Into the Fire

by burning_nova

Summary

Prompt: Frank Castle is a recently widowed man bent on revenge. Before he starts his course of vengeance he meets a man at a gym while gaining his strength back up. That man is Jack Murdock, a divorced boxer with a recently blinded son due to his heroism.

They hit it off.

It's an odd attraction for both men but they're not fighting it.

The Punisher is still a thing that is seething in the back of Frank's mind but he's kind of distracted by helping Jack with Matt.

Jack fails to fall to Creel.

Instead of killing Jack Murdock they take his son.

Frank Castle refuses to lose another family.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Frank hissed as he threw a punch. His muscles felt like they were on fire. He grinned when he delivered a final punch to the punching bag. He pulled back and went to get his bag. This early in the morning, Fogwell’s gym was empty.

Normally, at least, he was actually surprised to see a man near his age at the entrance. Frank paused. The man paused as well and gave him a cautious look. Frank gathered his bag and watched the man from the corner of his eye while he packed his things away. The man seemed to be doing the same.

The man glowered at him. “You have a problem with me?”

“No. Just surprised to see someone this early in the morning.” After a moment the man nodded in agreement.

“Yeah it’s early and its empty. That’s why I came.” He seemed to be considering him.

“You new here?”

“Yeah.” Because Frank would be here for a while and the gym didn’t have much of a paper trail. Didn’t need his real ID or name or even cared as long as he paid on time or in advance. The man nodded. He held out a wrapped hand.

“I’m Jack.”

“Frank.” He replied as he shook the hand.

“You throw a decent punch. You a boxer?”

“I know it.” Frank said casually. “Military, retired. You?”

“Boxer. It’s my job.”

“You any good?” The man smiled, viciously. It called to the fire burning in Frank’s blood that had been lit since…since the park.

“Yeah.”

“You want to spar?”

“Right now? You look tired.” Yeah, a coma would do that.

“Yes.” Because his prey wouldn’t give him any rest. The man looked like he wanted to say yes but shook his head.

“Not today. I have to pick up my kid from Sunday school.” Frank tried to turn away but his first response was:

“They’re always eager to leave.” Instead of “Sure, at a later time.” Jack grinned, fond and loving.

“Yeah. You have kids?”

“Used to.”
“Divorced?”


“I’m sorry, my condolences.” Frank nodded.

“Thank you. I’ll see you ‘round.” Jack nodded a good bye. Frank returned to his apartment. It was a shit hole but it was better than returning to an empty house and empty thoughts in an empty man.
They met again later that week. Frank went in late this time; the gym was emptying the last few stragglers of the day. He began punching a bag, falling into an easy rhythm. He was the only man in the gym for several minutes.

He stopped when he heard someone approaching. He was surprised to see his early morning acquaintance. Frank had gone to the gym several times that week but had not seen Jack again. He suspected that Jack must have regular hours and that the Sunday morning was a one off while his kid was a church.

Jack’s face was set in a hard expression. It melted into a friendly smile seeing him. He was dressed in exercise clothes.

“Frank!” Jack greeted. He walked to him. Frank nodded at him.

“Jack.”

“You always come in early and late?” Frank shrugged.

“It varies.” He had to get info, follow leads and build his arsenal after all. Mostly he just came when it was slow and empty. “You up for a match?” He felt alive after what was now his warm up. Jack grinned, it was eager and something in it made Frank think that the man became a boxer because he liked to fight.

“Yes. Let me warm up a bit too and we’ll start.” Frank was about to reply when a noise caught his attention. Jack turned but didn’t seemed concerned.

A tap-tap-tap slowly made its way toward him, to them. It unnerved him. He couldn’t place the sound or the frequent pattern. Frank was about to move for cover when the red tip of a white cane emerged from the shadows of the locker room.

A boy followed a few seconds later. Dark glasses covered his face. The boy paused. The cane made a sure movement to the left, hitting a bench. The boy continued forward with firm steps. The tap tap tapping of his cane was measured, practiced and seemed unnatural.

“Dad?” The boy called. Jack gave him an apologetic smile.

“Here, Matty.” The boy immediately headed in the direction of his voice. Then the boy stumbled once. Jack steadied his son, moving with a grace from his. Jack smiled at him, a pained and proud thing. That was an odd combination, Frank thought. “There’s another boxer here.”

“I can smell him.” Matt said. Frank resisted the urge to sniff himself. He was sweating yes but it wasn’t that bad. Right? Shit. If a boy who had barely met him could smell him so easily then clearly he needed to improve his conditioning. A blind boy at that who couldn’t even see him being slightly sweaty.

“Matthew.” Jack hissed.

“It’s alright. I did work out a bit before he came in.” Jack gave him a thankful look. “Hi, kid. I’m Frank.”

“I’m Matt. I thought you were training, Dad.”
“I am. Frank and I are going to spar. Do you need anything, Matt?”

“No.” Frank realized he had been carrying a small backpack. He had been too distracted by the cane. God, he was off his game. Jack led the boy to a table in the corner, helped him take out some books and the boy began to study. His fingers moved slowly over the heavy tomes. Jack came back.

“Sorry about that. I should have told you my kid was here.” Jack must have remembered what he said last time.

“It’s fine.” And it was, just because his world had ended didn’t mean that it had for others. Jack smiled. That eager look was back and it ignited the fire back in Frank’s blood. He might not be able to take down his prey yet but this. This he could do.

Frank stretched and kept his blood flow up as Jack began to work on a punching bag. The man was strong. He had power to his moves and he wasn’t heavy on his feet either. He was in good shape: powerful body and strong arms.

“My dad is going to beat you.” A small voice said from behind him. Frank turned around. Matt was there, his dark sunglasses shining in the dim light of the gym.

“You think, kid? I was in the Marines.” The boy lifted his chin; pride and stubbornness clear in his demeanor.

“Yeah. My dad’s the best.” He seemed to be gauging where he was before a finger pointed toward a wall. “That’s my dad there. Battling Jack Murdock.” Frank followed the finger and gazed at the posters. He spotted one, indeed announcing a fight for that fighter. Huh, so Jack really was a fighter. “See, you’re going to lose.”

“We’ll see kid.”

“You are going to lose.” The kid said with certainty.

“Matt! Get back to your books!” Jack yelled. The boy made a face and slowly made his way to the table. He moved in the room with a familiarity that didn’t require his cane. Frank went back to stretching.

The kid was right. Jack won that match by virtue of boxing being his profession, Frank's post coma physique still not at its most optimal, and endurance. The man could last and came at you like a train, there was no stopping him. They exited the ring full of adrenaline and sated from the match. Murdock looked like he could go on and Frank really missed his endurance.

The fight had been fun. It had been competitive but not enough to spoil the enjoyment aspect. Didn’t even feel like exercise. Of course they hadn't gone all out either. In a real fight, Frank thinks, he would win as he wouldn't just stick to boxing.

Give him a gun and then for sure he would have the upper hand.... He shook the thoughts out of his head. Not the time or place, Castle.

"Told you!" Matt called. Frank glanced over. The boy had his head on his crossed arms. He liked tired but clearly had stayed up to listen to who one.

"Matt!" Jack called irritably.

"It's okay." Frank said. "He was right. You did win."
"It's still not good sportsmanship to act like a braggart." Jack said loudly. Matt made a face that clearly said he thought Jack was full of it. It was one that Lisa had gotten often...he blinked away the image. The kid stood up.

"Whatever. Are we going home?" Jack shook his head then with a pained look said

"No, Matty. I got a bit of training left." The boy grumbled but went back to his book. Frank smirked.

"Thanks for the fight. I think I'm going to turn in for the night." Jack smiled.

"No problem. You were good. I'm always up for new partners."

"Good. 'Cause I really want to see if I can beat you at some point."

"You won't!" Matt yelled. Jack shot his boy an irritated look. Frank laughed. The action surprised him but it felt good.

He smiled and looked at Jack. “So you want to meet up again? I’m sure your boy would like to keep me in the loser’s corner.”

“That’s ‘cause you are one!” Matt yelled.

“Matty!”

Frank grinned. Yeah. This was what he needed. A fight, even if not a proper one. It would help him when he had to actually take out the filths that took out his family. He glanced at Matt. Even if the kid was kind of a pain in the ass.

They made plans to meet. Frank got ready to leave. The poster for one of Murdock’s fights caught his eye.

He would also check out Murdock.

The fight might be fun but this was still Hell’s Kitchen.

It wouldn’t do if he hung out with a piece of garbage he was intending to hunt. A small thwap caught his attention, he turned back and saw Murdock, Jack, guiding his boy on a punching bag. His face stern.

“Your form is sloppy. If you want to criticize people Matty then you got to earn the right.” The boy grinned. If Murdock intended this to be a punishment then it was obviously going to fail. The boy looked as eager as Jack did before their fight. Jack gave him an exasperated look but it was fond.

Frank tried to check his cynicism. Hell’s Kitchen might be full of filth but that didn’t mean everyone there was it. Sometimes a man was a man and his son was his son.
“Come on, Frank. That all you got?” Jack taunted as he dodged his punch. Frank glared and advanced. Murdock grinned, eager and excited. Frank feigned left and struck. Murdock’s grin grew bigger. Frank had a moment to appreciate it before Jack moved, fast. Frank was on the defensive again.

The fight lasted longer than their previous ones but in the end Frank succumb to his lack of endurance. Jack preened in victory, his smirk just irking Frank to agree to another match.

“Your kid here often?” Frank asked when they finished. He hadn’t seen the kid the last two times they had sparred.

“Sometimes.” Murdock said and shrugged. “I can’t find or afford a babysitter sometimes. He’s with a neighbor at the moment.”

“Wife work a lot?” Murdock stared and then, after a moment answered.

“I don’t have one. Just Matty and me.”

“Ah, sorry. Didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“It’s all right. I know I brought up bad ones earlier with you. You were honest with me so I’m honest with you.” Frank nodded. Though his discomfort was mostly an act.

He had found surprisingly little on Jack Murdock. His family appeared to be long time residents of Hell’s Kitchen. He found the idiom about their family interesting but it didn’t seem to point to a criminal family in of itself.

A few Murdocks here and there had been in crimes but so far nothing on Murdock himself. Murdock worked as a boxer and on the ‘off’ months did manual labor when not training. He found one wedding announcement but nothing more on a family life. A divorce made sense given the circumstances.

He was honestly glad that his new sparring partner was relatively clean. It was nice to not worry about outsiders potentially ruining his plans for a fight or having to look for a new partner. That would mark him in the memories of more people. Frank was trying to stay low.

Jack was really the only person he was ‘friendly’ with and that was still part of his overall plan. He was getting back in shape and an opponent was good, even if he did stick to boxing. Jack was actually quite good at varying his fighting. It made him a fun opponent.

Jack leaned against the ropes of the ring. Frank took in his profile. The muscles of his arms were obvious even in a relaxed state and he caught sight of his torso as the shirt stuck where sweat had built up.

“So you want to catch a beer or a game sometime?” Frank snapped his gaze to Jack’s face. He looked nervous and a bit embarrassed that he had asked.

“A game?”

“Yeah. What’s your pick? Baseball, football, softball?”
“Only if I’m suddenly a six year old girl.” Frank snorted in reply. He considered the proposition. Frank should say no but he was tired and he wasn’t going to be doing anything soon. He’d get there but on these kinds of days—where he had run himself ragged getting in shape or tracking down information—there was time.

There was nothing but time anymore. Time until he got to his revenge. Time until he took out the gangs. Time to build up his armory. Time until he was at his physical peak. Time.

All Frank did was go back to his shit hole and not think. Pretend to watch television and not seethe. It was a distraction and Frank could plan.

Lay low but not socializing would also draw attention. The loner. The gunman. The psychopath. They would say. He fit their ‘profiles’. So he answered.

“I’m usually up for whatever is on. Marines didn’t leave me a lot of free time for a few years.” And it was true. Jack’s posture actually relaxed, small tension left his form. The smile on his face was genuine. Frank found himself returning it without meaning to.

He needed herrings if he came up as a suspect or potential suspect.

It was nothing more.

The next morning Frank drank from his coffee and looked over the morning newspaper. There was a crowd at a new sandwich shop. Frank was eating in the small shop across the street. Greasy eggs, meat, and questionable coffee. His usual.

Same bullshit. Politics. Corruption in the police. Crime up in Hell’s Kitchen. He almost closed the paper when something caught his attention.

RAND CHEMICAL DEPOSITION SCHEDULED

Why had that gotten his attention? Frank scanned the article.

...incident which left a local resident of Hell’s Kitchen, Matthew Murdock, then aged nine, blind from unsecured chemical barrels. Rand is under investigation for improper permits and transportation of dangerous chemicals. An out of court settlement was reached with….

Frank put the cup down. Anger stirred in him. Matt hadn’t always been blind then. It explained some of Jack’s actions, shaking his head then repeating the meaning out loud. It added a new layer of meaning to the odd way that Matt had displayed with the cane in the gym when he was clearly comfortable in the place. He wasn’t using it while he had to there because he needed to, it was practice.

Frank read the article. It didn’t give much information.

He would need to follow up on this.

Maybe add people to his List.
Chapter 4

The scope wasn’t that of his rifle but it still did its job in helping Frank locate his target. He made a note. These dirtbags were part of the Dogs of War. They were low level; they knew nothing, were new and worked at the most basic tasks the group had. They couldn’t be fully trusted yet.

Nonetheless, someone who was trusted still over saw them and that person had connections, and that was Frank’s target tonight. The man was in his early thirties and looked like he could use a bullet between his eyes. He was berating a newbie on some job; maybe he didn’t bring enough dough or sold enough drugs.

Frank didn’t give a shit. He would take them all out in time. He just needed to make sure he connected all the pieces right. The dirt piles that killed his family came first before anyone else, if the Dogs of War weren’t the ones responsible then he had no plans on killing them.

Once he was done cleaning up, God knows there was still more to pick up after. First, it was strictly personal.

Yeah. Things were definitely adding. Up. His trigger finger twitched. A few more rifles, ammo and weapons. A few more recon sessions. Everything was adding up slowly.

Frank grinned, savagely, and put the scope away. Yes. Everything was coming together. He was missing pieces here and there but he’d get to them just like this.

He ran a hand through his growing hair. It wasn’t too bad but it irritated him. He needed a haircut. His hand skidded over his most recent gunshot wound. Another reminder of his mission.

He looked at his watch. He had to go meet up with Jack. He sighed. He needed cover and it was a necessary annoyance.

