!”

“Houby! On a freaking blind ninja.”

“That’s what you think I am?”

...“I hate you. No, I’m serious. I hate you so much right now.”

“Come here… It’s too bad you hate me, you know. Because I can’t seem to keep my hands off you. You’re stuck with me.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

And how that turned out for her. He ran his hand through his hair, grasping them painfully. It didn’t
help – his chest was still too full and too empty, burning and freezing at the same time, each breath making his head spin. He carefully sidestepped the dried puddle of her blood, reaching the couch. He took off his gloves, throwing them in the direction of his boots. He didn’t have to be cautious after all – his fingerprints were all over this place already.

He circled the couch, sitting down heavily, another memory arising.

“And I wish I could meet him again… You know why? Because I never told him! I never told him it wasn’t his fault. And I think he still feels guilty. So if I met him again… I would say that to him. And if he didn’t agree… I have this crazy idea about his hearing being so good he can hear people’s heartbeats and he can tell when they lie and when they are being honest, so he would know I mean what I am saying. I would make him to tell me he’s sorry, once again. And I would tell him: I forgive you.”

He childishly covered his ears, shaking his head furiously, chasing it away, but her voice continued, gentle, echoing in his skull stubbornly, her heartbeat perfectly steady, indicating she was telling the truth.

No, no, no. Stop.

“I forgive you, Matt. If that’s what you need to hear, if you’re seeking forgiveness... It wasn’t your fault, but if you believe it was, then I forgive you.”

“SHUT UP!” he roared, fists slamming the table; it protested under the sudden attack.

“I forgive you, Matt.”

Desperate sound escaped his lips, choking with laughter. Yeah, well. Maybe she shouldn’t. If she hadn’t forgiven him after the kidnapping, this would never happen.

What was he even thinking, letting her in? He wasn’t thinking, that was the problem. He had gotten weak, selfish, not pushing her away and cutting any possible ties when he should. Her acceptance – that was the moment he should have walked away, he should have known it would end up like this. With her death. But god, it felt so good to have her by his side. Someone who knew him and still wanted him.

“Can you... can you really hear it?”

“It’s... It’s very important for me. The sound of your heart.”

He couldn’t hear her heartbeat anymore. He would never again, because she was dead. And he was the one to blame. His own words, the ones he told her in the gym, resounded in his head.

“I never said I am a role model... I told you that your heartbeat is a very important sound for me. I wasn’t lying. I would hate if anyone died because of me. But the idea that one day I wake up and I won’t hear your heartbeat, finding out it fell silent because of me, or for me... that’s just unimaginable. How could I live with that?”

How could he live with that? He hoped that if she was somewhere – and he had to believe she was somewhere, in a better place – she didn’t forgive him this time. He hoped that she was watching him now, pleased by his suffering, hating him. He knew deep down it was just a fool’s hope – she wasn’t that kind of a person and it made it even worse. He despised Stick, couldn’t be with him in the same room, but it was nothing compared to the hate he felt from the bottom of his heart, aimed to himself.

“You okay?”
“Yeah. Yeah… I just… I feel…”

“Happy?”

“Alive.”

He had to get the weight on his chest out, nails digging in his skin, desperately desiring to rip it away, to let it out. Punching didn’t help, not even when he was fighting to survive, screaming made his throat raw, emptiness still suffocating him the same, physical pain didn’t distract him from the ache in his heart. Nothing. It was still right there, never leaving, acid etching his insides, wrapping his mind in a poisonously sweet blanket, muffling the outside world and making it agonizingly sharp at the very same moment.

“But… the pain. Does it mean the pain is worse too?”

…“Yes. It does. You’re too smart for your own good.”

She was so smart and so stupid. If she had enough sanity, she would run away by the time she realized who he was. But no, she did the exact opposite, accepted him, loved him, risked her life for him. Died because of him. Jesus Christ, Vera.

He stood up harshly, his weary muscles and bones protesting.

He couldn’t stay here. He mustn’t because they might come for him soon, demanding his return. But mainly, he simply couldn’t. He wouldn’t stand another second in here, surrounded by her scent, her voice, almost feeling her breath tickling his neck, his hearing creating the illusion of her heartbeat, the only sound that mattered, soft tinkling of the charms he gave her, sensing the ghost of her tender touch on his skin, tasting her on his lips. It was driving him insane.

Yet, he didn’t head towards the window, the bedroom calling out for him, more memories luring him in there, inviting him to the beautiful sea of agony. Fuck everything. He could spend few more moments in his personal hell, enjoying the flames licking his soul. He deserved it.

Her scent was most intense here despite being mixed up with his. Reaching the bedside, he fell to the covers, whirling up the dust and Vera all around him. His eyes were burning, every molecule in his body was on fire and he welcomed it with his arms open, wishing for burning to death, as different memory bit off another piece of his wilting heart.

“Jesus Christ, Matt, it’s not your fault….It’s not. It’s Collins’s and Collins’s only. Tell me it’s not your fault.”

“It’s not my fault.”

He clutched the sheets, still not believing the amount of forgiveness she had for him. She was so good, so bright. And he stole the light for himself. Worse – he handled it poorly and he let it die out.

“I love you, Matt.”

“Hey! You skipped most of the story! I would get there!”

“You’re such a dork, Matt. Seriously. And I love you for that. Thank you. For telling me the story… for being here tonight.”

He might be breathing. Maybe he didn’t. He wasn’t sure, he couldn’t think, he wasn’t able to connect his mind with his body. His mind was like a broken record, repeating her words over and
over again.

“I love you, Matt.”

Her laugh, the balm to his soul. Her voice, full of love, devotion even. Jesus. He never deserved that.

“The pilgrim… the man from your story. Was there anything he wanted? Something… something the girl could do to make him truly happy?”

“What makes you think he’s not happy? …He is. … He is seeking for forgiveness. Redemption. For the wrong he did, and not just once. She can’t help him with that. … the girl, she already did a lot for him. He did find happiness with her, you know?”

… “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be. That’s why it means so much for me, you know? … I am waiting for the breaking point, for you to say that’s it, I’m out, let’s never meet again. And you’re still here.”

But she wasn’t there anymore. Before, her presence filled the empty space in his chest he forgot he had. After his dad. After Electra. After Claire. After his and Foggy’s friendship suffered from his secret. Everyone always left. She did too; it didn’t matter it wasn’t willingly. He wanted to lie here forever, her soothing words washing over him, her scent wrapping him safely. Stay here, fall asleep, her all around him and never wake up into this nightmare again.

“I love you, Matt. … You make me feel like I am everything. So if there is something that would make you feel the same way, I want to do it.”

“You do it every day.”

And his mortal sin wasn’t the hate he felt – towards Stick, towards himself. It wasn’t the desire to kill a man, nor the wish to take his own life despite knowing it was pure cowardice and it wouldn’t change a thing. It wasn’t even his failure in keeping her alive. No. His soul was pitch black because he couldn’t make himself to regret what he did, not really. He enjoyed every second of their time and if he got another chance to do things differently – never meeting her or walking away before they could fall in love – he knew, deep in his wicked heart that he wouldn’t make himself to do so. And he could never redeem himself for that.

Keys rattling in the lock. His eyes snapped open into the darkness he saw every minute of his life for a while now. He focused on the person behind the door – she was on the phone, around her fifties, heartbeat slightly elevated. Indistinctive perfume, flowery shampoo. She was vaguely familiar.

He sprung to his feet, leaning to the wall next to the door into her bedroom, merging with it.

“Sorry, where did you say it was?” the woman asked and he recognized the voice – it was Nina Larkin, Vera’s landlady. Used to be, anyway. He squeezed his eyes shut, streams of his tears never drying out. He put his mask on, just in case.

“In the oven, Nina. I know my apartment is a mess and I have some ridiculous hideouts, but it’s not that bad.“

His heart stopped, invisible hand squeezing it painfully. His mind was playing tricks on him, creating incredibly vivid illusion of her voice coming from the phone. He clenched his fists, biting his cheeks to keep inside whatever sound almost escaped him.

Why? Why was his own mind betraying him like that?
“Jesus, the stain is huge…” Mrs.Larkin cursed, as she walked in the living room. Her pulse spiked and then started racing. She stopped dead in her tracks.

Shit. The window. The boots and the gloves. Shit, shit.

“Thanks for the mental image…”

Despite the impossibility of the situation, he felt the weight from his chest being lifted slowly. He let his hope rise, knowing the fall and the landing might actually kill him this time. Oh, he would so enjoy if it did.

“Vera, I think someone is here,” the woman whispered, barely audible, heart hammering in her chest violently.

He couldn’t care less. She said her name. He wouldn’t imagine that. It wouldn’t feel so real. Right? Was…was there any chance she somehow survived? By some miracle he could never explain?

How?

Beat of silence. Then: “Nina, get out of there. Right now.”

He couldn’t let that happen. He quickly moved to the doorway, entering her field of vision. She gasped, phone sliding from her fingers. “Oh my god.”

“Nina? NINA?!” Vera demanded from the phone but the woman didn’t answer. She was frozen, watching him in awe, excitement mixing with fear.

He slowly approached her, showing his empty hands. With no gloves. What a surreal image of the so called Devil. He knew his mask was already soaked with his tears, his movements weary, his bare hands trembling, shoeless feet treading soundlessly. He wasn’t able to breathe in as his ribcage was suddenly too small for his heart, coming back to life, pumping only due to his hope.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he creaked, throat too tight to actually talk. He didn’t bother with disguising his voice. To be honest, he didn’t give a shit about his identity at this point. Only thing that mattered was her voice, speaking on the other end of the line.

“NINA! Doprdele, doprdele, DOPRDELE.”

He never loved the way she cursed in her mother tongue more in his life. She was alive. Somehow, she was still alive.

The woman didn’t move until he was a step away from her. Only then she walked backwards, hands in front of her, building a border between them. “What- what do you want?”

_I want to listen to her voice forever and drown in her heartbeat. I want to hold her in my arms, never, ever let her go, screw everything and everyone. Because I still can._ “I want to talk to her,” he whispered eventually, not giving himself away so easily.

He could tell she was absolutely taken aback by his request. She didn’t make another move though, so he slowly, trying not to startle her, reached for the phone on the floor. He could hear rustling and silent curses, coughing.

He gulped, lump in his throat growing. “Vera?” he breathed and the noise suddenly stopped. There was a deadly silence, interrupted by her harsh breaths.
“Matt?” the hesitant voice said and he had to cover his mouth with his fist to stop himself from laughing hysterically.

She was alive. And her voice, saying his name - he was convinced he wouldn’t hear it again. His imaginations didn’t make her justice - even over the phone, he could feel the soothing effects she had on his soul.

“Yeah. Yeah it’s me,” he choked out, doubting his mind ever controlled his body, because at that moment, he had zero control over the mass.

She laughed like it was the easiest thing in the world (not the easiest, she coughed through it several times, but he didn’t fucking care, coughing meant breathing and breathing meant living) and he had to laugh too, delighted at the sound which flew in his veins instead of blood, providing more life than the crimson liquid even could.

“Are…are you okay?” she asked, for some incomprehensible reason afraid. She was worrying about him. Of course she was.

“Me? Vera, Jesus Christ. I thought you were dead,” he broke on the last word, hearing her sharp intake of breath and quiet giggle.

“I have three or four guardian angels. Guess I am lucky. Like super-lucky.”

“You’re blessed.” I am blessed.

“Yeah. Sure. That too. How are you? What…what are you doing in my apartment? Did Stick let you go, or-”

His delight was instantly gone. Stick. He was still waiting for him. And with every second he spent there, the probability of his arrival – or any member of the Chaste really – increased rapidly.

“Vera… I… I got to go. I hate it and there’s nothing I would wish for more than staying here, but I can’t. He wants me and you know better than anyone he would do anything to win my loyalty. It’s a miracle you’re alive and I am not taking any chances. I don’t know if I ever come back. Just… take care, okay?” He had to strain every word through his teeth, wishing he could say the exact opposite, his body begging to run to whatever hospital she was in, but if Stick would find out she was alive, he would be more than happy to finish his job even if Matt promised him to come with him. He couldn’t allow him to do that.

“Matt-“ she sounded anxious, but that was alright. He could want her to miss him, maybe even try to convince him to stay. He could afford his heart to be warmed for the last time. “Matt, please. There has to be another way, the Avengers-“

“There is none.” It didn’t matter the woman who observed him gaping silently would hear him. He wasn’t coming back, he knew it - the only way of leaving the Chaste was death. He needed to say it. “I love you, Vera. So much. Remember that.”

“Matt-“ she cried now and his black soul shivered in pleasure at her grief and he was so, so mean for feeling this way. He had to fix it at least a little.

“Remember that and take care of my heart. I’m leaving it here with you. But it’s okay to move on.” Please don’t move on. Or at least take your time.

“Miluji tě,” she whispered, voice breaking and his lips formed a smile, an honest one, probably the last one for a very long time.
“Taky tě miluji,” he breathed back, “goodbye.” He ended the call, tossing the phone on the couch, facing the woman. “Thank you.”

He grabbed his shoes and gloves, not bothering to put them on until he was several rooftops over. He left his heart on the fire escape for Vera to pick it up as he promised. He left there everything – except the memories he would cherish for the rest of his (probably) short miserable excuse for life.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re confused, it’s alright. We jumped in time a little, because I enjoy torturing people (I mean, where the fun would be if you knew she did survive in the beginning of the chapter, huh?), but we’ll come back. I’ll explain everything in the next chapter(s). Cross my heart.

There’s an upside, right? She’s alive?

Chapter title from Rhodes - Better
AKA the P word (Terri)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was supposed to be a good evening. They had plans for god’s sake. Victor took a day off, or rather a night off, they bought wine and cheese and put on The Untouchables, snuggling on a couch with an unspoken promise of the night turning out wild. It quickly did – they didn’t make it half through the movie (but hey, it was a long movie, okay) before Vic was hovering over her, bordering her head with his freaking muscular arms, watching her with what only could be lust, embolden by alcohol. They never got to a single kiss. Sudden dark in front of her eyes and sting in her chest made her gasp, hands shooting to the source of her pain blindly.

Her vision slightly cleared, revealing Matt Murdock with his mouth open in a mute scream of terror, horrified unfocused eyes glaring right into hers, making his way to her. He didn’t get far before someone grabbed him from behind; he made an incredible spin, kicking an old man in his face, falling to the ground in the process. Darkness danced on the edges of her vision again as her gaze slowly lowered, revealing something very sharp and very bloody sticking from her chest, her hands instinctively reaching for it, immediately colouring in crimson. When she looked up again, she saw Matt fighting – fighting like a freaking ninja, yet somehow weary, not being superior to the old-timer, turning his head to her every possible moment. The sting burnt more intense for few seconds and she fell to her knees, perspective changing. Matt was losing, letting his opponent clasp him in a bizarre vice, jerking violently with no effect. She tried to breathe in but she gaged, coughing, her chest squeezed in agony. She fell to her side, seeing Matt gradually limping, his attempts weakening with each try. Then it stopped completely. One beckoning from the older man and her body uselessly gasping for air was lifted, blue and crimson appearing in front of her eyes, cold biting her skin and she was lying again. Blurry figures raised their pray and headed to the window, leaving her behind.

“TERRI!” loud yell reached her ears and she gasped for air once more, pleasantly surprised she actually breathed in. She wasn’t lying – she was sitting, bended forward, hand supporting her chest from the front, another gently placed on her back. She blinked furiously, realizing she was in her apartment. They had a date with Victor. Wine, cheese and movie.

What the hell?!

“Terri, can you hear me?” the voice demanded and she snapped her head to him, greeted by anxious expression. She took another breath in. What the hell just happened? And why there was a cold hand clenching her heart painfully, fear suffocating her from inside like a residue form her- what, a nightmare? No, it couldn’t be. She fucking didn’t fell asleep. A shiver ran down her spine. It wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t just a feeling or a hunch like she sometimes had – lately escalating into something else. It was a fucking vision. And what she saw was an image of horror.

She jerked to her feet, surprised by the world spinning around her wildly – strong arms caught her before she met the floor. She turned to face her saviour. “We gotta go,” she blurted out, already freeing herself from his embrace, heading to her door, not giving a shit about her outfit, grabbing her handbag on the way.

It looked like Vera’s apartment, right? The walls, the couch? And the simple fact Murdock was there, no matter what crazy shit was he doing, could only mean she was right.

Firm grip on her forearm stopped her search for the right shoes for running. “Terri, what the hell are you doing? Where are you going?” Vic demanded, startled, probably still taken aback by whatever
was happening to her earlier. *Yeah, tell me about it. I did not see that coming.*

She had no time to explain. “I need to get to Vera’s apartment. Fast.”

He let her hand go, convinced by her hysterical voice. “Alright, alright. I’ll take you there. Just calm down.”

“I fucking can’t!” she snapped at him and finally found her shoes, putting them on harshly.

Victor, bless him, didn’t hesitate to take his car keys and wallet, following her example, running after her as she fled out of the door, taking two steps at time. Fuck, fuck, fuck. What did that even meant? Was it something what was about to happen? Something what was happening now? Or the worst possibility – something that already happened? She appeared on the street, slightly disoriented, looking for the right car.

“This way, Ter.” He pulled her the right direction and she obeyed, grateful he didn’t ask any questions. Not until they reached the car. “You know the road? Or give me the address-“

“I can navigate,” she whispered, feeling weak in her knees, throat tight, the picture of bloody hands enclosing a freaking sword swimming in her mind. *Breathe, Theresa. Breathe. You’re no help if you pass out.* Should she call an ambulance? She couldn’t give them anything – breathing, conscious? Bleeding? Absolutely fine at the moment? *Shit.*

She didn’t call. She was giving instructions to Vic, pretending she didn’t notice his worried glares. He was an incredible human being. Anyone else would tell her to go screw herself or at least made her to sit tight, breathe and drink a glass of water. Not him. But to be fair, she once did call him like ten minutes after he got a glass bottle shattered against his shoulder to ask about his well-being – he needed several stitches back then.

He understood she got a feeling of something bad, he didn’t question her and drove her to her desired location. Drunk. Once this would be over, she would kiss him senseless.

She jumped out of the car, running to the apartment building, pressing to Vera’s bell. Once, twice. She tried for the third time and changed her tactics – she rung The Larkins instead. By the time a voice came from the speaker, Vic was behind her, car parked.

“Who is this?” a sleepy, but thank god positively female voice asked.

“Hey, Nina. It’s Terri. Vera’s friend. Rememb-“ The buzzing opened the door for her before she could even finish. That woman was a treasure. Victor followed her as she sprinted to the first floor, raising her hand to knock on Nina’s door. She was faster, already standing at her doorstep. She was wearing a hoodie and pants that was definitely a pyjama. She squinted at Terri, her eyes going wide as she saw her companion.

“Is he a cop?” she asked in panic, already turning around and reaching for some keys – to Vera’s apartment, most likely. “Please tell me he’s not a cop and you’re not going to Vera’s apartment because she disappeared again.”

“Hey, Nina. He’s not. I’m really sorry. Actually I got a very, very weird phone call and…” she was making this up as she went and had no idea what to say next. She could feel Vic’s gaze burning through her – he knew there was no phone call. But what else was she supposed to say?

Nina slipped to her scuffs and walked with them. Terri was almost jumping as she wanted to run again. “I swear if there’s another blood on the wall…” she muttered under her breath and Terri felt dizziness wrapping her mind like a blanket, the picture haunting her. She didn’t think there was
blood on a wall. But it might be on the floor.

Nina locked out the door and Terri stumbled in. The small lights were on. Was it a good sign or a bad sign? They were on when she saw what she saw. She passed to the living room, stopping dead in her tracks, breath knocked out of her chest.

Vera was there. Lying on the floor, curled in a loose ball, no top on. In a fucking puddle of blood. And she wasn’t moving. At all. Terri gasped, reaching out to steady herself onto something, but there was nothing to hold on.

It was too late. She had the privilege to watch her best friend getting murdered, unable to do anything about it. She couldn’t breathe- and she fucking didn’t care.

“Jesus Christ.” It wasn’t Terri’s voice, but she was glad someone said that out loud.

“Ter, call an ambulance,” Victor ordered, appearing in her field of vision which was focused on the body on the floor. Why? What was the point? She was too slow. He rolled the body over on its back, bending her head backwards, ear on her mouth. Checking for breathing?

“Theresa!” he hissed and she obediently reached for her phone, dialling 911, watching the horror scene in front of her.

Nina joined Victor, pressing against Vera’s wound – well, one side of it. Only against one end of the hole in her torso. Terri felt the wave of nausea rising in her stomach.

“What’s your emergency?” the polite voice asked and Terri wanted to scream. My friend is dead, that’s what! Victor said something to Nina and started pressing Vera’s chest. Terri squeezed her eyes shut – vainly. The picture was burned to her retina.

“My… Theresa Gratton speaking. My friend, she’s- she’s been stabbed or something, in her chest. She’s not… she's out and not-” Terri observed her boyfriend breathing to her best friend’s mouth, bloody handkerchief in his palm as he had wiped the blood from her lips, then returning to the periodical compressions. -not breathing. Bleeding a lot.”

The woman probably tried to comfort her, but Terri couldn’t understand a word she was saying, tears appearing in her eyes. Was it just her, or was the puddle growing with each compression? She mumbled the address dully, not sure the woman asked her to.

“Can you hear me? We already sent an ambulance. Is there someone else with you? Tell me if you’re trying to help her somehow, please.”

Terri did as the controller demanded and after few minutes that felt like eternity ran down the stairs, opening the door for the paramedics. The world became a blur, illuminated in orange and red lights, flickering, humming of shouting and sirens, chaos of arms and legs. She didn’t register how she got to the hospital, but she was there, sitting on a squeaky chair, Nina at her side, Victor at the other. She leaned to his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her, stroking her arms comfortably. Terri didn’t look at him. She watched the floor, people crossing it – slowly or in hurried pace, limping or riding in a wheelchair. It was a like a symphony of steps and squeaks.

Until one shoes stopped in front of her, surprised gasp sounding above her. She lifted her eyes with effort, feeling it was one of the hardest tasks in her life.

“Terri?” a woman addressed her and she blinked, focusing on the face. She knew her. They met before. And it was bloody too. Jesus, so much blood.
“Claire?” she breathed out weakly, not having the will to speak out loud. Or having strength to be surprised. She shouldn’t be. Claire was a nurse after all.

“What are you doing here? What happened? Who are you waiting for?” she asked her kindly and Terri met the reality. So far muffled noise of hospital hit her ears, the unmistakable smell, the sharp lights, the chaos. A sob escaped her lips instead of an answer and she buried her face to Victor’s chest. *Wanna know what happened? Someone fucking run a sword through my best friend’s chest. Christina.*

“We’re waiting for Veronica Machackova. Any news on her?” It was Nina who spoke up. Terri sobbed again. Why the hell *did* she see her and why didn’t she see her *earlier*? If she was a fucking *psychic* or whatever, her abilities *sucked*.

“Vera? Uhm… when did they brought her in? What was her injury? I can find out what her status is…”

“They brought her in about an hour ago. I think she went straight to surgery-“

“Holy shit, that was *Vera* they brought in?” Claire asked incredulously and then Terri couldn’t hear her anymore and she didn’t care.

What did she even see? Who was the old dude who somehow overpowered Murdock and what the fuck was that flip-kicking thing he did anyway? Was he secretly ninja or what? The moves were like from a freaking action mov- Terri snapped her eyes open as the realization struck her.

*You gotta be fucking kidding me.*

She would brush that ridiculous, bizarre thought aside if it wasn’t making perfect sense and every cell in her body wasn’t screaming at her that she was right. And oh my god, she was *such an idiot*. It was clear as day. Clearer even.

Terri couldn’t believe herself. How could she not notice? Sometimes she just *knew* things only by looking at someone. Like when she met Vera for the first time and she knew she was going to be best friends with her. Examined her for few seconds and recognized the weird after-break-up state she was in. Or when she was on a first date with Victor and was sure of him becoming an important part of her life. She worked in a café for so long, saw so many faces, so many moods, so many strange and stereotypical characters. She learned how to read people. And she was getting these *hunches* lately.

But no. She couldn’t realize Vera having a boyfriend while Terri was joking about her *other boyfriend*, the *freaking Devil of Hell’s Kitchen* having a crush on her, was too much of a coincidence. And that she had feelings for him as well. Or that she fell in love with Murdock so fast. Of *fucking* course. They were the same person. How the hell she didn’t notice? There were so many clues!

For one, Murdock was sometimes coming in with a split lip, a shadow of a bruise on his faice, sometimes even crouching and that was long before Vera showed up. That was one thing. But to be fair, he was *blind*, so he was entitled to walk into something from time to time. (And about the blindness, Terri was sure. Call it a *hunch*.)

Then there was the whole getting together with Vera thing. Vera met Matt for the first time in a café and he was leaving with a smile. Terri could only imagine whether he was smiling the same way when her brilliant friend tossed him a midnight snack while he was wearing a mask. A black mask
covering his eyes, for god’s sake. Stupid didn’t cover Terri’s state of mind. He couldn’t be more obvious. Then Vera met Matt in Fogwell’s, where he was coming after everyone got out. Sure. It would be hard to explain what he could do. Jesus. And then he saved her – or she saved him…? – during the robbery and few days after, she got kidnapped. And maybe there was a reason why Terri went to Matt Murdock at the time, she just didn’t realize it. And oh my god, she actually said to the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen Vera disappeared – judging by his expression, he hadn’t known until then. He saved her. Terri wondered whether she played at least a small role in Vera’s rescue. And whether the balloon in Vera’s hospital room – the one she claimed she didn’t know where came from – was from him. The great love story begun.

Then there was the transfusion thing. God, Terri was exhausted that night. And it fucking made so much more sense now – the fact Vera ran to save him, the fact he was so obviously into her, and Claire - Jesus, Claire knew – wanted them to talk, because she knew they were dating, because she knew Matt Murdock aka Mike was dating Vera. Guilt and hero complex. Be certain, Vera would totally fall for that guy. And she told Terri she loved Matt and of course she did – she had an undeniable crush on the vigilante and she was on a date (and holy shit, she probably already knew when she went out with him and that was the thing she was keeping from Terri!) with Matt, she practically had hots for two people and while having them for one.

And then of course, the rescue mission with the Avengers. Vera was freaking out for the Devil, because her actual boyfriend was missing and she had his fucking mask around her neck when she walked into the Avengers tower determined to do whatever it would take to help him. Terri would slap herself for not realizing it. Matt was on the photo Vera sent her and the Devil wasn’t and Vera told her he was injured, lying in a different room and Terri was so distracted by the fact Vera took a selfie with the Avengers that she bought what she was selling and she ignored that she would swear she saw Matt wearing a black outfit on the photo for few seconds before she blinked and he was wearing a shirt as usual. Her psychic subconscious had been yelling at her for god knows how long – she graciously ignored it; even when he found her in the alley, asking her to spy on the freaky group of so called Devil Worshippers. He trusted her, not just because she helped the Devil before, not because she was a friend of a girl he was crushing at, but because he met her in her everyday life, went for double date with her, for god’s sake, and he knew his girlfriend trusted her as well.

Apparently not enough to tell her she was in fact dating a blind ninja though. Jesus.

She fought the urge to slam her head against a wall. Dumb, dumb, dumb. She was so having a very long conversation with Vera about her life choices and self-preservation. And about the fact that a blind guy was ninjaing around. And they would, because Vera was going to be alright.

Terri snuggled closer to Victor, tears rolling down her face and soaking his t-shirt, accepting the comfort he was offering. God knew she needed a lot of comfort right now.

Claire didn’t come back. But a doctor did – Terri had no idea how much time passed before he did. She vaguely remembered Nina bringing her and Victor coffee at some point. It tasted like crap.

“You’re here for Veronica Machackova? Which one of you is Nina Larkin?” he eyed them suspiciously as Terri sat up straight and he settled at the most likely option – Nina herself. “You’re her emergency contact. I can provide you information, but no one else.”

Terri shot him a murderous look. “Look, doc-“ Nina’s hand on her forearm stopped her before she could chew him. Fucking idiot. Fucking-

“It’s alright. They were both with me, trying to keep her alive. She’s her best friend. Please. How is she?” Nina sounded calm, but her voice betrayed her and broke. She fixed it immediately.
The doctor sighed. Don’t say it, don’t say it. “She was lucky—“ Terri released the breath she didn’t realize she was holding, her world spinning. “Arriving few minutes later, she wouldn’t make it. She’s stable for now…”

Terri didn’t listen further, even though the doc was talking and talking, sounding serious. She collapsed in Vic’s arms, crying all over again, swallowing the giggles that were bubbling in her chest. Or was it sobs? Who cared. She sure didn’t.

Apparently, they weren’t allowed see her. Terri didn’t give a shit. She knew her best friend was still living and that was enough for the moment. Vic drove Nina home and they headed back to Terri’s apartment. They didn’t talk much. They both needed time to process. But as they were falling asleep, he whispered doctor’s words to her ear – uselessly, because they were already echoing in her head dully.

“Arriving few minutes later, she wouldn’t make it, Ter. You saved her life, you know that, right?”

He didn’t question how she did it. He didn’t run away, screaming, neither he was afraid to touch her or disgusted. God, she loved him.

Her lips involuntarily formed an approximation of a smile. “So did you.” She rolled over in his embrace, kissing him gratefully on his lips. “Thank you. For everything. I love you.”

He kissed her back, smiling slightly by himself. “I love you too. Good night.”

“Night.”

Chapter End Notes

Maybe this chapter should be called AKA the F word, considering how often is in there.
Morning was…surreal. Terri woke up without her alarm, sleepily reaching for her phone, only to find out it was nine a.m. Vic was lightly snoring behind her, making her roll her eyes. She tried to remember last night, how the movie ended, but the last thing she could recall was the party of the older man. What was next?

Terri shot up, sitting up hastily, gasping. There was no next. Because after that, Vic hovered above her, made out with her and then she had a fucking vision of her best friend being murdered.

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

“Ter?” sleepy voice addressed her and she looked at her boyfriend in horror, as if he could prove her wrong, tell her she was crazy and it was all in her head, because she had too much wine. Her head did hurt, after all. He squinted at her, sitting up as well, stroking her arm. “You okay?”

Terri had no idea. She was pretty sure she did not make up last night’s events. Vic did drive her to Vera’s place, they did ring Nina, they did find Vera’s body- Vera on the floor and Vic did give her freaking CPR, Nina pressing against her stab wound, while Terri was calling an ambulance. Terri felt tears in her eyes at the memory and Vic sighed sympathetically, wrapping his arms around her.

“Hey, you’re okay. Vera’s stable. You saved her, come on, Ter,” he whispered to her ear, cradling her periodically and she found herself sobbing, the picture of Vera’s unmoving figure lying in the puddle of blood carved into her brain.

Jesus Christ.

They stayed like this for a while, time flying and dragging, he comforting her, her crying until she had no tears left. She inhaled shakily for a millionth time, withdrawing, this time determined to get it together.

“Thanks, Vic. For everything,” she mumbled, pecking his cheeks and he ruffled her already messy hair affectively.

“Anytime, Terrinator.”

“Oh god, not this one,” she whined, secretly pleased by his very own nickname for her (he knew she loved it, no matter how much she pretended to hate it). The corners of her lips twitched involuntarily. Her brain was finally rebooting, going over the events of last night rationally. What Vic did… what he didn’t do. He would deserve an explanation of what happened, at least of what happened to her, but the problem was she didn’t have any. She had no fucking idea how she saw what she saw. How she ever knew something. She sighed. “I’m more like a Kyle Reeves if anything.”

His eyebrow shot up. “Are you saying you’re from the future? That would make so much sense…” he murmured, tone light, playing with her braid as if he wasn’t really concerned about the fact she was obviously a psychic of whatever.
Terri blinked, observing his face, looking for any signs of freak out. She found none. She smiled at him unsurely.

“Don’t you… don’t you wanna know how I knew I had to head to Vera’s flat ASAP?”

He shrugged. “Do you wanna tell me?... Do you even know?” he added, one corner of his lips up.

Oh man, she loved him.

“I… don’t actually. As in I don’t know. Sometimes things just… appear in my mind. Never like this though…” she admitted, gaze lowering, unable to keep the eye contact. How was he so okay with that? Hell, she wasn’t okay with that.

“Well, whatever it is, we should be grateful,” he noted, pulling her in his embrace again. Bear hug. His arms were huge and he was giving her a bear hug, only slightly different from the previous one – he wasn’t protecting her from outside world this time; he was just giving her support, as well as space if she wanted to talk about it further.

She hummed, pleasant feeling at his affection, discomfited at the same time. She sighed again. “I… I had a hunch you weren’t okay, you know? When you got hurt with the bottle. But this… it was like I was her, Vic. I felt the sword sliding through my body and it was-” she shivered at the words and felt his body going rigid.

He was silent for a while, processing, before he relaxed a little.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” She chuckled humourlessly. “Anybody’s fault really.”

Vic just hummed, lost in his own thoughts, his grip around her tightening. Terri was well-aware she should call Nina to find out if there were any news; the thing was she might not want to know in case they were bad news. Maybe she should call Mrs.Walker – if Vera had a shift today (and Terri suddenly couldn’t recall, despite the fact she usually watched the schedule so she could be prepared for Olivia or look forward several hours with Vera), Terri should let Mrs.Walker know she definitely wouldn’t make it. Hell, she should probably try Murdock’s number, or Dick’s for that matter (because Vera was dating the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, who was a fucking lawyer by day, vigilante by night, and he was also blind), but she didn’t really believe he would pick up since some crazy old ninja with another ninja, who almost killed her best friend, dragged his unconscious body god knew where. Jesus, this was such a mess.

“We should agree on what we tell the police,” Vic’s voice snapped her from her thoughts and she jumped at the sudden sound. Then she processed the words he said.

“We should do what?” she blurted out, freeing herself from his embrace – he let her, eyeing her with concern.

“Well, unless you want to explain them you had a vision of Vera being in danger, we should probably come up with some cover story, match our statements…” he offered cautiously, eyes big and worried.

Fuck, he was right. It didn’t occur to her that they would question them. Hell, they might already question Nina and they could come knocking (or calling) any second.

“Alright… any suggestions?”
Terri came to conclusion that Vic was the best boyfriend in the whole world. On the other hand, dating Matt Murdock, aka the vigilante, utterly sucked. Not that he wasn’t a great guy, don’t get her wrong – he had this whole charming-blind-man-who-made-it-through-law-school-opening-his-own-practise-and-taking-down-Wilson-Fisk-with-his-best-friend thing going on, he could be funny and dorky apart from being hot (and god, that ass), but actually being his girlfriend put any poor woman though too much trouble. Just thinking about the lies among like million other things. Vera had to constantly lie or at least be very careful about what she told people. It would drive Terri crazy.

Terri managed to find a lame excuse she could tell the officer who would ask her questions – ever since Vera’s kidnapping, they had an arrangement with Vera, who would always let Terri know she got home save, because she was a fucking trouble magnet. Technically, it wasn’t a lie. She might even add that the times she was with her boyfriend were an exception from that rule, but Terri wasn’t aware if Vera was meeting Matt that night, so she naturally worried when she didn’t call her. Vic liked her story, because despite the fact they told Nina Terri got a weird phone call, there was no way they could convince the officers – there was a thick chance they might went through Vera’s phone and they would found nada about Vera calling Terri. The reason why she didn’t tell that to Nina was simple – she was ashamed and it was much quicker than explaining the whole call-me-when-you-get-home thing. So yeah, they hoped that would work.

Slightly calmer, Terri wanted to in fact call Nina, only to realize she didn’t have her number. A visit would have to do. Before she could make herself at least presentable, her phone ringed; the police found her number in Vera’s phone (aha!) and they would like her to give a statement as well as from the man who accompanied her last night. Nina was indeed already interrogated.

Truth to be told, Terri could imagine hundreds of more pleasant ways of spending Sunday afternoon than in a police station (including working in MDDC; she did call Mrs.Walker, but to excuse herself – and Vera for undefined time from now – from her shift, only to find out that the café was kinda flooded since yesterday and servicemen were still taking care of it, which…huh). When she entered the station, her knees were shaking inconspicuously; it wasn’t just a stage fright, she was also worried about meeting Nina, worried she might hear bad news. She didn’t. Nina told her she was heading to the hospital to check on Vera and that she would call her. Terri sent a quick prayer to the man upstairs she didn’t quite believe in (even though given her psychicing, she should reconsider) and gave Nina a nod, unable to say a word.

Vic squeezed her hand reassuringly and their paths soon divided, each of them being taken by another cop. Vic got some old fella (there was no better way of describing him) and Terri got herself a black officer, who looked nice enough and actually a little familiar. Terri didn’t want to think what the fact she could tell some cop looked familiar told about her. She convinced herself that it was totally Vera’s fault (and it actually was). The man introduced himself as Sergeant Brett Mahoney and Terri was quite sure that name rang a bell.

Mahoney was nice. He didn’t press, accepted her story about the calls with Vera (and it turned out he was something like Vera’s pet cop, humming in agreement when Terri suggested Vera was pretty much a disaster, revealing he did investigate the bank robbery and kidnapping), let her cry when she was talking about finding her best friend practically dead (offering her a box of tissues, the cutie pie he was), listening to her attentively the whole time, curious but kind eyes. Terri hoped Victor’s interrogator was at least half as nice as hers. Of course, he asked why they told Nina about a non-existent phone call; it was good they thought of that. The question about Murdock was harder – Terri had no idea what to say when the sergeant asked whether she heard about him lately, because they couldn’t reach him. Well, of course they couldn’t,
he was fucking taken or some shit.

“No. I mean…” Stick with the truth, Theresa. “I saw him few days ago, he picked up Vera from the café,” she admitted, hoping that it wouldn’t put him in the spotlight. Because dammit, he was a vigilante, she would not want to cause more problems to him than he already had. The police on his tail was the last thing he needed. Terri wasn’t happy about finding out – Murdock lied to her, Murdock lied to her, she had a lot of questions, much less trust in the man, but hell if she would act like a bitch. Being angry with him wasn’t easy – he did save lives, he needed to keep his identity secret and while Vera getting hurt might be his fault, he did try to protect her and blaming him for dating Vera in the first place? It wasn’t like he forced her to do anything; Vera was head over heels for him, that was undeniable. Being angry with Vera was even more difficult, because while she kept secrets from Terri, it wasn’t like it was her secret to tell – not mentioning the fact she was now lying in a hospital fighting for her life.

“Were they fighting?” Mahoney pried and Terri was… lost. He did seem a little tense and clingy, saying goodbye to Vera for too long – he didn’t only pick her up, he also walked her to work as if he was… following her around? And Vera was stressed. Did they know about the possible threat? Was Matt trying to keep an eye on her (and fuck, poor choice of words, we are so having a conversation, Machackova)? Terri wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

She had no idea what to say. Vera didn’t mention anything to her, obviously, so she went for negative answer. “Not that I know of. I mean… maybe? She was a little touchy lately, but that could be anything. It was her birthday a week ago. It’s a sore subject, she wouldn’t tell why, but I think it’s because she doesn’t like the fact she’s in a half of her stay in US. For now, anyway.”

Honestly, the reason only occurred to Terri now as she was thinking about it. Huh. No wonder Vera didn’t want any gifts. She must have hated the date.

The cop made a surprised face, letting out an intelligent oh. Terri considered why he asked and the realization made her eyes popped. “You thought he- uhm. You think Matt did this? No,” she spitted out, disgusted. He might have a dubious hobbies, but he wouldn’t hurt Vera (she thought that would be obvious even before). Not directly anyway. Whether she got hurt because of him, that was to reconsider though, because… well, ninjas.

Honest to god, Mahoney rolled his eyes. Terri liked the cop more with each second. “I don’t think he did. Just asking. Plus, we have to accept the fact that Murdock might have some enemies-“ You have no idea. “-who might be connected to Fisk. For all we know, she might be targeted because of him. Or because of the trial, it might draw attention to her.”

And huh. Terri hadn’t thought of that. Probably had something to do with the fact she knew Vera was… hurt by a fucking katana.

The cop sighed. “Anyway, thanks for the statement. We’ll let Mrs.Larkin know how the investigation goes, I guess you can always ask her…”

Terri stood up, relief washing over her. Thank god, no more question. She had enough questions on her own, she did not need another food for thought. Fisk. Unbelievable. No, worse, quite believable for anyone who didn’t see what she saw. Terri wasn’t quite sure if she wanted to know how the investigation would progress to be honest. She hoped Matt didn’t bleed over too much, because that might be a problem. On the other hand, it wasn’t like Matt didn’t occupy Vera’s often enough. Hell, he probably did it much more frequently Terri thought until now.

Foggy Nelson, who might and might not had a vague idea of what happened, was at the precinct when she walked out of the interrogation room. He looked taken aback by anything and everything,
somewhat pale. Foggy Nelson. Matt’s best friend and partner in law… partner in crime as well? Did he know about his friend running around in tight black outfit? What was he doing here? Did they call him because they couldn’t reach Murdock? Was Vera’s boyfriend so important to them?

If Terri wanted answers for those questions, she had to wait there for him. And she would.

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Terri waited outside alone - Victor, who gentlemanly held her hand as they sat on the bench, comparing their stories, watching the entrance so they wouldn’t miss Foggy, had to leave to get ready to work. She checked her phone to kill the time – finding a missed call.

Unknown number called Terri while she was still with Mahoney, so she called back – it was Nina. Vera was in induced sleep, artificial ventilation, visits still not permitted. Terri sank to the bench, regretting she didn’t make Victor stay with her a little longer, because she wanted to crumble to his arms just like in the morning, crying in both, fear and relief. She settled to crying on her own, occasional smile creeping on her lips as she decided she loved her psychic superpowers. Even though she didn’t know what the outlook for her friend was, she was at least alive – which she probably wouldn’t if Terri saw jack shit, so there was that.

Foggy spent only minutes in, soon walking out, phone on his ear. Truth to be told, he looked even more baffled than before, eyes somewhat haunted. Terri quickly made her way to him and he seemed to panic.

This time Terri was glad Victor was no longer by her side – she would tell him everything, once she had it sorted out, she would not let Murdock’s secret to build a wall between them, but dammit she needed to know stuff first.

Not that she had plan how to do this. She panicked as well, but she didn’t let the fear paralyse her. She needed answers. And she needed them now.

“Foggy,” she greeted him, unsure about her own expression – it was probably a mixture of curiosity, desperation and resolution (don’t you dare to flee you cute son of a bitch). He shoved the phone to his pocket, sighing, continuing his way as Terri walked with him.

“Hey, Terri,” he mumbled absently.

“Foggy. How are things-“ Terri wanted to start a casual conversation at first. He rudely interrupted her.

“I’m really sorry about what happened, but if you’ll excuse me, I need to reach my associate, so-“ he gave her a very unconvincing smile, pacing away.

Terri’s shoulders fell as she watched his back leaving. Like hell he would just walk out on her. She huffed and ran after him, pissed off. No, no, Nelson, no escaping. She was sure now, he definitely knew about Matt’s double life and he was freaked out – he might find out about the police’s incapability to contact his friend and now he was scared for him.

Perhaps he wasn’t the only one who could share some info.

“You mean the one who likes to run around in black outfit, his face covered, so people wouldn’t figure out he’s a blind lawyer?” she hissed once she got close enough and he stopped dead in his tracks, looking at her in horror.

Yeah, that’s right, buddy. I know. Surprise.
Then, as if she snapped her fingers, Foggy’s expression cleared and he put on a poker face. A bad one. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Now, if you’re done-“

“The old man took him,” she blurted out, attempting to stop him when he spun on his heels to disappear. He didn’t take a single step, freezing. He slowly turned back to her.

“How the hell do you know about Stick?” he asked incredulously, eyes wide, jaw slightly dropped. His words echoed in her head as if they were trapped. About what now?

“Stick?” she parroted intelligently, wondering if they were on the same page. The old guy. Stick?

Nelson blinked, getting more confused with each second. Then he raised his hands in defence. “Alright. Alright. I think we need to talk.”

Terri raised an eyebrow, sweet taste of victory on her tongue as she agreed. “Damn straight we do.”

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Matt Murdock left for university. Universities, actually. Some dean noticed the success of Nelson and Murdock and he wanted Matt to prepare a lecture for his faculty about the Fisk case and he might have mention it few of his colleagues, who loved the idea of a blind man lecturing and they wanted him to talk about studying college with disability in their class as well. The word got around and Matt Murdock suddenly got himself into something that would allow him (read made him) travel around US, being a guest to several unis in very near time rate.

It was the lamest excuse Terri ever heard, but she admired Foggy Nelson for coming up with it anyway. Because the truth was that Matthew Michael Murdock, the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, was forced to leave with his blind ninja master, joining some kind of a freaky crusade. Terri decided his life was a fucking comic book. An insane one.

It turned out Foggy actually not only knew about Matt’s late night activities (and judging by his expression, he wasn’t very happy about it, go friendship!), but he knew Matt had an encounter with the old man, because Matt called him afterwards. A goodbye call, only to ask Foggy whether he could think of some excuse for him to leave the city for an undefined amount of time, himself not having any time in the world to take care of things.

“I’ve nev’r heard him talk ‘ke that, y’ know.” Foggy whimpered, caressing a glass of scotch. Yes, glass of scotch, in the middle of Sunday afternoon. At Josie’s bar. Terri learned a lot of things that day. “He sound’d so… dead.”

Something dangerously resembling a sob escaped his lips.

“Well, his girlfriend was almost killed in front of his eyes – you know what I mean – so I can’t really blame him,” she blurted out, shocked by the fact the word killed actually left her mouth. She didn’t think she was able to do it. It was as if she was slowly coming to terms with what happened. Very slowly. But she was.

The more Terri thought about it, the more she was realizing Matt might actually think Vera was dead. If the vision was precise (and hell if she knew, it wasn’t like she got a manual for that thing), he was out cold by the time they dragged him away and Terri with the squad arrived after that. And Terri herself thought Vera was beyond saving when they found her. Huh. That kinda sucked. Especially if Matt couldn’t pick up his phone, so there was no way he could find out the truth. He
believed Vera died. *Fuck*. She felt sorry for him. What happened was probably his fault, but he didn’t deserve that kind of torture; him leaving was punishment on its own.

Foggy turned the glass bottom up, shaking away the bitter taste of alcohol. “How d’ you ‘ven know that?”

The conversation with Foggy was…difficult. She had to tell him Vera didn’t tell her and that she actually figured it out last night, repeating the story about phone-no-phone-call. Foggy chuckled at that humourlessly, telling her Vera and Matt had an arrangement about reporting safe home arrivals too. Which, *whoa, way to go, Machackova…* Was that how Vera knew about Matt going missing before the Avengers thing? Making up the story about S.O.S. call? Was it actually truth somehow? Dammit, she wanted to talk with her best friend. This was incredibly frustrating.

Terri shook off her thoughts, remembering what they were talking about. Yeaaah. She was not about to tell him about how she knew that. “Not important.”

Foggy hummed in agreement. He was already kinda smashed, so that helped – he talked a lot and asked much less; Terri wasn’t sure what exactly *the world of fire* meant (for her, it was only a song), but she understood Matt Murdock gained something like superpowers when he got blinded. And some blind old dude, apparently named *Stick* – the one who took him now – trained him when he was a kid. Then the story got lost in Foggy’s incomprehensible angry mumbling, him insisting he should have fucking become a butcher like his mum wanted him to, because it would spare him so much *Murdock trouble, and screw self-righteous vigilantes*, so she gave up. She was glad she got *something*. The rest she could consult with Vera later.

“I guess, s’ not. So…y’ know. That’s the c’ver story. Might wanna… tell t’t to Vera, when she’s ‘wake. I think Matt knew ’bout the lectures for…pfff… not e’n a week? ’ppened fast…” he was making up and Terri nodded to let him know she wrote it down mentally. He probably didn’t register that; she took a moment to appreciate how stubbornly he protected his friend despite being less than disapproving of his hobbies *and* being on a serious bender – he was awfully bright, considering the amount of alcohol he drank.

“Yeah, that’s about right. That’s when she started looking worried more than usual. We can blame it on it,” she noted, almost delighted at the fact something was clicking into place for once.

Foggy looked at her with something that might be surprise, but somehow dulled. In the end, he seemed unimpressed. He beckoned to *Josie* to get him another drink. “Not s’re I’m gon’ use the word *right* ‘ny time soon.”

Terri eyed the pale sad bundle of nerves in front of her, ordering a drink for herself as well. She could use liquid courage to deal with all this. She clanked her glass of whiskey (she was a wine drinker, but this was a situation that deserved an exception) with Foggy’s, sighing.

“Amen to that.”
Well, that was intermezzo no.5...

The title inspired by a lovely song from The Lion King. I dig Peter Hollens version (sorry not sorry). It’s the circle of liiiies, and it moves us aaaaaall…

Uhm. I figured at least one more “intermezzo” chapter would be appropriate. Vera is a little bit unconscious, so… yeah. Also, thank you for the comments ♥
New day has come (Terri)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Claire knew about the Devil as well. It wasn’t exactly surprising, Terri came to that conclusion by herself, but the fact it was Foggy who broke the ‘news’ to Terri took her by surprise – he gave her Claire’s and his number in case she had any questions about I-know-what-Matt-Murdock-did-last-night club and needed any advices at secret keeping. The club was pretty small, featuring Matt’s best friend, personal nurse and girlfriend. And maybe his favourite priest, but Foggy wasn’t sure about that, he never hung out with them. Now, Terri got VIP membership, even though the way she found out was dubious if anything (another soon to be member was Victor, but Terri didn’t share that with the class). Anyway, it meant Terri had someone else to talk to, which was nice; she called Claire on Sunday evening, after she called a cab for Mr. Nelson, who was absolutely plastered.

Claire was taken aback if anything. She agreed to meet her the next afternoon, which was good, because Terri had a morning shift (yes, Mrs. Walker called again, Terri felt like she did nothing but overusing her phone that day).

Monday morning was worse than most of Monday mornings – apart from the fact she had to get up at ass o’clock, she didn’t feel rested at all. Her dreams were confused and confusing, everything she knew about her friend and her boyfriend and the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen suddenly being questioned. On top of that, she entered MDDC and found out it was still pretty much a mess, because apparently anything in her life could be not messy at the moment. And Mrs. Walker put on an advertisement for a new employee – Terri was horrified, but Mrs. Walker ensured her it was simply because she needed another staff, since Vera would be unavailable for god knows how long. Terri was a little calmer after that, but still thought it sucked. She suspected Mrs. Walker got fed up with Vera’s constant absences. The only bright moment was Vic wishing her to have a nice day – she wished him good night. Because that was just how they rolled.

Terri was almost jumping on spot as she wanted to leave the café and run to Claire’s place; of course, it seemed like the clock were making her miserable on purpose, because the time was dragging incredibly slowly. Michelle talked much more than she did and that meant something. Then finally the clock struck half past one and she could leave, heading straight for answers she wanted.

Claire welcomed her with the same hesitation she reacted when learning Terri joined the club, yet was nice enough, offering coffee, cookies and answers. They started with Vera – there was no change in her status, but Claire claimed that was normal and that the doctors were probably about to wake her up and switch from artificial breathing to oxygen mask only in few days, permitting visits at the same time. Terri was delighted.

The rest of their conversation was darker, but still pleasant – Claire told her how she found Matt in a dumpster for the first time (he was like bleeding a lot, had broken ribs and concussion and it really shouldn’t be funny, except it kinda was) and how she got first hint of his supersenses when he told her he can smell a guy’s cologne two floors lower. Claire also got herself kidnapped to lure the man in the black mask out; Terri wasn’t surprised the men who did that to her got their asses handed to them and the connection between Claire hating baseball bats and taxis finally made sense. There was something fishy about the way Claire talked about that and Terri soon realized it wasn’t fear of the Russian what made Claire spoke in that tone – the memory was painful, but there was also fondness in Claire’s voice. She didn’t say anything, but Terri got a pretty good idea. Claire and Matt used to have a thing. Obviously not anymore. But still. Oh. My. God.
In return, Terri filled her in about Matt leaving. Claire wasn’t as shocked as she should, claiming she expected something pretty bad, when she learnt about Vera being a practice target for a katana and Matt not demanding a visit. Terri got to know that Vera had no defensive wounds – which wasn’t surprising, Vera sure didn’t see the sword coming – but she did have bruised neck as if someone tried to strangle her recently; not the same day as her lung was punctured. Matt tailing her made even more sense now – if she had been attacked before (and Stick was to blame, Terri didn’t doubt that), he wouldn’t let her out of his sight. And fuck, talking about not so blind people was difficult.

In the end, it was nice two hours – Claire went to bed afterwards, because she came back from 12 hours shift, which she kinda forgot to mention to Terri. Terri went home, having another thing to think of. She met with Vic before he went to work – they didn’t talk about the important stuff, only in general, cuddling more than usual, Vic graciously giving her time, because he knew there were things she was keeping from him, gradually getting ready to drop the bombshell. Then he left, sweet kiss for goodbye, no question asked. Because that was how they rolled.

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Claire warned her it wouldn’t be pretty. Sure, it was expected, Vera almost bled out, her lung collapsed and they recently pulled out the tube from her throat, because she fucking couldn’t even breathe by herself, and Terri had seen what happened – yet, she wasn’t prepared for the sight of her best friend, so pale and so small in the hospital bed, too expensive machines around her, her face barely visible behind the mask. Her heart was clenched with cold fingers, throat tighter she thought was possible.

Vera slowly turned her head in Terri’s general direction, when she heard the door squeak. Right. She wasn’t able to see her on top of that, no glasses, no contacts. She would probably recognize Terri though – the hair colour was kinda deadly giveaway. Perfect. At least she wouldn’t see if Terri couldn’t keep her poker face. Not that Terri was about to cry. Nope.

“You look like shit,” she shrieked, aiming for at least neutral tone, failing miserably. Her friend closed her eyes tiredly before she raised her hand heavily, giving Terri a small wave. Terri couldn’t help smiling a little, walking to the bedside. Vera’s eyes followed her and then she stretched her arm, fingers finding a nightstand, reaching for a handle of a drawer. Terri opened it for her, finding the glasses here. Sweet. Nina was a miracle worker. The glasses covered the tired eyes a little. Terri couldn’t tell she minded.

“So… Mechy. Can I sit?” she asked carefully, not really expecting a negative answer. But hell if she knew…

Vera touched the plastic mask, attempting to take it off in favour to speak – Terri quickly stopped her, covering Vera’s hand with hers.

“Uh-uh. Leave it there. Claire let me talk to you under one condition – I will do the talking part. If you agree, nod, if not… you got the memo.” That was the truth – Claire told her Vera needed the oxygen a lot and she had to do some breathing exercises to prevent infection. She already had antibiotics in crazy doses pumping to her system, she didn’t need more just because she wasn’t able to follow doctor’s orders.

Vera frowned, but gave up her effort and nodded. Terri took it as a confirmation and sat down, eyeing her with concern. She did look like shit.

“I would ask you how do you feel, but I guess you feel about the same way you look. Which means terrible.”
Vera answered her in a ridiculous motion which Terri translated as *yeah, something like that*. She sighed.

They fell in silence for a minute, Vera obviously uncomfortable. Her eyes were screaming, she wanted to *speak* and Terri couldn’t let her and the plea in her friend’s gaze made her nauseous – or maybe it was just the way she looked in general. So pale. Drained. *Jesus.*

And Terri knew what she wanted to say, wanted to ask, but probably also thought she couldn’t. Terri might come for some answers, but Vera needed one too. Terri wasn’t confident she knew how to deliver the info though. She cleared her throat.

“Alright. Uhm. There were actually two conditions – the second one was not to upset you too much. So… yeah. Promise me you won’t freak out,” she asked Vera, honestly hoping she could do that for her. Vera blinked in surprise and nodded hesitantly. Also, the heart monitor made a funny sound. Not as much funny as *funny*.

“I’m like hundred and ninety-nine percent sure you want to know about Murdock. The truth is I have no idea. I just know they took him, he called Foggy after he woke up and now he’s somewhere, not picking up his phone, which is not surprising, considering his phones – his personal one and the batphone - are in his apartment, unlike him. Foggy checked,” she blurted out and Vera’s eyes went wide, hand shooting to her chest as her breathing became hastier, her heart beating like crazy, high-pitched beeping too fast.

Terri stared the monitor in horror, taking Vera’s hand in hers. “Hey, hey! No freak outs! Calm down, dammit! Vera! I know, okay? Yeah, I know Matt Murdock is a freaking ninja, let’s skip the oh-my-god-Terri-knows part, okay? It’s fine! Slow breaths!”

She was illustrative of it, showed her one, moving Vera’s palm on her chest. She felt like an idiot, she never done this before, but to her surprise, when she took like fifth breath in, Vera seemed to watch her attentively, matching the tempo. She sighed in relief.

“Jesus Christ, Vera. You’ll give me a heart attack one day. *Seriously.*” Terri sat back to her chair, keeping Vera’s hand – scarly cold. “Now. If you want to know how the hell did I found out about him, when etc., squeeze once. If you want to know what happened lately, squeeze twice.”

Terri waited as Vera took several deep calming breaths, the heart rate slowing down. She felt the pressure once. Okay then. *Twice*. Oh. Guess that made more sense. *Three times.*

She squinted at Vera, who was watching her with curious and worried eyes. She sighed again.

“Okay. Just for you to know, I am pissed at you and I’m kinda not. It’s hard to decide. So…okay. Before I start…” Terri hesitated. It would be good opportunity to tell Vera about her… ability. It was actually pretty essential to the story. “…promise me you won’t judge me. That you won’t hate me.”

Vera wouldn’t, right? Her boyfriend had freaking superpowers. It wouldn’t be fair to reject Terri for being something like a psychic?

Vera tilted her head to her side and then nodded again. Terri gulped. Alright.

“Fine. Let’s start with the fact I knew you got almost killed…”

Vera didn’t interrupt her often – it wasn’t like she really could. But her body spoke its own language. When Terri told her she *felt* the katana punching her lung as if it was her own body, her eyes were horrified and the grip on her hand tightened with surprising strength, before Vera’s eyes softened, giving her a sympathetic look. Terri told her how they found her and she almost died and it felt like
eternity before the doctor came and told them she would probably make it. Terri voice broke when she said they were keeping Vera in induced sleep and she closed her eyes, feeling the tears collecting, begging to be released. She observed their connected hands, unable to look up.

Which was why it shocked her so much, when she heard scratchy voice and gasping.

“You saved my life,” her friend murmured, hoarse voice barely recognizable, but undeniably grateful. Terri snapped her head up, eyeing Vera in horror, since she had her mask slightly up.

“Young. Jesus Christ, Machackova. “Put that back thing on, you idiot!” she burst out, terrified she killed her friend, because Vera just made the first step to get a deadly pneumonia. Vera obediently did as Terri asked, not having enough decency to make a guilty face. Terri would lie if the words didn’t warm her heart though. It was nice to hear it. And there was no you’re freak or what? How did you see that? Get away from me! No. Just gratitude and concerned eyes. No fear.

“Well, Victor did. I was fucking frozen on spot,” she admitted and Vera squeezed her hand, saying *that’s okay*. Terri thought she saw her smile, but it was hard to tell. She smiled back.

Naturally, she told her about seeing Matt doing his thing, which was the biggest clue of his identity. She told her she talked to police, to Foggy, to Claire. Vera was picking up the mask once more on that, but Terri shot her a murderous glare – she carefully retreated, rolling her eyes. Seriously; after two years of medical education, Terri would expect her to be more responsible.

Since Vera couldn’t ask any questions, Terri did. Vera didn’t have a problem with answering them. Mostly.

“How long do you know?” she asked her, hoping it was clear she was talking about the secret with capital S. Vera raised an eyebrow and Terri realized her mistake. Right. Yes or no questions. “Did you know when you two went out for the first time?”

Vera nodded, eyes somewhat sad. She was upset at the memory; Terri didn’t blame her. Matt was god knew where and he would return god knew when.

“So he told you before you went out?”

She shook her head. Terri frowned. What did that meant? If he didn’t tell her earlier, then- "Claire told you? When you were in the hospital after the kidnapping?” she continued, that being the only thing that made sense to her. Claire seemed to be the type who had a strong sense of justice. And Vera would deserve to know for who she got kidnapped…

Negative. Terri threw her hands in the air. If Claire didn’t tell her, then-

“Oh. You figured it out? After he saved you again? From Collins and company?”

Nod. Shook of her head. Yes and no and no. Huh.

“Before?”

Positive. It took her a while to process. Her brain was getting tired, working slow, not connecting things.

“Before?!“ she squeaked, suddenly realizing Vera knew by the time they were hurting her. Terri ran her hand down her face. She *knew*? Did she tell them? No, she said something about *Mike*… Holy-
“I realized after the bank. Told him I know the night we went out,” her friend let out with difficulties and quickly returned the mask to its place.

“Jesus, Vera. You’re one of the kind, aren’t you. Stop removing the mask dammit!”

Anger was a good cover up for her shock and admiration. Truth to be told, her stomach rolled over at the idea of her friend keeping the secret while getting her bones broken and not saying a word; hence the admiration.

She rather asked lots of other things – about the Avengers (they knew too, which whoa, they might help Matt to get from his evil ninja master’s claws; not that she said that out loud, at least not for now), about Matt’s senses, but it wasn’t quite as satisfying as she wanted to, because she was choosing her questions carefully, so Vera wouldn’t remove the mask again. Vera managed to do it once anyway; she said she was sorry she couldn’t tell her, that she was keeping secrets from her best friend. Terri heart melted, but on the outside, she admonished Vera for being a bad patient. Terri thought she grinned at that (it was more like knowing her friend than actually seeing the grin).

There were so many things she wanted to talk about, but Vera’s eyes were closing more and more frequently – she was exhausted. She was only awake for like two hours, but it was apparently the longest she did recently. Terri patted the back of her hand, promising to come back, spoilering Vera they would consult her statement for the police – she seemed to jerk awake at that, but after another minute, she was sleeping like a baby. Terri smiled at the picture, feeling better about it than when she came in, Vera’s figure somehow growing in size.

