Creatures in the Night

by beetleboots

Summary

Frank Castle died the night his family was murdered, and returned as a vampire with vengeance. Karen Page is running from secrets in her past, the least of which is that she's a werewolf in the middle of NYC.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Dead Man Walking

Frank Castle was dead. It was an exhalation, a relief from the disbelief and shock, coming down the stairs and seeing his young family broken on the floor. Slipping in blood and collapsing to cradle his daughters ragdoll form to his chest. The shock rolling over to red rage behind his eyes, when he looked up and saw the glyph on the wall, carefully daubed in blood. He made to rise, and heard a choked curse from behind him. Frank Castle could barely turn to face the intruders in his home before they flew at him, ripping what was left of his life from his living body.

Then, death. Release. Relief. Maria, no longer drenched in the blood of her children, holding a smile and a hand towards him, and he moves towards her, dream-slow, but he knows he has an eternity now, he's not worried-

And like the blood rushing back to a sleeping limb, life surges back in to his body. He roars, every nerve on fire, and for a moment he truly believes in Hell, because what else could this be?

Frank Castle's body, his new body, cracks and shudders. Relays fire, new pathways connect and grow, and his senses bloom anew.

He sits, alone in the midst of his family, in front of the drying glyph on the wall. The red rage has cooled, hardened in to a knife point of shining steel. He turns that sharp edge against the memory of his attackers, sliding it alongside the knowledge of who they belong to, and the House that glyph represents. His focus is singular.

Frank Castle is dead. Long live Frank Castle.

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Frank often woke before the sun went down. The lone window of his tenement apartment caught the final moments of the day head on, and the warm light would push its way in through the tightly shuttered blinds. He would sit, sometimes, in front of the window, and dare himself to tear down the blinds. To let the sunlight in. He never got further than a half raised hand, before the red wave crashed down in front of his eyes. Part rage, part revenge, part death-wish, and below that, the dull throb of hunger.

It was omnipresent, from the moment his heart restarted and he was thrust back in to life. Frank knew, in that moment, surrounded by the pooling life-blood of his wife and children, that he was not human. No longer mortal. Frank Castle, already a talented killer, was now an apex predator. A goddamn vampire.

He had died, and had now lived again as a vampire for about 2 years. He slept in the day, avoiding the sunlight, and hunted at night. Sometimes he hunted to feed, swiftly ending the lives of Hell’s Kitchen’s scumbags. Most nights, though, he hunted the ranks of the Kitchen's resident vampire House: Carpathia.

The moment Frank laid eyes on the bloody symbol on his living room wall, he knew exactly who murdered his family.
Tonight he rose, ignoring the lingering sun. He pulled on his usual pants, Henley, boots. A pause by the sink, to run a hand over his scalp, and a brief glance at the creased photos taped to the wall, and then he was gone.

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Vampires were uncommon, even in a city that never slept. To create a vampire, you had to want to live after death. However, it all depended on who was doing the wanting.

A vampire’s bite was venomous, and would swiftly kill. To survive the bite, to live past that death, you required an unbearably strong rush of adrenaline. The easiest way to achieve this is by a good fight or a good fuck while being bitten. You ride the adrenaline rush through to the other side, and come out forever changed. Your body’s natural aging slows to a crawl, and your strength, senses, and healing are enhanced tenfold. The trade-off is a deadly allergy to sunlight, and the need to feed on adrenaline rich blood to survive. This is the usual course these things take.

Frank Castle was not usual.

It was uncommon enough to be considered a myth, a vampire urban legend, but it did happen. A strong enough burst of rage, or fear, or terror, stronger than a human’s usual reaction, would sometimes push a person through to the other side, without help. These accidental, unintentional vampires were rare, and dangerous.

Frank stalked the streets tonight. It was warm; the low clouds pushing the humid air down to the city. The city was irritable, on edge from the heat, and humans on edge made stupid mistakes. He quietly studied the noisy clusters of people he passed, looking for bite scars or House tattoos. Young men, bursting with bravado, gave him the eye as he passed, but their lucky survival instinct kept them in check. This was another telling sign: vampires familiars were often fearless and thoughtless in their actions. What did it matter what trouble you got into, or who you provoked, when your masters were mythical monsters? When you were sure to become one of these monsters, in the end of it? Vampire Houses lured young men and women in to their service with promises of immortality, as long as they served their masters well in the meantime. And if a wild familiar got themselves killed, all the better. One less person to turn, in the end.

Frank had no qualms about slaugthering familiars. They may he human, but they desired the change strongly enough to serve the Houses, and that was just as bad. They usually attacked him first, too, which was an added benefit.

The night was still young, with the waxing moon just beginning to show her face through the clouds, but already Frank was tired. The bone deep exhaustion was ever present, a fact of his life at this point. He was accustomed to that. Tonight, sliding over top of that like a wave of tar, was hunger. He needed to hunt, to feed. To restore that manic vampiric energy that he loathed with every moment, every fibre of himself. When the hunger lurched to the forefront of his consciousness, he often thought about starving himself. No blood, no life, and the relief of death were pleasant thoughts. Inevitably, though, the bloody vision of Maria would loom up in his mind, and need for vengeance would propel him onward.

Frank aligned himself toward Hell’s Kitchen. The square mile of basements and alleyways was his ideal hunting ground, ripe with unsavoury people. He knew the quiet places they lurked, from both his human life and his inhuman one. With this in mind, Frank slunk down the poorly lit alley ways,
alert for signs of his prey. He was nearly silent on his feet, unheard and nearly unseen by any humans nearby. He slowly moved further on, filtering out the sounds of the good working folk in the city, going about their nightly business. His keen hearing easily sorted through the sounds, until it hit on the soft click of a gun safety being turned off. Frank’s body stilled, all senses alert and honing in on the sound. Voices floated up from basement stairs further down the alley; two men were quietly running through a plan to rob an elderly neighbour. Frank could hear the dismissive tones of their conversation, the nonchalant way they discussed how they would have to end their neighbours life.

The red rage and hunger lurking behind Frank’s eyes melted together, honing itself to a grimly determined knife point. Frank Castle never enjoyed killing, either in the before or the after, but it was a necessary evil. He could accept his lot in life, this unwanted gift thrust upon him, but he would never tolerate those who chose to do evil things.

Frank stepped softly over the door frame, taking the stone steps with a determined pace towards the voices below. The men spoke plainly about their plans, and Frank knew they were the right choice for his meal tonight.

The two young men, barely grown, had laid their weapons out on a table under a single bare light bulb. Their demeanour spoke of desperation, but this did not give Frank pause. Your lot in life did not give you the right to take the lives of others.

The light bulb flickered. One of the men turned idly in his chair, and Frank lunged. He went straight for the throat of the first man, who barely had time to raise his arms in defense before Frank was on him, tearing out his jugular. The frantic beat of the man’s heart sprayed blood straight in to Frank’s waiting mouth, and he gushed it down. He hiked the body up, rearranging his grip on the gaping neck wound like a leech. The man’s heart slowed, losing too much blood in too short a time, and Frank could taste the change. He dropped him, the dying man falling the the floor like a sack of meat, and turned to the second would-be thief in the room.

The other young man had leapt backwards in nearly the same moment as Frank had attacked, and as his horror caught up with him, he stumbled over the broken furniture in an attempt to escape. The bloody attack on his friend, however, had lasted under a minute, and he had not made it very far when Frank turned slowly towards him. The man gaped at him, wide eyed, not comprehending the scene before him. Frank wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and advanced towards him.

“I heard you. You gotta talk quieter around hear. The walls have ears,” he ground out. The young man stumbled back another step, and Frank grabbed his arm to stop him from going any further.

“You’re not going to like this, but if you struggle, it’s gonna get worse then it already is.”

Frank gripped his arm behind his back, and went again for the jugular. This time, though, it was graceful. Poised. He sank his fangs in to the young man’s soft neck, rupturing the artery in just the right place. The man’s quickening heart pumped blood straight up to Frank’s waiting mouth, and he sucked and swallowed until the man sagged in his arms. Frank let him fall to the floor. The adrenaline rich blood pulsing through his system made him momentarily dizzy. His ears rang, and he had to hold himself up against the wall until the blur in his vision subsided. With this came the clarity in his senses that no human could ever begin to grasp.

Frank did his best to wipe the blood from his face and hands, and left the small basement room from the way he came, up the stairs and back in to the dingy alley.

The stars swam above him, peeking through the heavy clouds. He could see every speck and twinkle, every satellite and meteorite passing by. He could hear the noise of the city, the constant din of traffic and people and lives being lived around him. He could pick out individual voices, each
person living a piece of a harmony with those around them. The smells of food, of garbage, of heat, of fear and anger and love and lust around him made him heady, and as it was after each feed, he knew he wouldn’t be able to hunt again tonight.

The overwhelming effect would subside by the next night, returning him once again to the clear headed predator he normally was, and after that he had about ten days to be a fully functional hunter, before the pangs of hunger got too loud to ignore.

The night was still young, though, and Frank felt blood-drunk enough to want to enjoy it, for a moment. Maria and Lisa and Frankie were never far from his thoughts, and in some twisted way he knew they would want him to move on with his life. He wouldn’t, though, not until the entire House of Carpathia was dead for good, the entire lot of them stinking corpses at his feet. Then, only then, he would rest. Eternally.

Tonight, Frank could not hunt them. He conceded. Tomorrow was another night, and tonight, Frank wanted a cup of coffee.

Frank Castle was a native New Yorker, and he knew a good cup of black coffee like the back of his own hand. The dingier the diner, the blacker the coffee, the better. He meandered in the streets, letting himself have a moment of awe at what was usually the bane of his very undead living existence. His sharp predator’s senses were in overdrive, and the city around him pulsed and glowed, opening itself up to him like a chest of treasures. Peals of laughter, the glowing embers of cigarettes, like fireflies, and the waft of life being lived around him. His heart clenched when he suddenly thought how much Maria would have loved this. Certainly not the blood drinking and wanton murder, but the new outlook on life, and the opportunity to experience this sensory delight. He quickly squashed these thoughts down, the rational mind behind his blood-drunk self reminding him that vampires were monsters, /he/ was a monster, and anyone who truly wanted this life deserved to die.

His mood somewhat dampened, Frank entered grungy diner he had been heading towards. It was nothing very special, but the lights were bright against the night outside, and he could count on the other diners to ignore him entirely. He took a seat at the end of the bar, giving himself a solid view of the establishment. Nothing felt off, and he gave himself the luxury of putting his guard down.

The waitress promptly filled his coffee mug whenever it neared empty, and he ordered a plate of bacon to pick away at. Frank sunk down in to his thoughts, as the heady blood-high began to wear off. He idly sketched out his plan of attack for tomorrow night. He was fresh out of leads, getting nowhere in his search for the city stronghold of the House of Carpathia. Sure, the familiars were plentiful enough, doing grunt work for the suckheads, but he was growing weary of chasing them down. If one fell, it seemed like three more took their place, and Frank was itching to move up the food chain.

In the past two years, since becoming a vampire, he had killed 6 of them. Four had been lower Carpathians that he had lured out, using their missing familiars as bait. This action had put him on their radar, and he knew without a doubt that they knew exactly who he was.

The fifth vampire had been Armayan. He hadn’t realized he was actually dealing with a vampire, until he got a whiff of it. The petty criminals he had been tailing were humans, and he assumed the reported to a wholly human leader. He had suspected they were making deals with a gang of familiars, but when he arrived at the flophouse they had entered, the stank of vampire bowled him over. Armayans were an unruly, unpleasant bunch, and though they were few and far between, they had deep ties to the criminal underworld.

The sixth… had been an accident. Frank had still been new to his vampirism, and had taken down a
trio of Irish gang grunts to feed on. He was taking his time, feeding from each man, to make the most of the meal, when the half-crazed beast swooped down on him. The vampire was more animal at this point, ferociously beating Frank back, trying to steal the kill. Frank had been taken by surprise, but it was quickly give over to that predatory instinct, and he dispatched the starving creature easily. After the brawl, and after Frank’s injuries began to knit themselves back together, he carefully checked the dead vampire’s corpse. He found the House tattoo he had been searching for, but somehow it had been destroyed, unhealed and leaving a nasty scar. Even with his burgeoning knowledge of the vampire world, Frank had no idea what to make of this, and he left had the scene hastily.

Frank surfaced from his thoughts and surveyed his surroundings anew. In the hours that had passed, most of the diners had finished up and left. All that remained apart from himself was the waitress, reading a worn paperback on the other end of the bar, and the blonde in the corner booth, hunched over a pile of paperwork on the table. Frank must have stared at her a little too long, because she raised her head, a slightly alarmed look on her face. She held his stare, though, as if daring him to look away first. He would have liked to continue keeping her gaze, but he was interrupted by the waitress, offering him another coffee refill. When he returned to the woman in the corner, she was hunched over her table once again, though he could tell she was alert to her surroundings. Frank sighed, and drained the rest of his mug of coffee. The caffeine and bitter thoughts had melted away any unwanted joy he had felt earlier in the night, and it was back to business as usual now. He left a generous tip for the waitress, and made for the door. The blonde kept her head down as he approached, but he could see her watching him from under her brow.

“Ma’am,” he nodded, glancing down at the papers on her table, and what he saw almost made him choke.
Karen Page knew a lot of people. Ask any one of them, and you'd be met by lovely sentiments, but only generalities. "Oh, she's very nice! Always has a dollar or a coffee for the man on the corner." Or: "Karen! What a great writer. Always gets her articles in on time, no fuss." However, if you continued to probe these friendly acquaintances, you'd be left with a blank faces and a shrug. Karen Page knew a lot of people in this city, but not many knew her, not at all.

She tipped well at the cafe on the corner, she bought milk for the work fridge, she'd always be happy to lend you a pen. Her co-workers popped in to run a line past her, and she happily butt heads with her editor on a daily basis.

Karen Page was sunshine, lovely, and almost completely anonymous. When she had to work from home a few days every month, the people in her life were none the wiser.

It would start as a crackle at the base of her skull. Goosebumps in the sun. That feeling, like being secretly watched, grew and grew as Luna opened her eye overhead. The tingles became an incessant itch, and the crackle rose to a dull roar. And then, as the sun set, Karen would save her current article, throw on an old sweatshirt, and walk to Central Park. She'd stash her clothes and keys away, and as the full moon presided over her, Karen Page would shatter.