His body protested his walk away. Better than last time. He was tired nonetheless. Cover was acceptable use of recovery time. He reminded himself. He went to drop off his notes and changed at his safe house.

Frank met Jack at an empty bar. It was oddly loud from the blaring televisions on the walls. The noise buzzed in the back of his head. He doesn’t know how he did it before or tolerated it, this nonsense.

Jack came into view of his periphery. A beer fell onto the tabletop with a muted clank. Jack grinned

“You’ll see. They a good beer selection.” he shook his own bottle, a twin of the one in front of Frank. “You’ll see. This place is worth the beer alone.” He said assuredly. Frank just nodded and took a swig from his beer. The combination of its flavors was almost soothing. It was good, just as Jack had promised. At least that had delivered.

“You’re not wrong.” Jack grinned in agreement and took another swig of his bottle. They talked about nothing really, but it distracted Frank enough to enjoy the alcohol. They finished the first beer fast. Jack ordered two more, different brew but just as good. By the time they were ready for a third the bar had filled more, not a weekend crowd but a presence that had Frank uneasy.

“You have to try the onion rings.” Jack said as he came back with the third. “The beer and rings are fantastic together. Matty loves them.”
“You bring him here?” Frank asked in surprise. Jack laughed and shook his head.

“No. I take them home. I’m a single father, not an irresponsible buffoon. I mean I know I look like one but come on.” He waved to his face. The faintest traces of a bruise shadowed the left side of his face. Not Frank’s work, it was a recent match that Jack had won. Frank had watched.

It had been a good fight. It was one thing to spar with Jack; it was another to see him actually fight. Man was like a brick house. He wouldn’t go down. After a while it was just a matter of one-two-K-O.

Clearly Jack had been going easy on Frank.

“Some bars are grills in the day.” Frank answered instead of confirming the dig. Jack’s eyes narrowed. He knew what Frank had meant but he let it go. He drank from his beer.

“So what do you say? Yes or no to the rings?”

“Yeah. I’ll try them. You were right about the beer so might as well try the complete package.” Jack moved to get up. “I’ll buy. You got the beers.” And Frank didn’t have a son to support on an amateur boxer’s income. Frank grimaced, as he had to push his way through the crowd.

CHEMICAL SPILL IN HELL’S KITCHEN

RAND CHEMICALS DENIES RESPONSIBILITY IN HELL’S KITCHEN CRASH

LOCAL BOY SAVES MAN, BLINDED, IN RAND FIASCO

Frank read all the articles he could find after learning about the deposition. The glare from the lenses of the sunglasses in the gym as the read each article came to mind during each of them. The assured smirk. The goading little pain in his ass was a hero. Least he could do was help his father with onion rings.

He ordered two servings, one to go, and when the order came out he returned to the place at the bar next Jack. Jack raised a brow at the box but didn’t comment until Frank pushed it toward him. “For you kid.”

“You don’t have to.” Jack said and didn’t take the box. Frank rolled his eyes.

“Take them, last thing you want is your kid whining about not having brought him anything.” He lifted the beer. “Think of as a thank you for decent beer and food.” he took a bite of the onion ring. Huh. It was good. “Kind of been living off crappy take out.” Which wasn’t a lie. Frank didn’t have the time to be cooking when he could be working.

Jack stared at him. Then, after a moment, took the box with thanks. They went back to their talk, half nothing and half about an upcoming baseball game that Frank had somehow agreed to try and catch with Jack.

They split after that beer. Jack headed to pick up Matt from a neighbor and then home. Frank went back to his safe house. He felt sated even though the false calm from the alcohol was almost gone by the time he headed to sleep. It was worth the few hours of uninterrupted sleep he got from that.
Frank blocked and jabbed. Jack grinned and then moved quickly with a combo. Frank stumbled. "Yes!" Frank shook off the blow and made an assault. Matt cocked his head as he took in the sound.

He wondered what the footwork was like without the visual cues. Kid had an idea of what boxing should be like and had some training so he might have a pretty good picture. Frank blocked and smirked as he managed to get Jack into a corner. Kid jumped.

"No! Come on, Dad!" Frank concentrated on getting Murdock to acquiesce. So far Frank hadn’t won a single spar. Give him mixed combat and then he’d get something but boxing with rules? Yeah it was a good challenge.

One miscalculated move on Frank’s part allowed Murdock to escape the corner. Kid whooped. Frank glowered and tried to corner Jack again. Jack evaded it with quick footwork and had him down again. Frank conceded. Jack would win again. Though he had been close.

Okay, closer.

The man grinned in triumph. Frank returned it because it had gotten his adrenaline thrumming. He wanted to suggest another match but Matt came to the ring and crowed on about his Dad’s skill. Frank couldn’t get annoyed because the kid quickly started asking questions making sure his visualization of the spar had been correct.

Jack glanced at him. Frank shrugged as he answered a question meant for his moves but aimed at Jack. It was fine. Answering together seemed to make it less awkward. The kid went from directing the inquiries to just his dad to Frank immediately.

“How’d you corner my dad?”

"Luck?” Frank answered half humoring and half honest. He hadn’t really planned it but had gone with the opening when he saw it.

"Liar. You just don’t want dad to know so he can't prepare against it next time he goes up against you."

"Matt.” Jack warned. "It was a good fight. You can't expect everyone to tell all their secrets. Besides if it was skill then that means I can up my game." Kid grinned. He looked excited.

“Then you’ll keep up your streak.”

“I will beat you, Murdock.” Frank said.

“Well I’ll be waiting for that day.” Matt stuck out his tongue. Frank laughed. Kid was a card. Jack rolled his eyes.

“I guess we should set up are next match.” They did and chatted a bit about. Matt felt his wrist. Frank saw a watch.

“Is it ten? Can we go home? I’m hungry.” Frank and Jack looked at the clock on the wall.

“Yes, it is. We have to go Frank. We’ll see you for the game?” Jack said and helped his kid get his things.
The gym was empty now. He moved to a bag. His mind refocused. He thought about his aim tomorrow. He was getting acquainted with the black market of New York. He pounded the bag.

A few days later he met with Jack and Matt at restaurant-bar mix in the day. They watched and listened to the game over snack food. Matt seemed to indulge less enthusiastically in food than Frank would expect of a preteen.

Jack was eyeing his kid every once in a while but seemed content as long as his kid ate. Frank decided not to ask about it or look into it. Kid could’ve been a picky eater. God knows that his had their phases. It was a good game and ended with Frank paying after losing a bet on who would win.

The next time he saw them was at their sparring time. Frank was going against Jack and hoping to burn out his frustration. The last few days were unprofitable in terms of new information, new equipment and made him feel like he was going around in circles.

Jack’s greeting was terse. Frank didn’t think much into it until Jack aimed and didn’t seem to be pulling his punch as much as usually or holding back as usual. Frank had hell of a time and found he was struggling to keep up within the rules of boxing. This didn’t have the usual pace and Frank didn’t actually find himself liking it.

“Alright, let’s take a breather.” He rasped and for a moment thought Jack wouldn’t. His look on his face was furious and frustrated but Jack pulled back and immediately moved to a bag. Frank frowned and let him hit for a few seconds before stopping the bag.

“We going to have a problem tonight? If you can’t spar I can work alone.”

Jack glared at him. “No.”

“You sure because this isn’t the normal. I want to improve my fight not actually fight.” He gave Jack a knowing look. “I wouldn’t stick to boxing.” Jack gave a solid punch to the bag and Frank let go. Damn that was a hard hit.

“No, I’m not fine.” Jack took a breath. “Look, you’re right. This isn’t a good day for us to spar. I’m not in the right mind set.”

“What is it?” Frank asked because this was new and if it meant the end of their sessions he needed to know.

“Nothing. Just a fight I have scheduled.”

“The one against Alvarez?” Jack snorted.

“No, that one got cancelled and rescheduled with another fighter. I have one in two days. Half the pay.”

“Shit. You going to make it for the month?” Money trouble was a common issue in Hell’s Kitchen.

“Yes. It’s-I need to find someone to look after Matt.” He sighed. “My neighbor usually watches him but she’s out of town. I know he’s old enough to stay alone. It’s just he hasn’t been alone since his accident.”

“The chemical spill.” Frank added realizing he had said that out loud. Jack nodded.
“You heard then.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what was on those trucks? It is bad enough that, sometimes, industrial waste is passing on our streets but this was some secret new compound. Matt has to go to the doctors to make sure he doesn’t get cancer and God knows what. So far he hasn’t had any signs of poisoning or cancer, which I’m thankful for but it’s affected him.

“He can’t eat what he used to and sometimes having him get dressed is a pain because everything feels like sandpaper to him. His, his sense of smell has gotten better but I don’t know if that’s the chemicals or just because he can’t see anymore. You haven’t seen him collapse because he says he can hear everything.”

“You don’t want to leave him alone.” Frank said and seethed.

“Yeah but I probably will need to.” He sighed. “I trust Matt. I don’t trust what those chemicals are doing to him or did. I’m just worried he’ll be gone when I’m away and if he’s alone he can’t get help.”

“I’ll watch him.” Frank said. Jack paused. Frank didn’t know why he had offered. He hadn’t meant to. He seemed to be doing that a lot. He wondered how much more getting shot in the head affected him that he hadn’t realized.

“You don’t have to.”

“Look. I’m not going to bullshit you and tell you I know what you’re going through but I know what it’s like to worry about your kids. The worst thing my kids dealt with were sprained joints before but I can look after him for you just once.” Jack stared at him.

They hadn’t known each other long and it wasn’t something Jack clearly had expected. Hell Frank didn’t know why he had offered but he wasn’t going to turn tail.

“Let me think about it.” Frank nodded. “Thank you for the offer it’s just-“

“I get it.” Jack nodded.

“I think I can spar now. For real.”

“Good.” Their fight was better and Frank managed to work out some of the frustration he had brought with him. At the end of the fight Jack looked more collected and answered.

“I’ll take up your offer but under my terms.” Frank agreed. It wasn’t much. Just meet and stay at a dinner where Jack knew the people who worked there. Afterwards Jack would meet up with them. Matt would know not to leave and the workers would make sure he didn’t leave with Matt.

A matter of trust and a matter of concern, Jack was all that Matt had and visa versa. Besides Frank might be able to get a bit more out of the kid about Rand Chemicals. Once he was done with his business they were on the top of the list of scumbags to target.

He couldn’t take down the company with a gun alone but he could help maybe find something and slip the right words in the right ears. Until then Frank could help with babysitting.
Chapter 6

The diner smelled faintly of burnt food and old coffee, the smell of fresh cooking food hit his nose, over taking the older smells. Frank scanned the room. There was a pair of older women in one corner and at the bar two middle-aged men, blue collar from the looks of it. He took a seat at a booth and ordered coffee.

A few minutes late Jack entered with Matt. The boy had a hand on Jack’s elbow and his cane lifted. Jack spotted him and walked over. Matt sniffed as they made their way over. Jack’s recollection of Matt’s evolving sensory issues comes to mind however instead of complaining or commenting on the food Matt focuses toward the booth.


“Matt, Jack.”

“Matt you listen to Frank, okay?” Matt made a face but sat across from Frank. “I know Dad.” he whined. Jack turned to Frank and pulled out his wallet. “Frank, can you make sure he gets dinner?” He handed Frank money, too much for dinner. So Frank was being paid. First legitimate paying job since he got back was babysitting.

He’d returned the money after Jack picked him up but took it to get the man to go to his job. It would defeat the purpose otherwise. Jack introduced Frank to the waitress, who Matt greeted cordially and with an air of familiarity.

The waitress, Meredith, her nametag had made him aware when he had come first, looked at him seriously. If Frank were a creep he wouldn’t have escaped even if he tried, he thought. Frank greeted her warmly. He wasn’t hiding anything (yet) and him being creepy and vague would be more memorable than “Jack’s New Friend Who Babysat Once”.

Jack left with several glances back. Matt was running his hands over a Braille menu Meredith had brought over. Matt seemed to be reading slowly and Frank wondered how well he could keep track of the text. After a moment he seemed to decide if his reskim was an indication.

He didn’t say anything. Frank looked at his own menu and decided on a burger. It was the least likely thing to get him sick or to disagree with him. He grabbed the money that Jack had him.

“Here kid.” Matt frowned.

“What?” He pressed his hand onto the bill fold. “What is this?” He ran his hands over the bills. “Money?”

“Yeah, it’s what your dad gave me. Keep it. I don’t want to forget to return it.” Kid made a face.

“My hands are dirty now.” Right. Sensory issues, God knows what he felt. Although now Frank wanted to wash his hands too. Maybe it was just a hygiene thing.

“Okay. Let’s order and then wash our hands.” Matt’s hand vanished under the table and reemerged empty as he nodded. “You sure you ready?”

“Yes. I know what I want.”

“Good.” An awkward pause and Frank tried to catch Meredith’s attention. The woman came over
with a bored look.

“What can I get you?” Frank ordered. Her tone turned more pleasant and her expression softened as she spoke to Matt. “And you, Matty? The usual?”

“No, thank you, Merry. May I please have the six with no mayo and extra mustard?”

“Course.” She glanced at Frank with flinty eyes. She was watching him. At least Jack had good friends he thought. They added drinks and Frank awkwardly guided Matt to the restroom. They washed their hands and returned.

“Hey, Frank?” Matt said as they returned to their booth. Matt sat and swung his legs across from him

“Yeah?”

“What do you do? You said you used to be in the Marines but what do you do now?”

“I’m retired.”

“Oh. You get bored? Is that why you’re boxing with my dad?”

“Partly. Just need to get some training. I need to build up my strength.”

“You do that all day?”

“No. I do a few things here and there but I'm not working or looking for work.” Definitely not admitting what he did most days.

“What do you?” Frank shrugged then realized it was a meaningless gesture to someone who couldn't see.

“Nothing really. Trust me kid. My day would bore you.”

“I wanted to a boxer like my dad.” Matt said and Frank was struck by Lisa saying something similar seemingly ago. Matt didn't seem to think it was odd to comment given his situation because he added almost without preamble. “He doesn't want me to do like manual labor so I have to study a lot.” He made the universal face of children who did not want to do homework. “I think I want to be a lawyer.” He looked earnest. “I can still be one even though I can't see.”

“Yeah? That's good.” And Frank meant it. It would be unfortunate of the kid’s full future were just arrested because of the accident. “You know what kind of law you want to do?” He was probably too young to actually answer that but shit if Frank knew many lawyers. It was possible the kid had a role model and had a clear course of action in his head.

“No. I want to help people though.” Very noble but kid had proven he wasn't just spouting bullshit. He thought as he took a hard look at the glasses.