She was a fucking fighter. Strong, trouble-magnet, stubborn fighter. Terri freaking loved her. She just hoped she would have enough strength to make it through in all aspects, including the psychical one. Terri promised herself to help her with that.

Chapter End Notes

Intermezzo no.6.
Kind of a fill in, I know, rather short one too. It’ll get better :) Vera’s awake now, so she’ll get her POV back. But I’ll be definitely throwing Terri into the mix again sometimes. She’s fun to write.
11) Cut the ties, tell no lies

Chapter Notes

Alright, literally hot off press, because my sister's old laptop is burning. And makes sounds like it's a helicopter about to take off. Also, I finished the draft few moments ago. Not sure when the next chapter will appear, but I'll try my best and I'll pray my laptop survives and I will be able to use the stuff I have in there.

Thank you for your support and I hope you'll enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vera woke up to bizarro world. In this world, it was really hard to breathe (and later she found out that recently it was so hard that she couldn’t even do it herself, she needed help of a machine), metaphorically and literally speaking. Her best friend knew the identity of Devil of Hell’s Kitchen and saved Vera’s life (because apparently she had superpowers, and despite their usefulness, they kinda sucked, considering she had to relive Vera’s experience in being impaled on a sword as if it was her very own memory) and she discussed Matt stuff with Foggy and Claire. And Matt was gone. Vera didn’t like this world at all.

It was a world in which sleep came too easy, was filled with nightmares she had troubles waking up from and made her want to scream until her throat would hurt, but she never let out a single sound - when she did, her chest was in agony as she tried to gather too much air in it to let out the scream, and on rare occasion, when a sound would leave her lips anyway, the oxygen mask muffled it. Sometimes the dream was more like a memory, other days Matt took her place, on occasion it was Terri. In all of those, Stick was smiling wickedly, dark satisfaction, making Vera watch when it was someone else dying. Other times she was alone in a dark room; stupid, obvious bad dream. It made her cry anyway. And she didn’t like when she was awake either, because the reality wasn’t any better.

It was also a world in which Nina handled her phone while Vera was sleeping, once the police didn’t need it anymore. And she did terrible. See, Vera wouldn’t mind if Nina found a text from Matt or Mike, Vera was unconscious, so it wasn’t like she could actually read it by herself, she would just find it later – which she didn’t, because Matt didn’t have his phones on him and that really sucked, because Vera knew nothing about him and it was killing her. She wasn’t really okay with Nina calling back Trish, who texted her whether she wanted to grab a coffee, telling the radio host Vera was in a hospital in induced sleep. What she fucking minded though was Nina reacting on missed calls from her mum, letting her know Vera was attacked in her own apartment and almost died. When Vera got her phone back, able to operate it, she texted her mum she was awake, but couldn’t talk just yet – it wasn’t like she could make it worse than it was. Her mum was probably trying to get plane tickets already, so maybe if Vera texted her, she would drop it. She texted back and it didn’t sound like I’m on my way, so that was good.

In this world, Foggy came for a visit, holding back tears, which was something Vera couldn’t quite manage herself. Foggy was a sympathetic crier – once she broke, he did too. He retold her the story about Matt’s lectures she heard from Terri and told her that he claimed Karen Matt kept it secret from them, because he was ashamed he accepted. Karen visited her too – she was furious about Matt leaving especially when Vera was in the condition she was; Vera picked up her mask to Karen’s
horror and claimed he left the afternoon before she was attacked. Karen was angry because she couldn’t reach his phone and obviously was suspicious of the whole story (Vera didn’t blame her, it was ridiculous). Claire stopped by too, pitiful and worried look. Vera hated it. Vera hated the whole bizarro world and she hated the fact it was real even more.

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Her mask was replaced by a nose cannula. She wasn’t sure when it was, the time was kinda hard to follow, despite the nurses always informing her and asking it about it when they returned – sometimes she remembered, sometimes she didn’t. It was because of the sleeping regime, the sleeping pills they finally discontinued and the pain meds they were slowly reducing. It was still a bitch to breathe, but she was trying, obediently doing the breathing exercises she had to, pushing herself more than she needed so she could fucking leave the hospital. It was killing her here despite everyone’s best efforts – Terri’s visits and Nina’s delivery service featuring her laptop and books. Foggy stopped by once more and it was quite awkward.

One of the first things she did when she was able to talk relatively normally, was skyping her mum (and her dad and her brother joined them), who was out of her mind – Vera did the same trick she pulled out when she was in the hospital last time; no video. The next thing she did was buying a plane ticket home. She sobbed through it, her chest aching in every possible way, but she did it; not earlier date then necessary, but she did it anyway, lying to herself she did it only because the price was considerably lower so long time ahead. She didn’t know who she was trying to fool. She regretted it few hours later, when her freaky episode of hysteries passed, convincing herself she acted rashly. It didn’t change the fact that she also responded Marky that Matt definitely wouldn’t come to the wedding, not really explaining why - she didn’t tell her he might be as well already dead; at that, she had another episode, scaring the nurses shitless. She was honestly ashamed after, ensuring them she only just had the worst nightmare in days (it wasn’t actually secret she had those and the nurses, who kinda knew she was stabbed with something significantly bigger than a pocket knife, bought it and gave her a sympathetic look and extra amount of hospital jello, which, okay). The days dragged.

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They sent Brett Mahoney again; he waltzed into her hospital room she still had for herself (they moved her to another ward, but she had no roommate, only an empty bed by her side; she blamed the nightmares, she could actually scream now and keep her potential roomie awake, no mask to muffle them anymore - but hey, at least the heart monitor was no longer an issue), wearing an unreadable expression. Vera wondered whether cops were assigned to certain victims or criminals once they had to deal with them one time. The fact she used the phrase all the time was also quite disturbing.

“Miss Machackova,” he greeted her with familiar amount of kindness and exhaustion.

“Sergeant Mahoney,” she returned the sentiment, tossing her laptop aside. She wasn’t checking for Devil’s sightings, despite being sure there would be none (and there weren’t). She hadn’t been doing it daily either. Nope.

“You mind if I sit?”

Was she high on the meds again? He blinked, apparently asking himself the same question.

“Uhm. Telling me what you remember from the night you were attacked would help. If you
remember anything, of course,” he offered, obviously taken aback by her behaviour.

She sighed and wanted to start, when she realized there was something wrong. “No recorder?” she asked, bewildered.

Mahoney’s eyes popped and he indeed reached for it and turn it on. Huh. Did she really shock him so much he forgot?

There wasn’t much she could tell him, it was a bit hazy. She came home, turned on the lights, walked further to the apartment and was stabbed without any warning. Before she could register what was happening, she was bleeding on the floor, the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen fighting two creepy guys in hoodies, freaking ninja skills matching his, moving so fast she couldn’t even see their faces clearly, plus she was losing her focus rapidly, passing out. Then she woke up in the hospital. (She decided to add the Devil to the story after discussing it with Terri, both deciding it was the smallest of evils).

“The skills matching the Devil’s?” he asked, startled.

Vera shrugged. “I mean, he’s known for being quick and effective. He sure had troubles fighting those guys though.”

Mahoney sighed. “Alright. How does Murdock fit in all this?”

Vera’s eyes popped despite the fact she did expect the question. Oh god, she was so glad the heart monitor was no longer in the game.

“He left before I was attacked. He picked me up in the café, we walked and…said our goodbyes. Then I went home and I was attacked.”

Mahoney watched her as she was barely whispering this. It hurt and it had nothing to do with the wound in her chest.

“Nelson told us Murdock left in the morning,” he noted, suspicion all over his face. Uh-uh.

“He wanted to… uhm. We needed some time for ourselves,” she said, trying to make it sound as dirty as she managed, gaze lowered. She would swear he blushed and cleared his throat.

“Right.” His lips twitched, before he put on the mask of seriousness again. “Were you fighting together because of his decision to leave?”

“I wasn’t happy about it, obviously. I tried to convince him not to.” It wasn’t even a lie. The truth was he didn’t want to leave either – it didn’t matter it had nothing to do with educating young minds, more like with shedding blood.

“You have bruising on your neck. It’s not from the day you were attacked in your apartment and you didn’t mention it. What happened?” he pried and her heart actually did skip a beat, her breath hitching. They talked about a lot of things with Terri and Claire. They did not talk about this. And why this question followed the question about Matt and her fighting? Mahoney sure didn’t think what she thought he was thinking, right? Ridiculous.

“Uhm… It was…” What the hell should she tell him? She was a terrible liar and he was smart. He would catch her lying. Fuck. Stick with the truth then, as much as possible. “I was coming back from Fogwell’s, I clean up there. It was late and I was jumped in a back alley, didn’t see it coming. He was… I had no idea who he was, he just told me to let him go.”
Mahoney’s eyebrows shot up and he looked very interested in what she was saying. Also strongly disturbed.

“Let him go?”

Vera threw her hands in the air. “He was talking nonsense.” *Ha! Another truth!*

Mahoney wanted to know whether she knew who he was talking about and told her to describe him. Vera really didn’t want to get anyone in trouble, so she said she didn’t see him well and gave him a description of a man which would match every other white male’s looks in New York City.

“He attacked you, threatened you and he just let you go then?” he pressed, confused and curious.

Vera sighed. *No, Laser eyes saved me and then my boyfriend showed up. In disguise, obviously.* “The Devil saved me.”

Mahoney gave her what could be annoyed look, turning off the machine. “For real? Aren’t you afraid he’s stalking you? And... there is no record of this. You didn’t report it. As far as I know, we didn’t arrest anyone who would match your story and any hospital didn’t report us an injury that would... point to Devil’s M.O. *How* is that possible?”

Vera shrugged. Yeah, she didn’t think of that when she was alternating the story. “He disappeared,” she said simply.

That look on his face was priceless. “Disappeared?! The vigilante let him run away?”

“He was a little worried about the fact I almost got strangled, so yeah.” So much for not getting tangled in her lies. *Jesus,* she couldn’t lie to save her life.

Mahoney was watching her with silent disbelief. She tried her best to return the favour, almost breaking, when he finally lowered his gaze, sighed and mouthed something that sounded dangerously like *Devil has a serious crush.*

Vera blinked away her tears at that.

“Alright. Look, I’m not gonna lie to you. You realize these two things are probably connected right? And the timing is really shitty? Murdock leaving just before you got almost killed for the second time in three days?” he asked, observing her with concern in his dark honest eyes.

Her heart stopped while her mind started working in cosmic speed.

Doprdele. He saw through her lies. What had she done? Was he really suspecting Matt hurting her? That would be ridiculous, right? Or the Devil? *Or,* the worst of all, Matt being the Devil? She was such a fucking idiot!

“I-I don’t-“ she stuttered, unable to let out a single sentence. Shit, shit, *shit.*

“The people you were talking about – matching the vigilante’s skills, disappearing... They might be trained assassins.”

*Jesus Christ,* were they tracing the fucking ancient organization Matt was talking about? Stick and his friends or their enemies? Making connections with Matt? This was getting strongly out of hand and it was all going to absolute *shit.*

“What- are you- what?” she choked out, her chest tightening at the thought of revealing Matt. Of the
consequences, of the fact she fucked up so badly that she just ruined multiple lives – starting with hers and Foggy’s, possibly Terri’s and ending with all the people Nelson and Murdock saved when they put criminals behind bars (and all the criminals Mike put behind bars, most likely). Because if Matthew Michael Murdock (and the name stung, stung so badly) was accused of – or proved – being the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, every single trial would be compromised, because he would a criminal – saving lives, but a criminal nonetheless.

“…we think it’s Fisk’s work,” Mahoney’s voice snapped her from her horrifying thoughts and she gasped, her lugs protesting at the sudden movement, brain freezing.

“WHAT?!” she squeaked, not even bothering to put her hand in front of her mouth when the startled noise left her mouth, making him jump. The air was caught in her throat and she had to cough it out, her windpipe doing weird wheezing sounds, her chest burning.

They thought what?! Honestly, she was fucking relieved they were totally misled… but what the actual fuck?!

“It’s not a secret you’re dating Murdock.” Uh-huh. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Fisk somehow kept tabs on the two lawyers who put him jail and he sure still has friends.”

She gulped. Truth to be told, she never considered it before. So. Yeah. Great. Criminal mastermind keeping tabs on Matt, Foggy, Karen, potentially her. Fantastic. This world was getting better and better.

“And…” he hesitated, sounding unsure and she actually made herself to raise her gaze. Was he… embarrassed? “And, you know, he might actually hear about Collins’ case. And if he sent someone after you days before you were attacked in your apartment and you were saved by the Devil again, it’s kinda clear the vigilante runs after you every time you’re in danger…”

Vera opened her mouth and closed it again. This was once more heading the unpleasant way of Matt connecting with Mike. “What are you saying, Sergeant?”

“Obviously, he’s fond of you.” Devil has a serious crush, he mumbled earlier. “I would bet Fisk’s keeping tabs on the man who thwarted his escape from prison transport as well. He has a pretty good reason to hate him too. He hurts you, he kills two birds with one stone. You’re a goldmine, miss Machackova.”

Vera couldn’t tell she wasn’t totally taken aback by his exclaim. And she couldn’t deny it was scary as hell. The truth was though there was only a certain amount of emotions she could feel at once, and there was simply no space for more fear. Vera was just…tired.

“Great. Thanks. That’s… good to know,” she mumbled, examining the hospital sheet crumbled in her fingers.

He sighed. “Offering you protection detail – recommending it to you actually – suggests itself now,” he noted, voice too gentle. The kind of voice he probably used… well, when he was talking to victims of attempted murder.

He would probably think she was nuts, but she didn’t care. She knew it wasn’t Fisk. She also knew she wasn’t in danger anymore (not from the men who attacked her anyway, they might me thousands miles away). She shook her head and eyed him timidly.

“Not necessary, Sergeant Mahoney. Even if you’re right, I think they proved their point.”

He frowned at her, but didn’t protest. “Alright. If you change your mind…” he hummed and stood
up. “Thank you for your time.”

He was overly polite again and a small smile crept on her lips. “For you, Sergeant? Always.”

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Vera thought she got enough emotional wrecking in these days. Apparently, the universe had a different opinion.

Nina called her in the evening. She wanted to stop by the next day – Saturday, after all, she had time - and the sweet person she was, she wanted to bring Vera the best damn homemade pie in New York City and possibly in the whole world. Except she didn’t find her baking form and naturally, she came to conclusion Vera had it. Which was right. And despite the fact Nina had a spare key, she didn’t want to intrude Vera’s privacy (practically non-existent, considering her flat was recently a crime scene and the police searched it, not allowing Nina to clean up just yet, which seemed to irritate her) and she called her to ask where she should look so she didn’t have to turn the apartment upside down again while searching.

Vera rolled her eyes at that, hearing the rattling of the keys in the lock.

“In the oven, Nina. I know my apartment is a mess and I have some ridiculous hideouts, but it’s not that bad.”

Nina’s breath hitched. “Jesus, the stain is huge…” she cursed.

Vera stared duly on the ugly wall of her hospital room, trying her best not to imagine what it looked like on her carpet. Pain in her chest. Darkness on the edge of her vision. Matt fighting and losing. Matt gone. She shook her head to chase away the memories.

“Thanks for the mental image…” Vera noted wryly.

“Vera, I think someone is here,” Nina whispered, barely audible, voice strangled and Vera sat up straighter immediately, startled.

What?! Who would- Stick. His ninja friends. Fisk or his guys (and thank you, sergeant Mahoney, for adding them on the list). Vera couldn’t decide which option sounded the worst. All of them were terrifying, something cold creeping down her spine at each name that flew through her mind.

“Nina, get out of there. Right now,” she hissed to the phone, mentally kicking herself for the late response.

Horrified gasp sounded on the other end of the line and then there was a crack. “Oh my god.”

Her voice was distant and terrified. Something squeezed Vera’s chest in a vice.

“Nina? NINA?!” she yelled to the phone, begging her to answer her. Jesus Christ. What the hell should she do? Should she just hung up and call the police right now? An ambulance? Or would it be too late?

“NINA! Doprdele, doprdele, DOPRDELE.” She tossed the covers away, her body protesting as she rolled out of bed. And shit, her legs were fucking weak. And what exactly she wanted to do? So she was standing in a hospital room. She couldn’t exactly run to the apartment, could she? And even if she could, she wouldn’t be any help.

Nina was talking to someone. Jesus, was she trying to negotiate with them? Oh god, Nina.
Rustle and a male voice that made her heart ache. “Vera?” he breathed somehow unsure and she felt her knees getting weaker.

That was not possible.

Was it?

“Matt?” she whispered in disbelief, tentative, ninety percent sure the man on the other end of the line would start laughing at her addressing.

He didn’t. He sounded a little tight to be honest. “Yeah. Yeah it’s me.”

He didn’t laugh. She did.

She fucking choked with the weird action, because she barely remembered how to laugh and the lung problem had probably something to do with it too, but holy shit. Matt. She was talking to Matt. And then he laughed too. She almost forgot how that sounded as well. Beautiful. Vivid. Heart-warming.

“Are…are you okay?” she asked, righteously worried, because he left with – no he was dragged away by – his ninja master and she didn’t expect to hear from him. Possibly ever.

“Me?” he sounded absolutely astonished, as if he didn’t understand why she was asking. Which, huh. “Vera, Jesus Christ. I thought you were dead.”

And that was totally his voice breaking. This was ridiculous. He though she was dead. She thought he might be dead. Šmarja. She couldn’t resist. She giggled. Which was totally inappropriate, but to hell with it. She was probably high anyway, she was entitled.

“I have three or four guardian angels. Guess I am lucky. Like super-lucky,” she offered.

“You’re blessed,” he breathed and sounded like he quite believed that. She wasn’t sure how to react. And it certainly wasn’t something she wanted to talk about.

“Yeah. Sure. That too. How are you? What…what are you doing in my apartment? Did Stick let you go, or-“

She could immediately tell it was a wrong thing to ask. His next words were careful, somehow forced. Unconvincing. Unwilling.

“Vera… I… I got to go. I hate it and there’s nothing I would wish for more than staying here, but I can’t. He wants me and you know better than anyone he would do anything to win my loyalty. It’s a miracle you’re alive and I am not taking any chances. I don’t know if I ever come back. Just… take care, okay?”

And the sun that came out of nowhere was gone, cold embracing her again. She didn’t realize she was cold before. What was he saying? She thought he left, now she found out he didn’t, and now he was telling her once more she wouldn’t see him again? She had her happiness for like a minute.

“Matt- Matt, please. There has to be another way, the Avengers-“ she started, but he interrupted her simply, but resolutely.

“There is none,” he whispered, sounding a little broken. She was broken. That- the Avengers weren’t there at the moment, but they would be. Why didn’t- he clearly didn’t want them to get involved, but it didn’t matter, right? It would be for his own good? He sure knew they could help? “I
love you, Vera. So much. Remember that.”

She felt the tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn’t even realize she was about to cry; her mind was racing, trying to come up with something, anything, making her so focused on it, that she totally ignored the tears gathering in her eyes and the lump in her throat growing.

“Matt-“

“Remember that and take care of my heart. I’m leaving it here with you. But it’s okay to move on,” he offered gently and she held back a sob, because of course it’s okay to move on, you self-righteous bastard. That you would like, huh? Yeah, no chance in hell.

“Miluji tě,” she whispered stubbornly, weak attempt to convince him to stay, to find a solution. Here. With her.

“Taky tě miluji,” he said softly, so much affection in three simple words with strange pronunciation of his own. This time she couldn’t stop herself, so she at least muffled the cry with her palm, hoping he didn’t hear that. He made his decision. He made it for her, at least partly, because he was scared for her. He didn’t deserve her whining. She could whine later. Hell, she could cry out oceans, and she would. “Goodbye.”

And then there was the sound of ended call and silence. She never got the chance to say goodbye back.

She cried oceans.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, long way here from Matt’s intermezzo, I know (about 14k of words actually, uhm…), but here we are. Sorry to repeat the Matt-Vera conversation, it felt right and at least it’s from her perspective, so that’s something. Dammit I miss Matt already.
12) Hug in a cup

Chapter Notes

*throwing confetti everywhere, dancing around, yelling ‘it’s alive!’ loud enough for whole Prague to hear it* Yay! I got my laptop back! No further damage. I wanted to kiss the service guy, but then I remembered how much the repair cost and just wished him happy holidays instead.

If you missed the last chapter due to my (now deleted) freak out and want to know all the reasons why Vera’s life sucks at the moment, read previous chapter. Otherwise, ‘happy’ reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life sucked. No, seriously, Vera thought her life sucked, because of everything. She called Terri the next morning, hoping she wasn’t waking her up and that she didn’t have the afternoon shift, because she needed someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on, and Foggy’s just wasn’t convenient. Claire already saw too many of her outbursts and she had better ways of spending her break then running across the hospital only to comfort Vera. Vera texted them both anyway, only to let them know the news. Karen didn’t know, so she was out of picture. So Terri it was.

Terri didn’t have the afternoon shift so she could come and she did. Despite the fact Vera was pretty sure she had no tears left, she cried her eyes off again, Terri trying to soothe her. Then she attempted to distract her a little, which she totally did, because she just dropped the bombshell as if it wasn’t a big deal – Terri told Victor about the Devil’s identity. Vera would be horrified, but once again, she had no mental capacity to do that. She would be angry with Terri, but truth to be told, Victor saved Vera’s life, Terri obviously believed he could be trusted and Vera secretly thought he was kinda entitled and was glad he apparently took it as a champ.

Foggy visited her the very next day, and they had another nice cry over it. Claire visited as well, not crying, but giving Vera her necklace; Vera totally forgot she was wearing that thing when she got stabbed. They had taken it off for surgery and Claire apparently got it cleaned and she picked it up in the morning. Vera did cry again, hugging her gratefully. Claire smiled at her sadly as Vera put it on immediately.

Vera got discharged two days later. Nina didn’t came for a visit, but she picked her up and drove her home, preparing hot chocolate for both of them, serving a pie she baked the previous day. Later, she admitted it was because she couldn’t make herself to bake it earlier, her thoughts totally shattered all over.

Because Nina knew. Nina knew something, but she was so kind to wait until Vera got discharged from the hospital to confront her about it, taking her home, where there was no blood stain on a carpet, window fixed, and made her a welcome snack, only asking her how she felt. And then they were sitting against each other in awkward silence, Nina watching her attentively, obviously wanting to ask something. Vera didn’t encourage her, because she had a certain idea of what it would be about.

Nina cleared her throat. “He said he loved you,” she said simply and Vera froze, cup halfway to her lips. That opening she didn’t see coming. She kinda expected Nina to ask how she ended up
practically dead in her own apartment or how the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen knew where her apartment was; it didn’t occur to her she witnessed their conversation (Matt’s side anyway). Vera didn’t realize she had tears in her eyes, again, before they rolled down her face.

Nina’s sharp intake of breath snapped her from her thoughts. Right. Speak, Veronika. What the hell should she tell her?

“Yeah, he did.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “Judging by his expression – well, what I had a chance to see from it anyway - you told him the same,” she continued softly.

“I did,” she admitted, voice husky, throat tight.

She thought Nina nodded and finished her cup. “I’m gonna take a wild guess and say that Matt not visiting you in the hospital and the masked man giving you a goodbye speech is not a coincidence.”

Vera squeezed her eyes shut, more tears escaping them. She took a calming breath. There was no point in denying it. Nina knew. Vera tried not to think too hard about the fact, that ever since Matt fought with Stick, the amount of people – civilians, Avengers were a different case – learning the Devil’s identity doubled. Wasn’t that just fantastic.

Vera sighed, finally looking Nina in the eye. “No, it’s not.”

Nina pressed her lips together, nodding slowly. “That’s… something. How does that work?” she asked carefully, not pressing, giving Vera an opportunity to escape. Vera wasn’t sure she wanted one. Nina was her friend, her aunt, and yet another person who saved her life. She deserved better than being lied to.

“Which part? The blind thing or the lawyer by day, vigilante by night?” Vera finished her chocolate as well, rubbing her tired eyes under her glasses. She was tired again. She was tired all the time. It sucked.

“Both?” Nina offered, grimacing. She was curious, no doubt. Vera didn’t blame her.

She shrugged. “He can’t see, has no light perception, but his other senses are heightened. There are still stuff he can’t do, like going to the movies without audio description,” she lighted it up, not certain if she did it for Nina’s or her own sake. Ghost of a smile appeared on Nina’s lips. “But he’s good at using the other inputs. Very good.”

“Yeah, I gathered… but it’s kinda hard to image that.”

“I still can’t quite imagine that either if that helps,” she whispered, hand subconsciously touching her necklace, fingers running over the smooth surface of the hearts, memory of Matt’s delight on the sound they made together painful in her mind. Did he like how their hearts sounded together as well?

“A little. What about the other thing? A lawyer breaking the law? That’s…”

Vera raised one corner of her lips, unable to help herself. When she put it like that… “Depends. As a lawyer, he knows exactly how limited the judiciary system can be.”

Nina hummed, sounding a little as if she agreed. Talking about it… it was easier than Vera would think.
“I’m sorry for whatever happened with you two. With him. It sounded…intense.” Nina was observing her with sympathetic eyes and just the look made Vera want to cry all over again.

She worked against the lump in her throat. “Yeah. That’s… that’s one word for it.” She lowered her gaze so she didn’t have to see the pity. God, she didn’t need pity, she was feeling sorry for herself enough.

Silence fell for a short moment. When Nina spoke up again, there was a hint of a smile in her voice. “He has manners though. I mean, I didn’t meet Matt many times and he was always polite when I did, sure, but I didn’t quite expect the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen to be so… decent.”

Vera eyed her in surprise, waiting for further explanation. Nina was indeed smiling.

“He came through the window, but he at least he took his shoes off,” she exclaimed, bewildered. Vera was absolutely taken aback by that observation and she couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing, a little desperate sound, her chest aching. She couldn’t quite tell whether it was due to painful memories or the laugh itself as physical action. Either way, Nina’s smile spread wider and she offered her a piece of pie. And Vera somehow believed that with friends like these, she could make it through.

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Vera couldn’t make it through. She barely slept despite her exhaustion and waking up to morning shift she planned with Mrs.Walker earlier was a bitch. For about ten minutes, she was laying in her bed, cold and empty, only sign of Matt being the charm, warm on her chest, burning its way through to her heart. She got up only because she imagined being fired on top of all the lovely things happening lately and the horror picture of too much free time until she would find another job, too much time for brooding, made her crawl out. She ended up coming late, but the rest of staff didn’t seem to mind.

Speaking of the staff, there was a new member – Regina. Regina was quite a nice black girl, short dark hair and big eyes, looking as if she was pursing her lips all the time. She greeted Vera with a small smile, introducing herself, expressing hopes she was feeling better. Vera really hoped she didn’t know the details of her hospital stay – she didn’t pry, nor shot her too curious looks, so Vera guessed she didn’t. The other person on her shift was Hannah, so that was good. Neither of the girls asked her about a freak out she had in the safe space of a bathroom after she found Braille stickers in her apron. They didn’t say a thing about her red eyes; Vera loved them for that and finished her second green tea by the time the crowds appeared. It didn’t really help. She was still feeling like shit and wanted to muffle herself in the covers and sleep forever, dreamless if possible.

Her shift became a blur, until one of her customers didn’t make her stop dead in her track. She wasn’t wearing the sunglasses that day, but the leather jacket and the scarf and the bag over her shoulder – and for the first time Vera realized it was a case for a camera – stayed the same. Vera had to force herself to continue working instead of starring at the woman who saved her from being strangled, thanks her extraordinary strength. She ended up serving her anyway and she bit her tongue, making her lips to form at least a small polite for-customers smile.

“Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you?”

The woman raised on corner of her lip in sarcastic smile. “The usual. Americano, no sugar, tall cup, middle size.”

Of course. Daily dose of coffee with shot of whiskey. Weird felling sunk to Vera’s stomach and she
entered the order in the cash box, telling the price with uneasiness. She couldn’t quite tell why she felt like this, but it was probably the memory of their last encounter. What else it would be? However, *Laser eyes* didn’t treat Vera differently than before as if the back alley meeting never happened. Except…

When Vera placed the cup on the counter for to go coffees, watching the black-haired woman open the cup and add her special ingredient, she spoke up unexpectedly.

“İt’s good to have you back, you know. Some bitch kept refusing to give me the big cup,” she hummed, hesitating and put few more drops of the alcohol to her cup. Vera thought Olivia or Barbara. Or pretty much anyone, since *Laser eyes* seemed to be annoyed enough at the fact anyone was denying her her daily dope to call the said barista *bitch* even if it was Terri.

Later, Vera swore she had no idea how the words left her mouth.

“Is it good at least?” she asked when the woman finished her action, content. She glanced at Vera.

“I wouldn’t drink it if it wasn’t,” she noted wryly, coiling her flask. Then her eyebrow shot up. “Wanna try it?”

Nope. Absolutely not. Whiskey (possibly scotch) and coffee? Two terribly tasting things mixed together? It had to be disgusting. Besides, it was the woman’s coffee. It would be perfectly normal to refuse. Instead, she shrugged wordlessly.

“Knock yourself out. Alcohol’s disinfection. As long as you don’t drink too much of it, I don’t mind,” the woman offered, shrugging as well.

This was an idiotic idea.

Vera did it anyway, sipping cautiously. It was pretty hot, but the liquid from the flask cooled it enough for drinking. It burned anyway – the warm coffee and the alcohol on its own. Vera was right – it tasted like shit. Total and utter shit. And there was something appealing in it. She sipped again. It physically ached her not to do it at least once more and put it down.

The woman’s eyebrows were almost in her hairline. “That good, huh?”

The drink was warming her chest, weird aftertaste rolling on the tip of her tongue. “Whiskey or scotch?”

The woman smirked and closed the cup, taking it to her hands with a hint of satisfaction. “Whiskey. A cheap one. Thanks.”

Then she made a small salute with two fingers and walked away as if nothing happened. Vera once again watched the heavy boots leaving and murmured quiet *thanks for the tip*, convinced she would never drink it again. She was lying through her teeth, fooling only herself, because when she went to the store after her shift ended, she added coffee and cheap whiskey to her cart. If the clerk eyed her with pure surprise – because dammit, Hell’s Kitchen wasn’t that big, people knew each other and the clerks knew their customers and their preferences – she told herself that ignoring his baffled expression was the best thing she could do.

When she was laying in the cold sheets (and really, they weren’t colder than usual, it was the absence, which was stupid, because it wasn’t like she was always falling asleep with Matt who would be her personal heater, it was just the idea he wouldn’t join her at some point during the night, *ridiculous*), she thought of the coffee again, remembering its heat. It was too late to get caffeine in system though; she wanted to avoid even more restlessness in her sleep than she already had, so she
brushed the thought aside.

The solution was simple – she just made the drink small. And by pure coincidence, she forgot to add the coffee.

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Vera didn’t sleep well, but she did fall asleep easier. After one half-empty glass of cheap whiskey, she wasn’t hangover, thank god – but it didn’t change the fact she felt shitty again.

Most people, when they needed some start up in the morning, they got coffee. For Vera, tea always had this function and in some way she was proud of it, because it made her different from all the junkies that kept coming to MDDC, despite the fact that her anticoffee attitude was based on the disgust when drinking it. That morning, she knew tea wouldn’t work, so she tried the coffee. Naturally, she didn’t know how many spoons, how much water… and how much to spice it with whiskey. Her attempt tasted terribly and unlike yesterday, it lacked the delightful note. She brushed her teeth two times to get rid of the taste, promising that if she ever tried again, she needed less powder and more liquid.

She was late. Again. Regina eyed her, still somehow forgiving, while Hannah was less benevolent. Still, she didn’t say a word, only kept shooting her significant looks.

Foggy came for coffee that day, buying only two cups. It almost broke Vera’s heart, his poor attempt of making a conversation and she said him goodbye while holding back tears bravely until she couldn’t see him through the window anymore – only then, she ran to the back with a quiet excuse. She leaned her back to the wall, silent tears and muffled breaths, one hand in front of her mouth, another one clenching the charm. It was ridiculous gesture; she couldn’t care less. She drank tea in one go. At home, she tested her coffee making skills. It turned out better than expected. The aftertaste still sucked, but it burned just right. She rocked.

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“So, I was wondering…” Terri started two days later on their morning shift and Vera raised her gaze to her, slightly worried. Sentences starting like that never meant anything good. Her friend was a fount of brilliant ideas, but sometimes it was hard to make them work. Vera hoped Terri didn’t noticed the light smell of whiskey on her breath (she always checked, brushed her teeth twice before heading to work after her daily start up) and waited for the end of the sentence. “…have you been to Fogwell’s since you were released from the hospital?”

Vera stopped breathing and her eyes widened in horror. Of course she wasn’t. The idea didn’t even cross her mind, because Fogwell’s was lately something they only did with Matt. Even when she was just cleaning up and working out before watching him, long time ago before he started teaching her stuff, they were at least partly together. And the thought of coming there alone all of sudden was terrifying.

“No,” she let out, small choked noise and Terri nodded knowingly.

“Yes, that’s what I thought. But you’ll still be cleaning the place up, right?”

Truth to be told, Vera didn’t consider that. The gym must have been a mess by now – how long she was in the hospital? Almost a month? If no one even took out the garbage like last time, the place had to be a disaster. And she didn’t like that. Matt wouldn’t like that either. But Jesus…

Vera looked at Terri a helplessly, shrugging. Terri was very much not amused.
“I hope that was a yes. Which is why I’m coming with you tonight, because that place is probably in shambles. You need help. So, what time is the cleaning up squad meeting?” she offered almost cheerfully and Vera gaped at her, unable to let out a word.

That was- she wasn’t ready for that. Just few more days at least. And some liquid courage before going there.

Terri’s hand touched hers, stroking lightly and Vera realized she had her own hand clenched in a fist – around her necklace. She immediately let go, gaze flickering to her friend, who was smiling sympathetically.

“They are closing at nine, right? Wanna meet there or should I pick you up?”

Vera gulped, working against the growing lump in her throat, panicking. “Terri, I don’t think- come on, you have better things to do than tidying up an old gym,” she protested weakly, her knees turning into jello – not in a good way – at the idea of going there that night. She leaned onto the counter inconspicuously (there were no customers anyway, eleven a.m., as always.), supporting herself.

“Pick you up then. Quarter to nine? Perfect,” Terri continued, patted her hand that was scrunching her charm subconsciously again and claimed her break since Barbara returned. Vera sighed, somehow hoping Terri would came to conclusion it was a non-sense and changed her mind, the thought providing Vera at least some comfort.

Terri didn’t.

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“Do I smell whiskey on your breath?” That was Terri’s first words when Vera walked down the stairs, meeting her in front of her apartment building, both of them dressed in sweat pants, ready to actually do some heavy clean up. Truth to be told, Vera started the thorough cleaning up already – in her head. One for courage. The second was supposed to be for being nice to her amazing friend who just didn’t want her to do this alone, but she changed her mind in the last moment, leaving it for later, when she would come back, certainly feeling like a wreck. Vera was honestly shocked Terri noticed one glass on her breath.

“A little,” Vera hummed, refusing to elaborate.

Terri sighed, but didn’t ask further. Vera was endlessly grateful, walking by her side in silence. She didn’t even wonder how Terri knew where Fogwell’s was. She might didn’t come to that place, but she did live in Hell’s Kitchen for over three years after all.

Vera unlocked the door with her heart hammering, blood buzzing in her ears loudly. Stepping in felt ominous. She quickly turned on the lights, because that was what people did – they used the lights. It didn’t really helped – it wasn’t like Matt was working out in the dark when she was watching him; it would make it hard to admire his body and the way it was moving, muscles shifting when his fist of sole collided with the bag, making it look like it was the most natural thing in the world. She inhaled shakily, sweat, leather and something she never figured out attacking her nostrils. Fogwell’s. Just like the first time.

“Where do we start?” Terri’s voice reached Vera’s ears as she was looking around the familiar space. Just like her sheets, it felt somehow cold. Less vivid.

And now, she was just being dramatic. Cut the shit, Macháčková. It’s not like he’s dead.

She quickly blinked away her tears, her eyes stopping at the centre – not the actual middle of the
gym, but the most important part. The punching bags. Her feet ignored the voice screaming in her head, *don’t go in there*, making their way as they remembered it. She ran her fingers over the leather surface, as if she was expecting the bags changed with his absence. It was ridiculous, of course. They were still the same.

“We’re starting with the punching bags?” Terri reassured herself, standing right behind her (and Vera didn’t register she followed her), snapping Vera from her trance.

Huh?

No.

She shook her head. “I usually end with them, because I clean up and then work out,” she explained, voice agonizingly raspy.

“Oh,” Terri didn’t say anything else, giving her a little more time to come to terms with being here. Vera felt few tears rolling down her cheeks and she quickly wiped them away. *It’s not like he’s dead, Vera. He left and he would come back. Eventually.*

“He’s teaching me, you know?” she hummed, walking toward the ring, her favourite spot for observing him, automatically jumping on its edge. She grimaced when she realized that day she had nothing to watch.

It took Terri a while. When she finally realized what Vera said, she gasped, shooting her incredulous look.

“He’s teaching you how to fight? Why??”

Vera frowned. What kind of a question was that?

“What- Is he planning you to become his vigilante buddy or something? Is he insane?!” Terri blurted out, scandalized, and walked right in front of Vera, her furious face covering Vera’s whole view.

Her eyes popped. “No! Of course not!”

Terri relaxed a little. “Then why?”

Vera gave her an unimpressed look, honestly shocked Terri even thought Matt – Matt I-want-you-to-be-save Murdock – would want her to be his vigilante partner. *Jesus.* On the other hand… well, a girl could dream. She would be lying claiming she *never* imagined that. Just something small. Two or three muggers… probably not with guns… maybe one gun, possibly knives. Uh-huh…

“I asked him, because I need to learn how to defend myself, Terri. Matt would never allow me to hit the streets,” she assured her, a small sting in her heart. He wouldn’t. Maybe it was partly because he wouldn’t trust her to be an actual help. Mainly it was because he would spend more time worrying about her than actually being useful. He would probably end up being shot because he would try to shield her. Protect her. Yeah, that sounded like him.

“Good. Because if he ever changes his mind about it, he will meet my fist. And he will *not* see it coming,” she smirked and Vera chuckled tiredly at her attempt at humour.

She patted the place next to her and Terri climbed up with a grin, following Vera’s gaze, getting a perfect view on the punching bag.

“You’re totally watching him from here aren’t, you?” she guessed and a small smile crept on Vera’s
lips. Terri didn’t use past tense once. She actually spoke about the future just few second ago. Vera rested her head against her shoulder.

“Sometimes,” she admitted quietly.

“All the time. I know what I’m getting you the minute he gets back.”

Vera raised her head in surprise, tiny startled sound escaping her mouth. “What?”

Terri rolled her eyes. “Relax, Mechy. Just a small gift for my love-struck friend. A bib.”

“A bib?” Vera repeated, confused, losing track of their conversation.

Terri grinned. “Yes, Mechy, a bib. Because I’m betting my month pay-roll, that you’re drooling every time he makes the bag swing. Now, where do we start?”

Vera chuckled, face probably red, but she didn’t say a single word to deny it, leading Terri to the lockers.

_Let’s begin then._

Chapter End Notes

If you feel like there’s nothing much happening, sorry. Vera’s recovering, okay?

As far as I know, 'It’s like a hug in a cup' is used for describing tea (former Mentalist junkie here, associating tea with Partick Jane). I totally agree with that one, but it seemed convenient O:-)
Terri helped. Honestly, she was much more helpful with keeping Vera from breaking down than actually tidying up, but Vera appreciated it much more than assistance on wiping the floor spotless. They stayed for two hours, Vera still not quite satisfied, but convinced they had done enough for one night. When she would gather enough courage (possibly liquid one), she could come back. Tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow. Week tops. Terri walked her home and Vera actually managed to go the sleep without the glass of whiskey which waited for her in the fridge. Mind over matter. She didn’t even drink it next morning, because she didn’t need to get up at the exorbitant hour, having a day off.

Truth to be told, having a Friday off kinda sucked. Having any day off sucked, because she needed to do something. So she cleaned up her apartment, tried to casually chat with Anna, not having to hold her tears at her love-struck rambling about Martin, her boyfriend, because something finally went well in her love life and they were officially together for over a month and they were totally in the beginning of a relationship, when they were still a little worried about how far they could go with touching and Anna was smitten and wouldn’t shut up about it. In the end, Vera guessed it was better than if she asked Vera about Matt.

Her mum did ask about Matt. It was Vera’s fault, because it was her own idea to skype in the afternoon, so she had something to pass the time (and she was pretty much fed up with reading from the hospital, so books were a no-no). Her mum thought she was being too sad. She figured out it was because of boyfriend troubles. Naturally.

Vera sighed. “Yeah… Uhm. He left to travel across states. Kinda”

Her mum’s eyebrows shot up in silent shock. Vera hated telling the stupid tale over and over – she said it to everyone and she did it so often she was almost starting believing it.

“Ugh. Some university asked him if he could make a lecture about the biggest case their practise had – a huge corruption case, all over the newspapers – and some other professors heard of it and they wanted that kind of a lesson too, and they also wanted him to talk about making it through college with a disability, so now he’s just moving from one uni to another, super busy and miles away,” she recited the story on autopilot, not quite looking to her mum’s eyes even on the screen.

Shocked silence followed. And Vera understood. It was a lot to take in and it utterly, utterly sucked (well it would, if it was the truth anyway), but really? She eyed her mum – her expression was a mixture of confusion, surprise and suspicion.

“Yeah, I know. I miss him,” Vera offered carefully, the face on the screen frowning, gaze examining Vera closely.

“Why would Matt lectured students about studying college with disability?” she asked slowly and Vera suddenly realized her mistake, her mouth falling open. Oh shit. Oh shit.

“Uhm… his friend is blind?” she tried her best to sound at least a little convincing, probably failing miserably. Her mum’s face changed colour to something slightly redder than usual, expression losing the confused note, being replaced by comprehension and something Vera was pretty sure was betrayal.

“…Maybe?”

Her mother gaped silently. “You’re dating a blind man for almost four months and you never thought it might be an interesting fact to share with me?!”

Oh god, Vera was in so much trouble. Her mum was watching her expectantly, waiting for an excuse for such a horrible crime.

“I… plead the fifth?” she offered innocently and the face on the screen gave her an unimpressed look.

“Of course you do. You’re dating a blind lawyer.”

“You never asked! It never came up!”

“How should I have done that when I had no clue? … Oh my god, that’s why you never wanted to introduce him!” her mum figured and Vera closed her eyes, taking a calming breath. Deep, slow breaths, Macháčková. Huh, she could actually say that out loud, it worked for both of them. She almost chuckled at the thought- but no, this wasn’t funny. Maybe just a little?

“Yeah, it was kinda an issue. He’s doing just fine, he did manage to graduate suma cumme laude from law school, because he’s brilliant, sweet and possibly the best boyfriend in the world, but yeah, screen talk and keeping eye contact is quite difficult for him,” Vera admitted hastily and her mum’s face actually softened.

“I’m sorry, baby. How you’re holding up? When he’s coming back?”

For the first time in a long time, Vera believed she wasn’t asking just to piss her off and prying whether it had any effect on Vera’s return to Czechia. She sighed.

“Well, I live.” That sentence shouldn’t be so literal, but it was. “And I actually don’t know… But I know when I’m coming back. I bought a plane ticket few days ago, for 14th September.”

Her mum did light up at that, despite her best efforts not to. Vera bit her lip and clenched the laptop with more force that necessary. But damn, she couldn’t blame her. Right now, she missed her mum more than ever, hell, she missed her brother, because a very long bear hug was exactly what she needed at the moment. Yeah, dream on, Veronika. She held her tears with the power of will.

“It’s gonna be alright, Verunko. I love you and I’ll be looking forward to it. Let’s call soon again, alright? Have a nice day,” her mum said her goodbye, maybe too quickly, sensing Vera needed to end the call as soon as possible.

Vera gave her a weak smile and closed the app, just around the time the first tear rolled down her cheek.

She used the glass she was saving from yesterday. It felt like the right time.

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She returned to the gym on Sunday night, not only for the clean-up, but for punching something really hard too. It was totally her own fault, because she had the brilliant idea of going to the church.

Yes, she went to the church, because it was Sunday, it was mass and it was what Matt would do.
She never went there with him – not to this particular church. They went on Christmas Eve to the church that was closest to the Nelson’s (and Vera later found out Matt sneaked out the next morning, brutally early only to light a candle in his favourite church). He also took Vera on his father’s grave when she asked him once and he accepted, somewhat pleased, taking her to the graveyard behind the church, kissing her forehead before they left back home, strangely intimate gesture in the surreal environment. But she never came in.

Vera wasn’t a complete stranger to the holy houses (she went for a midnight mass with her grandma twice, when she was still among the living, and she had gone to London and Paris, visiting the Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame and Sacre-couer, because that was a must when being there), but she wasn’t religious, so she wasn’t very familiar with them either. She carefully stepped in, following a group of people, sitting rather in the back, listening to the sermon with her eyes closed, trying to relax and let the words wash over her. She couldn’t. She didn’t pick up much, but with horror realized it was almost Easter time – when the fast was beginning anyway. Instead, she wondered. She wondered how a man, who went through so much, felt so much pain, saw (sensed) too many wrongs and suffering – fighting against it, hurting people, no matter how many other people he helped while doing it – could be in his core a devoted catholic. She never understood that. Her gaze lingered on the crucifix above the main altar and she couldn’t quite stop herself from seeing a little piece of Matt in it. Blood. Pain. Sacrifice for others. Or just for you, tiny voice in her head whispered intrusively.

She shushed it and quickly blinked away her tears at the thought, looking around to make sure no one caught her. Her worries were gratuitous – there was no one in the church anymore. She slowly stood up, leaving the pew. The small lights of candles caught her eyes, tiny images of hope. Or a tribute? She didn’t remember whether it was allowed to light a candle for sick and lost, or only for the dead. She hesitantly made her way to them, unsure what she even intended to do.

It wasn’t just the lights – it was the heat. Or warm, perhaps. She missed warm these days, because even though she never realized it before, warm was something that was associated with Matt in her mind. Warm eyes. Warm smile. Warm embrace. She reached out one hand to them carefully, flames flickering with her movement, gently offering their heat.

“People like to do that,” kind voice sounded on her left and she retreated immediately, shooting the newcomer a startled glance. He must have been really silent or she had to be too consumed by her thoughts.

An old priest, all in black apart from his white collar (and really, how else she would imagine a priest), mostly bald, but with few grey hair, amiable eyes, lips slightly pursed as if he was admonishing her, or simply thinking. Vera hoped for the latter, expecting the earlier though.

“I’m sorry, Father,” she whispered, unable to state his gaze. He took it as an invitation, taking two steps closer to her, soft rustle.

“I didn’t say it was wrong and you have to stop.”

Vera raised her eyes to him, surprised. He looked like he meant it. Huh.

“I think I should probably settle on just looking,” she murmured, watching the flames while speaking.

“Lots of people don’t go to the church because they consider it too cold, fearing it, not seeing that God offers light and warm just like these candles…” he explained, gesturing lightly to a bin with candles. “You can light one too, you know.”
She hesitated and shook her head. “I’m not a believer, Father,” she admitted, ashamed for being at the end of his kind words despite not quite having the right.

Short silence followed before he spoke up, hint of a smile in his voice. “I don’t think I saw you there before, that’s true. You don’t need to go to church to believe in something though. And that’s the thing about Him – He doesn’t discriminate against any of His children because they found their way to Him later than the others. He forgives. He loves them all the same with no differences.”

Vera decided she liked the man – he weighted all of his words carefully, sure saw a lot in his life and he believed truly, from the bottom of his heart. She would never manage to do that, thinking it was one of rather rare things that somehow truly put distance between her and Matt. She never comprehended this side of him.

This priest seemed to be a fount of wisdom. What was a little question for him?

“Does He?” She looked at the man, meeting his compassionate eyes.

“Doubting so soon after coming here?” he questioned, not reproaching. She sighed, only half guilty, her mind wandering. Matt often came to confession, to talk about things that lied heavily in his mind. Why couldn’t she? Was it forbidden for someone like her? A non-believer?

“I know a man,” she started, examining the priest’s face and finding no indication he wasn’t willing to listen, “he’s catholic... very catholic. He truly believes. Yet, it seems Go-, it seems his faith is being tested constantly. He’s good, Father. He believes. So why does he suffer?”

He sighed as well, sounding regretful. “I can’t answer that, my child. Lord works in mysterious ways.”

Vera hated that phrase. She bit her lip, trying to cover her disappointment, eyeing the candles again. Warm and light. Was Matt one of the people the priest talked about, who liked to reach for it – in his case simply because he couldn’t enjoy the light itself they provided?

“He left to war. Fighting a fight for someone else, fighting for something he doesn’t want. A bad man,” she strained the title through her teeth, “hurt someone he cared for and he was afraid he would do that again. He was forced to leave his home. His life. People he loved and who loved him. It’s not fair.”

Silence fell for a long time and after a while, Vera looked at him, afraid she might offend him somehow. But he was watching her thoughtfully, his eyes probing her. Small smile appeared on his lips.

“I know a man who would be willing to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of those he loves,” he offered and Vera had to wonder why she felt a hidden meaning in his words. Probably because she was paranoid.

Do you? she almost asked him, keeping her mouth shut by force.

“He has been through a lot. Lost his father when he was too young. Never met his mother. And that’s just a fragment of what life had prepared for him...” he continued.

Paranoid, Veronika. There are many people of whom he could say that... how many of them are going to this church, though?

The man sighed. “He likes the candles too. He always had, their heat. The flames. Most people associate flames with Hell and suffering. He used to as well; sometimes he says that the world on fire
is all he can see.”

Vera’s head snapped to him. She only heard the phrase few days ago – Terri used it, when she was telling Vera about her conversation with Foggy, not quite understanding what he meant. It supposed to be a metaphor for Matt’s world, the way he saw it. He never shared that with Vera, but this man knew.

Matt had said to her his priest knew. Father Lantom.

The man was smiling knowingly now, slightly amused by Vera’s shocked expression and disability to speak.

“It seems we have a common friend. You can light a candle for him. He would appreciate it. I do it too, every day.”

Vera felt something very uncomfortable growing in her chest. “Aren’t the candles only for the dead people?” she asked, voice barely a whisper, the words heavy on her tongue.

His smile transformed into sympathetic one, a little patronizing, and he shook his head. “They don’t have to, no. They are also for those you would like to send a ray of hope, Vera.”

Her breath hitched, her heart picking up speed. “You know my name,” she stated the obvious, astonished. How the hell did he know her name?

“It’s hard to forget when you hear it repeatedly,” he noted, taking a candle from the bin, challenging her. She hesitantly did the same, absolutely taken aback by his exclaim.

“He…talks about me?”

Father Lantom ignited his candle with a long thin piece of wood, handing it to her. She accepted reluctantly, following his example, sending an approximation of a prayer for Matt’s safety. She hoped the God Matt believed in wasn’t picky about these and would keep him safe and bring him home despite the dubious form of the prayer.

“From time to time,” he hummed, the smirk on his face saying otherwise. Depends on your definition of ‘from time to time’.

“How did you know it was me?”

He honest to god shrugged. “I didn’t. But a young woman, coming to this church, talking about love, about a man favouring the safety of the others to his own, leaving to fight a war – relatively shortly after I haven’t heard from him or about the vigilante patrolling these streets? …I couldn’t be sure, of course. Your reaction was the best confirmation I could ever be offered.”

Wise man, this Father Lantom indeed. And stupid Vera. She couldn’t be more obvious, could she?

She returned her gaze to the candles, feeling his eyes on her. “He never told be about the world on fire. I only learned recently from someone else. It seems I’m the only one who he hadn’t shared this metaphor with.” I wonder why, she left unspoken, yet it hung in the air as if she said it out loud.

“I believe it’s because of the common sense.”

Vera turned to him, confused and curious. “Because of the common sense?” she parroted, clueless.

“Don’t you think most people – religious or not – see fire as an essential part of Hell?”
Vera thought about his words, nodding hesitantly, agreeing only partly – the religious ones? Sure. The others? Not so much… Vera herself always liked fire and she never thought of Hell when looking at it. And she wasn’t an arsonist either.

“I think we can both agree that Hell is not something pleasant. And Matthew associated flames with Hell too. Perhaps it’s a sin that he was always drawn to the candles when feeling this way. But there’s the catch. Fire doesn’t have to be synonymous with destruction and pain. It provides hope and safety as well. Candle in the dark. Torch illuminating the way, guiding. In some languages, hearth is associated with the warmth of family, home,” he made a pause, his gaze getting more intense and Vera felt tiny under it, tears slowly appearing in her eyes with no real reason. She was crying too often, dammit. How awkward was crying in front of a priest? ”Matthew’s viewing of fire changed not so long time ago. He spoke of a woman then. A woman, who sure made him want to sin…”

Vera gulped, wondering whether she was reading this right and Father Lantom was talking about her now (she hoped he was, because...well) – and if she should be feeling guilty for that. She kinda didn’t, in contrary, pride washed over her for a second; she quickly shook it off, well-aware that definitely was a sin.

“…But also made him to want to be a better man. And when he talked about her, he often compared her to the best kind of fire – the gentle one, safe, warm and bright - the candle, the torch, the hearth. The kind of fire he wouldn’t stand dying out.”

Vera gasped, not bothering with holding her tears anymore. She did wipe them away fast though, feeling silly. Jesus (blasphemy, Matt’s voice admonished her in her head, she was swearing in a church, how idiotic was that, even if she only did it in her mind), just few words about fire and she was on the edge again.

Delicate touch on her shoulder made her jump. He ignored her startle, squeezing carefully. “I can’t speak for God, but I can talk from experience. Matthew is a very stubborn man. Strong one too. And he always comes back to the candles for their warmth. This time will be no exception,” he offered kindly and Vera closed her eyes, breathing in shakily.

He always comes back to you.

Vera looked at him gratefully, trying her best to smile at the kind-hearted man. “Thank you, Father Lantom.”

“You know my name. So he talks about me too, huh?” One corner of his lips raised, vivid spark appearing in his eyes.

The smile came easier after his note. “From time to time.”

She might be leaving the church in relative peace, but it faded away too soon, during her afternoon shift. The conversation with yet another person close to Matt threw her over the edge, actually. She was punching the bag hard, soon exhausted as she was out of shape – she stubbornly continued until her legs felt too weak and she barely stumbled to her backpack, drinking whole bottle of water in one go, sitting down heavily. She was staring at the punching bag dully as it stopped moving too soon. When Matt was done with it, it kept swinging on the chain for god knows how long.

She huffed, pushing herself up, making herself to stretch at least a little so she was able to move the next day. She changed in hurry, packing her stuff as fast as possible. She walked home, alone, cold.
Hot shower, covers, charm on her neck and shot of whiskey to warm her chest.

Falling asleep, she thought of candlelight.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, this meeting was… a little unexpected to be honest. Not planned. So I hope it wasn’t that bad, because these too spontaneous ideas usually don’t end up very well.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is VERY LONG. Just fair warning.

Also, if you're up for something fluffy and you missed me posting a Christmas coda set between Damned If I Do and Damned If I Don't, you can find it here:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/13078317/chapters/29918754

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She texted Claire on Monday morning, Father Lantom’s words still in her mind, echoing in her skull persistently. She needed to believe Matt would return, and when he would, she wanted to be ready, because she had no doubt he would go straight back to the Devil business – which meant getting hurt, requiring stitching up.

Vera was sure Claire thought she was insane when she read her text, but she answered her anyway, offering several different times, including Wednesday morning, which worked perfectly for Vera, who had afternoon shift just like on Monday and Tuesday. The outlook of another sewing session helped her to make it through the shift and falling asleep without a liquid medicine. On Monday anyway.

Tuesday…well. She had Terri to cheer her up, who kept insisting the spring was coming to New York and she urgently needed new clothes, trying her best to talk Vera down into a shopping crusade as soon as possible. She was using her freaking puppy eyes and Vera was powerless against them, agreeing to shopping Saturday afternoon despite the fact she was decided to never say yes. Damn you, Theresa. I’m not in a shopping mood. Of course Vera could read the ulterior motives; Terri was just trying to distract her. Vera loved her for it, but since she knew what her best friend was doing, she kinda thought about it even more. She didn’t say that to her, naturally.

“Holy shit. Vera, this is one of the proudest moments in my life,” Terri exclaimed out of blue and Vera turned to her the second she finished taking an order, surprised.

“Why?” she hummed, paying attention rather to the two coffees she was making than her – dick move. Terri didn’t answer and Vera looked over her shoulder, finding her friend sort of frozen. She frowned at her, but handed the order before making her way to her, like a good employee she was. (Because she already was a shitty friend at the time, she was well-aware, she wasn’t exactly an excellent daughter and sister either and she was a caricature of a girlfriend since Matt was god knew where; she needed at least one role in her life to remain intact – probably failing miserably, considering she was lately drinking before coming to work, even only just slightly.)

Terri was awestruck. Vera, feeling completely ridiculous, waved her hand in front of her face – Terri gave her an unimpressed look. Oh, she was alive.

“Not funny. Just look at her. She was a star before she even knew what that was, she grew into a fucking supermodel and she made it through her teenage years without a single scandal, remaining famous but somehow sober. How is that even possible?” her friend babbled and Vera followed her gaze, eyes widening.
Oh. Right. Great. She should probably think of some excuse right now. Just in case Trish remembered her (she probably did, considering Nina answered her text, refusing her coffee invitation, because Vera kinda couldn’t breathe at the time) and wanted to ask why Vera never texted her.

And then Vera noticed the person next to her and her knees suddenly felt significantly weaker.

_Jesus Christ,_ why did everyone in Hell’s Kitchen know each other?

“Well, she doesn’t have a very good taste in friends, so that helps…” Terri murmured, eyeing the woman at Trish’s side as well. Wild black hair. Huge sunglasses. Thick grey scarf. Leather jacket. Camera bag over her shoulder. Be sure that freaking Laser eyes, who taught Vera how to drink coffee and saved her from Stick once, would be Trish Walker’s friend. Vera was fairly certain that the black haired woman was Trish’s _best friend_, adoptive sister actually, and the PI with drinking problem (and that part, Vera could confirm). Awesome.

“You have no idea who Trish Walker is, do you?” Terri asked her slightly disappointed as the pair made their way to the counter.

Vera hesitated. “Yeah, well. About that…”

“Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you?” Terri called out cheerfully, obviously nervous and Vera kinda couldn’t believe how excited her friend was about the meeting – the two women could barely check what drinks they were serving and she was already pressing. Terri never did that – she had enough years of working in the café to know better. Which meant she was out of her mind, which only led Vera to one possible conclusion; Terri had a woman crush.

_Hello, listen everyone, Theresa Gratton has a crush of size of Manhattan on someone who’s not a guy with a perfect ass!_

“Vera?” the blond blurted out, sounding a little surprised and Vera gave her an unsure smile, waving awkwardly just like when they had met in the hotel and Trish had been trying to find herself roomie.

Vera could _taste_ Terri’s shock in the air, feeling her friend wanted to snap her head to Vera to give her an incredulous look. Vera, the friend (a terrible one, but still a friend) she was, gathered herself and cleared her throat.

“Hey, Trish. This is Terri, the most amazing friend that ever walk the earth. Terri, this is Trish. We met when I was gaining my fit-box trainer license…”

“You’re having fit-box lessons?” Terri asked, baffled, gaze flickering between Vera and Trish as if she wasn’t sure who she should be addressing.

Trish laughed, causing Laser eyes to wince. Wait, what was her name? Dammit, Trish talked about her…

“No, I really don’t. I just train by myself and I wanted to do it right. It’s nice to meet you!” The blond extended her hand over the counter, taking Terri by surprise – she stared at the hand for full ten seconds, before she took it and smiled at Trish.

“Pleasure all mine. Vera didn’t mention she made friends in Allentown,” she said the second part of the sentence with sweet irony, lightly kicking Vera’s shin under the counter. Vera rolled her eyes, noticing Trish seemed a little wounded.

“You would think I’m just bragging,” Vera hummed and Trish grinned.
“I think I’ll live. But you owe me a coffee… and I mean like a meeting over a coffee, not a cup here, I’m gonna pay for this one. Middle sized plain latte, no sugar please? To go. Aaand,” she turned to Jessica - right, Jess, not Laser eyes - with a silent question.

Jessica was obviously very hangover, because she grunted and licked her lips, frowning. “Americano?”

“Middle size, tall cup?” Vera guessed and Trish eyed her, bewildered.

“Yeah,” Jessica huffed, already moving left. Trish raised an eyebrow, but shrugged and paid for both of them, following her. Vera could feel her searching gaze on herself as she was preparing her latte and she was pretty sure it wasn’t because Trish thought she was about to screw up their order. When she turned on her heels, writing her name on the cup, Trish gave her small smile.

“You look good,” she noted, big eyes, looking almost worried. Vera blinked, taken aback by her exclam, eyeing the black-haired woman as if she was asking her what that meant – but she didn’t pay attention at all, most likely staring blankly, maybe even having her eyes closed behind her sunglasses. “I mean, your friend answered your phone when you were in a hospital. Sounded pretty severe.”

And here it came. Vera tried to put on her best everything-is-alright expression. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was kinda the exact opposite, but now I’m perfectly healthy,” Vera reassured her, gaining a dubious look.

Terri approached them, placing the tall cup on the counter. “Oh, sorry. Name?”

“Laser eyes,” Vera replied automatically and Trish turned to Jessica, deadpanned expression.

“Really, Jess? This one?”

The woman smirked inconspicuously, taking her coffee, adding her secret ingredient. Trish just gaped, throwing her hand in the air. “Is that what she always does?” she demanded, partly shocked, partly outraged.

Vera couldn’t make herself feel or look guilty, only raised her hands in I-give-up-gesture “Hey, she’s the customer…”

Trish rolled her eyes again, taking her own cup, murmuring something about high-functioning alcoholics. “Thanks for the coffee. Text me or something when you feel like it. It was nice to meet you, Terri.”