It was the same, every month, and it had been for the past 3 years. It never got any easier.

Bones broke, muscles tore, skin stretched and bruised. Outside of her monthly transfiguration, Karen sometimes wondered what it looked like, to an onlooker. She could only assume it looked as horrible as it felt. A blessing, then, that within moments her bones regrew, her muscles knit themselves whole, and her skin settled over her new predator's body.

Karen Page was sunshine, lovely; a person you'd be happy to know.

Karen Page was moonlight, horror; a lone wolf in the dark.

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was, she had done her best to amend her actions, to make herself blend in with the bulk of humanity. The paranoia thrummed in the back of her mind, the wolf lurking behind everything, and she pushed them both away.

Karen had become accustomed to the lurking wolf. In the beginning, it had felt like a death sentence. She wasn’t human, she was a monster, she would live out her life as a subhuman beast and go straight to hell. Her painfully small hometown in Vermont was comprised of painfully small-minded people, and though they did not know the true extent of her “illness”, their disdain towards her was enough to drive her away.

New York City had seemed like a bad choice, at first. Karen had toyed with the idea of moving somewhere remote, where she could live the rest of her years in shame and isolation. In the end, though, she had worried that being alone with the wolf would not be good for her sanity. Surrounding herself with people, in one of the most populous areas of the world, felt like a good way to anchor herself to her humanity, while still affording her the anonymity she needed to transform into a freakin’ werewolf once a month.

Karen walked idly back towards the offices of the Bulletin, chewing on the straw of her drink. People surged around her, moving with and against the tide, and she watched. She always watched. Karen instinctively monitored the world around her, at any given moment. It was second nature, at this point, and she had easily used it to her advantage as an investigative journalist. Details that would be lost on humans would leap out in front of her, and she was often quick to connect the dots in any given situation. Her editor, Ellison, a stubborn man, sometimes questioned her conclusions, and they would hash out their ideas over many coffees.

Karen was usually the one correct.

She returned to her office, greeting a couple of her coworkers on the way in, make idle small talk about the weather, about the ball game, about Janet’s headline last week. Ellison nodded at her from across the room, and she smiled in return, before closing the door to her office. She valued the private space, and felt more at ease being in a space alone, under her control. Luckily for Karen, Ellison understood and respected this, and not long after she sat down at her desk to scroll through her emails and calendar, an IM from the editor popped up on her desktop.

ME: /Any luck with that lead on the new gang downtown?/

KP: /Nothing much. They’ve seen the new gang signs popping up around town, but they know as much about their origins as I do./

ME: /Well, I’ll keep an ear out, but you usually beat me to punch when it comes to leads/

KP: /What can I say? I’ve got great hearing :)/

Karen flipped open her notebook to her latest set of notes, and began to transcribe them. Her latest story had sprouted from her own observations; around town a number of new gang signs had begun
to show up. Some in graffiti tags, some printed on business signs, some carved right in to the city’s brickwork buildings. She had been curious, and had reached out to some of her usual informants, to see if they knew anything. Most either knew nothing, or refused to tell her anything. All seemed anxious to drop the subject. And that, for Karen, was reason enough to begin digging deeper. Her latest lead was a less than reputable tattoo artist, who had inked a couple of these sigils on some gangbangers not long ago. Karen had tried in vain to extract any useful details from him, but she got was the usual warnings: “These guys, miss, they’re bad. Bad news. You see someone with one of them tattoos, you turn the other way.” That had been the end of their conversation, and while Karen had left her contact card with the shopkeeper, she didn’t think she would be getting any calls anytime soon.

The hot day waned on, and most of the Bulletin’s staff left early in an attempt to escape the heat. Karen took advantage of the quiet office, using the time to churn out some fluff pieces that Ellison insist she write, to “earn her keep”, as he often said. She knew he valued her bigger, meatier stories over everything else, and she suspected this was just a way for him to pay her more, and maybe to keep her out of trouble as well.

Karen hit save on her fourth op-ed, and was somewhat surprised to see the streetlights on outside her office window. The daylight had gotten away from her, but she was still wide awake. The heat of the day, and the shining sun had energized her, and she wanted to ride this high as long as possible. Karen grabbed her bag, her notebook and half a dozen pens, and locked up the Bulletin offices behind her. The city may be dark, but it was still alive. The muggy heat brought the city’s denizens out of their homes, and Karen felt unafraid as she passed groups of people laid out on the stoops of buildings. She made her way along, still reveling in the warmth. The city was buzzing, and at moments like this she felt a part of it, rather than an outsider, a pretender.

Karen made her way to one of the greasier diners, about midway between the office and her apartment. It wasn’t 5 star, but it was bright, and the coffee didn’t stop coming. She parked herself at a booth against the wall, away from the windows, and quickly surveyed the restaurant. It was quiet, a couple of other late night diners. None of them looked particularly threatening, and with that, she spread her notebook open in front of her on the table and got to work.

Since she first noticed the new gang signs popping up around the city, she had meticulous kept an ever-growing list of them. She was sure passer-bys had eyed her strangely, as she carefully copied what looked like a sloppy tag on the side of a dumpster. Her list had grown, and she noted where they had been seen, when they had appeared, and the frequency they appeared around her. Some of the sigils appeared only once or twice, in completely random places around the city, and others had been seen dozens of times. One particular sign was clustered around Hell’s Kitchen, another was only found in Uptown Manhattan… her lists seemed endless as she tried to make some kind of connection between them.

Karen rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, beginning to feel some exhaustion from the day behind her. She pushed around the note cards she had made with each sign, trying to see some kind of pattern or repetition. Her eyes began to water. She blinked, slow, and out of nowhere felt an unpleasant crackle run up her spine. Her gaze darted up, in to the dark eyes of the sitting at the end of the bar. He almost imperceptibly started when their gazes met, and she held his, almost without blinking. She’d often used this trick to ward off unwanted attention from strange men, but in this instance he stared back, only breaking to acknowledge the waitress pouring him coffee.

Karen returned to her work, but she kept an ear on the soft noises around her. The shuffle of pages in the waitresses book, the dull rumble of traffic outside, still busy even at this time of night, and the steady breathing of the dark man across the room. When she heard him rise to leave, she chanced a glance up from under her brows. He passed her booth on the way to the door, nodding at her with a
gravelly “Ma’am,” as he met her eye. She saw him glance down at her work in front of her, and whatever he saw made him stumble. Karen tensed up, immediately on the defensive.
Frank regained his composure almost instantly. He leaned in towards the woman in the booth, trying to restrain himself from making any more of a scene than he already had.

"Where," he growled, "did you get these?" He jabbed a finger onto the pile of notes and glyphs on the table.

The blonde, to her credit, did not shy away. In fact, she rose, unfolding herself from the bench seat to Frank's level. She bared her teeth at him.

"What," she returned icily, "the hell is it to you?" Frank glared at her.

"This is dangerous shit, ma'am. You shouldn't be getting involved with this-"

"I will thank you to not assume you know anything about what I am doing. Now, if you would please leave. Me. Alone."

Her face turned to stone, blue eyes wide and nostrils flaring. Frank's brow furrowed as far as it would go. He gave the blonde a clenched-jaw nod, and with another nod to the wary waitress, he exited the diner, back in to the oppressively hot night.

Karen lowered herself back in to the booth, every muscle in her body as tense as a coiled spring. She laid her palms flat on the table, and took a deep breath, willing the wolf to return to it's slumber in the back of her mind.

For whatever esoteric reason, werewolves had no choice in transforming during the full moon. It would happen whether you like it or not, so you'd better prepare yourself. Outside of that night, though, you could have... Accidents. If enough adrenaline spiked through the body, and your guard dropped enough in a heated situation, the wolf sometimes sprung free.

It hadn't happened to Karen since her first year, and this charged confrontation was as close as she had been to it since.

The intensity of the dark man had rattled her. He knew how to put the pieces of this puzzle together. He knew, and she blew it.

Karen slumped back in the bench seat. The man was gone, and she had made no headway in her research. She settled up her bill, gathered up her notes, and headed home.

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Frank slammed the door of his apartment shut. His head swam, the red rage rising and falling behind his eyes. Goddamn humans had no idea what kind of shit they needed to be protected from - he tried to warn her - and she just, she just - spat it back in his face -

He paced the small room, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Frank tried to visual the papers on the table in the booth, from what he had seen in his brief glance downward. He had seen the Carpathian glyphs, for sure, and Cthon too; but he could have sworn there were nearly a dozen
down in front of her. What she thought they were, he had no idea, let alone how she even could physically see most of them. He knew familiars would paint them for each other in regular spray paint, but the vampires themselves used a UV reactive paint that only particularly sensitive eyes could register.

Frank collapsed in his chair, at a loss. He was angry, mostly with himself. He should have ripped that shit to shreds, made a damn point about what he was trying to say. He ran a hand over his scalp, not quite admitting to himself that the reason he didn’t was because the blonde had surprised him. She had fearlessly gotten up in to his face, which did not happen. Ever. He knew how intimidating he was, but she had stood up for herself without hesitation.

Frank slumped further down in his chair. He watched, immobile, as the sunrise began to redden the edges of the night sky. With a heave and a sigh, he closed the window shade, sealed tight against the coming daylight, and fell in to bed. His sleep did not come easily, and tonight was no exception. The presence of the sun behind the window blind was as oppressive as the heat. Frank squeezed his eyes as tightly shut as he could manage, and sent himself in to an uneasy slumber.

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Not far away, near the top edge of Hell’s Kitchen, Karen Page was having a fitful sleep as well. She tossed in her bed, for once decrying the heat. Her dreams were haunted by the man who had confronted her in the diner; haunted by the implication that she had been that close to another potential lead, and she had driven him away with a snarl.

Karen gave up on sleeping, and arose with the sun. It promised to be another beautiful day, and she tried to focus on that, tried to let a smile bloom across her face. It faltered, and sighing, she got out of bed to get ready for her day.

Showered, dressed, and coffee in hand, she made her routine check of the calendar on the wall before leaving. She instinctively knew how many days she had until the full moon, but it helped her to centre herself by counting out loud.

Eleven. Eleven days until the full moon. That was an eternity, if you kept yourself busy enough. She emptied the last of her coffee in to the kitchen sink, and locked up her small apartment behind her.

Karen’s route to her office was the same as it always was; she found much peace in routine. She had her fill of chaos during the full moon, when all bets were off.

She wove her way through the quiet morning streets, enjoying the dawn light and the emptiness of the city around her, a contrast to the heady night before. Her sundress flapped in the light morning breeze, and some joy began to seep back in to Karen’s demeanour.

With another cup of coffee in hand, she arrived at the Bulletin, and settled in to her office to wait for Ellison. She’d received a handful of emails since she had left the night before, but nothing worth following up on. The gang signs dominated her mind, and however much she attempted to turn her focus to other topics, it was fruitless. Luckily for her, Ellison understood this, as announced to her when he thrust his head through her office door.

“Page! Your op-eds are great. I especially like the one about the zoo animals staying cool in the summer heat. Go, go work from home or something, we’re good here,” he added, waving her out.
Karen leaned back in her chair, smiling wryly. “You couldn’t have texted me that this morning?”

“Nah I knew you’d already be here in the office by the time I got out of bed, so too bad.” He turned to leave, exiting with a dismissive wave. Karen rolled her eyes, but nonetheless gathered her purse up once again, and left the Bulletin. She briefly considered returning home and going back to bed, but the clear blue sky beckoned her, and she meandered through the streets until she found herself in the lower half of Hell’s Kitchen.

She knew where her feet had taken her. There hadn’t really been another option, had there. Pulling out her notebook, she compared the first entry on her list of glyph sightings, to the one haphazardly sprayed on a trash can in front of her.

Following the list took her through the back alleys of Hell’s Kitchen. In her two years of living in the Kitchen, Karen had come to proudly call it home. The brick buildings around her, the life teeming out windows and over stoops, had given her another sort of peace. She fought with that old fear, of getting too close to people around her, but at the same time, she craved it. She enjoyed her stroll through her corner of Manhattan, and her steps eventually brought her down towards the docks. A rusted sign, overgrown with morning glory, boasted a neatly stenciled gang sign on the upper right corner. However. Below that was - something new. Karen shaded her eyes against the sun, frowning slightly.

Scratched into the sign, below the stencil, was what appeared to be hasty 39. From a certain angle. If you squinted. It could also have been some kids tag, or even just the paint on the sign flaking away. Karen always tried to avoid jumping to conclusions, but still, she found herself walking down past the docks, counting the numbers on the warehouses beside them. She slowed as she saw the faded 39 painted on the aluminum siding of a totally nondescript warehouse. Completely normal. Nothing to see here, Page.

Even as she told herself that, she tucked her dress under her and sat down on a concrete block across the alley. She rummaged in her bag for a stray granola bar, and sat, chewing thoughtfully in the sun, as she watched Warehouse 39. The docks around her were quiet, except for the distant cry of a seagull, and the boat horns out on the water. It was… peaceful.

Karen tipped her head back, enjoying the heat on her face and the salt on her skin. She tried to empty her mind, to give herself over to the moment. It worked, for a time, until her mind sank far enough down to rustle the sleeping wolf. With a resigned sigh, Karen rose, and made her way away from the docks, and back towards the life in the city.

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Night fell. The city toiled on, never afforded a moment’s rest. Frank rose after the sun had set. After his feed the night before, he was in peak form. His senses felt sharp, honed to a knife’s edge. He was every inch a predator; a deadly weapon. Tonight, he would make someone talk. He wouldn’t give himself any other choice.

The city’s heatwave had broken during the day prior, and the residents breathed a sigh of relief. The stoops were deserted, except for the usual night folk. Frank stayed within the darker shadows tonight; with fewer people on the streets, he did not feel like bringing attention to himself any more than necessary.
The air was cool and crisp around him, and for a moment, he let himself revel in it. Summer was still upon them, but the faint chill on the breeze promised autumn’s arrival. The humans, they felt a shiver, and then they carried on. For a vampire, every dip in temperature, every rise in air pressure, every change in the sensory feast the surrounded him, brought him more knowledge of his world than he knew how to process. It was all filed neatly away in his mind, and he still occasionally surprised himself.

He monitored the smells wafting on the breeze, and as we walked on, the scent of familiar and vampire, woven together in a sweaty haze, grew stronger. Turning a corner, he came upon a back alley stoop occupied by half a dozen young men. They were loud, boastful, nearly dripping with bravado. They laughed crudely and loudly, and Frank had no doubt that their antics terrified their neighbours.