“I'm not too familiar with lawyering but I'm sure you'll do fine and help people.” Matt seemed to enjoy the encouragement. “You doing good in school? You need good grades to be a lawyer.”

“Yes.” A bit petulant now, normal kid reaction Frank thought and realized he was smiling. Frank shook his head. “I'm not a baby I know you need good grades and I have to go to college and law school.”

“Not saying you’re dumb.” He said with a firm voice. “There was a reason I went into the Marines, kid. I had decent grades, but nothing special.” Matt seemed to think about it.
“Can I ask-”

“Order up!” Meredith exclaimed. Frank turned and saw her carrying their meals. He took his plate and watched her narrate the positions of the food and drinks.

“What did you want to ask?”

“What do you look like? You don't have to tell me. If you don't want to that's okay. I know it's weird.”

“It's fine, kid. I'm not much to look at but I'll try to give it a shot.” He had to think and describe himself. He hadn't really needed to too before and he didn't feel comfortable describing himself like a target, it was too impersonal. He thought.

“Well I'm not sure. I'm kind of average. I guess? My hair is a bit grown out but I usually have it in a standard Marine haircut.” Kid pondered.

“Color?”

“Black, well mostly. Got some grey from life, my time in the Marines, marriage and kids. Mostly I'm just getting old.” Kid laughed at that. Frank smiled.

“My nose is a bit crooked. Got hit a bit too much.”

“Enemy combatants?” Kid asked a bit too interested and Frank was not heading that way for several reasons.

“Nah. I was dumb. Got into a few fights, lost some, won some.”

“You won't win against my dad.”

“Give me time. I'll get back into shape.”

“You'll still lose. My dad is a good boxer.”

“My dad is better than you.” He sing songed then made a go on gesture. “Anything else or are you all nose and a big mouth?” Frank laughed.

“No. Okay let me finish.” He tried to keep the tone light and was a bit exaggerating in describing himself but think it worked out. Kid was relaxed and happy by the time he finished. Good. His burger was half cold when he finished but didn't care too much.

Their conversation was light but Frank kept in mind his aim. He needed to know if the kid knew more about the chemical accident. If Frank was going to pursue it he needed to know all he could. Still it didn't seem like the right time to press. Kid was good and didn't seem to be suffering any sensory issues that Jack had mentioned.

He didn't know if it could be triggered by stress but he wanted to avoid it. There would be time enough for that later he thought. It wasn't the most entertaining few hours but they had dinner, dessert and Matt was drinking a milkshake when his dad returned, a split on his right eyebrow but he didn't seem to notice.

Kid greeted Jack with genuine enthusiasm and Frank felt his throat tighten for the briefest of seconds. He'd get his own justice and then maybe this one or die trying. He thought sternly. The thought was pushed away as Jack thanked him. Frank waved him off again.
Matt handed Jack his money back and Jack gave him this particular look. Frank wasn’t sure what he was thinking but didn’t say anything.

“You hungry, dad?” Matt asked as he returned to his drink. Kid had at least half a glass to drink.

“I’m fine, Matty.” Frank sat across from them. It felt awkward to just leave. “Thanks again for watching, Matt.” Jack said.

“Again, no problem. Kid was good company.”

“Yeah. I like Frank. He wasn’t boring.” Matt replied and then added. “Mrs. Cortes is boring.”

“Matt! Be nice.” Jack said with no actual venom, just exasperation. Matt smirked. Kid was trying to get a rise out of his dad.

“Well, at least I can die knowing I’m not as boring as Mrs. Cortes.” Frank added dryly. Jack laughed lightly. Kid grinned and kept drinking.

“How’d the fight go?” Frank asked, mildly curious. Jack hadn’t seemed too concerned when he’d mentioned it. Matt immediately perked up, sitting straighter in his seat.

“Yeah, did you win?” Matt asked enthusiastically. His father gave him a fond look but then Jack grinned, a savage thing.

“Yes.” A satisfied tone to his simply reply that hinted at more. Matt whooped.

“Wish I could’ve listened. We should have gone to a sports bar.” He said. Jack snorted.

“No. Not until you can drink.” Matt gave a sigh but this seemed to be an old argument. Kid wanted to hear the fight but a bar was clearly exotic and mysterious to him. A no made the least exciting places an automatically desirable to children.

“I knew you’d win.” Matt said. “Told Frank you’re good.” Jack preened at his son’s praise but shrugged it off with a simple rebuttal.

“The fighter any good?” Frank asked.

“Yeah. Young but good, a few more years and maybe he’ll be a challenge.”

“You’ll still win.” Matt replies confidently. Jack made a ‘go on’ gesture to his son and says.

“Finish your milkshake, Matt. We gotta go soon. I’m sure Frank has things to do.” Frank waved him off and added.

“Is fine. I don't have anything urgent or planned.” A large rumble startled him.

“You said you weren't hungry.” Matt said accusingly to a sheepish looking Jack.

“I wasn't.” He said. Frank laughed.

“I'll get something to go. Matt finish your shake.” Matt shrugged but obliged. He looked content.

“Burger was good.” Frank suggested as Jack caught the waitress’ attention. He placed an order for “the usual”. Matt excused himself to the bathroom for a moment, milkshake almost gone but a few sips.
“What's the usual?” Frank asked. Jack replied without a hint of humor.

“A burger.” Frank snorted. The cut to Jack’s brow caught his attention as the man peered in the direction his son had gone.

“You need someone to help with that?”

He motioned the cut.

“It's fine.” He said. “Nothing I can't handle. You really helped me today. Thanks.”

“It's not a problem. You have a good kid. Good to remember they are out there .” Jack made a pained expression.

“I can't imagine what you've gone through but thank you again.” Jack grinned and playfully said “seriously today was quite nice. My fight was easier than I thought. Good fighter but no real spirit. We sparred better rounds.”

“I'll get to the point where I will win. You'll see.” Frank said a bit of anticipation under his skin, looking forward to it.

“Matt would say otherwise.” Jack laughed. Frank scowled but without real feeling. They made plans to meet again as Matt returned.
He woke up with a suddenness that made him hesitant to believe he was awake. The fleeting remnants of his dream pressed against his mind in the vaguest of senses. He has the impression of Maria’s smile, Lisa and Frankie’s laughter, a thump of a punching bag and the reflection of light off dark lenses. It jars him.

He hasn’t really remembered any dreams since the incident. He used to dream in some semblance of order or he had the impression. Now everything was disjointed, fractured and sometimes didn’t seem restful. Sometimes he just had the impression of sun and the smell of blood so strong that he thought he was in the middle of a massacre.

He sat up in his dingy bed. His sight fell on a newly procured rifle. He grinned. Yes, this was worth the annoyance that came from waking up a bit perplexed. His trigger finger twitched and he felt a thrum of bloodlust. Soon. Soon he would be ready. Not right now but in the next few months he would be. His stamina was increasing and he felt less tired as before, his thoughts were less muddled.

Things were looking up for him given the shit turn his life had taken. He stood and rummage for the cash he had taken from several small time drug dealers. It wasn’t a large haul but he was finding sources of cash he needed for things he couldn’t otherwise obtain with a little money. In time money would be secondary in some respects, his own ammunition would help him build it by ambushing and taking out the filth before they even knew what hit them.

Still he needed money and needed it to build his stock pile. He looked over his notes. He had news of suspected Dogs of War activity in Hell’s Kitchen but the newspapers would only offer so much. Frank needed a police scanner to get a closer look at the communications coming from the authorities in that region.

Cops might be dirty shits in New York but they still acted on the law or at least the clean ones did. Was there anything like a honest cop? He wondered and went to make coffee.

New York was less lively during business hours. He made his way down the street, duffle bag at his side swaying with ease. It was empty but soon, soon it would be carrying just what he needed. A tap tap tap caught his attention and he turned, expecting and older man or woman using their cane.

He startled to see Jack with Matt at his side approaching the counter of a small store. Matt paused. He frowned and turned his head in his direction. Maybe he felt him staring, Frank thought but Jack immediately caught his son’s change and jerked his head up. The expression on his face was rock hard, ready to defend his son if necessary.

That expression melted into surprise and he smiled warmly. “Frank!” Matt’s expression also shifted from concerned to pleasant. He said something to Jack. Jack nodded and Matt tapped his way over to
his direction, but a bit to the left.

“Hey kid.” The kid corrected himself and stopped when the cane tapped his shoe.

“What are you doing?” The asked with the innocence of a child. Frank didn’t think answering with ‘buying a police scanner so it can help me track down people to kill’ would go over well so he half lied.

“Shopping. Got to get somethings.” Matt nodded.

“You? Shouldn’t you be in school?” It was a Tuesday and not even ten. Matt made a face.

“Yeah but I had to go see a doctor.” He gestured to his cane. “I don’t have cancer still, so that’s good right?” His smile was strained. Frank gritted his teeth but agreed. Frank quickly changed subjects and motioned to Matt’s father who was almost done with his purchase.

“Late breakfast?” That cheered the kid up a bit.

“Yeah. I can’t eat as part of the exams for some reason but they’re done so we’re getting take out.” Matt looked like he was struck with an idea. “You should join us. Dad told me you don’t eat a lot of good food. Mama Tita’s have the best breakfast tacos. They don’t taste weird even after…” He gave a vague gesture with his cane.

Frank nodded then corrected himself. “Good to know, kid but I don’t think your dad would want me just imposing on your time.” He shrugged. “Besides I still have to do my shopping.” It was either now or very late. Lateness had its risks with more seedy elements moving freely on the streets, Frank wanted to avoid them if possible. He didn’t want the scanner to get damaged incidentally.

Matt pouted, a childish thing that had Frank smiling, but he didn’t argue. Frank wondered if the kid was going to his afternoon classes despite the doctor’s appointment. He heard approaching footsteps and saw Jack, who waved.

“Frank, it’s good to see you. You doing okay?” Frank nodded.

“Yeah, Matt was recommending the shop here.” Jack lifted his bag.

“He’s not wrong. You get good food for a good price.”

“Frank’s shopping.” Matt said with a tone that said he thought the idea was stupid. “Tacos are better than shopping.”

“Unless he’s buying better tacos.” Jack retorted.

“No one has better tacos on this street. I’d smell it.” Matt said. Frank shook his head in amusement. Jack rolled his eyes and took his son’s hand, which quickly made it’s way to the man’s elbow.

“We got to go, Frank. Good seeing you. We still up for tomorrow?” Frank nodded.

“Wouldn’t dream of anything else Murdock. You will go down.” Jack shifted, expression eager and infused with a hint of violence.

“Good, I have to make sure Matt’s prediction stays true.” Matt stuck his tongue out at Frank’s direction. Frank returned it without meaning to.

“He stuck his tongue out at you.” Jack said with a hint of laughter to his voice. Matt looked a bit surprised then laughed.
“No fair.” Matt replied and pouted but it dissolved into laughter again. Jack gave him a thankful look again. Then they were off and Frank went to get his scanner. It ate most of his fund but he felt right with the purchase. On his way back he stopped to pick up tacos for lunch.

The Murdocks hadn’t let him when it came to food might as well hope the trend kept going.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay. I've had killer writer's block and life's been busy. Let me know what you think. Criticism is always welcome, especially if I can change a thing or two to improve this.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Frank!! Are you okay?” Jack exclaimed. Frank gave a light laugh.

“Could you be anymore of a Catholic, Jack?” He replied then grinned, a hard thing that was probably a bit viscous. “But yeah, I’m okay. You should see the other guys.” Frank unconsciously clenched his bruised fist. Jack’s instinctively looked towards them. The instant Jack’s gaze met his fist his nostrils flared.

“You get them? You need help?” Frank’s grin grew. Jack’s expression turned bright with a peculiar light.

“No, but thank you for the offer.” Frank unclenched his fist. Jack nodded, the hard expression on his face morphing into concern again.

“If you ever need help, Frank, let me know. I know this isn’t the nicest of neighborhoods. Sometimes you gotta defend yourself.”

“Thanks again but I handled it. I was a Marine after all.” He replied and gave a light shrug. “We still going to the game?”

“Really that’s up to you. You look awful to be blunt.” Frank smiled again. He had made the same assessment that morning when he saw his reflection. His left eye was swollen and he is lip was split but he could see and then there was his clothes, bruises and a few scrapes.

“I could use it after last night.” He said honestly. Frank needed to rest at least a few hours and reassemble. He could also admit he liked Jack. They got along well. It beat passing it at his safe house eating a can of beans for the next few hours—he also made a note that he needed to buy food.

Food also sounded good too. He rubbed a bruise under his shirt and motioned that they should get moving. A bruised torso was definitely worth the illicit cash and weapons he had taken. He also may have left a body or two. Maybe not, one shot one kill wasn't his goal that night. Fair was fair.

The game was an hour away but they were taking the subway. It would be packed and crowded. Good to blend in. A few people shot him a few looks but with Jack’s own slightly bruised face he didn’t feel too conspicuous. On the bright side, there was a bit of space for them in the subway, not too much because New Yorkers were New Yorkers.

On their way their Jack talked about how he apparently won the tickets in a bet. Frank was apparently the first person he had asked. To Frank this meant two things, either Jack didn't have many friends or he thought they were better friends than Frank thought.
“You rooting for any of the teams this season?” Jack asked. Frank shook his head.

“Not particularly just whoever is doing better. Like I said I'm pretty much unopposed to any game because it was either that or finding a book I hadn't read in the middle of nowhere.”

“Come on, not even the Yankees? This is New York!” Jack joked. Frank shook his head. “Frank, Frank, Frank, we need to cultivate some team loyalty while you're here. Otherwise it will be a lie when we wave our pennants.” Frank snorted and laughed when he had an image of himself with a Yankees cap while sniping.

Jack shot him a curious look. He shook his head.

"I just had an image of myself in a Yankee's hat and with my gun." He snorted. "While I was in the service, I mean."

"I don't think that's what Uncle Sam had in mind at any point." Jack said with a smile. Frank glanced at the station. Jack took a glance as well. "Soon we'll have some over priced beer, hot dogs and probably a hat since it's going to be sunny today."

"Great. Now if I sign up again my vision can be complete." He deadpanned. Jack laughed.

They arrived at the station and exited. Frank disliked the crowd and the pushing. It set him on edge but he tempered his reactions by concentrating on moving forward. Jack seemed to sense his dislike and tried to place himself as a buffer. Good man, knew there was as reason he liked him, Frank thought.