Her friend lighted up like a Christmas tree and Vera supressed a giggle.

“Same here! Enjoy your coffee and have a nice day!” she called after them as they were leaving and the moment the doors closed behind them, she spun to Vera. “Alright, Mechy. Any other interesting things you forget to mention to me?”

Vera put on a mask of innocence, her mind racing. She didn’t have any other, right? Except maybe…

“Uhm. I have a meeting with Claire tomorrow? Because she’s been teaching me how to stich up people?” she offered and Terri gasped, her eyes going wider than when she met her celebrity crush. She blinked, turning around, greeting another customer. Vera really wasn’t sure what she should take
from that reaction, but she guessed Terri simply couldn’t find the right words.

Vera made her friend speechless. Today, the history was being written.

Her relatively good mood went to shit the moment she left the café, walking the dark cold streets no one patrolled anymore. With a sigh, she entered her apartment, taking a shot. She wasn’t tired at all. She wandered around the flat, thinking of what she could do – reading was still less than interesting activity and taking a long bath was definitely very low on her to-do list. She grabbed her backpack, making the only decision that made sense.

When she came back from Fogwell’s, legs and arms shaky with exhaustion, she felt a smile creeping on her lips at the idea of someone entering her flat after one a.m. Maybe next time she might even let the window open and climb up the fire escape just for perfection.

Getting up was less appealing. Once she came through Claire’s door, she asked Vera what the hell had she been doing instead of sleeping. Vera just shrugged and admitted that she was punching the bag. Claire seemed to be taken aback for a minute, before she replied that it was probably better than punching people, throwing in some Spanish word Vera thought was a curse. Vera couldn’t argue with that one, if only because if she was punching people, she would probably lose. Not everyone could be a kickass vigilante, after all.

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“I’m sorry, can I leave the application to you?” a girl Vera remembered serving earlier asked, bright smile on her face and Vera blinked in surprise, frowning at the paper. What application? Did she miss something? It was more than possible. She was out sometimes.

Time was… dragging. The nights were hard; she started sleeping in a hoodie and sweatpants, cold all the time, unsure whether it was just absence of warm itself or her weariness caused by the lack of quality sleep. She wasn’t stupid, she didn’t mix sleeping pills with alcohol, but since she was cold, she couldn’t give up the heat in her chest provided by the whiskey; so the drugs were out of picture. It was probably a good thing, since she was still having nightmares. The worst dreams were those that actually weren’t nightmares though. The worst waking ups were those with warm feeling around her waist, ghost of a gentle touch, non-existent huff of breath tickling her hairline, feeling of lips on her forehead. Nightmares she chased away with a glass; the good dreams she cried over, fully realizing the fact Matt was gone mostly because of her – for her. And that were just nights.

All the days seemed to be the same – whether she had a morning shift or the afternoon one, whether she was meeting with Claire or not, only significant day was Sunday, when she went to church, listening to the sermon, lighting a candle for Matt. The rest of her week was a blur. Days with Terri were better – Terri didn’t try so hard anymore, sometimes actually popping up a random question about Matt or their trainings and relationship in general; it might felt like a punch right to her gut every time, but it worked as a shock therapy well. The fact she often cried over it in the privacy of her apartment or the gym was only a small flaw in the plan.

Sometimes Foggy or Karen stopped by. Surprisingly enough, with Karen it was easier – Vera could tell her how she missed Matt, felt sorry for not hearing from him often enough (at all, but Karen didn’t need to know that), just talking about relationships like two ordinary women and in return, Karen told her about her part-time work in The Bulletin, her eyes shining. Foggy was… difficult. He kept shooting her pitiful looks, not quite able to find another topic, unsure how to treat her. Nina was the second easiest to talk to after Terri – most likely because she was the least involved, having plenty other things to discuss; with her, the world seemed almost normal.

Vera snapped from her thoughts when she heard the girl clearing her throat.
“Uhm… Sorry, what? What application?” Vera blurted out, smiling apologetically.

“The fit-box application you have on the counter? I filled it in, so…” she extended her hand with the paper, showing it to Vera. Vera noticed the words fit-box, professional trainer and Fogwell’s gym and her eyes widened in horror.


“Oh, yeah, of course. You can give it to me,” Terri hurried to the rescue, returning from her break, taking the satan’s paper from the girl’s hand. Vera took a very deep breath and it physically hurt her not to shot her friend an incredulous look. Or a murderous one.

Fit-box classes application. At Fogwell’s. There was no way this wasn’t about Vera and it wasn’t Terri’s doing.

“Thanks!” the girl beamed and ran from the café, leaving one very pissed off, one innocently smiling and one indifferent barista to deal with the consequences. Vera turned very slowly to her amazing orange-haired friend, mentally counting to million.

“Terri, you got a minute?” she asked her, voice perfectly calm, nails digging to her palm. Terri made small startled sound at her tone, nodding, walking few steps away with her.

*Breathe, Veronika. Breathe.*

“What the fuck is that?!?”

Well, Terri explained. She thought Vera could use a distraction and she loved fit-boxing and punching things. She was also convinced that her license was totally wasted. She swore she talked to Mr. Fogwell, who was absolutely alright with her having lessons there (and Vera wondered if he knew what he was agreeing to, the almost deaf old man he was) and she showed her the applications – the stock of applications actually, because apparently, the papers were on a counter for a week, ever since Trish came in and Terri made sure everything could work the right way. Terri pointed at the questionnaire about days the participants would prefer and their experience with fit-boxing, because she freaking thought of everything. She even got an old, but very loud stereo from Victor’s friend from the club and she bought eight pairs of wraps (there were four punching bags at Fogwell’s, how awesome was that) in case people wanted to borrow them, especially for their first lesson – that was for free, of course. Terri also talked to Mrs. Walker, if Vera could only have morning shifts from now – during a regular week anyway – she agreed under one condition; Terri had to find someone, who would be willing to take afternoon shifts. Apparently, Terri would do it, but it turned out that asking around was a good idea – Becky liked the idea too and actually would be grateful for that – that way, Terri could keep having shifts with Vera from time to time at least. Terri thought of literally everything, she just kinda forgot to ask if Vera was on board with that and if she was ready.

Vera listened to her excited babbling, bewildered and slightly amazed, the anger fading away. Terri must have recognized it, because she grinned.

“I’m still not okay that you made all of this behind my back. Plus, a professional trainer? Really? These people will expect Rocky freaking Balboa…” Vera complained, and Terri grinned even wider.

“Hush, you love me,” Terri opposed and one corner of Vera’s lips twitched in amusement. She sighed.
“Heaven help me, I do.”

“I know. Hug it out, come on,” she challenged her and Vera chuckled, throwing her arms around her, Terri’s braid smacking her cheek.

“Aright, this is all sweet and everything, but do you guys think I could actually get some help in here?” Michelle called out and both Vera and Terri snapped their head in her direction. They left her alone at the counter. There was a line forming. They quickly let go.

“Sorry,” Vera apologized honestly and Michelle just rolled her eyes.

“It was totally worth it, wasn’t it?” Terri hissed at her a minute later, when Michelle actually took her break, leaving them for a change.

“Totally worth it,” Vera confirmed, smiling at another customer, catching herself meaning it.

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The thing was that finding a sense in all of those applications wasn’t that hard – Vera actually managed to sorted it out somehow, creating three groups (three groups – she had fucking nineteen people who were interested, she thought it was mostly because of the free lesson, but still), more or less at the same level. Sometimes she had to priority the days to experience, but she hoped it wasn’t that bad. Imagining she was the one leading the lesson was significantly harder, but that wouldn’t be happening until next week. Because next week, she had fucking three fit-box lessons. People watching her. People expecting her to teach them something. She wondered how much whiskey she needed before she would be able to stand in front of them. She decided a lot.

She went to Fogwell’s early, talking to the owner, who actually did remember his conversation with Terri and what he agreed to. They made a deal that three days a week, he would close early for public apart from the participants, dealing with charging her once it was all sorted out a little. It seemed too easy. She stayed after, trying out some of songs she usually used for her own workout, wanting to figure out choreography. It was ridiculous how much fun she had while doing it, finishing after midnight, exhausted, but with plenty of endorphins in her system. After quite a long time, she was warm, falling asleep almost happy. She needed to bake Terri a cake or something. This was a way to go.

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Vera didn’t get a shot for courage before her first lesson – she was afraid people would be able to tell, because she was almost sure that one glass wouldn’t be enough anyway. Instead, she went to Fogwell’s earlier with headphones in her ears; she was incredibly relieved when she found only two people apart from the owner in, leaving relatively soon. When the owner left, she wasn’t sure. She was trying out the punches only lightly, not wanting to wear herself out ahead, when a touch on her shoulder scared the shit out of her.

Vera spun on instinct, her fist shooting out, aiming to the intruder’s face, headphones flying around her head. She only glanced brown wild hair as the man ducked, dodging her punch only by inch. Intense feeling of déjà-vu washed over her and she gasped, eyeing the man before she could decide what hit she would go for next. She went for none. Not because she knew the man – no, it wasn’t Matt, of course not, what would he be doing here – but because he straightened, taking two quick steps back, palms turned in no harm gesture.

“Easy, Vera! Not here to hurt you,” he announced, little startled and she felt the air being knocked
out of her chest, the feeling of déjà-vu getting stronger when hearing her name. Jesus Christ.

He didn’t look like Matt, maybe the hair colour was the same if she was searching for similarities, but that was all. The face was completely different, quite pretty though, by general opinion she guessed, light green-blue eyes. He was wearing a sports jacket, body build of someone who had an interest in working out. Nope, not similar at all.

She would believe what he was saying, but there was one huge catch. She felt silly, but she liked her safety, she wouldn’t do the mistake of trusting a stranger creeping behind her back – she didn’t let her hands fall down.

“How the hell do you know my name?” Vera blurted out, taking a small step back, ready to move to defend herself.

He smiled innocently, walking backwards to show her he meant it. “Caroline, the other barista told me when I asked about the lessons?” he offered and Vera huffed, relaxing, her cheeks flushing. Of course. It was probably about time, it was logical that someone walked in. And she almost punched him in the face. Sakra. Thank god he had quick reflexes.

Vera cleared her throat, smiling apologetically. “Sorry. I got… a little consumed by…” she gestured around the punching back and he laughed easily, waving it off.

“My bad, should have known better. I’m Bryan.”

The first thing that came to her mind was I’m Vera, naturally. But then… the unpleasant feeling that hit her when he called her that, here, in the gym, punching bags, working out and the dark outside…. Could she work with that?

“Veronica. I go by Vera too, yeah, but I feel like Nica sounds better. So, if you’re okay with that, I’m Nica. Nice to meet you. And seriously, sorry,” she repeated, hoping she could erase the terrible first impression she had made.

“Whatever you say, coach,” he saluted and Vera sighed in relief.

The rest of the crew followed soon after him. Vera knew most of the faces from the café – it made sense –, but she introduced to everyone individually again, trying to remember their names, asking them about their experiences once more. Bryan shocked her; he used to box like a pro while in high school.

“You wrote you had no experience in fit-boxing,” she complained, checking the paper again.

He shrugged, expression a little smug. “Well, I don’t. Not in fit-boxing.”

Bryan was… easy-going. Vera knew she could afford to shoot him an annoyed look and he would laughed it off – he did.

“Your choice. You’re gonna be bored,” she warned him and showed the actual newbies to the world of boxing and fit-boxing how to wrap their hands, using six pairs of bandages from her reserves by Terri (no, seriously, she thought of everything).

Intense eyes found hers, glaring into her soul and she shivered at the violation of her privacy. “Somehow I doubt it.”

Vera blinked and cleared her throat, checking on everyone, ignoring the heavy feeling in her stomach. She wasn’t sure if it was the words and his gaze on her or just her stage fright getting
stronger.

“So. Ready? Like I said, my name is Nica, whatever you need, don’t hesitate to approach me. Alright, some basic rules…” She tried her best to stop her voice from shaking, as all the eyes were on her (she hated it, she hated people watching her closely so much, whose idiotic idea this was?), seven people listening to her attentively. “Hey, from what I understand, you’re mostly beginners, but don’t worry about it. We’ll start easy and I’ll try my best to do the lesson enjoyable. If you want me to slow down, I will. If you’re bored and thinking I’m taking it too easy on you, I’ll deal with it too. Also, I need someone to be with me on my bag, so… volunteer?”

“He’s the only guy. I say he goes for it,” one girl – Vera thought her name was Darina – exclaimed and the rest of the group hummed in agreement.

Vera felt one corner of her lips rose. “You just want something nice to look at, don’t you? You should be keeping your eyes on me, at least most of the time, so you don’t hurt yourself by going with wrong arm or leg…”

Some girls giggled and Bryan approached the soon-to-be-theirs punching bag with a grin. Shit. What she just said… could that be considered flirting? That was not her intention.

“I’ll try my best to be a good example too,” he declared, punching the bag hard. Show-off.

“Alright. Whatever. So, the basic punches…”

Bryan wasn’t a bad bag partner – Vera could tell he was holding back a little, because he didn’t want the bag to hit her, but he was clearly enjoying himself nevertheless. Vera found herself enjoying it too – she walked between the participants, supporting them to blow the bag harder, cheering them up and correcting them from time to time, but not being an asshole about it. They took it as champs, breathing heavily, smiling. It was amazing. And the time was flying too fast.

“Alright, guys… or girls, whatever. We lost a little time at the beginning, so we can take like two more songs or we can use it for work out-“

“Please don’t,” the girl, who outed the fit-box application in the café to Vera, whined and Vera looked around, finding most of the group kinda exhausted; no one asked her to slow down during the lesson though. “No work out today.”

Vera shrugged and offered two more songs as she promised, one of them allowing them to screw her teaching and hit the bag however they wanted – she remembered her favourite coach to do that and she loved it too, somehow finding strength in them despite looking really tired. Then they did stretching and it was over. She couldn’t believe it. Her first lesson was over. She managed it and she felt awesome.

And the people must have like it too, because they signed on a list for next week, leaving with tired smiles and thanks on their lips.

“You have a really good boxing technique,” she heard a male voice behind her as she was cleaning the bags, the participants slowly leaving. Vera turned around, facing Bryan. He seemed to mean it, honesty all over his face.

It wasn’t hard to figure out where she learnt it right. But the memory of it stung and she suddenly felt her throat tightening. She gulped and made herself to smile. It’s a compliment, Vera. From someone who actually did boxing.
“Good teacher,” Vera hummed, because she was just great at lying by omission. Bryan would probably think she was talking about another lecturer; of course, she had someone else in her mind. Someone, who had boxing in his blood and soul, just like any kind of fighting, fighting against the whole world, because the world seemed to hate him.

Shit, she needed to go to church on Sunday again.

“Yes? Where did you get your licence? From what I heard, some of the lectures are shit when it comes to actual boxing,” he pried and she felt the lump in her throat growing.

“Allentown.” Vera raised her gaze to him, only to quickly look away. She didn’t like the way he was looking at her. She was pretty sure her teacher wouldn’t like that either – even though he couldn’t exactly see it.

“Huh.”

Yeah, huh. She finished the cleaning, planning on changing her clothes. She eyed him, indecisive. She didn’t want to be rude, but... “I’m just gonna…uhm…change and lock up, so…”

One of the corners of his lips twitched. “Sure. Sorry. I should be going as well.”

She did not sigh in relief. That would be quite rude. “Of course. See you next week?” she offered lightly, realizing her mistake when his face lighted up. Dammit, Veronika.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” With those words, he was gone. Vera ran hand down her face, sighing. She was just overthinking thing again. He was just being nice…. Right?

She packed her stuff, taking home the sweaty bandages she leaned, intending to wash them for another group, who would come two evenings later. She smiled at the thought, pleasantly surprised at the outcome of her night. It was good. She could handle the next crew as too. It was fun.

She turned off the lights and coldness crept down her spine. Now, when she was alone… she felt almost guilty. She really enjoyed today. Without Matt. It was his gym, his memories. Their memories. She quickly locked up, trying to chase away the thought.

When she went to sleep, Matt’s accusing eyes followed her, squinting as she got up, replacing the warm of his arms by burning taste of good-night whiskey. Jesus, she was becoming an alcoholic.

“Sorry,” she murmured, apologizing mainly for feeling good in the gym without him. His eyes softened and the image in her mind dispersed, calm washing over her instead. She slept surprisingly well.

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Wednesday course went well too – there were actually two guys and all of the participants had at least some experience, so she could push a little harder, using choreographies that were more complicated. Friday wasn’t bad either, but she noticed some people didn’t sign up for another lesson – she didn’t mind, since on Wednesday, one of the girls, Kate, asked her whether she could go twice a week.

She actually stopped by church on Thursday and Sunday, lighting a candle both times, sending another approximation of a prayer, squeezing her charm in her hand. She added a silent apology, because she couldn’t help feeling like she was betraying Matt a little with each evening she spent at Fogwell’s – a good evening – without him. She went to cemetery as well, bringing fresh flowers to Jack Murdock’s grave, hoping Matt would appreciate it; she decided she would do that every week.
It felt right.

Chapter End Notes

Long and heavy. Sorry. I needed to get somewhere with this chapter, because in the next one is going to be a little messy - probably in a different way than you're thinking ;)
Keep On Hoping

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Yeah, not really a chapter.

Just wanted to let you know, that there is a coda/sidefic/whatever to this fic.

It’s a crossover with Arrow (I know, DC x Marvel, kill me), but the comic universes don’t collide much in case that would discourage you from reading it; in case it would encourage you in fact, it’s definitely colliding! :D

You can find it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/13167954 or just find it on my profile here or on wattpad (Anika_Ann_M).

If you hate the idea of reading it, you can find in notes down below some (un)important facts the fic brings to Damned If I Don’t storyline, so you can just check these. Doesn’t change the fact I would be delighted if you read the fic and left a comment or kudos if you felt like it.

Chapter End Notes

Important facts for Damned If I Don’t:
- There aren’t many people who have the honour to call Vera Vera anymore, especially if it’s someone who she met recently. Oliver Queen is one of them though.
- Vera met another vigilante, found out she got really good at stitching people up and figured out another secret identity.
- She might have made a friend of two and got some emotional support from unexpected places.
- Foggy is struggling with keeping the lights on in the office of Nelson & Murdock and he told Vera, together with the fact he considers shutting it down entirely; he also have doubts about Matt coming back...like ever.
- Vera found out there are people out here, who apparently took vigilante business in Hell’s Kitchen to their hands. (Now who that could be...)
- And probably most importantly: Vera learned Matt is alive even though he changed his outfit and he was currently in Cambodia (Felicity sent her photos from a security camera).
Vera bought brass knuckles. She would be lying through her teeth if she claimed she had no idea why, but truth to be told… she wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like she planned to become an actual vigilante and she had been doing enough punching, thank you very much, but she just did it. She tried to convince herself it was simply for her own protection, she did wear them in her purse just like her pepper spray, but she was failing miserably. The point was — she had them. Just in case.

To balance her craziness, she called Trish to find out if she was free any time soon, because Vera still owed her coffee and it might be nice to talk to someone who wasn’t engaged in vigilante business or was her student.

“Vera! Hey! I’m so glad you called!” she burst out and Vera was sort of taken aback by her enthusiasm. “I actually wanted to call you, but I didn’t want to bother…”

“You wouldn’t bother, Trish…. Things were just… a little crazy. Terri – my friend from the café, the one I introduced you – she organized fit-box lessons for me as a trainer without knowing about it, so I was kinda busy. I know you’re always busy too, but- yeah…. So, how are things? You think you could find some time in your schedule?” she asked hesitantly, hearing loud Ms. Walker can I have your attention?! in the background. Guess she choose a wrong time.

“In a minute,” Trish hissed back and Vera understood it wasn’t meant for her. “That’s great, I would love to hear about that. I’m pretty sure I can squeeze a meeting with my friend somewhere. Maybe not coffee though, so a dinner? Or lunch? How about Thursday? Thursday’s good? Jesus Christ, give me few seconds to deal with my phone call!”

Vera winced as she heard Trish being pissed off and loud. Very authoritative. The person she was talking to apparently shut up. Vera was pleasantly surprised Trish would find time for her so soon – it was only Monday – and she sounded quite eager to find it. Huh. “Okay. Dinner’s good. Choose place and time and I’ll be there. Sorry for keeping you-“

“You’re not keeping me from anything, Vera, they are some people who need to learn a thing or two about privacy and patience,” she murmured, raising her voice at privacy and patience, as if she was giving the said person a hint. “I’ll text you. Have a nice day.”

“You too. You know, try to have one…”

Trish just laughed and hung up. So that went well.

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Monday evening was… nice. She had some regular attendants now, finally remembering their names and they were excited about each lesson. In a good spirit, they even played a game of some sort and they welcomed it with enthusiasm just like when she pulled out the free punching for the first time. She also asked them to share any song they would like her to make a choreography for; they immediately blurted out Eye Of The Tiger – Vera laughed at that, but promised to try something out.

Bryan stayed a little longer, watching her hesitantly as she went cleaning the bags like usual. “Need help with those?”
The offer surprised her, but she quickly gathered herself. She smiled at him, tossing him one rag – he caught it with no trouble, grinning. Bryan was…not just easy-going. He was really nice, throwing jokes around, but mostly kind ones. He started attending on Fridays as well, filling the gap that appeared for some reason – Vera blamed the Friday night being the night of hanging out with people. Bryan apparently didn’t mind. He was always smiling – apart from that one moment someone called him a show-off (and maybe he was throwing punches harder than usual, Vera thought he might have a small crush on Rita, one of the girl attending, and he was just trying to impress her) on said Friday lesson; that second, his face twisted in ugly grimace and he punched the bag with such strength that Vera would definitely receive a blow to her face if she was standing on the other side of the bag – luckily, she didn’t. But otherwise, he was simply a nice guy.

“I have one request too,” he hummed and Vera snapped from her thoughts, looking at him encouragingly.

“Shoot.”

“Just The Way You Are,” he suggested with a genuine smile. Vera was pretty sure she heard wrong. Or that she was shitting her.

“Just The Way You Are?” she reassured herself, biting her cheek, waiting for him to crack. But he nodded, silent (and a little ashamed) yeah leaving his lips. Her eyebrows shot up. “Bruno Mars? Seriously?”

He made a wounded face. “What’s wrong with that?”

She unfroze as she realized she stopped the cleaning and nodded. “Alright. I’ll try to find some remix and see what I can do.”

He brightened up like Christmas tree. “Deal. It a fitting song, you know,” he flashed her another smile and her heart jumped as she got a vague idea of what he meant. She mentally rolled her eyes – pride is a sin, Veronika, you’re reading too much to it, overthinking, again.

“I wouldn’t guess you a Bruno Mars fan,” she ignored his note, hoping she was right and it was simply a friendly reminder of her non-existent awesomeness.

“I live to surprise,” he exclaimed confidently and they finished the cleaning in silence. Vera couldn’t say it was uncomfortable one though. Just silence. He left with a small wave, still smiling. Vera couldn’t resist smiling too and even though she would deny it later, she put on Bruno Mars and figured the song out before she went home, just like the other one requested. And somehow, she realized that this was a way to go.

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Vera couldn’t tell she was exactly on a cloud number nine, but she liked to think she was quite decent pretty-much-girlfriend, reliable employee (with persistent need to get a whiskey coffee in the morning, but seriously, she seemed unable to function without coffee now), good trainer and she was almost confident she could add friend to the list. She managed a movie night with Terri, making the terrible slip to offer her place and send Terri to the fridge, almost empty bottle and one full, bought previous day, coming to light. (Terri was incredibly pissed off. And sorry. So instead of a movie, she made Vera talk about how much she missed Matt and how guilty she felt for being happy from time to time and told her about her nightmares and dreams and it was awfully embarrassing, they hugged for like an hour and then they put on the cheesiest comedy they could find on the internet, because they planned to watch some sob-through-it-all-movie before and they decided please no.) Anyway, she spent Tuesday with Terri, Wednesday with her lesson and cleaning up the gym and Thursday
evening with Trish.

And the Thursday was surprisingly the most difficult. Vera didn’t mind Trish was late and she had to
wait in front of the restaurant, because the waiter though she was a stalker who somehow found out
Trish Walker was having a reservation that evening and she wanted to sneak in, she could live with
that and the look on his face when they walked in with Trish was actually priceless. Vera told Trish
about the lessons, learning about Trish’s annoying boss in return, and Vera even managed to answer
her questions about Matt, reciting the learned story about him leaving (even though it was getting
harder and harder to lie to people – it had been two months since he left and it was suspicious).

The bombshell dropped about an hour after they both finished their meals. Trish was watching Vera,
biting her lip, hesitating. Vera didn’t say a word, but tried her best to look approachable and willing
to listen whatever she had to say, even though she had no idea what Trish could possibly want and
was obviously afraid to go for it. The only thing that came to her mind was her lessons – but Trish
wanted to always work out alone, right? And it wasn’t something she would be scared to ask. So
what was it about?

“Alright. Vera, I… I told you I actually wanted to call you, right?” she begun and Vera nodded in
anticipation. “I… have a question to ask. Maybe a favour?” She grimaced, wrinkling her nose.

“O-okay. That sounds ominous,” Vera joked, finding Trish grimacing even more.

“It kinda is.”

Vera couldn’t hold her expression, one eyebrow up. It was ominous? “Alright. Shoot.”

“I need to know your opinion about something… and it would be absolutely awesome if you came
to my show to share it,” she blurted out, eyes big, hopeful and pleading and Vera stared at her,
slowly decoding her words. When she finally did, confirming she heard her right and she was
actually asked what she thought she was asked, she shrieked.

“You want me to what?”

She covered her mouth the second that weird high-pitched terrified sound left her lips, few people
sitting around them snapping their head in her direction. Trish closed her eyes shut, pressing her lips
together, inconspicuously shaking her head, as if this wasn’t the reaction she expected – definitely
not the reaction she wanted Vera to have though.


wasn’t like she had much to offer.

Trish was still looking at her timidly, expecting a resolute no. Well, opinion? She could give her one,
probably. Coming to her show? That was a hell no, Trish wasn’t wrong about that.

“It’s… I understand if you say no. If you don’t want to come, I’ll just quote you before I ask the
audience. It’s about vigilante justice. There are rumours the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen bailed on people,
disappearing…” she started explaining and Vera’s heart stopped, before picking up some serious
gallop, her blood buzzing loudly in her ears, muffling Trish’s next words.

Jesus Christ. Trish wanted her to talk about Matt’s disappearance. She couldn’t manage that. And
why the hell would Trish want that? Why Vera? There were literally hundreds of people who would
want to- oh. OH.
‘I know where I know you from!’

‘You do?’

‘Yep. You’re the girl from the Collins’ case, aren’t you?’

This was not happening. Trish didn’t want her to talk about vigilantes because she was saved by the Devil and publicly talked about it – well, in the court room anyway, it was the reporters who blab it out. She would never ever live it down, would she? The freaking dirty cop would follow her like a death weight for the rest of her life.

Don’t be dramatic, Veronika. Only for the rest of your stay in New York. Vera felt new wave of nausea at the thought.

Pressure on her hand and nails digging to her skin snapped her from her trance and she blinked – she didn’t even realize she closed her eyes. Trish was watching her cautiously, worry written in her face. Still talking. Vera tried her best to turn on the audio input.

“Vera? Are you okay? Forget it, alright? You don’t need to do it.” Trish didn’t just look worried. She sounded concerned too.

Vera made herself to breathe in, realizing she also had tears in her eyes. Jesus, no wonder Trish wore the slightly freaked out mask – Vera was freaking out. She would bet her savings she was white as a sheet of paper too. Wonderful.

She cleared her throat. “I’m fine. Sorry… just really caught off guard. You were saying? I zoned out somewhere around disappearing-”

Trish squeezed her hand before letting go. “Vera, like I said. Forget it. You’re paler that this tablecloth. Seriously. It was just a question,” Trish assured her, voice soothing and patient, speaking slowly.

Vera breathed in again. “You said you wanted my opinion on something? I can do that, I guess. But god, no speaking in front on anyone. I mean I know it would be in studio, probably just you and me and maybe a few people around, but… I can’t.”

Trish eyed her, indecisive, while Vera was wondering where the hell the words she just spoke came from. She didn’t even want to give an opinion on anything. Why did she offer? Her voice was shaking, dammit, and her hands trembling too. Her own body was screaming one big fat no.

“Ohay. Just… do you really think he’s gone? Or that’s he’s hurt or something? Badly?”

Yes. Probably. If he’s even still alive. The Cambodia photos were scary enough.

She licked her lips. “Yeah, I think so. I don’t believe he would just… bail on Hell’s Kitchen. I mean, the whole time he had been out there – well, as far as I know – he always stayed here. He took care of people in Hell’s Kitchen. He could have gone anywhere, but he didn’t, as if he was tied to this place. He just appeared one day, as if he couldn’t ignore all the suffering around him anymore. I don’t think he left or just decided to quit unless he had a very serious reason. Like an injury for example.” Someone else’s injury.

Trish was observing her with her mouth slightly hanging open and Vera realized she must have been talking with too much interest. Too much emotions. Oh dammit. Well, it wasn’t like she was lying – she was convinced about what she said. Matt wouldn’t leave Hell’s Kitchen for nothing.
Vera shushed the voice in her head and sipped from her glass of water.

“Oh shit, I so should have record that. Give me a sec,” Trish mumbled, pulling out small notepad from her purse, writing down furiously. Vera blinked at her action, not wanting to think why she was carrying a notebook on her while on dinner with a friend. Then again, she obviously wanted to ask Vera things, so she just came here prepared. It was kinda scary, but Vera tried to convince herself that Trish didn’t squeeze Vera in her schedule only for that.

Trish looked up from her notes, eyes curious and wide. Seriously – she did have distinctive mimics. Her face expressions were easily readable. She was super-excited.

Vera huffed. “Anything else?”

“I don’t know if you heard about it – it seems there are some people, who are trying to compensate his absence,” she asked and Vera could see her inner fight – she wanted to switch to full reporter or radio host or whatever mode, but she was holding back for Vera’s sake. It was nice.

“Yeah… I heard,” Vera admitted hesitantly and Trish’s eyes gleamed. Oh god, no.

“What do you think? Is it right? Are they doing it right? I mean, vigilantism is illegal. And from what I read, they are not exactly excellent at it and they don’t hide their faces. Why are they doing this? For fame? It makes them potential targets—” she shot one question after another and Vera barely followed.

Those were not nice questions. Vera didn’t have this sorted out, she only found out few days ago. And if Trish wanted to somehow present her opinion to public – Jesus, how crazy was that? – she needed to think it through. “Uhm… just… give a minute…”

Trish smiled sympathetically (and a little apologetically) and nodded, putting the pen and notepad away; Vera found herself relaxing as she did so.

And really, what did Vera think about all this?

“Okay…. Uhm. First of all – I think is kinda awesome, that one man can inspire people to stand up for others, making them look around and wonder if they can do anything to help. I mean, vigilantism is illegal – I know it, you know it, the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen sure knows it and I would take a wild guess and say the people you’re talking about, they know it as well. But it doesn’t stop them. How they do it… well. That’s a tough question. I mean, it’s easy to say that if they want to help people, they should just join police academy. But maybe they can’t for some reason and that didn’t stop them either. Or… I don’t know. I can’t see in their heads. Just like I can’t sort the moral dilemma for all people. They have to make their own opinion. My opinion? Sure, go for it, it’s great. But they should think about the consequences. One day the mugger of whatever might be stronger than them and they lose – they might even lose their lives. They can be caught and in the eyes of the law, they are just as bad criminals as the people they are trying to stop. So I guess they should think it through very hard if it’s worth it.”

She had no idea at which point Trish grabbed her pen again and start scribing. Vera was lost in her own thoughts, the brass knuckles heavy in her purse. Was it worth it? For Matt, it always was – then again, he was fucking good at what he was doing. Yet, it didn’t mean there was no possibility of ending up behind bars. And he had too much experience with getting hurt and it wasn’t just scratches; she was thinking cuts, stab wounds, bullet wounds, concussions and broken bones. The patchwork of scars on his body proved it. But what about Vera? Could she ever done what he was
doing all the time and made it as natural as breathing? Probably not. She was too much of a coward. She might tell herself she had too much to lose – her family, friends – but hell if Matt didn’t have too much to lose as well. He was just willing to give it all up for the sake of others.

“Is it?” Trish asked, barely audible, looking at Vera from under eyelashes as she was still bended over her notes.

Vera couldn’t help it. She chuckled as the answer hit her all of sudden. Trish raised an eyebrow. “The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen saved my life, Trish, more than once. What do you think?”

She smirked and wrote down three letters.

Yes.

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The rest of the diner was uneventful – they talked about everything and anything, from med school to being a childhood star and blond. Trish tried really hard to keep the topics light and paid for the dinner (Vera was secretly glad, the restaurant was expensive as hell). She hugged the shit out of Vera outside, taking a cab, while Vera decided to walk – naturally. She walked rather quickly, because it was drizzling and she didn’t have an umbrella (she was unpleasantly surprised that April weather was just as unpredictable in New York as in Czechia).

The restaurant wasn’t that far – she was walking with her phone only for few minutes before she found herself in familiar space, putting the GPS away. She continued on autopilot, her mind wandering far, far away from these streets. She thought of what she said to Trish. They were mostly the first things that actually came to her mind and those were usually the honest ones, the right ones. She just hoped she didn’t say anything that would have consequences.

And then she heard it. The muffled scream and a bang. Vera wasn’t stupid. It was coming from an alley. And seriously, why anything nice ever happened in the back alley. (Kissing Matt didn’t count. He was an exception for lots of things.)

Vera walked faster, fully intending to be a good citizen, peek in the alley and call the cops. Because that was what people did. Calling the cops. When they didn’t just give a fucking opinion to Trish freaking Walker about positive effect of vigilanting. Jesus.

Vera only saw two shadows as she glanced in the alleyway. Two people. One of them female, rather tiny. Another one male, hitting her. She was crying. Could this be more cliché? Vera didn’t think about it too hard, intending to pull out a phone.

As the universe wanted it, she didn’t find the phone first. No. She found something more metallic and heavier. Her heart skipped a beat as she ran her fingers over the brass knuckles.

Bad idea, BAD IDEA, TERRIBLE IDEA!

She squeezed one of it firmly, putting it on. What was the line?

“Hey, asshole!” she yelled with much more bravado than she felt, making her way to them resolutely, mentally cursing. Ježišmarja. Are you crazy, Veronika?!

The taller figure froze, fist prepared to place another blow, glancing in her direction. Coming closer, Vera could see the woman’s top was torn. Darkness covered her vision for a second, her dinner rolling over in her stomach.
“Keep walking, missy,” he shot back, unimpressed and looked back at the woman, punching her face. The sound it made sent jolt of something right to Vera’s fingertips and it was not a pleasant feeling. She gasped, pacing closer, watching the man rather than his victim, because she looked awful and Vera couldn’t stand looking at her.

The man’s gaze shot to her again and he squinted. “Didn’t understand or what? Get lost,” he spit out, not hitting the woman though. He was watching Vera cautiously and for a split second, Vera thought he might run away – if anything else, Vera was a witness and that wasn’t convenient for him – and she kinda wished he would. It would make it so much easier…

“I can’t do that. Now, I’m gonna call the police-“ Vera said, aiming for calm tone, steady voice, but it was trembling like never. Oh, maybe except the time when she was kidnapped. Or when Matt was kidnapped. Good times.

He shoved the woman aside, taking few furious steps to Vera. “You won’t do a fucking thing,” he ordered, straightening his shoulders, somehow growing in size. Jesus, how people did that? Matt could do it too and it made him look really intimidating.

Vera didn’t have time to think about it. He raised his fist to strike and Vera quickly ducked, his hand missing her face by inches. Holy-

She threw a punch on her own, aiming to his gut with her left hand – without the brass knuckle. Her fist collided with a soft mass, but it still hurt like a bitch. She got why Matt wore wraps for this. But if the whimper the man let out was anything to go by, she wasn’t the only one hurting.

“Bitch,” he hissed and she barely managed to jump aside as he got up and tried to hit her again. She didn’t like him being so close.

Vera stretched out her right hand and her brass knuckle met his cheek with a sound of serious pain. Hers and his, because Jesus the metal was fucking hard against her fingers. She clenched her teeth and kicked out – she scored a decent front kick to his abdomen he wasn’t covering, because he was too busy with his bleeding cheek.

She made him bleed. Quite a lot. Vera couldn’t tear her gaze from the wound.

Silent cry snapped her from the trance and she did the only thing she could think of. “Run!” she yelled after the woman and she obediently pushed from a wall she was resting against ever since the man let her go and made her shaky legs moving.

Something hit her side heavily and she let out a surprised sound as the blow made her stumble. Ow. That hurt like a bitch.

Vera returned her focus to the man only to block his other blow with her forearm and another one with her thigh, using her elbow since he got so conveniently close – she hit the side of his jaw and he lost his guard for only a moment. The moment was enough. She booted his side, colliding with his ribs, her right hand shooting shortly after to deliver an uppercut.

Jackpot. His head was thrown back and he stumbled backwards, giving her space, one hand protecting his newest sore spot, other one outstretched to gain his balance. Oh thank god. She knew what to do with this. Pull and cut his core out. Send him to the ground. Her muscles remembered. He hit the pavement with heavy thud and colourful cursing.

Unlike Matt, Vera wasn’t masochistic or suicidal and she could recall his very first lesson well. Before the man could climb up to his feet, she was at the end of the alley, appearing on another main
street.

She clutched her purse closer to her side, hiding her right hand in it and walked home as if someone was chasing her and she didn’t want to drag his attention to her, her fingers holding on her weapon as if her life depended on it.

Vera entered the apartment, shaking, kicking off her shoes, heading straight to the bathroom. Only then she pulled out her right hand – it was bloody. It wasn’t her blood, as she found out once she washed it off – her skin was intact apart from the angry reddening, which would surely change colour to blue soon. The thing that sucked was that her purse was bloody too. Everything was bloody – her coat on her elbow, her purse, her hands – all she could see was the red liquid. She leaned onto the basin, clenching her fingers around its edges, breathing heavily, eyes closed.


She snapped her eyes open, meeting her own reflection in the mirror. She was white as a ghost. Scarily white. She was scared. Her lips were trembling, cold tears rolling down her face, eyes red. And even though she couldn’t see it now, the little charm was heavy and hot against her chest. She wiped dry her hands and stripped her coat, shaky fingers tracing Matt’s gift, before she squeezed it, like clasping a straw.

It was okay. She was okay and the woman would be okay too. She helped her. It’s gonna be okay.

Vera decided she really needed to remove the word okay from her vocabulary.

She let go the charm after what could be hours, scrubbing the stains on her clothes until she couldn’t see even a trace of pink. She showered slowly, trying to make her muscles relax, but they were still vibrating due to the adrenalin, fear and weirdest – and quite unpleasant – excitement. Her heart was still hammering when she drowned two glasses of whiskey in her chest, lying to her bed without any expectation of actually falling asleep.

She did. The adrenalin was slowly fading away, weariness covering her better than her blanket ever could and she drifted away to the land of nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

So…that was fun.

Alternative chapter title – Vera does some stupid shit. Still not sure which part I’m talking about though.
Vera didn’t sleep well. Nightmares were haunting her (what else was new) and the last dream she could remember had Matt in it, dropping by her window. He was dressed in the Devil’s outfit, no mask on, just like he used to be appearing in her apartment at night. He was angry with her – no, he was pissed off, but he didn’t yell or something, he was giving her the silent treatment, his eyes god knew why accusing. Vera woke up, sheets soaked with sweat, her phone claiming half past three. She was so tired she would cry, her stomach hurt and her knuckles were definitely bruised, red fading away, replaced by lilac – perfect. She took a shower, prepared her daily fuel and went to work early.

Of course, her co-workers didn’t come until 5:15. Barbara didn’t give her a second look, while Terri raised her eyebrow at Vera’s early arrival, eyes scanning her – Vera didn’t blame her, since lately she was being rather late, always trying to wash away the odour of alcohol from her mouth (that morning she brushed her teeth three times). The thing was, Terri didn’t ask anything, which Vera appreciated – what she didn’t though was the persistent look Terri was giving her. Vera felt her friend’s burning gaze examining every inch of her as she was watching her, squinting, while not saying a single word and it was kinda terrifying.

Vera thought it was terrifying. At least until Terri came to her and wordlessly squeezed her hand. Not gently. Firmly. And over her knuckles.

Vera didn’t expect that and she couldn’t help it - she hissed in pain, her hand instinctively jerking away, shooting Terri a wounded look. Why did she do that?!

Terri’s face twisted, her teeth clicking together, eyes widening. Ah-uh. That didn’t look good. But she couldn’t know, right? She just noticed her light bruising and- wanted Vera to hurt?

“You and I? We need to talk. Right now!” Terri ordered and grabbed her forearm this time, dragging her away from Barbara’s ears. Vera quickly checked the café – still empty. Barbara could handle it until Terri would tell Vera what on earth was in her mind.

“Uhm… okay?” Vera agreed hesitantly, sensing she didn’t really have a choice. She did not like Terri’s expression. Terri spoke up once she thought they were out of reach.

“Are you out of your mind?” she hissed at Vera, irritated eyes piercing hers and Vera blinked, lowering her gaze.

“What?” Vera murmured, flickering to her face again as Teri let out an indefinable sound.

Terri grimaced, anger flashing in her irises. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about!”

Vera shrugged, making her best confused face. Terri couldn’t possibly know what happened last night. So she could always blame it on the punching bag, right? Maybe Terri just thought Vera choose the way to self-destruction by drinking whiskey and punching bag too hard – hard enough to bruise (and shit, she had a lesson today, that would be a pain, literally). It wasn’t like she would be completely wrong – Vera just didn’t have self-destructing tendencies, it was simply a way to deal with it; not mentioning the fact the boxing part was kinda Terri’s idea.

“Seriously?” Terri fished her phone out, drawing something furiously, while mumbling. “You know,
I get notifications from the Devil’s site – for you, just in case he comes back and someone sees him, so I could tell you the very same minute. You wouldn’t believe what happened yesterday around eleven!”

And shit, the timeframe was right. Vera helped the woman around ten. But how- Terri shoved the phone in front of her face. The woman was thanking her. Oh. That felt nice. She fought a smile.

“So?!” Terri demanded.

The woman was thanking her saviour. Black haired young woman. Brave. With brass knuckles. Vera didn’t tell Terri about her new accessory – and even if she did, that description fitted like one quarter of Hell’s Kitchen. Lately, there were notes thanking mysterious people helping various victims of crime. It could have been any of those people. Terri was just guessing things.

“So what? Apparently the woman was very lucky someone decided to be decent enough not to pass the alleyway she was attacked in without rushing to her help-“

“Yeaaaah and the description of her saviour just happen to be matching yours. What a coincidence…” Terri gave her a pointed look, as if she was saying do you think I’m completely stupid?

“Exactly. I watch the site too, you know. They are popping up from time to time, helping people.”

“They always go in pair or more!” her friend protested, her irritation rising gradually with Vera’s heartbeat. Huh. Vera didn’t notice that – now, when she Terri pointed it out, she realized it was the truth. Guess they were afraid a little? Not everyone was a freaking hot-headed ninja who needed to do all by himself. But that was Vera getting out of track – she had more burning issues. Like the fact Terri seemed to be sure it was Vera last night for some reason.

“So what? Maybe they got better and-“ Vera tried again, but she was rudely interrupted, Terri taking the wind out of her sails.

“I saw you dammit!” Terri burst out and Vera froze, her heart stopping before it started sprinting even faster. Terri had a vision. She saw her.

Oh. Okay. Busted. That- Vera couldn’t really argue with that. She had no idea what to say to her defence. Except she was trying to help and she had it under control. (Which she really didn’t, but it wasn’t like she was jumping off a building, okay, it wasn’t a life threatening situation; unless he would pulled out a gun. That would be an issue. Šmarja. What if he had a gun?)

“Uhm. Look, Terri, I am not crazy, okay? She needed help. I was nearby and he was just one guy,” she reasoned with her friend, telling her a simple truth.

Terri huffed, speaking in dubious tone. “Sure. You were just passing by.”

“YES!” She actually was!

“And you just happened to have brass knuckles in your purse?!“

“Uhm… I-“ Yeah, she had no real argument here. They kinda were for cases just like his one. That, Vera couldn’t tell her of course. Vera had to do thing she hated and was getting better at each day, which was scaring her to shit. She lied. In omission. “I bought them not so long time ago. Dangerous city.”

“Veronica,” Terri strained through her teeth, her face actually getting red. She wasn’t buying it at all, and Vera gave up.
“What else should I have done, Terri?” she complained, throwing her hands in the air, frustrated. Why Terri couldn’t just understand? There was someone who needed help and Vera was right there, knowing no one else would come. Matt was gone and all this city had left was those random pairs of wannabe vigilantes.

“Call the police! You know, those guys who deal with criminals?!”

“There was no time for that,” Vera shot back immediately, once again telling the truth. The man was beating her up. Her top was torn for god’s sake. It wasn’t just any assault, it was most likely attempted sexual assault. Before the police would arrive….

“You know he would roast you for doing shit like this if he was here, right?”

“But he’s not!” Vera cried out, tears appearing in her eyes after such a long time in public.

She always cried in private, not letting her guard down. But what happened yesterday night, the fact the girl expressed her gratitude on Matt’s site – which Vera absolutely had no right to be thanked at, just like any of those yahoos, because it was dedicated to him –, the loneliness, the exhaustion, Terri’s burst out – it was too much. She covered her mouth before the sob could escape her lips.

“Vera-” Terri’s voice was suddenly gentle, apologizing, hand twitching as if she wanted to comfort her, her eyes full of sympathy.

Jesus, Vera didn’t need sympathy. Right now, she needed to be alone.

“Don’t,” she whispered, not trusting her voice, walking in the back to get herself together. As she was leaving, she felt one regretful and one curious gaze on her back.

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Vera wasn’t an alcoholic – she didn’t wear flask on her for moments like this, so she simply made herself hot chocolate, once she worked through her endless streams of tears and heavy breaths. It was getting ridiculous. She almost thought she would be used to things like this by now, but there was always something that took her by surprise. She was getting tired in a way that had nothing to do with the lack of sleep. She wanted to stop mourning – firstly, Matt wasn’t dead, secondly, she had plenty of things to be happy about and thirdly, she fucking had right to move on a little – but every time the last idea popped in her mind, unpleasant feeling in her gut and heart worked like a bucket of icy water, guilt washing over her. Matt was out there. And no matter how much she could keep telling herself she was not the only reason, her conscience screamed at her that she actually was. She did not deserve to move on, not just yet at least. Not the mention that she freaking missed Matt. And there was nothing that could beat that.

Terri kept apologizing whole morning until Vera shot her a tired look, pleading to shut up and never talk about it again. Her friend obviously didn’t like it very much, but she took what she could get and actually admitted that she hadn’t seen anything, but connected the dots. Vera wasn’t even surprised – honestly, she was glad her friend wasn’t tortured by another vision.

By the time they were leaving the café, they were in relative peace, Terri carefully probing whether Vera wouldn’t want to go for a movie or go to club on Saturday on Sunday. Vera just raised an eyebrow, ignoring her question otherwise and Terri got the answer without hearing a single word from her. They said their goodbyes, going separate ways, Terri to meet Victor, Vera to go shopping. The period between shopping and fit-box lesson spent Vera well – she managed to fall asleep for two hours, which was about as long as she had slept that night. She didn’t feel much better, but she told herself she did feel more rested, eating a flapjack before heading out.
Vera didn’t think she would pull out the *Just The Way You Are* choreography, but Bryan seemed a little off that day, so she went for it – he lighted up, flashing her an honest cute smile, eyes twinkling and she couldn’t help smiling too. The rest of the participants seemed to be okay with the song, grinning when she said it was requested, throwing in few ideas themselves. Vera wrote them down as they were leaving, before she managed to forget them.

“Live While We’re Young,” Bryan hummed over her shoulder and she turned to him, shocked, finding him reading over her shoulder.

“First Bruno Mars and now One Direction?” she asked incredulously, her eyes wide just like her smile.

He shrugged. “It’s not the interpret. It’s the song itself and the lyrics,” he offered, voice kind, intense gaze making Vera’s still racing heart jump, something hanging in the air. Vera didn’t know the lyrics well, but she had a vague idea. Which…

Nope, she was still reading this wrong. Bryan was not suggesting anything.

Right?

Vera closed her eyes, taking a deep calming breath. It wasn’t that she couldn’t believe it (except it kinda was), more like she had no idea what to do about it. Run or babble. Ignoring the hint was an alternation of the running.

“Okay,” she chuckled uneasily, adding the song on her list. “I’ll see what I can do…. It’s a good song. No promises it would be done by Monday though.”

One corner of his lips raised and he reached for one of the rags to clean the bags just like the last time, apparently satisfied. “There’s no rush. I can wait for a while. I believe it’s worth it.”

Vera gave him an unsure smile, cursing mentally. If she thought he wasn’t suggesting anything before, now it was kinda hard to miss. She just couldn’t decide, whether she liked it or not.

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Vera would be a freaking liar if she claimed Bryan’s words didn’t affect her. They *did*. And not in a good way. Apart from nightmares, the nice dreams and illusions that stung once they were over, she got another thing to think about instead of sleeping.

Bryan was great. Talking to him was simple, he was sure good-looking and apparently, he was interested. Vera felt terrible for even considering it and when her mind finally relaxed enough to go to sleep (with a little help), Matt’s sad eyes were haunting her and she got her answer right there. She wouldn’t do that to him, let alone after two months of him being away, being away because he wanted her and Foggy and Karen and company to be safe. She wasn’t a bitch, right? That would be a terrible thing to do.

She promised herself to go to church on Sunday, considering a real life confession. If she didn’t make herself to confess, she would think about it at least when in church and asked Matt for forgiveness while lighting another candle for him.

After that, she slept a little easier.

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Vera was starting understanding that shitty things tent to come superior in numbers. Last few weeks weren’t a complete disaster, but there were sure more than few bumps in a road and they weren’t exactly small ones and Vera was wondering how many hits she could take before crumbling in a pile of dust.

When the black officer appeared in the café on Saturday, Vera didn’t find it too suspicious. It wasn’t the first time a cop came in, buying a daily dope of caffeine and/or sugar for himself and possibly his colleagues. She even remembered she once used the opportunity and sent Sergeant Mahoney her thank you via his co-worker. She simply assumed it was Mahoney’s turn and she tried her best to smile at him at least professionally despite her exhaustion. At least she got the afternoon shit – if she could be getting up again, she might need some actual physical help.

“Sergeant Mahoney! Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you?”

He seemed to be happy to see her and a little relieved to be honest. He returned the smile somehow unsurely though. “One Americano… and whatever you like to have – any chance I could steal you for few minutes?” he asked hesitantly and Vera blinked in surprise.

What could possibly Mahoney want with her? Was there any progress in her… thing? That was kinda impossible, wasn’t it?

“Uhm… sure,” she mumbled as she looked around the café, finding Olivia and Regina both on their feet. She could take her break. She entered the order in the cash box. “Here or to go?”

“To go. I won’t hold you for long I believe,” he assured her and Vera felt slightly calmer after that.

“Be with you in a minute,” she hummed, already turning around to prepare the order.

“Good. I’ll just… wait here then.”

They sat in a corner, in rather quiet space, eyeing each other, none of them wanting to be the first to speak. Vera expected the cop to talk, but he kept flickering between his cup and Vera as if he couldn’t decide what he should start with.

Vera broke first.

“What’s going on, Sergeant?” she encouraged him and he sighed, sipping his coffee before he raised his gaze to her, suddenly looking as tired as she felt. Why was everything so exhausting lately? Or was it just her view and everything being sunshine and rainbows, while all she could see was drizzling, cold and dark?

“Any word on your masked friend?” he asked out of blue and Vera looked at him, startled.

What. The. Actual. Hell. Was he really asking her about the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen? Why was everyone asking her about the Devil lately?

And holy- was he asking her because he made some kind of a connection she hoped he never would? Like Matt-Mike connection? She thought it was out of picture after they talked in the hospital. But maybe it was here all over again.

No doprdele.

“I- I’m sorry. I don’t understand-” she stuttered.

“Come on, Machackova,” he made an honestly annoyed I-am-so.done-with-your-shit face. “We both
know you are in contact with him.”

**Were , Sergeant Mahoney, if you insist on that sentence.**

“Officer Collins thought the same thing,” Vera shot back, fighting urge to cover her mouth the second the words left her lips.

Another interesting thought popped in her mind. What were the odds he would come a day after Terri chewed her for her stupid heroism? What if she reported her and he came here to arrest her or give her a very resolute warning? Terri wouldn’t do that, right?

“Low blow. I take it you don’t know anything,” he hummed and he ran his hand down his face before he sipped his coffee several times, while Vera was just staring at him. **Don’t know anything about what?** Was he… baiting her?

She sighed, tired of the game. “No, Sergeant. I haven’t heard from him for a while now.”

*And it pisses me off and it drives me insane, I have no idea if he ever comes back and I am fucking worried about him.*

The cop frowned hard, concerned crinkle between his eyebrows, looking out of the window. “That’s what I was afraid of. The cat is away, the mice will play…”

“What do you mean?”

His gaze flickered back to her, indecisive. He was examining her for seconds, before he spoke up again. “Ever heard of the Devil Worshipers?”

“…Satanists?” Vera asked him, baffled. She really wasn’t into this religion thing – which was kinda ironic, considering her boyfriend (and he was still her boyfriend and she loved him and she was a fucking bitch for considering giving in Bryan even for what could have been a few hours) being so religious it sometimes hurt to see it.

“Might be as well,” he admitted, the crinkle deepening and Vera felt like a bombshell was about to drop. “But this is a very specific group. They’re operating in Hell’s Kitchen. They practise vigilantism – trying to honour their idol – The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.”

“**WHAT?!”**

“Huh. You really didn’t know. Two days ago, one of them saved the my neighbour’s daughter’s ass – she was lucky, both of them actually,” he was explaining while Vera thought *that was me, but okay, are you telling me that those randomly appearing pairs of vigilantes actually have a name?!* “But that’s an exception. They are doing some pretty nasty things too…”

Vera’s mind raced. There was some *group* of people, who was *worshipping* Matt (aka Mike, aka the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen), playing *vigilantes* and they were organized. How did she miss that?!

And what the hell was he talking about? **Nasty things?**

“**Like?**”

“Like crucifying muggers for one,” he deadpanned and Vera felt her jaw drop.

Crucifying. As in… hanging people on a cross? By their hands? With… nails? **Stakes? Jesus Christ.** And **fuck**, that was a very inappropriate swearing. Her stomach clenched and darkness danced
around the edge of her vision, head spinning. She was glad she was sitting, because she felt legless. She couldn’t let out a word.

“They did it months ago. Then there was quiet, I suspect the Devil kept an eye on them. But now? Three victims in last two weeks – muggers, assailants, attempted rapists. Our boys believe they do it as sacrifices, trying to call him back.”

This time it was Vera who ran her hand down her face, Mahoney’s words echoing in her skull dully, not making any sense. ‘They did it months ago. Then there was quiet, I suspect the Devil kept an eye on them.’

Vera couldn’t see the table in front of her eyes anymore. Instead, saw Matt’s troubled face months ago, hearing his tired voice. ‘I discovered someone new on the scene and I don’t like it very much, but I’ll handle it. Promise.’

She squeezed her eyes shut under the weight of the realization. Matt knew. Matt knew there were some crazy people trying to honour him by vigilating and by crucifying criminals, apparently. Her stomach rolled over again at the thought. And he was facing it alone. He didn’t even tell her. He was fucking dealing with religious fanatics and he somehow didn’t bother to share (now she was just being mean – he probably didn’t tell her because he didn’t want her to worry; well, the joke was on him).

And Matt couldn’t deal with it for real, because he was forced to leave. ‘They do it as sacrifices, trying to call him back.’ Good luck with that, she thought bitterly.

Three victims in last two weeks.

“That’s- that’s insane.” She wasn’t confident what exactly she was talking about – about what he said or what she just realized? Perhaps all of it.

“Tell me about it. Judging by the colour of your face you had no idea,” he noted, eyeing her, worried.

Vera just shook his head. Nope. She had no freaking idea. But the colour of her face could be caused by multiple things – starting with what they were talking about, ending with her alarming sleeping troubles.

“Hey, if you learn something, just let me know, alright? And keep you pepper spray close, even though you’re not a criminal so they shouldn’t target you,” he added and Vera was pleasantly surprised (would be, if she had mental capacity and energy for that anyway) by his concern about her.

“Will do, Sergeant,” she promised as they both stood up and he nodded as goodbye, leaving her to deal with her shock. Vera wasn’t sure she could ever do that. The rest of her shift she was lost in thoughts, scary images flickering through her mind.

That night, she dreamed about Officer Daniel Collins being nailed to an enormous cross, empty glare watching her accusingly. She barely made it to the bathroom before she threw up. She didn’t fall asleep again and at four a.m. prepared her coffee with extra shot of whiskey, refusing to lay down. Instead, she washed her teeth four times in case she would talk to Father Lantom when in church and walked half empty Hell’s Kitchen streets until it was time of the mass. To fulfil her promise, she walked with her purse and pepper spray close.
In case you’re not BBC Sherlock fan (or fanatic, depends) or/and you aren’t into Oscar Wilde, the chapter title comes from the quote: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” But I guess it could apply for more stuff in this chapter, couldn’t it? :)

Also, I'm giving you like three guesses on what Vera's gonna do now...
Days off were always a curse and a blessing. Vera didn’t manage to sleep in significantly, but she
did get up at six instead of four, so that she counted that as a win. She tidied up her apartment,
arranged a meeting with Claire and called her mum, ending Monday the best way possible – with her
lesson. Bryan gave her an ambiguous smile at the point she pulled out Bruno Mars and she flashed
him a very friendly smile back, heavy feeling in her gut, stubbornly repeating herself that she was just
seeing things. Everyone loved the other song though, so she quickly recovered and grinned for real.
Bryan disappeared with everyone else for once and she was actually glad. Monday was a good day.

Tuesday was better. And worse. Depended on the point of view. From Terri’s, it was a freaking
nightmare; Vera couldn’t decide.

Jessica stopped by to pick up her coffee and told her – with impressively low level of grumpiness –
that Trish was letting her know the show, in which Vera might take interest, would be airing on
Wednesday after six. It made Vera slightly dizzy and Terri incredibly curious. The thing was, it
happened relatively early, which meant Terri didn’t have a chance to really pry, because Vera
managed to avoid any conversation with her. She was a terrible person.

The crowds were slowly thinning, when she noticed it. It wasn’t even Vera who served the black-
haired girl with piercing in her nose and too many metallic stuff around her wrist and Vera honestly
wouldn’t give a shit about her – except she did. She was turning around to hand some lady her
cappuccino, when she saw the girl spun on her heels and pace away. A little flash of something
cought her eye for some reason she was later convinced was the higher power. It was a button, two
of them actually, both black. One of them had a silver reversed pentagram on it.

The other read *In Devil We Trust*.

Vera’s heart jumped at the sight, the craziest idea popping in her mind. She quickly looked at the
woman she was serving, practically shoving her coffee, shooting her a quick smile. Vera was the
master of harsh decisions - she ran after the girl, ignoring Terri’s surprised yelp.

“Taking a break!” she yelled back without bothering to face her and fled through the door of the café
without putting a coat or anything – there was no time for that. She found the girl in the crowd – she
was still walking rather fast, but Vera was just grateful she didn’t break into a full run, because with
this, Vera could work.

The girl looked over her shoulder several times – Vera was confident she glanced at her directly
once. She didn’t give a damn, following her path, taking every turn the stranger did, her pulse loud in
her ears, Mahoney’s words echoing in her skull.

‘*Ever heard of the Devil Worshipers?’*

‘…*Satanists?’*

‘*Might be as well…’*

If Vera was wrong, this would get really awkward. If she wasn’t, it would be awkward *and* scary.

The girl took a sharp right, leaving the main street. *Great.* Vera inhaled in anticipation, doing the
same – finding the girl making few more steps, before turning to her with pointed look, eyes full of unjustified hate.

“Why are you following me?” the girl hissed, hand sliding in the pocket of her jacket. With a quiet click, Vera recognized a switchblade. She deliberately took a step back. Oookay, that she didn’t see coming. That was what she would get for tailing someone. She couldn’t really blame the girl.

“Hey, I don’t want to hurt you or anything!” she blurted out, showing her empty hands.

“You’re from the café.”

Obviously. The apron was a deadly give-away. “Yeah. I just… I just noticed you badge-“

Vera didn’t expect the girl cross their distance, hand with the knife in front of her, lunging. Vera took her hand in reflex, twisting – the blade clanked to the pavement with a surprised hiss and Vera kicked it aside, the weapon disappearing under a dumpster. Huh. Guess her muscles remembered that movement too. Good to know.

Vera let go, walking backwards, giving her space – she didn’t seem to appreciate it, measuring her with a startled look, eyes squinting. She massaged her wrist. “What the hell do you want, huh?”

Vera showed her empty hands once again, gesturing no-harm. “Like I said. I saw your badge. Any change it has a profound meaning?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” She was trying to sound doubtful, pretending she thought Vera was a nut job – but she was easily readable. She was pissed off, because she was busted. And she obviously didn’t trust Vera. How should she gain her trust? Because this was better than Vera could even hope. She was one of them. Vera was sure.

“I was saved by the Devil,” Vera said eventually, observing the girl’s eyes going wide. She straightened a little, examining Vera, aiming for indifferent expression, failing miserably.

“Congratulation. And?”

“And I believe there are people – I heard whispers there are people, who… follow his path. I want to join them. You know something about it?”

Vera could tell she did. But she was cautious. Vera didn’t blame her. Her motives indeed were slightly ulterior after all and she did just follow her like a full-time creeper. “Why should I trust you? For all I know, you could be shitting me. Leave me alone.”