Frank stepped in to the pool of the streetlight.

The young men jumped to attention, hands moving to hover over knives and guns. A braver one jumped down from the stoop, ambling towards Frank.

“What the hell do you want, bro? We botherin’ you?” He smirked back towards his fellows, who snickered. Frank crossed his arms.

“I don’t know, kid. You lot making trouble?”

“The fuck it matter to you, old man!” The kid snarled, advancing on Frank with a blade unfolding in hand. Frank kept still, eyeing the young man as he approached, and when he was within arms reach, he unleashed a predator’s smile.

The kid faltered, and Frank shot an arm out, grabbing him by the neck. The group of men behind them exploded in to action, a furor of guns cocking and knives drawing. Frank held the kid out, visibly squeezing his neck tighter while his eyes lay dead on the group above.

“You shits are gonna help me out, tonight. Otherwise your buddy here is gonna die. Unpleasantly.”

The man in his fist sputtered, and he spasmed involuntarily, releasing the knife from his grasp. Frank kicked it away.

Another of the young men stumbled forward. Very young. He was frantic, the sweat running down his brow stank of fear. As he cautiously neared Frank, the other four men behind him backed away from the scene, before turning tail and running in to the dark night. Frank cast a moment’s glance at their retreating figures. It was a small disappointment, to lose so many at once, but these two would do for now.

He focused back on the fearful young man in front of him. Frank could see the glyph tattoo he was looking for, poking out of the neck of his t-shirt. He nodded at the kid.

“You guys with Carpathia?”

The kid nodded vigorously. “Yeah, man. Look, let Sully go, we’ll get you whatever you want-”

Sully gurgled in Frank’s vice grip, trying to shake his head no. The other kid stuttered on. “Our guys can get you blood, you want that? Or, uh, I don’t know what vampires want, man. Just let him go, please-”

Frank loosened his grip by a hair. “Where do you report to?”
“The docks! Down at the docks. I only ever been there once, though, I don’t know which one…”

Frank released his fist another inch. “Close to the bridge?”

The kid shook his head. “Further up, I think-”

Frank released Sully. He fell straight to the ground, gasping and pawing at his neck. He rolled over and kicked out at the kid.

“Run, you fuckin' asshole! That’s Frank goddamn Castle-”

Frank stomped on the prone man’s trachea. He spasmed for a moment, and went still. The younger man looked horrified, but he pulled a large knife out nonetheless. It shook as he pointed it towards Frank.

“What the hell man! You said he wasn’t gonna die!”

Frank shook his head. “I said he wasn’t gonna die unpleasantly. That was pretty quick. You, though…” He lunged. The kid turned and tried to run, his flight instinct finally catching up with him, but Frank was already on him. He fought back, and Frank would give him credit for that, landing a couple of decent slices with his knife, but at the end of it, the kid was a Familiar. He threw his lot in with the vampires voluntarily, and there was no coming back from that.

Frank easily spun the man’s neck. He went limp, and dropped to the ground. Frank bent, his blood dripping slowly out of already healing wounds, and tugged the collar of the t-shirt down, exposing the glyph tattoo. It was limned with angry red, the sign of a fresh back alley treat. The kid was new, barely a part of the group. Frank had no pity for him.

He straightened, and aligned himself with the faint sounds of Hudson River. He could smell the trail of fear left by the remaining gang as they had fled, and they had made a beeline in the same direction.

Frank had a feeling he would get lucky tonight.
Karen nestled in to her dark jacket. She perched on a rooftop adjacent to warehouse 39, monitoring the slow traffic on the docks below. It was later in the evening, but that detail only increased the volume of people lurking about.

She checked her watch, noting the time in her notebook, and returned her small binoculars to her eyes. 39 had been quiet tonight, and she wasn’t sure she should give it any more attention. Still, her stubborn streak guided her, and she stayed put.

She began to zone out, not really focussing on the docks below, when a bolt of movement startled her back in to the moment. She realigned her binoculars with the warehouse, and saw a small group of young men, nervously milling about. None of them attempted to unlock the warehouse door, but they stayed put outside, waiting for something.

Karen was too far away to hear them speak, even with her sharp hearing, but she could see by their body language that they were an anxious bunch. They may not be related to her gang sign story, but Karen was briefly pleased, as it could mean an equally interesting story to write tomorrow.

She saw the group tense to attention, and from out of the dock shadows appeared a dark figure. The men parted, and the new arrival opened the warehouse door and entered, not waiting for the group to catch up. The aluminum door clanged shut behind them, and Karen held her breath, counted to 200, and then carefully rushed down through her building-perch, and across the alley to the warehouse.

The door was firmly shut, but still unlocked. Karen gingerly turned the know, keeping a sharp ear out for any noise inside. The door gasped open, and she slid through the gap, before slowly returning it closed.

The interior of the warehouse was musty, as if it had absorbed the water from below it all the way in to it’s rafters. It creaked around her, and Karen chose her footsteps wisely, in an attempting to keep the floor from groaning.

She felt her way along dusty towers of crates and boxes, some sporting dates long since passed. She rounded a tower, and the noise of the men leapt at her, pushing her back in to the shadows. From this angle, she could hear the conversation between the gang of men and the stranger, clear as a glass bell. They young men were clamoring, arguing at the stranger, who stood stiffly above them. They were disordered, distraught about some event that had happened earlier this night. The man raised a hand, and the din ceased in an instant. From her alcove, Karen could barely hear the man’s soft voice, though the tone and cadence was alluring.

“I do not care. I have no sentimental feelings for any one of you. In fact, you are essentially disposable. So do not coming running to me with your problems, unless they are serious enough to put your masters in danger. Or, if you somehow manage to kill Frank Bloody Castle. Then you may summon me.” The man sighed, brushing an invisible mote of dust from his jacket sleeve. He looked back up to the group before him. “In this moment, though, you can do your job and go fetch our little visitor, please,” he said, nodding in Karen’s direction. It took her a moment to realize that he was in fact referring to her directly, and this wasted minute brought the group of young men to surround her. Outnumbered, she raised her hands, and was dragged back into the light, to be thrown down in to a hard chair in front of the stranger in black.

The bare lightbulb above swung, throwing his face in competing light and shadow. He appeared to be middle aged, albeit with very fine, smooth skin, and only the whisper of wrinkles around his eyes
and mouth. He peered down at her cooly.

“Can we help you, miss?” Karen stayed silent, keeping eye contact with the man.

“No? Pity. Give me her bag,” he ordered, gesturing to the young man clutching Karen’s purse.

He pulled out her wallet, flipping through it to find her ID.

“Karen Page… oh yes, the reporter from the newspaper. Investigating us? Or out sniffing around, getting in to no good kind of trouble…” He continued to rifle through her bag, pulling out a fistful of her gang sign notecards.

“Ah! So you are on our trail! We better not let you go, then…” He nodded to another young man, who returned with a roll of duct tape, securing her tightly to the hard wooden chair. They slapped a length of tape over her mouth, and left her alone under the single light bulb, to congregate further back in to the shadow of the warehouse. The stranger appeared to dictate orders to his men, though what exactly he was saying, Karen couldn’t make out. A sense of panic began to rise in her throat, blurring her vision. Things were going south very, very fast. These men obviously knew what the gang signs were, what they meant, but she still had no idea whatsoever what that meant for her. One thing was sure, though; they definitely weren’t your run of the mill book club. She winced, her weak joke doing nothing to calm her nerves. She could feel goosebumps rising up her arms and legs, despite the temperature inside the warehouse, still warm from the sunny day.

The stranger and his group of accomplices turned back towards Karen. The man murmured a command, and the foursome began to advance on her. Karen strained against the tape holding her back, hands curling in to fists on the chair, and she was ready to bodily throw herself at them, when the skylight window far above them crashed down, followed by another holy terror drenched in black.

…

The odious trail left by the remaining group of men was as stark as day. Their sheer terror followed them across Hell’s Kitchen, and down to the docks on the Hudson River. Right up to the door of one particular warehouse, in fact. They were making things easy for him.

Frank paused outside the door, listening. He could sense 4 humans, still oozing fear, and one vampire inside. His body tensed at that, and Frank quickly ran over his plan of attack, amending it to account for another vampire. The best course here was to do some recon, before anything else.

Frank scaled the side of the warehouse, bodily heaving himself up over the edge of the roof, and picked his way across the the skylight nearest the water. The cool breeze from the river erased any sound of the group below, but he could see them well enough through the dingy glass, crowded around a wooden table. The vampire held sway over them, and then gestured off out of Frank’s view. The familiars peeled off as a unit, and returned momentarily, dragging a woman with them.

Frank snarled, gripping the frame of the skylight so hard it cracked in protest. He watched as they threw her down to the floor in front of the vampire, who nosed through her bag. He cursed, trying to reconstruct his plan of attack around this new obstacle. The woman did not appear to be interacting with these brutes by choice, and Frank could only assume she was an innocent caught in the crossfire.
The vampire below came up with a fist of papers from the woman’s bag, and threw them to the side with force, which brought one of the familiars running up with a roll of duct tape. They strapped her tightly in to the chair, and Frank could see her begin to struggle against her bonds, and the group of men and vampire moved back out of his sightline. He saw the woman pause, warily watching the direction the group took away from the light, and then she began to struggle in earnest once again.

A shaky frame of a plan clicked into place in his mind, and with that, Frank struck. He slammed his booted foot straight through the skylight, sending glass straight down in to the advancing crowd below. He followed right behind it, landing as solidly as a lead weight in to the middle of the fray.

The young men around him erupted. Partly from their fear of him, and partly because of the fear they felt for their master’s wrath. They converged on Frank, swinging knives and fists in his direction, some making contact, some not. Frank grabbed at the first one to come within arm’s reach, ripping the man’s throat straight out, and using the suddenly slumped body as a shield from the other three. They continued to strike, before realizing their fourth was taking the brunt of their attacks, and they attempted to maneuver themselves in to another formation. Frank threw the body to the ground, and lunged for the next man, forcibly driving the him in to the concrete floor. Frank reeled his arm back, ready to slam his fist in to the face of the human below him, when a soft clearing of a throat behind him brought him to a pause.

Frank turned, looking over his shoulder. The vampire stood behind the woman taped in to the chair, one hand solidly around her neck, the other nonchalantly slipped in to the pocket of his slacks. Frank’s sightline narrowed. He rose, keeping eye contact with the other vampire.

“Mr. Castle! A pleasure to finally meet you, in the, ah. Flesh.” The vampire grinned toothily. Frank barely twitched.

“I’d appreciate if you let what was left of my familiars go. Good ones are so difficult to come by. And of course, I would hate to put you in a tight position here…”

Frank’s eyes darted down to the woman, and his body tensed tenfold.

The blonde from the diner stared back up at him, wide eyed in fear. Her entire body shook, vibrating around the vampire’s firm grip. Frank felt his control of the situation begin to ebb away from him. He had no idea how he would be able to get that woman out of here, and take out the vampire, or at least the rest of his familiars. His mind raced, attempting to reshape his plan before his timer ran out. His gaze met the blondes again, and as she focused back in on him, her body stilled. Her blue eyes turned steely, and as she held his stare, she shattered.
Karen Page could describe her transformations with disturbing clarity. How squeamish are you? How long do you have to listen? She could tailor her description for any situation, and still keep it effective.

The moments before a change, though... She knew the /feeling/ innately, but it was difficult to put in to words. Imagine... Imagine the feeling of your eyes rolling back in to your head, prior to a loss of consciousness. But instead of your eyes, it's your brain, rolling back in to itself. The unpleasant physical-yet-not feeling of your higher brain functions, stepping down to take the back seat in your head.

Karen had strained against the duct tape holding her back, and strained against the wolf, trying to keep it at bay. Her eyes met those of the newcomer in front of her, and the rolling sensation in her brain flashed with a hot spark of recognition. She held his gaze what felt like an eternity; a heartbeat, and then the wolf arrived.

Frank was blown back by the sheer burst of kinetic energy in the room. In one second, the blonde woman was sitting in front of him, and in the next, a chaotic monstrous mass of bones and fur and flesh erupted. He stumbled back, and in that short moment of inattention, the monster reared back on the other vampire, lunging straight at his jugular. The vampire could barely react, before the animal had savaged him so profoundly, that there was no coming back. The strong jaws crunched through sinew and bone and dense muscle, rending the body in to an unrecognizable mass of suddenly rotting flesh.

The creature turned, and Frank saw it clearly under the swinging lightbulb. A wolf, or nearly a wolf. It was larger than any natural canine, and appeared to be as wild an animal as you would expect, but the longer you looked at it... you could tell it was looking back. It had the air of a person in thought; observing and calculating. Frank and the wolf watched each other warily. It cocked it’s head at him, and then leapt passed him, on to one of the cowering familiars behind him. Frank spun, watching the wolf make easy work of the fragile human. His mind charged, catching up with him, and sprinted after the third and fourth of the gang of familiars. They limped as quick as they could, but they only made it a dozen feet before Frank was on them, snapping their necks for an easy kill. As the dropped to the ground, the air in the warehouse stilled. Frank straightened, and slowly turned back to the wolf. It sat in the middle of the carnage, as still as stone. Watching him. He approached it slowly, hands in front of himself in a placating gesture.

“Hey, uh… ma’am? That’s you, yeah?”

The wolf merely stared. Frank was at a loss, but he soldiered on. “Are you ok?” Still silence. Ok. Frank glanced up to the broken skylight. The night sky was ever so slowly brightening; the sun was on its way. He had to move, now, but he was loathe to leave the woman behind, even if she was currently inhabiting the body of an incredible beast.

“Ok, ma’am, honestly… I don’t know what’s goin’ on. I need to get back to my place, and I’m not leavin’ you here. You can come nice, or I’ll drag you with me, yeah?”

The wolf’s ears cocked back in distaste, but she dipped her head towards him, which he took to be agreement. He let out a small breath of relief, as he had not been looking forward to wrestling a giant wolf, on top of everything else tonight. A ripple of irritation ran over him as he eyed the fleshy mass that was once the Carpathian vampire. His best new lead in weeks, and it was rotting at his feet. He
quashed that notion, quickly gathered up the salvageable contents of her purse, and beckoned the wolf to follow him out.