Finally they made it past the main crowd packed at the entrance. Frank followed Jack to the gift shop and helped him buy Matt some souvenirs with raised logos. Frank did end up buying a hat, it was sunny as Jack had commented earlier. He didn't need sunburn on top of his bruises.

They took their seats after standing in line for food. He thinks it would've been nicer before but everything before the Park was something like a weird dream where he had a family and home. Now he was a different person, alone and somehow making a friend who he sparred with in preparation for his revenge.

In time he would have to drop this friendship too. This was temporary. Everything was temporary now except for his mission. Frank knew there were only two ways it would end: his death or arrest. He tried to shake off the train of thought.

He focused on the game and eating the overpriced nachos he had bought. Beer helped as well. Instead of making him angrier he relaxed. Jack's enthusiasm for his team was a big part of that. Frank found himself complaining or rooting for the Yankees along with Jack.

By the time they left, one inning left but they didn't want to be sardines again, they had drunk a bit more than was probably wise for a hot day but they weren't shit faced and Frank knew his own tolerance.

“You heading home?” Jack asked him as they entered the train. They snagged two seats.

“Yeah.” He said.

“If you don't have any plans today you should head over to my place and eat dinner. Matty’s on an overnight field trip. I didn't really want him to go but he really wanted to go. Hope he's having fun.” Jack said.
“You worried about him?”

"Always.” Jack said with such conviction that if anyone had ever doubted Jack as a father it would have cast those feelings aside. “I always worry about him.” Jack leaned a bit towards him, shoulders touching. Frank didn’t really notice until he shifted a bit away.

“Yeah. Kids do that.” He said and tried not to think about his own. He shifted in his seat, there shoulders were touching again. Jack didn’t move away. Probably wouldn’t do any good, the seats were a bit small.

“Don’t know how you do it.” Jack replied a moment later.

“I don’t have a choice.” He thought about his plans, abstract as they were. “Everything I do now is for them. For their memory.” Jack nodded and they sat in silence for a moment. The heavy tension in the air between them before Frank replied:

“We can get dinner. I need to burn off this beer and I don’t have much for dinner except a can of beans.” Jack started to snicker before seeing his expression.

“You’re kidding.” Frank glared for a moment. “You’re not! A can of beans? Really? Even I kept more than that when I was a bachelor.”

“I was busy.” Jack laughed. “Okay, we’ll get dinner then. Won’t be much. Maybe a good sandwich. At least you’ll sober up enough to get more food after.”

“A sandwich is fine.” Frank replied and shifted in his seat. He was slightly drowsy from the beer and the ride was lulling him a bit. He needed to wake up enough to be aware of his surroundings. He was sure that the Dogs he had ambushed yesterday hadn’t seen his face but he couldn’t take the risk of being completely off guard in public.

"Hey, our stop is coming up.” Jack replied. Frank stood up. Their seats were immediately pounced upon by a few standers. They made their way to a residential street. The apartments were old in the building they entered, worn but not neglected. Jack’s apartment had the same appearance, it was worn but well cared for otherwise and a bit small.

"The man’s home was clean, not that he expected a sty. Frank was just expecting some mess that people normally had. Everything in a place and set in a way that reminded him of the kid’s blindness.

They had dinner. It was a simple sandwich but it quenched the hunger he had developed once the stadium food had passed. A glass of water had sated his thirst that had risen in the heat. He meant to leave after, thank Jack and leave but the heat, beer and activity from last night made him lag.

Instead he found himself sitting next to Jack on the couch and watching the late afternoon news before he felt sober and awake enough to head out. Despite his bruises they agreed to meet tomorrow for another spar.

Frank bought supplies and headed to his safe house. He turned on the scanner. The thing had already practically payed for itself last night. He lied down and listened.

Most of what he heard was nonsense but what wasn’t, code for drug and organized violence, helped paint a picture of territories and activity centers.

He had picked up enough to learn that the Irish were in the same line of business as the Dogs. After he had realized there was the Cartel, newish, but they were also moving heavily to gain traction in Hell’s Kitchen. They were all rivals. Direct rivals, not simply incidental ones, and they fought for
territory.

There was a high probability they would meet and fight...not caring who was caught in crossfire… He fell asleep gazing at the weapons he had seized and the thought of buying more. His dreams were filled with the red of blood and the heat of the day’s sun.

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“What do you think about mixed martial arts?” Frank asked Jack as the man tapped his newly bandaged fists together. Jack frowned.

“In what way?” Jack asked and leaned against the stage to the ring.

“In us fighting. You know anything else than just boxing?” Frank asked and wondered if he could teach Jack some more if he needed to spar with different moves.

“I know some but dabbling isn't really my area.” Jack answered with a shrug. “Don't really have the time or money for many other classes. It was useful in training but not really learning in depth. I'm a boxer.” Then he grinned. “You ready to call it quits, Frank?”

“Never.” Frank said emphatically then added “just thought we could use a change in pace. I will beat you, I'm close.” Their last round was a close call. Frank felt like he was almost, if not quite, back up to speed. Sparing seems to have helped a process he thought would take longer.

Jack grinned, eyes bright. “Close isn't it though but you know what? I'm game. We can try some other things.”

“You'll be the underdog now.”

“Trust me I'm used to it.” Jack said and dropped his gloves into his bag. He was going to work the bag. Frank pulled himself up from the edge of the ring. Jack helped him, laughing at his groan as his tired muscles protested.

“Go on home, Frank. We’ll do mixed but until you’re in top shape I think I’ll have less of an advantage than you think.” Frank feigned a punch in response, too slow and clunky to be serious. Jack blocked it with a laugh and feigned a hip check. It surprised Frank and he tumbled a bit

Jack grabbed at him to steady him. Hauling him up against him. Frank looked up. “Thanks.” he said. Jack nodded, his eyes locked on his with the movement. Frank realized how close he was to Jack.

A moment passed, they stood still, sweat dripping down both their faces and realizing they were the only two in gym that late in the evening. Jack licked his lips. To say something? He could feel Jack's breath. Frank wasn’t sure -

A siren rang, passing quickly, but it caused them to both jump back. Jack licked his lips again and looked at him. It was a curious thing, and Frank figured he probably wore its twin.

“Mixed martial arts. Yeah. We’ll do that.” Jack said. Frank nodded. He didn’t reply. They had plans to meet already.
Chapter 9

The barber had cut a little more than he would have liked. Frank ran his hands over the sides of his head. Maybe he should have gone with another haircut but it didn’t feel right. He had been a Marine too long. He should have done it himself.

He glanced at his watch. He had to go soon. He grabbed his gym bag. He walked briskly to the gym. The heat of the day was dissipating as the sunset but it was still warm out. Frank caught his reflection on one of the passing building’s windows and knew he had a fine sheen of sweat on him.

Frank wiped at his brow irritably. He reached Fogwell. The gym was hardly any better temperature wise but strong fans around the room gave the impression of a breeze. That is if you didn’t mind if a breeze smelled like old leather, sweat and the faint scent of musk from the many men who spent their days there.

The room was almost empty. Most of the regulars left at sundown at the latest. He scanned the room. Jack wasn’t there yet. He went to the locker room and changed. The splashed some water on his face and wiped away the sweat. The water at least helped him feel cooler.

He exited the locker room. There was maybe one man still at the gym, doing a set of lifts and was clearly a beginner. He left a few minutes later. He didn’t bother throwing an inquisitive look at Frank. Had Jack cancelled? He wondered as the man left when he came back from the locker room. He saw a shadow forming on the door. Frank stood up.

“If it isn’t Mr. Victory.” Frank goaded as Jack entered the gym. Jack grinned, the shiner on his left eye looking worse for a moment. “Caught the fight. Good job. I had no idea you could hit that hard. O’Donovan’s face looked like he got hit by a brick in the slow mo.”

“I have been told I give a hit as well as I take it.” he said. He shook his head. “Sorry I missed a bus when picking up Matt.” Frank shrugged.

“It’s fine. Go get ready. Can’t warm up if you’re not ready. It wouldn’t be fair.” Jack rolled his eyes and eyed him.

“You got a new cut?”

“It was overgrown. You would think I was more of a punk that a former marine from that mop.” Jack tugged at his own hair, short and straight.

“I think it was like mine right? You call that a mop? Jeeze.”

“Marines.” He shrugged. “Go get changed.” Frank beckoned. Jack disappeared into the locker room. Frank started working on a few stretches. He remembered what it was like at first, when he first started out and wished he still had that physique without all the scar tissue as some of the stretches pulled on from not quite forgotten wounds.

Jack emerged. His shirt looked new. It certainly fit him closer than the previous items he sparred in. Those had been looser.

“That new?” Frank asked to confirm.

“Yeah.” Jack shrugged though he looked pleased. “I thought maybe it was better for today.”
“Yeah, that’s true.” He took a look at the shorts. They were good. Jack knew at least some basics. Good. They each worked on their warm ups. When they began to spar it was tougher than Frank had expected. When he thought he said he knew a little more of other techniques, Frank thought Jack had meant a cursory passing in some techniques.

Frank clearly should have asked for a better explanation when he has asked Jack. He pushed Jack away. The man grinned, a savage thing. Frank knew exactly why Jack knew more than a few moves. He liked to fight.

The Murdocks have the Devil in them. He recalled. He upped his game.

“That all you got?” Jack grunted from the floor. Frank grinned he had him pinned. Jack tried to wiggle out but Frank just readjusted his grip. “Damn. Fine. I give up.” Frank let him go. Jack fell back, on him for a moment, before rolling off, standing up and offering him a hand. Frank took it.

Jack smiled at him. He looked sheepish and laughed with a shake to his head. “You beat me.”

“You beat me.” Though he preened he was honestly surprised by the victory.

“You did. You rest up for the day?”

“No. Just a good day, I guess.” Frank said and resisted the urge to touch his bullet wound. Scar now, but all the same he didn’t want to draw attention to it. He felt almost like himself again. He had noted the muscle gain and his increased stamina but nothing like before, still he wasn’t going to spit in the face of a good day. Frank stood straighter.


“You want to just out brawl, Murdock?” Frank asked half joking.

“Not today,” Jack replied.

“I still won. What do you mean by celebrate? A beer? I don’t think I want one right now.”

“No,” Jack agreed. “Something.” He didn’t seem to push on it. Since it was his win, Frank guessed he was supposed to choose.

“Lunch? Next Yankees game?” Frank asked. “Might convince me to at least give them a better chance.” It would be in a few days.

“When’s the next game?” Jack paused to think. “Yeah, I can do that.” He frowned. “You mean at a bar right? I can’t really-” Afford tickets and food, Frank thinks he wants to say.

“Yes. I don’t like shitty hot dogs that much.” Jack nodded. He seemed relieved. Frank wondered how often people got annoyed with him for that. He stretched and felt his muscles protest the movement. Looks like his wind had passed.

Jack followed the move and copied it. It seemed to help. “That’s fine. I gotta train a bit too.” He motioned for his bag near Frank’s. “Can you pass me my water?” Frank pulled the bottle from the worn bag. Jack drank appreciatively from it. Frank licked his lips and went to get his own bottle.

“Better.”

“How are you upcoming matches?” Jack shrugged.
“Same ol’, same ol. Nothing I’m too excited about.”

“Your chances good?”

“Yeah. You looking to bet?” Frank snorted.


“I’m going to win.” his tone would be cocky on anyone else but as Frank had fought the man he knew it was truth. Jack knew his fighters too. If Frank were a betting man he would definitely place his money on Jack

Frank gave a faint nod. “I believe you.” He thought. “You know any good bars for my victory meal?” Jack named a few. They made plans. It was good. Frank took his time in loosening his fatigued muscles.

Jack hit the punching bag. Each hit was a precise move with calculated force. His muscles conveyed his power and in the ring it was clear he was also fast. Battlin’ Jack.

Frank wondered just how much of the Jack in the ring was with in the man he had spent time with at bars and with his son. Frank finished his routine and headed to gather his things. He walked out of it a few minutes later. Jack’s punches had the room resonating with the thumps from the bag

He neared the door. The thumping stopped. “Your new cut looks good, Frank.” Frank nodded “Thanks. Have a good night, Jack.” Jack wished him a good evening too

Frank was halfway down the block before he realized he was smiling. It had been a good day.

The game was a few days away. Frank decided to give one hit on the local scumbags again. He could prepare for a few days and then strike. He needed to find more leads. Frank thought he had pieces of the right puzzle but didn't have the whole picture. He needed answers.

It didn't quite work out that way. Frank hit a local bar. He was listening to the chatter around him. He was pretending to focus on the screen in front of him when a couple of low level boys spouted shit about a recent shipment. It was in Spanish.

He knew enough to get the gist. Frank definitely got enough to confirm that the Dogs and Irish were direct competition. Yeah they were fighting over turf. How about Central Park? Maybe a bit about product? He didn't hear more.

He wanted to follow the punks when the screen in front of him changed. It was an old fight. A recap of Jack’s previous matches. He saw the same ferocity he had against the bag, he blocked, he worked well against his opponents.

He drunk his beer quickly. He lost the punks. Fuck. He left the bar. He had info but nothing new really. Except for that other dealer. He hadn't heard anything about them anywhere. The cops were keeping quiet about him.

Maybe he did have something. He thought. He went back to his safe house. He slept.

He met with Jack at a small bar he noted a few tourists and relaxed minutely. A couple near the bar have him the distinct impression from Wisconsin. The male half of the pair turned and glanced outside. His green shirt had name of the state.

Frank took a small table. He glanced at his reflection on one of the mirrors on the wall meant to make
the place look larger. He brushed his hair back and cast a glance at the door before turning to the menu.

Jack joined him a few minutes later. Frank brushed off his apology. Jack wasn't late. Frank had gotten there a bit early.

“You see anything you like?” Jack asked as he motioned to the menu. Frank nodded.

“Yeah. You? Let me guess you're a regular too.” Jack laughed.

“No, I came a few times before. They're good but not my kind of regular place. Too far from home for it.” He yawned. Jack looked tired.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Long night. Matt couldn't sleep until two and then he woke up around five.”

“You need to be elsewhere?”

“He went to school - his choice, not mine. He will be tired but probably able to sleep tonight at least.”

Frank nodded. They ordered and turned to chat about the game. It was nice. His food settled in his stomach well and he really enjoyed Jack’s company. They were friends, he realized. If only for the moment.

He'd repay him for this slice of normality where Frank didn't need to be on guard all the time or at least fully. It was safe because it looked normal, was normal to any outsider not in his head.

The Dogs, the Irish, the Cartel, Rand and the new drug runner. Frank had a lot of shit to clean up. Just not now. He let the tension in his body ease and ordered another beer.