“I don’t think she does,” a new voice sounded above and Vera snapped her head up, searching for the man. He was more a boy – sitting on the fire escape nearby, jumping down with surprising grace. He gave Vera a crooked smile as he approached the girl from behind. Apparently she knew him, because she turned around calmly with an annoyed look.

“Is that so, Sherlock?”

“Look at her, Eileen. Doesn’t she look familiar to you?” he sounded as if he was admonishing her, aparent or perhaps a teacher disappointed in his student.

Vera couldn’t help raising an eyebrow. That guy was weird and she wasn’t following. However, she could see similar features with the girl – brother maybe? Or was it just the black hair, pale face and dark clothes?
The girl rolled her eyes, obviously irritated by his haughtiness, but she examined Vera further for few seconds. “Nope.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “You can be such an ignorant. She’s the witness. Don’t you remember the trial?”

Vera gasped. How-what- come again? This was not- What? Did fucking everyone in this hellish city follow the stupid case?

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh, you dumbass. Or am I wrong?” he addresses Vera and she snapped from her shock. His eyes glimmered with something Vera couldn’t place.

“You’re not. In case you’re talking about the Officer Collins’ case,” she confirmed, voice a little shaky. “I was kidnapped – and saved by the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. That being the third time he saved me. I owe him a lot. I heard about what you’re doing – that you’re his legacy.”

“We’re not legacy. He will come back,” the boy protested, the glow in his eyes getting brighter.

Vera realized her mistake and gaped, before she got it together. Come on, Macháčková, this is your chance.

Chance to do what exactly?

“I’m sure he will. But until then, this city needs people like you.” Vera suddenly knew what she had to say to win them. “People like me. I saved a girl few days ago-“

“Come on! She’s full of crap-“ Eileen interrupted her, throwing her hand in the air, spinning on her heels.

The boy took her by her backpack, making her turn back and shushed her with a strict glare. “Why would she? She’s matching the description – which is something you would know if you did your homework better.”

Vera’s gaze flickered between the odd pair hesitantly. The girl was clearly angry with him – he was disappointed in her. Vera had no idea what to say. It turned out she didn’t have to say anything.

“She’s not just someone, Eileen. If she really was saved by him three times, she has a bond with him. She believes in him. I know what she said during the trial, how she protected him, defended him – she’s just like us, feeling he’s something more – she said she named him after an archangel. Michael. And she fought for justice already. We could use someone like her,” he talked in resolute voice permitting no objection. He wasn’t persuading her – he was stating a fact. He wanted Vera with them. Vera found a satisfied smile, something warm, exciting and dangerous rising in her abdomen.

“But there’s already enough of us-“

“There will never gonna be enough of us. Just because she would be eleventh and there would be no balance for a while, it doesn’t mean our group can’t grow. So one point will be stronger until we find others.”

Vera was baffled, she didn’t understand his words, but she wanted to support him, worried by the silence that fell. “It-it would be an honour,” she blurted out.

He smiled brightly. “See? She understands. You want to join us then?”
Vera nodded, ignoring the dubious glare from the girl.

“Very well. My name is Egan, this is Eileen.” What kind of names were these? “You can meet the others once you’re hallowed be thy name. We’ll perform the ritual in two days. Is that alright with you?” he offered kindly, voice commanding though. She mustn’t refuse – not if she wanted to be one of them. And even though she didn’t, she desperately did. For her own reasons. She couldn’t back out – not now. This was her chance. This was a chance for the police, if she was right and these two yahoos belonged to the Devil Worshipers. She was 99 percent sure they did.

“Of course,” she agreed without hesitation.

“Marvellous. Meet us on Thursday at nine, pier 92/94. Alone.”

The girl next to him finally relaxed a little and all alarm bells in Vera’s head were set off. Eileen didn’t like the fact Vera would be part of their closed group, probably afraid of her disloyalty. Egan, on the other hand, was all in, maybe too trustful – or at least it appeared so until now. If Eileen relaxed, it meant whatever was about to happen – wherever they were about to meet – it wouldn’t lead anyone who wasn’t worthy to the group. It couldn’t be their usual spot. But Vera would take what she could get.

“Thank you. Anything particular I need?” she asked, trying to sound honoured as she claimed to be by their proposal and genuinely curious. What did that even mean, once you’re hallowed be thy name? What kind of a ritual they wanted to perform? The image of crucified Collins flickered in her mind, making her nauseous once again. She just probably made a huge mistake, mixing up with them. But to hell with it. She could deal with her fear later.

Egan offered her the first honest smile. “Nothing. Only yourself and your belief.”

And that wasn’t creepy at all. Vera gulped, returning the smile uncertainly, lump in her throat, walking away. Once she turned around the corner, she exhaled shakily, stopping in her tracks, dark spots around her field of vision. She just agreed to join a cult which took interest in killing criminals. By hanging them on cross.

She would definitely need something stronger that day.

What Vera needed right now though, was to return to work – she eyed her watch, relieved she only lost about ten minutes. Hannah wouldn’t be mad for taking too long break at least – Terri on the other hand… Vera found herself being scared of her questioning more than of the meeting she just arranged.

“What the fuck was that?!” Terri burst out once Vera returned behind the counter and she winced at the sharp tone. That was not good. When showing Terri her back, she squeezed her eyes shut, mind racing – what should she tell her? She breathed in and out, before she turned to her friend with the most innocent smile she managed.

“She was one of my students, as you like to put it,” Vera exclaimed, lying shamelessly, unable to meet Terri’s eyes. “And I just came back from my break, so if you let me…”

It was a dick move. Vera was treating her like a bitch (and guess she could add that title to her list of what she was now), smiling to another customer. It was the only customer in the non-existent line. Hannah disappeared in the back once Vera returned, and this man Vera was serving at the moment was the only thing keeping Terri from interrogating her. So she took her sweet time, trying out a small talk, meeting with the man’s enthusiasm about her attempts. She would swear he winked at her when he was leaving and she waved at him.
Vera could feel Terri’s gaze burning a hole in her head and she slowly faced her, finding her gaping.

“Since when do you flirt with custo- never mind. What the hell happened with the girl?” she demanded, eyes squinting, glaring into Vera’s soul. She shivered under her probing piercing eyes – they were usually really nice green, shining; when she was obviously angry though, the spark in them was intimidating.

Vera knew how shitty liar she was. Yet, she went for it. “Told you, she’s one of-“

“Cut the crap, Mechy. You ran as if the Devil was snapping at your heels,” she shot back and Vera couldn’t help smirking at the irony. “Oh, shut up, Veronica! What. Was. That. About?”

It was clear as day Terri wouldn’t let it go. Vera frowned at her miserably, considering how much she should tell her. The less the better, she thought. Terri watched her, her eyebrow up expectantly.

Vera sighed, looking around to make sure no one was listening.

"Fine. Just promise me you won’t be mad."

“I solemnly swear. Now spill it,” she pressed and Vera bit her lip, unsure where to even begin.

“Remember telling me that you knew it was me, who saved the girl few nights ago?” Terri shot her a stern look. She took that as a yes. “Well, you said the others always appeared in pairs, right? There are people out there, who are trying to fight crime, filling the gap after-after you know who.”

Terri eyes widened with what Vera thought was horror. She wasn’t quite sure why that was, but since Terri didn’t say anything, she continued.

Anyway. That girl, I think she was one of them,” Vera explained slowly, waiting for a shit storm to go down. And oh, it did.

“So you ran after her?!” Terri exploded and Vera jumped. She was certain the few people in the café turned their direction, hell, the half of Hell’s Kitchen probably did. Vera nodded carefully. Terri lowered the volume. “Are you crazy? -No, don’t answer that.”

Vera was left speechless. If she was honest with herself, the answer would probably be yes.

Terri ran her hand down her face, covered her mouth with her palm, her eyes furiously measuring Vera, obviously freaked out and pissed off. She looked like she wanted to tear Vera apart – with her teeth.

“Oh, fuck him. Vera, there’s something I need to tell you. Because this is exactly…” Terri’s angry voice traded off, as she was observing her surroundings and turned back to Vera. Vera was baffled.

What just happened?

“Terri,” she finally found a way to speak, “what are you talking about?”

Her friend looked almost guilty and Vera had no idea why Terri, who was chewing her a second ago, suddenly was the one who felt guilty.

“They call themselves the Devil Worshippers,” Terri announced and Vera gasped, shooting her an incredulous look. How the fuck-

“How the hell do you know that?!”

Seriously, how the hell did Terri know? Sergeant Mahoney told Vera. Who the heck told Terri?!
Terri grimaced. “How do you know that?”

“I asked first,” Vera protested childishly, her brain working on 120 percent. Did she hear from someone from the café? Did she actually spoke to one of them? It wasn’t like Terri wouldn’t be able to do that. She talked to everyone.

Terri made the strangest face – as if she was afraid someone (Vera being the someone) was about to hit her. Vera didn’t understand a thing.

“Matt asked me to spy on a freaky group of wanabe vigilantes. The one he didn’t even tell Vera about. And he went to Terri- hold on a second.

“You knew who he was already?!” Vera let out in disbelief, her head spinning. Oh god, she was about to throw up. Get her a bucket someone.

Terri quickly grabbed her forearm as Vera felt her legs gave up and she shoved her further to the counter.

“Vera, dammit!” Terri hissed, holding most of her weight.

Matt told Terri he was the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Terri knew, while Vera was trying to keep it a secret from her best friend. Terri told her she figured it out by herself after the katana thing. Matt didn’t come to Vera for help, he went to Terri. He rather went to a stranger-

She felt tears in her eyes, her emotions a complete mess. She didn’t know whether she was more confused, pissed off, scared or betrayed. The betrayal was definitely taking over though.

“Alright. We’re going to the back. Now,” Vera heard Terri’s voice distantly and her feet involuntarily moved, heavy and slow, letting Terri, who was fucking keeping a huge secret from her (Vera could proudly add hypocrite to her own list of her awesome character features), lead the way.

They kicked Hannah out, but Vera had no mental capacity to think about what she must have thought of them and how much she must have been angry. Fuck it. That was her smallest problem right now. She felt support under her as well, coming to assumption she was sitting now. Jesus, the world was blurry and spinning.

“Veronica Fucking-trouble-magnet Machackova, listen to me, dammit!”

She felt light stinging in her cheek and she blinked through her tears, focusing on the worried face in front of her.

“Now, I know you too well. You think he told me who he was and asked me to be his eyes and ears, which is hilarious, by the way. But I assure you he didn’t tell me a fucking thing, the Devil gave me a heart attack in a back alley, drop the bombshell that there was some crazy group of people, who were playing vigilantes, and he wanted to me to eavesdrop in the café. Nothing more, nothing less. I got the permission to call him a Dick though. By the way, he has some seriously sweet ass in those pants. You won the boyfriend lottery my friend,” soothing words washed over Vera and she let out a hysterical huff of laugh, eyes turned to the ceiling, desperately looking for some help from above.

“Yeah, too bad my boyfriend is in fucking Cambodia, fighting side by side with his ninja master.”
She took a deep breath, wiping away her tears.

Terri offered her a small smile. “What can you do – wait, Cambodia? He told you where he was-
never mind. Later. Now tell me, how the hell do you know about the Devil Worshippers? He didn’t 
want to tell you, because he was afraid you would do something stupid in attempt to help-“

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Vera admitted, voice weak. Of course Matt didn’t tell her what he was 
dealing with not just because he wanted her to live in a beautiful world where unicorns were shitting 
rainbow, but also because he thought she would do something stupid if she found out. And Jesus 
Christ, when did she become so bitter and cynical?

“Well, I can’t really blame him, considering what you just did,” Terri deadpanned and alright, they 
both kinda had a point. And Terri didn’t know half of it yet. Vera sighed, remembering she was 
being asked a question.

“Sergeant Mahoney told me. He wanted to know what the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen had to say to the 
matter, because apparently he thinks I’m besties with him.”

“Smart guy,” Terri noted with a grin and Vera rolled her eyes, feeling her breakdown fading away. 
The breathing was getting easier. The world steady, firm ground under her feet. Ha! You wish, 
Veronika. “What did you tell him?”

Vera shrugged. “The truth. That I haven’t heard from him for quite a while. He explained what was 
happening. They aren’t just vigilantes, Terri. They are freaking lunatics.”

“Well, that’s kinda expected, considering the name,” Terri hummed, not impressed and Vera decided 
she couldn’t handle this. Not right now. Not ever. Not alone. She needed someone to share with.

“They are crucifying criminals, Terri. As in actually-“ She whispered lowly, gesturing with her hands 
inconspicuously, ignoring the urge to throw up once again, chasing away the too vivid picture of her 
kidnapper from her head.

Terri’s jaw dropped. “They do what?... That’s- that’s the ritual?!”

“The ritual?” Vera parroted, not following.

Terri shook her head, face pale, pure disbelief and disgust. “It was- it was when you were in 
Allentown. I overheard some weirdoes talk about a ritual, I called Dick because of it.”

Vera felt her eyes go wide, horrible realization striking her. “Mahoney said they did it months ago. 
They did it when I was in Allentown? …I wasn’t even here. Oh god, I wasn’t even here, I knew 
something was wrong, but-“ she mumbled, her mind racing, every single stupid puzzle piece falling 
into place. She wished she could tell she was happy things were making sense, but somehow, she 
really wasn’t.

Terri sighed. “Yeah. Not really your fault. Feel better? We really need to talk about this, but now it’s 
not the right time. Just tell me – you followed the girl you thought was one of them for some reason I 
don’t understand. You came after her and what?” she pleaded, eyes big and worried.

Vera squeezed her eyes shut as she remembered what she got herself into. The Devil Worshippers. 
Rituals. Pentagrams. In Devil We Trust. Blood and enormous crosses. This was her way to hell.

Vera gulped, carefully eyeing Terri. “She had a button – In Devil We Trust, so I went for it.... And I 
might just agree to join them.”
This time, it looked like Terri was the one about to faint.

“I swear to god, the only reason I’m not gonna kill you right now is that I really want to know what the fuck does that mean. Oh, and also I want to see Murdock’s face once he finds out about this.”

Vera swallowed against the lump in her throat, never feeling smaller. She couldn’t quite decide what she was fearing the most at the moment. Probably the fact the world seemed to be turning the opposite direction than it should and she was about to be so dizzy from the change that she would fall and fall and fall…

Chapter End Notes

Remember the alternative chapter title two chapters earlier? Yeah? Well, his one is in my head called 'Vera does some even more stupid shit'. Because she’s just awesome like that. I’m having some serious fun writing this. I hope you like it at least half (hell, even less) the way I do.

Comments=love and fuel.
Terri walked home with her. By the time the door of the café closed behind them, more explaining was on schedule. Terri didn’t have much to tell, only adding details of her second encounter with the Devil, while Vera shared all her information from Sergeant Mahoney. It was not a nice talk. Adding she met two members of a freaking cult, sometimes not understanding shit of they were saying… it was a pretty good start for turning the bottle of whiskey bottom up. Vera opened the fridge once they were in her apartment, ready to fulfill her desire.

“Just… hold on a second. You agreed to meet them. On Thursday?” Terri reassured herself, frowning as Vera pulled out the bottle and gave her a disappointed look.

Vera sighed and returned it on its place, putting the kettle on instead – perhaps she could sneak a drop in her coffee without being spotted. She still felt Terri’s eyes on her though.

“Yeah,” she confirmed, mouth dry at the thought.

Terri watched her expectantly as if she was waiting for her to continue. Vera had nothing more to say. Terri huffed.

“Alright. And you gonna tell the police about it when?”

Yeah, Vera had plenty of time to think it through during the rest of their shift. And the result was simple. And scary.


Terri turned her palms up, looking at her incredulously. “Are you fucking kidding me?” she burst out. Huh, she did that a lot these days. Perhaps there was something wrong.

Of course she knew why Terri was mad, freaking out at her statement. It was just… it made sense.

“It would be useless,” she explained.

Terri exploded again. “Useless?! You mean you going alone into the freaky cult base-“

“But that’s it, Terri! I don’t think I’m going there!” Vera shot back. “The girl – Eileen – she doesn’t trust me, obviously. But she seemed to be okay with me going to the location Egan offered. They are taking me somewhere else. Just in case that, I don’t know, I had police as my backup? And what if it doesn’t work out at all? The cops will laugh to my face.”

“Because that’s what really matters. Definitely worth your life or something,” Terri spitted out, disgusted. “Gimme that bottle.”

Vera’s eyebrows shot up as Terri held out her hand in anticipation. It seemed there would be no need
for sneaking whiskey in her coffee after all. She opened the fridge again, handing the whiskey to her friend.

“Look, Terri, it’s just… I don’t want to mess this up,” Vera admitted in a conciliatory manner.

Terri frowned at her, worries all over her face, before she gulped the alcohol, grimacing as the warming, yet cold liquid flowed down her throat.

“You want to do this because Matt can’t. You don’t want to disappoint him,” she guessed and Vera opened her mouth, no sound coming out. That was- shit, she sometimes forgot how good Terri was. Vera raised one corner of her lips in sad smile, taking the bottle from her. “Is that so wrong?”

“Well, it is a terrible idea. You tell me. You think it’s worth the trouble?” she challenged her, already knowing what her answer would be. It reminded her of the Trish talk. ‘Do you think it’s worth it?’ Vera turned the bottle bottom up before speaking up. “Yeah, about that…”

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Terri couldn’t believe Vera was about to be quoted in Trish talk. When she was leaving, she was still shooting her incredulous glances, alternating them with lingering worried looks. Vera assured her it was going to be alright, perhaps speaking rather to herself.

Vera called her mum. It was a while since they spoke and despite the fact she had no real news (not the ones she would be willing to share, because this time, her mum would fly across the ocean and dragged her home if she found out what was Vera up to), she wanted to do it. Her mum seemed to be genuinely happy for her when she told her about the fit-box lessons going well, asking her whether she found friends among the participants – she mentioned Bryan, regretting it instantly. She quickly changed the topic to the dinner with Trish, explaining her mum how they met in a first place. Apparently, she was satisfied.

She caught up with Marky, Anna and Jitka as well. She found out Marky was freaking out about her wedding, still unable to put the seating plan together to everyone’s satisfaction, Anna proudly and shamelessly spilled that she slept with her boyfriend and Jitka… well. Jitka was fighting with Karel, first huge fight in their two years long relationship (how cool and terrifying was that), so she was bundle of nerves and tears. Vera could relate. She tried to react the right way to each of them, comforting Jíťa, cause she definitely needed it the most and she seemed to be quite open, knowing Vera was in rather bad place herself. Vera would choose all the fighting in the world over what was happening with Matt, but she couldn’t tell her that.

She cleaned up at the apartment, then at Fogwell’s, staying there much longer than she should to figure out all the requested songs she had on her list. She went to bed exhausted; she woke up feeling exactly the same, only with new nightmare on her disposal – in her dream, she led a nail through Collins’ hand. Vera woke up before it went on, but she spent solid minutes hyperventilating, fighting the waves of nausea.

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Trish opened the discussion on vigilante justice with the last thank you note for the Devil, highlighting the date of his last possible appearance. Then she talked about the other people, who apparently decided to follow his footsteps, happily announcing that she managed to ask the girl from Collins’ case had to say about it. Listening to her own words, Vera wondered – she would definitely have a lot to add if Trish asked her only few days later. Not that she would call to Trish Talk to
refine her opinion – god knew the Worshippers might be listening.

Vera was silently freaking out about the meeting. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to call the police, because she was fucking scared. She knew she shouldn’t be a target, but she was afraid she might do something to piss them off and the last thing she wanted, was to end up being nailed to a cross by herself. And even if she didn’t, who knew what they would want her to do? Terri spoke of a ritual – what if it was some kind of a test? Beat someone up to prove she was worthy to be one of the twisted vigilante group? God forbid, kill someone?

She was barely listening to the opinions of other people – she needed to head to Fogwell’s. She put the radio to her headphones while walking there. She was sure the boy talking at the moment – he introduced himself as Vlad – was one of them, because he was heated about the issue, too emotional, speaking in a voice that ran down her spine like cold fingers, making her shiver. She was honestly glad when Trish politely stopped him, giving space to someone else.

There was a new girl on the lesson – she approached Vera, carefully asking whether she could join, that she heard about the lessons from a friend, but apparently forgot to get phone number from her. Vera didn’t want to pry, still little dazed from the discussion she was listening before, so she just checked the paper, finding out there were two blank spaces, letting her join with a smile, borrowing her wraps, first lesson free and all that. Bonnie seemed delighted, taking Vera’s number and during the lesson, Vera found herself watching her – she was really enjoying herself. With people like this, Vera forgot her worries for a while at least.

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“You’re still going tonight?” Terri demanded when their changed shifts, watching Vera with the same worried expression she wore on Tuesday.

Vera sighed, clenching her fists inconspicuously, so her hands wouldn’t tremble, shooting Terri a brave smile. “Yeah, sure.”

Terri frowned, reading her like an open book. “You’re scared shitless.”

“I’m scared shitless,” Vera quickly agreed, letting out a nervous laugh.

“You can still back out, you know. Or, I don’t know, call some help.”

Vera thought of that, of course she did. More than once. And it wasn’t just the police – she actually thought of the Avengers, but firstly, she didn’t want to bother them with something like this, secondly, they would ask about Matt, which would mean involving them into the Stick mess despite Matt’s wish (even though at this point – screw you, Matt) and thirdly, if the Avengers took down the Devil Worshippers only few days after Mahoney told Vera, she was sure it would raise some uncomfortable questions. As for the police itself, Vera still had the same reasons for not calling them just yet. It was complicated.

“Yeah, I know. But at the same time, I can’t.”

It was Terri’s turn to sigh. “Alright. At least tell me where the meeting is. And call me when you get home for god’s sake. It’s at nine, right? If I don’t hear from you till midnight, I’m calling the cops,” Terri offered, pleading eyes burning into Vera’s, making her insides to twist in guilt. Terri really worried about her. Not that she could blame her. She had her own fear to deal with. This, she could do though.

“Okay. Thanks. Pier 92/94. And make it one a.m. I have no idea what’s gonna happen,” she
bargained, knowing it was a right thing to do. This was good. Reasonable. She would theoretically have a backup and it wouldn’t have to blow up to her face. Hopefully.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Thank you, Terri. I will feel safer this way. I really appreciate this. You helping. It means a lot.” Vera smiled at her honestly and Terri whined, pulling her into a crushing hug.

“You’re a damn idiot and if you get yourself hurt, I will kick your ass, Mechy,” Terri declared, voice deadly serious.

Vera couldn’t help chuckling, squeezing her back much more carefully than she did. “Wouldn’t that be kinda counter-productive?”

Terri tightened her grip despite Vera thinking it wasn’t even possible. “Shove your sass to your ass. And take the brass knuckles with you.”

Vera froze in shock as Terri let go. She examined her friend’s face, but there was nothing but seriousness – Terri meant it. She wanted Vera to- huh. That was… cool. She wondered how much self-repression it took Terri to say that. Man, she was awesome.

“Thanks. I will.” And with those words, she went to face the scariest thing she ever had in her life. Considering last few months, that said something.

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Vera regretted she didn’t take her brass knuckles. She wanted to have free hands, so she only shoved a phone to her pocket. She called herself an idiot multiple times as she walked rather slowly, each of her muscles tight, ready to flee.

Docks were a scary place, especially at night. Huge containers, dark corners, abandoned looking buildings, tall derricks and shadows all around, making her heart beating agonizingly fast. When Vera passed a lonely figure, she quickened her pace, feeling its gaze on her, measuring her from head to toe. She almost sighed in relief when she hit the right number and scanned her surroundings for anyone familiar.

“This way,” a voice hissed from behind her and she jumped at the sound, hand shooting to her heart, spinning on her heals. Very brave, Veronika. Show them how very much they shouldn’t want you.

She recognized him – it was Egan. He beckoned to his left and she followed him wordlessly, partly because she didn’t know if she was allowed to speak and partly because she wasn’t quite able to do so. She walked by his side in silence – where the hell was he leading her –, worried to even shoot him a glance. She was afraid she would do something, a tiny misstep, and she would be out (or nailed). She mustn’t do that.

“Nice speech,” he hummed unexpectedly, making her wince despite his almost gentle tone. She had no idea what he was talking about. “In the radio. You made quite an impression. We decided you can meet all of us tonight, we’ll perform the ritual together.”

Her heart jumped, mixture of excitement, satisfaction and endless fear. She had been afraid of the consequences of what she had said to Trish – now it seemed it was for a good cause. She was meeting the whole group tonight. That might me a good thing. But how many were there? And most importantly, what the hell the ritual was? Last time she heard of a ritual associated with the Devil Worshippers, they fucking killed someone.
No doprdele. Was that what was happening tonight? What if she was the one who should-

Vera stumbled over her own feet, deliberately shooting out her arm to catch on something. Or someone. Egan looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

She cleared her throat. “Sorry. Just… I didn’t expect that, took me by surprise.” He still didn’t seem convinced. “I’m nervous. It’s an honour I’m not sure I deserve.”

Vera was such a shitty liar. Apparently, Egan was a shitty people-reader, because he flashed her a patronizing smile.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Like I said, you made an impression.”

Vera hesitantly returned the smile and they spend the rest of their journey – about five minutes – in silence. They stopped in front of a warehouse, which seemed to be abandoned – of course they were hiding in such a place, alleyways and warehouses belonged with shady stuff, she always knew that. Vera measured the building with distrust, searching for anything that could help her to identify it later; there was no company sign, but there was a small number. 600 W. Good to know.

“Don’t speak unless you are asked to do so. Walk into the middle. The rest you’ll learn later,” he instructed her in low voice, somehow solemn, and she gulped, the lump in her throat growing.

If there is a dying person or a rotting corpse, I’m calling the cops. Her stomach rolled at the idea.

Good thing she didn’t eat dinner.

Vera nodded, trying to look resolute and confident and they circled the warehouse, squeaky metal door opening. Egan entered it, while Vera spent few seconds calming herself down, trying to convince herself that running away now was a really bad idea. She took one deep breath and followed him inside, the door shutting behind her feeling like sealing a death sentence.

The space was poorly illuminated, but the first thing she noticed was that there was no cross. She counted that as a win. Slightly calmer, she examined the room – it was mostly empty, tens of candles all around. In its middle, there were nine people standing, Egan joining them, finishing what resembled a circle, but not entirely, because there were gaps. The people seemed to be in pairs.

Coming closer, her eyes adjusting, she could see it wasn’t a circle they wanted to create – they were standing at the points of a pentagram, drew by something red – Vera repressed a shiver, hoping it wasn’t blood. But Egan took few steps in the middle, bending down to a bowl, raising a knife. Before Vera could even think of why, he cut his palm without hesitation, scaring the shit out of her – he bended again and let the drops of his blood fall to the bowl, the sound echoing in the large space as everyone was scarily quiet. Dark spots danced on the edges of her vision, her knees feeling weak. This was sick. Yet, she pressed her lips together to stop herself from screaming, walking to the middle, passing two motionless figures – their fists were clenched, blood dripping from it as well.

Don’t throw up. Don’t.

Egan left her in the centre, next to the bowl – Jesus, how the hell there was still so much blood in it if the pentagram was painted with it –, clueless. When he completed the pentagram, he looked at her, small smile on his lips. There was something creepy in his smile, something twisted he didn’t let out before. Shriver ran down her spine, but she forced herself to return his gaze, no matter how darkly it seemed to wrap her soul as he was glaring at it through her eyes.

“Welcome everyone, welcome here at this blessed night. Tonight is a night of celebration.”

Vera was freaked out by his words. He spoke them as if they were true, coming right from his heart.
Which was something she could appreciate, unless it was creepy as this. She clenched her fists to stop her hands from trembling, heavy feeling in her stomach. This was so wrong.

“We’re embracing a new member, new sister to our fellowship. She believes in what we believe.” You wish. “She’s ready to honour and serve our master, our father.” Because that’s not fucked up at all. “To make her feel welcomed, I suggest we introduce ourselves - the true us, without the masks we’re wearing to hide from the outside world, which doesn’t understand. Not yet.”

Vera was seriously sick at this point. She turned her head to Egan’s left as he beckoned to a girl, black-haired, obviously, dresses all in black – they all were, but honestly, that was the least creepy thing about them – and she raised her head to Vera, meeting her eyes.

“I’m Dabria. I’m the angel of death,” she whispered, yet her voice was clear and strong. Vera froze, unsure how to react to such a statement. It turned out she didn’t have to – the girl lowered her gaze again, while the boy next to her spoke up, same strength in his voice.

“I’m Dugald. Dark stranger.” Vera took a second to appreciate how weird the names were, biting her tongue. When he looked down again, Egan continued.

“My name is Egan. Fire.”

Vera knew the girl standing by his side – and she suddenly understood what were the words they spoke after their names – it was the meaning of the names. And Vera was sure they were fake; they stood for what they were, what they felt to be under their masks. In her mind, she allowed herself to smile a little – they would never believe who was under the mask of a man who was called the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

“Eileen. Torch of light,” she introduced herself sharply and Vera came to conclusion she did not like her any better than before.

“Viggo. Battle.”

“Vlad.” The boy who called to Trish talk, Vera remembered. The one who was so emotional. He introduced himself his fake name on the radio as well. That was something. “I’m ruler of the world.”

“I’m Ilda, fighting a war.”

Vera was finally sensing a pattern and she kept her jaw from dropping by the power of her will. They were standing in pairs. Two people on each point of the pentagram. Two people, whose names started with the same letter. And the letters weren’t random. She almost laughed, but she was sure it would sound hysterical.

Dabria and Dugald. Egan and Eileen. Viggo and Vlad. Ilda. The last three people would be called something starting with I and L. Unbelievable. At least she would fit in. If they would actually let her have her name.

“My name is Isandro. I’m the one who frees men.”

When Vera looked at the last pair, her heart stopped. It was a boy and a girl. And she knew the girl. Her name was Bonnie. She came to her lesson yesterday, claiming she heard from a friend. What the actual- that couldn’t be a coincidence, could it?

They were what, spying on her? Her head was spinning.

Smug smile appeared of the girl’s lips as she guessed Vera recognized her. “I’m Lilith. The woman
of the night,” she announced. Lilith my ass.

“And I’m Liam. I stand for strong mind and protection.”

A single clap of hands made Vera wince. She quickly turned to its source, finding Egan with his hands clenched, looking straight to her eyes once again. It was really creepy.

“Thank you all. Now, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner to think about your real name, a one that should have been given to you when born. I came up with my own proposition. It’s clear you have an extraordinary connection with our master, being saved so many times. It means you’re essential for a reason we don’t understand yet, but we will soon, I have no doubt. I choose the name Latonya. Invaluable. Do you accept?”

Her breath hitched, lips parting in shock. Egan choose her a name. And the meaning? She didn’t feel the meaning harmonized with the others very well, but sure there was something about it, that felt… right. And she had a feeling she mustn’t refuse anyway.

“Yes,” she breathed and he smiled once more. A real ray of sunshine, wasn’t he?

“Please, bond with us.” He nodded toward the bowl and the knife and Vera felt her eyes going wide. Jesus. That was not sanitary. Somehow, it was the smallest problem she had with it. But they were waiting, watching her expectantly. She gulped, bending down just like Egan did before, taking the blade in her right hand. It had a pentagram on its handle. Of course it did. Before she could change her mind, she quickly ran the blade across her left palm, biting her cheek to stop herself from hissing in pain. She tasted blood in her mouth as she did so. Because apparently there wasn’t enough blood that night already.

Vera’s gaze flickered to Egan, but his eyes gaze was aimed to the bowl. Right. Not creepy, not creepy, not creepy. She let her blood drop in the bowl with a sickening wet sound.


“In Devil we trust,” ten voices sounded in scary synchronicity, making her shiver.

Vera carefully placed the knife back where it was, looking to Egan again, because apparently he was the big boss around here. A cult leader. She was sure his mum was proud.

Also, she figured out sarcasm was not only a great weapon against pain, but also against her fear.

“Latonya,” Bonnie/Lilith addressed her and she turned to her, surprised. God, her new name was stupid. “There is only one more thing, before you become one of us in his eyes.”

Yeah, I bet there is.

Vera nodded in understanding, her freak out level reaching the top. What exactly was the last thing? Please, don’t say ‘kill someone’, don’t say ‘kill someone’…

Lilith beckoned to where Egan was standing seconds ago, his place suddenly empty. Door she hadn’t register before slammed behind him, as he was coming back. (She knew the warehouse looked bigger from outside! There must have been another room. She was just too terrified to actually notice.) In his hands, he carried something Vera definitely hadn’t seen before either. Where the hell did they had it? Where the hell did they even get hold on something like this?

Egan was wearing thick gloves as he held it in his hands, so he wouldn’t burn himself. He was going to burn her though. He carried a fucking branding iron. She knew what the symbol would be even
before he was close enough for her to recognize it. A pentagram. She couldn’t help gulping at the sight, nails digging to her palms keeping herself from running the hell away from this madness.

They were lunatics. Vera knew they were lunatics, but she had no idea they felt a need to burn it to their skin. Lilith approached her together with Egan, whose lips were spread into a small proud smile. Lunatic. Maniac. Nut job. She could go on. She couldn’t say any of this out loud, but she wanted to scream it at the top of her lungs.

Vera felt the heat radiating from the iron, strong urge to throw up taking over. She was sure her face was pale as sheet of paper, visible in the faint light of the candles. And the burning iron.

Ježišmarja.

Lilith rolled up the hem of her top, exposing a scar - pentagram of almost a size of palm – placed above her hip. New wave of nausea washed over Vera. “Where do you want it?” she challenged her, voice deadly serious.

Vera squeezed her eyes shut, trying to figure out a place where it would hurt the least. And where no one could possibly see it. Like ever. She hesitantly rolled her top up as well, turning her back to them, looking over her shoulder.

“Right side. Slightly above lower back,” she whispered, trying her best to keep her voice from shaking. She wasn’t completely successful.

“Whoa, what’s this scar from? Looks quite fresh,” Egan demanded, astonished eyes piercing into hers. She lowered her gaze, taken aback by the question. What the hell was she supposed to say?

She sighed. “Katana.”

He gasped and her gaze flickered to his face. His lips were parted in silent shock. She felt Lilith’s eyes on her too.

“It was… shortly before he disappeared. The fourth save,” Vera admitted, leaving out the one time he came too late, Jessica being faster than him. And the fact that the last time, he lost, no matter how hard he tried.

Egan was absolutely awe-struck. “He saved you four times?!”

Vera closed her eyes as she heard a wave of whispers rising. “Yeah,” she breathed in agreement.

“Invaluable indeed,” Lilith murmured and gestured to Egan to do what he was meant to do. Vera quickly turned her head back to the front, gritting her teeth in anticipation of pain. She couldn’t prepare for that enough.

The second the burning surface met her skin, she hissed, all muscles in her body tensing, ready to run from the flame licking her back, pain shooting through her back to her leg. She felt her nails reopen the wound on her palm as she dug too deep, stopping herself from jerking away, tears escaping her eyes as she squeezed them too tightly. It could only be seconds, but each of those dragged like an hour. Then the worse fire was gone, itching and burning remaining. Just like the brand. The scar.

“In Devil I trust,” Lilith breathed to her ear, Vera barely hearing her over the buzzing in hers ears and her harsh breaths. It took her a while to realize Lilith wanted her to say that.

Vera gulped, blinking away her tears, unable to look up to anyone’s face.
“In Devil I trust,” she declared, ten voices responding her in unity again.

“In Devil we trust.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah. I guess I have nothing to say to this chapter. Just a friendly reminder the shit they do is not exactly Satanism.

Also, I am not crazy, not in that way anyway. And thanks for putting up with me.
“I don’t know why I’m putting up with you,” Terri exclaimed the next day when they were changing and she saw Vera’s burned back, returning the dressing with cooling salve on its place.

Vera called her the previous night once she got home, so Terri wouldn’t alert the whole police force of New York City. She came home around midnight, after she witnessed arranging shifts of vigilanting, because apparently, they were always two pairs patrolling each night. They had system; Vera had to give them that. Since she was a little hurt, they didn’t give her shift that night or the next one – but Liam would let her know (because everyone fucking had her phone number, since she gave it to Bonnie aka Lilith for her fit-box lesson) where they would meet to start their patrol on Saturday. Vera was glad she didn’t have to spend night with Eileen – apparently they always made pairs with at least one boy. They stuck around for a while, Vera rather listening how they were sharing experiences – and it sounded almost as if they were the good guys – then switching topics and talking about upcoming sacrifice; they needed to literally catch and drug a criminal. Vera’s head hurt. She headed home the moment Egan, leaving to his shift with Dabria, gave her his goodbye and permission to go. She didn’t need to be asked twice.

“No, seriously. You’re insane. Why am I your friend?” Terri continued murmuring exasperatedly, walking out of the private room. Caroline was supposed to be with them on their morning shift, but was nowhere in sight just yet – they could share scary info all they wanted.

“Because birds of feather flock together?” Vera offered innocently as she rolled her top down and adjusted her apron, following Terri behind the counter.

Terri turned to her, lips pursed. She seemed offended, but Vera knew better. She was… worried. Troubled. Vera didn’t blame her, because what was happening was shit.

“Nice try. But you are a whole new level of crazy, Vera. I’m not used to people who are crazier than I am!”

Vera couldn’t help smiling and shrugged. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you jealous,” she teased, trying to keep the mood rather light instead of dark and angsty – and they were fucking dancing on the edge of angst. They did. And that sucked, because Terri should be all rainbows and sunshine. Not angst. Vera really was a bad influence.

Terri sighed as their colleague walked in with a tired wave. “Trust me, Vera. I am lot of things right now, jealous is not one of them.”

After a long time (and it made her a terrible person that it took her so long) Vera realized she was not the only one dealing with something rather scary – Terri was more than entitled to be freaked out as well. Because she had been coming to terms with her psychic abilities or whatever. The abilities that saved Vera’s life.

Vera waited until Caroline disappeared in the back. “How are you doing?” she asked her friend, examining her more thoroughly than before. Terri’s eyebrow shot up.

“How am I doing?” she parroted sceptically.

“Uhm. I mean… how you’re dealing with the-“ Vera gestured vaguely around her head and eyes in
“-sixth sense thing.”

Terri blinked, looking almost surprised. “Sixth sense, huh?... Well, at least I don’t see dead people.”

Vera cracked a smile. That was the Terri she liked – and she seemed to be telling the truth. She was okay, no matter how surreal it might be.

“Actually, I was able to prevent one person becoming dead, so I guess that’s something. I would like to keep it that way, so I gotta ask. You called the police yet?”

Vera winced at the note. She didn’t. “I thought I’ll stop at the precinct after my shift,” she admitted and shrunk under Terri’s strict gaze.

“What the hell are you waiting for?”

“I want to talk to Mahoney. And I thought it might be better in person. I just hope he’ll be there.” Vera thought it would be for the best. After all, it was Sergeant Mahoney who approached her. And he was really nice – he might not even arrest her for joining a cult. Maybe.

“You’re playing with fire, Vera,” Terri pronounced darkly and Vera couldn’t help sighing. As if she didn’t know that.

“I know, Terri. I have a freaking pentagram burned to my skin to remind me that,” she murmured back and that was the last thing she had a chance to say before Caroline joined them.

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The thing was Vera couldn’t go to the precinct. Because around twelve, Dugald walked into MDDC, acting indifferently, ordering a chocolate cake and tall Americano. But he seated himself in the corner, pulling out laptop from his bag and didn’t look like he was about to leave any time soon, shooting her glances from time to time – Vera suspected he wouldn’t leave until Latonya would. Possibly following her, making sure she wouldn’t do anything stupid. Like going for a nice little chat with the police. Vera wondered if Eileen asked him to check on her, still suspicious of her, or if it was just standard newbie policy; or if she was just being paranoid and he simply came to get a coffee.

Terri poked her ribs. “What’s wrong?”

“The guy I served few minutes ago,” Vera hissed, beckoning to him inconspicuously, “he’s one of them.”

Her friend remained quiet. Vera, taken aback by the strange reaction, looked at her, finding her with her eyes wide, face paled.

“Terri?” she addressed her, slightly worried. Was she having a vision or something? Or was it just regular brain freeze?

She unfroze only to frown. “You said one of the girls joined your lessons?”

Vera nodded, not liking the tone Terri was speaking and her frown deepening.

“And now this guy? I don’t like this Vera.” Welcome to the club. “You need to tell the police. And you need to do it asap.”

“I know,” Vera hummed, serving another customer so she didn’t look suspicious. Terri took the hint,
“I mean it, Vera. This is no laughing matter. Next thing you know they take your wallet and phone, tell you who you can and cannot meet with and take over your life,” she whispered as they passed each other, Vera handing a coffee, Terri approaching one of the machines.

Vera felt something heavy in her stomach at Terri’s words, fear creeping up her spine. She gulped, smiling to her customer shakily. “Enjoy your coffee! I can’t just go to the precinct. What if he follows me?”

Terri eyed her once she gave another person his daily dope with thank you for choosing MDDC. She seemed startled. “Then fucking take a break and call them right now!”

“To tell them what? I have nothing, Terri. I involve them too soon and it will blow up. Welcome to MDDC, what can I—”

“Sorry, I’ll take your order. My colleague is just taking her break, she has an important phone call to make,” Terri interrupted her, shoving her lightly from the counter, giving her a significant look. She strained the last words through her teeth as she smiled to the pair Vera wanted to serve.

Vera just gaped silently, returning Terri’s gaze. Her friend was being deadly serious. Call them, right now, she mouthed and Vera made an unhappy grimace.

It wasn’t like it was completely out of picture. Terri was right of course. This was not a laughing matter, Vera knew that, she definitely wasn’t laughing, hell, her teeth were almost clattering with fear and anxiety at each glare Dugald gave her. And Jesus, his name was really stupid. But what should she tell the police? It wasn’t like they could keep her save if she wanted them to catch the worshippers doing something very illegal – not that stalking wasn’t illegal, but dammit, Vera wasn’t even sure if she was being stalked. This was insane.

Terri kept staring at her and the boy on the other side of the counter cleared his throat. Right. Customers. Work. “Thanks, Terri.”

Vera had no idea what she wanted to do, but she spun on her heels, humming something about a break in Caroline’s direction. Once she was in the back, she found her phone, toying with it for what could be minutes.

Nonsense. She couldn’t call the police just yet.

Could she?

Before she could change her mind, she found number to 15th precinct on the internet – a number which supposedly served as anonymous crime-notifying line - dialling.

“15th precinct, Hell’s Kitchen. How can we help you?” a pointed voice on the other end of the line responded after one dialling tone, making Vera jump. That was fast. She had no time to think through how they could help her.

“Uhm… Is Sergeant Mahoney present? I need to talk to him. It’s- it’s urgent,” she blurted out, only thing that came to her mind. The panic in her voice – caused not only by actual fright of what she got herself into, but also by being rejected, possibly tracked down and something – probably made her exclaim believable without her attempting to.

The woman in the phone sounded kinder than before, tone softer. “I can check. But you don’t have
to be scared to tell me either,” she offered and Vera would really appreciated it if she didn’t in fact need to talk to the one particular cop. She wondered if the woman was a cop or some kind of a social worker.

Vera breathed in deeply. “Please,” she whispered, not really aiming for sounding pathetic. Yet, she probably sounded very pathetic.

“Alright. He’s here. Give me one minute tops, dear.”

Vera sighed in relief, finding her body relaxing – she didn’t realize how tense she was before. She took a moment to appreciate the fact that one of few people she trusted was a cop who she only met few times.

There was a click and Vera exhaled shakily before speaking up.

“Sergeant Mahoney?” she asked hesitantly.

“...Yes,” he agreed with caution, obviously not recognizing her.

“Hey, uhm… this is Vera. Veronika Macháčková.”

Sergeant Mahoney made a very surprised sound and she would swear his next words were almost pleased. “Hey. What's going on?”

Too much, Sergeant. That probably wasn’t the best line she could give him. Yet, it would be the most fitting.

“I might have something you would like to hear…”

“…are you talking about the friend I think you're talking about?” he asked her, speaking lower than before. Vera had to erase a picture of him, crouching to the phone, looking around as if he was doing something illegal as well. She cleared her throat.

“Yes. Kinda.”

“Then maybe you should come down here,” he offered, sounding excited – and a little concerned if Vera read his voice right. Well. That was the problem, wasn’t it? If he was concerned now, how would he feel about the rest of what she had to say to him?

“Can’t. I don’t know if I’m not being followed,” Vera admitted in quiet voice and the first answer she got was a sharp intake of breath. She should have probably considered the choice of words better. But it was too late and it was the truth. For once, she wasn’t lying or lying in omission.

“What?! Dammit, Machackova, that’s your headline right here!” he burst out, obviously not worrying about other people hearing him anymore. “Where are you?” he demanded, tone sharp.

“Doesn’t matter-“

“You’re not sure about not being followed and you’re telling me-“

“Listen to me dammit!” she interrupted him impatiently, barely keeping her voice down and he actually shut up. Ops. She just shushed an officer of law. She didn’t have time to feel guilty or ashamed though. “Uhm... Sorry. I didn’t hear from him, but I have a solid lead on what you’re working on.”

“The Devil Worshippers?”
“Yes.”

He sighed, sounding exhausted. Vera thought he might run a hand down his face. “Let’s pretend I’m not majorly concerned about the fact you think someone’s on your tail. For now. I’m listening.”

Vera mentally counted to ten, gathering courage and giving him time to prepare as well. 3, 2, 1…

“I’m in. Last night I underwent an admission ritual and I became a Devil Worshipper.”

On the other end of the line, there was an absolute silence for several seconds and Vera checked her phone, worried the connection was cut off. It didn’t seem like it. She subconsciously looked around as if she could find someone watching her, jamming the signal. She found no one. Naturally. She was alone in the back room, safe.

Then there was another sharper intake of breath and she almost sighed in relief hearing it.

“YOU WHAT?!?” came a yell so loud she had to put the phone further from her ear.

Perhaps the silence was better.

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Sergeant Brett Mahoney was a miracle worker. He was smart, he knew how to improvise and he was fast.

Vera returned to the counter, smiling at Terri reassuringly despite the fact she was far from calm and reassured that things would go well. Mahoney agreed to meet her in the café – in his civil clothes – and Vera just hoped Dugald, who was still enjoying his coffee an hour later when the officer came in, wouldn’t recognize him.

The cop entered MDDC with a light smile, ordering a coffee for himself and tea for Vera, asking if her shift was ending (and Terri shoved her in a friendly gesture, suggesting Vera should go even though she still had few minutes of work left – Terri was a good actress). He mouthed silent is anyone dangerous here and Vera nodded, his face darkening immediately at her gesture. She mouthed in the corner back, offering a professional smile and went to change, while Terri prepared their drinks. Vera liked to think things were good, squeezing her heart-shaped charm out of habit for good luck.

Matt would like what she was doing at the moment, right? Not taking as crazy risks as she could. She felt a ghost of Matt’s lips on her forehead and she sent unspoken I care about you too with a soft smile, walking out with determination, finding Mahoney at one of the tables (rather far from Dugald, but in perfect angle for watching him), their cups already in front of him.

Let’s do this.

The cop mostly let her talk on her own. By the time she finished her reasoning of why she hadn’t contacted the police sooner, Mahoney was watching her thoughtfully, little surprised, little as if he just had a moment of clarity.

“Alright. I can see you’re Murdock’s girlfriend,” he exclaimed and Vera wasn’t sure what to take from the statement, pushing the stinging feeling at being given that title away immediately. He actually made it sound quite offensive.

She watched his face, hoping to get a cue of what he meant. His eyes widened and he sat straighter.
“Okay, that’s just creepy. Stop doing that.”

Vera was even more confused. “Doing what?”

He gestured to her face indefinably. “The- the head thing. Murdock does that to.”

Vera realized she tilted her head to side as she was thinking. She quickly did as he asked her, clearing her throat. “Sorry.”

He sighed and leaned his forearms on the table, fingers interweaving. “Okay. Let me ask you a question, miss Machackova.” He made an ominous pause and Vera felt her throat tightening even more. “What do you think happens now?”

“Good question. I was hoping you would tell me. I know nothing yet, even though I’m one of them. We have a meeting tomorrow night, well, I do. I go for a patrol. Will you like… wire me or something? I don’t know if there will be some of the… sacrifice stuff,” she admitted, chasing away the picture of possible crucifying from her mind.

“Wire- so I am reading this right and you joined a creepy cult, because you were hoping you could help us by… infiltrating them? Help us to catch them while they are actually doing the nasty stuff?” he asked with disbelief and she wondered what other reason he thought she might have for this. She didn’t want to think about it too hard. She hesitantly nodded. Her answer was rewarded by a lingering incredulous glare and he raised his connected hands, resting his chin on them, while his elbows remained on the table.

He kept just watching her – half horrified, half curious –, examining, probing and Vera shifted uncomfortably under his intense gaze.

“You’re crazy,” he blurted out in the end, his hands falling. “This is just- this is not how things work. Civilians don’t go undercover-“

“I’m not going undercover. I’m being me. I mean, that’s different, right? And I’m doing this from my own will, I’m not expecting money for it,” she interrupted him and he raised an eyebrow.

“What do you do expect?”

Yeah, another good question. What did she expect? She hadn’t wanted to contact the police just yet, but she had and even when she wanted to ask for their help later, she had no idea what she thought would happen when she would.

“Not to end up behind bars for being a member of a cult which apparently kills people?” Vera offered in small voice and he gave her an unimpressed look. Then he leaned back to his chair, mouth falling agape, eyes wide.

“This is your version of vigilanting, isn’t it?” he exclaimed, realizing her motives. Vera wasn’t sure if catching vigilantes could be considered vigilanting, but they were killing people and they were nasty vigilantes, so probably yes. "God, no wonder he has crush on you. … Well, at least you rely on police’s help.”

Vera bit her tongue to stop herself from asking whether he was talking about Matt Murdock or the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen crushing on her; both would probably kill her if they knew what she did, she decided – it didn’t matter she might have the whole police force as a backup. Terri said it herself – she was a whole new level of crazy, wasn’t she? Mahoney seemed to think so as well.

“Does it matter?” she asked rhetorically, instead of confirming his exclaim. It wasn’t like he was


wrong. Matt wasn’t here – Mike wasn’t here. Consider her being his next of kin. This was something she had to do.

He sighed, running his hand down his face. “I’ll talk to the captain about this and I let you know how that goes. For god’s sake, stay out of trouble before I reach out to you.”

_Not sure I can do that if I don’t want to haul the plan by not doing what they want me to._

“I’ll try my best, Sergeant,” she said instead, flashing him a small smile. Somehow, he didn’t seem to trust her. She wondered why. It probably had something to do with what she was about to do the very next night. _What_ was she about to do? “What about tomorrow night? I have to go there.”

He looked troubled. “I think you should stay out of that. Find an excuse for not going. Apart from illegal, this shit can get dangerous.”

“If I decline, I might get expelled,” she protested, pretending not to be scared shitless at his words. He wasn’t telling her anything new – it didn’t make it less terrifying. “And Dugald saw me talking to you, it might be suspicious if I changed my mind after that.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Dugald?”

“Eh- you don’t want to know, trust me. I told you I was hallowed by thy name. Technically, I’m called Latonya.”

 “…Right. I don’t want to know. _Yet_. If you find the time though, write down everything you remember. Or record it on your phone or whatever. It will get handy. About the _patrol_… try not to engage too much. The possible charges, it shouldn’t be a problem, at least I hope so. But I don’t know – I told you, this isn’t how things work. _Ever_,” he pointed out again and Vera nodded, calmed and freaked out even more at the same time. “I should go. Dugald is watching me, I think he’s beginning to suspect something already. Seriously, Machackova. Be careful.”

With those words, he stood up, smiling at her friendly. Well, at least _someone_ was a good actor here. Good thing Dugald couldn’t see _her_ face, because she tried to smile back and probably failed.

“Thank you.”

_Vera_ was grateful. It actually went better than she thought it would. She should buy Mahoney a fruit basket or something. Perhaps a bottle of whiskey?

To her utter shock, he gave her a quick hug. “That’s what a friend would do. Or your date. Whatever. Sorry.”

This time, she smiled for real before she took the dirty dished to put in on the counter. As she was putting her light coat on, she saw with the corner of her eye that Dugald packed his stuff as well. Unpleasant feeling settled in her gut and she waved at her colleagues, leaving with her lips in thin line to keep them from trembling. She pretended she didn’t know about the person following her to the supermarket _and_ home.

Coming to her lesson, she wasn’t even surprised to find Bonnie in. Exercising was a little difficult, because every time she stretched in a wrong way, she felt the wound on her back burning, the bandaged cut on her palm (and she was smart about cutting herself, okay, she knew _where_ and _how_ she needed to lead the blade to make sure it healed rather fast) protesting with some movements as well. She focused more on cheering the participants and added few requested songs to cover up she was hurting. Judging by the enthusiasm they accepted the new choreographies with (especially Bryan his _Live While We’re Young_), she did well.
She tried her best to ignore *Lilith* on her tail as she went home as well, even though inside, she was shivering. One shot of whiskey helped. A little. The second helped more.

Chapter End Notes

I love Brett. I had to laugh when I remembered frimousse’s ‘*Vera is out there giving anxiety attacks to everyone around with her life choices*’, because it *is* very fitting, isn’t it?

Title – technically from Beautiful Crime by Tamer, because I freaking love that song.
Vera didn’t have a shift on Saturday. It was the worst thing that could possibly happen, because she had nothing to do and yet she wasn’t able to sleep in. She prepared her daily fuel, forcing herself to eat at least light breakfast and she scrubbed her apartment clean. She also baked and after late lunch, she knocked on Nina’s door with a shaky smile, offering her the result.

Nina was pleasantly surprised by her visit and Vera couldn’t really blame her – she kept her distance lately. Everything was so crazy.

“How you’re holding up?” Nina asked her gently over hot chocolate and Vera couldn’t contain her hysterical laugh inside, just like her tears.

She didn’t tell Nina about her plans for the evening – she wasn’t stupid. What she was though, was afraid of what Nina would think of her. Because what she was about to do… Mahoney asked her to try to stay out of trouble and not to engage much. But how could she do that? How could she pretend she was okay with what was coming? How could she play along? How could she- what if they would run into a criminal and she would have to stop him? She didn’t have problem with stopping a crime, okay, but what exactly that required? She had no idea what the patrolling looked like. And what if Liam decided their criminal was the one they should- kill? Could he even decide about that? Or was it only Egan who was calling the shots?

Vera tried really hard to pay attention to what Nina was saying and for few moments, she even managed that – Caitlin proposed. And Maria said yes. Nina’s daughter was getting married. Vera realized Nina was crying, happy tears rolling down her face and for precious moments, she was happy too.

The bright feeling died out the moment she entered her apartment, finding a text from Liam (or she hoped so). They would meet in less than three hours and he recommended to take her brass knuckles with her. She suddenly felt legless and she sat heavily to her couch, her mind blank.

This was wrong. This was so, so wrong. She had no idea how her night would go, but the feeling in her gut screamed at her it would go sideways. She fought the urge to text him back to go screw himself that she was not about to hurt anyone, even if he or she would be a- but then someone else might get hurt, right? It wasn’t like it was out of the picture. They would only hurt someone who would want to commit a crime. And Vera would at least be mild.

But what if it wasn’t be her call? What if she didn’t have a choice?

Vera sprung to her feet, determined. She buried herself in her wardrobe, finding every possible black piece of fabric she had and changed. She didn’t take her purse. She only shove her phone deep in the pocket of her pants and wrapped her brass knuckled in a handkerchief so they didn’t clink together before she hid them in the pocket of her hoodie. She had a pretty good idea of spending the time she had left before she would meet Liam – if she was meeting him. She still wasn’t sure.

Her tracks led to church.

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“You have someone else who needs hope?” kind voice asked her as she lighted the second candle
and she sighed, not even startled. Father Lantom was like a ghost and this time, she definitely was too lost in her thoughts to register him. Add that to the list of reason why she should not go out that night.

“I- I’m sorry. It was wrong,” she apologized quickly, keeping her voice down. The church was empty apart from her and the priest, but… it was a church. Father Lantom was watching her thoughtfully, eyes sincere, curious. Yet, he didn’t say a word. So why did she felt the urge to explain? "I just… it’s for me, actually.”

“You do seem a bit troubled,” he hummed in agreement, not pressing, but with hints of a challenge. An offer, perhaps. God, she wanted to accept whatever he was offering. And shit she just swore in a church, even though only in her mind.

“I… it’s nothing.” And she just lied to a priest. And her evening was about to become much more sinful. She was doomed.

The priest ‘s eyebrow raised inconspicuously as if he knew she was lying. Well, if she looked half terrible as she felt, it probably wasn’t hard to figure out she was. “Why don’t we sit? How do you feel about latté?”

Say no, Veronika. “It sure sounds nice, Father.” Veronika. You do not want this man to know what you’re about to do. “But I don’t want to keep you.”

That’s better.

“I offered,” he protested lightly with a gracious smile. Damn his kind smile. “And even Matthew says it’s good. He wouldn’t lie to his priest. That would be a sin.”

Vera had no idea if he intended to be sassy. But he kinda was. She gulped, turning her eyes back to the candles. One for Matt. One for her. Should she light another one for possible victim of that night?

Vera had to blink away tears gathering in her eyes. “I’m sure he wouldn’t.”

“You know, on not so rare occasions, our latté session worked better than regular confession. I don’t think you would go for one, but the rules would apply the same over a coffee if you wanted to.”

Damn you, Father Lantom. Damn you and your amiable smile and kind eyes.

Damn you, Veronika, for being so weak.

She sighed and nodded.

“You’re losing your faith in him. You don’t think he’s coming back to you,” he noted, observant, as he placed two cups on a table in his chamber or wherever he took her, sitting next to her on a bench.

Vera couldn’t make herself to sit at the table right – she was rather on the edge of her seat, ready to flee any second, even though there was nothing dangerous. When he said those words, she felt painful knot in her stomach. She didn’t expect that.

“That’s not- yeah, that too,” Vera confirmed, realizing it was the truth. How did he know better than herself? “But that’s not it, Father, I’m… I did something. And I’m about to do something worse and I’m afraid it’s not right.”

And wasn’t that it? Vera, loosing hope Matt would come back? Was that why she wanted to take the Worshippers down? Because in the back of her mind, there was something, a tiny voice she was
trying to ignore and push away, telling her he would never take care of it, because he was simply not coming back?

What was she even doing? When did she decide to be his next of kin? Not just following his footsteps into vigilanting, but also abusing his priest along the way? She was a terrible person.

“Right according to who? People have very different opinions of what’s right and wrong,” he said after a while. Vera lowered her gaze to the cup, taking it to her hands. Despite May slowly coming, warm breeze in the streets of New York, she was cold. She was always cold, wasn’t she?

“Well, Matt sure would approve. If it was anyone but me doing it. My friend is freaking out, but I think she thinks it’s right. Me… I just don’t know.”

Unlike her, he ignored his drink, watching her attentively. “If you came here and didn’t shut me down… perhaps you would like to know another opinion?”

“Perhaps,” she wondered. She thought she came here because of the candles. Or because it was something Matt would do, going to the church. Then again, he might even go there only for the priest. What did that said about her – that she needed to mimic someone else’s action? Was she really that lost?

“I… there are people, Father. Bad ones. Partly. Big part. Uhm. They picked up where he left off. They are on these streets, saving people from criminals. But they are hurting people,” she murmured, not really making sense, eyes pinned to the foam of her latté. It looked nice. And she preferred it to the no doubt pointed glare the priest was giving her.

“You think they’re bad people,” he stated the obvious and she felt on corner of her lips twitch. He didn’t continue, and she glanced up to him, realizing he was waiting for her confirmation nevertheless. She nodded and curled her fingers around her cup tighter.

“Interesting how differently we see the ones we love, blinded by affection, forgiving things we wouldn’t tolerate with anyone else.” Well, he was not wrong… “Is that why you’re troubled? Feeling the way you do about them, knowing you’re, forgive me, being hypocritical?”

Vera chuckled humourlessly – she really was becoming a cynic, wasn’t she? Dark chuckling didn’t use to be her thing. When she looked at him, he his brows were furrowed, eyes observing, trying to read more in her face. There was more.

“Oh, I wish that was the problem, Father. I know that what they are doing is wrong. They’re different from… Matt. No. I- I want to stop them.”

“At what cost?” He understood. How did he understand? Did Matt ever come to him with similar dilemma?

“I’m… I’m not gonna hurt them,” she reassured him quickly, mentally crossing her fingers. But would she? If there was no other option left? Would she hurt them to save a criminal? Jesus. So complicated. “I can’t beat them, I’m not doing this alone. But… I joined them. So I can be with them when something wrong happens. I asked police to help me, but their hands are tied until they catch them red-handed. They are killing people, Father, they- in a monstrous way.”

Vera didn’t think he needed the details. Talking with a priest about crucifixion, that special twisted kind? That would be just wrong.

Father Lantom closed his eyes, bowing his head, drawing a cross in silence.
“I’m one of them now. They don’t trust me completely, not yet. I’m going out with them tonight – I-” Vera couldn’t finish. Her voice was shaking as her fears resurfaced.

“You’re afraid you’ll hurt someone else, while trying to deliver them to justice.”

“What if this is all wrong?” she questioned heatedly, not even surprised he read her so easily anymore. “How the hell do I know I’m being right when doing this?”

The priest made a small motion with his hand, as if he wanted to place it on her arm in calming gesture, hint of a smile – hint of a smile?! – on his lips.

“What does your heart tell you?” he asked her in mild voice and she stared at him, startled.

“What?” What does my heart tell me? Apart from being scared shitless?

“People have different sense of good, I told you. But this isn’t about sense. The conflict you feel inside you? That’s the mind fighting your heart. The way we were raised, the world around us, the people we met – it all affects us. But your heart? It’s pure. Listen to it and let it lead you,” he explained softly and she tried to calm her frantic mind, confusing and terrifying pictures in her head.

Was that what Matt had been doing? Being led by his heart? How?!