She padded along beside him, keeping up with his quick pace as they crossed Hell’s Kitchen. Frank felt like he was racing the sun, just barely keeping ahead of it. The wolf loped beside him, seemingly unaffected.

The daytime denizens of the city began to stir, and Frank did his best to assume the identity of a man out for a brisk walk with his enormous blood covered wolf dog. They were lucky enough to keep a noticeable distance between themselves and any other people on the street, and the pair had no trouble making it to Frank’s flophouse apartment. He shuffled her up the three flights of stairs, and through the door in to his one room, slamming it behind him. The wolf watched him fly to the window, sealing the blinds shut to the arriving daylight. With a heaving sigh of relief, Frank slumped down the wall under the window, and came to rest on the floor. His head fell back against the wall with a quiet thud.

For a moment, he could breathe. He eyed the wolf across the small space, sitting idly. Frank gestured weakly to the rest of the room.

“This is it, make yourself at home. Not much, but it’ll be safe. You gonna turn back anytime soon?”


Karen’s ears perked up visibly at the word “shower”. Shit, she was absolutely drenched in blood.

“... shit, ok. I guess we can get you in there first…”

He ushered her in to the small adjacent bathroom, nothing more than a shower stall, toilet, and pedestal sink. With some careful maneuvering Frank was able to shut the door of the shower stall on her, and by standing on the toilet he could spray her down with the shower head. It wasn’t much of a bath, but the blood and gore hanging off of her coat disappeared down the drain. Karen gave herself a vigorous shake behind the shower door, and Frank coughed out an unexpected laugh at the sight. He let her out, throwing an old bed sheet on the ground for her to roll herself dry on. Frank began to strip down for his own shower, modestly closing the bathroom door. The wolf-not-wolf in the next room played havoc with his senses. He let the now-lukewarm water run over his body, sending more blood down the drain. Standing clean under the shower, he let the irritation from earlier resurface, probing it cautiously. Karen had killed that vampire, and he wasn’t sure when he would get another chance at one any time soon. It bothered him, but she had more right than anyone to rip that suckhead to shreds. He had some inkling of just what the hell she was doing at that warehouse in the first place, but that revelation would have to wait until she was back in a human form.

The water around him turned bone cold, and Frank reluctantly got out of the shower. Pulling on a pair of somewhat clean sweatpants, he opened the bathroom door. Karen was curled up, wolf-like, on the floor, but her eyes followed him intently. He sat down on the bare bed.

“I, uh. Not great at talking. And we’re stuck here ‘til tonight, and… you can’t talk either.” He ran a hand over his scalp. The wolf continued to watch him from the floor. “You ok to sleep down there?”

Karen twitched an ear, which he assumed was a yes, fine. Frank rolled over on to his side on the bed. He looked back over his shoulder.

“You wake me up if you need anything, yeah?”

Karen’s ear twitched again, but her eyes had closed. Frank rolled back over, facing the wall. He
squeezed his eyes shut as tight as he could, and began to force himself into restless slumber.

The day passed uneventfully. Frank was vaguely aware of Karen rising a couple of times while he slept, but she didn’t purposefully wake him until the early evening. The sun was on its way down, but they had about an hour before he could safely leave the apartment. Karen, to her credit, did not seem at all antsy or fidgety. She lay placidly on the floor, alternating between cleaning herself and dozing. Frank tried to read one of the worn paperbacks that littered the floor, but he conceded defeat when he found himself reading the same line over and over again. He got up to get dressed, and tried to stretch is meager bathroom routine to fill the remaining time.

Frank studied his face in the mirror. That particular myth he discovered to be false almost immediately; after returning to life amidst the blood and bodies of his family, he had watched his reflection rise to standing in Maria’s decorative hall mirror. He shut his eyes at that memory, willing it away. Opening them again, he studied his face. It was the same as it had been for the past two years; unaged and unbroken. There were a smattering of scars from before he was bitten, but the smooth gloss of vampirism had nearly ironed them out. The furrow in his brow had remained, though. Frank pulled a t-shirt on and returned to Karen, who was nosing at the blinds on his window. He pulled the cord, opening the small room to the clear night beyond. “Ok,” he said, looking down at Karen. “Let’s go.”

Karen betrayed her excitement as she bounded down the flights of stairs and out of the apartment. She led him to a small patch of courtesy grass on the next block, and he turned to afford her some privacy. The night was still young, and the pair got some odd looks from walkers passing by.

“Uh, Karen…? Do I gotta buy you a leash?” he hissed, over his shoulder at her. She returned to his side, nosing his palm. The cold jolted him up through his arm. Karen looked up expectantly, as any normal dog would, excited for the day (or night) ahead. Frank scoffed a laugh, trying to suppress a grin. She may be acting like the dumb dog, but he could see the laughter in her eyes. “You gotta eat?” A nod. “Ok, shit. Any meat is ok? A burger?” Another nod. “Ok, you got the nose. Lead the way.”

Karen led Frank through the still lively streets of the city. He felt absolutely out of place, trying to blend in amongst this throng of humans. The giant dog beside him was a decent distraction from his distinct other-ness, though. He almost refused to admit it, but tonight felt almost… good. Like a deep sleep, a much needed reprieve from everyday life. He cringed internally at the thought of betraying Maria and Frankie, and little Lisa, at the thought of abandoning his vengeance, but a tiny, tiny part of his mind he attributed to Maria told him a break was well deserved. The vampires weren’t going anywhere.

Karen led him to a hole-in-the-wall burger joint, not far from Central Park. Frank ordered half a dozen hamburgers with bacon and cheese, which Karen inhaled, tail wagging happily. He felt a rusty laugh rise up in his chest again, and he tentatively set it free, which set Karen's tail wagging even faster.

They spent the next few hours of halfmoon light traipsing around the city. Frank tested out his oft unused voice, making generally one-sided small talk with Karen. He had little reason to interact with anyone, human, vampire or otherwise, but he found the skill returning the longer they kept on.
As the night wound down, they found themselves outside a shabby brick tenement near Central Park. Karen abruptly sat, her keen eyes trained on a fourth floor window. Frank followed her gaze up, but he couldn't sense any life behind the glass. He turned back to Karen, puzzled, and—“Oh shit, this is your place?” Karen huffed, still unmoving. “Did you want to go up?” Karen's ears flattened, and she dragged her gaze from the window to meet Frank's.

“Come back to my place, it's fine. We'll keep an eye on it, til we can get you changed back, yeah?”

The wolf sighed, more human than ever, and they made their way back to Frank's bare apartment.

Frank completed his morning routine, and when the small space was safe from the rising sun, he sat on the bed. He glanced down at Karen, laying peacefully on the floor, her blue gaze on him. He considered her situation. She was very obviously not completely human. And he very obviously was not, either. Tonight, though, with her, for the first time since he had died and forced his way back in to existence, he felt almost… normal.

Frank patted the bed beside him.

“C’mon. Come up here. That can't be comfortable.”

Karen rose hesitantly, meeting his eyes, then sprung up on to the mattress. Frank laid down, his back pressed up against the wall, and Karen stretched out beside him. She gave an air of both human and canine, and it struck Frank belatedly that this might be awkward.

“Can I, uh, do you like to be pet?”

Karen butted her head in to his hand in response, and he scratched behind her ears, which made her rumble in to a contented doze. Frank found himself falling in to an easy sleep as well, and his mind went blissfully blank.

…

Frank barely stirred, sleeping without interruption. The heat of the body beside him in bed had lulled him to sleep, and now her unconscious stirrings beside him drew him out of his slumber. He pulled Maria in closer to him, feeling his heart thump happily when she tucked her face deeper in to his chest. He brought his top hand, draped over her waist, up in to her hair, and she sighed happily. She was warm, pulsing with heat, and he pulled her flush with his body. He was cold, always so cold -

Reality struck, hard and fast, like the shocking plunge in to an ocean. Frank’s eyes flew open, and it wasn’t Maria in his arms, in his bed, but Karen, his hand clutched around golden hair, not chestnut brown, and the smell was wrong, not citrus and cinnamon but oakwood and complicated vanilla, and the eyes that instantly snapped open at his body tensing were sky blue, not hazel-

Karen and Frank pushed off from each other in a whirl of bedsheets, Karen dragging the worn comforter down with her as slipped backwards on to the floor.
The air was thick with tension between Karen and Frank; he still on the bed, she sprawled on the floor. Frank dropped his head into his hands, feeling absolutely mortified. He should have known this was bad news, he should have realized this would have happened-

A swift kick in the ankle snapped his head back up. Karen was still on the floor, but now she lay back, laughing. She raised herself back up on an elbow, wiping a stray tear away.

“It’s ok, Frank. It’s fine! I’m fine,” she smiled, her face becoming tender. “Your kindness brought me back, I think. Thank you.”

Frank dipped his head, and they fell into silence. Karen wrapped the blanket around her, a little self consciously. “Can I use the shower?”

“Jesus, of course,” he said, leaping up give the bathroom a once over. He pulled out a clean pair of sweats and an old t-shirt, handing them over without looking at her. Karen took them, murmuring thanks, and as he turned away she stopped him.

“Frank.” He finally met her eyes again, and whatever agitation he felt at the whole situation fell away entirely. Karen’s face broke into a wide grin. “Let me take a hot shower and get presentable, then you can buy a girl a cup of coffee?” Frank tentatively smiled in return.

“Yes ma’am.”

…

Karen let the bathroom door click shut behind, and dropped the blanket to the ground. She inspected her face in the mirror, and every inch of her body. It had been some time since she she had spent that long in the wolf’s body; it was unsettling. She thanked whoever was watching that the transformation back into human from wolf was much less disgusting than the other way around. Frank seemed to be accustomed to, ah, her type of lifestyle, which was also lucky.

She stood under the shower head, cranking the heat up higher and higher til the bathroom filled with steam. The water washed errant wisps of fur off of her body, and Karen mostly human once again. Clad in Frank’s too-big clothes, she left the bathroom still toweling her hair. Frank had gotten dressed, and had drawn the blinds up, once again opening the small space to the night sky. Karen felt a small pang of sadness at having missed the sunlight, but that was low on their list of priorities at the moment. She sat back down on the bed, and Frank leaned on the back of his chair.

“Coffee?”

“Please. All of it. And a big greasy plate of bacon. And like 6 eggs.”

Frank chuckled. “Slow down, slow down. Back to the diner, then?” Karen nodded. She slipped on the pair of emergency flats she kept in her bag, and waited for Frank to lock up the apartment behind them. She stopped on the stoop, breathing in the air around her. The wolf’s sensitive sense of smell was fading, and it was something of a blessing to breathe deeply in the city without drawing all of
the unpleasant odors around her.

“Actually, Frank, could we go by my apartment first?” He nodded, and they set off towards up
towards her building. The were quiet, and comfortable, and Karen was surprised to find herself
enjoying his steady company as much as the wolf did. Things were often simpler in a predators head.
Frank, to his credit, treated her as he had the wolf, with an amiable familiarity. His hardwired
manners slipped out more frequently though, now that she was back on two legs, and his hand sat
lightly on the small of her back, as they made the short walk from his apartment to hers. She quietly
let them in, relieved to not see any of her neighbours.

Her small one bedroom was homey and secure, even with a vampire standing in the middle of it.
“You can sit down, if you want,” she said, gesturing to the couch. “I’m gonna get changed and
repack my bag, then we head out.”

“‘S’fine, ma’am. My pants are probably dirty.” Karen waved a hand in dismissal, but didn’t press
him. She went to her bedroom, moving out of sight of Frank so she could change and still talk.

“So, Frank, while I’ve got you safely in my living room, I need you to clarify a couple things for
me.” She could hear Frank shuffling his feet in the other room. “Ok.”

“Firstly: you’re a vampire?” A sharp inhale of breath, followed by a terse “Yup.”

“Alright. The whole… everything? Garlic, sunlight, whatever?” She put on a fresh pair of pants, and
took out a black tee.

“Sunlight, yeah. Garlic, haven't tried it. Silver, only if it gets inside you, crosses, no. Healings great,
until you lop my head off. Or rip out my heart,” he added.

Karen finished dressing, and folded up Frank's lended clothes, along with a change of her own. She
paused in front of her bed, before asking her final question.

“And… blood? All that?” The apartment fell silent around them, and when he didn't answer, she left
her room to rejoin him.

Frank was leaning against the wall, arms folded tightly against his chest, his gaze downcast and
furrowed. Karen approached, a gentle hand outstretched towards him. He turned towards him.

“Yes, the blood. I drink blood or I die. Karen, you don't understand, I'm a fucking monster.” Karen
grabbed his arm angrily. “I just spent the last 36 hours as a /wolf/, Frank! You're just as much a
monster as I am!”

Frank looked away again. She could tell he wasn't convinced. She spun away, glaring. “I have to let
my boss know I'm still alive, then we're out of here. And,” she added, spinning round again and
jabbing a finger in to his chest, “you're gonna tell me what vampires have to do with gang signs,
cause either way I'm gonna find out. Hang on.”

Frank listened to Karen's one sided conversation with her boss. It sounded as if she had enough clout
with him to get away with going AWOL for a couple of days. She ended the call with a sigh, then
with a terse “let's go,” the pair were out in the city once again.

They were both quiet on the short walk to the diner, caging themselves within their own minds. The
fluorescent lights lit the diner up from a block away, and as they smell of coffee eased Frank's mind a
little. He stopped Karen outside the door. “Neutral territory, ok?” Karen gave him a small smile.

“Only the truth. From both of us.” He nodded, and they entered. The same waitress, barely moved
from her paperback book since the last time they were there, betrayed a touch of surprise at seeing
them enter together, but she waved a hand dismissively at the empty diner regardless. They took
seats in the booth in the corner. The waitress came around, coffee urn in hand. “Is that the usual, for
both of you?” Frank nodded, and Karen held up two fingers. “Double it up for me, please.”

The waitress left, and the both took long drags from the hot mugs of coffee, once again in a
comfortable silence. Frank, uncharacteristically, broke it first.

“Before we get in to it I gotta clear the air.” Karen’s eyebrows raised at him over her mug. He felt a
bit foolish, but he pressed on.