When evening came Frank went out to do a reconnaissance. He looked for dealers. It was easy to spot the small exchanges. Small time dealers didn't really know anything. They were easy pickings for money and to scope out the territory of a group. It wasn't perfect but he had a rough overlay of the groups’ territories over a few square blocks.

Bikers were the Dogs. The Caucasians were probably the Irish- dressed more normal and less junkie stereotype. The Latinos were probably with the Cartel.

Like he said not perfect. He spotted several players he couldn't identify or was comfortable grouping into the others. Still he thinks the independent players he did confirm were that mystery drug dealer.

He didn't take them out. It was too risky still. He felt good and thinks he can take them (they wouldn't be too armed) but he would rather get more information. Luckily he had patience and money talked.

He did a quick calculation of his funds. Yes money talked and walked. He turned and headed to his safe house.

He caught a punk mugging a couple and took him out of commission. It had been a good day.

He met with Jack for sparring a few days later. In the corner was Matt, sitting with some school books. He scowled in his direction.

“Hi, Frank.” Matt greeted dourly.
“Hi, Matt. How’s school?”

“Fine.” He replied and he could feel the full extent of the glare behind the glasses.

“Really? Doesn’t sound like it.”

“It’s *fine*.” He repeated.

“Where’s your dad, kid?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Uh huh. I’ll just wait for him.” Kid scowled.

“Dad told me you beat him.”

“I did.” He said proudly. “Told you I would.” Kid’s scowl intensified.

“Liar. You cheated.”

“I didn’t Beat him soundly.”

“You did! You didn’t box. That’s cheating!”

“Look, I’ll concede that I haven’t beaten your dad in boxing but I beat him in my own game.”

“Cheating.” He repeated.

“Matt!” Jack snapped as he came out of the locker room. Both he and kid jumped. “Don’t be a poor sport. You want to be punished?”

“Yes.” Frank laughed. “I want to learn more boxing.” Jack’s exasperated expression made it clear he knew he had messed up with his las punishment. “He cheated though!” He pointed toward Frank. He was off by a few degrees but he was still pretty accurate.

“It’s not cheating if I agreed to that fighting style. Otherwise it would be cheating if he switched midway through boxing.” Matt opened his mouth. “Homework.” Jack ordered.

“But-”

“Matthew.” Kid pouted and pulled out his books.

“Sorry about that, Frank.” Jack said with a smile. Frank shrugged.

“It’s fine. I know how it is.” Jack sighed, clearly not wanting to make the moment anymore awkward.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Beat him, Dad!” Jack’s disbelieving look had him laughing as Jack rounded and barked.

“Matthew Michael Murdock! Homework!”

“I am!” Frank lost the fight. Jack helped him up and slung an arm around his shoulder.
“Next time, Frank.” He called as the kid jumped and ran to them and crowing in support of his father. Frank smiled. When the kid reached them he realized Jack hadn’t moved his arm. He let it slip to direct Matt to a nearby bag, his tone serious as he started to scold him for poor sportsmanship again.

“You want to help?” He asked Frank. Frank blinked in surprise.

“You want me to help with boxing?”

“Can I learn something else too?” Matt asked, eager.

“That okay, Frank?”

“Yeah, I can help with a few moves, stretches mostly but it’ll help your form.” Kid brightened. Jack smiled at him. Frank grinned and helped Matt warm up. He wasn’t dressed for PE but he didn’t care nor Jack.

He couldn’t meet for the next week. He was disappointed. The sparring had improved his form a lot and he felt the difference as he stalked the neighborhood and learned more gangland territories. He was firmly able to identify a few dealers for a few gangs. It was good.

The unknown dealer had a more contested network. He couldn’t tell how he recruited them. He just knew he needed to be put down even if he wasn’t responsible for the loss of his family. He was dealing at a rate that meant the gangs were going to start openly warring with each other if past experience was any indication.

He couldn’t risk it. There were too many innocents in New York for all it was full of shit. (Innocents everywhere and God have mercy on all their souls.) He could almost make it through the night and he thinks he could take on several men alone without a gun. With a gun Frank was one of the best.

He almost tested it out. He had to get some downtime though, recover and process what he had. Exhaustion made people slip and fail to recognize patterns. Adrenaline would help but Frank wasn’t in a fight it was just recon now.

“Can you believe Matt’s history teacher told me he wants to hold him behind? He doesn't think that Matt can do the work.” Jack groused. Frank shook his head and took a swig of his own beer.

“Matt is in top of his class despite the accident. Do you know how quickly he learned Braille? I mean he struggles like anyone who lost their sight would but he can read! My boy makes sure he understands what he reads. I’m not the smartest man but I can tell you Matt isn’t wrong. He has a print copy of his assignments so I can help him. He’s rarely wrong.

“And this stupid prick wants to act like Matty is some sort of struggling kid. If he were I would be thankful but he isn’t. People just see a blind kid and think dumb!” Jack throws his fist against the arm of his sofa. The whir of the fan dominated the silence that ensued when Jack took another swig of his beer.

“I take it you told him to fuck off?” Frank asked after a moment.

“You're damn right I did.”

“Good.” Jack looked pleased by his irritation. Then he stood up.

“I'm going to get another beer. You want one?”
Three down each, a fourth wouldn't change much. He glanced at the time. “Yes.” It was early enough. Frank noted he wasn't swaying. Probably the advantage of having to stay on his feet while taking several blows. Form was always good he thought as he trailed his eyes down.

Yes. Jack was a good choice in sparring partner. He was glad to have met him. He had helped his recovery. He opened the bottle which was why he was there. He needed to stay in Jack’s good side.

“What do you expect out of people now?” He asked. Jack frowned

“You mean with Matt?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. It’s the worst. Most people won’t care, treat him normal and help him but sometimes. You know I really pray to God for guidance and forgiveness then. You know?” He growled.

“I guess. God and I haven’t really been seeing eye to eye for a while.”

“Have faith, Frank. Have faith. It keeps me going.” He ran his finger along the neck of the bottle. “It keeps me going when everything is seems unfair. Matt will never pay for his medical care. We got that as a settlement. Our lawyer, which is another expense I have to worry about, says he doesn’t think anyone is going to get charged.” He looked angry.

“They said Matt is at fault too. He shouldn’t have saved the life of the man. Can you believe it? They bring those chemicals, unsecured, in our home. They drive their trucks which needed repairs here - the driver wasn’t found at fault, I don’t blame him- but they still blame my son!”

“Calm down, Jack.” Jack’s grip on the bottle loosened. “I think you’ve had a bit much.”

“I can drink more and be fine.”

“Yeah but I asked the wrong question.” Jack relinquished the bottle. Frank took one last drink of his own and went to dump them in the kitchen. He found two clean cups and filled them with water. When he returned Jack was reaching for the remote and turned on the television.

“Is it okay if I sit with you for a bit?” Jack nodded. He chugged the water. Frank drank his slowly.

After a few minutes Jack spoke again.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I understand. It’s not the same but I get it.” Jack closed his eyes. Maybe it was in prayer.

“Thank you for understanding.” He smiled at him, a strained thing.

“Don’t mention it, Jack.” Frank gave him a light punch to the arm. He was aiming at friendly but knew it was awkward. Jack caught it. He didn’t push it back. He squeezed lightly on it.

It was- Jack kissed him or maybe Frank kissed him.

It was - Frank found himself on unfamiliar ground for the first time since he woke up. He had had groundwork laid out. Now he had stepped off- lost off the course. They pulled back.

“Frank.” Jack breathed and this time Frank did initiate the kiss. He surged toward him and Jack didn’t push away. It wasn’t a make out session, maybe they were too old for that but it was- Jack pulled away. He looked at the time.
“Frank. What are we-?

“I don’t know.” He replied. Jack licked his lips.

“I think we had too much beer.”

“We didn’t have much.” Jack took a breath.

“Do we-”

“Talk about it? I guess.” The alcohol was too prominent in his blood to make him comfortable.

“Later.” Jack said.

“Yeah.” He went to stand. Jack caught his arm and pulled him back down.

“Stay. You drank more than me.”

“You sure?”

“You asked the right question now.” Frank stayed. They sat next to each other, watching the local network. Jack didn’t have cable. It was comfortable, he realized. He was comfortable around Jack.

Jack placed a hand on his thigh. Frank didn’t move it. It was a lull almost. Just sitting there, he thinks they both felt the awkwardness of this change but it was nice.

Frank didn’t know what he was doing. The false calm of the alcohol faded after a while. He just felt raw. He thinks Jack may have dozed a bit because a loud commercial. He smiled at Frank, a bit strained but genuine.

“It’s fine.” Frank said, unsure of what else to say. Jack glanced at the clock and jumped.

“Shit. I have to pick up, Matt.” He murmured. “I’m going to be late.” Frank stood. Jack grabbed his keys. He juggled them awkwardly.

“Go get your kid, Jack. I’ll see you at our usual time?” He asked. Jack paused then nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll see you.” He licked his lips. “You still have to beat me.”

“And you beat me too, Jacky boy.” Jack smiled. He motioned for him to exit with him.

Frank went back to his safe house.
Chapter 10

He could still taste the beer on the walk to his apartment. He would’ve thought that the water would’ve washed it away but it lingered. Over it he could taste Jack and he thought he could smell him on him, the lingering musk and cleaning products he used, maybe a hint of deodorant.

He got to his safe house.

He brushed his teeth, washed his face and changed to sleep for the afternoon. He had to do something and he knew it wasn’t going to happen then. It would be in the dark of night, in the shadows. He stared at the ceiling.

The police scanner buzzed with activity every few minutes, softly but still clear enough for him to snap to attention if needed. Police code wasn’t hard to learn but what passed was the same bullshit he heard everyday from the scumbags littering New York like discarded McDonald’s wrappers from tourists.

Ah ooo. New York. Now let's have some McDonald’s before we head to Time Square. Take the fries. Just leave them.

Frank had danced that same horse and pony show too. Once upon a time. Now he had no place in it. He shouldn’t have any place in any of that nonsense.

So what the hell had happened with Jack?

It wasn’t the beer. Frank could hold his alcohol. He knew his limits. He knew better to drink when he felt...bad...when he wanted to take a gun and eat it...when he wanted to go out and shoot it out with the garbage until he was riddled with bullets too...when he wanted to forget. Frank wasn’t suicidal.

He wondered and looked at his small window trying to will sleep on himself so he could plan something and hit up some more leads. It wasn’t working. He grunted in annoyance and shifted in the bed.

He wasn’t gay. He knew that. No, he liked women. Had loved Maria and a few other girlfriends when he had been younger.

He had seen people go off with their own sex in his time. Men, married or engaged men, would pair off for some physical release, sometimes even act like scorned lovers when their regular got a new partner. Then they would go back to real life and it was over. This wasn’t like that either though.

He had kissed Jack or had been kissed by him. He sure as hell liked it. Did he play for both teams, then? He knew people did that. Maybe he did. It hadn’t occurred to him before but life seemed to be throwing a lot of unexpected things at him lately.

His family got killed.

He woke up from a coma.

He was hell bent on revenge.

He liked men or maybe just Jack.
Sure, why not. Not like that was the worst thing on the list.

Jack.

Frank sighed and closed his eyes.

Sleep did not come easily.

Frank looked at the closet of his safe house. He had rented out a studio. The rent was cheap and the place was hardly in the safest part of Hell's Kitchen but the building itself was secure. He shifted his few clothes there and threw them onto his bed. He gaged how much the shelf above could hold and decided it probably wasn't worth seeing if it could hold his scanner.

The two bullet proof vests he had purchased wentin first. Slowly the ammo migrated from the table and small kitchen counter to the closet shelf. The scanner he returned to the duffle bag he had purchased it in. His guns were in cases which were unmarked. Frank placed them so they hid the vests.

The ammo was a dead give away what was in the cases. He begrudgingly threw a few clothing items over them. Not perfect but there was little chance that they would be pulled down or call attention if the door opened a bit. He closed the closet and transferred his clothing into the dresser next to the bed.

Anything that wouldn't fit the old thing Frank piled on top. Better. He acknowledged that it wasn't perfect but it wasn't suspicious at least.

Frank sat on the bed. It was empty though and made him - loner, target for profilers - self conscious for the first time since the Park. It was too late to buy even a clock. He swept and tidied up the rest of the space. His time as a Marine made him tidy but this felt like a cover up than real neatness.

He wanted to bring out his gun and shoot something. Frank didn't and couldn't. No. He made sure his handguns were out of view and out of immediate range of most people.

A radio. He should buy a radio, maybe keep some books. He thought. Cover was good. This was cover. Right? He sat and shook his head.

He had no idea what he was doing. He knew what he expected on some level though - of the many options that existed. This was probably the more optimistic and his need to change of sheets from earlier that day made him plan.

The savage smirk on Jack's face before a fight came to mind. The same smirk on the smaller form. The want of a fight.

Frank wondered if he had that same thing in his face when he smashed his fist and aimed his gun at the drug dealers.

That wasn't new.

There was a reason he had done well in the Marines.

The Murdock boys had the Devil in them. Maybe Frank did too. He certainly was drawn to it.

He grabbed his gym bag and headed out.

Jack was the gym before him this time. Man looked up. He was anxious but smiled and nodded at
“Frank.”

“Murdock. “

“Ever going to find out your last name?”

“Maybe.”

“We still on?” Jack asked as he banged a fist into the palm of his other hand.

“Only In your dreams is it off.” Jack’s posture relaxed a bit.

“Then go get ready. I've been warming up. Can't wait forever.”

“You call five minutes forever? Getting old, Jack?”

“Ouch. Someone's feeling their age and projecting.” Jack retorted with a laugh. “Hurry up, Frank.”

The spar was like their last ones. Jack made no motion of wanting to discuss their previous night.

He lost. They went to the lockers and Jack packed slowly instead of continuing his training like normal. Frank decided to bite the bullet.

“You got a moment, Jack?”

“Yeah. What you need?”

“Thinking we could finish our talk. The one we had before you had to pick up Matt.” Jack let out an audible exhale through his nostrils.

“Yeah. I have time. Where do you want to talk?” Not his place then. He wanted neutral or a place where things could explode.

“My place.”

“And here I thought you just scurried to the sewer after.” Jack joked. It was a bad one but he was nervous too. He’d take bad jokes to fists.

“Nah, rent’s too high.” Jack a choked laugh and motioned for him to lead the way. Frank wasn't too worried about Jack remembering it.

He had acquired a few extra funds the few last nights by hitting low level dealers’ source. He got info and money, got drugs off the streets but it hadn't been enough to justify going higher. He had tired after. Not like before but just enough for him to decide to save his bullets.