Even if she decided – her heart decided it was somewhat right…

“What if it’s not me hurting someone directly? What if I just stand by, doing nothing, while they are-and the police’s not here yet. Jes-” she quickly covered her mouth before she cursed in a church out loud. Her mind was something else. No blasphemy in a church, Veronika, for god’s sake.

Wrinkled fingers took the cup from her hand; and she realized it was trembling, the sides of the cup stained with thin trickles of the drink as she spilled it. Vera let him, her hands going limp, and he placed it on the table again.

“You’re already doing more than just standing by. You’ll do what you feel is right,” he offered graciously and Vera wanted to believe what he was saying, she really did. “I’m a religious man, Vera. You might not want to give a concrete shape or name to what you believe in, but that doesn’t change the fact that you do. Now you need to have a little faith in yourself too, in your… intuition, voice of our Lord in you, the universe; the word itself doesn’t matter. Believe there is a spark of something bigger than each of us inside your heart and give in to it.”

She felt her lips parting at his words. It wasn’t like he was completely wrong. Of course she believed. She believed things were happening the way they should, each of them having a certain place and purpose, as the wheels of fate or whatever wanted them to turn. She made decisions with faith of doing it because she was meant to do them in that way. It was relatively simple – the guilt of bad decisions fell to something else and she just tagged along.

That was the problem, wasn’t it? Now she was trying to escape this comfort, accepting responsibility and that was the thing that was so scary.

“How do I know it’s not the mind winning?” she asked without fully realizing it. The question didn’t even make sense. How could someone divide mind from heart? She was confused, she was scared and she felt the consequences of her lack of sleep too, so, so tired.

She winced when his hand cautiously took hers and she tried to focus her gaze on him. He was smiling again, the kind-hearted patronizing smile, welcoming.
“The same way you walked into this church, the same way you decided to take care of Jack Murdock’s grave.” Her mouth fell agape completely, no sound coming out. He knew. Of course he knew. “The same way you joined people, who believe someone else’s evil can make them good despite only giving a different name to the doing of the same they fight against, only to stop them.”

Vera tried. She really tried but... yeah, his explanation was not helping. She was watching him clueless.

“Confusing, I see. Difficult for you to believe. Perhaps...” He made a small pause, thinking. “Do you believe Matthew’s judgement? Of what’s good?”

“Of course,” she blurted out, not giving it a second thought. His lips twitched at the harshness.

“Funny. He often doesn’t trust himself, questioning his every move. But there is something he was always sure about. As far as I know, he never questioned any of your choices.”

Vera blinked in surprise. He was kidding her, right? Except there was only honesty in his eyes. He wasn’t shitting her. Plus, lying. Sin. “That’s- unwise.”

“You think? Do you have faith in Matthew?” he demanded gently, his head tilted to side in Matt’s very own gesture.

“Yes,” she agreed once again, not quite understanding why was he asking the same question twice.

“Then believe me when I say he has faith in you.”

Heavy silence fell. Vera realized she was crying. Again. And Jesus fucking Christ, could she ever stop crying?!! She didn’t even care about the swearing anymore. She was damned anyway. She quickly wiped the tears away, blinking against the others begging to be released as well.

“Drink your coffee. You look like you hadn’t slept in a year,” he broke the deafening silence with what was almost an order and all she could do was to oblige.

_Not a year, Father. Only for the past three months._

---

Vera would be lying if she said she was alright with what she was about to do all of sudden. She wasn’t, of course. But she did feel better. Maybe it was Father Lantom’s not so much of an approval – he didn’t tell her go to streets and beat up people, obviously – he showed her a way. She tried not to think about it too hard and convinced herself she believed it was a right thing to do. Heart was pure, Father Lantom said. The first decisions made are usually based on emotions, instincts, intuition; and her first decision was to join the Devil Worshippers to take them down. And that was what she was trying to do.

No more, no less. It didn’t change the fact the brass knuckles in her pockets felt heavier than they actually were.

Liam wanted to meet in front of Fogwell’s. Vera remembered the weakness in her knees when reading his text, a reminder of them knowing of her whereabouts. She kept telling herself it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. She was on place five minutes earlier, Liam arriving shortly after her.

He was wearing all black as well. Shoes suitable for running. No mask or anything to cover his identity – his sweatshirt didn’t even have a hood. Right – they weren’t hiding their faces, the insane people they were. Vera wore a hoodie – it might reduce her field of vision during potential fight, but
she didn’t really care; the idea of someone catching her (or remembering her) while playing vigilante again was intimidating enough for her to choose this disadvantage. Of course, she wasn’t wearing the hood. Yet.

“Latonya,” he greeted her with a nod and inconspicuous smile. The streets weren’t completely empty yet – his voice was rather quiet, despite the fact the closest person to them was over ten feet away.

Vera fought an eye roll – and a shiver – at the addressing. She nodded too, her heart hammering, fighting a way out of her chest. “Liam.”

“Shall we?” he offered, extending his hand in her direction and she eyed it, baffled. What the hell? “Alright, not a date then,” he hummed and Vera gasped silently.

Seriously. What the actual hell?

He rolled his eyes and turned on his heels, slowly walking away. Vera was… confused. But she followed him.

“Relax. We’re just a couple of friends, hanging around in the evening.”

Vera didn’t understand a thing and she couldn’t keep her mouth shut anymore. “What?”

He stopped in his track, looking to her face. Seeing her expression, he raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

“Lat, you don’t need to be afraid. I’m serious, relax. What did you think was gonna happen? That we would be swinging over rooftops?” he asked her, barely containing laugh.

Vera blinked, surprised. Did he just give her a nickname based on her fake name? And about his question… if she was being honest, yeah, kinda. “What are we gonna do then?”

“We walk. We stay rather close to alleyways, maybe hit the less populated areas, but no, we’re not gonna climb, jump and swing. Unless you’re secretly a Russian gymnast. Huh. When I think about it, you actually do have an accent,” he hummed, thoughtful, and broke into motion again.

Vera shook of the weird feeling – the urge to actually laugh at his note, how was he being funny, that wasn’t fair, he was one of them, he was not supposed to be funny – and joined his pace.

“I’m Czech. Not Russian,” she murmured and he made a small sound of acknowledgement.

And that was it. They… walked. The talked, as if they were indeed only friends hanging out together. Sure, they were looking around – they paid much more attention to their surrounding than a regular couple of friends would, they were striding rather than strolling, but it felt almost… normal. And that was even scarier than Vera expected, because Liam was… nice.

Liam asked her about the times the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen saved her – Vera couldn’t afford not to talk about it, because her motives to join the Worshipers was supposedly strongly affected by it. She asked him about how he joined the Worshippers. He had been assaulted. And saved by them. Started learning self-defence and ran into Lilith (Bonnie, her name was Bonnie, but he didn’t say that) in a pharmacy, where she was helping her mum from time to time and realized he wanted to do the same they had been doing.

“How long you’re a member?” she asked casually, her gaze flickering to another dark corner as they passed it. Nothing.
“Not long,” he answered thoughtfully, something odd in his voice. “About two weeks. I’m the newbie – well, not anymore, obviously.”

Vera frowned. “And they let you babysit me?” she blurted out before she could stop herself. To her surprise, he grinned.

“I proved myself enough. And you’re not exactly a rookie. Lilith watched you during the classes – you can throw a punch. And you saved the girl.”

“Hm.”

It was strange. On one hand, Eileen was very wary of her, Egan was giving her a permission to leave few night before, Dugald and Lilith were spying on her. On the other hand, they decided to hallow her by the name and let her to their lair after they only heard her opinion on a radio and they let her patrol with someone, who only joined two weeks ago. Two weeks ago. Three victims in last two weeks. Vera closed her eyes, trying not to come to conclusions.

Conclusions were dangerous.

She rather dug deeper. “Lilith… she’s one of the… uhm, senior members?”

“Yeah,” he smiled at the choice of her words. He had such a boyish smile, Jesus. “She’s one of the originals, actually.”

“Originals?”

Liam sighed. “There were three of them. Eric, Vlad and Lilith.”

Eric?

“They were the three that were actually confronted by Him. Don’t tell her I told you, but I think when Eric got arrested, it broke her heart. And that’s why she didn’t really fight Egan when he took over.” Vera tried to process all the information. He sure was chatty.

“Someone got arrested?” she wondered, honestly taken aback. If there were three of them how only one of them got arrested? She ignored the note about them meeting Matt – she wasn’t even surprised anymore she didn’t know about that. She made a mental note to ask about that later.

He hummed in agreement.

“Huh. Why Vlad didn’t-“

“Did you see that guy?” he questioned, expression unamused. “He’s a kid.”

Well, he looked like he was barely sixteen, Vera had to give him that. But Liam could be what? Twenty? Was it really such a difference? She huffed, but didn’t protest.

“Fair enough.”

They spent another moments in silence, occasionally making a small talk. Vera walked by his side on autopilot, her legs used to the periodic motion, doing it without fully realizing it. She shivered and shoved her hands in the pocket of her hoodie, huddled in it. She was getting really tired. And cold.

It honestly shocked her when she saw a crack of dawn. What time was it? She pulled out her phone, almost stumbling when she found out. It was four a.m. They were patrolling for almost eight hours. Literal shift. Her legs felt suddenly much heavier than before.
But at the same time, she felt incredibly relieved. How much could have been left? *Crack of dawn.* They managed a whole night – a Saturday night, what the hell – without a single intervention. She didn’t have to hurt anyone.

*Don’t count your chickens until they are hatched,* she admonished herself, biting her lip to stop herself from smiling.

“Tired, huh?”

Vera jumped as he cut the train of her thoughts and shot him a look. He gave her a patronizing smile.

“I didn’t sleep much. Was nervous,” she admitted. That was one way to put it.

“We’re just few minutes from your apartment,” he offered and Vera’s heart jumped. Sure, that wasn’t creepy at all, that they knew where she lived. Come on now, she knew that already, they followed her around. “I’ll just walk you and you sleep it off.”

So sweet of him. Not creepy. Not at all.

“Thanks. And I’m sorry.”

“No problem, Lat,” he responded, curling he arm around her shoulders, pulling her to his side friendly. She was so taken aback by the gesture she let him and they remained in the surreal hug until they reached her doorstep.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea if the talk with Father Lantom makes sense. I’ve rewritten it like three times and I’m still not sure about it.

Title – Half in the shadows… *half burned in the flames.*
21) Hard soul to save

Chapter Notes

Added total chapter count. I can’t promise it will be precisely like that, but it's something. Just for you to know that the story actually will end someday (and it won’t be at count 50) :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Terri (4:45):
Still alive?

Terri (4:46)
Sorry, that was inappropriate. Truth to be told, I wasn’t joking.

Terri (5:12)
Vera.

You have 1 missed call(s).

Terri (5:28)
Vera!

Terri (5:45)
Veronica Fucking-trouble-magnet Machackova!

Terri (5:47)
You have half an hour before I’m calling the cops.

You have 2 missed call(s).

You have 3 missed call(s).

Terri (6:02)
Vera? Please?

Me (6:05)
Ter.

Vera got home shortly after four. She didn’t bother with stripping. She just kicked off her shoes and fell to her bed. It was a smart move to set her alarm while she was walking up the stairs, because she wouldn’t manage after – she fell asleep before her head hit the pillow. Not that she had enough energy to actually aim for the pillow. She didn’t care.

When she found the text from Terri while turning off her alarm, she stared at it dully. To say that she was exhausted was an understatement. She would think she was dead, which would make her a liar, since she wrote Terri she was alive, but she had a splitting headache and she was sure those didn’t bother dead people. Each heartbeat echoed in her skull painfully and when she finally texted Terri back and actually got up from her bed, the pounding got even worse and she had to sit back, because
the world was spinning.

“Ježišmarja. Proč?” her lips mumbled, the words somehow blending together. Good thing no one need to understand her. It took her about five minutes to realize that even if she said the words clearly, the only people who would understand were over the ocean. English, Veronika. You’re in New York City, United Stated of America.

Vera took a short and very cold shower to wake herself up. It didn’t help. The only effect it had was that by the time she was preparing her daily dose of caffeine with extra shot of alcohol, her teeth were clattering. Her body was too tired to heat itself up. And wasn’t that wonderful. She grabbed a granola bar, attempting to eat it sometime during her morning shift, putting Matt’s hoodie over her clothes, because she was a masochist. She pulled the hood over her head – despite the outside temperature, she knew she would be freezing – and headed to work.

She ended up being late. When Hannah saw her, she didn’t even dare to admonish her. Vera probably looked shittier that she thought. But hey, she tried okay? She even put on the mascara despite the fact she fell asleep with her contacts in – not that she was sleeping long enough to make it a problem – and her eyes burned like a bitch.

“Jesus, Vera,” Terri breathed out when she saw her, horrified, and circled the counter to give her a crushing hug. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“Cajk,” Vera murmured to her ear, feeling her friend tensing as she did so.

“Translate, please.”

Huh. Sakra. “I’m fine, Ter. Tired.”

“And smelling like a liquid store,” Terri noted helpfully and released her from her arms. Huh. The truth was she did brush her teeth only once that morning. “That’s fine. Change and I’ll give you a chewing gum… and prepare you tea. And cake.”

“Not hungry,” Vera hummed back and Terri gave a significant look.

“What was the last time you ate?”

Vera looked up, her head pounding as she moved her eyes. And from the focus. What was the last time she ate?

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Change. Customers are here any minute,” Terri ordered, keeping her tone gentle and voice rather quiet as if she knew that talking out loud was a very bad idea. Also, Hannah would hear them.

“Thanks, Terri.”

“Any time, Mechy.”

What kinda did wake her up was a package in the back room with her name on it. She noticed if after she changed, but instead of opening it, she walked behind the counter. She could deal with it later. She just hoped it wasn’t a bomb that was about to go off.

Terri fed her. Made her drink the tea. Vera felt nauseous before and after it the same, but she tried to convince herself that the sugar helped; it didn’t really work. She was leaning onto the counter next to one of the machines, finding her eyes closing involuntarily, until someone snapped their fingers in front of her face. She blinked her eyes open, finding Terri measuring her with worried look.
“You look awful. You know, the café is half empty. I’m sure Hannah would understand if you came home,” her friend offered and Vera sighed, running her hand down her face, rubbing her tired eyes.

“What time is it?”

“Half past ten.”

It was too soon. Vera shook her head, the world becoming less steady with the movement. Jesus.

“I can handle another three hours. I might take a break though. Any idea what’s in the package in the back?” Vera squinted at her and Terri shrugged.

“Nope. Why don’t you take it home and find out?” she challenged and Vera gave her an unimpressed look.

“Nice try,” Vera mumbled and pushed herself up. “I’ll check it out.”

“Hannah’s on her break,” Terri noted her gently, biting her lip, examining her thoroughly.

“Terri. Stop looking at me like that. I love you. But stop looking at me like that.”

“Wanna share how yesterday went?” her friend asked innocently and Vera rolled her eyes. Huh. The headache was actually getting better. That was good.

“Fine. No punching.”

Terri’s eyebrows shot up, awe all over her face. “Really? Cool!”

Vera smiled at her excitement and explained what happened. Or didn’t happen. Depended on the point of view.

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The package was from the New York’s finest as Vera soon found out. It contained a letter and something that dangerously resembled a bug. Vera would know, she had once worn it. To be fair, the Avengers’ tech looked much fancier, not that she minded.

The instructions were simple. Sergeant Mahoney – and it was the first thing Vera checked, his signature – was letting her know how to operate the one-way bug (of course it was one-way, it always was one-way, wasn’t it), asking her to put in on the next time she went for some action. He enclosed his phone number, wanting her to let him know she got the package and if she had any questions. Also, she had to report when she was about to take some action, because that was the captain’s conditions – Mahoney didn’t forget to add that his boss thought it was a great and absolutely terrible idea to get her involved.

There was one more paper in the box – a small note, written in hand. Be careful. Vera thought it was incredibly sweet. She quickly called Mahoney to confirm she got his package. She was utterly shocked when she found out she woke him up, because apparently, the number he gave her was a personal one. Which… huh.

Vera returned behind a counter with new shot of energy in her veins, managing to actually smile. Terri raised an eyebrow at that, but Vera just smiled wider and shook her head. Later, she mouthed.

Eileen showed up. She was frowning at Vera, but she sat in the corner, staying until her shift ended. Vera didn’t even tell Terri who she was, not wanting her to worry even more. She told her about the
package from the cop though – Terri was pleased. When she wasn’t shooting her worried looks at
the moment. She insisted she would walk her home. Vera didn’t protest and she ignored Eileen on
their tails. She was almost getting used to it. She tried really hard not to think what the fact she was
getting used to being followed around meant.

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By some miracle, she actually fell asleep when she got home. She intended to, or at least just lie and
rest, but she was out cold before she managed to count two sheep. She woke up at a sound of a text,
startled more by the fact that she had been sleeping than by the sound of a received message itself.
That changed by the time she actually read it.

*Meeting at 9. Same building like last time. E.*

Vera didn’t know the number. But she had a pretty good idea of who that was and the thought made
her heart race. She quickly checked the time – it was after seven.

“Shit.”

She shot up from the bed at cosmic speed, the fast movement making her dizzy. Where did she want
to go anyway? She sank back to the mattress, trying to think. Another meeting. What did that mean?
Was she on patrol tonight? That would be weird, right? Two nights in a row? And why would they
– or him? Her? – wanted to meet in the warehouse if they were getting on a patrol? This was not
good. This wasn’t good at all. She needed to make a phone call. Two actually.

Vera knew she should be calling the police first, but she couldn’t make herself to do that. She called
Terri instead.

“Maybe they just want to welcome another member?” Terri said in a hopeful voice once Vera
informed her about recent events.

Yeah, maybe. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“No. No I don’t,” her friend admitted with a sigh, sounding panicked. “Vera, you called the police,
right? You’re not going there? You just send them over?”

Vera, who was pacing back and forth through her apartment, stopped in her tracks. She didn’t
consider that. Her heart fluttered at the idea. She didn’t have to go there. Terri was a genius. Why
Mahoney didn’t offer her that in his letter or whatever? It would be much, much safer. She almost
allowed herself relax. Except…

It wouldn’t work. You know that. You won’t show up and they would be suspecting something fishy.

She whined silently, not bothering to shush the small voice in her head. Because it was right.

“Vera, what was that sound?” Terri demanded, startled.

Vera closed her eyes tiredly, the weight lifted from her shoulders for precious second falling back. “I
whined.”

“I know you did! And you know what that was? That was a sound of making a stupid decision!”
Terri hissed over the phone and Vera could only imagine her pissed off face. She licked her lips.

“I wasn’t aware stupid decision had special sound.” She started walking away, looking where she
stripped her yesterday black outfit. They loved black, right? Black hair. Black clothes. In the dark,
even the blood seemed to be black. Her stomach rolled over at the thought. Seriously. So cynical. When did that happen?

“Veronica.”

“Theresa,” she shot back, entering her bathroom. Right. She fell asleep, then she went to the shower. The cold one. *That* was a stupid decision.

“Call the police. And stay home,” Terri ordered harshly, voice deadly serious.

*Such a tempting offer, dammit.* Vera would *swear* she heard Matt’s content hum at the thought. Yeah, well.

“There was a bug, Terri. The police gave me a one-way bug. Why did they do that?”

“Because they are bunch of idiots!”

“Look, Terri, I- I gotta go. Same deal like last time. I’ll let you know to one a.m. Then you’re allowed to panic. Now, I gotta call the police and get going otherwise this whole thing will blow up and everything I did goes to vain,” Vera blurted in one breath, not waiting for Terri’s response. She quickly changed, finding out she had an hour to get to the warehouse.

She planted the bug to her bra, switching it on before calling Sergeant Mahoney. They were kinda on clock.

“Mahoney,” the voice in the phone announced and Vera felt something icy, sharp claws creeping down her spine. This was so much more than a stage fright. She was fucking terrified.

“Sergeant. It’s Vera. Tonight at nine. Warehouse 600 West 59th Street,” she announced to the phone, not really having time to beat around the bush.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a sec. What are you talking about? What’s happening tonight?- What’s happening in an hour?” he shot questions, one after another, sounding a little horrified about the last one. Yeah, she should have called him first. Shit.

“I don’t know. I got a text. They want me to come there. I was there before. It was where I got… named. I- I don’t know.”

There was a rustling on the other end of the line and she heard the sergeant’s voice distantly. He was shouting. Mobilizing other cops? Vera appreciated it, but she didn’t have time for waiting on the phone while they got their shit together. She really, really didn’t want to be late. Except she kinda did. Or she wanted to return the invitation. Pretend she never received it, that it got lost on its way. Too bad she couldn’t blame it on the post office. Jesus, her brain was fucked up.

“Sergeant?” she hissed to the phone impatiently.

“Machackova, are you sure you want to do this? You don’t have to.”

“I’m not sure about anything. But if I don’t show up, we’re screwed. I bugged myself. Can you hear me talking?” she demanded, grabbing her hoodie, putting it on with the phone still in her ear.

“Hold on a sec.” *I don’t have a sec! “Say something.”*

“…I’m giving up on you. Sorry. My mind is a mess. Heard that?”

He cleared his throat. “Loud and clear. Alright. We have several officers, calling for more. You go
there, you talk as much as you can, okay? So we know you’re still with us. You see danger, you get the hell out of there, understood?"

“Understood.”

“Be careful,” he said and it sounded like an order. She almost chuckled at his bossiness. She couldn’t find herself to answer, ended the call and shoved the phone to her pocket.

She noticed Terri texted her while she was calling with Mahoney. She couldn’t find strength to open it either.

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“Almost in the area. Can’t really talk right now,” she informed them, working against the lump in her throat. She wondered whether they could hear that loud and clear as well. Actually, she wondered if they could hear her at all. Without the feedback, without Mahoney on the line, she felt alone. And who was she kidding, she was alone. She subconsciously reached for her charm, hidden under her top. Two hearts. She wasn’t alone.

If Matt ever came back – she had no enough strength to correct the if to when at the moment – she could never tell him what she did. He would kill her for doing something like this. Then again, she would sure meet Terri before him – she might kill her too, considering she hung up on her. Her outlook was definitely something to look forward. She gulped again, reaching for a doorknob.

She wasn’t catholic. She wasn’t anything. She sent a silent selfish prayer anyway.

They were all already there. Ten people with ridiculous names and twisted conviction. When she was patrolling with Liam, only walking and talking, it was easy to forget. To lie to herself that they weren’t bad. But now?

The cross was in the middle of the room. Enormous wooden cross lying on the pentagram they painted last time she was there. She fought a tremble, her head spinning, her knees getting weak. Keep going. This is a good sign.

Vera felt her legs almost give up at that dark thought. Good sign? Of course it was, in a way – she called the police, they would catch them red-handed, but at what cost? She hoped the bug was still working so the police could hear everything, so they had enough evidence, because if this was all for nothing…

She scanned the room. There were tens of candles illuminating the space, the bowl, freaking stakes and a hammer-

Jesus, she couldn’t breathe in. Cross, thorn crown, stakes and hammer. To nail a person. Another human being. It fucking didn’t matter if it was a criminal. What kind of a pain a man had to feel while- or was he already dead by the time they-

Her nails dug to her palms and she had to stop for a moment, the world swimming in front of her eyes. She rather squeezed them shut, but picture of officer Collins – because he was the only criminal she could recall sharply – nailed to the cross appeared in her mind instantly. Accusing eyes. Blood. Deafening screams. She heard him scream before. Whimper. When she got kidnapped. The image in her mind was scarily accurate.

She felt a hand on her forearm and she snapped her eyes open.

“Latonya!” Excited voice reached her ears and it took her a while to realize someone was addressing
her. Latonya. Right. Liam was talking to her.

“Liam.” He gave her a quick smile and she shakily returned the affection. “What’s this about?”

She had to talk. Remember, Vera, you need to talk, so the police know you’re with them.

“Oh. Right. We’re doing a sacrifice tonight. We hope he will come for the soul-“

“Liam,” Eileen hissed behind his shoulder and he shut his mouth, looking guilty.

“I was just-“ he protested but Lilith gave him a sharp glare too and he put on a face of a kicked puppy.

Vera was… baffled. And horrified. They believed the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen would come to collect a soul…? What the actual fuck? Was that why they were- killing people? She wanted to throw up. She was glad that since breakfast, she ate nothing.

So far, she didn’t see anyone she didn’t meet before. Where was the criminal? In the back, where Egan brought the branding iron from? Vera didn’t want to know. Jesus, how much she didn’t want to know any of this.

You’re doing a right thing, Veronika. You’re doing a right thing, come one now...

“Don’t worry. You’ll learn about everything when the time is right,” Lilith reassured her and Vera forced herself to nod. Yeah, she would prefer to learn everything in the right time and form; after all of this, from a police report. If ever.

A loud clap of hands caught her attention and she wasn’t the only one. All heads snapped up in Egan’s direction. He was wearing a bright smile and he beckoned to his right – Vera followed; there were… eleven glasses with a red liquid.

Jesus Christ, don’t let it be blood. God forbid, the blood of the criminal they were going to nail. Her legs were slowly turning into incontrollable mass.

“Let’s drink at this blessed night,” he said simply and Vera was on the edge. She was not going to drink anyone’s blood. She was not.

“Please, tell me it’s not blood,” she breathed as she walked beside Liam and she would swear she could hear his eye roll.

“Lat, it’s wine. We’re not vampires.”

Oh, thank god. “Just wine,” Vera murmured, trying to calm her frantic mind and heart. Wine. She could work with that.

Lilith handed her a glass. “Latonya.”

“Thanks.” It did look like a wine. She carefully brought it to her lips, smelling it. She never liked the red wine. Or any kind of wine. But she couldn’t smell iron, which meant no blood probably, and she was much more comfortable with that. She eyed the others, who were watching Egan attentively. To distract herself, Vera wondered how exactly he took over after Eric. Did he just waltz in one day? Did Lilith bring him in?

“Bless the night we give our Father what he deserves and needs,” he proposed the weirdest toast Vera ever heard, thinking this was something Matt did not deserve or needed in the slightest, “here’s
Here’s to Him. Bottoms up. Unbelievable. She exhaled shakily and did as she was asked to, fighting the urge to grimace. Wine drinkers would probably say the wine was rich. For Vera, the wine was just bitter. She needed to stop for a moment, incredulously watching the others drinking it in one go. Was her glass different? Did they have just juice in theirs or what?

She felt Eileen’s gaze on her, burning through her head. She could almost hear her mocking. She gulped, licked her lips and drank the rest, supressing another grimace as she swallowed. She really didn’t like red wine.

Lilith graciously took her glass away, returning it to its place.

“Let’s begin. Would you like to have the honour to start tonight?” Egan approached with a smile and… yeah and with a bowl and knife. Somehow, the fact her cut was finally healing and she would reopened it again – or cut right next to it – was the last thing that bothered her. There was even an upside of her starting – the knife was relatively clean so far.

Vera blinked to steady her world. There was another reason why she didn’t drink wine. It made her lightheaded. And drinking a glass technically in one go? Jesus.

“Sure. I’ll start. Just cut and bleed to the bowl right?” she reassured herself, while informing the cops, who she wholeheartedly hoped were listening to what was happening, about her actions. She was still with them. Her head spun, but she was with them.

“Exactly. Just give a little bit more than the last time,” he noted with a patronizing smile. She almost huffed. Almost. So what, so she liked her blood where it should be. In her blood vessels. Sue her.

“Of course,” she hummed, bringing the blade to her palm with slight hesitation. No one liked pain. She wasn’t an exception. But as she knew what to expect, it hurt less. So… there was that. She let several drops fall to the bowl, clenching her fist to make it bleed.

Was insanity infectious?

Egan nodded contentedly, taking the knife, cutting himself as well. They all followed. They gradually moved closer to the centre of the room. Eileen started drawing another pentagram on the floor the moment the last person – Vlad – added his blood. Vera watched it like hypnotized.

She thought the long nap she got in the afternoon helped. Obviously it didn’t. The lack of sleep, the stress, the alcohol and the faintly lit room – it was not a good combination. She felt her eyelids getting heavier each second. Not that she was all eager to nail a person, but it would be nice if she could finally see the victim (and Jesus, that was another awful thought, dark, heavy and sticky with blood) and somehow let the cops know. Because then, it would be over, right? And she could finally sleep.

Vera dug her nails to the still bleeding wound, hoping the pain would wake her up a little. Yeah, not so much. The pain was dulled with her exhaustion. She forced her eyes to open widely. Eileen was just finishing the drawing. And started drawing a note. In Devil…

Come on, Veronika. Few more moments. It would be over soon.

“What happens now?” she heard herself mumble and she couldn’t resist rubbing her eyes. So heavy. It wasn’t just the eyelids anymore, her whole body weighted so much it was dragging her down. So much blood. On the ground, in the bowl, buzzing in her ears. She tried to focus her gaze. Lilith was watching her curiously.
“Latonya.” It didn’t sound like an answer to Vera’s question.

“In Devil we—be his drink—of the invaluable—” Egan’s voice wasn’t making any sense. The words – what was he saying? She heard him, but she couldn’t understand the meaning.

The blood rushing in her ears was getting louder and louder. She closed her eyes as her head spun. She felt the world turn upside down and then she couldn’t hear anything anymore. Darkness and silence enwrapped her in their gentle warm arms, chasing away her fear. She was safe.

She didn’t dream.

Chapter End Notes

Today’s motto: Don’t take drinks from strangers, kids.

Title from Florence and The Machine – Over The Love

Short Czech vocabulary: (while no one gives a crap)

Cajk. – Cool/okay/alright…
Sakra. – Damn.
22) Through the crowd (...I was crying out)

Chapter Notes

I changed the chapter count again. I’m confident this is the final. Most of the future chapters are drafts already, so I’m pretty sure I won’t be expanding. Don’t worry, we’re getting there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Vera was warm. It was the first thing she acknowledged as she was beginning to mind her surroundings and her own body. Heavy, but warm. She felt her finger twitch, the feeling she got when she was falling asleep, but not quite. She startled. Intrusive smell hit her nostrils, voices and beeping her ears.

Oh, please, not again.

“Vera, can you hear me? Can you squeeze my hand?” a familiar female voice asked and the same moment it did, Vera was sure. She was in a hospital. Why the fuck was she in a hospital again?

Something was weighting her hand. Right. Someone was asking her to squeeze it. Okay. Her fingers were tingling in rather unpleasant way, but she tried her best.

“Good.”

Guess she managed to complete the task. Good to know. She wasn’t sure. She would open her eyes, but they felt even heavier than the rest of her body, somehow disconnected to her brain.

Alright back on track. She was in a hospital for some reason and she felt like shit. Did she collapse in work? She remembered going to work, Terri’s worried looks. She also got a package from Mahoney. There was a bug in there. And she went home. She did go home, right? Did she pass out on the way? She kinda had felt like passing out any minute, she recalled.

“She heard you. She managed to move her hand. Why isn’t she waking up?” a male voice asked for a change and once again Vera was pretty sure she knew that person. But dammit, her brain was slow. She didn’t even identify the first person yet.

It seemed that the easiest way to find out was to make herself to open her eyes. Jesus. Vera gathered all her focus and blinked them open – she was immediately hit by sharp light. Ouch. Tears appeared in them in seconds, the world swimming. But yeah, if she wasn’t hundred percent sure about the hospital before, now she was.

“Machackova?” the man addressed her and with effort, she turned her head slightly to side, finding him. She saw jack shit. She didn’t have her contacts. But the guy was black. How many black guys she knew?

“Mahoney?” she mumbled, the syllables somehow blending together. Sergeant Mahoney. Why the hell was there Sergeant Mahoney at her bedside? She called him when she received the package. Did she pass out while being on a phone? Because that would be embarrassing.

“How do you feel?”
“That’s my line,” the woman protested and Vera’s gaze flickered to the other side. Claire. Of course. Vera must have been on the ER of Metro General then. Vera wasn’t certain, because Claire wasn’t close enough to be sharp, but she had a distant feeling the nurse had a raised eyebrow. Expectant. Right.

“Tired,” Vera admitted, finding a way to move her hands again. The noise was getting louder. Her eyes were adjusting to the light, tears escaping her eyes, others not following. She felt the bed and tried to shift so she wasn’t lying like half-dead. Claire made her job easier by rising the upper part of the bed. So cool.

“Well, you’re entitled. You got some serious amount of sedatives in you,” the cop announced and Vera would raise her eyebrows in surprise as well, if she knew how.

Sedatives? If she passed out, why did she get sedatives? She had a strong feeling she was missing something. She subconsciously reached for her head as if the something would click into place with the action.

It didn’t. But her head was bandaged? What the hell. She was getting more awake and freaked out each second. There was something else terribly wrong.

“Who cut my hair?!” she shrieked, realizing her hair – her hair she would be lying on most likely – just… weren’t there. She traced their length with her fingers, watching it in horror as the tousled ends were only reaching approximately the middle on her neck. What the actual fuck?!

“… you had a thorn crown on your head-” Sergeant’s voice sounded somehow incredulous. Thorn crown. And that explained the bandage, huh, she didn’t remember that. Why would she had a thorn crown-

*No doprdele.*

Did they jump her or something? On her way home? But it was broad daylight when she went home, it must have been, because she had a morning shift. She was getting really confused, because it didn’t make any sense. At the same time, she was somehow less confused. The details were kinda shady, but it seemed they tried to… crucify her? What the actual fuck?

”-you’ve been drugged,-“ Mahoney continued. She had been drugged? Vera didn’t remember either – yeah, that was probably because she got drugged, point taken. She didn’t remember *shit.* “-some fanatic kids were about to carve a pentagram to your chest, nail you to a cross, leave you to bleed out and you’re upset about your *hair?”*

Well. She tried to ignore the idea of the cross. She had a more pressing issue. Her *hair*, dammit!

“Ma- I liked them!” *Matt liked them. Matt was obsessed with them. He is obsessed with them.* He was also kinda obsessed with her safety. He could never *ever* know about this.

“Sorry,” the cop hummed in sympathy, apparently understanding what she wanted to say. She had no idea how to react. She had no idea what happened.

“Uh-uh.”

“For everything. We should have stepped in sooner.”

Step in? As in the police knew- oh. Oh. She *did* walk home, right? She called them? She knew what was gonna happen? Did she go to a meeting, using the bug? Did they… catch them? So many questions were popping in her head and she didn’t know which she should be asking first. So she
didn’t ask any. Yet. Because… hair.

“Nah, don’t worry. They’ll grow again and I’ll soon have them longer than Foggy…” Vera reassured him giving him a smile. Why was she rambling about her hair? “I’m under some other meds, aren’t I?”

“Not really. And don’t worry, I think you still have them longer than Nelson.” He sounded strange. A little amused, a little incredulous, a little tense.

“Good to know. Huh, I feel drunk.”

“That’s because rohypnol is still leaving your system, the alcohol left it like an hour ago and also because you’re insane,” Claire explained matter-of-factly. The what? And she wasn’t insane. Much. Claire just seemed to like addressing her with those words. Madwoman. Insane.

“Awww, Claire, you’re such a sweet talker – what is this drug, seriously!”

Mahoney cleared his throat. “Uhm. Okay. You might wanna know we arrested them all and they are being interrogated as we speak.”

Really? They arrested them? The Devil Worshippers? They arrested them?! That was amazing! Except-

“You’re not the one interrogating them?”

“Someone needed to make sure you were okay. Okay given the circumstances.” Vera was fairly certain he shrugged. It looked like he shrugged.

“But it’s pretty much your case. You’re the one who came to me,” she protested.

“And how that turned out for you!” he exploded, making her wince. The room fell silent. Vera realized there were multiple people on other beds, only partly separated by a curtain. Not exactly the most private place to talk. She thought the cop slowly breathed in and out to calm himself down. “Sorry. I’m getting updates. And once I have a talk to a doctor, I’ll be heading to the precinct.”

Sorry. He was sorry for her getting hurt. That was nice. It wasn’t a coincidence he was the one who stayed with her, was it? He was feeling guilty for getting her involved. But it was not his fault. She walked right into this thing. Or rather rushed. He just followed.

“It’s not your fault, Sergeant. That’s totally on me. I spent some time with them and I did not see that coming. I mean, come on! I joined them to be part of their group, not to get- uhm. That’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not,” exasperated voice joined their conversation without permission. Vera snapped her head in her direction. She approached the bed rapidly. “Are you fucking kidding me, Mechy?! How the hell did you survived for twenty-two years when you’re getting into shit once a month?!”

“That’s what I said. Hey, Terri.” Vera couldn’t resist raising at least one corner of her lips in a half grin. Her best friend was here. And Vera kinda was getting into shit once a month, wasn’t she?

“Don’t you dare to Hey, Terri me! You hung up on me, you never answered my text and- what the hell happened?”

“Sorry.” Vera didn’t remember hanging up on her friend. She was sorry anyway. “I’m fine. Actually I’m so fine-“
“-a blind man could see it,” Claire finished and Vera shoot her a shocked look, the world spinning with the rapid movement.

“What the hell?”

Mahoney actually cracked a short laugh at that.


“Don’t change the topic,” Terri complained, gesturing wildly. “How are you in a hospital again? You’re in Metro General more than home!”

“Well, I got jumped there twice, bleeding on the wall and the carpet. Can you blame me?” Vera couldn’t help a little sarcasm. It was always better with sarcasm. Distraction. Less drama. More fun.

“Charming. I’m so glad that whatever happened didn’t affect your sense of humour.”

“Me too. We won, Terri. How awesome is that?”

“It would be more awesome if you didn’t get yourself drugged,” Claire hummed and Terri shot her a horrified look. Ah-oh.

“What do you mean drugged? And what’s up with your head – what the hell happened to your hair?!” Terri asked the burning questions one after another, freaking out and truth to be told, as Vera was slowly coming to realization of what happened, she couldn’t really blame her. She almost got crucified. How insane was that? Let’s do not think about it.…

“Yeah, about that. Could you set up a meeting with the hairdresser? Please? I didn’t see the whole picture, but I’m sure it could use some improvement.”

“I hate you,” Terri exclaimed in pissed off and fond voice at the same time. Was that even possible?


“Not really. I got drugged with….”

“…rohypnol,” Mahoney finished her sentence helpfully, full police mode.

“That,” Vera agreed gratefully. “I don’t remember shit. Apparently, they cut my hair, supposedly gave me new accessory on my head, which had few thorns-“

“A thorn crown?!?”

It sounded so ugly and mean when she said it out loud.

“Uhm. Yeah. They were going to nail me, but the New York finest saved me so everything is cool.”

Terri just gaped at her silently. She needed to lighten up the mood. “Apart from the hair. That really sucks.”

“Jesus Christ, you really are insane,” Sergeant exclaimed somehow horrified. And yuck.

“Very inappropriate swearing,” Vera noted, slightly nauseous. Even though it was kinda funny. Kinda.

“Vera? Shove your sass to your ass.”

Vera eyed her amazing friend. “Rude.”
“Miss… Machackova?” Another man joined their exchange, surprising them all. Oh. A doctor. Might be helpful.

“Yes, doctor?”

“My name is doctor Vogel. Mind if I ask you a few questions and do some examination now?” he asked politely and Vera had a feeling he was smiling as much politely as he spoke. Also, she was pretty sure he shot her cop and her friend significant looks.

“I think I could use some crappy hospital coffee,” Terri hummed and the fire of her hair disappeared in a distance.

“I’ll be right around a corner. I’d like to talk to you after, doctor Vogel, if that would be possible.” Mahoney left too as the doctor nodded.

“So…

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The thing was, she didn’t recall anything. The doc said it was normal. He also said it wasn’t very likely she would ever remember. Vera, learning the cops apparently had all they needed from the evening recorded and the rest she would be able to tell them, was actually glad. She had enough traumatic experience with the Worshippers, thank you very much.

Vera was exhausted. By the time Terri came back, her eyelids were heavy again. I.v. in her arm for rehydration, Terri’s quiet rambling to help her recover from her very special kind of hangover, she soon fell asleep. Her friend assured her – together with Claire, because Claire was once again on Terri’s side, not on Vera’s – that she would get her out of the morning shift Vera was supposed to have. Vera had no energy to think about how. But it occurred to her that maybe Terri should have had a day off and possibly offered instead of her. Vera owed her a year’s supply of chocolate or something. Actually she should make it two years supply, considering the amount of shit Terri was putting up with when it came to her. A lifetime supply. Yeah, she should do that.

She was good to go in the morning, if eleven a.m. could be still considered morning. She happily signed a release and was a free woman again. Maybe too free. She offered Terri sorry-I-love-you lunch, but she already had plans with Victor (and managed to set up a meeting with the hairdresser the next day). So instead, she focused on herself, calling her mum (claiming she had troubles with wifi, what a shame), stopping by Nina’s. Light clean-up. Ordinary stuff. Also, she had a lesson that day. She wasn’t feeling at her best, but she didn’t want to cancel. She simply wore something that could be considered a sportive hair-band. She looked like an idiot. Still better than the scratches.

Bryan asked about the accessory. Vera admitted she was curiously clumsy and resembled a person who had an encounter with a fearless cat. He asked her if the cat only had two legs and if it happened when she was looking in a mirror. It took her five minutes, him already gone, to realize what he probably meant. She tried not to think about it too hard.

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It blew up on Tuesday. The Devil Worshippers story. Not that Vera was involved, Mahoney asked her whether she wanted to be named and despite the tiredness she was feeling at the moment, her NO was very loud and resolute, so they settled on a small lie. But the rest. Their practices. A nameless cop going undercover. The police taking them down. People were talking. No, the whole café was buzzing more than usual, people handing newspapers and phones from one to another, grumpy and
wide-eyed, and maybe Vera was just being paranoid, but she would swear she heard about the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen and the Devil Worshippers from every corner. She was getting paranoid. And it was giving her headache. The fact Terri wasn’t on her shift didn’t exactly help.

Olivia was watching her. Vera didn’t blame her. She looked like an idiot, since she wore the hairband again. Michelle was actually brave enough to ask her; Vera repeated the story about the cat. Michelle didn’t ask further. Thank god.

Leaving the café, finally able to breathe, she found two missed calls and a text from Trish.

**Devil Worshippers etc at five. Just thought you might want to hear that.**

Vera wasn’t sure she did. But while cleaning up at her apartment, she actually put it on. Verdict? People were idiots.

It wasn’t like all of them were. But lots of people calling in, giving their opinion… they were talking shit about vigilantes all of sudden. Including Matt. It was pissing her off. When a woman said it was his fault, that he inspired them to kill people in the way they did, she ran out of patience. She picked up a phone.

“You reached Trish talk. There is another caller on air at the moment, but you can be the next. Would you like to give an opinion?” the female on the other end of the line asked, sounding as if she had to say the line millionth times before. Drilled phrase. Vera knew about those. She hoped she didn’t sound so bored at work herself, it was annoying.

“Yes.” Hell yes. And yeah, I know someone else is speaking and I feel a twitching urge to punch her in her face.

“That’s great. Just hold on.” The woman apparently didn’t think it was great. But at least she tried.

Trish finally managed to silence the annoying and utterly stupid woman, who was giving her opinion. Vera could respect another person’s opinions. She could. But not when it came to this, not when the woman was blaming-

“Still there? You can be on air in ten, nine, eight…”

Vera heard Trish on the radio thanking for the woman’s input, announcing another caller. Vera lowered the volume on her laptop she was using instead of a stereo, focusing on her phone call. She couldn’t help smiling, hearing the familiar voice in her ear.

“Hello, there. Who’s our next caller?”

Vera hesitated slightly. She gave a statement before. Some people might make a connection. She didn’t think it would do any good. More like the opposite. “It’s Nica.”

“Hi, Nica,” Trish greeted her once more, sounded a little taken aback. Did she recognize her? “So, what’s your take on this? Are you joining a potential anti-vigilante camp or are you on the side of the angels? No, wait, I meant the Devil.”

Vera huffed.

“Well, I’m on the side of the angels. The vigilantes.” God, she would wish to see the previous caller’s face. “Isn’t it who they are? The vigilantes? Guardians angels of cities?”

Trish gave her time, not interrupting even though she got a change. Vera appreciated it. She needed
to think before speaking.

“You know, I’m listening from the beginning. I was also listening to the... the rather recent discussion about them. Here, on Trish talk. Oh and I remember. The way people were talking about them. Sharing their experiences, thanking them, thanking the Devil again. Because, you know. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. A hero. I wonder... how many people who called tonight were once grateful to him? Grateful for any kind of a vigilante saving their lives? The lives of their loved ones? Friends, family? Oh, we forget so fast, don’t we?” She probably sounded mean. Wry. She didn’t give a fuck.

“Can’t say you’re wrong. Lots and lots of people believed in them,” Trish hummed rather uncertainly, not sure how much Vera had to tell.

“That was just a reminder. How quickly we change opinions. One would tell we’re entitled, right? I mean, they did turn out crazy. One side of them. I would like to point that out. Two sides of the same coin. They were- killers. They were saving lives,” Vera gathered her courage, feeling the next words bitter on her tongue. “I actually agree with the previous caller.”

Vera thought she heard Trish gasp. “You do?”

“Yeah. Partly. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen? The man who has hundreds of grateful letters on a site founded by someone who believes in him? Yes, he inspired them, there’s no denying it. He inspired them to stand up for the others. Helping people. Fighting for what’s right. But he never ever inspired them do to the monstrous things they did. He never killed anyone. I don’t know what snapped in those people, what went wrong. Perhaps they were disappointed in this world, hell if we’ll ever find out. They did terrible things before they were stopped. And we’re scared and we’re angry. I get it. And it’s so much easier to have someone to aim those feelings at. But this is wrong. Blaming it on the person, who stood by this city, shred his own blood for people who were – and that’s awfully familiar, isn’t it – pointing a finger at him, calling him a terrorist and a villain? Really? Wake up. Open your eyes. It’s hard. You’ll feel lost. But I would rather be lost, looking for a tiny flickering light of hope, than walking in wrong direction.”

Trish was quiet. Vera was fairly certain she got much more time than she should be able to get. She distant wondering in the deafening sound of silence meant she was cut out a long time ago. But when she quickly turned up the volume, there was no sound either.

Her hand shot to the mic on her phone to cover it when her laptop – and Trish on the other end of the line – finally made a sound.

“Well, that’s definitely something to think about. While you’re grope in the dark, I’m sending you a song to light up your world. The Flashlight. Stay with us and share,” the host exclaimed and Vera turn off the radio once the song started. Should she hit the red button now?

“I should end the call now, right?”

“No! No, wait,” the woman sounded panicked and surprised at the same time. Vera was confused. No?

“Hey!” Trish blurted to the phone and Vera blinked in surprise. “Vera?”

For a split second, she considered lying. She shook the ridiculous idea away.

“Hey, Trish,” she hummed, suddenly guilty. Did she make a mess of the show right now?

“That was cool.”
What? “What?”

Her friend (?) laughed. “Oh, honey, you have no idea how much I wanted to hang up on the fury. Thanks for calling. I’m really looking forward the next calls, should be fun.”

Vera felt a wave of relief wash over her. Not a mess then. “Glad I could serve.”

“How you’re doing?” Trish asked, sounding genuinely concerned. Vera was…baffled. Trish couldn’t know. Right? She was asking because she knew vigilantes and stuff was a sore subject for her.

“Uhmm… okay? I guess? It pissed me off, that’s true. But I’ll live. I said what I wanted to say,” she admitted. “Also, thanks for the time. I was talking for too long, right?”

Trish hesitated. “Maybe. And maybe, I liked it. It was making sense at least. Usually when people talk for too long, they ramble. Anyway, I gotta go. Meet me for a coffee soon? Or dinner? Lunch? Just call me.”

Vera’s level of shock that day reach the top. She felt her jaw falling dangerously down. “Sure.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Vera held the phone in her hand for minutes before she realized the call was over. Then she turned up the volume once again and with a small piece of pride, she listened as people weighted their words more carefully, sometimes seconding her opinion.

The members of anti-vigilante camp could go screw themselves.

Her sleep was after a very long time calm and she woke up rather rested, Matt’s I love you in her ear and a ghost of his lips in her freshly cut hair. She let herself to be consumed by the pleasant illusion, drowning the empty feeling when it went away in her special brand of coffee.

Chapter End Notes

The last chapter was rather dark, so I believe we needed some light. Also, combo Vera-Terri (+Claire) could use some fun. Or jokes. You know, something. And there was Brett, so that’s always a plus.

I think people of Hell’s Kitchen, because they are just people, would turn their back and those who wouldn’t, they wouldn’t feel the need to express themselves on air. So that’s when Vera needed to rush in. Maybe I’m wrong. But hey, it’s my fanfic, so there’s that :D

Chapter title from The Florence and The Machine – No light, no light
“Come on, Mechy. You were totally right. You did some reckless shit I hope you’ll never do again, but you won. I say party. What do you say?” Terri shocked her in once she returned from her break the very next day and Vera couldn’t help shooting her a surprised look.

“What kind of a party? Are we talking alcohol and drugs? Cause I had more than enough of both recently…” Vera hummed, biting her lips, guilt sprouting in her when she realized she that the last time she had alcohol was… well. Morning. If she had party with Terri, she would at least have the right reason to drink. Celebrate.

Her eyebrow shot up. “Actually, I was talking about something like a slumber party, ice-cream, movies, girl talk and braiding each other’s hair, but…”

“You already have a braid and my hair is a disaster.” Terri made a very disappointed face and Vera decided that starting the making-it-up-to-my-best-friend with this was as good as anything else. ”You know what? Slumber party sounds great.”

“That’s my girl.”

And that would be it. Except… Vera wondered. Was there any particular reason Terri wanted to talk? Girl talk? Was something wrong? There was only one thing Vera could think of going wrong requiring a girl talk.

“How much Victor hates me?” she asked cautiously, serving few customers in between. Were they fighting? Was it Vera’s fault? Oh, god, please don’t let it be my fault.

“Why would he hate you?”

“I’m stealing you from him all the time and when I don’t, you probably worry. So there’s that,” Vera offered, unable to keep her voice light. It was the truth. But Terri made a face.

“Please. He’s fine. He’s… let’s talk about it over an ice-cream, shall we?”

Vera grinned to mask her fright. So there was something. “Just let me know when I’m not stealing you from you boyfriend.”

Terri gave her annoyed look. “I’m not his property, you know.” She was cracking. She wanted to laugh at the ridiculous idea of Theresa Gratton being anyone’s property. She was awesome. But she was the kind of a person who if she got kidnapped, held against her will, would get returned in the speed of light, because the kidnappers wouldn’t be able to keep up.

This time Vera smiled for real. “I never said you were.”

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Mahoney wanted her to stop by precinct. She got rid of that duty as soon as she could, because she wanted this thing to be over. Also it was kinda amazing she could go to the precinct without being followed. He had questions. Lots of them. She told him everything he wanted to know and he just sat here, listened, recorded it and took some notes. He also wanted her to connect the fake names
with the photos of the people. Vera couldn’t help shivering when looking at them – on the pictures, some of them seemed to have a spark of insanity in their eyes. She probably only imagined it, but it made her feel nauseous all the same. The others were… she couldn’t figure out what was it. It made her feel uneasy too.

Mahoney asked her about the anonymity once again. Reporters were asking questions – the name of Sergeant Brett Mahoney came up a lot, basically the credit went to him fully – but people wanted to know the other name. The name of a person who risked his skin, pretending to be one of the Devil Worshippers. Why would the person not want to be named? ‘It was a great act of bravery’, after all. They were suspicious. Vera just shook her head when he told her. She expressed her delight at the fact Mahoney got the appreciation he deserved. He sighed, but didn’t try to persuade her further. She was glad.

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Thursday was… weird. It was also as good day as any for going to the church, but she had a lot to deal in work. Terri had an afternoon shift, while Barbara and Olivia were with Vera, she could deal with that. The difficult part was Trish.

“Hey, stranger,” the blonde saluted her with a hint of sarcasm, miss Jones by her side with her usual charming level of grumpiness; no sunglasses, but the leather jacket stayed. Vera blinked in surprise, her cheeks flushing. She didn’t call her. Damnit.

“Miss Walker,” she shot back with a healthy level of sass, smiling politely. “Welcome to MDDC, what can I get you? Apart from middle sized Americano to tall cup to go?”

Jones’s corner of lip twitched satisfyingly. Trish rolled her eyes, before smiling to Vera. “Vanilla latté.”

“Tall?”

Trish frowned at her, examining the fading scratches on Vera’s forehead. They were barely visible now; looked better than the freaking hair-band she wore to cover it up. Vera’s heart skipped a beat. Of course Trish would notice.

“Yeah, tall,” she hummed thoughtfully, paid and moved left. As Vera prepared their order, she felt her gaze burning a hole to her head. Not good, not good. Reporter mode activated. Vera tried her best carefree smile as she handed them their coffee, smirking when the PI spiced her drink as always.

“Jess? I think you’ll have to carry on on your own,” Trish exclaimed calmly, the stoicism making Vera wince. It sounded ominous.

Jessica’s eyebrow shot up. “What a shame. See you.” She beckoned to both of them, pacing away.

Vera felt cornered. There were no customers that needed her attention. She kinda wished there were. “Sorry. I was a little busy. But hey, we can set up a date now when you’re here, right?”

“What time do you quit?”

Vera froze. What? Her gaze flickered to the clocks. Twenty minutes left of her shift, they were late that day. It was unusual for Trish to stop by for coffee at that hour.

“Half past one.”

“Mind if I wait? Do you have plans? I’ll take you to lunch,” she offered with a brilliant smile that
terrified Vera.

“Sure.”

If it was Matt waiting for her, she was sure the time would be dragging. But Vera was actually worried about the lunch with the radio host, so naturally, twenty minutes felt like two instead. She tried to draw out the period as long as she could, taking her sweet time with changing, but it was inevitable. Trish took her somewhere less fancy than last time. Vera was glad. They spent several minutes in silence, only ordering until Vera’s curiosity reached the unbearable level.

“So. What’s up?” Vera asked, aiming for casual, failing. She never managed to sound casual, did she?

Trish shrugged. “You just got me wonder.”

“Wonder?” She felt her eyes going wide, her breath hitching. The radio host Trish Walker wondered. Well, that couldn’t be good.

Trish hummed as they brought their food. She kept her waiting, ghost of a smug smile on her lips.

“Trish?”

“It was you, wasn’t it?” She phrased it rather as a statement than a question, raising her big eyes to Vera, excited spark in them. Vera was fairly certain her heart stopped. No. Trish was talking about something else.

Vera couldn’t make herself to let out a word. And she didn’t want to took the possible bait. She just raised an eyebrow expectantly. Trish didn’t seem to mind.

“You know, we’re just people. Even cops are just people. People want to get famous. They love being cherished. There is no way a cop wouldn’t want to only help his or hers carrier but also want people to know his name if he was an enormous help in such a big case. So I thought... maybe they involved a civilian. Maybe it was even the police’s call to keep it under a rug, not wanting to admit they endangered someone outside the law enforcement. But how would they make the person shut up? There is no way. But if the said person wasn’t in for glory, it would be possible. What would the person be in for though?” she questioned and Vera was feeling the colour being drained from her face. Yeah, Trish seemed to be sure. Still, Vera wouldn’t confirm that too easily.

“Interesting thought. Guess the said person was a good Samaritan, huh?”

“Awww, Vera, that’s adorable. I read the articles and police report several times. I know too much for my own liking, but hey, that’s what you get for working in the area I do. So... wanna tell me how you got scratches on your head looking like being caused by... I don’t know. Having a thorn crown on your head?” Her eyes were gleaming, yet somewhat worried. Vera appreciated the sentiment as she put her fork down, sighing, defeated.

“Trish, I...”

“I knew it!” she hissed under her breath with satisfaction. There was an aura around her. A reporter’s aura. Horrible thought struck Vera.

“Trish, you can’t tell anyone! Please. There is a reason why I didn’t want to-“

“Hey! Hey, calm down. I’m not outing you! I wouldn’t do that,” Trish reassured her hastily, traces of hurt and disappointment in her face. “I’m not gonna lie, it’s huge and it would be one hell of an
exclusive, but… I believe you had a reason. I’m just… curious. How the hell that happened? Are you okay? Of course you’re not okay.”

Vera took a very long moment to stare at her friend. At this point, she was confident Trish was a friend. If she wasn’t, she wouldn’t hesitate to share her suspicion with people and she definitely would share when she found out for sure there was a bloody civilian involved and obviously bloody in every sense of the word. If Trish wasn’t her friend, she would already pull out a recorder or at least a notebook. But Trish was her friend and she wanted to know how she was coping. Vera’s heart fluttered and she felt something warm spreading in her chest. Her lips involuntarily formed a small smile.

“Off the record?”

Trish gave her a look. Yeah, off the record.

“Well…”

Vera could tell Trish wanted anything but to run the story. But she didn’t ask her once, sitting on the edge of her seat, meal forgotten. Vera was grateful for her discreetness.

Vera wanted to pay for the lunch, but as expected, Trish didn’t let her and threw in a quick hug on a way when they said their goodbyes.

Her next steps led to graveyard.

“Is it time for another latte?” her favourite priest (and the only one she knew) greeted her as she finished her work on Jack’s Murdock grave, walking between the pews, surprised how differently the church looked when sunrays played with the stained glass, giving an impression of God’s light being actually present.

Vera beckoned to the man as a greeting, small smile attacking her lips.

“I would say it’s my turn, Father. Not to mention I owe you for what you’re doing for me,” she said, keeping her voice obediently low as she came closer to him. He returned the smile graciously.

“You know you owe me nothing, Vera,” he offered kindly, sounding slightly offended. Was it offensive?

Vera nodded, moving to the candles, quietly lighting one. Just one. For Matt. She didn’t need it anymore, not urgently. Sure, she could use some hope, because she felt it leaving gradually, losing faith in his return, but she didn’t want to think about that. She wanted to allow herself to be happy for few moments. Enjoy the victory, no matter how conceited it sounded to her own ears.

“Doesn’t change the fact I’m grateful. Thank you, Father,” she turned her head to him, as he wordlessly followed her, yet leaving her space. His smile looked more honest this time.

“I’m glad I could help. I suppose things worked out well.”

Vera considered agreeing simply. But he had this… knowing gaze, but different from Trish’s. His was wearier. The Worshippers actions weighted him. She would bet he was praying for their souls to find peace despite more than just not agreeing with what they did.

“That’s one way to put it.” She recalled their last conversation vividly. With everything, she pushed aside one of the fears she shared with him. There was one more victory she missed before. “I didn’t have to hurt anyone. I didn’t have to stay side by side with them, watching someone get hurt. That’s
a plus.”

His eyes flickered to her forehead knowingly, concerned “Seems like it. I guess even our Lord can have… particular way of hearing out our prayers.”

Vera barely held back a snort. “Sure does.”

“You seem happy about it.”

Vera shrugged. “In a way I was. I’m just glad no one else got hurt. I’m…” The church was a weird influence. Maybe she was selfish before, but once she stepped on the holy ground… she couldn’t help feeling sorry for them too. What was about to come to them? She sighed. “I mean… I’m not sure what happens to them. They are all young, whole life ahead and- I don’t know.”

“Are you saying your conscious is not clean?” he prodded gently and she looked up to the crucifix, quickly tearing her gaze away as she remembered why exactly it should, in fact, be clean. Could she do better? Was there something she could do now?

“I’m… I don’t know. It was. Like… five minutes ago,” she admitted, eyeing the candles. Matt would approve of what she did, right? That part that should be bothering her the least.

“It’s known church has that effect on people sometimes.”

Yeah, not helping.

“Send them a prayer, Vera. If you’re the woman I believe you to be – the woman Matthew believes you to be – then I’m sure you did everything in your power and there’s nothing more you can do.” His voice was soothing, his words kind. Yet, she flinched at Matt’s full name. She did as he told her.

She passed the latté, once again thanking the priest, leaving lost in thoughts, less victorious. Still, she was glad she went there.

Even if that meant she cried when she came home, Father Lantom’s words about Matt’s faith in her echoing in her ears and making her heart ache.

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Friday, people of Hell’s Kitchen got another scapegoat. They got a deputy mayor sleeping with his secretary despite having two kids and lovely wife. Vera was right about how fast people forget. She caught few words on the Devil and the Worshippers, but it was rare.

She beat the remains of her sorrow out the next day with a smile on her face. She tried her best to ignore a missing person on one of the bags – Lilith signed herself up last week and stuff happened. Vera couldn’t tell she was feeling sorry for it anymore, or at least she convinced herself she wasn’t. She let the music and the beat consume her, finally physically at her best, no sedatives, cut on her hand practically healed, very light reminders of the scratched on her forehead. Also, the burn on her back was completely silent – all she had to worry about was being careful for anyone to see it. She needed to think about getting rid of it somehow dammit.

The hour of their lesson passed too fast. Vera overran five minutes – no one complained and they were leaving with the very same smile on their faces she felt on her own.

“Are you gonna be my girl?”

Her head snapped up from the paper of people signed up for next Friday and requested songs and
she didn’t manage to guard her shocked expression as she faced Bryan.

“The song,” he explained and Vera wondered if he made it on purpose. Was he trying to give her a heart attack? “Are You Gonna Be My Girl by Jet. It’s a really good song. And I would like it very much.”

His last words freaked her out before she could calm down at the claim it was just a name of a song. His eyes were intense, glaring into her soul and she blinked, unable to state his gaze.

“Bryan, I… I really don’t want to see anything that’s not there, but… I’ll do the song, of course. But if you- otherwise…” she babbled, embarrassed she might imagine things, but Jesus, she wouldn’t imagine the flirting so often, right? There had to be something.

“It was too forward, right? Sorry. I just… a dinner? A movie? Both? Something else?” he kept offering and Vera whined mentally. No imagination then. Dammit. She could say yes to go the cinema. There would be nothing wrong with that. Except it wasn’t meant in a friendly way. And then there would be everything wrong with that.