“You gotta know, I didn’t mean, I mean, it wasn't my… intent, to get you naked in my bed-”

Karen snorted in to her coffee. “That's what we're starting with? Frank,” she intoned, meeting his
gaze. “It's fine. I'm fine. In fact, I haven't had an awesome sleep like that in years. And it sure beats
waking up naked in Central Park,” she added. This visual brought some absolutely unbidden
thoughts into his brain, and he could feel the blush rushing up his neck. Karen laughed out loud at
that, clear and joyful, and Frank couldn't help but grin. He touched his face. “You don't smile much,
do you,” she said, more of a statement than a question.

“Don't really have much to be happy about.”

This earned him a complicated look from Karen, which she slid away hastily as the waitress returned
with their food. Karen dove in, inhaling her meal without the usual grace Frank had come to expect.
She began to slow down once half her plate had been cleared, and she looked back up from her
food. Frank toyed with a strip of bacon, amused. Karen rolled her eyes. “Ok, tough guy, let’s get
down to business here.” She pointed at Frank with her fork. “You: vampire. Me: werewolf. Care to
expand on that?”

Frank leaned back in the booth, resting his hands on the table in front of him. This could get long.
“Yup. Vampire. One of ‘em killed me, I died, and but I ain’t stayin’ down for long, so I came back.
Not really what I wanted, but you gotta play the hand you’re dealt.” Karen nodded in agreement at
that. “Your turn.”

Karen busily cut up her remaining sausages. “Honestly, my story is pretty much the same as yours. I
was bitten three years ago, and I had an allergic reaction to the wolf bite. It's not common, but it
happens enough that there’s a tidy little population of werewolves in the world. So now,” she sighed,
“I change into a wolf once a month, no exceptions. And as you saw, it can happen during periods of
extreme stress as well. On the plus side, I heal really well, and I’ll live for a pretty long time, so.
That’s nice.” She looked up at him from her plate. “Back to you. How many vampires are out there?
Do you guys have covens?”

Frank laughed out loud at the expression that accompanied that. “Almost. Most of ‘em gather
themselves in to Houses, which most of them keep to. Past that, the Houses organize themselves
however they want. The 12 oldest Houses have a council, they run most of the bullshit, but there’s a
bunch of smaller Houses poppin’ up. Upstart assholes who want a piece of the pie.”

Karen rested her chin in her hand, turning this over. “I’m not gonna lie, if it were anyone else telling
me this, I would laugh in their faces. It sounds like a bad fantasy novel, or something out of a comic
book…”

“Yeah, I know. Those ‘gang signs’ you’ve been tracking, those are House glyphs. They can be used
as warnings, territory markers, public displays of pride… it’s kinda… you gotta consider the context
of ‘em.” He watched Karen’s face light up with journalistic interest.
“Okay… so I wasn’t that far off. Never would have guessed vampires, though. And you can read these glyphs?”

“Not really, I more just know them by sight. It’s a language, but I wasn’t too keen to learn.” He turns grim. “Majority of vampires are changed on purpose, cause gettin’ the change itself to hold is tough. Some of us are nasty fucks who won’t take dead as an answer, but most who are changed want to be. And anyone who wants to be a dirty suckhead deserves to be put down.” His cold ferocity hovered over their table, like a dark cloud. Karen took a moment to formulate her next question, and soldiered on.

“So there’s 12 vampire Houses, and any number of outsider groups, ok. These glyphs I’ve found, which are they? How many Houses are in New York City?” She watched Frank contemplate the question, crunching on his bacon. “There’s 2 of the 12 based out of New York, and the rest have a pretty good foothold in the city. The small ones, they usually stick to one territory, and they guard it. Can I see your list?”

Karen slid her notebook across the table. She noted Frank’s hands; bruiser’s hands, scarred from his human life. She idly wondered what sort of person he had been, would she have liked him? Did vampirism change the core of a person, or were the people who desired the life of vampire better suited to it in the first place? Her eyes traveled up to the notched furrow in his brow, and the desire to smooth it out with her thumb crashed like a wave out of nowhere, over her. She gulped, and steadied herself. Frank looked up from the papers, beckoning her to lean in closer. She folded herself over the table, and he turned the cards around to face them both.

“You’ve done a pretty good job here. These three on the left, they’re from the 12. This one is called Cthon, and this one is Leichen. This third one, it’s old. It’s called Erebus. These four are local. This one is Frost, it’s old too. Pretty much dead. Talos is still around, but not very active. This one is more like a cult, though they call themselves ‘House of the Rising Sun’. And this,” he intoned darkly, jabbing a finger on fourth glyph. “This one is called Carpathia.”

Karen leaned back to look him in the eye. His dark eyes were heavy, storm-stricken.

“That’s the one in Hell’s Kitchen. That one took me down to the docks that night. I’ve seen it the most, out of all of them.”

Frank sneered. “Yeah, I don’t know exactly what the hell they’re up to yet, but they’ve been recruiting familiars like it’s going out of style-”

“Wait, what are familiars?” Karen asked, leaning back further.

“Assholes. Human scum who want to be turned, so they join up to work for the Houses. If they please their masters, do a good job, and don’t die, they might just get what they want. The humans we put down at the warehouse, they were Carpathian familiars.”

Karen sat fully back, cataloging this new information. She had danced around the events of the night at the warehouse in her mind, not yet wanting to fully confront them. She knew she had killed people, as the wolf. She had suspected they weren’t upstanding guys to begin with, and while she wasn’t overly thrilled to have killed them, this little crumb of knowledge made her feel somewhat better about the situation. She ran a hand through her hair, grabbing the back of her head as she thought out loud. “So Carpathia is up to something nefarious, more nefarious than usual, they’re recruiting humans, these humans are flooding the streets, and doing… what? Why were they at the warehouse on the docks that night?”

Frank’s blush returned at this. He ran a hand over his shorn scalp. “That’s, uh, that’s on me. I got the
drop on them earlier, took out two while the other four ran. Followed their stank to the docks, and you were already in there with ’em. So…” he looked sheepishly up at her from under his brow. “Bad timing?”

She laughed. “That explains why they were so terrified. I could smell them too. Good job. And,” she added, leaning over the table with a wide smile, “I wouldn’t say bad timing; not at all. If it weren’t for that, I wouldn’t have met you.”
Frank’s heart thumped a little in his chest. Even under the fluorescent light of the diner, Karen glowed when she smiled at him, and again he felt… good. Like things might not be so hopeless, after all. He broke the connection, feigning a desire to finish his cold plate of bacon in order to do so.

Karen pulled her notebook back towards her, and was skimming over her notes with a fresh set of eyes. Everything Frank had told her had sounded fantastical, like an old world legend. And yet, here she was, a werewolf, city in a NYC diner with a vampire. Her entire life, she supposed, sounded like a Stephen King novel, so she really had no room for doubt here.

“You all finished?” Frank asked, flagging down the waitress. Before Karen could answer he paid the bill, and took a final swig of his mug of coffee. “How about we take a little walking tour of Hell’s Kitchen, and you can show me the glyphs you’ve found so far?”

Karen agreed, eager to stretch her legs again. The night was still fresh, and after a proper meal and a proper cup of coffee, she felt re-energized and ready for anything. Frank still looked exhausted, but she suspected he could sleep for days and still look like the dead.

Notebook in hand, Karen led Frank through the maze of Kitchen alleys, dead ends, through-ways, and back stoops. Armed with her new knowledge of vampire hierarchy, she could see now that some of the glyphs were very sloppily made, with little thought as to their location. These, Frank reminded her, were the work of human familiars. Some of the more… excitable ones took their oath to serve to heart, and plastered their mark anywhere they could.

“These are pretty common, right. Vampires want to keep as low a profile as possible, but the familiars, usually they don’t give a shit. The number of ‘em, though… either they’ve got a couple of spray-can goons, or their numbers are growin’ by the minute.” He rubbed the shadow on his chin, looking down at the drippy tag in front of them. Karen grabbed his hand, and pulled him along to the next glyph on her list.

Frank’s hand was ice cold, but he gripped her warm one tightly. She leaned in to him a little bit, imaging they looked like any of the other couples around them on a late night date. Frank, to his credit, seemed to understand this without them discussing it beforehand. Karen allowed herself a small sliver of enjoyment in the moment.

The redbrick buildings around them radiated heat from the earlier day, making the streets below pulse. Karen tipped her head back, her sharp eyesight taking in the breadth of the night sky. Frank stole a look at her, before taking the notebook from her free hand. The next glyph on their list was nearby, neatly carved in to a stone block on the side of a nondescript building.

Karen touched it lightly. “This one looks… professional.”

Frank nodded. “This one’s a vampire’s sign. Made to last, and made to look good, but not too much. You’d only see it if you were lookin’ for it.”

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Karen nodded. “This one’s a vampire’s sign. Made to last, and made to look good, but not too much. You’d only see it if you were lookin’ for it.”

Karen stood back to study the building it was carved in to. A bodega occupied the ground floor space, though it’s legitimacy (and hours of operation) were suspect. The rest of the building appeared to house regular apartments. Karen frowned, looking up. She turned to Frank.

“So what’s it mean? Why is it on this building?” Frank considered it for a moment longer.

“Well, it’s carved right into the stone, which suggests permanency; and it’s down at the bottom. My
guess is, there’s some kind of passage through the bodega in to a sub-basement, and they’ve got a cache of blood, or a safe room or somethin’ down there.”

“Did you want to take a look?” He shook his head. “We can come back another time. I’m not… I don’t want to get in to any shit tonight.” Karen looked at him, with a funny expression. They walked on towards the next one. In between, the idle conversation ebbed and flowed comfortably. Frank asked her about her work at the Bulletin.

“It’s good, you know. It’s really good. I never thought I’d be a reporter, of all things. Before that, I as a paralegal for a bit, and before that… I dropped out of college because I got bit by a werewolf.” She shrugged comically. “But no, it’s good. It was a fluke that I got the job at all, but I think it’s a really good fit.”

“So,” Frank countered with a grin, “what you’re saying is, you’re nosy and you figured out how to make some dough out of it, huh? Good job.” Karen socked him in the arm, but she conceded. “What about you, tough guy? What personality fault did you spin in to a career?”

Frank grimaced. “Yikes, Page. I don’t want to dig too deep into that. I was a Marine, did three tours. Had a tough time, when I got back, so I worked with a Marine buddy and did some odd jobs around the city. Handyman, hired muscle, that sort of thing.”

His voice sounded light, but Karen could see the muscle in his jaw twitch. She believed him; or at least, she believed he wouldn’t lie to her. Lying by omission, maybe, but she had to remember: two nights ago they had been strangers. No matter how close she felt to him now, and that was something she needed to unpack for herself, at the end of the day he didn’t owe her anything.

Karen, lost in her thoughts, did not notice Frank softly steering her home, until she ended up on the sidewalk across from her apartment building. A warm light glowed in the window, inviting her up. Frank let go of her arm, and stepped back, opening the space between them for the first time in what felt like days. The gulf puts Karen on edge. She scrambled.

“What are you going to do? Will I… will you come back tomorrow?” She asked, attempting to quell her desperation. Frank rubbed the back of his head.

“I don’t have a phone or anything, not sure how to contact you. You could, I dunno, put a pot of flowers on the window sill? Then I can swing by, and knock on the window, then you can come up to the roof, or-”

Karen closed the gap between them. “Frank, stay. Please.” Frank stumbles over his words, excuses, but Karen soldiers on. “Look, I really need to go in to the office tomorrow, and convince Ellison I’m not dead. Plus, honestly, I need to get some sunlight for a couple hours. And if you stay, I can come home early, and we can, I don’t know, do some brainstorming or something! I just… I don’t want you to disappear.” Her eyes away from his.

Frank could feel his heart cracking open, and he hurriedly tried to seal it shut. “You sure your boyfriend isn’t gonna walk in on us or something? I don’t need that.”

Karen’s eyes flashed back up to his. “No! No, Frank. No. No boyfriends. No friends, no family either. I’m… incapable of keeping a healthy relationship, with anyone. Relationships are built on trust, and I can’t trust anyone, not with the wolf at my door. You… you get it, though.” She added, almost as an afterthought to reassure herself.

Frank’s heart wrenches back open. Whether he liked it or not, he felt the same way.
Surprising himself, he abruptly folded Karen in to a hug.

“Ok,” he mumbled in to the crook of her neck. “I’ll stay.”

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Frank was whisked inside, up the stairs and in to her apartment, the door closing behind them with a soft click. The sun was threatening to show it's face once again, and Karen busied herself with sealing the windows and making the couch in to a passable day bed, while Frank changed in to the spare sweatpants he had previously lent Karen. He exited the washroom with a sizable yawn, and the choked laugh he received from Karen earned her a raised eyebrow. He looked down at his bare chest and low slung pants. “This ok?” He asked wryly, smirking. Karen's dazed “uh huh” made him laugh out loud. The sound, like summer thunder from a mile away, snapped her back to meet his gaze sheepishly.

“So, uh, I made the couch up the best I could, I hope it's ok, I'm going to sleep for a couple hours then head in to work, I'll try not to wake you up…” she petered off, doing her best not to actively wring her hands. Frank sat down on the couch, patting the cushion beside him. “Feels great. Now, go get some sleep.”

Karen stood in front of him for a moment, and Frank could almost see the words on the tip of her tongue. She shook her head slightly, and with a final look back at him, she retreated in to her bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

Frank stretched out on Karen's couch. Her apartment was small, but her tasteful touch made it homey. The heavy curtains she had drawn over the windows muffled the sounds of the city awakening outside, and Frank let himself give in to a quiet sleep.

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Karen felt trapped in her bed. Frank was silent on the other side of the door, but just knowing he was there was putting her on edge. She couldn't believe herself: level headed Karen Page getting flustered by a man she had only met, what, two days ago? A lifetime ago? And she had practically begged him to stay in her apartment. God, Karen, what-

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. This was not a… normal situation, she reminded herself. And the two of them, they were not normal people.

With a frustrated sigh, she kicked off her blanket and rolled over, drifting in to a restless slumber.

When the sun rose a couple of hours later, Karen resignedly rose with it. She showered quickly, giving herself a moment's indulgence under the hot water, and stepped out, pulling her long hair back in a twisted bun. She willed herself to meet the mirror, and while the sight wasn't as bad as she expected, she looked like she could use another ten hours of sleep. Dark shadows had begun to stain the delicate skin under her eyes; a symptom of too little sunshine. At least this way Ellison wouldn't need much convincing of her mystery illness.
Karen finished up a truncated version of her bathroom routine, and pulled on the most basic skirt and blouse she had.