Next time he was going to leave a trail of bullets and blood. He was sure of it. That certainty was tamed by this. He couldn't let this just drop. They were both itches he couldn't ignore.

They arrived at his studio. Jack gave a glance around. Not impressed and slightly concerned.

“This isn't what I thought you’d live in.”Jack said in comment.

“Me either.” Frank drop his bag. “I have a house.” Jack understood and let the matter drop.

“So you wanted to talk?”
“Yeah.” he walked to the fridge, skipped the beer and grab a water. “Want one?” Jack nodded. He threw the bottle and took a new one and took a long drink from it. “We need to talk about it.”

“I kissed you.” Jack said and didn't seem defensive. Good.

“Yeah. I didn't exactly find it objectionable. I am still not sure who initiated it first.” Jack nodded and took a drink from his bottle.

“So…. I don't know what I'm doing Frank. I've never kissed a man before. I don't know why I did it. I mean I guess I do but it's new.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. This is new. Different.”

“Are we going to do something about it or forget it?”

“I didn't say bad. Different can be good. Not bad.” He squeezed the bottle. The plastic crinkled and he relaxed his grip. An itch he wanted scratched for sure. Maybe once that was done he could back to the other one.

Jack fiddled with his own bottle. “I have no idea how to do this.”

“We'll take it slow. Yeah? What's the worse thing that we can do?” Jack nodded.

“Let's see where this takes us.” Frank nodded and glanced at the closet for a moment. Jack’s gaze didn't waver from him.

“So you want to go to dinner sometime?” Somehow this made Jack laugh like it was the funniest thing in the world.

They ate a few sandwiches at his place and talked. It would be more than sex. He knew that. Maybe he needed it.

They talked about Jack’s upcoming fight. Frank agreed to babysit. It was...better than being alone until his next move. They didn't kiss or anything but they say next to each other and Frank wondered when this familiarity had set in.

When Jack left he opened his closet. He touched one of the cases then pulled out his scanner.

He had another itch to scratch. It had to be a balance act. He just hoped that when he fell it was alone.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was sweet.

Very, very sweet.

Frank swallowed with a grimace and gave a smile. He was pretty sure it would make his voice sound a bit more honest in praise. He really wanted water.

“It's good. Probably a little less sugar for me but not bad.” If you liked sugar. Matt, who was a child and did, as most children were want to, smiled and dutifully measured out ingredients into his blender. He still placed a lot of sugar. Thank God he wasn’t a diabetic. Frank thought. At least he didn’t need to worry about dinner.

He’d gone to use the restroom in the past few minutes. Matt had started working on a snack or dinner depending on how filing the shake he made was. With all the ingredients on the counter he knew it would be filling.

It was impressive how easily he measured everything out with easy. Where he got half of it was beyond him. He just hoped Jack didn't need the ingredients for anything specific. Frank was going to clean up but he wasn’t going to put them away anywhere specific.

Maria would’ve chastised him for it. She would’ve laughed at him babysitting. He would’ve had Frankie and Lisa with him as well.

They would’ve liked Matt. Matt would’ve too he thinks.

He shook his head and smiled when Matt missed the stop button before smashing the blender with his fist. Matt looked annoyed but it was soon replaced by childish glee. He groped the counter for the cup he had pulled for Frank’s own shake.

“Careful.” He said as Matt had poured the blender. The cup was almost overflowing.

“It’s fine.” The kid said in that familiar petulant tone and didn’t spill anything. He turned toward Frank, off by a few inches. “Here.” Frank took the shake. “Do you like it? I can make it again if it's too sweet.” His tone implied Frank was full of it if he said so.

Frank tried it. A bit too much banana but he’d had worse and it actually wasn’t horrible. “Yes. Thank you.” Matt beamed.

“Dad doesn’t let me make a lot of things anymore. He’s worried I’ll burn myself or something.” Even behind the dark lenses Frank could sense the eye roll that accompanied the statement.

“Can’t blame him.”

“I can cook.” He made a face. “Kind of. He could at least let me make a sandwich. I’m tired of peanut butter.” He groused.

“I’m sure he’s just worried.” Matt touched his wrist slowly. His focus was clear on his face. Frank bit his tongue. He wasn’t going to but in. He’d confirm or correct his reading but he wouldn’t but in.
Jack had made it clear it was a big no-no.

Don’t move him suddenly unless he was in danger.

Don’t try to do things for him.

Don’t let him cook.

The last one didn’t quite contradict the first two as Matt had started a small fire trying to cook eggs.

Matt told him the time, with a hesitance. Frank mmm-hmmmed loudly as he was mid drink. His expression changed to pleased and he bounded to the living room.

“My dad’s going to win.” He said as Frank put the milk in the fridge. Frank soon followed him.

“You always are sure.”

“That’s ‘cause he’s one of the best.” He crowed. He scowled. “He could have more matches but he has me.” Kid didn’t seem to be angry at himself but angry at something in the past. “Dad says money isn’t worth not having me even if others say it is.”

“Can’t argue there.” Because Jack loved his kid, that was clear. Matt’s scowl vanished.

“You see how good a fighter he is. You haven’t beat him.” He stuck out his tongue. “‘cept when you cheated.”

“Didn’t cheat.” He replied. Matt scowled and murmured into his shake. Probably a dig at him that he wasn’t comfortable uttering without his dad around. He wasn’t risking Frank not narrating the match on TV.

Kids. He thinks and finishes his meal. They had some time so Frank left the TV playing while he washed the dishes and organized what Matt had used. He frowned as his fingers caught on something on one of the displaced salt shakers. Braille he realized after a moment.

The salt shaker looked special ordered. He looked at the pepper. Same thing. A lot and little things were different. He thinks.

“Hurry up, Frank!” Matt yelled. Frank glanced at the time. He had a few minutes but he’d indulge the kid’s impatience. His enthusiasm was good for his mood at least.

The fight was good. Frank narrated as quickly as he could, making sure to describe what the announcers missed. Kid was bouncing in place at the sound and description. By the time it ended -- Matt’s prediction was correct -- Matt’s excitement was visible on his face when Frank turned around. He was asking a million questions about things he could've missed. Frank answered as best as he could.

At some point he ran out and smiled. It was big and wide. He turned to him.

“Hey Frank.” He said after a moment but still smiling.

“Hmm?” Frank responded.

“Thanks.”

“For what?” Matt’s smile grew.
“For not being weird and helping. A lot of people get weird or treat me like I'm stupid.”

“No problem, kid. I really don't mind.” Matt grinned and then said.

“Do you want to see my collection?”

“Sure.” He followed Matt into the apartment into a small bedroom. Only slightly messy. Matt dug around under his bed. He brought out a box. He ran his fingers along it.

“Is this a Nike box?”

“Yeah.” Kid nodded and opened it. He started bringing out toys. Ah. That kind of collection.

He wasn't really sure what he was expecting but the kid was in a good mood. Frank wasn't going to ruin that by asking stupid questions.

“These are from a show I used to watch.” He paused. “Before. Dad tries but he gets busy and it's not really the same.”

“Can't say I know the show. Tell me about it.” Of course that set the kid off and Frank was handed worn toys with apt descriptions and how they were either a good or bad guy.

He hadn't been lying. Heck if he knew. Frankie had been the right age for it and Lisa’s taste weren’t for this. Still it brought the kid out of a glum for not being able to enjoy it.

It somehow ended up with them playing together in the living room. He kept careful track of everything so it wouldn't get lost. He didn't play well since he wasn't at all familiar with the characters and he knew Matt was at an age where play like this was less likely to happen, if at all, but they made it work at least.

Maybe it was something familiar and comforting.

Frank didn't care. It wasn't hard to do. It also passed time.

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Kid was in bed by the time Jack came home. He looked troubled but smiled when he saw Frank. His face was bruised. That was expected but not how much it was.

Frank rose to meet him. “It’s fine.” Frank received to the question he was about to ask. “Just some guys that didn’t appreciate I didn’t lose.” It wasn’t the whole story but Frank wasn’t going to press. Probably a drunk.

 Probably.

An anxiety settled in his stomach and he helped Jack clean his face. It wasn’t as bad as he thought but it didn’t settle his anxiety. “You –“

Jack kissed him, he winced at the action. “Thank you for watching Matt, Frank.” Frank frowned but nodded. He didn’t feel like…whatever it was they were doing.

“I should get going. You need to rest.”

“It’s late.”

“I can take care of myself.”
“Stay, just for a bit please. I could use the company” Jack said. He sounded tired. Frank hesitated but his anxiety didn’t settle.


“You want coffee?” He didn’t.

“Sure.” Frank agreed. He followed Jack into the kitchen. Jack set a kettle on the stove, opened to prevent it from screaming. He glanced at the items on the counter. “Matt made dinner.”

“What did he make?” Jack asked. Jack smiled as he gave a condensed version of his impromptu dinner and what they did after. He poured coffee. They sat at the kitchen table. They had shitty instant coffee. Jack didn’t drink much of it. Neither did Frank.

“Sounds like you had a good night.” He sounded relieved.

“Yeah. You had a good fight too.” He didn’t say anything else about what irritated him.

“Yeah.” He replied and tensed a bit again. Something was there but he didn’t press. “Cortez is a good boxer. He’ll move up quickly.”

“You still beat him. Matt is sure I’ll never beat you boxing.”

“Matt always says that.”

“So far it’s true.”

“Well you’re a poor boxer compared to professionals but you’re not bad.”

“Can’t blame me for that. I was a sniper.”

“You are a good fighter,” Jack said and smiled. Frank wondered if he was remembering the match too. He scooted his chair closer. Jack angled his body toward him.

And God help him were they going to play footsies or something like it? He wondered half chagrined but smiling as he saw the tension ease out of Jack.

Jack yawned.

Frank pulled back.

“You should rest, Jack.”


“It’s fine. I wasn’t planning anything.” That was his own lie.

“You sure you want to leave? It’s late and it’s Hell’s Kitchen.”

“I can take care of myself. Trust me.”

“I do.” Jack said. They headed toward the door in a slow trek.

“We can catch up later. Tomorrow? Lunch? I still owe you a meal.” Jack looked confused for a moment then laughed.

“We’ll work something out as to where. I’m not saying no to a good meal. Call me tomorrow at
around ten. I’m too tired to think straight.” Frank nodded.

They kissed goodbye.

It was a date.

Sort of.

He returned to his studio. He grabbed a gun then went back to the apartment. No one was hanging around the place or scoping it out.

He was being paranoid.

It didn’t help.

He cancelled his plans for the night. He wouldn't be much good.

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In the morning he felt tired and wanted to rest but couldn't. He got up. It was early but not that early.

He’d wait to call Jack.

He surveyed his information. He had a potential lead on the unknown dealer.

He reviewed.

It was almost ten exactly when he called Jack from a payphone near his studio.

Jack greeted him. He sounded better and didn't sound guarded like yesterday.

Matt was at school. Jack agreed to lunch. It settled a knot in his stomach.

He put away his things.

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It was regret!

This had to be what regret tasted like Frank thought as he downed his beer and Jack’s laughter echoed around him. .

Why had he agreed to this? He fanned at his mouth.

“I told you not to get that.” Jack said and pushed the plate of wings away from him.

Damn it. It was true but his damn pride

He glared. Jack looked like shit - face bruised and colored - but his grin was infectious. Frank started laughing.

He was acting like an idiot but he didn’t really care. He decided against eating the wings. He couldn’t put off his lead forever and the night would be better served used than stuck in his restroom.

It wasn't the rest of his pride. Nope.

He ordered more food.
This what was bothering him he thinks. Jack's openness. He’d been so closed and not even reprising with a half reply of “I don’t want to talk about it.” Or something.

It got him full at ease again.

“This is going to be a story.” Frank muttered.

“Yes.” He glared but it fell flat as he chugged some water. “Oh come on it's a good laugh.”

“You're not the one who made a fool of himself.”

“I did before. How else do you think I ate those? I'm an idiot but I can admit it.”

“You're not dumb.” Frank said. “Just took a few too many to the head.” Jack laughed.

It was familiar.

It was good again.

------

He may have spoken to soon he thinks as he sees Jack smile at him. Face bruised and all muscle it wasn't anything that he knew from before. But the smile as he closed his blinds had Frank’s blood burning.

This wasn't the burn of vengeance.

It was - Jack eyed his form the the same glow in his eyes he thinks and he walked forward.

It was Good.

Chapter End Notes

There was more to the chapter but I don't think fits the tone of it.

The next chapter is partly written at least so yay.
Chapter 12

It felt like he had just gone to sleep.

The alarm by his bed had him groaning. He tried to reach out and slam his fist on the damn thing but found it asleep and not quite able to move. An arm reached out, grabbed the alarm and shut it off. Frank looked at the weight on his arm.

Jack looked as tired as he did. Despite it Jack smiled toward him. It was followed by a yawn, Frank shared its twin.

“Have we really been asleep for just two hours?” Frank lied back down.

“Yes.”

“Not enough.” No, it wasn’t. It was the first actual rest Frank had felt in a while - no dreams or nightmares of anything, just blissful darkness. He closed his eyes. Well sleep wasn’t coming to him again Jack shifted next to him.

Frank rubbed his non-asleep arm over his face. He tried to wipe away the vestiges of sleep from his eyes. He heard a thump. He opened his eyes and saw Jack on the ground.

“Fuck your bed, Frank.” He said. Frank started to laugh. Jack followed and pulled himself up in an undignified huff. Frank sat up and helped the other man up. Jack smiled at him.

“Shower?” Jack asked. He pointed to the door at the corner of the studio. “Do you mind-?”

“It’s fine. It’s small or else I’d make an offer to join but I don’t think injury from slipping in the damn thing is what we’re looking for.”

“Hey, you never know. I do have a set of bruises to complete.” Frank smiled and shook his head. Jack pulled back from him and stretched. Frank did not look away. Jack snorted when he realized it but Frank was sure he flexed his arms a bit more than came naturally. He went into the restroom.

Frank lied back down. The afternoon sun came in filtered through the blinds and he suddenly became aware of New York as something more than background noise. It felt like he had been removed from the city.

Frank may not have been dating for a while…quite a while since he and Maria had been together for past a decade…but he thinks he's doing okay.

God he was out of it for long enough to not be sure. Luckily he doesn’t think that Jack will hold it against him. He stared at the popcorn ceiling.

The shower turned off. Frank frowned and yelled “The towels are clean!”