Vera didn’t plan on staying alone for the rest of her life – but she kinda didn’t think of dating until she at least came back to Czechia. Firstly, starting a new relationship with the knowledge of leaving in five months? Yeah, no. Believing she would stay for the new potential partner? Unlikely (then again, with Matt it was quite fast and she seriously considered staying here with him – for him, among other things – and they weren’t together for so long). Secondly, Matt. It wasn’t only Matt was a very strong competition, but she couldn’t do that to him just yet. After she would leave the country, her actions could be justified (at least in front of herself, somehow), but before that? He left, because he wanted to protect her, sacrificing the life he built here. It would be a terrible thing to do, no matter he told her it was okay to move on. And she would, if he wasn’t coming back. Eventually. Just not yet.

“Nica?”

Vera blinked, snapping from her dark thoughts, realizing he was addressing her. Nica. Right. And he had a hand on her arm, hesitant. She gulped, thinking of the most diplomatic answer.

“I’m sorry, Bryan. I’m… I already am someone’s girl,” she whispered and god, that sounded tacky.

His hand fell to his side, his eyes widening, surprise all over his face. It was actually kinda offensive Was it really so unbelievable she had a boyfriend? (Technically.) He gaped silently.

“But you… you never said anything!” he blurted out exasperatedly. The emotion behind his words caught her off guard – he sounded angry. “I’ve been dropping hints for weeks.”

Yeah, there was definitely accusation written in his face – and slight embarrassment. Vera felt like an ass. She licked her lips nervously, looking away.

“I’m so sorry. I just. I guess I didn’t want to see it. I thought I was only imagining things.” It was actually the truth. She was hoping she was reading it wrong.

Bryan took a step back, frowning at her. He look humiliated (stupid, stupid Vera), rejected, outraged. “You should have told me.”

Vera winced at his sharp tone, freezing as he walked backwards and turned around, grabbing his stuff. She squeezed her eyes shut, cursing under her breath. When she opened them again, he was already at the door.
“Bryan-“

“You’ve been flirting back, Nica. From the very first day. Just something you might want to think about,” he spitted out meanly and with those words, he left the room, door slamming behind him.

Vera stood there in shock, unable to make a single move. ‘You’ve been flirting back from the very first day’. The words echoed in her head, making her insides twist in guilt painfully – not because of misleading Bryan (maybe a little), but because of Matt. Bryan must have been lying. She wasn’t. She was just being nice. He was one of the participants and he was easy-going too. It must have been him who misjudged.

Did he though?

Vera blinked away the tears slowly gathering in her eyes, wiping away those which leaked and rolled down her cheeks. Jesus Christ. Wasn’t there a ceiling to the amount of tears person could cry in a life-time? Vera was pretty sure she had to reach it by now.

How long had it been? Three days? Technically, she had three days of things not going to shit immediately. What had she ever done so wrong she deserved that? See, Veronika, that’s what you get when you allow yourself to be happy.

She grabbed her phone, dialling.

“What’s up?” Terri’s cheerful voice greeted her and she huffed a laugh mixed with a sob. Terri seemed to identify the weird sound. “Oh, for god’s sake. What happened? Did you get involved with another death cult?”

Vera had honestly no idea whether she should be laughing or feel offended. “No. Can we do the slumber party now? I need to talk about boys.”

There was a short stunned silence before her friend spoke up in bewildered voice. “You definitely know how to bait me. I’m at your place in a few. You’re bringing ice-cream though.”

Vera sighed, relieved smile creeping on her lips. “It’s a date.”

Yet, the words tasted somewhat bitter on her tongue.

Chapter End Notes

Draaaaama. But see? Boys. Lunch with a friend. Chilling… for two minutes.

Title from X Ambassadors - Eye of the storm (could’ve been taken from anything really, but the song’s gold)
24) The point of breaking

Chapter Notes

Yeah. So. Like in the middle of the chapter, things go a little… sideways. You’ve been warned. Kinda.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Terri was super quick, standing by her doorstep by the time Vera came, pack of ice-cream in a paper bag. They didn’t bother with greetings and went up, nestling on the couch, watching each other expectantly. Terri broke first.

“Come on, Mechy. I’ll bite,” she huffed, cheekily claiming the ice-cream for herself, taking a spoonful. Vera sighed and let go of the pack.

Was there any way to sugar-coat it? Probably wasn’t. Obviously, she sucked at sugar-coating.

“I just turned down a guy. From my lectures,” she admitted, playing with the hem of her t-shirt, unable to look up. She could only imagine Terri’s curious face. She didn’t want to continue. Was there even anything to add? That she was sorry for him? Silence fell.

“Was he hot?” Terri demanded and Vera snapped her head up, shocked. She shouldn’t be shocked. It was a valid question. Terri’s eyebrow shut up as she took another spoon.

“Uhm… I guess?” He definitely wasn’t bad-looking. But…

“So he was. And your said no to him because….?”

Vera huffed. She would think it was obvious. Was it? She simply didn’t want to admit she might like him. She didn’t want allow herself to like him. Like like him.

“Because he’s not Matt. Got it. You know, If you’re waiting for another Matt Murdock, I hate to disappoint you, but you won’t find any. I’m pretty sure he’s one of the kind,” her friend exclaimed, tone somewhere between sympathy and wryness.

Vera sighed. That stung. “I know. I’m not waiting for another Matt Murdock. I’m waiting for my Matt Murdock, even though it feels pointless. But if I’m not having him, I’m not having anyone else… not yet at least.”

“Oh god. You playing a martyr.” Terri gave her a knowing and slightly horrified look. “You’re like a widow. Guilty survivor.”

“He’s not dead!” she snapped, biting her cheeks right after. Her friend’s face softened.

“I never said he was. It’s just… I get it, okay? You love him. He left partly because of you, but you deserve to be happy, Vera. Where’s the line? When do you allow yourself to let another guy in? Or a girl, I don’t judge,” she joked and Vera grimaced. She wasn’t sure she ever told Terri she already bought a ticket home. New wave of guilt took over her. She cleared her throat.

“Dunno. When I’m across the ocean?”
The spoon fell from Terri’s hand. “You’re coming back?! You’re not gonna apply for-“

Vera just managed to gape. Her friend sounded so betrayed. She felt a heavy knot in her stomach, stinging in her eyes. Terri climbed from the couch, handing Vera the ice-cream resolutely and Vera panicked. Was she leaving?

“Terri-“

“In the fridge, right?” she demanded and Vera frowned, before Terri opened it, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. She looked around, looking for glasses. Then she obviously changed her mind, because she just turned it bottoms up.

Oh. At least she wasn’t leaving. Yet.

Her friend made a slightly disgusted face, yet somehow satisfied. She seemed to consider something for a short moment, closing the fridge and took the bottle with her, seating herself back to the couch.

“You’re a freaking traitor. If he’s coming back after you leave, I’m gonna be his personal poltergeist,” she declared solemnly, darkly, obviously meaning every word. Vera gulped at the thought. They needed to change topics.

“So… what about Victor?”

Terri deadpanned. “I really don’t want to talk about Victor right now, Vera. When?”

“Terri-“

“When?!” she demanded and Vera bit her lip, few tears escaping her.

“14th September,” Vera squeaked and Terri gasped.

“So soon?!”

“Terri, it’s like a week from exactly one year of me being here. And it’s not like I’m leaving tomorrow. Can we please talk about something else?” she pleaded, trying her best to make puppy eyes. She did not want to talk about this. Terri was fun. Terri was not angst. Terri was not supposed to have a freaking bottle of whiskey in her hand. She handed her the ice-cream instead.

Her friend let out slow tired sigh. “Fine. Tell me what’s the deal with this… guy you turned down.”

“His name is Bryan. He is good-looking, okay? And he’s really nice. Funny. Used to be professional junior boxer-“

“You certainly have a type, don’t you?” Terri teased with a sarcastic grin and Vera would kiss her for the hint of easiness. That was Terri. So she just hummed in agreement.

“Yeah. Well. Too bad I apparently hurt him. He claimed he was flirting with me for a while and that I was flirting back.”

“Did he? Did you?”

Vera threw her hands in the air. “I don’t know! I mean… I was nice, okay?” She was not flirting with him! She was not.

Terri’s face was a pure sympathy. “Aww, honey. When you’re being nice to a guy, they automatically consider it flirting, didn’t you know?”
“No!” she complained. Did they? In that case she was flirting with most male population of New York. “And he… he was dropping hints, I guess. I just didn’t want to see it…”

Terri patted her shoulder. “Hey. He’ll come around. Considering you do have a type, he’s probably gonna punch few stuff and he’s gonna be alright.”

Vera made herself to raise at least one corner of her lips. “Thanks Ter.”

Terri returned the smile wholeheartedly, shoving the ice-cream to her hands resolutely. Vera chuckled.

“So… what about you? And Victor? How are things?”

Terri rolled her eyes. “He’s perfect. No, seriously, he’s awesome. He deals with my shit better than I do…”

There was a panicked note in her voice. The uneasiness was back. Vera obediently took a spoonful of ice-cream, waiting for her friend to continue.

“I mean… come on. What am I? Am I a psychic? Do I predict the future? I knew he got hurt, I didn’t know how. I saw you being almost killed from your perspective and that was the last thing I ever saw. So, that’s it? How did I see that? Why don’t I see all people? How the hell-“

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down, Ter,” Vera interrupted her, placing a hand on her forearm, as her friend started gesticulate wildly. Terri took a calming breath, in and out. And one more. “Maybe it’s tied to people… that sounds smug, but… people you care about? And it’s getting stronger?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. But then I was scared the radar or whatever got broken. So now I’m calling my parents every other night, scared to shit, because I feel like I should be seeing something, but I don’t. They are okay so far. And getting stronger, alright, I used to just know stuff and now I’m obviously seeing them, but what the hell? What happened? It’s not like someone injected me with something!” she complained and then froze. “I would know if someone injected me with something, right?”

“I think so?” Vera confirmed unsurely, realizing she wasn’t being the best support. Then the brilliant idea struck her. “Hey, once the Avengers are back from mission or whatever – when I can actually reach them, you know, since they gave me their phone numbers in case on an emergency, thank you very much, we can ask them. They might help.”

Terri’s panicked expression magically dissolved. Her eyes shined with excitement and gratitude. “You think?”

Vera shrugged and Terri finally grinned.

“You’re awesome. You know, I actually did some research…” Terri admitted and Vera felt her eyebrows shooting up, taking another spoon expectantly. “There are more people. I mean, obviously, there is a guy with enhanced senses, not that you can read about that on the internet…” Vera sighed. “Anyway, there are more. Rumours about a woman with super-strength-“

Vera froze. Well, shit. She knew. She met her. Her name was Jessica Jones. And she was Trish’s best friend.

“You’re making a face. Why are you making a face?”

Vera licked her lips nervously. “I met her. She saved me when Stick tried to strangle me.”
“WHAT?! He tried to kill you before?”

“Uhm. Yeah. But Matt came to the rescue. A little late. She was faster. She is strong.” Vera said, adding *and I could probably arrange a meeting as well* in her mind.

Terri’s face screamed with pure shock. “Wow. Okay. What did she looked like?”

Vera shrugged again, not wanting to talk. If she talked, she would have to lie, because it was not her secret to tell. Dammit, she should have keep her mouth shut. Terri let out a disappointed sigh.

“Seriously, Mechy. It’s like with the Devil’s butt. Do you need her to save you three times, before you notice stuff? Anyway, she apparently killed a guy—” At this point, Vera’s panic doubled. “—a bad guy. He could… control people’s minds? How crazy is that? She was immune or something. Super cool. And there is a guy with unbreakable skin. Like, literally, *unbreakable* skin. He can’t get hurt. So yeah, things are happening. Maybe I should go after them instead. Ask them how they get their powers of whatever.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Vera blurted out, secretly freaking out. How many special people were out there? Were those just myths? She resisted the urge to chuckle. Yeah, myths. Like the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen having super-hearing?

“Thanks for the support,” Terri noted wryly, but Vera could tell she didn’t mean that. Still, Vera felt like an ass.

“Hey. If you want to, we can look for them together, hm? You steal walkies from Victor and we’re gonna be the best investigators ever. Sherlock Holmes will be green with envy,” she exclaimed ceremonial and her friend laughed.

“You bet your ass he would. I’m taking your word for it.”

“You should.”

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Terri left shortly before midnight. Vera was rather in a good spirit, Bryan not forgotten, but in the back of her mind. She didn’t remember having nightmare about him if anything, so that was a win. She thanked Terri for the evening once she took her break around half past ten. She made it through her shift just fine, realizing she even managed her morning without coffee with whiskey. The world was almost rainbows and sunshine.

On the top of that, she scored another session with Claire in the afternoon and apart from stitching up pig trotters, they talked. Claire was bickering about endless shifts in the hospital (short on staff, like they were *always*), but she also mentioned a guy she met on the ER a while ago. Apparently, there was some unexpected chemistry. Vera was happy for her.

Sunday shift had Terri, so that was great. Vera tried her best to look indifferent when Laser eyes walked in and ordered her usual. There was also one memorable incident. A guy shoved Vera his number. She was just silently gaping as he was leaving the café. She was just being *nice*. She wasn’t-

“Told you,” Terri hummed to her ear and laughed as Vera threw the small paper away. He was weird. She didn’t like him anyway. Which meant she was *not* flirting. She wouldn’t flirt with a guy she didn’t even like.

She shortly stopped by church and graveyard to perform her duty (a pleasant duty?), not staying for
long. She didn’t run into Father Lantom and she would have to excuse herself anyway. She expected a skype call from her mum in the afternoon. She spent night at Fogwell’s, cleaning up properly after a rather long time. She dreamed of punching bags, warm kisses and reunions.

On Monday, she added extra shot of whiskey to her coffee, making up for the previous two mornings. Not that anyone would know. She brushed her teeth thoroughly and drank tea in the beginning of her shift so she didn’t look suspicious. If either Caroline or Lyla noticed her alcohol breath, they didn’t say a word.

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Vera realized she didn’t even bother with downloading the newest requested song by Bryan. Thinking about it, it was probably for the best, because he might take it as a mocking. It turned out it didn’t matter at all.

Because despite his name written on a paper, he didn’t show up. Vera was expecting him to come later – after ten minutes she suppressed a sigh, squeezing her eyes shut and got into hitting the bag with more force than was necessary. She skipped Live while we’re young and Just the way you are. Just to make it more significant. The others, probably sensing her emotional status, didn’t ask for it.

Despite the endorphins, she felt like shit.

_He would come around_, Terri’s words echoed in her head and she stubbornly tried to make herself believe them. He would. _Eventually._

Vera said her goodbyes as nicely as she managed, relieved she obviously didn’t scare them off with today’s behaviour, since they signed up for more. She thanked god.

She cleaned the bags, changed and locked the door, attempting to head straight home; to shower and maybe, _maybe_ have a tiny shot of whiskey before going to sleep. She didn’t even take one step before she almost collided with a body. She jumped back, hand shooting to her chest.

_Best defensive move ever._

“Bryan? Jesus, you scared the shit out of me,” she complained between the panting, her heart racing. God. She did _not_ expect him to be there. She didn’t expect anyone, for that matter. At least not so close.

He took a step back, making a space for her. _Thanks._

“Hey. Sorry I didn’t make it today,” he apologized and as he spoke, his breath tickled her face. Her nostrils to be precise. He drank. Beer. Lots of beer. And something else, indefinable, but definitely stronger. Something cold crept down her spine as she examined his face. She couldn’t read shit in it.

“Uhm… it’s… it’s okay. You could have text or something, but… are you okay?” The moment the words left her mouth, she wanted to take them back. He was not _okay._

He chuckled humourlessly, scary sound, and nodded. “Yeah. Sure. I’m _okay._”

Vera gulped and sidestepped him – to her endless relief, he let her. _And what did you think? That he will attack you? Because you said no to him? Please, Veronika…_ 

“Uhm. Did you… did you want something-“

“I asked around,” he interrupted her and she blinked in surprise, readjusting her backpack on her
shoulder nervously. Asked around?

“Oh?”

“About you,” he explained and her heart skipped a beat. This wasn’t good. She didn’t like this. Her brain was screaming at her to get this over with and leave asap. “And your so-called boyfriend. Turned out he’s not around for quite a while.”

Ouch. Shot through the heart. Vera squeezed her eyes shut, working against the sudden lump in her throat.

“Yes, he’s not.” She was liking it less and less. She looked him straight to his eyes – there was something in there, gleaming. It was just alcohol. She tried to give him a significant look that would speak louder than words.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t love him the same. I can lie to myself I’m alright, but if he came back I would be lost to him the very same second.

He wrapped his hand around her wrist, startling her. “That seems like a waste. How can you be sure he’s not banging another while you’re stuck in here, waiting for him?”

His tone was even meaner than his words. And just the words alone hurt like a bitch. Despite that, she didn’t yell to his face. She knew better than that.

“Bryan. Let go of my hand.” And shut the fuck up.

He held his hand high, releasing her. He didn’t look sorry. She didn’t care. “Letting go. Tell me, Vera, aren’t you a little cold at night?”

And that stung. The addressing and the question. Because he was right. She felt tears in her eyes. Why was he so mean? She took shaky calming breath.

“You’re drunk, Bryan. Go to sleep. I’ll be happy to see you on next lesson.” With those words, she spun on her heels, heading home.

He snorted, not really amused, but he didn’t follow her tracks. “You’re doing it again.”

Doing what? she wanted to ask, but she didn’t turn back to him. Definitely bigger than just a tiny shot of whiskey tonight. A big one. Two big ones. Half of the bottle dammit.

Such a dick.

Vera continued walking, not looking over her shoulder once. She only did it after two minutes, when she was almost sure he wouldn’t see her. He was nowhere in sight, but she took sharp right to an alley instead of left – if he was following her, she wouldn’t want to head straight home. Last thing she needed was him knowing where she lived.

To her shock, she almost collided with a body. Again. A male body. A body of someone who had interest in working out. She snapped her head up, meeting familiar eyes.

“You’re a bitch, you know,” he exclaimed and she gulped, taking a deliberate step back as his alcohol breath blew to her face. She was beginning to panic, her mind racing.

Vera didn’t like the odds. Alleyway. Typical mistake, Veronika, idiot, idiot… Weight advantage. More experience. Backpack and purse to slow her down and restraining her movements.
“Bryan,” she addressed him cautiously, voice shaking despite her attempt to make it sound firm. “Don’t make me call the police.”

“I’m not making you do anything,” he hummed, enclosing their distance, sending her heart racing painfully. Her gaze flickered to the main street only few steps away. So close. ‘You learn how to fight your way out and then you’ll run the hell away from the danger,’ Matt’s voice whispered to her ear and she couldn’t do anything but to agree. She quickly looked back at Bryan, hoping he didn’t really notice her tendencies.

“I would argue about that one.”

She jerked away from him, springing towards the main street and people. He yanked her back by her backpack. Of course he did. Fucking backpack. She spun, freeing herself from the weight on her back and threw a punch. He dodged and took a quick step aside, enwrapping her in his arms from behind, backpack falling to the ground.

Shit, he was fast.

“Come on. You really want to fight me? You know I’m better,” he hissed to her ear, tightening his grip as she tried to jolt from his arms. “The workout you do? It’s like a warm-up for me.”

Vera huffed, trying to fight her way out again – vainly. She didn’t want to freak out – but she really did. Calm down, Veronika. Think.

She stopped jerking and waited for his reaction. He was taken aback, loosening the hold only slightly – but enough. She prodded his knee with hers in attempt to trip him. He sunk and she quickly squatted and spun with one leg extended – he tripped this time, falling to the ground. She didn’t hesitate, grabbed the backpack and ran.

He was faster – grasped her ankle, yanking her back. Vera jerked strong enough to escape his hand, but she lost her balance and stumbled to regain it – it bought him enough time to climb up again, tossing her against the wall, pressing his body to hers.

“You don’t teach this in your lessons,” he purred, half astonished, half… aroused. It was turning him on. Jesus Christ. She needed to get away from him as far as possible. And she needed to do it fast.

“I wonder why.”

She wrenched against him with no effect, her mind racing, trying to remember the way out of this one. She was pinned between him and the wall, her torso and one arm, the other one gripped firmly in his hand. He had the weight advantage, so he could allow his other hand travel around her body, squeezing her waist, her ass.

Think, think. She tried to bury her knee in his balls, but he was smart – he expected it, pressing against her thighs harder, letting out a small laugh.

“You know, I don’t mind a little violence. But you would enjoy it much more if you just stopped fighting. I know you want it too,” he hissed, confident, making her to want to throw up.

Vera fought the wave of nausea at his words, thinking NO. And then it hit her. Her heart skipped a beat – that was it. She had to make it a YES. She stopped wrenching gradually, letting him wedge one of his knees between hers. He was cautious – he didn’t believe her, she could read it in his face. One eyebrow up, he loosened the pressure a little. She looked him in the eyes, not moving an inch. Her gaze flickered to his lips – she repeated it several times just to make sure he noticed. He tilted his head, watching her mouth too, leaning in.
She really, really didn’t want to do this. However, she didn’t have much of a choice. She needed him to let his guard down more. His lips touched hers, warm and wet and she had to swallow the bile she tasted on her tongue. She didn’t answer him at first – hesitant, because even if she would be giving in, she wouldn’t be passionate from the beginning. It had to feel real. She had to gain his trust. She would wash up her mouth with bleach later if needed – it would be a small price to pay.

He sucked her upper lip and she slowly broke into motion, moving towards his lunges. She felt him smile contentedly and a heavy feeling sunk in her stomach. Bit by bit, he let her hand go, tracing her torso, moving to her breasts. And oh my god, she might actually gag. His tongue slid in, slippery and Vera could only imagine how much alcohol he had from the bittersweet stinging taste.

Her hand free, she buried it in the purse, searching, trying to make the tiniest movements so he wouldn’t catch her. She finally found what she was looking for. She curled her fingers around the tiny sprayer, her secret weapon. The brass knuckles were option two; she never made herself to stop carrying them around. She teasingly bit him, just lightly, so he knew she didn’t attempt to hurt him with the action. He whined to her mouth and she felt his dick twitch. Gross. And good.

3…2…1.

She pushed him away with all strength she could gather, aiming the spray and compressed. He screamed as the substance got into his eyes, one hand shooting to his injury. But within a second the other one grabbed her wrist, twisting it painfully behind her back, making her to bend forward. The bottle clanked on the pavement.

Vera whimpered in pain, shocked by his lunge. He was too close and scored a knee in her stomach as well. She gasped, air knocked out from her.

“How do you like that, huh?” he hissed, shoving her to the ground with surprising force, pinning her down. She barely managed to turn her head around so she didn’t bite the dust and dirt. He seized her neck, fingers digging in her throat. She tried to breathe in, fighting against it. She couldn’t. “You fucking bitch. I thought—” he growled and she felt the pressure disappear.

She rolled over – just to receive a generous dose of spray right in her own eyes. She shrieked, hands darting to her face immediately, the burning, stinging feeling being everything she could think of. He chuckled as she reached her eyeballs, getting her lenses away. It didn’t help, it felt even worse, the acid etching, her vision blurry. She squeezed her eyes already full of tears tighter, trying to put out the fire, welcomed by darkness.

Heavy body lied on the top of her, hot mouth muffling her scream. She shook her head violently, escaping at least that gross feeling.

“No, no, no. Rape position. Come on. You know this one, Veronika. Behind her eyelids, it was suddenly white, only shadows of two bodies – hers and Matt’s – flowing. Shift your body like this, push.

She managed the smallest motion, but it was enough to regain her confidence – she worked her way
from under him, pushing, jerking her arms and he finally let go, cursing. She tried to punch his face – it went for his throat, even better. She peeked, her eyes swimming as he leaned backwards, gasping and she freed one of her legs, kicking his chin with satisfaction. She squeezed her eyes shut again, rolling away from his reach as he lost control over her.

Vera stumbled to her feet, hoping to get a glimpse of anything, finding the right direction – away from him. Shit, she was practically blind. No contacts, tears everywhere, darkness. And the pain. God, the stinging pain. She wiped her tears away with her sleeve, mapping her surroundings rather with her hand.

Where was the wall? Where was the street with people to provide her a hideout?

Grip on her forearm sent her flying in direction she couldn’t quite identify. Her side slammed onto what she identified as a dumpster, pain shooting through her ribs, but she used the opportunity to catch on it, steadying herself. Before she could raise her arms, hard blow hit her jaw and she cried out in agony, the momentum making her to stumble several steps over.

She squinted, looking for his figure, forearms up. Her side and cheek throbbed.

“I can do this all day,” he grumbled, panting and that was his mistake – she knew where he was exactly due to that and threw a punch on her own. She thought she heard his nose break, her knuckles definitely feeling the hit as well.

He whimpered, silent curses escaping his lips and she quickly added a kick to his stomach and spinning around, she cut off his core once again. He fell to the ground.

Blinking, she found the street lamp at the end of the alley, purse and backpack be damned. She could return here later. Hell, she would even take care of a new ID and stuff. Just get the hell out of here.

Unsure of her balance in the dark, she walked fast, but didn’t run. It only occurred to her that her mouth was almost intact – her vocal cords sure were.

“HELP!” she yelled, quickening her pace as she saw the light of street getting closer. “HELP, PLEA-se“

Darkness danced around the edges of her vision, her hand shooting up to the back of her head as something hit her. Her feet tangled up and she was falling and falling, one arm in front of her (or under her?), to steady herself (to slow down the fall?). Dull pain. Her head, her hand. Her side. She probably hit the ground, yes, she was definitely lying and the world spun and spun despite her eyes being closed and the pitch black colour surrounding her.

Vera wanted to scream one more time, but she couldn’t find her lips. She felt her body being rolled over, his weight on her, his fingers sliding over her body – she wanted to fight, fight so hard, look at him so she would see what she was doing when scraping his eyeballs out, scratching his face until it was bloody, hurting him until he would leave. Then sudden cold bit her skin and she knew, she knew what that meant and she cried, cried in pain, cried in desperation, please don’t – and the pressure was gone instantly, as easily as if she snapped her fingers.

Harshness of the greedy hands was replaced by gentler touch.

“-y?... -ar me?”

The words, the syllables, they made no sense and she thought something was wrong, even more wrong than before, because she hadn’t hear that voice in her life and she knew Bryan, she would recognize him, so why didn’t she? She wanted to open her eyes, she really did, but her eyelids were
so, so heavy. The sensation on her arm disappeared, just like the cold. Did someone un-undress her?

And it was such a mess, the noise around her, sizzling and scream…

Panting, whines, cries. Blows, thuds. Cracks?

“-sus. ”

_Open your eyes, come on._ She clenched her fist, finally finding a way to control her body at least a little. Her eyelids lifted with effort, but all she could see was the sky, blurry fusion of a dark, light and shadows. She managed to turn her head to her side. She thought someone was lying on the pavement nearby, another person hovering over him – no, two other people were above the last one.

“Stop!” the voice from before said or screamed, it was too hard to tell, so difficult to understand the single word.

Vera closed her eyes. What was happening there? Who were those people? They were hurting each other – were they going to hurt her too? Please, don’t. Leave her alone. No more pain for her.

She gathered the rest of her strength, putting all her hopes in one loud cry, her last chance.

“Help.” It came out like a whisper or she thought so and she felt her body floating away, ponderous blanket covering her.

“-fe. You’re safe.”

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title – Bryan is a dick (with a dick).

If you’re asking yourself a question, the answer is probably _yes_. 
25) Beyond salvation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera woke up startled, gasping for air. She wanted to open her eyes, but she couldn’t – her hands shot up to her face, finding a bandage over her head. She panicked. Why the hell- and why was it stinging so badly?

Beeping. Intrusive smell and taste of chemicals. Her hands felt her surroundings – and yes, she was in a bed. Hospital.

And fuck, it wasn’t just a nightmare. Bryan waited for her after the lesson. And he followed her. And he- he- she jerked up, sitting straight, fighting for breath, her head spinning. Sharp memories flickered in her mind, mostly sounds, touch, pain. He-

“Whoa. Whoa,” a voice she knew too well blurted out on her right, hand catching her forearm. “It’s Terri. You’re okay. Everything is okay. Well, not exactly, it sucks in fact, but... you’re in a hospital.”

Vera fought the urge to shake off the hand and tried to relax into the touch.Terri. It was Terri. Terri wasn’t Bryan. She wasn’t anyone who would hurt her.

She inhaled, focusing on doing it slowly. “ ‘Kay.” It's okay. ”I know. The smell is unmistakable.”

Vera heard a smile in her friend’s voice. “You’re one special snowflake, aren’t you?” Terri sighed and stroked her hand. “I should probably call a nurse-”

“No!” Vera protested immediately. Not yet. She needed a little time. She didn’t give a shit if they should have check on her the minute she woke up. She wanted to be alone with Terri. She had questions. And she rather asked her friend than some stranger.

“Uhm… alright,” she agreed hesitantly.

Vera loved her, she really did. “So… what’s the word?” she asked casually, too many questions popping in her mind. There were two burning ones she desperately wanted and didn’t want to ask. Her eyes? It was just pepper spray – it would be fine, right? And- and Bryan. Did he- she didn’t think he finished what he started, but-

“Uhm… What you wanna know?”

Vera huffed, mentally counting to ten. Go for it. She gestured wildly around her head. “This thingie… it’s gonna be alright, eventually, right?” She tried her best to keep her tone light, and she failed. Epically.

“Yeah. Yeah, it should be,” Terri answered cheerfully. “Your eyes are a little messed up, because there was some weird reaction with your contacts, but they said it should go away. It’s mostly for your comfort, actually. But-“ She cleared her throat, discomfited. “Uhm… you remember what happened? Shit, this should be the nurse asking, not me.”

Vera’s breath hitched, all alarms bells in her head setting off. Why was she asking? Was she wrong? Did- no, Bryan didn’t- he didn’t. She would know, she would feel ,if- oh god, she couldn’t even think that word. “Why?”
“Uhm. Well, you recognized me, so that a good thing. The blow to your head – it was quite a blast. They are worried about your memory.”

Her memory. Great. So he might rape her after all and she didn’t remember. She gagged at the thought, her already dark world getting somehow darker on its edges.

“Whoa. You gonna throw up?” Terri panicked, hand going over Vera uselessly.

Shit, shit, shit. She needed to know. She- “Did you see that? Did you see what happened?” Vera demanded, not wanting to ask directly.

Beat of silence. “No.”

It was so hard to read Terri when Vera couldn’t see her face. Her tone was sad, which could mean she did see it and didn’t want to tell her as well as it could mean she honestly didn’t get any of her psychic whatever.

“Fine. Fine. You at least know what happened then?”

“Yes. But I shouldn’t be telling you. It’s the memory thing.”

Vera gulped. It sounded so solemnly. “He tried to rape me,” she choked out, praying like never before, hoping she was right. Tried being the key word. Her body hurt, but she didn’t think- didn’t think that-. Blood buzzed in her ears so loudly she was afraid of not hearing Terri’s reaction. She held her breath.

“Yes. He did. He tried and he’s so lucky he didn’t, because I would break his arm for the fourth time,” Terri growled, her amazing sunshine friend growled, but each of her words were a balm for Vera’s soul, crushing weight lifted from her shoulders. Vera took a deep breath and laughed. She thought tears escaped from her eyes, but it was hard to tell, they were so weirdly glued together and the bandage…

“Are you laughing or choking?” Terri freaked out again and Vera burst out laughing and it made her side hurt and her head throb and she didn’t care, delighted, because she was okay. And Bryan- she froze.

“Come again?” She realized what Terri said, horrified and astonished at the same time. “What do you mean break his arm for the fourth time?”

Her friend squeezed her hand. She sounded pleased, satisfied. Dark. “They brought him in about three hours after you. Or at least that’s what Claire said. He had like a half of a pepper spray in his eyes, whining worse than a dying animal. His right arm was broken in three different places – some latin stuff I don’t remember –, shoulder dislocated, several tendons torn. His left forearm was pretty much shattered. Totally busted knee on one and ankle on the other leg. Oh, and cracked ribs. He was scared to death, yelling his confessions about what he did to you – or rather tried.”

Vera fought a wave of nausea when she heard the injuries, feeling lightheaded. Who the hell did this? The two men who saved her? Who were they? What they did… that sounded… twisted. It sounded like torture. Like the people who did that wanted to make sure he wouldn’t do that again. A lecture. Were there any other wannabe vigilantes in Hell’s Kitchen? Or did just got… lucky?

“That’s it. I’m calling the nurse. Sorry, but you look like shit.” Terri’s hand disappeared and Vera didn’t protest this time. She got two most important answers and that was all she wanted – for now.

Following fifteen minutes weren’t the most pleasant in her life, but they weren’t the worse ones.
either. Terri had to head out, being dragged away by the nurse, who checked her vitals, asked her about her memory, pain and actually disconnected the heart monitor since Vera was up. Vera learned she was in a coma for two days, which sucked. A lot. Terri forgot to mention that. The nurse promised the doctor would check up on her in an hour or two and let her friend in again. She came back though, with some hospital jello and nutrition drink. Vera never understood what was it about the jello all the time, but hey, she was hungry and it was better than anything else.

Terri told her what she had missed – it wasn’t much. Vera only found out she scared everyone to shit again, some of her students (Terri, they are not my students) showed up when they learned she was in the hospital, which- whoa, Victor left her a teddy bear by her bedside (Terri handed it to her and she snuggled him, refusing to let go, anticipating Terri was actually jealous) and Mrs.Walker supposedly considered hiring another employee – Vera couldn’t blame her. And of course, Nina brought her stuff, the amazing aunt she was.

Vera listened to Terri’s narrating and couldn’t help wondering one more thing. “Terri… do you know how did I get in? Did someone called me an ambulance? Or did someone bring me in? How… how did Bryan-”

“Bryan? Wait, the Bryan?! As in- Jesus, shit. Some drunk kids called him an ambulance, they found him in the alley, pretty much unable to move; limbs broken and all that. He was screaming, begging them to call the police, kept repeating he needed to confess or he might come back and kill him,” she announced, voice flat. And Jesus Christ. “You? That’s the funny thing. The word is some weird guy brought you in, bridal style, told them he found you in the alley, laid you down and before the nurse reached any doctor – puff. He was gone.”

“Only one?” Vera asked, surprised. Terri might made a face – it was hard to tell, being blind sucked-, but she didn’t say a word. “Terri?”

Her friend sounded bewildered. Tense. Hopeful? “Why? Do you- do you know who saved you? Did you see the guy?”

Vera bit her lip. She didn’t, not really. She might recognize his voice though, if she heard him again. The other guy? Nothing. She hesitantly shook her head. “I didn’t see him. Or them. It’s… I only recall shadows. But there were definitely two guys. I think one of them beat Bryan up, the other one tried to talk to me. Probably. And I guess he wanted to stop his friend or whatever from hurting Bryan further – since you told me which state he’s in, it kinda makes sense…”

“Huh.”

“Miss Machackova?” a new voice resounded and Vera turned in its direction, surprised – she hadn’t notice him coming.

“Yes?”

“I’m Doctor Jabi. I would like to check you over, is that alright? I would have to ask-“

“Yeah, yeah, I’m out. I’ll be back,” Terri mumbled, patted her hand and left the room.

“Uhm… she probably won’t, there is a police officer waiting outside-“

“Shit. Your favourite cop is here. See you tomorrow – oh dammit, you know what I mean. I’ll come here. We’ll hang out. Whatever,” she yelled, most likely peeking from the opened door and Vera chuckled. That girl was a freaking treasure.

“So, how do you feel?”
Sergeant Mahoney was not amused, if his irritated voice was anything to go by. He seemed to be pissed off, because he was in the hospital interrogating Vera – again. He was frustrated since Vera couldn’t tell him much about the attack (he did have enough though, because apparently Bryan wouldn’t stop confessing, claiming a man of hell fire came for him and he had to redeem himself and it didn’t sound like Bryan at all, but who cared). More importantly Vera wouldn’t describe her so-called saviours, who seemed to vanish into thin air. Vera didn’t like the term ‘so-called saviours’ – whatever they did, they also did save her from being raped. She would be grateful for the rest of her life. But Mahoney was out of his mind, because he thought it probably were another vigilantes and he had believed the police took care of that kind of shit when taking down the Devil Worshipers. Vera understood. It sucked. Everything did lately. But hey, she was saved! That was something.

“You heard how he’s doing?” he asked her, voice concerned. It was clear who he was talking about.

Vera sighed. “I have a vague idea. Shattered forearm and three broken bones in his other arm?”

“Yeah. Among other things... any chance any of those things goes from you? Just curious, whatever you possibly did, it was self-defence.”

Vera thought back about their fight and really couldn’t get herself any credit. “Don’t think so. Some bruises maybe? ...Is his nose broken?” she asked eventually.

Mahoney chuckled. “Yeah, yeah it is.”

Vera beamed, unable to help herself, raising her hand, owning up. “Yeah, that one’s on me.”

“...but you didn’t use your brass knuckles,” he noted and Vera’s heart stopped.

What? How could he possibly know- did they search her purse? Shit, shit, shit, she was so in trouble.

“Am- am I in trouble?” Her voice was shaking, weak, mirroring her fear. Jesus. Did that mean he made the connection? Did he realize it was her, his neighbour’s daughter? He probably could; brass knuckles, potential interest in vigilanting, matching description.... And Vera realized too late that by asking if she was in trouble, she probably confirmed any suspicion he possibly had. Dammit!

Sergeant Mahoney sighed, sounding exhausted. “No, you’re not. But Vera- I can call you ‘Vera’, right?”

Bewildered, shocked and too scared to protest, she nodded.

“-Vera, you- I’m glad you didn’t ignore some girl crying for help when you had a chance, but you can’t do this. I think we established that when hunting them down – this vigilante bullshit, it’s dangerous and it’s illegal and I know you probably just wanted to do something good that day, and thank god for that, but... don’t make it a rule, okay? It’s tough shit and you don’t want to put up with it. And I don’t want you to be the next person I bring in in handcuffs – and that’s the better option. Worse, you end up bloody or they’ll carry you out in a bag,” he pleaded and this time she definitely had tears in her eyes and she couldn’t blink them away, because bandage dammit.

Vera had no idea what to say. She was startled, because he figured it out. She was disappointed and hurt, because... she knew she couldn’t do that. She was like twenty stories under Matt and she wouldn’t be able to help people like he did – which she didn’t have to of course, he would come back. But she was touched – it almost looked like he cared. She had to swallow a teasing note. Oh, you care, Sergeant? That’s sweet.
“I’m… uhm. I’m sorry. Don’t worry, Sergeant. It was a onetime thing. I think my latest adventure proved that I can’t pick up a fight. Not really.”

“Pff. I believe you can. But these streets are dangerous and criminals like to play dirty. Try to stay out of trouble, would you? Also, it’s Brett,” he offered, tone finally light and she had to smile. That was an honour.

“Thanks. I can try. But they just keep following me around.”

“Yeah. I noticed. Even though sometimes you just go meet them halfway, don’t you? Told you that befriend another Nelson was a bad idea.” Silence fell, but not uncomfortable. It felt more and more like a social visit than a professional one. She liked it. Brett was a good guy. Foggy knew it. Matt knew it. And Vera herself practically adored him ever since he chased away Collins and offered her a box of tissues. “So. I gotta go. Duty calls. I let you know if there’s any progress, okay?”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I wasn’t much help,” she said, not sure if she really was sorry. On one hand, she owed her saviours, on the other hand, they were obviously dangerous, unpredictable – and the streets of Hell’s Kitchen were already unsafe enough. But then again, Matt was dangerous too and he was able to help a lot of people. She was honestly torn. She didn’t know what to make from the little information she had.

“Not exactly your fault.” He still didn’t stand up, or at least she didn’t think he did. “Anyway. How are you doing?”

Social visit. Absolutely.

Vera’s lips spread widely at his care. “I’m good. Well, I should be. Doctor said there will be no permanent consequences. They just want me here because of the head injury, under surveillance for another two days and they would put on the bandage as well and we’ll see.”

He chuckled, lamely covering it as a cough and Vera realized what she said.

“Uhm… yeah. I hope we’ll all see,” she added, biting her lip, gesturing in front of her face. There was something appealing about accidently making a blind joke. Matt liked to do that.

“Sure. Need something? You want me to call a nurse before I head out?” he offered kindly, laugh not leaving his voice entirely. He moved though – she heard a rustling of a fabric, his voice coming from above her now.

She shook her head. “Thanks. Have a nice day, Ser- Brett. I’m glad it was you who came…. Get some rest. You sound tired,” she added after a short consideration. It wasn’t a rude thing to say, right? He expressed concern about her first.

He sighed, but Vera thought she heard a hint of a smile when he spoke up. “Thanks. You too.”

And then he was gone, leaving her alone with her dark and silence.
Chapter End Notes

This one’s rather short, but I have the next one almost prepared and I think you’ll like it. If for anything, then for getting Terri’s POV. The very first line will help too. I think.
Of puppies and heart-spilling (Terri)

Chapter Notes

So, about the first line I thought you’ll like… :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Yo, Murdock! Care to visit your girlfriend in the hospital? You know, now when she’s finally awake?” she yelled as she opened the door to his apartment. She was loud despite knowing he would hear her just fine if she was whispering. It was a force of habit.

Terri kicked her shoes off, letting herself further in his flat. She wasn’t less amazed by how roomy it was – the high ceilings, wide space – than the last time she was there. It was a designer’s dream except the billboard outside and its disturbing light. It was nice, organized – lacking of personal touch though. She wasn’t sure whether it was due to his blindness or his personality.

To her disappointment, it wasn’t Matt sitting on the couch and enjoying Thai take out. Of course it wasn’t. It was the bearded ray of sunshine, actual puppy, insisting he should be called Danny. How the hell Murdock befriended this guy, she had no idea. On the other hand, she could see few similarities between him and Foggy. Guess brooding Murdock (and she saw him brooding, alright) needed polar opposites of him to keep him smiling charmingly.

“Vera’s awake? That’s great!” he beamed, noodles sticking from his mouth and falling when he smiled. Terri rolled her eyes. She didn’t understand this guy; he was walking barefoot, loose shirt (?) and pants too short, hairy, actually looking homeless a little and he had no manners. He was just weird.

Truth to be told, she didn’t understand many, many things. Starting with the fact Matt Murdock didn’t return to town officially despite being here, ending with the fact he was not present at the moment.

“Where the hell is he?” she complained, disappointed she delivered the news to no one. Well, anyone who cared, really. Which- wrong. Danny cared. He cared for everyone, apparently. But Terri wanted to tell Matt, okay?

He at least swallowed before speaking this time. “He’s picking up his armour-“

“His what?” Terri blurted out, absolutely taken aback. His armour?

He nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, yeah. I know. He told me how he used to jump around without any. Kind of irresponsible with guns and everything and that means something coming from me…”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Terri muttered under her breath and sat down on the armchair, facing Danny, who seemed to be totally content with his huge box of noodles. Give him food and he would fall to your feet. Jeez. He was like a puppy. Maybe she should buy him a chewing toy as an expression of her gratitude? Because she was grateful, okay. “Uhm, any idea when he’s coming back? Where-where is he even getting an armour anyway?”

“Dunno,” he muttered, mouth full again, “he said something about a Fick guy? – who he used to
fight and he wore some fancy reinforced suit. He claimed he found the guy who made it for him. So, yeah…. He went there few times since we arrived to New York.”

“You mean when he was not watching – listening to – my best friend sleeping at the moment?”

Danny grinned. “Yeah. Something like that.” He took it easy, the way it was. So what, his friend was stalking his own girlfriend, hiding from her for whatever reason Terri couldn’t wrap her head around. That was Danny.

It was only two days ago when she met this fella, after another of her visions. It scared her to death, because from what she understood, someone tried to fucking rape her friend and she didn’t seem to really put up a fight, despite Terri’s certainty whatever the guy was doing to her wasn’t consensual. And Terri was somewhat awake during the vision – she panicked, because unlike the last time, she had no way of figuring out where the hell was it happening. And then the horror image changed – two guys, both in hoodies came to her rescue, just in time. Terri couldn’t explain it, but she knew it was Murdock, back in town in all his glory, even though she hadn’t seen his face. When she learned about Vera being brought to the hospital – by Danny, who she hadn’t met yet at the time, obviously – and most importantly about Vera’s assailant having several broken bones, she was confident someone who was very, very angry did that to him. It had Murdock written all over it. Terri wasn’t much for violence, but she was glad Matt broke his hands several times. If Terri was there, she would kick his balls repeatedly, but guess this worked too. He fucking deserved it.

So yeah, she knew about the Devil being back in town, but wasn’t sure what to do about it. Naturally, she went to Claire’s, coming up with some ridiculous lie about picking up some of Matt’s stuff – ‘blind, you know, Vera is pretty much blind for now, even though only temporarily’ – for Vera to cheer her up and she gained a spare key to his apartment, learning his address. She found them both there, Danny and Matt, the unlikely pair of dummies, each in their own way. A half-cheerful surprised puppy (‘Matt, what the hell? Who is she?’) and a half-desperate bundle of nerves with torn expression (who didn’t say a word until she collided with his chest and then spoke up). Despite being unsure of Murdock’s temper, she hugged the shit out of him and he let her (she believed she would stand no chance in he wouldn’t). There was a little catching up, uncomfortable tiptoeing around Matt’s recent whereabouts and Terri’s… awareness of things she shouldn’t know (like Matt being the Devil for example, ‘no, she didn’t tell me, carry on’), until they settled on who the hell cares. He wanted to know everything about Vera, and Terri was actually relieved Victor called her, because she didn’t want to be the one who would say Murdock that his girlfriend had been busy – like almost-got-crucified busy – and left, promising to come back. Not before she smacked his chest multiple times for not reaching out to Vera despite the fact he was in town for four days now. Once again, he let her, eyes big and sad.

The door slammed above and Terri snapped up her head on instinct, remembering there was a rooftop access to the apartment. Seeing the newcomer, she yelped and jerked to her feet, taking several steps backwards.

What the-

Danny burst out laughing, sending a spray of half-chewed noodles on the table. “You gotta be kidding me,” he choked out and Terri realized that the scary creepy figure standing there was actually Matthew Michael Murdock. That fucking intruder, wearing a red-black spandex costume, with a helmet- “It has horns, Matt. It has freaking horns, you know that, right?”

“Jesus. Christ,” Terri breathed out and the figure broke into motion, walking down the stairs, hint of a smug smile on his lips.

“Blasphemy.” Matt took off the ridiculous helmet. “Hey, Terri. Any news?” he asked, voice and
expression suddenly soft, as if the mask he was wearing hid more than just his face.

She couldn’t let out a single word, gaping, staring at him, at the surreal individual with muffled hair, observing her nose with his sightless eyes, sad and hoping at the same time, waiting for the verdict.

“The red grew on you, didn’t it?” Danny noted and Terri was still too shocked to think about what that meant. She thought the blond cleared his throat, because his next words were comprehensible, crystal clear, his voice ceremonial. “Vera was awake today.”

Matt’s features softened even more and his lips spread into a brilliant smile, eyes shining, and he looked like a little cute boy from the next door, whom you returned his favourite ball. “She was?” he asked, clearly addressing Terri. “She wasn’t conscious when I stopped by-“

She finally snapped from her trance. “-on a rooftop, I assume.”

“-so it was hard to tell. How is she?” He ignored her wry comment and Terri knew she was right.

“Well, you would know if you visited her. But I already know you’re a stubborn piece of shit, you two happen to have that – that from all possible character features – in common, so I guess it’s like talking to a wall and I’ll have to wait until you realize it on your own-“

“Terri. Please.” And he was fucking pleading. She huffed and told him what he wanted to hear.

“She’s fine. She’s so fine a blind man could see it.” Danny snickered. “I mean, she should be. She has her ribs and knuckles bruised, they still worry about her head injury, but she seemed lucid enough, if you ask me, no amnesia or anything. And sure, there is this whole-” Terri made an indefinite movement in front of her face, “temporary blindness thing. I don’t know how much it freaks her out, but I think she was more interested in-uhm. In what happened after she passed out.”

She didn’t have to explain further, Matt knew what she was talking about. They almost arrived too late. And it wasn’t hard to tell what Bryan wanted to do to her and Terri was well-aware it made Matt’s blood boil with anger and see red and he didn’t feel a need to keep his violent side on leash when he got that bastard in his hands. It was Danny who stopped him from doing something he might regret later – Terri liked him and hated him for it at the same time. She also respected him immeasurably, because he somehow managed to stop Matt Murdock – and the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen – from doing what he wanted to. She was convinced he had magic or something.

Matt’s expression was hard at the memory – he clenched his jaw, visible tendons of his neck tense, murderous glare. She had no idea what to do about it. Change the subject?

“Uhm… Sergeant Mahoney was waiting outside when I left. I think he was actually worried about her. It was sweet,” Terri said casually and Murdock unfroze, relaxing his posture.

“Good. That’s good. Brett is a good man. They… they go a way back.”

Terri bit her lip. Yeah, they sure did. The memory of Vera going undercover or whatever arose in her mind again. She was so not going to be the one who would tell him about that. Or about the fact Vera beat up some guy who assaulted an innocent girl, rushing to her rescue with brass knuckles. Nope.

“Yeah. Anyway. What’s up with all this? Are you like… getting ready to hit the streets again? The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen 2.0?”

It was Danny who answered. “You bet your ass he is. This city is a mess,” he complained, but not really outraged – he had food at the moment and nothing else mattered.
Matt sighed, stripping some reinforced gloves or whatever, tossing them on the couch. He made his way to the kitchen counter, helping himself with a glass of water.

“At least the Devil Worshipers are gone, aren’t they? I didn’t hear a thing about them since I came back.”

Terri swallowed against the lump in her throat, anxiety growing in her chest. This was a dangerous territory. She couldn’t give herself away. Or rather give Vera away. “Yeah. They are gone. The police took care of them.” And yeah, her palms were sweating and Murdock tilted his head, frowning in her direction.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, slightly alarmed and walked back to her.

Shit, shit, shit. He was some kind of a lie detector, right? But she wasn’t lying technically. Yet he still knew. Shit. How the hell should she keep it a secret? “Uhm… I heard about their… practices. The not so vigilante ones. It was all over the papers. It’s… it was terrible.”

Matt frowned harder, examining her for another seconds and then sat down on the couch. She released the breath she was holding. “Yeah. Yeah… Uhm, sorry, want something? Water? Beer?” He gestured toward the counter. “Help yourself.”

Terri shook her head, realizing she should probably go. She wasn’t any help here. And it was already dark and local vigilante – who was back, how cool was that – was chilling out on his couch, so she should be heading back home. “No, thanks. I should go.”

He nodded in response, not protesting. She hesitated, noticing his face falling again. He wanted to know more. But screw him. He should be with her. It was his choice to keep his distance – a decision she was hoping to change soon. It wasn’t like Matt Murdock wasn’t coming back eventually. Or the Devil, apparently. Vera would find out he was back and she was going to be pissed off and fucking sad if she found out he was in town for so long without letting her know. Terri gathered her courage and stood in front of the pile of misery sitting next to the beaming sunshine, crossing her arms.

“She misses you, you know. She always does. And she could use her boyfriend right-”

“Aaand that’s my cue to leave,” Danny exclaimed, putting the empty box away, leaving to Matt’s bedroom, closing the sliding door behind him. Obviously he did have some manners after all.

Matt didn’t look up, his gaze somewhere on her thighs. He remained silent. When she sighed, letting her hands fall, he didn’t react. She took it as an invitation, seating herself next to him instead of Danny.

“Matt, I don’t- I won’t pretend I understand any of this shit or you for that matter. But I can tell you what I see, okay? I see an unhappy guy, who I’m pretty sure loves my best friend and wants nothing but be with her again. Then I see a miserable girl, who is struggling and fighting really hard to function despite the fact she misses the man she loves as well. I think the guy is being fucking stupid, because he probably assumed the girl would be better off without him-”

“I almost got her killed. She’s safer,” he breathed out silently and Terri rolled her eyes, because of fucking course.

“-which is a complete bullshit, in case you didn’t notice. You also saved her multiple times. And let me tell you, she was not very safe while you were gone-”

“What do you mean?” he sat up straighter, alarmed. Another eye roll.
“Nope. I am not telling you. Ask her yourself. Not the point. You both miss each other, you both need each other and you fucking love each other, so from where I’m standing, it’s pretty obvious what you should do. And I’m fed up with lying to my best friend. She deserves better than that.”

And wow, she just gave a talk to the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen and it would be actually kinda scary if he didn’t look like a kicked puppy. Huh. They were both puppies, Danny and him.

He seemed thoughtful, hesitant. He opened his mouth and closed it again, as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind in the last second.

Terri waited. And waited. Then finally: “Does… does she really still miss me?” he asked in low voice, peeking (not peeking, blind, dammit, but something) on her from under his eyelashes almost timidly.

Terri ran her hand down her face, wishing she could rip it off. She couldn’t believe this guy. She looked at him as his expression was nothing but expectant. He was actually asking her. “Oh, for god’s sake. YES, you thundering dumbass. She misses you so much it hurts to see it. … oh, maybe that’s it. You can’t see it, so you don’t get it. Do you need me to spell it out for you? She M-I-S-S-Y-O-U. You know why? Because she L-O-V-E-Y-O-U. Am I being clear or should I print it on a sticker in braille?”

The corners of his lips raised a little. Hallelujah.

Aaaand, down again. What now?

“Is there… is there anyone-“

Terri threw her head back and whined. 1, 2, 3… 10. “No. Jesus Christ, Murdock. No, you’re the one and only and if you don’t let her know you’re back in next three days, I swear to god I will do it for you.”

“Maybe… I should at least wait until she can actually see?” he offered cautiously and Terri had to admit it might be a good call.

“Fine. You have 24 hours after her discharge from the hospital. But if she finds out sooner from anyone else, it will bite you in your ass, believe me. Because she will hate you- no scratch that, she will be hurt and betrayed and then fall into your arms anyway, but there will be barrier between you which wouldn’t be easy to break and that would be on you, sir. Jeez. I’m out. This was exhausting.”

Terri stood up, surprised he did the same, watching her chin with unreadable expression. She raised an eyebrow curiously. To shock her even more, he slowly lifted his arms – giving her time to escape – and wrapped them around her, enclosing her in gentle timid embrace. Huh. She returned the hug, feeling almost blessed, anticipating Matt wasn’t much of a hugger – he seemed to be taken aback by her attack two days ago. She relaxed in his arms – the weird red-black armour slightly pressed against her body, huh, it might actually protect him – resting her head on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Terri,” he whispered, voice honest and full of emotions and Terri couldn’t help a smile and squeezed him back.

“Sure.” They let go. “Every time you two have some kind of a- whatever it is-, I’m the peacemaker. I’m actually getting used to it. But it won’t be cheap. I do expect to be a bridesmaid for this.”

“What?” he blurted out, blinking furiously, absolutely bewildered.

“What?” she parroted dully. Oh. Shit. “Uhm… never mind. Ignore me. I keep saying things. Jesus, don’t you dare to back out. She’s not planning a wedding or something. She doesn’t even know
you’re still alive. Which is an asshole thing to do to her, by the way, but you got that already, I hope.”

“Yeah.”

Huh. Was that a hint of a smile on his face? More importantly, was that a freaking blush on his cheeks? Did she miss something? God, no, they were together like seven months including the almost three months break…

“So. Yeah. Not sure what are you gonna do until then, but I hope it doesn’t involve too much blood. Say hi to puppy Danny from me. Oh, and as soon as you talk to Vera, talk to Nelson. He has some money issues with your office or whatever…” Terri babbled as she headed to the door and put her shoes on. He followed her, expression still (or again) baffled. “But don’t you dare to meet him before you meet Vera.”

“Noted. Thank you, Terri. For stopping by. For taking care of her. For… everything,” he offered reluctantly, but with unmistakeable gratitude. It almost made her blush as well.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, just don’t be a Dick…” And with those words, she left the apartment, door slamming, unsure what exactly happened there. “It has horns.”

Jeeez.

Terri would swear she heard him laugh and she smiled at the sound unwillingly.

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title – In which Danny isn’t the one who’s a thundering dumbass.

Matt is finally back. Omg, I think I missed him more than Vera, Foggy, Karen and Claire altogether.
26) Is it too late? (...to come on home?)

Chapter Notes

If there is a chapter of this fic that should be rated, it’s this one. Another fair warning.
Also, it’s pretty long.
Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Talking to Foggy was… exhausting. And awkward. Vera could tell he came to her with bad news, probably deciding to close the office for real, but he felt sorry for her at the moment and didn’t have the heart to announce something like this to a temporarily blinded person. The fact she could tell that from their conversation – or rather non-conversation – made her wonder if it was the things she couldn’t see, but she hadn’t been noticing when distracted by her sight, which spoke the most clearly.

Foggy asked her how she was, how was she coping with her blindness, whether she knew when she was coming home – probably to find out how long he had to keep the dark secret, because he was a decent person and just wouldn’t make her upset while she was still in the hospital – and that was pretty much it. She answered him truthfully, mentioning Brett’s visit and he promised to buy his mum extra cigars, which- okay. End of conversation. But hey, he also brought her flowers. So that was nice.

Terri didn’t come despite her promise, but Nina stopped by, exhaustion radiating from her to miles. Of course, she was absolutely amazing and brought her a homemade pie, because apparently that was her comfort food for when Vera was in hospital for more than few hours. She helped her to the bathroom as well, rearranged her covers and brought her water. She also told her she spoke to the cop outside Bryan’s room, but he wasn’t willing to give her anything. Vera thanked her for the update anyway and changed the subject, asking about the weather, honestly curious. Then Nina started about the upcoming wedding of her daughter, so Vera could… chill, thinking about nice things.

Claire stopped by, giving her back her necklace again – it felt awfully familiar, except this time the charm didn’t need to be washed from blood at least, only put down because of the MRI she underwent. Vera didn’t even cry, just thanked Claire and asked her to put it on, because she could even see it. So that was different too.

Doctor came in the evening, checking her eyes and offering not wrapping her head again – she agreed and spent the rest of the evening squinting in the dark room, illuminated only by a dim light of a reading lamp. It hurt and stung, but she was trying until she was too tired and closed her eyes, falling asleep. When she woke up in the middle of the night, she found her glasses on the nightstand together with her sunglasses. She had no idea how did they get there, but she was too sleepy to think about it. When they were still there in the morning, she was honestly confused. For some reason, she didn’t ask about it though.

Before lunch, they offered her a discharge. Vera was all for it, immediately calling Nina if she could pick her up. When she didn’t succeed, she tried Terri, who was absolutely delighted and swore that this time, she would come, because she couldn’t wait to finally get Vera home. She sounded
overexcited and Vera was actually concerned.

In the afternoon, Terri and Victor helped her packing and paid for a taxi, because she wasn’t really in condition to wander the streets, no matter she had a literal bodyguard by her side. And Terri as a bonus. They kinda had a point, because she couldn’t wear her glasses and sunglasses at the same time, obviously, and the light was still quite violent. She couldn’t wear contacts either, because it would hurt like hell and she had a special salve for her eyes which sure wouldn’t agree with them. So yeah, she was still pretty much blind, but she could tell it was getting better with every hour.

At her apartment, they made her tea and stuck around for few hours, before Victor headed to work (she hugged him wholeheartedly and thanked him, which apparently took him aback big time) and Terri vanished with an expression Vera thought screamed conspiracy. She snuggled on her couch, changing her sunglasses for actual seeing ones, not bothering to light up anything else than a reading lamp once again. She wanted to read but gave up after few pages – it was still too difficult. She decided for shower and going to bed early in spite of the fact she spent most of her time sleeping lately and she didn’t expect to be so lucky and actually fall asleep. Leaving to the bathroom, she opened the window, hoping the air of New York City would help.

Vera didn’t rush – she had nowhere to be, nothing to do really. And tomorrow and the day after that, she would stay in, doctor’s orders, Terri’s and Nina’s too and Mrs.Walker’s as well. She didn’t mind, she knew too well she was still far from a normally functioning person. She couldn’t go to work. She considered taking at least one lesson, she missed boxing and even though it required some vision, she could set the lights as dim as she needed. Yeah, she should go to Fogwell’s, the day after tomorrow, maybe.

Hair dipping water, freshly out of the hot steam, she felt the cold air against her skin the very same moment she opened the door to the bathroom. She made her way to the window only to freeze when looking at it.

He was sitting in the window, almost casually, like he belonged there and nowhere else – his outfit black as she remembered, lines of his body tightly enwrapped. He didn’t wear his mask, hair sticking out in every possible direction. Vera couldn’t read his expression – it was too dark and the window was too far for her tired eyes even with the glasses. Besides, she was sure her mind was playing tricks on her. There probably were some of the pain-meds remaining in her system after all. Still, with her heart hammering in her chest painfully, too scared to even breathe, worried it might destroy the beautiful illusion, she came closer to his unmoving figure.

She still couldn’t read his face. Even when she was just step away from him, his expression was an enigma, so she gathered all her courage – not afraid of his reaction, but afraid of her disappointment when finding out she indeed only imagined him – and held out her hand, fingers hovering over his cheek. And she would swear she could feel the heat radiating from his skin. She gulped and touched him.

Hot air tickled her wrist as he exhaled, holding his breath until that moment just like her. Her head started spinning, because she could touch him, she could see him and if he only spoke, she would be hundred percent sure he was right here.

His cheek still in her palm – and Vera thought he might have leant in a little, his eyes closing, the gesture warming her heart, spreading the feeling in her chest, filling it with something she couldn’t even describe – she asked him the most ridiculous thing. “Say my name, please,” she whispered, not trusting her voice to say it loudly without breaking. Tears almost escaped her eyes as one corner of his lips raised a little, his eyes vaguely focusing on her face.

“Vera.”
And god, *his voice*. She didn’t bother to hide her tears anymore and she didn’t give a shit if he might attack her or whatever because he just came back from some freaking war he never wanted to fight, she threw her arms around him, colliding with his chest hard, *solid body* pressing against her, and *Jesus Christ* he was *here*. A second before she hugged him or rather jumped him, he slid down from the ledge, spreading his arms slightly to she could fit into them the right way. And there was nothing *more right* than that.