Purse and flats in hand, she cracked the bedroom door to survey the living space beyond. It was unusual for the room to be so dark, and her eyes took a moment to adjust before she could clearly make out Frank's sleeping form on the couch. She pushed the door open slowly, and padded out to check on him.

He slept, one arm flung up over his head, and his face tucked in to his shoulder. Asleep, like this, he looked vulnerable. Human. Karen felt a wave of sentimentality cover her from toe to tip, and she hastily slipped away, doing her best to lock the front door without a sound.

The minute Karen crossed the threshold into the sunlight, she felt her heart bloom inside her. The sun embraced her, giving a healthy glow of joy to her peachy skin. She stood, face raised and eyes closed, before drawing in a deep breath, and setting off to the Bulletin.

The walk was pleasant, and though she had enjoyed her nights with Frank, alone in the velvet dark, the stirrings of the city around her buoyed her aloft. She stopped in to her cafe, to the relief of the morning barista, who made Karen's usual coffee before she said a word.

Sipping her coffee, Karen breezed in to the Bulletin office, and right in to Ellison. He wordlessly beckoned her in to her office, and shut the door. His demeanor deflated her mood to some extent, and Karen stood warily in front of her desk. Turning from the door, his face broke in to tired relief.

“You're ok, then?”

Karen exhaled. She gave him a small smile, nodding. “Just a flare up, with my medical issue, you know…” Ellison nodded. “I'd appreciate it if you didn't go totally MIA next time, but yeah. I'm glad you're ok.” He clapped her on the shoulder and slipped out of her office.

Settled in at her computer, Karen got to work, sifting through her email inbox. A couple of leads to follow up on, a handful of interview requests, and the rest was deleted. She did her due diligence, outlining some short articles for Ellison, and did some proofreading on her colleagues work. A couple of people poked their heads in, glad to see she was alright, but overall her morning was spent in busy isolation. When noon hit, she raised her head from her computer screen, rubbing her eyes. The short sleep had begun to catch up with her. She packed her things, and went to knock on the door to Ellison’s office, before letting herself in.

The editor looked up from his work. “Shit, Karen, you went downhill pretty fast. Go home?”

Karen nodded in agreement. She reached for the door knob, but abruptly turned back to Ellison. “Just so you know, I think I’ve got something. With the gang signs. I don’t know if we can publish it, though.”

This earned her a raised eyebrow. “I assume you’re not going to tell me?”

Karen smiled, and waved over her shoulder as she exited his office, and made her way home.

Once outside, she reveled in the sunlight, enveloped in warmth once again. It made her swift walk home a happy one, and she had to reign in her buzzing joy in order to enter the apartment quietly. She needn’t have been so careful, though, because once she was inside the door, she heard Frank.

Caught in the throes of a nightmare, Frank was restlessly tossing, tangled in the bedsheet on the couch. Karen was torn between waking him and letting him sleep whatever it was off, and she approached his side hesitantly. From above, she could see his eyes darting back and forth under his
eyelids. He snarled, mumbling unintelligibly, and Karen leant him, to hear was he was saying. An errant lock of her hair slipped out of place, and brushed his chest.

In an explosion, he was awake. His arm shot up, clutching Karen’s arm in a vice, and he lunged upward with a roaring “MARIA”, snarling in her face. Karen stumbled back, fearful, and the nervous movement brought the rest of Frank’s consciousness to the fore. He let go of Karen’s arm, and collapsed to the floor beside the couch.

The apartment held its breath. Frank buried his face in his hands, still breathing heavily. Karen knelt down in front of him, rubbing the sore spot on her arm. She lay a warm hand on Frank’s bicep.

“Come on. Come lay down.”

Frank’s hands dropped from his face, and he eyed her increduulously. She pulled on his arm, and he rose with her, following her to her bedroom. Frank was overcome by the sheer presence of her, as if the bedroom was an extension of Karen herself.

She gestured to Frank to lay down on the near side of the bed, and he reluctantly did so, staying on top of the bedding. Karen mirrored him on the other side, before rolling on to her right side, to face Frank. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to will the bloody vision of Maria out of his head. He felt Karen’s light touch again on his arm, and he turned his head to face her.

Karen’s face cracked in sympathy.

“Frank, do you… want to talk about it?” She asked softly. His entire body tensed under her hand, and she snatched it away, backtracking: “If you don’t, it’s ok, I just want you to feel ok…”

Frank turned to face her. “It’s ok” he rasped, his voice caught in his throat. “I just… I’ve never talked about it. With anyone. Ever,” he added, introspectively. Karen desperately wanted to take his hand again, to hold him, to steady him with her presence. Instead, she wrung them together against her chest. Frank breathed once, twice. His eyes fell as he spoke.

“Maria is… was, my wife. We had two kids, Lisa and Frankie,” he paused, taking a breath. Karen could feel her eyes welling; she’d had no idea.

“Maria was a spitfire. She burned bright. And the kids, they were. I never expected to be dad but it, it was the, the best thing I’ll ever do. Everything I did was for them, the three of them.”

Frank lay back, facing the ceiling. “After I got out, after the Marines, I was fucked up. Had a rough time readjusting to, y’know, life. My buddy, he got us hooked up with some easy jobs, for easy money. It was good, for a while. Then it wasn’t.” He ran a hand over his face. “We did a job for some bad men. Really bad. I did some things I am still not proud of. I told Bill I wanted out, but he convinced me to stay a little longer. Said he had the job of lifetime. If we did well, we’d be set for life. I said yes. I should’ve walked, but I didn’t. I trusted Bill. He was my best friend. We get to this last job, it’s at night. Sun’s down. Swanky outfit uptown. We were told, just guard this room. One entrance. Don’t go in, don’t let anyone out. We did that, for a while. Then we started hearing noise, from in the room. Begging. Screaming. I couldn’t… I couldn’t just stand there, so I bust in. It was,” he gulped a breath. Karen swallowed.

“Vampires. Fucking vampires. The room was full of kids, barely legal, covered in bites and bruises and they’d been fucking used and just tossed aside, and when I saw them, I saw Lisa. And Frankie. And I turned right around and told Bill I was leaving. That I should go to the police. Bill, he was cool about the whole thing. Said ‘Frank, you can go. I’ll stay here. Don’t say anything, though. I’ll come by later and we can talk about it.’ I was furious, furious at him for taking this shit kind of job,
and furious with myself for stooping so low. I went home. Tried to cool off, went to bed. Didn’t hear from Bill again.”

Frank stopped. His gaze grew hollow, as he stared up at the dark ceiling. Karen’s breath caught in her chest. Frank shut his eyes.

“One night, a few weeks later. Was heading out to do some night security. I got stuck, and ran a bit late leaving. I came downstairs, and. They were there. All three of them. Laying in their own blood. Dead. A fucking vampire’s glyph painted on the wall in their blood. I guessed I surprised those fucks by being there, cause they attacked me too.” Frank turned his head, his eyes boring in to Karen’s.

“I died. I was dead, and I was gonna be with Maria and then I wasn’t. I woke up as a vampire. It’s my fuckin’ fault they died, and I should’ve died too. But I didn’t, so I’m gonna work my way up the Carpathians and look their masters in the eyes, and tell them that they brought this on themselves.”

Tears ran down Karen’s face. She choked on a sob, and reached out again to touch Frank. He pulled away, and sat up on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands.

“When I said I was a monster, Karen, I didn’t mean vampire. I was a monster before I ever knew the word.”

Karen pressed a hand to her mouth. She sat up too, in the bed, watching the expanse of Frank’s broad back shudder. She felt her heart sink inside her.

“I’ve done bad things too, Frank. Before.”

He shook his head, and rose to leave the room, without giving her another look.
The sun set, once again, and Karen drug herself out of bed. She took her time getting up, standing inert under the shower head. She belatedly realized Frank would probably want a shower, and she shut it off, dressing in dark joggers and tee.

With a steadying breath, she cracked the door, and at the sight she saw beyond, swung it wide.

Frank looked up from the chopping he was doing over the kitchen island. He watched Karen, his eyes apologetic, and a little wary. Karen approached, watching his hands deftly dicing green onions for the omelette he had on the stove. Frank felt unnerved by her silence, and for once in his life, his brain pushed him to fill it.

“Look, Karen… I'm sorry for last night. You let me in to your home, and I acted like an asshole. I got no excuses. I'm sorry,” he finished, his voice running to gravel. Karen finally looked up from the cutting board, and he was surprised to see her tearing up. She closed the distance to lean over the island, to look him straight in the eye.

“Frank, you have nothing to apologise for. What you've been through, I… I had no idea. I cannot, cannot, imagine the grief you must feel. I've lost people too, but…” she paused, wiping the running tears off her face, and reached across to grasp his hand. “This goes beyond my story now. I want to help you take down these sons of bitches.”

Frank had to turn away, and he feigned attention to the omelette on the stove to hide his own tears forming. “Thank you, Karen,” he breathed.

Karen took a seat at the island, slaying her hands wide on the woodblock counter. Frank passed her a mug of coffee, and they both sipped, no sounds except the sizzle of the eggs. The meal smelled wonderful, and Karen felt wonderfully cozy as Frank slid the entire portion on to her waiting plate.

The feeling of contentedness that Frank brought with him surged up inside her, except-

“Frank, do you… do you eat?”

Whatever question he had been expecting, it obviously was not that. He choked in to his coffee, laughing.

Karen pretended to huff, crossing her arms. “It's a valid question!”

“I know, I know,” he said, waving her off. “I can eat food. I don't digest anything other than meat very well, though. Do I have to eat? Doubt it.”

Karen leaned over her plate, intrigued. “So you can eat, but don't need to. You can drink a gallon of coffee, no problem. What about alcohol?”

Frank laughed again, and Karen noted the crinkles it gave to his eyes.

“You tryin’ to get me drunk, Page?”

“Who, me?” She scoffed, placing a palm to her chest. “I only ask in the interest of journalistic integrity.”

Frank chuckled as he stacked his used dishes in the sink. Karen plunged onward.
“And, as a journalist with integrity, I'm going to have to take the reins to this whole endeavor.”

Frank leaned up against the counter, eyebrow raised.

“I'm with you in the wanton murder of criminal familiars. I don't love it, but I get it. However, I suggest we come at things from a more… legal angle?”

Frank shook his head. “Vampires don't operate within the bounds of the human world.”

Karen stood up, her body emphasizing her words. “Maybe not! But they still exist in this world, and within human infrastructure. Somebody has to own the buildings they use, right? And what about the warehouse?”

Frank nodded, albeit skeptically. “That's true. I'd bet they'd cover their tracks pretty good, but it's worth a look.”

Karen nodded vigorously. “We can check at City Hall, and the library, and City Records as well.”

Frank grinned a little at her enthusiasm. It died on his face, though, as another thought entered his mind.

“One problem. All those places, they're closed at night.”

Karen stopped short, before throwing her hands up. “Ugh! Damn. I guess I can go at some point this week. Damn!” She slumped back on to the stool. “Don't vampires need a local lending library? Yeesh.”

This had Frank pause, full stop.

“Karen,” he said, coming to stand in front of her. “Say that again.”

“Why don't vampires... have libraries?” She repeated, more than a little confused. Frank clutched her shoulders.

“Let's go.”

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Frank led Karen down towards Chinatown.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they walked, in order to keep their voices low. Karen stilled the little thrill in her stomach.

“Ok hang on. So the House of Erebus has these vast underground data bunkers, in major cities around the world, that houses all known vampire history. But then they all died, and this info never got out, at all?”

“The House didn't all die, just the tribe leaders, yeah? The rest of 'em got in to trouble, and the House collapsed. There's still enough of 'em around to keep an eye on things.”

Karen mulled this over as they walked. “They didn't have anyone to take over? No contingency
“Vampires don't expect to die. Especially ancient ones.”

This earned a look of irritation, directed at herself.

“Right. I keep forgetting. How long do vampires live? Wait, no,” she waved herself off. “We'll talk about that later. So we're heading to a vampire treasure trove that you think is semi-abandoned?”

Frank scrubbed the back of his head.

“Pretty much.”

“Have you been there before?”

“No… I've heard about it, though. Some bad shit went down there, and a lot vampires are superstitious as hell. I'm expectin' it to be a mess, but the power should still be on.”

“Hmm” was Karen's only response. The pair lapsed back in to silence as their walk brought them to the edges of Manhattan's Old Chinatown. Warm lights and neon illuminated the still busy streets. Tourists and locals alike spilled into the streets, and Frank grasped Karen's hand to lead her through the throng.

In the midst of the lively, buzzing crowd, Karen's focus honed in on her hand held firmly within Frank's cold one. She squeezed once, and he looked briefly back over his shoulder, eyes crinkling. A nod to the right took them in to a shadowed alleyway. Pockets of light welled up out of back doors, propped ajar with back alley detritus.

The ambient light and sounds from the city dimmed the deeper they ventured into the maze. Buildings built and rebuilt upon had created an entire second city lurking behind the neon. Frank slowed, bring Karen to a halt in front of a rusty door, handleless and sitting flush with the wall. Frank gave Karen's hand a squeeze, and pointed up.

Above the top of the door frame, inset directly in to the brickwork, was an Erebus glyph. It glowed dimly, barely noticeable to a human eye. Frank pressed an ear to the door, and when he was satisfied with whatever he didn’t hear on the other side, he gestured for Karen to stand back. She retreated a step, and he braced a shoulder to the door. With a bodily heave, the metal crumpled inward, and Frank pushed it all the way through, leaving a black hole in the gloom. They stepped through in tandem, and both pairs of predator's eyes adjusted to the dark inside. Around them lay the trashed remains of a commercial kitchen, dusty and unused. A low hum ran beneath the heavy silence, drawing Karen towards one of the grimy industrial refrigerators. She looked back at Frank, and he nodded silently.

The fridge door creaked, protesting after years of disuse. Karen pulled the door wide, and was unsurprised to see a metal stairwell leading downwards. A flickering fluorescent light guided the descent, and Karen only hesitated until she felt Frank at her back.

They moved down the flight, unsure of the depth until they were abruptly ejected in to a small hallway, with only one other door at the opposite end. It hung ajar, and bluish light glowed from within.

Both Karen and Frank stood still, listening to the dense air. Neither sensed any thrum of life from the other side of the door, and with a pointed look of agreement, they entered.