“Thanks!” Came the reply. After a moment the door opened. Frank looked at the emerging figure. He did. He wasn’t going to deny anything now. He’d had sex - well, if you could count their fumbling as that - with Jack. He wasn’t going to bury his head in the sand about it now.

Jack emerged. Frank stood. “I hope you didn’t use all the hot water.” he said instead of whatever he had in his head. Jack gave him a curious look. “That wasn’t the first thing I wanted to say.”

The other man huffed. “Go shower, Frank. I’ll change your sheets if you have any clean ones?”
Frank nodded and gestured to his drawers. An anxiety hit him and he realized he didn’t want Jack rummaging in his place if he didn’t. The closet-

He pulled the drawer opened and brought out a set. He had only three left.

Jack nodded. Frank hit the shower and bathed. He heard Jack’s movements vaguely over the water and the sound of sheets being opened with a wave.

The water was still warm when he got out and dried with the other towel - he had set two by habit. He emerged Jack was only half dressed and fumbling on a shirt.


“It’s fine just thought you should know.” Jack made to take it off. “You can keep it and return it later. I gotta do some laundry anyways.” Yeah that was a great way to tell him you liked the way it looked, Castle. He thought.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I like it.” He amended as best as he could. Which wasn’t much better. Jack smiled, half nervous and smoothed the shirt on him. They weren’t the same build but Frank liked the way it looked on Jack.

“Okay. I changed the sheets.” He glanced at the alarm clock. “I have to head out in a few. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, probably going to see if I can sleep a bit more.” Jack nodded at that. He must look tired. Frank needed it for his plans that evening. Jack licked his lips and look hesitant. It made Frank pause his movement toward his drawers.

“Are we okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you later.” That sounded okay. He thinks. He didn’t like it and with the uncertain look on Jack’s face he added. “I will. I - Thank - Look I still have no idea what I’m doing, what we’re doing exactly, but I liked it. I like you.” Yes, Frank Castle sounded like a seven year old again. How the hell had he gotten married?

His awkwardness made Jack relax; his own nervousness was clear in the way he worried the bottom of Frank’s shirt. The fact that he’d kept it calmed him a bit. It was proof Frank wasn’t having some sort of elaborate hallucination.

“Are you good with it?” He asked because he had to know. If Jack had second-

“Yeah. It was great.” He frowned. “Okay not great, I didn’t think it would be that hard. It could’ve gone better. We’re both men so it shouldn’t have been so awkward…”

“I’m still surprised I didn’t break your nose.” Jack laughed and grinned.

“I have good reflexes.” Then he added. “But we did it at least.” He giggled, that’s the only thing that it could be called. “I sound like a teenager. We had sex, or something like it! It liked and I like you too.” Oh good, Frank wasn’t the only awkward one. He thought as he smiled back. “If you don’t have a problem I’d like to get dinner next time?”
“You asking me on a date, Murdock?” He clarified because a sniper was thorough if anything- it wasn’t nerves.

“Yeah. You up for it?”

“Yes.” Jack nodded and then shuffled toward him. He looked serious.

“You sure? I won’t - I won’t hold it against you, Frank, if you want out. I know this is new for both of us. It doesn’t have to cont-”

“Yes. I want it.” The words came quickly and before Frank could finish thinking over the sentence. The seriousness of his voice had Jack smiling. “I like you Jack as a whatever the fuck we are - friends and more, I guess.”

Jack smiled. “Okay. Just so we clear that up.” Frank was not surprised when Jack kissed him.

Yep, still good.

Definitely still good.

*****

Frank managed to sleep once more. He woke up late and with a game plan. He unpacked his guns. Vest, guns, knives - he paused and grabbed a crude bandana.

He couldn’t risk people connecting him and Jack, no matter how wrong it would be. People were stupid. He wasn’t making the kid an orphan or letting Jack get hurt. He’d eat a bullet first.

Speaking of a bullet. He chambered a round in one of his guns and exited. The building was quiet. Good. The less attention he drew the better, even if incidental. He left.

He hit two gangs. He hit them hard and fast. He didn’t need much physical exertion for it. He wanted a fight but the most he experienced was a punch he failed to block before shooting a punk his first bullet hadn’t quite killed. Not that there were many that night.

This was where having great patience helped. He wasn’t a good sniper for nothing. He could sit, observe and know when to strike. Observation let him know people’s routine. It let him anticipate the best day to strike and hunt down anything he could find.

He got nothing. He burned their drugs and weapons. Frank took their money. He had a good reserve now. Drugs brought good money, just another reason he had to wipe these scum out even if they weren’t tied to his family. They preyed on the vulnerable and then the weak once they had become addicted.

His search yielded him nothing connected them to his family but he didn’t actually think it would be that easy. He just needed to connect something to the park and that day. In the service had had more elusive scenarios with an unknown objective, Frank just had to piece the clues he could gather and when stealth couldn’t gather him more answers he would need to get more personal.

He had a few addresses from information gathering and listening to the police scanners. The gangs had territory that overlapped. They all competed, they were all near the park. The right circumstances and it could happen.

Just like Matt with the truck, the right bullshit and tragedy. Poor kid was still dealing -
He frowned as something came over him.

A newspaper. He'd never checked for his family's news on it except when he woke up. Yet he hadn't caught anything. No police had followed up with him as well. No investigators, no feds or anything.

Not even when he was in the hospital. He had had a funeral for his family. He had been stationary for a while from grief and shock. Someone should have come to him.

He couldn’t- had he? He frowned and wondered if the bullet had taken more time from him than before. It was doubtful. He remembered the nurse and the drive home. The pain. The fugue of disbelief...

He needed to follow up on more sides than he had previously thought.

He went back to his studio near dawn, his equipment in a gym bag. New York was coming to life again.

He packed his stuff and made sure nothing was out of place - gun, knife, and scraps of information he had taken. It was important the closet stay closed in the closet.

He didn't feel like sleeping. After a shower he went to a bookstore and fled it after browsing the sex and sexuality sections.

Dating Jack was one thing but buying literature on the issue was another.

He knew he should look at a library but his thoughts were scattered. He needed to rest and recoup.

A few hours of sleep and he could go back to the building.

*****

It was five o’clock. Frank blinked the sleep from his eyes. He had maybe slept an hour. There were two people in front of him in the corner store. The cashier glanced at him with disinterest.

“What can I help you with sir?”

“Large coffee. Leave room for sugar and cream. I’ll also take a breakfast sandwich.” Sugar would aid the caffeine and he was hungry. He hadn’t eaten since yesterday before he had gone out. The cashier handed him the coffee and his sandwich.

He headed back to the safehouse. The morning traffic was barely starting to pick up and he didn’t want to deal with people. He sipped the cup. The coffee was a welcome warmth.

A map of New York sat out spread on his shitty kitchen table. He sat down on the chair and marked the the gangland activity all across city. The modern gangs worked more subtly than the gangs of the seventies.

Hell’s Kitchen was a bit of an exception with its seemingly never ending crime. Mayoral clean ups had done a good job at taking out most of the overt seedy elements from the cities but the ghettos and public housing units filled with crime still existed behind the shiny veneer. All people needed was a bit of help and a few pieces of trash ruined it for good people.

He snorted to himself. Look at him, giving people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe Jack was rubbing off on him in a good way. It was good to be balanced. Don’t get him wrong he still had a few hundred bullets that had scum’s name on it but he was at least seeing something of a brightside.
Maria would approve.

There were a few areas where he had seen increased crime. A certain business with increased crime had in a pretty low crime block. New York City was not so big a place but even with his focus on Hell’s Kitchen he had to make his way out to the outer boroughs like Brooklyn. Frank had another safe house there that he had...acquired. He could go there for a while, let the Manhattan cool for a while. Let their guard go down…

He looked at the clock.

6:30.

Damn it. It was still early. He needed to go to the library.

If he were potentially forgotten things it was important to confirm he hadn’t. He had been shot in the head after all. It wouldn’t do to plan that far ahead.

He tried to sleep again.

The library was empty at ten in the morning, most New Yorker was busy with school or work. The librarian glared at him as he came in.

“Sir, you can’t take food or drinks into the library. You need to dispose of your coffee.” Frank knew it would happen but he still sighed before chugging his coffee and dumped the styrofoam cup into the trashcan.

“I’m looking for old newspapers.”

“We have most on film or subscription to newspapers.” He was shown the computers. Frank chose the most remote machine. It was slow, it was always slow, but he started reading starting from the date of his family’s death.

The myriad of newspapers he had accessed to mentioned the attack after the day it occurred, speculative and sparse on details, then nothing after. Well he found one brief paragraph, three months later, an hour later. There was no victim profiles nor even blotters on potential attackers in any of the archives. There was no police press announcement. Nothing.

He kept looking. He knew sometimes it was kept quiet but there was just absolutely nothing. He had lost his family. There had to be *something*. The only other thing he had found post attack was their obituaries. He had quickly turned away from those.

He felt empty by the end and left near four.

He would look again. This would take more than a day but the first reading was disheartening and angering.

It just made him certain no one had called him from any police department or feds.

His mouth tasted sour and he realized he hadn’t eaten since the morning. Nonetheless he wasn’t all that hungry. His head did hurt though from the lack of water.

Frank headed to a nearby restaurant. He ate and drank water then headed to his safehouse.

*****

The problem with being an illegal killing man on a revenge plot was that he couldn’t connect a
legitimate land line to his place. It was a bad idea for several reasons. Right now it exacerbated on his earlier bad decision to date Jack as a man bent on revenge.

Frank stumbled out of bed and had only resisted pulling out a gun from his coat when he saw Jack out of the peephole. Then he quickly put it away. Frank pulled open the door and made sure to keep his body in line with Jack’s line sight.

“You look like shit.” Jack blurted out then looked chagrined.

“Thanks. Good to see you too.” He grumbled.

“I’m sorry but you look like you haven’t slept at all.”

“You’re not wrong.” He rubbed his tired eyes and looked at the man. Jack’s face looked worse than last time Frank had seen him. “You look worse too so at least we’re even.” His bruises were bright. Jack grinned.

“Healing at least.” His expression changed to worry. “I came to talk about uh when we could go on a date again.” He spoke the words so fast that Frank almost missed the nervous rush. “Can I come in?”

Frank almost move back but shook his head. “Sorry, it’s a mess. *I’m* a mess.” He sighed. “I just haven’t slept. I want to talk about it too but I’m not really sure if I’m awake right now and just imagining this.” He frowned. “I hope I actually said what I think I said.”

Jack’s look of worry deepened. “I can come back tomorrow. You need sleep.”

“Ten?” He offered because he’d be up by then again and have slept from exhaustion at least. He shouldn’t have gone to the library…

“Yeah. I can come back.” Jack said and sounded hesitant.

“Yes. We can talk then.” He gave a tired sigh. “I’m sorry. I just can’t really think straight right now and I want to do this right.” The words came out easily and he knew half of it was just his mind spewing out unfiltered.

Jack nodded. “Go to sleep, Frank. We’ll talk at ten.” And he left. Frank stumbled back onto his bed.

He slept and didn’t dream.

He woke up about eight thirty. He felt tired and like he had slept nothing at all but he knew it was better than yesterday. He went to the restroom and headed back to bed.

Frank barely remembered his conversation with Jack. However the half memory had him out of bed. Shit. He couldn’t really remember the conversation just that he had said ten and Jack something about their next date. Was that at ten?

Fuck. He looked at the apartment. It was a mess. Okay he had time.

His stomach rumbled in hunger. He also could eat. Wait.

Were they going to late breakfast? Brunch? He had no idea.

Fuck. He hoped he hadn’t said anything like going somewhere.

He showered and cleaned.
He was nervous when the knock to his door came. Frank opened the door. He smiled nervously. Jack was on the other side with a bag dangling from one wrist and drink carrier. He immediately switched hands and adjusted his grip on the bag when he saw Frank.

Frank moved to the side to let him enter. Jack smiled at him. “You look better.”

“Thanks.” He replied and tried to adjust his hair. “I come with breakfast and coffee.” He replied. Frank grinned.

“Thank you. We eating in for our second date?” He took a sip of his coffee. It was good.

Jack took his own coffee and laughed before taking a sip. “How much do you remember about what we talked about?”

“Not much. I almost fell back asleep earlier before I remembered we sort of talked.” He confessed.

“Well I’m glad you slept but I came back to set up our second date.” He shrugged. “I brought breakfast. Seemed like you’d probably need it.”

“I do. Thanks.” He said in real appreciation. Jack’s expression shifted back to concern.

“You need someone to talk to? You seemed very out of it.” Frank took a minute to compose himself. He drank from his coffee. He could avoid the question but Jack knew enough about him for an honest answer.

“I made the mistake of trying to find out about the investigation made into the incident that killed my family.” A surge of anger had him pacing. “There was nothing. Nothing at all after the first mentions. It’s like it’s been swept under the rug.”

“Isn’t there usually an investigator-?”

“That’s what I thought about too! No one ever contacted me. No one. It was hell of a time getting the death certificates for the funerals too.” He tried not to crush his coffee cup. “I had to check because, well, I got shot in the head. I had to make sure my memory wasn’t acting up.” He sat down next to Jack at his shitty table.

He grabbed a piece of bacon that had come with the breakfast Jack had set out for him. “It’s not because I’m here.” He ate it quickly. His stomach settled some from hunger but his anger didn’t fade. “I was ho-home for weeks. I was in a coma! No one told me anything. Not even who signed the DNR on file.”

“DNR?”

“It’s short for do not resuscitate. I never placed one in any file I had. Maria would never place one for me.” He sighed. “She was already dead by then too.”

“Jesus, Frank.” Jack said.

“Yeah, well. What can I do?” Frank glanced at his closet. He had his answer. He was doing something about it even if it looked like the authorities were covering it up. Jack got up.

“Are you okay? Will you be okay? You didn’t look good earlier, Frank. I was worried.” Jack said and Frank looked towards him.

“Yeah, I will...I’m alive. Not much I can do about that and you’re here.” He bit into another piece of
bacon. “Thank you.”

Jack ate a piece of his own breakfast and said. “You want to hang out today? I don’t have anything planned or at least nothing that can’t wait. Well I have to get some groceries for dinner but that’s it.”

“And out date?”

“We can talk about it later.” Frank nodded.

“Yeah that sounds good.”

They ate in silence. When they finished and finished through out the trash, Frank pulled Jack near him and kissed him. It was a bit unexpected from Jack’s part but the man didn’t oppose it. “Thank you.” He repeated and Jack smirked.

“If that’s what breakfast gets me, what will dinner?”