She sobbed to his chest, feeling his face burying to her hair, one arm around her waist and the other finding the back of her neck, interweaving in her hair as well. He inhaled deeply and she chuckled, because she just washed her hair and if she didn’t, all he would smell would be hospital, bitter and sweet taste of chemicals and cheap detergent, but she *did* and he squeezed tighter as if he wanted to make sure she was there and she was *freaking* laughing and crying to his undershirt at the same time.

“Vera, Vera, Vera…” he kept whispering her name and she was delighted at the sound, at the way her name rolled off his tongue and she couldn’t return the favour because her throat was too tight, the lump in it too big to actually speak. So instead she breathed him in as well and it was totally *Matt*, santal wood and home, danger and safety, and she thought she felt his tears in her hair. She refused to let go to find out. She wouldn’t move an inch, she would freeze in that moment forever, wishing it never ended, because *he was here, alive*, and whatever happened to him or her, she was in his arms right now and he didn’t seem to want to let her go any more that she did.

So they stood there, rather one person than two, tangled together in peculiar octopus, breathing, crying and laughing.

“*Jesus Christ*, I missed you so much,” Matt broke the silence, voice still quiet, loosening his grip just a bit so she could lift her face to his, seeing his eyes shining despite the enigmatic expression never leaving.

*I missed you too*, Vera wanted to say, but she couldn’t make her vocal cords work. *God*, how she missed his warm eyes. No sound came out from her mouth, so instead she took his face in her hands, lips colliding with his. She longed for that touch for endless days, weeks, *months* and now their lips finally met, that tremendous feeling, tingling, running to her fingertips and- he wasn’t responding at all. He was frozen, a sculpture of surprise, and something heavy fell to her stomach, making her heart drop. She let her trembling hands fall down to her sides, suffocating feeling in her chest. He didn’t move – his eyelids closed, not even breathing she suspected.

“**Matt**, I- I’m sorry,” she choked out, new tears rolling down her cheeks and his eyes snapped wide open, dazed, but burning with intensity; confusion and delight.

One furious step to her and his hand was on the back of her head again, his lips hungrily drinking from hers and she gasped into his mouth, relieved laugh muffled by his tongue. Vera had no idea what just snapped in his head, but she didn’t really care. She let him to spin them a little, press her back against the wall next to the window – the air was still cold, but she didn’t give a damn when she shivered, blaming the man and his demanding teeth biting her lips instead, sending jolts of pleasure right down her spine.

His free hand pushed the glass of the window away absently, not really paying attention, finding way under her ass, lifting and silencing her yelp effectively. She wrapped her legs around his waist on instinct, her hands sliding under his top to explore the body she missed so badly. And there were *so* many scars, she was sure some of them too fresh and she gasped again, horrified, clarity hitting her clouded mind like a truck – she retreated her fingers quickly, afraid she hurt him. But Matt only lost the contact on her neck, gently took her wrist and returned it on the same spot, breathing *it’s*
okay, setting her lips free for a short moment.

“I missed you too,” Vera said finally and he rested his forehead against hers. Still in the air, his arm and the wall her only support, she stared into his eyes, so warm and kind, glassy, touched, his lips forming a brilliant smile. His fingers traced her cheeks gingerly and she was reminded of his tenderness. That was all him – violence and tenderness, anger and forgiveness, greediness and generosity, passion and kindness. And love. Oh god, so much love. “I love you.”

And his lips met hers so sweetly she felt her tears again, because she was an emotional wreck and she fucking loved him. The pace changed, picking up speed, conquering once more, taking and taking, and all she wanted was to give, give him everything, because he might not be there tomorrow. Or her, for that matter. So she interweaved her fingers in his hair, pulling his mouth closer and he wedged it in hers, tasting its every corner with his tongue. She didn’t remember his fingers leaving her cheeks, but suddenly they were under her t-shirt, exploring the skin of her hip, drawing circles and indefinite patterns, pressing his thumb hard in her skin as she bit his lip playfully. And god, she loved that deep dangerous sound he made in the back of his throat and she wanted to hear it again – trusting he wouldn’t let her fall, she rocked her hips against him and the sound became more distinctive, making her giggle to his mouth.

“Teaser,” Matt accused her and spun her around, hand moving to her back so she didn’t end up on the floor. But god, she wouldn’t mind the floor as long as he would follow her. But he was walking to the bedroom and the memory of the benefit night arose in her mind.

High on his proximity, on his touch, on his kisses, Vera giggled again. “And here I thought you would finally fuck me to the wall… hard,” she poked his imagination and felt him twitch, sensed the stumble in his gait. She almost grinned in satisfaction. His fingers dug in the skin of her back and ass at her words, sending a jolt of warm to her abdomen.

“You still do have dirty mouth,” he breathed as he reached his destination, laying her down carefully, losing his shirt the second their bodies untangled. She didn’t do the same – she would leave that privilege to him. He reached for her glasses, cautiously putting them away and sliding his hands under her top. She gasped as his thumbs passed over her nipples accidentally and his face twisted in a smug smile.

And she was a teaser, huh?

“I do. For you,” Vera admitted, raising her arms helpfully, then receding, moving to the centre of her bed as he threw the stupid t-shirt away. He seemed to freeze for a second, his eyes softening. Before she could think of what caused it, he reached to her chest, agonizingly slowly. Her gaze flickered to the direction the same moment his fingertips touched her charm, tracing it carefully. Oh. Now when she thought about it, it hit her sternum lightly as he stripped her clothes, he must have heard it. He gulped, strange expression shadowing over his face and she managed a weak smile he couldn’t see.

“I love you,” he whispered, voice so full of emotion it stung her heart almost painfully.

Her smile widened for a second. She beckoned him with come here gesture and he immediately obeyed, leaning into her space in one fast motion, bordering her waist. His lips sunk into hers thirstily, hands returning to her body, greedy fingers taking what belonged to them. And she let him, because that day she wanted to give and give him everything including what he didn’t ask for. He was hovering over her, supporting himself on one elbow, his other hand tracing her inner thigh, when she ran her palm over the bulge in his trousers and he moaned, the sound almost desperate, aimed right to her gut. It made her realize what she had to do, what she wanted to do, the idea making her smile against his mouth. She pressed her fingers against his lower abdomen, pushing him away.
Her action must have confused him, because his hand froze, lips stopped their movement. She pushed harder and he withdrew a little, frowning.

“Roll over,” she ordered and he didn’t move at all, like he didn’t understand her words. “Roll over, Matt… please?”

He hesitantly did what she asked for, setting her body free unwillingly – it was her who was hovering above him now, knees next to his thighs, palms bordering his arms. God, those arms. She touched them with fascination, wondering whether they grew while he was gone or her memory just didn’t make them justice.

His eyes observed her, big, burning and she had to look away, feeling her cheeks blush, rather moving to his chest. There were so many new scars on his torso – angry pink, still raw. She carefully ran her fingers over one of them, under his clavicle, noticing his breath hitched, muscles tensed. She quickly retreated.

“Sorry, sorry!”

But Matt shook his head, eyes closed. “It’s… it doesn’t hurt,” he said reluctantly, his Adam’s apple jumping several times. Vera wasn’t sure she understood. In fact, she thought she understood it wrong. She hesitantly touched another scar right on the edge of his left pectoral, watching his lips parting as she did so.

No way.

She brought her lips to the sensitive skin, kissing it lightly and he exhaled shakily, his fingers twitching. She was amazed by it, doing it again and again, trying out his reaction to her teeth, biting it gingerly. He gasped.

“Vera-“

She moved to another place, another memento of battle, slowly making her way to his belt. She reached it, undoing it while kissing him over the fabric. He growled. He fucking growled and she loved it, her own body overwhelmed by arousal. But she could wait. She waited for months, she would handle another minutes. Now, she was the giver.

Suddenly impatient, she pulled the pants down, taking his boxers with it. His body tensed in anticipation – or maybe it was shock – and she licked her lips before she brought them to his tip. His quiet moan and his fists clutching her sheets were the most satisfying reaction she could get.

“Vera, you don’t have to-“ She enclosed his head with her mouth and then swallowed him whole to the base and the rest of his sentence got lost in his gasp, his body arching up unable to help himself. “Jesus.”

Vera would tease him with blasphemy if she wasn’t amazed by his incredible sensitivity just like the first time and second time and…. Also, she was quite busy. She slid her tongue alongside his length, the hotness of her mouth never leaving him. His hand wasn’t clutching the bed sheets anymore – he interweaved his fingers in her hair, desperate whimper escaping him. Then he made her move, setting the pace and the feeling of victory while actually being controlled washed over her, satisfying. And then he joined her, thrusting his cock into her mouth by himself and all she could do was to oblige, never stopping her own initiative, her nails digging into his thighs, moving to his balls, stroking lightly. He arched, pulling her head back, away, but she didn’t let him, licked few more times, making him understand – and he came, his cock spasming, releasing. He whimpered, loud and pleading, suddenly weak as kitten, loosening his grip in her hair as she swallowed what was offered,
slowing down her movements.

Matt took her under her chin and brought her head to his, eyes unfocused more than usually, lost, yet travelling around her face. He wiped away the corner of her lips and tenderly met them with his own. She had no idea what it had to be like for him, tasting the very himself of her lips, but his touch on her face and on her neck was light, delicate, almost reverential, so she hoped that was a good sign.

“Christ,” he breathed between the kisses, voice astounded. “Who are you?” Before she could even wonder if he wanted her to respond, he locked their lips again.

And his eyes had sparks in them, beautiful, so she had to smile contentedly, pride making her heart growing, but also his expression, the purest delight, this, this was what she wanted and she accomplished that. One arm wrapped around her waist, the other around her shoulders and he rolled them over, covering her body with his, pleasantly warm. God, how she missed the warm.

He caressed her nose with his and her smile widened at the affection. “What do you want?” he breathed to her lips and she blinked in surprise. What?

“What?”

“Hm…” he hummed, covering her jaw in light kisses before returning to her lips, “Tell me what you want. Anything.”

Vera gasped as his fingers travelled over her body randomly, as if accidently running over her clit, the touch sending a jolt to her spine despite being touched over fabric.

She was tempted. So tempted by his offer, her mind already coming up with different ways of how he could led her to her orgasm, she was freaking burning, but something inside her was still stubborn, desiring to reward him for coming home, returning to her. He came back to her.

He waited patiently, not resisting when she took his wandering hand and brought it to her lips, part of her crying at the loss of his touch. Vera gulped, watching his huge honest eyes. “I want you to stay,” she admitted softly and saw a cloud of pain covering his face. He squeezed his eyes shut for a short moment, obviously not expecting that kind of an answer.

“I will,” he promised, burning gaze piercing into her eyes again.

Her lips twitched unconsciously. She continued. “I want you to never leave again, even though I would wait for you.”

He blinked furiously and she noticed he fought tears and worked against a lump in his throat. “Okay. I won’t.”

She licked her lips, getting to the point. “And I want you to take everything you want, any way you want to, because I belong to you and no one else.”

His lips parted and she would swear his pupils dilated despite the fact she knew they couldn’t. He exhaled shakeily, burying his face in her shoulder. “How can you even-“ he choked out, unable to finish his thought and she kissed his neck since he exposed it so helpfully, taking his skin between her teeth playfully. She felt him twitch again, content and astonished – there was no scar there. He was just incredibly sensitive everywhere. Or maybe it was the words, or their long period apart, but he definitely was ready for another round. And she was more than ready.

But his pants by his knees was a serious problem; it would be getting in their way. Vera tried to strip it completely, realizing for the first time he never lost his boots. Huh. That was new. He took care of
all of it with skilful fingers, returning to her mouth as she babbled.

“Should I lie on my back? Side, belly? Do you want me on top? I can-“

He silenced her with a bruising kiss and Vera answered him enthusiastically, as he stripped her sweatpants and underwear. Her hands mapped his body out, muscles shifting with his movements and she was enjoying it, just the feeling under her fingertips, the sensation she missed for far too long.

She gasped to his mouth when he thrust one finger inside her without a single warning, her muscles tightening around it reflexively. This time it was him, who smiled into the kiss, thumb of his other hand stroking her lower belly. He moved his finger inside her few times and stars flashed in front of her eyes just from this, warm growing in her abdomen. Like the tremendous feeling appeared, it vanished quickly as he pulled his finger back. She wanted to whine at the loss. He knew it very well, biting her lip teasingly. Smug bastard.

“What if I want you to beg?” he hissed dangerously, provoking her by fondling her entrance, retreating when she rocked against him. That fucking bastard. That was what she got for her offer – his mischievousness, her proposition backfiring. His lips travelled down her neck and chest, stopping at her nipple, licking it. She dug her nails to his shoulders, desperately wanting him to stop and never ever stop. He ran his fingers over her clit incidentally – repeatedly – and she threw her head back in the pleasant tension his action sent through her body. “Hm?”

Vera tried to get a sentence together, but she freaking couldn’t, because he still stimulated her clit, not enough and too much and she couldn’t think. She licked her lips absently, attempting to come up with some witty answer. Vainly.

“Then I’ll beg,” she let out unwillingly and her reward was being filled with two fingers this time and her head spun.

He didn’t move though. Jesus Christ, move. He didn’t and she realized he waited. For god’s sake-

“Move,” she strained through her teeth and she saw him smile against the skin of her breast, placing a little kiss there. Oh my god. She gulped. “Please,” she whispered and it was like a magic, because he broke into agonizingly slow motion, but finding the exact right spot which made her hand drop and clench her fist, because-

“That,” she whined and like he knew precisely where she meant, he avoided it with his next move, the torturer he was. She hit the bed with her fist in frustration. “Matt, I swear—… please.”

He heard out her pleas, quickening the pace, adding a finger on the top of that and she thought she might explode, more, please, please escaping her lips without fully realizing it, the tension growing, growing…

“Jesus Christ, I forgot how gorgeous you are like this,” she heard his words, not understanding its meaning though, not caring, because she was so close. And then the dizzying sensation disappeared and she snapped her eyes open, shocked, horrified, until he replaced his fingers with his cock, sliding into her and how could she ever ever wanted anything else when she could have this.

His lips found hers, wet, swollen, like he was kissing her the whole time and she craved for the contact, overstimulated in so many places as he filled her and all she needed was few thrusts and a light touch on her clit and she was sent over the edge, the jolts of warm spreading through her body. She panted, fought for air, almost oblivious to his moans as he was overwhelmed by her orgasm as well, her muscles tightening around him.
With the marvellous feeling slowly flowing away, she regained her own awareness, offering him her body, guiding his hands over her bottom and thighs. “Any way you want to,” she reminded him softly and Matt stopped moving, gasped, indefinable sound on his lips as he bit the crook of her neck and shoulder painfully, surely leaving a mark.

“Get a licence for that mouth,” he mumbled, barely comprehensible and all she could do was to rock her hips against his, making him sink into her deeper in response. He gripped her hips firmly, twisting them slightly so she was partly on her side and he thrust into her hard, taking what she was offering so wholeheartedly. Only few moves and he rolled her over on her belly, the change of angle too much for him. She rode him through his second orgasm that night, delighted.

He pulled away, leaving her, falling to her side, face down. She was laying, cheek resting against a pillow, watching him. His lips wore a content smile, drops of sweat on his forehead, rapid breaths and closed eyes. She ran her fingers through his moist hair, pushing them aside. His smile widened, his fingers travelling down her spine, his face turning to her.

“You’re going to be my death,” he breathed, no malicious or angry note in his tone.

Vera grinned. “I love you too.”

He blinked, glassy eyes observing her for a long minute without a single word. Then he shifted, wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling close, giving her a lazy kiss before speaking in serious voice. “Thank you for waiting.”

And she knew what he meant. It made her want to laugh, because of course I waited, you moron, I love you, but she already said that. She had her own gratitude to express so she returned the kiss (they could be kissing all night if it depended on her, because he was right here, in her bed, and she missed this, she missed his lips, she missed him so badly) and whispered it to his mouth.

“Thank you for coming back to me.”

Chapter End Notes

So. My face is extremely red posting this. There is no excuse. It just… happened. You know, I could totally quit with Matt putting her down on the bed, love you, or something like that… yeah, I didn’t. It’s shameless smut. Shameless fluff. Shameless everything.
27) Turn off all the lights (…and let the morning come)

Chapter Notes

Enjoyed the fluff in last chapter? Good. Save the feeling. Also, this is way too long. Like about 6500 words long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment she was becoming aware of her surroundings and felt something heavy around her waist, she didn’t freak out. She was grateful for this extremely vivid dream not really fading away just yet, enjoying the warm feeling in her chest, the sensation of his proximity, his protective embrace, his breath tickling her neck, his lips kissing the side of her neck. It’s been a while since she dreamed about this, dreaming a good dream.

“Getting up already?” asked his voice, pleasantly hoarse like he used to have it in the morning, when they were waking up together.

Vera smiled goofily as he placed another kiss, this time to her hair. To her short hair. And she was indeed smiling, like I-have-control-over-my-lips-because-I-am-awake smiling. She felt his arm around her waist with her hand – an actual mass, weight and heat. She snapped her eyes open, breath caught in her throat.

“You okay?” he worried and she slid from his hug, rolling over, blinking furiously when she actually saw him. Her sight was shit without glasses and still slightly affected by the pepper spray, but that was definitely more scarred body than she remembered. The frown Matt had on his face was sure the same though. She made the most stupid thing she possibly could – she extended her hand, poking his bicep with her finger. And yep, he was very solid. And he came to her apartment yesterday night. He was right here. Oh my god.

She threw her arms around him, pushing herself closer and Matt chuckled silently, then breaking into full laughter.

“Did you just poke me?” She felt his body vibrating against hers and she couldn’t believe it. He was here, laughing. She would give him some witty response, but she was actually too astonished to speak. “Also did you think it was just a dream? I had no idea your dreams are so… exciting.”

“Shut up,” Vera mumbled to his shoulder, squeezing tighter and he returned the favour, inhaling deeply, chuckling once again.

“If you have any imagination you would like to share-“ Matt offered and she withdrew, smacking his back in the process. (Bare back – even though she eventually made herself to but her pyjama back on, the short one, no cold anymore, he settled only for his boxers – no hoodie or sweatpants protecting him from the sandpaper of her cotton sheets. “Believe me, this is the most comfortable place I slept lately. But maybe we should leave this kind of conversation for the morning.”)

“Shut up, Matthew. And kiss me, dammit.” He obliged with a grin, meeting her lips with sweetness and enthusiasm, fingers interweaving in her hair. (“I miss your long hair.” – “Yeah. That’s for the morning conversation as well.” It was a long story she wouldn’t mind not sharing ever in fact.)
“Anything else I can offer?” he teased her, devilish sparks in his eyes, eyebrow mockingly raised. Vera thought about it for a while as he stroked the back of her neck lightly.

“Yes. *Silence.*”

“Oh-huh. I thought you liked my voice.”

She would be irritated by his quick answers, but her lips spread into wide smile involuntarily, simply too happy for having him back to actually let him throw her off balance. She missed all parts of him, cockiness included.

“Truth,” she admitted.

“Then why silence?”

“Because your lips have better things to do.” And they did. Rolling on the top of her, he sunk them into hers, speaking only on rare occasion. ‘*I love you.*’ ‘*Still so gorgeous.*’ ‘*Missed you.*’

This time they took it slow – exploring any changes of their bodies they had missed the night before, remembering patterns and touches that felt the same and so different every time. He came first, taking care of her afterwards, his mouth indeed busy. She traced the lines of his body long after, honestly concerned about the amount of new scar tissue and the effects of obviously missing nutrition. She didn’t want to ask. She didn’t want to break their little piece of heaven, where troubles and darkness of past months couldn’t reach them. So she remained silent. Sadly, her stomach didn’t.

“You’re hungry,” he noted and really, she thought the whole apartment building could tell she was, because that stomach grumble was very loud. She wondered how he did it – he was basically a walking famine advertisement and his stomach sure wasn’t doing any weird sounds.

“I can’t deny that.”

“So… getting up?” he offered, one corner of his lip up.

Vera thought about it thoroughly – for what could be two seconds. “Nope.”

Matt laughed, surprised by her answer. “Your stomach would disagree.”

“Yeah, well, screw my stomach, I can’t get up.”

His eyes popped, shadow of worry covering his face. “What’s wrong? Is your head spinning or something? Hurts? Any double vision? Light hypersensitivity? Nausea?” he shot questions one after another and she almost didn’t catch them all. She felt a sting of guilt for worrying him. But he couldn’t know about her concussion right? Could he sense it somehow? A concussion? How did that work?


“I’m fine, Matt. *But.*” She framed the frowning face with her palms and he obediently let her to bring it closer to hers. “I have naked Matt Murdock in my bed and leaving that would be a very serious crime.”

His relief was literally palpable as his tensed body relaxed and he pecked her lips. “I would say I know a good attorney, but I rather didn’t, because I don’t mind staying here at all.” Vera grinned, content with his agreement. And her stomach ruined that moment again. He sighed. “However, your stomach might sue us, so…”
She whined and allowed him to pull her up to sitting position at least. To be honest, her head was spinning a little with the movement, but she would not tell him that. She reached for her glasses Matt had graciously placed on the nightstand last night and bit her lip at the full sight of his very naked figure trying to find his boxers and some sweatpants. She had no intention to help him. Nope. He found the items too soon. So she dressed up too, lending him her (and partially his) hoodie. He smiled contentedly when putting it on as if he met an old friend.

Vera walked to the kitchen and put kettle on. He followed her, ghosting her steps, standing just few inches behind. “Tea or coffee?”

His silence was the most puzzling answer. She closed the cupboard as she pulled out both and turned around to look at him. He wore a baffled expression. Vera had no idea why.

“Since when do you have coffee?” Matt asked, tilting his head to side and she would smile at the familiar gesture if she wasn’t startled by that question. That was exactly the kind of question she wouldn’t want to answer.

“Uhm… since I drink it?”

Matt seemed to be shocked. “You drink coffee?”

And what should she tell him? Other than the truth? It wasn’t like he wouldn’t know if she was lying. “Yeah. Some mornings were… rough,” she admitted, choosing tea for herself on purpose. She wanted it to feel like old times – when she didn’t need coffee with whiskey to function.

His jaw clenched, eyes saddening. She hated it. She wanted happy Matt – cheerful Matt with witty comments about her dreams. Passionate Matt and tender Matt, not… guilty Matt, because she was sure he would come knocking any minute.

“Anyway. Coffee?” she asked again, hoping he would let it pass.

He nodded, expressionless. He didn’t say a word, watching her in his own way as she moved around. He didn’t follow this time.

“Uhm… want milk? I know you don’t want any at café, but… just asking.”

Matt blinked, small smile reaching his lips. “Do I get a sticker on my coffee?”

Vera smiled at him back. “Sorry. Only for paper cups.”

“Shame. Milk in the fridge?”

The kettle clicked so she waved in its general direction. “Yeah. In the door, carton. Not exactly the kind of milk you would drink, but…”

She froze when Matt opened the fridge, glass clinking lightly as the bottle met with the loose shelf in its doors. She probably didn’t even bother to close the bottle properly last time she drank from it – which had been few days. In case he would ignore the sound, the unmistakable smell of whiskey was a deadly give-away. And her heart hammering violently in her chest was only a confirmation. Busted. She refused to face him as he pulled the milk out, closed the door with another clink and set the box on the counter.

“Had a party recently?” he asked quietly, voice so low she had to prick her ears to hear it despite the fact he was right behind her.
“Terri and Victor were here yesterday,” Vera offered innocently, telling the truth, but anticipating he wouldn’t buy what she was trying to sell. She would bet he could tell she was the one drinking it from scent around it or whatever.

“It’s opened for a while…” He gently touched her elbow, spinning her around. It wasn’t a reproach. And she knew without looking that his face screamed guilt.

“Some nights were rough too? And… did you ever tried coffee with whiskey? It’s surprisingly good, much better than plain Americano.”

“Vera…”

“It’s… seriously, Matt, it tastes great-“ Desperate lips shushed her suggestions and excuses before she could think them through. *I’m sorry,* she heard him without speaking and she did her best to express *Not your fault* silently as well. She wanted to erase that bitter taste of his kisses, wishing them to be sweet like in the morning, when she was still feeling only lightheaded by his presence. He sighed, resting his forehead against hers.

“Nina Larkin is here,” he whispered discontentedly and she jumped at his exclaim, snapping from whatever state of mind she was in. She sighed as well.

“Hoodie, please… maybe-uhm. Hide in the bedroom? Just in case she would want to come in?” Vera felt like a teenager hiding her boyfriend under her bed from her parents. Which wasn’t far from reality. “Coming!”

His lips actually twitched as he was leaving, calling out silently. “You never tell *me* that when you do.”

“It’s not like you don’t *know.* Shut up, Matthew!” she hissed at the overgrown child, hiding her delight at his little joke. It was kinda hard to keep up with the sudden changes in his mood – but she wasn’t better herself.

She opened the door the same time he closed the one to the bedroom. “Nina, hi!”

Nina was smiling hesitantly at her, two steaming mugs with a whipped cream caps. “Chocolate?”

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“So, how do you feel? You look… better,” Nina noted, sipping her drink. Vera invited her in, grateful for the sugar bomb. It only occurred to her Nina would see two mugs when they entered the kitchen, but one of them simply disappeared – together with the carton of milk. So they settled in the living room, Vera on the couch, Nina on the armchair, both enjoying their chocolate in silence, until Nina broke it.

Vera couldn’t help smiling. “I *feel* better,” she admitted and raised her eyes to Nina. She was watching Vera with thoughtful expression, curious gaze examining her like looking for something more behind Vera’s words. Vera had to stop herself from eyeing the bedroom door. She wasn’t sure whether she should let Nina think there was a hidden meaning or rather mislead her and talk about her physical condition. She decided the latter since she had no idea what Matt’s next move would be. Matthew Murdock obviously wasn’t back in town yet – he wouldn’t use her window if he was (or maybe he would, because he just loved using her window instead of her door). She might ruin his plans if she gave away he was in Hell’s Kitchen. “I mean… my eyes aren’t so sore anymore, it’s getting better each hour. Head’s okay.” She shrugged and sipped her chocolate as well.

Nina nodded, probing look never leaving though. “I’m sorry I couldn’t pick you up from hospital
“Nina, that’s okay. You’re not my— mother, Vera wanted to say, but she realized it might hurt Nina – she was treating her like her own. “-taxi driver. I don’t expect you to come whenever I call. You’re doing more than I deserve already.”

“Oh… mind if I ask something?”

Vera froze, startled by her suddenly hesitant tone. “Uhm… sure. Ask away.”

“You… you seem to cope well. Given all the things that happened lately – you actually seem to be happier. Any particular reason?” she asked, head tilted on side, corners of her lips slightly turned up.

Vera blinked in surprise. That she didn’t see coming.

Thinking about it, her happiness was probably inappropriate, given the circumstances. She would be coping a lot worse – she was coping quite badly, no matter what others read from her face, the façade she was trying to wear – but now Matt came back. Everything else suddenly felt so small and unimportant. But what should she tell Nina? Since she obviously couldn’t come out with the whole truth. Her mind raced as she tried to figure out the least evil.

“I… got a phone call. Not sure what it meant, it was a little cryptic, but… I think it was definitely good news,” she said eventually and Nina’s eyebrow raised, face mixture of wonder and amusement. “Alright. I won’t pry. Whatever it was, it made you smile with honesty after a long time. Young love…”

Vera felt the blush reaching cheeks, knowing Nina read between the lines. Guilt stung her on her aunt’s words though – she didn’t know Nina saw through her mask as well. She had no idea how to react.

“Anyway. I let you rest, you still look a little tired and I’m sure it was the doctor’s orders as well. If you feel like it, stop by anytime – even though, maybe let me know first. Thao is… Thao. But it’s getting better, gradually with the weather. So… don’t be a stranger, hm?” Nina offered kindly as she stood up and Vera couldn’t help her lips twitching at the mention of Nina’s husband. Nina took both glass mugs and made her way to the door.

“Thank you for coming, Nina. It was really nice of you. And the chocolate. It was perfect as always.” Truth to be told, Vera was baffled Nina decided to leave so quickly – maybe she never intended to stay for long, maybe she felt Vera’s slight impatience. Sure, Vera was pleased by her visit, but… but. Matt in her bedroom dammit.

“I’m glad you realized marshmallows and hot chocolate are a perfect match. Bye.” She winked at Vera and disappeared down the hall. Vera sighed and closed the door. She turned around to head back– she almost collided with a naked torso, patchwork of scars. She jumped involuntarily, hand shooting up to her heart.

“Seriously, Matt?! Don’t do that!” she complained, not really outraged by his ninja appearances. She was just glad he did appear.

Instead of some witty answer, she got a murmured apology. She snapped her head up in surprise, almost disappointed by his reaction. His face was a miserable grimace and she had no idea why. “You okay?” he wanted to know, carefully taking the hand on her chest to his.

Oh. Oh. He worried about her. Because he heard about the hospital. About her head and eyes, if he
wasn’t sure before. And about her brooding (even though he kinda knew about that already, whiskey and all that).

“I’m fine,” Vera reassured him, pecking him on his cheek. Sad smile was her reward. She returned the squeeze of his hand and led him back to the living space – he obediently followed, quiet light steps against her unsure.

Vera found his mug in the sink and decided not to think about how the hell he managed to get it there already. Instead, she led him to the couch, snuggling to his side. They weren’t talking. He just played with her hair as she leaned her head against his bare shoulder. She blinked as she realized he was probably cold, sitting up straight. His hand immediately left her hair.

“Sorry. Hoodie?”

“If it’s not too much trouble…” She rolled her eyes and stripped, giving it to him and he quickly slid in, not bothering with the zipper. “Come here.”

She returned to her spot, but Matt pushed slightly, shifting their positions – she laid her head to his lap, looking up to his face, now smiling fractionally. They fell to silence again, Matt continuing his mission of mapping her scalp with his light touch. She closed her eyes, not minding postponing the inevitable conversation for later.

“…you didn’t tell her I’m coming back,” he whispered, no real emotion in his voice. Maybe hints of surprise if she searched hard enough.

Vera shrugged. “I don’t know what your game is. You just came back,” she said simply.

“You think I’m leaving again?” Vera practically heard him frown, traces of betrayal in his tone making her snap her eyes open. Sad was the only way to describe his expression. It never occurred to her until he said it. What if he was leaving?!

“Are you?” she breathed out, throat suddenly tight, lump growing in it. No, no, no. She just got him back! But at what cost? How did he even get here? Stick let him go? Did they win whatever war they were fighting?

He tensed, muscles in his jaw tightening. “I can’t- I can’t leave Hell’s Kitchen, never again, but I can leave you alone. If you want me to.” His last words sounded forced.

Her eyes went wide, something heavy falling on her chest. “What?” she choked out, leaving her comfortable spot in his lap as she sat up sharply. What the hell?! How did that even- “I don’t! Why-”

“Then I’ll stay,” he said and gently pulled her back, kissing her forehead.

She relaxed, trying to calm down her heart. Jesus. He would give her a heart attack. What was he thinking? “You better.”

Vera’s mind wandered. Matt was with her and it was amazing, but they both knew something was hanging in the air and it couldn’t be ignored much longer. And his return wasn’t as simple as kissing her senseless. There were things to do. Other people to meet. She was blessed he visited her before she could learn about his homecoming from anyone else.

“I just… I’m not sure what are you doing here. Matt Murdock didn’t return officially yet. I get it – no I actually don’t, because I know I can never imagine what you’ve been through out there – I’m… I’m thrilled you came to me, I’m so happy I can’t even express it. But… I guess you probably need some time to… get back to normal. No matter how abnormal your normal is. Don’t you?” She
couldn’t find the courage to face him when saying it.

His body going rigid under head was her only answer. Maybe it was a wrong thing to say. “I’m sorry. That was-I didn’t mean to pry or something. I know I don’t underst-“

Light touch of his index finger on her lip shushed her. She cautiously turned her head to face him. He seemed to be fighting with something and the struggle made her chest ache. Then his lips formed a small smile.

“You understand more than you should.” Vera felt the but coming. She never like when the but was coming. Plus his face was pure guilt and regret now. “But… you deserve to know. I-“ He sighed and Vera touched his cheek lightly, reassuring him whatever he wanted to say, she would try to accept. He winced at her touch like he didn’t expect it. “I’m in town for a few days already.”

And that stung. She felt her breath being knocked out from her lungs, her eyes slowly filling with tears, her hand falling from his face. Matt was in town for days. And he didn’t- she was still alone, wondering whether he was in Cambodia or other end of the world, if he was even still alive. And he-

Vera knew she was being irrational. After all, she did offer him her understanding with what he must have been coming through. Whatever reason he had not to visit her, it was probably a good one and she shouldn’t reproached him. It didn’t mean it didn’t hurt though. She blinked away her tears, unable to look at him. She examined the scars on his side, painful reminder she had no right to feel offended.

“Uhm. Talked to Foggy yet?” she asked, ignoring her voice breaking on the last word.

“No.”

“Oh.” That was surprising. She had to stop herself from smiling with satisfaction. That would be mean. “Claire?”

He sighed in resignation, wiping away the tears that somehow escaped her eyes without her notice. “No. I wanted to talk to you first. I’m sorry it took so long. I… had few things I had to take care of. And you had enough on you plate too, you were in the hospital-“

That made her head snapped at him. “You knew.” And of course he knew. It wasn’t Nina who gave it away. He didn’t sense her concussion. He was in town and he knew and he probably didn’t want to overwhelm her. Which… was kinda a Matt thing to do. In fact she would probably think she was going insane and she was just hearing voices, so she couldn’t really reproach him.

The warm feeling spreading around her heart as he said he wanted to talk to her first slowly replaced the unpleasant sensation of betrayal.

“And… I wasn’t sure how you would react-“

“And how exactly you thought I would react to finally getting you back, Matt?” she demanded, sceptical.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was gone… and last time we saw each other, I got you-“ he inhaled sharply, not finishing his sentence and again, she thought about Matt things. Last time we saw each other, I got you impaled on a katana.

“Okay. I get that. But I thought I established I love you nevertheless when we spoke few days after.” She saved her breath and didn’t explain him it wasn’t his fault; a) it would be like talking to a brick wall and b) it pretty much was, for once.
Matt chuckled humourlessly. “Yeah, because you’re crazy.”

“What else is new… in case you didn’t notice, I missed you. I love you. Now stop brooding and kiss me,” she ordered and watched his expression changing as his eyebrows shot up. “I mean… I mean if you want to.”

He laughed, this time honestly, and brought his lips to hers, obviously on board with her idea of spending their time. They deserved something nice after the heavy conversation. And that wasn’t the worst one that waited for them. At that thought, she caught his face in her hands with intention never letting him go just to avoid more talking.

He withdrew slightly after what could be seconds or hours. “I always do, silly.”

Vera smiled goofily and met his lips again.

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“So. I spilled one dark secret. It’s your turn. What’s up with the hair?” Matt complained as they were sitting at the dining table, tea and cookies (because she had nothing better at home at that moment) in front of them. Matt barely ate – she wondered whether it was because his stomach being unable to contain more after starving for god knows how long or because he simply didn’t like them – he refused to let her go shopping though, so she chased the thought away.

Her heart stopped at his question. Not yet. Please. Vera knew he would be angry. He would be pissed off as hell and that didn’t even cover it. There was no gentle way to put it. And for now, he was here, relatively calm, almost sunshine and rainbows and once she let the cat out of the bag, a storm would come.

“Can you please, please, choose something else? Like, I don’t know, my love life?” she pleaded, trying to keep her tone light.

His eyebrow shot up. “Your love life?”

“Yes! There was none! Your turn!”

“Vera. What could be possibly so terrible about having your hair cut that you don’t want to tell me?” he pried and she whined internally. You have no idea.

“Seriously, Matt. Anything else.”

He frowned so hard she thought his face might actually stay that way forever. “Alright. Your choice. You have a scar on your back.”

And holy shit, Vera so should have seen this coming. Of course he noticed. How could he not to? Yet, she tried to play it off. “The katana-“ she started weakly and he shook his head discontentedly.

“No. On the other side.” His gaze was burning right into her eyes and Vera felt herself panicking.; the fact he could tell that was making her panic grow in enormous measures. But it was time, wasn’t it? Honeymoon was over.

“Maybe… maybe move to the couch?” she offered quietly and Matt nodded, face already palling in anticipation. Oh, he would not like what she was about to say. He followed her to the couch, sitting at her side. She toyed with his fingers, gathering the courage to start.

“Okay. Uhm. Just… try not to get mad, okay? Or freak out or something-“
“Little late for that,” he deadpanned and she gulped, flickering to his face before returning to examining their intertwined fingers. *Squeeze and lose the grip. Tip of each finger connecting with his, interweave. Thumb running over the back of his hand...*

“Right. So... it’s... complicated. Happened about less than three months after you had to leave. After the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen left.” Vera already felt his body tensing at her exclaim. She needed to go slow. Baby steps. *Squeeze and loosen, caress his knuckles... ‘There were some... let’s just say you were missed. And some people were hoping to get you back here and they had... a very specific idea of what it required.’*

“Vera, you’re not making any sense,” Matt noted softly, changing his attitude from demanding answers to you can tell me anything. Which was even worse.

“The Devil Worshippers,” she blurted out and his hand froze, his fingers no longer compliant with her games.

“The Devil... the Devil Worshippers,” he repeated dully and she would almost believe him he didn’t know what she was talking about. Except he knew.

“Oh and in case you’re wondering, I know you let Terri spy on them or whatever. I am very displeased by the fact you didn’t share with me by the way. So remember that.”

Matt didn’t seem to feel guilty. “I didn’t want you to get hurt-“ She wanted to comment but he was faster. “-and Terri wasn’t in any danger. She was willing to eavesdrop but nothing else. She was safe enough.”

Vera huffed. “Then I could have done it too, you know. I’m not reckless.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes!” she cried out, questioning her answer when she came over what she was about to tell him. “Anyway. It wasn’t Terri who told me. And luckily enough, they didn’t even make it to the papers until being taken down. I heard about their practices from Brett.”

He blinked in surprise. “Brett? As in Brett Mahoney?”

“Yep. He contacted me, wanted to know if I heard from you lately.” That was good. Involving Brett might mollify him. Matt liked Brett and he trusted him. “He’s not stupid. He can put two and two together. It was no use denying that the Devil and I are... connected.”

Matt sighed, hand running down his face, looking tired already. *Oh, Matt. “Okay. Go on.”*

“I had to disappoint him. I haven’t. So he told me about them. Their activities. The mostly good ones and the terrible ones. They... they crucified people, Matt. Three in two weeks. In your name. They later confessed they were hoping to bring you back from wherever you left to. They were ruining your legacy and people were getting hurt. Brett wanted me to let him know if you contact me. I mean, the Devil, obviously.”

Matt didn’t react. He waited. But his skin visibly paled.

“So... when I saw some girl few days after, a girl who had a badge with *In Devil We Trust* and looked kinda like a weirdo, I obviously asked her about it. And... the scar. It’s from her brother. They were both members.”

“They hurt you,” he whispered weakly, eyes squeezing shut. He was going to be so, so mad when
she would tell him.

She took a deep breath. “I let them.”

His eyes snapped open, pain and horror in them. His hand gripped hers tightly, painfully, making her wince. He didn’t seem to notice. “Come again?”

“I let them. The scar… did you noticed how does it look- feel like?” Vera asked cautiously, waiting for his nod. To her surprise, he slowly reached her back, fingers tracing the lines with tender touch which contrasted with his rigid posture. He frowned, apparently not recognizing it. She cleared her throat, working against the lump in it. The bombshell was about to drop in 3, 2, 1… “It’s a pentagram, Matt. It’s a brand. It stands for their membership.”

Matt gasped, his hand retreating as if he got burned. He jumped from the couch, hands running through his hair, watching her incredulously, with shock, with horror, with… disgust. He started pacing, suddenly unable to turn in her direction. It hurt. A lot. From everything she expected, disgust wasn’t one of those things. **Why disgust?**

“How- how could you-” he gaged, gesturing with his hand like he didn’t even wanted her to answer. “You told me you knew what they were doing. And you joined them?” He looked like he wanted to throw up and she finally realized what conclusion he came to.

For real?!

“Excuse me?! Do you really think I would want to be part of that?” she raised her voice, insulted and hurt. She jerked to her feet as well.

Matt gave her a completely baffled look, desperate with confusion. “You just said that, Vera!”

“No, I didn’t. I said it’s a mark of membership. I never said I wanted to join them and participate in- that.”

He stopped dead in tracks, finally facing her. “Did-did they somehow force you?”

Vera whined, not, not, **not** wanting to answer that. She wished she could say yes. He would accepted it, be a little angry, maybe even with himself. But that would be a lie and he would know and even if he didn’t, he would find out eventually. He crossed the distance between them slowly and took her hands in his gingerly.

“Vera, it’s okay. You can tell me. Did they force you? Threatened you?” he demanded, his voice so soft out of blue that she had to blink away her tears. Jesus. She was going to break his heart.

“No.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the police were desperate, I could tell from what Brett said. They never caught them red-handed. They always only found the… aftermath. I was saved by the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen multiple times. I owed him a lot – the trial with Collins made it to the papers so people who wanted to know, knew. I was a perfect candidate.”

Matt stared at her, his grip slowly loosening. He didn’t ask further. He waited for her to say it, but he already understood – it was written all over his face. Fear. Disappointment. Guilt. Terror.

“I was a perfect candidate, because they could trust me I meant it. I offered the police to infiltrate
them.”

The quiet words were hanging in the air, filling the atmosphere like a suffocating gas. Matt’s hands dropped and he closed his eyes, expression suddenly unreadable. Vera was afraid to speak. He was on the edge. She couldn’t even breathe in, scared it would irritate him – he was about to snap any second, that was for sure.

The silence prolonged. Unlike him, Vera had to inhale, her lung capacity obviously not as good as his. He snapped his eyes open at the sound and the look in them startled her. She couldn’t even describe it. It was a dead glare. Not murderous, maybe hateful, but mostly… empty. Without saying another word, he headed to the bedroom and Vera felt like she took roots in the floor, dully staring at place he was just seconds ago. She heard quiet rustling and she unfroze, following him. She was surprised to find him stripping her borrowed clothes.

“Matt?” What was he- he reached for his own pants, put them on, together with his shoes. Oh. Oh, shit. “Matt, please, talk to me.”

He didn’t react. Didn’t look up in her direction, didn’t growl or mumble anything, didn’t say a word. He didn’t even clench his fists at her words, which was something she would expect him to do. No. He absolutely ignored her presence. And that scared her. Her heart was painfully fighting its way out of her chest and she was positive he was well-aware. Vera took a step closer to him, but he reached for his undershirt, extending their distance once again. It was like a stab to her side. And she would know how that feels.

“Matt. Listen to me. I know you’re angry-“ This time, he at least made some noise in the back of his throat and she counted that as a victory. She continued. “I know it was a dumb thing to do, but I was their best shot.” He furiously pulled the shirt on, straightening it with more force than necessary, walking to the living room, heading to the window. She sighed and followed him again. “They did horrible things and they needed to be stopped. I managed to gain their trust and the police took them down. I have a scar, yes, but it was a small price to pay. I couldn’t really get hurt-“

And that was a huge misstep. The levee broke. He spun around to face her, their bodies almost colliding as she was just a step behind him. The glare he gave her knocked the air from her lungs. He wasn’t mad. He wasn’t furious. He was- he was-

“You couldn’t really- are you listening to yourself?! Are you FUCKING KIDDING ME?!” he yelled, his chest rising with heavy breaths. She never ever heard him yell. Not like this. Once when she was tied and shot, and he was threatening the man who had a gun at her head, yes, but this was a whole new level. Also, he rarely swore like that. The combination was terrifying. Vera subconsciously took a quick step backwards, for the first time truly afraid of him.

“You-“ he turned around like he couldn’t stand seeing her, which was quite ironic. “Have you thought of me?” he shot out an unexpected question and Vera just gaped as big accusing eyes pierced her. “Have you?!”

She couldn’t let out a single word.

Matt laughed hysterically. “Let me tell you something, Vera,” he spit her name out and she felt tears filling her eyes at his harsh tone. He said her name as if it was a curse. “Last time I was with you, I witnessed a katana puncturing your lung, unable to do a fucking thing about it and the last sound I heard before I passed out was you choking on your blood. I woke up hours later, only to have your t-shirt thrown to my face, soaked with your blood, mostly dried so I could be sure it was too late for me to come back and help you.”
Vera squeezed her eyes shut, gaging, chest aching for a completely different reason than a reminder of her pain back then. *Jesus Christ*. It never occurred to her what it had to be like for him. And what they did to him…. She wanted to say something, but she couldn’t find the right words.

“Then I found out that by some *freaking miracle* I still don’t understand, you were still alive. I literally told you I’m leaving my heart here. You know what I’ve been through? You have *no idea*. One day of it would be enough to give you nightmares for the rest of your life.”

“I’m sorry,” she finally choked out, tears streaming down her face, approaching him so she could do *something*. Take his hand, hug him, kiss him, *anything*. Matt mirrored her move, keeping the distance as if they were magnets facing each other the same pole. Something icy clenched her heart, twisting her insides painfully.

He chuckled darkly. “Yeah, you’re sorry, imagine. People all around me crying in pain, dying. You know why I survived? I survived because I had a reason to. I didn’t know if I ever came back. If I got lucky enough and I did, I couldn’t know if you would still want me, hell, I wasn’t sure if you would be in New York. But the idea of you living here against all odds… You didn’t die, Vera, and I thanked God for that every single day.”

She covered her mouth as she saw his rage fading away, tears finding a way to his face as well. The rage was replaced by something that could only be betrayal.

“I left my heart here and I was hoping you would take better care of it. Can you imagine if I came back and you were *dead*? And I would find out that once again, you would be dead *because of me*? Because of the mess I’ve made and didn’t clean up before leaving?” He wasn’t longer loud, in contrary, the last words were more like whispers, silent movements of his trembling lips. “Have you thought of that?”

Vera furiously shook her head, desperately looking for something to hold on as each of his words stung another needle to her insides. She couldn’t find strength to stop him, to protest it was still broad daylight, when he climbed out of her window, not bothering to put the mask on. She stood in the middle of her living room, haunted by his words, accusations and guilt in his glare. Her shaking hand wiped away her tears uselessly as others replaced them immediately, until her knees finally gave up and she sunk to the floor.

Vera didn’t get up for until her phone rang.

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Alternative chapter title – Dialogue heavy no.1. I could have split it before the hair question, but it felt wrong. Dammit, it’s too freaking long.*

*Title from Florence and The Machine – Over the love*
I don’t like them fighting. But I really enjoyed writing this chapter, because MATT IS BACK. And I love drama :D You got that already, right?
Brett Mahoney was having a good day. If not good, at least not bad. The night shift was relatively calm, no muggings, no break-ins, no assaults – he hoped there were none and not that anyone wasn’t alert enough to report one.

It was only around nine p.m. when he got a call – some drunk kids had been too loud, messing around after they were probably forced to leave Josie’s bar. Brett didn’t like the place, it was usually filled with… well, odd bods, drunks and ex-cons and the list of weirdoes included Foggy Nelson (and he happen to know that ever since Murdock made a trip he still hadn’t returned from, Nelson was definitely a regular there). Josie was a scary woman though and she rarely let something really bad happen in her bar – she was intimidating enough to muscle idiots out before they managed to start a fight inside.

There were three officers at the precinct when Brett picked up the phone – Jeggers, Vildow and himself. He wasn’t a chauvinist, but Jeggers was a freaking scrag who was better to left to paperwork and Vildow… Vildow really should have retired years ago. Which only left him one option. With a sigh, he grabbed the car keys and headed to the reported address.

They were four skinny kids who couldn’t hold their liquor, one of them already throwing up by the time Brett got there. The police lights – together with rattle of the handcuffs he offered them in case they didn’t want to shut up and go home – were enough to scare them away. Each of them walked (or rather stumbled) different direction and Brett silently prayed for them not to jump under a car. That would be much more work for him.

He sighed, turning around to head back to his service car, when he heard a rough voice.

“Sergeant.”

Brett instinctively reached for his gun, spinning around to the sound, aiming at nothing. “Who the hell is there?!” he demanded, not admitting he was startled by the sudden noise. He scanned his surroundings, lights from his car illuminating the alley in red and blue. There was not a single person. Was he getting crazy? He should have drunk the third coffee no matter it was crap…

“Sergeant,” the voice repeated and Brett looked up this time, finding a shadow of a crumpled figure on a fire escape twelve feet in front of him. As the red light passed over it, Brett would swear he saw horns on the stranger’s head. He blinked, chasing away the ridiculous thought, aiming his gun at him.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he asked, unsure whether he should put his weapon back to his holster. Just because he didn’t see the guy properly it didn’t mean he was dangerous – it didn’t mean the opposite either though. “Show yourself.”

The figure jumped down with a surprising grace, standing up straight, head bent down slightly. Brett, seeing him better now, was shocked. He was wearing some freaky red-black costume (spandex?), leg holster attached to his thigh and he had a helmet – with fucking horns. It was the weirdest cosplay costume of Satan Brett had ever seen. And it was kinda terrifying that he had something to compare to.
“Who the heck are you?” he spitted out, gun still in his hands, never putting it down. The stranger didn’t approach him, only raised his hands in *I’m giving up* gesture. Brett allowed himself to relax a little.

“Not the bad guy. I thought we established that when I handed you Wilson Fisk,” the man exclaimed solemnly and sudden realization made Brett gasp and finally lower his weapon.

‘*When I handed you Wilson Fisk.*’ The billy clubs in his holster. Kinky costume of the Devil. Voice that sounded too familiar. Because he heard it before – when he got beat up (not much, considering the amount of broken bones the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen usually left behind) and when he was indeed arresting a man who tried to corrupt half of the city. Including Brett’s friends and colleagues.

“Holy shit. It’s you,” was all he managed to choke out intelligently.

The Devil lowered his hands, giving a small nod. “Yes. I need to talk to you.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Brett blurted out, offended by the fact the so-called hero (and Brett hated himself for being actually kinda fond of him) just left *his city* in the lurch and disappeared to the wind. For what? Getting a new costume?

The man tensed. Then: “Gone. I had no other choice than leaving…. But I heard you did some pretty dangerous stuff while I was gone.”

The tone he was speaking made Brett’s hair stand on its ends. He subconsciously tightened his grip on the gun once again. The man sounded dangerous. Threating.

“Meaning?” he asked cautiously.

The Devil took a step closer, snarling. “Veronica Machackova. Ring a bell, Sergeant Mahoney?”

Brett froze, fear actually licking his soul. He swallowed against the lump in his throat, pulse loud in his ears. It was no secret that the Devil was fixated (and it bordered on obsession, really) on the young woman – that was the reason Brett contacted her when the Devil worshipping got out of hand after all. The man would punish anyone who would lay a hand on her – Brett could recall very vividly how his former colleague ended up after kidnapping and hurting her. Collins was partially crippled for the rest of his life.

And now it was Brett facing the Devil after he endangered Vera; he put her in the front line when taking down a ring of criminals, bunch of kids really, but criminals and dangerous freaks nevertheless. It didn’t matter it was for a good cause and it was more her doing than his – she ended up hurt and no one felt more sorry for it than Brett. They hadn’t expected the evening to turn out like that.

“Yeah, it does,” he tried to remain calm, hoping the Devil could be reasoned with. Which was probably a fool’s hope. “Believe me, I wouldn’t choose her if I had a better option.” The man didn’t react, only tilted his head to side, like he was listening to something only his sensitive ears could hear. “She volunteered,” Brett added and he could immediately tell it was a mistake, because the man’s mouth twisted in ugly grimace.

“That doesn’t surprise me, Sergeant. Did you at least made sure she was safe?” he demanded, voice still dangerous, more like a nonhuman growling that sent shivers of fear down Brett’s spine.

That, he could confirm. “Yes. We made everything we could. That’s why we could step in as soon as it took the unexpected turn.”
And shit he just poured gasoline on the fire. The Devil’s shoulders straightened, his figure looking bigger than before. “What do you mean, unexpected turn?” he thundered and Brett actually winced.

And he was getting really confused. Obviously, the Devil was back in town and learnt about what happened during his absence – most likely from Vera herself (and really, Brett didn’t feel good about their weird connection, he wouldn’t get less obsessed with her if she kept encouraging him). The man knew about her involvement and he was pissed off (it was hard to tell which direction his anger was directed most intensively). So how the hell he seemed honestly confused and didn’t understand what Brett was talking about?

Unless… he did talk to Vera. And she kept details for herself. Oh man, oh fuck, Brett was in so much trouble. He lost his awareness for one second and the Devil was right in front of him, hissing into his face. “What are you talking about?”

Before Brett could raise his gun, it was knocked out of his hand, wrist twisted and he was pushed against a wall, face on the cold surface, vainly struggling to free himself. Holy shit, that guy was strong. And fast.

“Tell me,” ordered the voice, not permitting any objections. Brett was a cop for god’s sake! He would not let some ass-

He hissed when the turn of his wrist became more painful. Fuck. “Okay, okay. Jesus, man. I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?!”

“Would you be so kind and let my hand go so we could actually talk?” Brett complained, feeling really uncomfortable in that position. Incomprehensible grumble in his ear and he was free. Brett massaged the wrist, more embarrassed than in pain. One guy. One shitty guy and he overpowered him so easily. Then again, he overpowered most of people – often in very unfair numbers.

“I’m waiting.”

“She was gathering information – became a member, gaining their trust. We knew they were about to sacrifice another criminal, the period was too long without any body popping out…. She let us know about the upcoming ritual, giving us the address and everything. We wired her so we knew what was happening in there, demanding her to say something as often as she could, ready to step in and caught them red-handed. We didn’t expect them to change their M.O.”

He made a pause and he could tell the Devil was getting impatient but also was morbidly curious. “Change how?”

Brett sighed. “Trust me, no one feels sorry for it more than I do. She’s a good kid, alright? They told us once we arrested them – they believed that their sacrifices weren’t working so they… they thought they should somehow return the gift what you gave people or whatever. That she was really important. We were listening to the weird mumbling and whatever shit they believed in, so we didn’t panic when she didn’t talk for a while, because no one really did. The moment we realized she was about to be the next victim.”

His back was suddenly pinned to a wall, one arm holding him on place, second forearm crushing his windpipe. He gasped for air uselessly, meeting only resistance. He tried harder, blood roaring in his ears, real fear clouding his mind as he couldn’t took a single breath in.

The glassy eyes of his helmet reflected his desperate face as the Devil was only inch from him. “Are
you telling me,” the man strained through his teeth, voice trembling with suppressed rage. (Suppressed? Brett was fucking hovering in the air, having his throat being crushed. There was more of his anger held inside?) “That she almost got crucified?”

The edges of his vision were getting blurry, head spinning. He wanted to say yes or not really, but he couldn’t let out a single word, dizziness taking over him. His feet hit the ground unexpectedly and he had to steady himself, supporting onto the wall. He finally gasped for air successfully, almost crying in relief as the oxygen filled his lungs, his vision becoming sharp again.

The Devil was still there, just a step away from him, fists in gloves clenched so hard his hands were shaking with the power. Brett slowly raised his head, only to meet the visible half of his face in ugly grimace. He was terrifying, like an angel of vengeance. The costume didn’t look ridiculous all of sudden.

“You were saying?” the man growled and Brett massaged his throat before he found strength to speak. His voice was more like gasp than an actual voice.

“We-we- rushed in, ok-okay?” He fought for another air, coughing. “They- already cut some of- her hair and- put the crown on. She was- out cold, rohypnol- as usual, half-naked. That was-”

Brett didn’t expect the sharp pain shooting to his jaw, the crack echoing in his skull and the darkness in front of his eyes. He stumbled backwards from the brutal blow, colliding with the wall once again, hand covering the injured place. And fuck if that didn’t hurt like a bitch.

He distantly heard the voice speak up for the last time. “You do something like this again and I’ll break more than your jaw.”

“I’ll break more than your jaw.

Suddenly everything got crystal clear, making perfect sense. Vera being saved from attempted rape. It wasn’t some idiot playing a vigilante – not anyone new at least – it was the Devil, making a dramatic entrance. He definitely left one hell of an impression. He made sure he wouldn’t be seen at the same time though; Brett didn’t bother trying to find a reason in that action.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Brett managed to mumble, each word vibrating in his broken mandible, blood mixing with saliva in his mouth. The Devil, walking away slowly, stopped in his tracks, not turning around. “It was you who beat that guy almost to death.”

Brett was sure of it. The amount of broken bones. Torn tendons. The person who roughed him up must have been experienced, knowing what he was doing. And he was very, very angry. Of course it was this lunatic.

The Devil didn’t answer, no doubt knowing what Brett was talking about. The silence was the best confirmation. He took several steps and jumped back on the fire escape, disappearing, leaving Brett alone to pick up his weapon and dignity. He had to spit out the blood. Jesus. His jaw throbbed with pain. He needed to go to the hospital. He had no idea what to tell them though – despite the Devil being a nutjob, Brett kinda deserved that one and he didn’t want to report this. Shit. Where that guy came, he only brought trouble. And right now, he was out of his mind – Brett expected a lot of criminals beat up to pulp that night.

A terrible thought struck him and he tried to chase it away immediately. No, he wouldn’t do that. That would be crazy.... But then again, the Devil was a little crazy, wasn’t he? Brett didn’t imagine he was thinking clearly at the moment, he seemed furious. Despite the tiny odds, he took his phone and before dialling 911 – he couldn’t drive in his condition – he called a number he saved only
“Macháčková,” the voice on the other end of the line answered reluctantly, probably disturbed by the fact someone was bothering her at that hour.

“Hey, Vera, it’s Brett. Mahoney.” He hoped she could understand him, he tried his best despite the pain.

Surprised gasp. “Oh. Sergeant. I mean, Brett. What’s going on? Is everything okay?” She sounded a little on edge by herself and Brett could only assume her own conversation with the Devil about her… activities was recent, didn’t go well either and she was disconcerted by it, the memory still raw.

“I just had a talk with your friend – he seemed quite angry if the fact my jaw is probably broken is anything to go by. Look out, okay? He was pretty pissed off. Lock the- windows or whatever.”

Shocked silence lasted for long seconds. “Oh my god. What happened? Did- did he- he broke your jaw?!”

“I think so. Next time I would appreciate a warning.”

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea he would- Jesus Christ,” she whispered to the phone, obviously absolutely taken aback and horrified, regret easily heard in each word. Brett almost felt sorry for her. It wasn’t like she was responsible for the guy. “What… what did you tell him?” she asked hesitantly, voice filled with something that could only mean fear, which only confirmed his suspicion about her secrecy.

“The truth. You’ve told him but obviously haven’t shared details, have you?” Dammit, his jaw really, really hurt. But he needed to warn her. “Look, I just wanted to let you know. He’s angry and I don’t know, he might be heading your way…”

She sighed. “I don’t think he would hurt me. I’m really sorry, Sergeant. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Brett snorted, delighted at the fact that didn’t hurt. “Not really. Be careful.” He ended the call, content he fulfilled his duty and then he asked an ambulance.

After being taken care of, he visited the room of Bryan Nickel. At the end, he had to admit he got lucky that he only got away with one broken bone. It still hurt like a bitch though.

Chapter End Notes

I really do love Brett! He is a poor precious baby and I’m sending him my most sincere apologies.
By the way, Matt is totally pissed off because of the hair thing, that’s the main reason. The rest? Details. A+ for his anger/fear management.

And really, frimousse? Was the comment that much of a hint? (sending you a virtual cookie *pouting*)
The phone call Vera got took her breath away. She had been honestly shocked when she heard Brett’s voice in the phone, checking the ID to actually find out it was him, but by the time he told her why he was calling, she was ready to pinch herself to make sure it was real. Matt had visited the officer of law slash his friend. And he had asked about the Devil Worshippers. And he had also broken Brett’s jaw, apparently.

No doprdele.

Vera stood frozen for several moments, her brain slowly rebooting after the shock. Well. What now? Obviously, there had to be something she could do, if not helping Brett – it was too late for fixing that –, then helping to prevent something similar happening to anyone else. Even though Vera had no idea how and if there was anyone else who was in danger of being on the receiving end of Matt’s affection right now. She doubted it was her though.

The only thing she could think of – as lame as it was – was to talk to him. She had no clue what she would tell him, but she needed to find him first anyway. She needed to go to his place. It was her first option. Except, well. She fucking didn’t know where his place was. She never had been in Matt’s apartment. But she knew few people who had.

Vera was left with three options here – and she choose the one she hoped would be least painful. A person who would probably ask least questions. With no real plan, she dialled.

“Vera? You okay?” the familiar female voice asked and Vera turned her gaze up, suppressing slightly hysterical laugh. ‘Okay’ wasn’t exactly the word she would use right now.

“Hey, Claire…”

Claire indeed didn’t ask many questions. She sounded bewildered, sure, but she seemed to have a moment of clarity, judging by her, oh, right, and honestly seemed to be more taken aback by the fact Vera had never been to Matt’s apartment than Vera’s weird request. Vera didn’t want to bother with visiting Claire and taking a key Matt’s personal nurse surely had, only learning the address, hoping Matt would let her in eventually.

Yeah, about that.

She got lucky – she didn’t even had to wait in front of the apartment building for too long, someone else letting her in; she secretly hoped Matt didn’t run on her during that short time period. She walked up to the top floor (any other day, she might giggle at it, Matt simply liked being at height, close to the rooftops, didn’t he – but she really didn’t), knocking at 6A, praying wordlessly.

Once. Twice. Three times. Vera sighed, leaning to the door. She had no doubt he heard her – if he was in – but she tried again anyway.

“Matt. Come on. Please, can we talk?” she called out, keeping her voice rather down, but not too low in case he was enchanted in… well. Anything. Breaking things. Or something. He would probably punch and break things, right? She sighed again. ”Matt-“
Vera jumped when she actually heard the lock opening, taking a deliberate step back. That was
easier than she- the door opened. And there was a guy. A blond guy, bearded, with bright gleaming
seeing eyes and a little surprised expression. He offered her a smile while Vera’s heart missed a beat.
Oh shit. Oh shit, of course. It was too easy, wasn’t it?