Karen was not sure what she had been expecting, but the room elicited a gasp. It stretched out on
either side of the entrance, easily a mile each way. The ceiling was low, and dripped with cables and wiring down to the stacks of data below. Stacks upon stacks of bricklike hard drives stood in rows along the entire length of the vast room. They clicked and whirred, flickering with blue lights. The amount of data was astonishing, and Karen turned to Frank with a small look of awe.

“How… where do we start?”

Frank glanced about the room. They passed between the stacks, keeping an eye out for any signs of life, and as they neared the opposite wall of the room, a number of doors materialized. One in particular stood out; it appeared to have had it’s door blown clean off at some point. Frank pointed at it. “That’s as good a place as any.”

The small room was an absolute disaster. Computers and torn apart electronics littered every surface, along with piles of stinking trash. The sheer volume of debris was staggering, and it circled the room’s centre, surrounding an enormous corpse. A good portion of it appeared to have been somehow roasted; the features were charred beyond recognition. Somehow, the body had achieved some kind of mummification down here in the catacomb. Karen stepped nimbly around the garbage, and leant over the body. A shallow sniff elicited a grimace, and she straightened up quickly.

“I think it was a vampire. Once. Maybe?” Frank stayed back by the entrance. “I’ll take your word for it. It’s dead? Actually dead?”

Karen nodded, and strode swiftly past Frank out of the room. With a final sneer of disdain, he followed her out.

The next door opened on to a more opulent hallway. The black marble floors and walls had probably been impressive, once. Now covered in a thick layer of dust and broken glass, it almost seemed like the sacked temple of a forgotten god. Karen and Frank diverged, inspecting the remaining glass showcases that lined the walls. A number of them were broken, accounting for the glass covering the floor, but a number still stood, albeit now empty.

Frank attempted to navigate the floor without disturbance. An errant step, and his foot uncovered a pile of dirty cartridges on the floor. He knelt, plucking one up to inspect it. The small glass bulb held some sort of liquid, and it ended in an unextended syringe.

“What is that?”

He passed the object up over his shoulder, to Karen, who hovered behind him. She held it up to the dim light, before giving it a tentative sniff.

“ Weird. It smells kind of garlicky. Garlic and something else. Do you know what it is?”

“Nope.” He carefully pocketed two more of the cartridges, and rose up.

Karen crossed her arms, slightly nervous. “What happened here?”

Frank surveyed the room around them. “I don’t know exactly. Like I said, vampires are superstitious. They talk about blood gods and Daywalkers and all that shit, and who knows if there’s grains of truth in any of it.”

Karen shivered. “We need to find some kind of computer terminal, to try to access the data storage. I have no idea if this is going to work…”

Frank pointed to the large door at the end of the hall. “Through there?”
Karen paused. “Wait, Frank, I don’t know-”

She was cut off by a hulking figure slamming to the floor between them with a shattering thud. The beast rose up between them. It bared its fangs and lunged for Frank. Karen leapt back, skidding in the broken glass on the floor. Frank dodged the creature’s grip, and swung for it’s head to knock it off balance. The creature hefted a shoulder up, catching Frank in the chest and knocking him to the floor, winded. He shuffled back on his hands, hastily avoiding the reaching grasp. The monster roared and tried to rush Frank, but not before Karen swung a length of metal directly at it’s temple, stunning it, and giving Frank time to scramble to his feet. He dove back in to the fray, reaching for monsters eyes, it’s nose, anything soft. It got a foot up under Frank, knocking the wind out of him again, and it followed him down, slashing at his face and arms. Blood began to run in rivulets downward, as he tried to shield his face and neck from the beast. Karen circled the pair, lashing out at an opening in it’s bodily defenses. The monster struck her with an errant arm that sent her flying back into a still standing showcase.

Karen tried to rise, dazed. She could see the monster pinning Frank to the floor, slowly draining the fight out of him. Karen tried to stand again, but as she made it up on all fours, a boot hit her in the middle of her back, flattening her back on the floor. Though her vision spun, she could see a group of figures advance of Frank and the creature. The beast appeared to stand down when it saw them, taking up a suppliant position out of the way.

The black clad figures hoisted Frank up between them. As he swam in to focus in front of Karen, her heart cracked at the sight of his injuries. Blood poured from a myriad of deep open wounds on his arms and chest, and his face bloomed with bruises. She knew he would heal before long, but at that level of severity… she wasn’t sure just how long it would take. Frank was barely conscious, his head hanging low from his shoulders. At least, she saw, he was breathing. Not very steadily, but it was there.

The men - vampires - collected themselves, and milled about for a moment, before the grand door in front of them opened. Lights above them blew on to full power, illuminating the entire room around them. Another half dozen vampires entered, dressed in black tactical gear, and from the rear came a single figure. Tall and beautiful, dressed in an impeccable suit, the final vampire sauntered over to the group. He surveyed the room, and the further destruction. He eyed the monster in the corner, before turning to the vampire in charge of the team.


The tall one turned back to the rest. Karen could see him consider Frank for a moment, before making an unseen gesture to the team leader.

“Great. Great job. Suffice to say, I’m impressed.” Karen saw him raise a hand up, which drew his sleeve down an inch. Below the cuff of his crisp shirt, she could make out a glyph tattooed on the inside of his wrist. Even missing a third, Karen knew it by heart. Carpathia.

The man stared down at Frank.

“We got you, Frank. It’s done. You’re done.”

Frank stirred at the voice above him. He raised his head heavily, breath rasping with difficulty. One eye turned toward the stranger, and he ground out a single word:

“Bill?”
Blood sucking son of a bitch

Billy Russo stooped down to look Frank in the eye. He grinned, not unlike a feral dog.

“In the flesh, Frankie-boy. You surprised?”

Frank sputtered, spitting up blood. Russo straightened, adjusting the sleeves of his suit with a casual air.

“Take Castle with you, throw him in the tank.” The team of vampires supporting Frank dragged him away, up and out the grand door. Karen watched, still flat on the floor. Billy stalked towards her. He squatted, sneering down at her.

“And you. What's a nice girl like you doing in a shit hole like this? And with that oaf?” He sniffed. “Ahh, not much of a girl, are you? Not quite human. Interesting.” He rose again, ordering her guard to take her as well.

Billy stood back as Karen was heaved up to her feet, out of the dirt and refuse. Billy looked her up and down, tapping an idle finger to his chin.

“You gonna save us the trouble and tell me what you are?”

Karen pointedly ignored him, instead focusing on the trail of blood Frank had left behind him. She heard Billy shrug and leave the room, the clatter of his footsteps echoing in the emptied hall.

Karen's guard didn't bother to restrain her, and she briefly considered trying to fight back. She might have succeeded, but the bloody vision of Frank dominated her thoughts, and she let the guard drag her up the short stairs and out the door after him.

…

The chill of the box truck seeped in to Karen's bones as the hours passed. The insulation was thick, and even with her sharp hearing, she wasn't sure if the truck had been moving, or parked stationary this whole time. She curled into the corner, doing her best to allay her panic, at least until the situation could be properly assessed. Then she could panic.

Her mind turned back to Frank frequently, hoping against hope that the vampire he had called Bill had not decided to kill him.

Decades passed, or perhaps minutes, until the door to the box split wide. Fluorescent light poured in, burning Karen's eyes as she strained to see what was outside it. A guard climbed in and grabbed her, dragging her out on the concrete floor of a vast garage. Two other guards hovered nearby, as dark and silent as the rest of them. For a moment Karen considered trying to attack them, but before she could centre herself, hone her panic into a trigger for the wolf, she was again grabbed roughly, and towed along a stark hallway, down to a heavy metal door.

The guard's radio buzzed, unintelligible, and the guard hefted the door open, throwing Karen off her feet in to the dark room beyond.
The smell of blood permeated her nose, well before her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She flew across the room, coming to rest at Frank's side. He lay sprawled against the far wall, breathing shallowly. Karen gingerly inspected what wounds she could see, and the realization that they were not healing dropped like a cold stone inside her. She gathered up the sleeve of her jacket, in a feeble attempt to clean some of the blood.

The ministrations stirred Frank, and he cracked his un-swollen eye, which widened when he saw her.

“Kare, Karen, are you ok? He rasped. Karen cradled his cheek in her hand. “I'm ok,” she replied tenderly. Frank struggled, trying to rise, and she held him down with a firm hand on the shoulder.

“Try not to move. That monster… I don't know what it was, but it really hurt you. You're not really healing-” she choked, tears beginning to run freely. “Frank…”

He leaned in to the hand on his cheek with a sigh of small contentment, despite the circumstances. Karen tried to smile through her tears.

“I'm sorry, Karen, I shouldn't have… shouldn't have dragged you into this. If I'd know it was Bill, I wouldn't have…”

Karen tilted his face, looking him in the eyes.

“Frank, I don't care. We're going to make it out of this, but whatever happens, I don't- I could never, ever regret meeting you. You- Frank… I can't imagine this without you now.”

Frank closed the distance, leaning his forehead against hers. Karen felt her eyes flutter shut, reveling in the relief washing through her body. “Frank…” she began, but her whisper was abruptly swallowed in surprise when Frank pressed his mouth softly to hers. She melted in to him, drawing strength from their connection.

Karen leaned back, looking at Frank with a heavy heart. She pulled up his shirt to inspect the larger wounds on his chest.

“This looks bad… I don't know- I don't know what to do. Why aren't you healing?”

He sat up a little higher, grimacing. “Haven't had any blood for a few days, that might be it. Should start to heal, just slow.”

Karen pursed her lips. The only choice, the obvious one, sat before both of them. She knew Frank would never suggest it, and probably wouldn't even agree to it if she did, but she had to try. She knelt in front of him, pulling her hair over to one side. She leaned back in, finding his gaze.

“Frank, Frank, you need to take my blood. You need to heal.”

The moment blood passed her lips, Frank’s entire body went tense. She could see panic in his eyes; panic and fear and her heart cracked a little further. Karen took his face in her hands again, directing his focus.

“No. You need to. I’ll heal, remember? Pretty quick. And if we’re lucky, my blood will jump-start your healing too.”

His head fell back with a thud against the wall, and he turned away from her. An internal battle raged for a long moment, before a resigned look settled over his face. He looked back to Karen, not meeting her eyes, though he laced his fingers with hers.
“Okay,” he breathed. Karen directed his gaze back to her own once again, eyebrows raised in question. “Okay?”

He nodded, the resignation giving way to shame. Karen swept forward with another kiss, hard and fast. She pulled him to her, and he held her round the waist.

“You won’t hurt me, Frank,” she murmured in to his hair. She felt him take a steadying breath, the exhalation cool on her warm neck, and then -

It hurt. Of course it did. Even when you expect it, it’s not entirely pleasant. It was predatory, eliciting a basic animal instinct. Karen felt the wolf’s anxiety rear up inside her, and she began to panic, trying to tamp it down. Frank’s arms around her tightened, but in comfort, rather than entrapment. Karen let herself fall away in to her trust for him, and her body relaxed.

It was minutes, but it felt like infinity. Frank reluctantly pulled away, careful of Karen. She sagged back, probing the bite on her neck as it began to close. Frank was flushed with colour, and she noted his breathing had steadied. She pulled up his shirt, and was pleased to see the smaller cuts closing up, and the larger ones were no longer leaking blood.

With a gasp of relief, Karen fell back. She lay inert on the floor, collecting herself, and watched Frank heave himself to his feet. He grew sturdier by the second, and Karen allowed herself a moment of hope, that they just might escape unscathed.

Frank prowled the perimeter of the dark room, testing the metal walls with his fingertips. The panels were thick, and they did not budge, and it was the same with the large door. He pressed a shoulder against it, asking for any kind of give, but the door did not oblige.

Karen’s strength returned, and she moved to sit up against the wall. Frank caught her eye, and she winced.

“Frank, the vampire, from before… was that your friend… Bill?”

The memories of the immediate past loomed up in Frank’s mind. He gave her a single, stern nod.

“I don’t know what the hell he’s doin’… how they got to him. Makin’ the best of a bad situation…”

“He’s got a glyph, Frank. On his wrist. I saw it in the bunker. It’s… it’s Carpathia.”

Frank’s face turned to stone. He looked her, directly in the eye. “You’re sure.”

She nodded, swallowing a sob. “I’m sorry, Frank. I’m so sorry.”

Frank turned away. Karen couldn’t see his face, but she watched his hands curl into tight fists, knuckles white.

“I’m getting you out of here,” he growled, and shoved his shoulder into the door, pushing mightily. It creaked in complaint, but barely shifted. Karen rose, but stood idle, unsure if she would be of any help.

Frank pulled back, ready to push back again, when the lock clicked. He stepped back, alert. Karen slipped behind him, and they watched the heavy door creak open.

A team of Russo’s vampire guards lurked beyond. The team leader strode in, filling the doorway.

“Feeling better, Castle? Time to go.” He nodded, and four other vampires flanked Frank, leading him
away. The rage erupted on his face, but he kept it in check. Another vampire grabbed Karen by the upper arm and dragged her on after them. The bright light in the hallway made her squint as she tried to assess her surroundings. The hallway was void, and their footsteps echoed all the way down.

The long hall ended in a service elevator that slowly rumbled open as the group approached. Frank was thrust in first, and quickly surrounded. Karen's guard pushed her in after, making sure she was facing forward; away from Frank. She could feel him, though. His presence, his rage, filled the elevator. It sucked the air out of the small space. She could feel his eyes on her back, honed in on her safety, and she longed to reach out to him in reply. To smooth the furrow from his brow.

Instead, she continued to face the elevator door as it ambled upward. Time slowed, and if not for the clank of gears outside the box, Karen would have sworn they weren't moving at all. The guard stood still beside her, hand like a vice on her bicep. She would have liked to rip his arm from it's socket. To let herself go. The base of her skull tingled, and Karen tried in vain to focus on that feeling. The wolf hummed inside her, but did not make an appearance.

After what surely had to be an eternity, the elevator slowed to a stop, audibly protesting. Karen was steered out, directly in to a tasteful penthouse apartment, decorated in typical minimalist fashion. The guard sat her down on a slim couch, which gave Karen the chance to examine her surroundings. The open concept loft effused the air of a casual party, with smartly dressed guests dotting the room. They barely gave Karen a second look, instead chatting among themselves. It took her a moment to realize that, of course, everyone in the room was a vampire. They passed as human at a distance, but the closer you looked, the more inhuman their mannerisms became.

An outburst of noise behind her drew their attention, and Karen chanced a look behind her, though she knew what to expect.

Frank was dragged in to the penthouse by no less that six of Russo's guards, each holding the end of a heavy chain that was attached to Frank. He certainly gave a valiant struggle, which earned him a small grin from Karen. The vampires pulled him to the empty centre of the room, where he looked absurdly out of place, bloody and beaten, in the midst of the finery. The larger slashes under his shirt had began to bleed through again, and his breathing was heavy. Still, though, he glared up at his captors with icy resolve, as if he had already decided when they were going to die.

Billy entered from another door on the far side of the room. He strolled through the party goers, giving greeting here and there as he went. The crowd was calm, some almost bored looking. Billy reached the centre of the room, coming to a halt in front of Frank. He slipped his hands in to his pockets, and considered the man on the floor.

“Frankie, Frankie, Frankie. I'm a little sorry to see you in this state, I won't lie. But you've been a thorn in my side for two years now, and,” he squatted down, grabbing Frank's face to look him in the eye. “It's got to end, Frank. No more games.”

Frank wrenched his face out of Billy's grip. He searched the other vampires face, anger and rage giving way to a small slice of desperate hope.

“Bill, Billy… how'd they get to you, man? I'm sorry Bill, I'm sorry, I should've, should've stayed with you that night…”

Billy's face became an unreadable mask. He rose back to his feet, turning away from Frank. Ran a hand over his slick hair; adjusted the sleeves of his suit. The room was silent around them. He returned to Frank abruptly, standing over him.

“Do you think… you think I didn't want this? This is all I've ever wanted!” He swept an arm out
grandly. “Money, power… control.”

The rest of the room fell away around Frank, crumbling to dust. Billy Russo, his friend, his family, stood before him with pride. He squeezed his eyes shut to stem the tears that threatened.

Frank’s voice was low, so low. It ground out of his chest like the rumble of an earthquake.

“They killed my family, Bill. Maria, Frankie… my baby girl, Billy. Carpathia took them from me, and they couldn't even do me the fucking favour of killing me too.” He raised his head again. “This is what you wanted?”

Billy stepped back. He considered Frank coolly. “Yeah, Frank. I'm more than aware. If it makes you feel any better, they died for that. I made sure of it-”

Frank lunged up, dragging the chains restraining him nearly out of his captors grasp. He was stopped short right up in Billy's face.

“What do you mean, you made sure of it? What did you do, Bill? WHAT DID YOU DO!!”

The thunder in Frank's voice sparked the rest of the room back to life. The guards holding Frank reeled him back in, re-securing their grip on him. Billy refreshed his composure, and spoke loud enough for the room at large to hear him.

“I did what I had to do, Frank. I worked very hard to get what I wanted, and when I threw you a bone, you spat it back at me. You threatened to tear down everything I had, everything I had wanted, because of some sense of morality. I did what any good Marine would do, Frank. I neutralize the threat.”

The echo of his voice reverberated in the once again silent room. Billy stared Frank down, looking a little manic. Frank stared back at him, his stony face tracked with freely running tears.

“You had them, Bill. You had us. They were babies, Bill…”

Billy's resolve wavered for a moment, before he sneered. “It's too late for that, Frank. You got in my way, and they're gone because of it. And it's long since time that you joined them.”
Tooth for a tooth

Time had slowed around Karen Page. Not just in the immediate room around her, but in the last few
days altogether. She would be the first to agree that her life was indeed unusual, but she clung to her
routine to preserve some modicum of sanity.

But, then Frank Castle dropped in to her life (in the most literal, cliche way possible), and her time
slowed to a crawl. He was a complete and total stranger, and yet, every moment with him made her
feel comforted and cared for. Every moment was engraved in her memory.

She sat, nearly forgotten in the throng of vampires watching the nights drama unfold. This would
have been an opportune time to either fight or flee, but Karen could do neither. Her heart beat a
bruise against her rib cage as she watched Frank break in front of her.

His head hung, so low. She saw the resignation drag him down, and she was the only one in the
room to see the barely there sigh of relief.

He was done. She knew it, the moment she saw his shoulders drop. Frank Castle had been waging a
one-man war for the past two years, without any real desire to live. Karen squeezed her eyes shut, in
part to stem the flow of tears, but also to avoid the sight of Frank's death in front her.

She allowed herself, for a moment, to wish that she had been given the opportunity to know Frank,
before it all.

“I'm not a monster, Frank,” Billy added, his languid voice slicing through her reverie.

At that, something shifted. A chill ran up Karen's spine, settling at the base of her skull. She watched
Frank, eagle-eyed.

He hadn't moved from his kneeling position, head still hanging low. The air of defeat, however, had
given way to something else. He lifted his head, turning it to look at Billy with his good eye.

“I know you ain't gonna make it easy, Bill. But it's gotta be you.”

Billy bared his teeth, barely a smile. “It will be my pleasure, Frank.”

Karen noted the brittle sigh of relief wash over him. Frank straightened up, the brunt of his gaze on
Karen. Her breath caught in her throat. His eyes didn't leave her as he jerked his head towards Billy.

“And the girl, Bill. She's not a part of this. Free her.”

Free her.

The rest of the room blurred around Karen. She could hear Billy making a snide remark as Frank
was pulled to his feet by the guards.

Free her.

The wolf crackled under her skin, finally ready to make an entrance. Karen had been loath to leave
Frank, but she saw him now. Saw that almost imperceptible change in his demeanor. His eyes bore
into hers, and she could see the determination and ferocity ablaze within. She gave him the smallest
of nods, and he tore his gaze away, once again facing Bill.
The guards unshackled Frank, leaving him bare in the centre of the room. He rubbed the raw spot on his wrist, which had slowly begun to heal. Billy motioned for the crowd to move back, and they did so obediently. The onlookers spoke quietly among themselves. This event, so to speak, did not seem to perturb them in the slightest.

Karen stayed glued to her spot on the couch, staying as unobtrusive as possible. The vampires around her barely gave her a second glance. She could feel her skin begin to ripple; it took a great deal of strength to hold off the wolf, after begging it to appear for so long. She grit her teeth and zeroed her focus in on Frank.

He stood, tall and straight, in a pool of white light. The rest of the room dimmed further, until he was illuminated; stark and white and drenched in blood. Billy stood just out of the light, loosening his shirt collar and slipping out of his shoes. He looked back to Frank.

“I'm ready when you are, Frankie-boy.”

Frank looked him dead in the eye.

“Nothin’ left to say, Bill.” Billy nodded, and stepped in to the bright circle.

The room inhaled, held its breath, and the two vampires sized each other up. Frank was still; Billy was loose. Neither appeared to want to make the first move. Frank was expected to fight, and expected to die. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but otherwise did not move.

“Oh, for fucks sake-”

Like a shot, Billy lashed out. A solid, open palm struck Frank on the jaw, the force sending him reeling. The stumble lasted a fraction of a second, and then Frank was back on his feet, now defensive. Billy grinned.

“There we go! Let's go, Frank!”

Frank snarled, and lunged. He made to grab Billy's arm, to wrench it loose from his body. Billy pulled back at the last second, instead getting a grip on the back of Frank's head and pushing him down hard to the floor. Frank slammed into the hardwood with an audible burst of air. He scrambled, trying to right himself, but Billy kept him down, raining blows in to the back of his head.

Frank threw an arm behind him to intercept, and Billy's next throw he grabbed, before it could land. He rode the momentum, pushing Billy down to the floor beside him, and righted himself with a deft flip. Frank rumbled, barely coherent. Billy smiled, blood in his teeth, and rose smoothly upright.

The moment Billy righted himself, Frank let loose another assault. He plowed into the vampire, shoulder first, and bodily threw him back on the floor. Gravity pulled them both down, hard.

This turn woke up the watching crowd. They began to rustle and murmur; suddenly the surety of the fight wasn't so. A couple of vampires advanced on the two exchanging blows on the floor; others fell back and faded like smoke into the shadows, and fled.

Frank pummeled Billy, a barrage of fists, left and right. Billy struck back, reaching up between Frank's blows to claw at his face and neck.

Blood began to run anew down Frank's chest and arms, and he roared, lunging for Billy's face. Billy's arms came between them, caging his face away from Franks fangs. Frank sunk his teeth into the meat of the other vampires forearm, earning him a scream of rage. Billy wrenched his arm out of Frank's jaws, and his arms shot up to encircle Frank's throat. Frank yanked Billy up by the collar,
face to face. The blood from his broken trachea erupted from his mouth when he laughed.

“Can't kill me, Bill. I'm already dead!” Frank jerked Billy forward, slamming his forehead in to the other with a resounding crack. Billy's hands dropped from Frank's neck, and he was slammed back in to the floor. Frank pulled a fist back, and the fraction of a second it sat at its apex slowed to a standstill.

Karen shook, watching the bloody fight, trying to rein the wolf. In that infinite second, Frank's eyes met hers from under his heavy brow. Blood dripped down his face, pooling in his eye sockets, dribbling from his mouth and cracked lips. He looked a holy terror, and yet, in that moment, Karen's heart seized in her chest.

Frank's blow reached the top of it's arc and time froze and she felt a flood of fear and rage and love -

“Now Karen! DO IT NOW!”

The echo of his roar filled her head and she felt the breath in her chest catch and she exhaled, and exhaled, and exhaled, and the wolf! The wolf leapt up out of her skin in a burst of joy, and landed in a torrent of blood.

Frank's fist connected with Billy's face, and time caught up with it. Billy's face shattered beneath him, and his inhuman screech was lost in the chaos of the room.

The wolf cut a bloody swathe through the remaining vampires. They attacked her with fists and fangs and claws, and she reciprocated in kind, ripping out throats and snapping clean through bone. Some of them ran, cradling broken limbs, and the others died in a whirlwind of teeth and rage.

The rain of Frank's fists slowed as Karen approached him. The wolf's grin split, and Frank's matched it. He reached a hand out, grasping the wolf by the scruff for an instant. Karen rumbled in return.

Billy spat and gurgled below, still feebly trying to push Frank off. Frank pressed his hand down harder, effectively trapping Billy, and silencing him. Frank reached back behind him as he leaned down to Billy, to whisper in his ear.

“I told you Bill, I'm already dead. And killing you… I think that would be too easy. I want you to live with what you did, just like I have to. Every. Single. Day.”

Frank slammed his fist down in to Billy's face one final time, and the ear-piercing scream that tore from his throat came straight from Hell itself.

The cartridge in Frank's hand burst on impact, driving shards of glass and oil in to the flesh of Billy's face. He writhed violently on the floor under Frank, who struggled to keep Billy still enough to continue grinding damage into his face. The oil from the cartridge seeped down into the existing wounds, turning the ragged cuts into deep, oozing fissures of flesh. Billy scrabbled at his face, and his shrieking intensified as he felt the damage done.

Frank smiled grimly, leaning over Billy once more.

“Sorry, Bill, but I don't think that's gonna heal.”

He stood, wiping his hand on his filthy pants. The oil had left an angry burn on his palm; whether it would stay unhealed remained to be seen.

Karen studied him. Her expression was measured, as if assessing the extent of Frank's internal and external trauma. Frank ran a hand over her head, and she leaned into it, huffing softly. He gave her a
gentle squeeze as he surveyed the rest of the rooms carnage.

“Damn, Kare, good job.”

The wolf grinned. Frank jerked his head towards the exit, and she began to carefully pick her way through the mess. Frank followed, pausing at the door. He turned back to Billy, still writhing and gibbering on the floor.

“By the way, Bill… it's only a couple hours til the sun is up. Might wanna get some curtains for those big windows of yours. Nice view, though.”

Billy's gurgled hiss echoed behind him, as he slipped out the door after Karen, and back into the waning night.
For the second time in under a week, Karen Page woke up in a bed that was not her own. The boxy room was warm and dark, and she felt comfortable. Safe.

The wolf’s memories from the night before seeped into her mind. Flashes and feelings and smells entwined in her consciousness, and gave her a pretty good idea of how the night went.

In the midst of the blood and rage and gore, was Frank. Like a steady pillar in the centre of the chaos; a marker to find her way back. Home.

They had been up town, far and away from where they had started. The events of the past however many hours were taking their toll, but still, they needed to push themselves to race the sun. Karen could still feel the wolf’s muscles burning, her body working hard to keep her moving, and to keep her healing. Frank ran beside her, and even though he was in far worse shape, he kept a steady stream of encouragement as they went.

“C’mon, Kare, not far. We made it, we’re gonna make it…”

Looking back, Karen wasn’t sure if the muttered words were for more for himself than for her.

Luckily, they did make it, with time to spare. Frank shut the window cover tight, and then, without ceremony, stripped down to nothing in front of her. He ran the shower hot, and ushered her into the stall, and joined her on the floor. They sat under the spray for an eon, not moving, letting the water wipe away the visible evidence of the night. The water turned tepid, then cold, before Frank wearily reached above his head to shut off the faucet. He gave himself and Karen a perfunctory wipe with a dry towel, and then fell into bed, dead to the world. Karen climbed in beside him, stretching out. She felt a hand bury itself in the scruff of her neck, and both human and wolf purred, before falling into sleep.

The cold slab alongside her on the bed stirred, half rolling over to crack an eye at her.

“You're back, s'good.” Frank rumbled, blindly reaching a hand back to grasp Karen's hand. She squeezed back in return. He turned the rest of the way over, to face her; their hands still joined between them.

Frank's sleepy expression sharpened as he woke fully. The crease in his brow furrowed as he roved Karen's face. “You're ok? You sure?”

Karen gave him a small smile. “I'm sore, and I'm hungry, and I want another shower. But I'm alive, and you're alive, so I'm… I'm ok.”

Her smile turned shy, and Frank pulled her up against him. She could feel his heartbeat, feel the buzz in his throat when he whispered down to her.

“Y’know, I'm alive. I'm alive, and for the first time in a long time, I think I want to be.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for indulging me, everybody. Keen readers will note that most of the basis for the vampire underworld is from the Blade movie/tv series, so /technically/ it's still part of the MCU? I certainly took liberties with it, for sure. Come find me on Tumblr @sarma. Thanks!

End Notes

I don’t usually write (or i do, i just never publish it) so be kind please D: i’m sarma on tumblr, and i usually draw stuff.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!