“I’m… I’m so sorry. So sorry,” she blurted out. His smile widened. Oh crap. “I… I think I got a
wrong apartment,” she explained, already turning away, her mind racing. Claire had said top floor,
right? And she had said-

“Oh shit. Oh shit, of course. It was too easy, wasn’t it?”

“I’m Danny, hi.” He raised his hand in awkward an wave as if it was the most natural thing in the
world. Vera… did not understand. Had she met this guy? She quickly checked him over – he wore a
rather loose shirt (was that even a shirt?) and too short pants and- he was barefoot? She was pretty
sure she would remember him. Right? But there was something familiar about him, something she
could put her finger on.

“Hi… Danny,” she waved back hesitantly. “I’m sorry, do I… do I know you? You actually- never
mind. How do you know my name again?”

Danny’s face twisted in sad grimace. “Oh. He didn’t mention me.”

Vera took a moment to that statement to sink in. “Who didn’t-“ Then it hit her. Did he actually… he
knew Matt? Did she get the right apartment? Was he like… apartment-sitting or whatever? And Matt
told him about her…? The wheels in her had were turning so loudly he might actually hear it. “You
mean Matt? Uhm, no. I… is he at home?”

“Nope. Wanna come in?” he offered, already stepping aside to make space for her. Vera had no time
for that. On the other hand the offer was tempting if anything. But it would be like invading his
privacy, right? Plus… no time for that. She needed to find him. Not to mention she had no idea who
this guy was.

“No, not really… I wasn’t… I haven’t been there before,” Vera admitted and Danny’s eyes went
wide, his face incredulous.

“You’re kidding me. Come in! How is that even possible?”

Vera could come in. At least to find out what Danny’s deal was? She could spare few minutes. She
shushed her conscious screaming at her that Matt might be breaking someone’s jaw at the moment
and reluctantly entered a narrow hall, losing her shoes. She followed Danny further to the apartment
and… lost the ability to speak. Because. What. The. Actual. Hell.

Vera wasn’t sure what she expected from Matt’s flat, but she sure didn’t think it would be so
spacious. Sure, his living room, dining room and kitchen was basically one room, but the said space
had tall ceilings, massive rafters, raw brick walls. The kitchen perfectly organized, some abstract art
on the wall, sliding door partly open so she could peek into his bedroom. None of that surprised as
much as the stairwell which lead- to the roof. It must have led to the roof. Of course he had a rooftop
access. She had like a million questions popping in her head as walked to the tall windows with no
curtains. For one – how the hell could Matt afford this place?

It was when she reached the window, huge shiny billboard catching her eyes, making her squint, she
got an answer. Danny had big lights on – yet, when she looked at her hand, moving it in the sea of colours from the opposite building, it was evident that the billboard would disturb most of the people. Unless they were blind. Sort of. If they eyes didn’t work. No one wanted it – so it couldn’t be that expensive.

Vera looked around the apartment once more, finding Danny leaning onto the wall separating the hall and the kitchen, smiling almost graciously, as if he was saying yeah, I know.

“Wow. That’s. Wow;,” she finally found a way to control her lips. So, she got few more questions she wanted to ask Matt now. But she still needed to find him first. “Thanks for… letting me in, I guess, but I should be going. I need to talk to him and he’s not answering his phone and- any idea where he is?”

“Ouch. You guys had a fight?” he asked, grimacing somewhat knowingly. “Because he was like really angry. And before, he was like- glowing, I never saw him like that and then – puf, he’s here again, dragging that cloud around him as usual, darker if possible. Dresses up, leaves, comes back even more pissed off, grabs his bag and disappears.”

Well, Vera knew there was a reason why she should come in and talk to Danny. That was new. So he knew Matt rather well? How?

“You- what- is- yeah, I kinda… pissed him off,” Vera admitted, biting her lip nervously. When Danny said Matt dressed up…? And when he said he disappeared that meant…? “He didn’t approve of some of my activities I was engaged in while he was gone…”

“Yikes. Did you cheat on him?”

“What?!” she blurted out, startled. What kind of a question was that?! “NO!”

He raised his hands in no harm gesture, bouncing off the wall. “Sorry, sorry. That’s right. Terri said you missed him-“

Vera was fairly sure she heard wrong. Did he just say-

“Terri?! What the- you know Terri?” Vera demanded in disbelief, her brain catching up with the sentence, sending her heart racing. “What do you mean she said- you talked to her? Matt talked to her? How is that even-“ She froze, her mind faster than… the rest of her mind. How could Terri possibly talk to Matt? Or Danny? How would she even know Matt was in town? Did he reach out to her? Or- or. There was one more possibility. Vera wasn’t sure she liked it, but somehow she felt she was right. Holy shit. “She saw him coming back. And she didn’t- and he didn’t-“

Terri knew Matt came back, because of her… ability. And she didn’t tell Vera shit, but apparently she talked to him. Matt didn’t tell her shit. He said Vera was the first person he tal- he said Vera was the first person he wanted to talk to, didn’t he? Oh Jesus, lying in omission. But why?!

“Hey, you okay? You look kinda pale. Do you have spins? That’s sign of a concussion right? Double vision? Wanna throw up?” Danny worried, making her way to her and the questions snapped her from the trans while freaking her out even more.

“Sign of a- how the hell do you know I had a concussion?! You-Terri told you. Of course she told you. Or she told Matt, or maybe he somehow found out earlier, because he always finds things out, freaking eavesdropper, and he told you.” He probably heard her doctor or something. Yeah, that sounded like Matt. “And then Matt came to check up on me yesterday after they released-oh my god, she knew he would come to me, that’s why she was so- alright, I think my head is spinning.”
Her head was spinning. Because it was all coming together – possibly in the worst way. She felt his hands carefully reaching for her forearm, ready to steady her if her body decided to nestle on the floor. Vera blinked at the sudden vertigo.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay. Do you want a glass of water? Vera! Hey! Can you hear me?” Soothing voice. The words. Syllables that suddenly made sense. The darkness edging her vision got possibly even darker.

“Ježišmarja,” she heard herself cursing, her knees actually feeling weak. “You- you’re the one who saved me, aren’t you? From… uhm.”

Danny had been there. Danny had saved her from being raped. So Danny could probably fight. And he could fight very well. Her brain slowly processed the information. Very slowly. He led her to a couch and she sat down heavily.

“Yeah. I brought you to the hospital. But hey, the save was more like a team work,” he exclaimed and Vera would swear she heard a grin in his voice.

So, so agonizingly slow brain.

“Team wo- no doprdele. Dopr- you were both there?! “ she cried out in horror, the last puzzle pieces falling into place. Of course they were both there, she remembered two men. Matt had had to be in town already at the time. And if he had, he would hear them. And Bryan had several broken bones. In each limb. A lecture. A very, very painful lecture. She should have make the connection the moment she had learnt Matt was back in town. For days. Vera would wince at the idea of Matt being able to do something like that, but truth to be told, with all of the info Danny fed her, this was rather one of the least concerns she had at the moment. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t done that before – in front of her.

Her mouth finally caught up with her brain. “He’s the one who- exactly how long has he been in town?”

“…for a while. But that’s really not something I should be telling you, right? I mean I told you a lot of things I shouldn’t have already. What about the water, huh?”

This was too much. Breathe, Vera. You’ve been through worse. You revealed much worse things. Well, maybe it was cumulative and she just reach her ceiling. Finally.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks. Actually, you have something stronger than that?” she asked hesitantly, sensing that whiskey, even the cheap one she mixed with coffee most of the times, would do. Danny, who walked to the kitchen, stopped dead in his tracks.

“That’s… probably not the best idea. I mean, your head is already spinning.”

“Danny, right?” Vera reassured herself, hoping she didn’t screw his name while processing all the information she got.

“Yes, madam. Danny Rand,” he saluted.

“Trust me, Danny. I need something stronger, it helps. But water on the top of that might not be such a bad idea.”

“If you say so. Is beer working for you? Because we… uhm. Matt doesn’t have anything else. Neither of us… went shopping yet.”
Vera grimaced at the idea of drinking beer. She always had been a black sheep of Czech people. She didn’t like beer. She could handle light beer breath, but definitely not a drink. And yeah, that was something she should be thinking about right now, sure. If anything, she should be thinking about the best approach. When she would finally find him. Alcohol breath wasn’t on her to-do list, so there was that.

“I think I’ll settle just for the water,” Vera gave him a weak smile and he lighted up, nodding enthusiastically. Who the hell was Danny Rand? Warm, beam of sunshine fighter occupying Matt’s apartment? That’s… weird. But hey, she was kinda used to weird, right?

Vera only spoke up when he placed a glass of water on the table, seating himself next to her on the couch, feet up. “Okay. Sorry for the whole… freak out. It’s just… it’s A LOT. First things first – thank you. Thank you so much for saving me. Secondly, I’m still not sure who you are, but it’s nice to meet you. Thirdly, whatever you said and you think you shouldn’t have, don’t worry about it.”

His smile grew wider. “Nah. I’m sorry I accused you of, uhm, cheating on Matt.”

“Yeah. You know what? I think he would actually mind less if I did…”

“What did you do?” Danny pried, but not necessarily demanding. He just… asked.

“I… kinda helped the police to take down a group of bad people he was after earlier and almost got crucified along the way?” Vera offered hesitantly and his mouth literally fell agape.

“Holy-shit! Jesus- no, no Jesus, that’s a bad, bad word, especially now. But Jes-“

“Ehm. Yeah. It’s not like I planned it, alright?” she defended herself uselessly. “I should have only infiltrate them, become one of them and I did. I didn’t expect they decide to change their manners and try to crucify one of their own! And I don’t even remember it, I only got my hair cut and they put the crown on-“

“Stop. Just- stop right there. There are so many things wrong with what you just said. I would love to talk to you, but not now, because you have more important things to do, like finding your furious boyfriend. I spent some time with Matt, alright? He… he isn’t exactly a ray of sunshine, or wasn’t at the time anyway.” Vera frowned. What exactly meant ‘at the time’?

“When we were coming home, he could finally talk about you and- and you have no idea. It was hard to get back to… normal mode, it took a while, but the moment he started talking about you, he was happy. And then we came here, and all the not so nice things happened and you were in a hospital and then Terri came and then once more, when she wanted to tell us you were awake, and he lighted up like my fi- like a Christmas tree. Let me tell you, he’s crazy about you. And he has quite a temper. So yeah, if he found out what you told me he found out, I think he went to break several other bones- oh, dammit, I should be looking for him too-“

This time it was Vera who felt her jaw falling. Danny was with him. Of course, it made sense, but she didn’t want to believe it. They were fighting together. In Cambodia. Danny was a member of the ancient organization Stick lead or was a part of. It must have been the concussion, because dammit she should realize these things. On the other hand, it was hard to believe that. This guy?! Was he forced to fight? There was no way he would choose to do so. Right? Jesus, did he decapitate someone?!

No. He sure didn’t. Vera chased away that awful thought, rather taking in all of his words.

“He already punched an officer of law and friend in one person, so- wait. You said he took his bag?”
Danny shrugged, apparently having no clue why it should be important. It was fucking important! “Yeah. I thought he was heading to your place actually. What do you mean he punched?”

“He’s not breaking any bones. I think I know where he is.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. He’s in the gym.” Vera was certain. And of course. She should have went there in the first place – at Fogwell’s, there were actual things to punch. Then again, she wouldn’t meet Danny otherwise. Or see Matt’s flat. Things are happening the way they should, she reminded herself, swallowing the ironic chuckle that almost escaped her lips. Yeah, well.

“Huh. Okay. Whatever you say. Feel better?” Danny asked with unsure smile and Vera obediently drank the water he brought her. He looked pleased. He was easy to please, wasn’t he? He was one interesting figure, that was for sure.

“A little. I should go talk to him. Thanks, Danny. For everything. I’m looking forward knowing you better. Something tells me you’ll stick around.”

He made a strange face. “Don’t-uhm. Little advice? Don’t say the word ‘stick’ around him, okay? Or me. Good luck, Vera. Just… be nice to him. He really likes you.”

Stick. Right. Good point. Also… there was something warm spreading in her chest when she heard about Matt’s feelings from someone else. Was it evident?

“I love him too,” she assured him, rising to her feet, giving the blond an honest smile. “Bye, Danny. You’re the best.”

“Don’t tell him that either!”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted this chapter and the following one to be… well, one. Then I realized it was very long. So… yeah.

Alternative chapter title – The one in which Danny is not a thundering dumbass (again) and actually helps. Also, give him a stuffed bear for not telling her he’s the Immortal Iron Fist the moment he opened the door for her.

Title from Florence and The Machine – Only if for a night
Finding Fogwell’s was a little harder than Vera thought – it took her a while to realize where exactly Matt’s apartment was and which direction she had to go. But actually entering the gym was like million times worse. She would stand in front of the door for minutes – except she didn’t have that time. For all she knew, he could have already been on his way out by the time he somehow found out she was heading his way. With a deep breath in, she unlocked the door and took a hesitant step in.

The second Vera opened the door, she knew Matt was in – the lights were out, but she could hear the quick heavy blows and she imagined his figure quite vividly. He was panting, violent huffs with occasional grunt echoing in the dark space. She watched him train too many times for not to notice this was a different kind of exercise – listening to his punches, she knew they were less coordinated and more furious than usual and he didn’t place a single kick. It wasn’t even an exercise – it was destruction. Vera swallowed nervously, lump in her throat. Matt was out of his mind. The fact that he broke his friend’s jaw only supported her theory. She probably wouldn’t reason with him at the moment. She considered spinning on her heels and running away; she clenched her fists and took another calming breath to stop the fleeing tendency.

Matt didn’t register her or she thought so – when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see at least shadows and she slowly made her way to him – there was no change in his doing. He might noticed her longer before she entered or he was sure by the time she reached the door and he just decided to ignore her. Or maybe he was so consumed by his fury he really didn’t sense her. She didn’t know which was worse. But when she sat down on her usual spot for watching him, he still didn’t let her disturb him. She sighed, gathering her thoughts and courage.

On her way here, her mind was racing, trying to come up with the best way to approach him – all of her ideas were in the wind by the time she heard his almost desperate fight for breath. Fighting. That was what he knew the best. The easiest way of getting something out of his chest. The smallest problems were those which could be solved with a punch. Quick and effective.

Oh, Matt.

“Did it help?” Vera asked eventually, voice barely a whisper. He would hear her. Whether he would listen to her, that was something else entirely.

He didn’t react. Maybe the next sound he made, hitting the bag with even more force, could be considered a reaction. Either way, he apparently wasn’t going to talk to her.

“I mean with Brett,” she specified, trying not to feel like an idiot talking to herself. “Did it help when you punched him?”

Loud grunt and powerful hook. The chain holding the bag cried. She gulped, mentally counting to ten. She opened her mouth to speak again, change her tactics maybe, but she didn’t get a chance.

“Not really.”

Vera almost cried when he finally forced those two words out. He actually... they might even have a conversation. Was he giving her at least a chance to explain herself? It wasn’t like she could change
what she did… and she didn’t regret it.

“Yeah. And the bag… does it… help?”

This time, he remained silent. Well, he didn’t say anything comprehensible. He just hit the bag with what could be a desperate desire, a violent plea it actually would help. Which meant it didn’t. The strong blows in furious pace continued.

Terri told her Matt didn’t want her to spy on the worshippers because he thought she had no sense of self-preservation. Considering her next words and the plan suddenly appearing in her mind as she observed him to deal with his inner tension in his own way, he might be even right.

“I think that’s because you’re not angry with it. Or with Brett, in fact. It wasn’t his fault,” Vera noted, giving him time to process her words before she would make a literal punch-line. She jumped off the edge of the boxing ring, taking two steps closer to him. Oh god. 3, 2, 1. “Which is why you should punch me.”

Instead of another blow, there was only a rustle. She couldn’t be sure because of the lack of light, but she thought Matt might missed the bag completely and didn’t try to place another blow. Deadly silence fell, interrupted only by his harsh breaths.

Vera cleared her throat. “It’s me, right?” she bugged him, taking another step. “It’s me you’re angry with. And this is what you do – you have a problem, you punch it. That’s your cure. You can, Matt. Hit me, I can take it.”

Quiet, barely suppressed growl escaped him. He didn’t move. So she continued, poking the not so sleeping bear. And she accused him of being suicidal. Vera knew she couldn’t take it in fact. She was totally bluffing. Yet, she was absolutely serious – if few punches ended their disagreement, she would let him. Hell, Vera would let him break her own jaw too.

“It was my fault, Matt. I didn’t exactly plan it like that, but it was. I was reckless. I was stupid. I wasted your gift – my life, something you left me to protect – and I carelessly put it in danger. You have every right to do it.”

The sound in the back of his throat was louder this time. Vera half-blindly reached for his forearm. His muscles were clenched so tightly it had to be painful.

“This, what you’re doing right now? That’s self-destruction. But it’s simple. You know who you’re angry with. So punch me. Punish me for almost getting myself killed.”

The movement was so fast she never saw it coming. She stumbled backwards as he grabbed her forearms and pinned them against the ring, fingers bruising her skin. Her heart was loud in her ears, actual fright creeping up her spine, making her hair stand on its ends. Apart from their hands touching, their bodies weren’t connected, his figure inches from hers, hot breath tickling her face.

Her own breath was caught in her throat, waiting for his next move. She could tell he was fighting with himself – she believed his first instinct was to punch her, the source of his fury – on the other hand, there was one thing she knew from the very beginning and that was the fact he would never hurt her. Despite forcing her next words from her mouth, she encouraged him, gently this time.

“It’s okay, Matt. I had my reasons to do it just like you do have a reason to be pissed. I want you to get it out and get it out right without… ruining your body with this nonsense you’ve been doing here. You want to let it out too. It’s a win-win. You can hit me.”

It shouldn’t have surprise her when he released her hands tentatively and placed them next to her
forearms, resting against the edge, exhaling shakily. She allowed herself to breathe too.

“I never want to hit you, Vera. And it wouldn’t help either,” he whispered, bowing his head. She didn’t understand.

“It… wouldn’t?” Vera parroted weakly, suddenly without a leg to stand on. But… he was angry. He was- she suddenly couldn’t make out anything from his face, from his words, from the tension in his shoulders, nothing. Being suicidal once more, she hesitantly reached for his chin, levelling their eyes. He had them squeezed shut and tears – she earlier thought it was drops of sweat – escaped them. His lips were pressed together, giving the impression of… being held from trembling. Vera was… confused. “Matt, what-“

“Nothing would. I wasn’t here,” was all he said and she heard him work against a lump in his throat, tight from emotion Vera didn’t manage and didn’t want to interpret. But she was sure of one thing all of sudden. And oh my god, she should have realized it sooner. Her hand dropped. Of course. This was Matt Murdock she was dealing with. What was the most common emotional status of Matt Murdock? What was Matt feeling even more frequently than anger?

“Well, you were trying to keep me alive-“


“Jesus, Matt.” She couldn’t find words. Did he think it was somehow his fault? He was furious with himself?! “You realize Stick would kill me if you stayed here?”

Matt winced, letting out a silent sob. He honest to god sobbed and wrapped her in his arms, face burying in her shoulder. A second of panic, startled by his unexpected attack, and she relaxed to his embrace, returning his affection, differently than any time before. This time it was her who enclosed him protectively, hearing his body begging for being held. He almost limbed, accepting her support wholeheartedly and Vera was glad she had the ring behind her – otherwise she would fall under his weight (and she was sure he was still being gentle with her, relaxing his muscles only partly). Her hand found her way to the back of his neck, stroking lightly, kissing his temple.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, saying something she didn’t plan on saying that night. She came to make peace with him, but she wanted him to see her perspective and agree with her. She didn’t expect to turn it out this way.

His body went rigid at her words. “For what?” he mumbled into her shoulder, not bothering to withdraw.

She sighed, wondering what she was apologizing for. It was a good question. For everything? “For… for hurting you. For endangering something you care for.” Small smile crept on her lips as she finally found the right words.

Matt retreated, leaving his hands on her waist, touch lighter. His expression was softer, traces of anger and betrayal still present though. Vera wanted to sing when she saw his eyes for the first time since their first fight. They were full of emotions that were too mingled together to be recognized. A precise reflexion of his inner world, of his soul, the very himself.

He cleared his throat. “Yes. That… that wasn’t very nice.” His voice was serious, but she noticed the tiny elevation of the corners of his lips. She noticed, because she was waiting for it, hoping for this beautiful miracle.

She nodded furiously. “I know, I know.”
One of his hands carefully reached for her jaw, wrap scratching her skin. “I’d like you to treat it better. It’s very important for me,” he breathed, slightly leaning into her space, giving her chance to escape. Like hell she would. She met his lips halfway, just a small peck.

“I’m bad at it. You better stay and make sure I’m doing it right.”

“I will,” he whispered back and finally kissed her, salty lips caressing hers with certain desperation, but also tenderness and Vera felt a suffocating weight being lifted from her chest, relief washing over her as she was answering him gratefully.

He interrupted the kiss to rest his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry too,” he offered kindly and she blinked in surprise.

“For what?” Vera repeated his own question and he smiled.

“For leaving you here- let me talk- and for hurting you as well. I’m sorry I yelled at you. I… I shouldn’t have. It won’t happen again,” he promised solemnly and despite being delighted at his exclam, she felt a stung of guilt. She wasn’t so certain about it. She wondered whether Matt would prefer hearing about all of her escapades at once or whether she should save it for another time.

“Vera, what is it?”

She huffed. Damn his super-senses. She licked her lips nervously. “Wanna go home? Or to my place?”

He retrieved. “You wanna say something. Say it,” he demanded, hints of bossiness in his tone, irritation bubbling once more.

Vera looked around nervously. “Here?” she squeaked, deciding that no, she did not want to tell him everything at once.

“If you don’t mind…” he hummed, reaching for water and a towel, sitting down, resting his back against the ring. She eyed him, indecisive. Maybe she should just… go? “Don’t even think about it. Sit down, Vera. Please. I rather… talked here.”

She couldn’t help it. She chuckled. “Closer to the punching bag?” The fact Matt didn’t answer was slightly disturbing. “Also, how do you even know what I was thinking about? Did you learn how to read minds too?”

He grinned, just a fraction of second, the expression almost surreal on his face. “Well, it’s true that I am more open to things like this being possible, but no-“

“What the hell does that mean?” she blurted out, sitting down as well. There was no point in running away. He would catch her. Dammit.

“That means that if I meet another guy claiming he punched a dragon to its heart, I might even believe him.”

And what?! “What?” She was absolutely taken aback. And totally scared Matt dehydrated himself or something. Because he was talking nonsense.

Matt stopped her possible protest with a simple gesture. “Just… don’t ask. I’m sure he will gladly tell you about it by himself. I’m surprised he hadn’t already. I don’t need to read your thoughts – when you’re nervous, you run or babble. I’d like you to babble now. What do you have on your mind?”

Who was ‘he’? And what was he shooting up? Or sniffing? Or perhaps he was smoking pot? Whoa,
wait, Danny?

And was she that predictable?!

“Vera.”

“Uhm…”

“Vera, if you’re about to tell me you did another stupid and reckless thing, you better do it fast. The waiting is actually making it worse. I imagined like fifty possible scenarios in my head already and all of them are so you and dangerous that you better come up with something that will surprise me,” he exclaimed, deadly serious. And really? It’s… she wasn’t that reckless. Right?

Okay. Just say it. “Is interrupting an assault with brass knuckles that happen to have a permanent place in my purse – for protection,” she quickly added as he took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak (or yell), “-on your list? It was a onetime thing!”

His teeth clicked together and he closed his eyes, mentally counting to a million, judging by the sweet time he took. Matt didn’t yell. He didn’t punch anything. He was fighting with himself though, trying really hard to keep his emotions inside. She hesitantly touched the back of his hand clenched into fist. He must have felt her touch even over the wrap, because after a while, it relaxed.

“Okay. Okay. Onetime thing-“

“I didn’t even know about the Worshippers by the time. I wasn’t- she was crying, Matt. And he was one guy and she was tiny and I had freaking brass knuckles in my purse. I didn’t even plan on using them really, I was hoping he would let her go when a witness appeared, but he didn’t and he was hurting her and-“

“Okay. You were playing a vigilante. Once. But that’s it, right?” he turned his face to her, lips forming a timid smile, eyes big, kind and... compassionate, she realized. Understanding. He had to understand. It must have been like this for him all the time – hearing the cries, the screams. Vera returned the smile, pecking him on his lips.

“I love you,” she admitted, resting her head against his shoulder. “And I missed you, I really did. Yesterday…” and it was hard to believe it was only yesterday, “…it was probably clear as day I did, but I missed this too. Talking to you. Being… being here with you. It doesn’t have the same atmosphere here. The spirit.”

Matt placed a small kiss to her hair. “You do babble. And I love you too. I’m glad I’m back.”

Her smile faded. He was back… what that even meant? “And how are you back? I’m… I’m thrilled, I’m delighted you are, I couldn’t wish for more but-“

He sighed and she shut up. “Short version? Big fight, many dead bodies, Stick captured, the rest of us fleeing in different directions.”

Vera sat up straight, gasping. “WHAT?!” Stick was captured?! Their leader (?), Matt’s mentor, idiot who wanted her death because she was a distraction to his favourite warrior was… captured? “Is he… that means he’s… dead?”

Matt shook his head. “I doubt it. They would… uhm.” He didn’t seem to know how to finish his sentence. His face was emotionless. Vera had no idea what that meant. He doubted they would kill him. Why do you ever capture someone?
“Does that-“ she hated the idea, she hated, hated, hated it, and she wanted to scream, because she just got him back and she would not survive if someone came for him as well, because some old asshole ninja got chatty. While being tortured most likely. She didn’t give a crap about him, which was probably insensitive, but he did almost kill her. She was entitled. “-does that mean someone would come after you?”

The shake of his head was more distinctive, almost furious. “He won’t give us up. He’s might be a dick, but this is something he wouldn’t do. Maybe not for us, only to piss them off – but still no,” he deadpanned, speaking very factually.

Vera didn’t care. The outcome was important. He wouldn’t tell. “You think… you think someone followed you?” she asked carefully. She didn’t want to upset him – however, the question was burning and valid.

“I don’t think so. We were trying really hard to mislead everyone. The fact that it’s not exactly easy to get from Phnom Kravanh to New York with almost no money probably helped…”

Her head started spinning. Phnom Kravanh. Cambodia. When did they capture Stick? Was it hours, days after she saw the photos? After she got new hope, the assurance Matt was alive? How much time it took this big fight Matt talked about to happen? What exactly he considered a big fight? And how often he fought for his life? Jesus Christ, she wouldn’t know half of it.

‘You know what I’ve been through? You have no idea. One day of it would be enough to give you nightmares for the rest of your life’, he said. Oh god. The pictures. Torsos without heads. ‘People around me were crying in pain, dying.’ It was a fucking miracle he was still alive.

Vera threw herself around his neck, colliding with him hard, most likely causing bruises to both of them. She couldn’t care less. She pressed her ear against his chest, listening to the startled thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, tears appearing in her eyes. Jesus, she loved that sound.

“Hey, it’s okay. We got home. I’m here.” His voice was startled as well, baffled, because he couldn’t possibly know what triggered her outburst. It wasn’t anything he said. Or at least he must have thought so.

“I saw you,” she whimpered miserably and his hand stroking her hair stopped.

“What are you talking about, sweetheart?” He caressed her again, readjusting his grip in their bizarre half-hug.

Vera took a deep breath. “I saw you, in Cambodia.” His body was suddenly created of stone. The rising of his chest stopped – if she didn’t hear and felt his heart beating, she would think he was dead. He knew she was telling the truth – her own heart hammered painfully and fast, but didn’t skip a beat when she told him. She continued. “I think you were all in red, it was hard to tell because of the dark. You wore a mask covering your whole face. Unlike the others, you had no weapon. There were so many… so many-” she didn’t finish, sure he got the message. He had no doubt now – she did see them.

“H-how?” he choked out, his chest rather jerking than rising periodically, as if he couldn’t breathe in properly. She knew that feeling.

“If I tell you, will you stop crushing my wrist?” she offered in light tone despite being on the edge herself. Matt did hold her wrist like he wanted to shatter every single bone in it. He immediately let go. She sighed to his still sweat-soaked t-shirt and shifted to more comfortable position – she rested against his side again, keeping his arm around her shoulders, catching his wrist, stroking it lightly.
She took the end of the wrap, untying it slowly – he didn’t protest, but his fingers twitched as if he wanted to stop her.

Once more she had no idea how to start.

He finally took a regular breath in. “Vera? I don’t really think you can make it worse than it already is.” He gave her hair a kiss, moving his wrist in small motions, helping her with the bandage. She smiled for herself and she begun, mentally questioning his claim. She might surprise him.

“So… I received an envelope. With pictures. Photos from a security footage. With a timestamp and a note with the location.”

He froze. “From who?” he asked incredulously, traces of fear in his voice.

Uh-uh. “From a friend. I guess,” she said, choosing her words carefully. He relaxed again, putting the bandage away. She started working on the other one.

“Stark?”

And oh. That didn’t occur to her. It was a logical assumption though. Why didn’t she involve the Avengers? Right. Matt didn’t want them to mix up with this. Idiot. Though it wasn’t like she tried to contact them again after he left.

“No. A different friend. A new one.”

The back of his head banged the ring in frustration, hand falling from hers. “Vera. Spill it. Did you befriend another genius billionaire superhero I haven’t heard about yet?”

Vera had to appreciate that even though he was obviously tense and worried, he tried to joke. Except, well. “Uhm…”

Matt sat up straight, pulling her up with him, turning to her with pure disbelief. “I was kidding. What the actual hell, Vera?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” It kinda was. “And it wasn’t him who sent it anyway!”

“Just- hold on. You befriended a billionaire hero and someone who was able to get a security footage from a crappy security camera in Cambodia?” he reassured himself, eyes wide, face absolute shock.

She shrugged in attempt to cool his up ‘n down emotions, taking his hand again, finishing her job with satisfaction, claiming the wrap for herself. “Uhm. Kinda, yeah. She’s great, by the way. She also sent me wine with cute notes appreciating my qualities. It was really sweet.”

“Vera,” he practically growled her name impatiently and it was not the funny way of impatience. Like the sexual impatience. Nope.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just say that I might be a vigilante magnet in fact. Alright. A guy crushes on my fire escape, so I go there, obviously, because I know of someone who just loves crushing on my fire escape, so sue me for keeping my hopes up-“ Matt made an unhappy face, guilt showing once again. But hey, it was the truth. This time, it totally was his fault. “So he has a hood and bow with arrows, obviously not you, so I think, hey Hawkeye is here and he’s hurt. So I ask him what he wants and by the time he talks and I’m positive he is not Hawkeye, he’s pretty much halfway to my apartment, so… yeah.”
Matt was quiet. The tendons in his forearm tensed under her fingers as he clenched his fists. Nothing new. He didn’t encourage her to continue, so she gave him few moments to process.

“Alright. Injured archer in your apartment. Go on.” His voice was flat. Whatever he felt, he buried it deep down in him, locking it up. Vera was worried what would happen when it blew off. She needed to be gentler with him, take it easier on his heart – she didn’t need enhanced hearing to know it was fast and sounding funny.

“Yeah. He just wants to call his team, because apparently that’s a thing – you should consider having one as well, by the way –, asking them to pick him up, because his coms stopped working and yeah, he is hurt and can’t make it to… their base or whatever.” And here came the part which Matt wouldn’t like. Probably. She rather decided to graciously leave out the fact Oliver wanted to leave at that point. “He… uhm, he was bleeding, so…. Uhm… I… I stitched him up.”

His whole body went limb. “You did what?”

“It was a knife wound, I wouldn’t go for nothing major-“

“Knife wound is nothing major?” he parroted weakly, eyes uselessly scanning her face. She was surprised when she looked at his face. He was… mad, probably, but she could actually see hints of… admiration?

“Well… I mean I wouldn’t try to fix a bullet wound, or went for it if we was like… stabbed. Anyway. I kinda had a small breakdown after, so he hugged me and I noticed the next day that his day-him was hurt as well, and there were too many coincidences. I sent him an e-mail later, you know, to his civil e-mail address, thanking him and asking about his health and they somehow put two and two together, realized I’m probably dating you, like the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, because I had a small breakdown at the café the day before too and they were there. Uhm. A week later I received a package; wine, arrow head and photos of you, with a note claiming the search was based on body built and fighting style of the Devil. The team of the vigilante has one hell of a blond hacker who did some magic and found you,” she blurted out in almost one breath and huffed. She could have probably leave out few details. Too late.

If Matt was an app, he would have loading written above his head. He stared dully, going over everything she said, putting the information together and making sense of it.

Vera did not expect his next words to be what they were.

“I didn’t know you could stitch up a knife wound. You never said,” he whispered, voice soft.

It was her turn to be taken aback. She thought he may chew her again for what she did. He might sound worried, guilty (because he would find a way to blame himself for… whatever). He would be sad since she admitted she had two breakdowns in two days, well, one day, actually. She did not see that coming.

“You never asked,” she murmured back quietly, absently licking her lips as he tilted his head, observing her in awe. “And I didn’t know how. Not until recently… well, recently… I mean, we never got to that before I dropped out from college.”

“What- then how do you know?” He sounded honestly confused.

Oh. He really didn’t know about her sessions with Claire. Or maybe it just slipped his mind, since he never talked about it with her? He had a lot on his plate lately…

“Claire taught me. We started around Christmas-“ His lips parted, shocked exhale leaving them. He
had no idea. Unbelievable. “-because… you know. What if she was out of town or something? Right? Or she had a shift and you would… uhm… you would be bleeding all over and. “ Vera was tangling in her words as his expression was changing into something she couldn’t decode. She looked away, having difficulties to speak in sentences. “-and you wouldn’t want to- to go to the hospital, because you never want to go. And- and I wouldn’t be able to help you which would probably kill me and you. So it was a logical step to ask her to teach me-“

Tender hands framed her face, light pressure turning it to look at him. She kept her gaze down though, suddenly feeling ashamed. It was a stupid assumption, thinking he would even let her to stitch him up – he was supersensitive and hated pain meds and anaesthetics and even though she did fix Oliver’s wound, she was a freaking amateur. There was no reason for him to choose her over Claire or taking care of himself on his own when necessary.

“You asked Claire to teach you so you could patch me up?” astonished low voice demanded as his thumbs caressed her cheeks. Amazed. Disbelieving. Touched.

No, you dumbass, I know tons of people like you who need it. Of course I did it for you. Vera nodded cautiously. She refused to raise her eyes. Nope. Maybe if she did, she would see the kiss coming. But she didn’t.

Hot soft lips touched hers delicately and she closed her eyes, letting out a shaky breath. She almost missed his next words.

”What have I ever done,” he mumbled to her mouth, his lips sinking into hers deeply, sweetly fondling, as one of his hands moved to the back of her head, pulling her closer.

Something grasped her heart at his tone, but it didn’t hurt. She just… she wasn’t sure he ever spoke with so much affection. She had to gulp against the lump in her throat when he kissed away the tears of relief rolling down her cheek before he returned to his mission of turning her body into jello just by meeting her lips again and again, until she finally responded with enough enthusiasm. Only then he decided to let go of her cheek and slipped his hand under her top, fingers tracing the skin of her side and reaching for the hem of it – he stopped there, mouth withdrawing for a split second. Her head spun.

“May I?” he breathed and she chuckled, because of course he would ask like that. She remembered the aftermath of their fight in here the first time she did something he considered reckless – at that time he asked her if he might kiss her. The situation changed, but her answer didn’t.

“I would appreciate it.”

Chapter End Notes

Alternative chapter title – Dialogue heavy no.2. Also Double F; freaking fluff.
Title from Florence and The Machine – Only it for a night

And there’s only epilogue left. I’m not sure how I feel about that.
**Epilogue – The psychic, the vigilante, the guy who punched the dragon and the master of attracting troubles**

Chapter Notes

Mostly snapshots. Little bit of settling down, little bit of friendship and bantering and lots of fluff.
Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things were… fast. And slow. Definitely difficult and messy and quite easy. It was a lot.

Matt Murdock returned to town. And in his absence, things had… changed.

Matt talked to Foggy. That was the difficult part. It wasn’t just that Foggy pretty much ended the office of Nelson and Murdock – he ended the partnership. Not friendship, but Matt told Vera he had claimed that he was afraid things just couldn’t work with one of the partner constantly worrying about the other one disappearing for three months or, well, dying. Vera could tell it broke Matt’s heart, no matter how hard he tried to cover it when they were together; she was pretty confident he cried. And punched things. But he didn’t want her to know. She did her best to comfort him anyway, not pushing him into finding a solution of his sudden unemployment.

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Matt also wanted to talk to Karen, but she offered all four of them – Vera, Matt, Foggy and her – to meet up in Josie’s. Matt seemed to be taken aback (not that Vera blamed him), but agreed. Karen announced her arrival with a thud of a newspaper, cutting through the rather awkward silence between the three remaining people. Matt raised his eyebrows while Vera squinted in the relatively dark room to read the headline; and it made her heart almost stop.

**HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN? HE’S A REAL DAREDEVIL!**

An article written by the one and only Karen Page. The front page. A sketch of… a new outfit of the former Devil of Hell’s Kitchen? Lots of red among black? A helmet? Vera looked at Karen, blinking in surprise, distantly registering Foggy doing the same. Then Karen’s lips started moving, but Vera couldn’t make out the words, no matter how much she pricked her ears – she just noticed Matt tensing gradually, until he took off his glasses with a shaky hand, running his other hand down his face. Vera didn’t follow.

“She knows,” Matt murmured barely comprehensible and Vera snapped her head to former Nelson and Murdock secretary, now apparently a full-time reporter of New York’s Bulletin, only to see her smirk.

“Well, I’ll drink to that,” Foggy exclaimed and made his way to the bar, while Matt sort of eyed Karen.

“I never thought you were stupid, Karen. You know that,” he said lowly, his voice dripping with honesty.
Karen sighed. “Well, it sure feels like it. Thanks for saving my life, by the way,” she hummed sarcastically and Matt winced. She sat down, reaching for his hand, squeezing lightly. “I mean it, Matt. Thank you. And now I want to know everything. Off the record. Because I’m an amazing friend.”

Vera cautiously observed their exchange, too scared to enter their… whatever. Small smile reached Matt’s lips and Vera felt herself relax, stroking Matt’s thigh in attempted comforting gesture.

“Machackova, keep your hands off. I can see you,” Foggy warned her and Vera jumped, her hand withdrawing instantly.

“I wasn’t—“

“Vera, he’s kidding. He’s just a jerk like that sometimes. You should know that by now,” Matt calmed her, placing her hand back where it was.

“Well, maybe not everything…“ Karen interjected.

“Oh my god…”

Guess the questions about Matt’s new superhero costume had to wait.

Later, Vera also shared how many other people knew about him. Terri. Victor. Nina. Add Vera, Foggy, Claire, Karen and Father Lantom. And Danny, obviously. There were so many people now that they actually could start a club. It was a little terrifying. Kinda a lot.

They didn’t start a club.

Yet.

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“Alright, I feel kinda useless among all of you guys…“ Vera admitted as they were all four of them sitting in Matt living room, each of them having a drink of their own. Or, well, drink. Danny and Terri had beers, while Matt and Vera had juice. Vera, because she was in unofficial unnecessary rehab and Matt because he didn’t want her to feel left out. Vera could tell Matt wanted to drink some alcohol though, because apparently he heard about Danny’s life story for like a millionth time earlier that afternoon. They were now all chilling, Danny in one of the armchairs, Vera and Matt on the couch, Terri moving, momentarily sitting on the armrest of the couch.

“Useless?” Terri parroted sceptically, eyeing her with raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I mean… ordinary,” Vera explained, gesturing to each of them as if it meant something. It did, in her head. “Come on, Terri, you’re a psychic. You saved my life. Danny— Danny punched a dragon to its heart and gained super-powered glowing fist and he saved me. Matt, I don’t even— he’s a hero with super-senses, kick-ass lawyer and he saved me too many times to actually count it.” She counted it. It was just easier to say she didn’t. “You see what I mean.”

“No, I really don’t,” Matt deadpanned and Terri rolled her eyes.

“Because you can’t see anything, Matt, no offence. But I can’t see it either, Vera. From what I heard you’re a total badass.”

Vera wasn’t sure she wanted to know what Danny meant.
“Also, you have a superpower too.”

“Oh, do I?” Vera asked Terri sarcastically.


Danny’s lips twitched. Matt frowned. Vera sighed.

“Brilliant, Terri. Because I should totally get credit for that and it’s a real thrill.”

“Oh, you think explaining people that you grew up in a mystical city with monks and punched a dragon is a thrill?” Danny complained, looking outraged. “Seeing nothing but an approximation of reality, some… world on fire? Knowing the future?”

“…feeling a katana punching your best friend’s lung as if it was your own?” Terri added, sipping her beer, probably wishing it was vodka.

“…hearing someone’s heart giving up while not being able to do anything about it?” Matt reminded Vera softly and Vera felt like an idiot for bringing it up.

“Point taken. Superpowers suck.”

“And you’re cool, because you’re a hero even without them. A little reckless, but still,” Terri reassured her, winking. Vera lowered her gaze and Matt smiled slightly.

“You’re the heart of this group. I would never meet Matt or Terri without you.”

“I love you,” came a low voice and Vera peeked him from under her eyelashes, her lips spreading in an involuntary smile.

“Come on, Murdock!” Terri cried out, throwing her hand in the air.

“Just few days ago you told me you learned how to stich people up. You stand for what’s right, you’re never giving up. You see good in people, even when they doubt there is any. I could go on.“

Silence fell at his exclaim, the words sinking in. Vera didn’t know he… he thought that. She curled up against his side, kissing his neck, the only place she could reach from her current position. She could feel his kiss in her hair in return.

“Wow, that’s intense. Let’s stop talking about feelings,” Terri demanded not so subtly, finishing her beer in one go and Vera smiled against the crook of Matt’s neck.

*These people.* Matt. Terri. Even Foggy, Karen, Claire, Nina. Danny. Trish. She didn’t want to leave them.

*I don’t want to leave them.*

The realization made her freeze. If she didn’t want to leave them, there was only one thing she could do. The question was… was she the only one who didn’t want to cut this loose or was it mutual?

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Vera didn’t wait long. She still had time, sure, but the uncertainty… it was eating her up. As soon as Terri left home and Danny went for a walk – Matt claimed he wanted to know New York again,
sometimes walking the streets, sometimes jumping across rooftops, enjoying the view – Vera felt the question growing like a lump in her throat, like a suffocating gas filling her lungs, expanding in her ribcage, making her breathing impossible.

She snuggled closer to Matt’s chest, feeling almost stupid for being so clingy, but… she just got him back, okay. And she didn’t want to let go. Ever.

If Matt minded, he didn’t say a word about it, stroking her arm lightly in periodic motion. He started when they were left alone and didn’t stopped ever since.

“You’re tense since we told you why we like you,” he noted, keeping his tone light, only a hint of worry in it. Vera startled, realizing he was right. Shit. She was tense and for a good reason. If she didn’t ask the question soon, she might choke on it. She licked her lips, mentally counting to ten. She refused to leave his embrace and god forbid retreat enough to face him.

“Matt, I… do you-?” Vera huffed, swallowing the curse that almost left her lips. “Uhm. You don’t have to answer this minute, okay? Just… think about it, please. Do you want me to stay?”

Vera could touch his confusion.

“Of course I want you to stay,” he said, confident, placing another kiss to her hair and she allowed herself to breathe in. Matt wanted her- “If you don’t mind Danny returning at some point-”

Aaaand, it was gone. Slight misunderstanding.

“That’s… okay, I’m glad,” she interrupted him cautiously, gathering her courage once again. “But I meant. Uhm. Not tonight, not… here in your apartment. I… do you want me to stay?” she asked, forcing herself to pronounce every word crystal clear, hoping he could understand the severity of the question this time. Judging by his body tensing as well, he did.

Vera almost fought him when he made her withdraw, so they could face each other instead of her hiding in his arms. She was taken aback by the sincere expression he wore.

“Of course I do. I don’t— I don’t understand why you even need to ask that.” And he sounded honestly baffled. He would even make her feel stupid for asking as if his agreement was the most natural thing in the world. Vera let his words sink in, repeating them in her head, the weight lifted from her shoulders. He wanted her to stay?

“Things could have change, Matt. And you never… you never really asked me to stay. Didn’t try to persuade me or anything.”

It wasn’t a reproach but it sounded like one. Dammit, Veronika. But, well, he hadn’t.

His eyebrow shot up. “Do you want to be persuaded? Vera, I do want you to stay. I just don’t want you to feel like you have to. I don’t want to press, corner you, or crawl in front of you so you felt sorry for me and stayed, regretting it later. It has to be your decision,” he explained, surprisingly heated about it and Vera couldn’t help small smile.

“But you rather if I stayed,” she reassured herself, because she was an idiot, and she wanted to hear it again. Possibly every day.

“Yeah, I rather if you stayed,” he confirmed and Vera felt her smile growing wider.

She wasn’t the only one. Mischievous smile appeared on Matt’s lips as well and he took her hand, placing it over his heart. Vera frowned, feeling his steady heartbeat as he spoke again. “I love you.
You make me happy like nobody else. I want you to be here, with me, because it feels right. I hate the idea of you leaving. I thought I lost you once and... the world stopped making sense. You make me feel alive. You are the light that guides me home, Vera. Please. Stay.”


“Jesus Christ, Matt. You can’t just say stuff like that and— and-“ -make it sound like you mean it.

“And what? You know I’m telling you the truth,” he reminded her gently, patting the back of her hand which was still resting against his chest, still feeling his heart. Honest. Kind. Loving.

“I... know. Unless you learnt how to control you heartbeat too.”

“That would be useful, thank you for the tip.”

Vera just let out a tight laugh, her mouth slightly hanging open, her brain unable to come up with any argument. He loved her. He loved her a lot.

And he wanted her to stay.

Vera leaned in and kissed him with all she had, hoping the action spoke louder and more comprehensible than her words. It could be minutes later – very interesting minutes in which she somehow climbed to his lap, not for... sex, but simply because it was the most practical position – when she found out it actually didn’t.

“’Kay,” she breathed to his lips and kissed the corner of his mouth. Beautiful, sinful, swollen and very red mouth.

“’Kay?” he parroted, baffled she spoke out of blue, interrupting their kissing session. He found her lips again, just a passing touch.

“’Kay. I was thinking about it. I’ll stay.”

That seemed to shock him. “You— you’ll stay.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay,” she repeated again for a good measure. She didn’t mind. She needed to be reassured he wanted her to stay several times as well, she understood.

“You’ll stay,” he breathed, astonished. He let out silent, yet delighted laugh. “Thank you. Thank you. I love you.”

“One condition!” Vera blurted out before he could kiss any of her thoughts away. It was a rather sudden thought, to be honest. But it was one hell of an idea.

He froze, inch from her mouth. “What condition?” he asked cautiously.

“No secrets.”

“...No secrets?”

“No secrets. Please. You deal with shit like a satanic cult and you tell me. Okay?” she demanded, pressing just slightly. That couldn’t happen again. Not without her knowing, not when he was miserable and lost and she couldn’t do a fucking thing about it, staying behind. “I get it, it’s hard, you don’t need to tell me the same second, but... you told Terri. She’s awesome, no doubt, but-”

“I didn’t want you to get hurt.”
“Worked well,” Vera noted, not being entirely fair. But she had a point, okay?

“That’s not my fault.”

Vera couldn’t believe those words left his mouth. She stared at him, amazed. “Wow. I’m gonna frame those words. Or maybe you should put that on a t-shirt.”

“I wouldn’t be able to read it,” he shut down her brilliant idea and she rolled her eyes. “You’re stubborn and reckless.” Sounds like someone I know. “I might be hot headed, but harsh decisions are your area of expertise.”

“Huh-uh.”

“I have one condition too,” Matt exclaimed, face unreadable. Vera squinted at him.

“You want to me stay in a foreign country.” Half-truth. I want to stay with you. “You don’t get to have conditions.”

“You stop doing crazy things,” he demanded, voice deadly serious.

“Like dating a guy who’s called Daredevil?”

“Vera.”

“I’m serious! What crazy things?”

“Dangerous ones.” Yep, that was what she thought. “Playing a vigilante-“

“That was once-!” she protested immediately. She was not about to do that again. Probably.

“Going undercover-“ he continued and she interrupted him once again.

“That definitely was a one-time thing. I was scared to death.” He gave her a significant look, making her rethink her claim. “Poor choice of words. Sorry.”

“Convincing me you don’t need protection when you do-“ he added nonsensically and at this point, she got kinda fed up. She was the one giving him a condition. Not the other way around. She needed to prod him gently though.

“Shouldn’t that be the other way around? Me convincing you about protection?” she teased and he blinked in surprise.

“I got an armour.”

…What? Alright, not the right time to make that kind of jokes. Also… the new outfit – an armour. She definitely wanted to see that with her own eyes, not just in a newspaper.

“And I still want to see that,” she blurted out. “But I meant the girl convincing the guy he should wear protection…?”

Vera could tell he was not amused. Well, she tried. “Vera, I meant the Avengers. I’m trying to get somewhere here.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, that would be it. Apparently, most of those were one-time things, so it shouldn’t be a problem,
right?” he asked innocently and this time she was the opposite of amused. What he wanted after her — it was impossible.

“Can’t promise you that.”

“Vera, dammit. I don’t want to lose you,” he pleaded with those big imploring eyes, worried crinkle on his forehead, his whole body language screaming he was being honest. She was touched. But—how could he not understand? It was exactly the reason why she couldn’t promise what he wanted her to; could he stay aside while she was getting into trouble? No. It went both ways dammit!

“You’re being a hypocrite, Matt,” she noted matter-of-factly and he frowned. “And if I won’t stop?”

“Then I— I…“

“You would break up with me? And lose me anyway?” she offered, biting her cheek the moment the words left her lips. What if the answer was yes?!

“Not fair.”

Vera sighed in relief. She was winning. This wasn’t a match, arguments shouldn’t be about winning, they should end up in compromises… but yeah, she was winning. “That wouldn’t stand at court. Not fair, your honour.”

“I don’t sound like that,” he objected, making an offended face at her poor impression. But she could see a smile creeping to his lips.

“No. I bet you sound hot.”

He had no answer to that.

“I promise not do to crazy stuff,” she declared. Unless the situation requires it — she could do dangerous stuff when Matt was in serious danger, right? Or Terri? In that case, it couldn’t be classified as crazy. Ha!

“I swear I’ll tell you about everything… as soon as possible,” he promised in return, kissing her temple as a peace offering. After all, they just decided to stay together. It had written peace all over it. Except Matt was a sneaky bastard and she wasn’t stupid.

“You’re trying to find a loophole, Matt.” Hypocrite, Veronika, YOU are a fucking hypocrite. “I won’t take your promise literally. We both know what I asked you and you just swore to me.”

He grimaced. “I hate when you’re being smart.”

“You love it.”

“I love it,” he confirmed with a gorgeous smile and showed her how much he meant it without words. After all, the actions spoke louder.

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“Matt? Why the hell does it have horns?” Vera asked incredulously as he walked out of the living room, where he was putting the armour on. She was hoping the newspaper were exaggerating. She observed the red-black thingie that looked kinda like a BDSM costume. Even the sticks in his leg holster had red on them. And they looked very… dominative. “It’s a symbol,” he hummed, somewhere between proud and ashamed. Vera had no idea this
combination existed.

“Of you being horny?”

“They were the ones who started calling me the Devil,” he shot back, offended, his lips turned down. Vera sighed. It wasn’t that bad. It was just… the horns. And the BDSM vibe. Jesus, some people might even enjoy if he beat them up dressed like that.

“It’s ridiculous, Matt…” Vera told him honestly, walking closer to him. His expression – half expression – didn’t change. “Also a little scary,” she added and the corners of his lips rose inconspicuously. She lightly knocked on the helmet, her other hand checking the material of his suit. Well, it definitely wasn’t leather, so there was that. It felt lighter, yet much firmer, like… well, like an armour. “I’m glad you have it. It looks that it might actually keep you safer.”

“It will,” he confirmed with a nod.

“Can’t say I won’t miss the black one though.”

“You liked it, huh?” he challenged, taking a step closer, sensing she was regretting the loss genuinely.

“Lots of great memories…”

“Hm… I’ll keep the old one.” He kissed her lightly on lips, making her smile. “For sentimental value.” Another kiss. “Only sentiment, of course.” One more kiss, deep, sweet. Amazing.

Vera almost jumped when he withdrew and she met the glassy red irises of the helmet instead of his warm brown. Jesus, that thing was creepy.

“Please, put that off. I’m not kissing you with this thing on,” she demanded and he smirked in response, but put the helmet off, tossing in on his bed. “Much better.”

When she looked at him like that, without the helmet – his hair tousled as if he just rolled out of bed (possibly after a wild night, a different kind of wild) – it was actually kinda hot too. Different, it would definitely take some time to get used to it, but…. She took a step back to get a better view once more. Matt snickered and slowly turned around so she could see him better. Vera decided Terri would love this armour – because whoa, Vera liked the cargo pants, okay, but this suit made his ass look amazing.

Matt cleared his throat and she realized the picture of his bottom must have stayed burned to her retina, because he was already facing her and she stared at his crotch while… well, not staring. She quickly snapped her head up, finding his amused expression and eyebrow raised teasingly.

“I guess this one isn’t too bad either?” he hummed, shortening the distance and Vera realized she forgot to breathe somewhere along the way. And that her heart was freaking out, gradually speeding up with each inch disappearing between them.

“It’s not… that bad.”


“You’re such a show-off,” she complained, throat tight and dry. “And one incredible egomaniac. Wipe that smirk off of your face.”
The said smirk widened as he stopped less than a step from her, raising his gloved hand.

“You’re not touching me with that thing on,” she warned him, but he could hear the hesitation in her voice, the stupid, absolutely irrational desire to actually be touched like that. It was awful. God knew what was on that reinforced glove, but Jesus, he just tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear and her heart was going to explode. Why? Because even though he was in an armour – something that served his… violent side –, he was being rather tender? Not to most people – to her? Only and only to her?

Now who’s an egomaniac?

The gloved hand cupped her cheek and he kissed her fiercely, not giving her a chance to take the breath she kept forgetting to control.

“You really like it,” he accused her, slightly amazed, his other arm wrapping around her waist, pressing her body against the freaky armour and there was nothing arousing about that. Except it kinda was. Just a little.

“I think I can live with it.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” he laughed silently and kissed her again, demanding more and more, his hands getting distracted.

“Matt, Jesus, stop it, Danny-” she started as his lips made a path down her neck to her cleavage. It was a valid worry – Danny walked in and out as if he owned the place.

“-is not here,” he finished, smile in his voice, smile against her-

“But he’ll come back any-”

“I’ll hang a sock on the door knob,” he breathed and she snorted, her eyes flickering to the bedroom door. If they were quick…

“This door doesn’t-“ she protested weakly.

“The rooftop access does. Gimme a sec.” He actually withdrew.

“Do you really— are you serious? Matt-“

Vera muffled the giggle with her palm, watching him in disbelief as he took one of his socks from the drawer and disappeared, returning with satisfied smile, tossing his gloves away.

“You’re such a dork. And jerk,” she laughed, deliberately taking a step back as he approached her with want written in his face. “What if he’s coming before-“

“Danny coming is none of my business. Yours is. And mine.”

“You did not just-“

He took her by her waist and they landed on his bed. Vera liked his bed. If anything, it was soft, it had silk sheets and… Matt was there, so…

“He’ll handle it, Vera. He’s a big boy. And now shut up or I’ll make you,” he murmured to her neck, biting.

Apparently, they were on honeymoon number two, ever since they made up after the short but
intense disagreement after his return. Now, his *appetite* was *infinite*. Vera couldn’t tell she felt sorry for that. She missed all sides of him after all and it wasn’t like she was any better.

*Make me, huh? Sounds like a challenge.*

“No, seriously, Matt. You’re going to traumatize him. And when you finally put the sock down and he can come in here, he’s gonna know-“

Matt probably saw right through her, but that wasn’t important. The outcome of her talking was.

*He wasn’t bluffing about making me,* was her last comprehensible thought.

That armour wasn’t that bad indeed. She still liked him better without it.

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The problem of silk sheets was that they were *cold*. And so smooth that it actually tickled as she was sensitive to all touches, so she sometimes couldn’t suppress a giggle when the fabric ran across her skin. Mainly when she hadn’t Matt’s wandering hands to distract her at the moment.

Lying in his arms, very close so she could stay warm, perfectly content and satisfied in every meaning of the words, she was slowly drifting away, his fingers playing with her hair.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered softly, apparently still fully awake, engaged in his mission.

Vera smiled sleepily, not bothering to open her eyes, sloppily kissing his pectoral. “How would you know?”

“I get to touch you a lot,” he laughed silently and she could hear the smile in his voice as well. “It’s not just the appearance. You’re beautiful, sure. But also smart. Caring. Good. Warm. Light.”

Her heart fluttered. That was some serious pillow talk. Matt got chatty.

“Like a candle in a dark?” she murmured, her lips attacked by a very goofy smile.

It was only when his hand froze in her hair when she realized her mistake.

*Shit.* Vera snapped her eyes open, afraid to look up at him.

“Yeah,” he breathed hesitantly, shifting their position slightly, so she in fact had to face him. His eyes burned with honesty. “Yeah, like a candle in the dark. And I won’t let it die out. Ever. I promise I’ll protect it with my life and I’ll do better.”

Vera gulped at the declaration, remembering Father Lantom’s words. ‘*And when he talked about her, he often compared her to the best kind of fire – the gentle one, safe, warm and bright – the candle, the torch, the hearth. The kind of fire he wouldn’t stand dying out.*’

“The fire...”

Matt sighed, his irises rolling up. “Danny needs to learn how to shut up.”

“It wasn’t Danny. It was Terri, who learnt from Foggy.” He blinked in surprise.

“Oh. Are you... mad I never told you?” he asked carefully and it was her turn to sigh.

“I was sad. For a while.”
“But not anymore?”

He frowned at her confession, confused. Vera, fully awake again, reached for his face, smoothing the crinkle that created between his eyebrows. It didn’t really work.

“No. You told me a lot of things, Matt. You told me how your senses worked. So you left out one metaphor. I’ll live.”

“Aren’t you curious why?”

“I have a theory,” she admitted, shrugging. It was not entirely truth. “…Father Lantom actually does,” she said hesitantly, seeing his eyes go wide in shock.

“You talked to Father Lantom?” Matt blurted out, absolutely taken aback, hints of startle in his tone.

“Yeah. He’s pretty amazing. He helped a lot when… when you weren’t around. And he makes a mean latté,” she tried to lighten it up, obviously failing, because Matt opened his mouth, no sound coming out for a while.

“Wh— …and you talked… about the world on fire.”

The crinkle was still present; Vera ran fingers through his still tousled and moist hair. He indeed relaxed a little and she couldn’t help smiling. “Among other things. He said he thought you took the fire as a bad thing. But… not recently.”

“No. Not recently,” he agreed, voice lower than before. His gaze was directed somewhere to her chin. He seemed ashamed. Vera had no idea why, because she thought it was freaking amazing. She would never thought about herself like that. But Matt….

“Because fire brings warm and light,” she offered.


“That’s incredible, Matt,” she laughed softly, astonished.

How could she ever doubt he wanted her to stay here? Matt didn’t have many friends. He didn’t have many people he cared about, not really, but those who belonged to the rare species, they were loved, very deeply. And she belonged to them. She was blessed.

“That’s you.”

The words were hanging in the air, his declaration heavy, as if he waited for her verdict, bringing his heart on his sleeve, expecting her to stab it or wrap it in silk, hide it and protect it with her life. He deserved some compensation. Some revelation of how much he mattered.

“It’s actually kinda funny,” Vera managed, licking her lips nervously. But this… it shouldn’t be hard. “This… what you think, me being… warm. When you— I was always cold. I missed the warmth. Never really realized it until it was gone. Until you were gone. Warm eyes,” she explained and something twinkled in his eyes indeed as he blinked in surprise. Way to go. She continued. “Warm smile.” His lips curled in a hesitant, but brilliant smile. “Warm embrace.” His arm drew her just a little closer, something warm spreading in her chest. “Warm kisses…”

Matt could take a hint. His lips met hers, love and gratitude, rolling them both over, so his body covered hers, protecting her from potential cold.
“I love you,” she offered him the darkest and the brightest secret she kept. She was really bad at keeping this one. Probably everyone knew that.

“Miluji tě,” he whispered in return and she grinned. The words that weren’t in his mother tongue still sounded a little funny with his accent. She adored him for saying it anyway. He learned it for her. He did so much for her.

So stupid for ever doubting. “You… you really want me to stay, don’t you?”

He retreated just slightly, so she could see one corner of his mouth raised in uneven smile.

“Yeah. I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, hell. What now?

Guess now I should thank to everyone who stuck around :) So, you know, THANK YOU. Thank you if you left kudos. Thank you so much if you ever left a comment or two (or you know, more), they are love and they are everything ♥

Okay, done. So… what now?

Heads-up aka known facts:
- I promised Matt meet the family thing. My brain is working on it (instead of studying, thank you very much). There is something else in making too, because my head is a mess.
- Things should feel familiar, though not quite. Danny is in NY. Vera met Trish and Jess. Stick is captured. N&M are no more. No, I don’t feel like it right now, because it’s difficult to make it mostly canon and considering the changes at the same time, but yes, there is a possibility. Also, did I mention my mind is one big mess? + Vera and Matt need some good things, I cannot just let the Hand screw up everything right away. So. Later. Maybe.
- There were hints of few other things in this very fic and the stuff in making has them too, which is very helpful, I know :D

Kudos to you all.
Just fair warning. If you were reading Damned If I Do while I was posting it, you might appreciated I posted mostly every day. Yeeah, that’s not gonna work with this one. I need to focus on school a little bit more, otherwise I will be a med school dropout and let me tell you, I don’t really feel like running to US and becoming a barista. I’ll try my best to post twice a week.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!