“Depends on the food.” Jack burst into a deep laugh. The solemnity of their earlier topic was still on them but it lifted slightly.

They spent the rest of the day at Jack’s place and Frank helped him pick out groceries. A budget and food sensitive son made it a bit longer than Frank would have expected. He had planned to leave by then but Frank stayed for that too.

The kid didn’t complain about his presence and monopolized his time while Jack made dinner.

It was a decent distraction.

*****

Perhaps distraction wasn’t the best word choice. Distractions didn’t have multiple dates and enjoy each other’s company beyond a superficial level.

Or hang out with their kid.

But it was good and taking more of Frank’s time than he knew was wise.

*****

Frank woke up at the curse and thump next to him. He sat up and looked down. Jack had fallen of the bed again. The man glared at him.

“Fuck your bed, Frank.”

“I’ll get another one.”

“You could stay over my place at some point too. I feel like we’re basically running off to a sex den or something.”

A sex den? He glanced at his closet as Jack stood up. He didn’t know how many dens had half an armory and the other half in a storage place nearby. Though he soon planned to move the rest to the storage, Jack was here to often to not eventually open the closet.

“I mean I think we need to have sex well before we can count my studio as a sex den.”

“Hey we are getting better at this.” Jack said with a laugh and sat down on the bed. “And I don’t
think there’s any specifications that a sex den needs to be filled with good sex to count.”

“That’s true.” Frank tossed his sheets aside. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I mean yeah, staying over some point. We’re not hiding this, right?”

“No. So, okay. We’re doing this. Good.” What the hell was he doing? Still he agreed to give clothes to Jack, at least a spare.

They both seemed to realize something with it.

They had to tell Matt about their relationship. They weren’t exactly overt or hiding but casual was not the same as them dating.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I know how I want to go but I can't jump right into it! Well I could but I'm sure it wouldn't be appreciated for clarity's sake. :)

Jack was cleaning out his ears when Frank caught sight of him again. Jack grinned. “Having second thoughts?” He said and shook the q-tip. Frank snorted.

“I would be more concerned if you didn’t clean them.” He replied and waved to his face. “Besides I’ve seen you with one eye swollen like a cantaloupe and still found you attractive. I think you should be worried if I found that more attractive than you practicing good hygiene.”

“It was not a cantaloupe, a lemon maybe.” Jack threw away the q-tip and walked near him. Frank pulled on a shirt from his dresser. They were in his studio again or, as Jack had called it earlier, ‘the sex den’ since that is all they seemed to do together in it. Frank glanced at the open closet and the sparsely numbered clothes hanging from the coat hangers.

He missed his guns being close but this was important. He couldn’t risk it when it was so easily avoidable.

“We still up for tomorrow?” Jack asked, an anxiety that Frank was starting to recognize better, visible for only a moment. How many people had left Jack because he was a single father and the fun was over? It could be fun to be with a boxer but a single father was different for most people.

“Yeah. Got the kid a gift.”

“We can start with that if you want and then dinner before we tell him.” Frank shook his head.

“No, we tell him first. I don’t want him thinking that we were buttering him up or something. I want to be as frank as possible.” Jack snorted at his unintentional pun but nodded, a light in his eyes that made Frank think that his response had earned him something with Jack.

“Okay. If that’s what you want I’ll go with it.” He licked his lips. “I think it will go fine. Matt likes you.” The nervousness was back. Jack knew his son but every person had hard limits and most of those involving dealt with unfamiliar situations. This was quite left field in most of circumstances.

“I like him too. I’ll work on it if he doesn’t like it.” He shrugged. “He’s your kid, Jack. I know you’ll choose him first and that’s good but doesn’t mean I’ll just go lie in a ditch, you know?” Jack nodded and moved to kiss him. It was intense.

Frank made to pull Jack toward him. The man pulled away. “We just showered.” Though he seemed pleased by the reaction. Frank sighed, more for show than anything else and let the man go. Jack sat next to him on the bed.

Frank looked at him from the corner of his eye and said. “Careful, Jackey-boy. You don’t want to fall off again.” Jack huffed and glared as best as he could while looking at the ceiling.

“Fuck your bed, Frank.”
“Not fuck me?”

“We just did that.”

“That was bad.” He said with a laugh.

“You started it.

“I guess I did.” He conceded and looked at the new clock on the wall.

“How long you got?”

“Another hour. Want to get some food?” Jack motioned to his kitchenette. “If you got something I can fix it up.”

“Nothing much. Maybe some old takeout and a jar of beans.”

“I hope it’s not the same one we talked about last time.” Jack said and looked concerned towards him. “Take out isn’t healthy either.”

“No and I’m aware.” He didn’t think he’d live long anyway. Years at best but at some point if he continued taking out filth then he was eventually go down. There was always something - unseen variables, someone better, someone faster, faulty equipment, old injuries.

“Come on, we’re going grocery shopping. There’s a place not too far from here.”

“You know this will take longer than an hour?” Jack smiled.

“Eager to get rid of me?”

“You said you had that much time.”

“I can move those errands to some other time.”

“Jack-”

“Frank. Food.” His tone stern. Frank reluctantly got up, grabbed some money and followed Jack out. When they got back Jack managed to make him a meal with his basic cookware.

“I don’t know what this is but it’s good.” Jack grinned.

“Irish staple. My mom taught me how to cook it before she passed. I was her only kid and I don’t think she wanted the family recipe to die just because she didn’t have a daughter.”

That made Frank think. “You got any family out there?”

“Nope or nothing close at least. Just me and Matty.” He sighed. “I had a cousin but he died, heart attack.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re good Catholics in every way but one. We can’t seem to build a clan. You?”

“Just me. Maria had the family.” He looked away from Jack. “Just me now.” He repeated. Jack layered a hand on his and squeezed it comfortingly.

It was something at least.
The apartment was still. A fan whirred in the corner of the living room and quieted the muted sounds of the city creeping in. Frank stared at the package on the table and wondered if he had selected a good wrapping paper.

He'd read up a bit on blindness and sensory issues since he had started his thing with Jack and babysat the kid. Texture was important. The paper was shiny but smooth and with a card attached; Frank had punched a rudimentary message on a postcard with a pen in Braille. It took him half an hour and it was a pain in the ass but he thinks it'll go over well. Although he's worried he didn't actually make the grooves distinct enough, he couldn't feel anything other than vague bumps.

Jack stepped into the kitchen and smiled nervously at him. The kid was downstairs getting their mail. Frank was there for 'dinner', which wasn't a complete lie but it still felt a bit deceptive.

"Ready?" Jack asked.

"Yeah." He replied and took the opportunity to kiss the man. It reminded Frank that this was where they were in their relationship, in the privacy of their homes when they were alone.

A hurried rush of footsteps heading to the entrance had them pulling apart. The kid came in with a pile of mail in one hand. He didn't have a cane but he did have his glasses on.

"I got mail!" Matt announced and dumped the letters on a side table near the entrance. "Dad, where are you?"

"We're in the kitchen, Matt!" Jack replied. Frank took a step away from Jack. Matt headed in their directions.

"We having dinner already? It's like five." Matt said. He cocked his head. "Where's Frank?"

"Here." Frank responded and Matt nodded.

"No, we're not having dinner yet." Jack said and sighed. "We have something to tell you actually."

"What? Did Frank finally beat you?" Matt looked displeased by the thought. "If he was cheating it doesn't count." He insisted. Jack smiled.

"No, I still have him beat in boxing."

Matt preened. "Good." Then stuck out his tongue in Frank's direction. "No cheating!" He wagged his finger and then laughed. Frank rolled his eyes but it eased some of his tension."What is it then?"

"Uh well. Matt you now-" Jack cleared his throat. "Frank and I are friends- were friends- well, we're still friends-" The kid just looked confused. Frank sighed and uttered.

"We're dating." The words were like a final pronouncement and it shut Jack up.

Matt frownd. "I don't understand. What does that mean?"

"We're going out. Together like uh boyfriends." Jack said.

"You meaning dating-dating?" Matt sounded a bit bewildered. "But Frank's a guy." It wasn't outrage or disgust at least.

"Yes." Frank confirmed. "I'm a man." Matt bit his lower lip in consideration.
"This is weird." He said. "I thought Dad liked girls."

"Women." Frank corrected. His time in the military had taught him that much, women didn't always like to be called girls.

"It's new to us too, Matt, but we're dating and you needed to know." Jack added.

"You can do that? Like both men and women?" Matt asked. "Or do you like just guys now?" Frank gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, people can like both men and women, or something like it. I still, myself, like women but I like your dad."

"Same here, Matt."

"Okay." Matt said and shrugged. He wasn't fully at ease with it, that was clear but he seemed to be getting on board the idea.

"Okay? You have any questions?" Jack asked.

"No." Matt said. "I like Frank. He's nice." He said and bit his lip in consternation. "Am I supposed to keep it a secret?" Jack looked at Frank. He shook his head.

"No." Jack said. "We're not hiding anything. If people have a problem they can go to hell." Matt grinned at his dad's temper.

"You sure, you're good kid?"

Matt nodded. "Yeah. It's...different but I don't think it's bad. I know other people say so, the Church does too but my dad's a good guy and you're too, Frank. So it can't be bad right?" Well, Frank wasn't going to elaborate on that.

"I just gotta get used it. You have a boyfriend!" He giggled then made a face. "You've kissed!" He accused them.

"Yes." Jack replied.

"Ew!" But the response was clearly for effect and he laughed again. Jack grabbed Frank's hand. Good. Frank motioned to the gift, Jack nodded.

"Got you a gift kid. It's yours, even if you hadn't liked this." Matt's interest was immediately piqued.

"What is it? Can I have it now, please?"

Frank smiled. "Yeah. It's on the table." Matt immediately felt for it. Frank was glad he chose the paper when the kid ran his fingers over it a few times. In the process he found the card. Matt’s expression turned from curious to focused and he ran his hand over the card. He smiled.

"You misspelled hang!" He said gleefully but opened the package. The smooth paper revealed Lego toys. It wasn't a model. They didn't seem to come with braille instructions or maybe they could only be bought if customized. Frank had bought a few colors and a lot of pieces. They were organized by color, probably would end up mixed later but he'd resort them if need be.

Matt grinned. "Thank you!"

“Can we play with them now?”

“I'm taking them to my room.” He said and ran off with the box. Jack let out a loud sigh.

“That was okay.” He said.

“Yeah. Could've gone worse.” He smiled

“Yeah. I think he'll be okay with it.” Jack sounded relieved and Frank believed it too.

When Matt returned he inquired about dinner in a different tone. He wanted to play with the toys. Frank grinned, he was glad that went over well. He wasn’t sure what the kid could do and couldn’t beyond the obvious so he’s glad he didn't mess up today of all days.

Dinner passed and the Lego set with the base to connect the figures on the kitchen table. Matt seemed to be able to keep a scary recollection of where everything was. Red and whites were not mixed up when he constructed a rudimentary American flag.

Jack and Frank helped him. It wasn’t the most exciting evening but it was good and fun. Matt hummed and ran his hands over a horse figure.

“Hey, Dad and Frank. Are-Is Frank going to stay over? It's late and I know people do that when they have boyfriends. Mary-Ann’s mom has had a lot of boyfriends stay over. Mary-Ann says they’re loud.” Jack nodded.

“If Frank wants. It’s part of the reason we told you, Matty. Can you imagine just finding Frank in the kitchen without us telling you?”

“That’d be weird.”

“Exactly why we told you. You’re the first to know.”

Matt hummed and placed a figure on his horse. “Just don’t be loud. I have enough trouble sleeping in the heat.” Jack choked. Frank bit back a laugh and cleared his throat. He was sure Matt had an idea of sex given his age but….yeah let the kid figure that out on his own.

*****

It was a scream that woke him up.

Frank practically propelled himself out of bed and reached for a gun in a near graceful move. He spent half a second disoriented in the dim light streaming into the window. The other second, it clicked it was *Matt* and Frank ran into the kid’s room.

Matt covered his ears and acting like he was in pain. His rapid breathing made Frank think the kid was heading to a panic attack. It was a stark reminder of the after effects those damn chemicals had done to Matt.

He hadn’t thought about that so much though but rather helped him calm down.

One...two...three...One...two...three...One...two...three...four….

“Come on, kid, breath with me.” One...two...three.. Matt’s eyes were wide and unseeing but he slowly relaxed his breathing to match Frank’s. Jack loomed nearby. The boy let go of his ears.

“Nice and steady. Go at your own pace.” Frank let his loose hold go and the kid seemed to find his
dad in the near darkness of the room. The two settled on the bed and Matt’s breathing stayed even.

Frank closed his eyes and tried to get his heartbeat back to normal. Frank looked at them. Jack wasn’t looking his way but focused on the kid. Good.

“I’ll be in the kitchen.” He said softly. Jack nodded and Matt zeroed in on his form. It was unnerving how blank his eyes were, not a cliched thing of evil, but just knowing they didn’t see him. He really hadn’t seen that before.

He poured himself a cup of water and drank. His heartbeat returned to normal.

Almost half an hour later Jack met up with him. “He’s asleep again. Thank you, Frank.” Jack looked tired.

“Don’t need to thank me. Just glad I helped.” He took another sip from his water.

“Are you okay?” Jack looked up. “You mentioned you were in combat ...that can’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t.” He admitted. “But I can deal. It’s not as bad as others.”

“Just because people have it worse doesn’t mean your suffering counts any less.”

“You get that from a therapist?”

“Yeah, actually. The settlement we got paid for some for me. I still have nightmares of not being able to find Matt or it being worse. Most of the time it’s just the feeling but I know where it came from.” Jack shrugged. “I stopped going when the money for that ran out.”

“You think it helped?”

“Yeah, a bit. You get any?”

“I...I don’t do so well with therapists” He replied. Jack frowned but didn’t press or say something stupid like that he should. Which was probably true, he didn’t think taking up a gun and spewing out some asshole’s brain was on any therapists list of coping mechanisms.

“You good to go back to bed?” Frank shook his head. “Okay.” Jack replied and took a seat next to him. He didn’t say anything. Frank hesitantly took Jack’s hand. The man squeezed it reassuringly.

When Frank motioned for them to return to bed they did without preamble.

It was a night filled with fitful turning.
Chapter 14

****

It was really very good.

Frank grinned at the man beneath him. Jack tried to shift Frank off but Frank adjusted his weight and kept him pinned. Jack glared and tried his upper body next. He was strong, very strong but Frank was trained to deal with many body types.

He managed to pin Jack’s arms above his head in the scuffle that followed. Jack’s pupils grew wider, dark and Frank thinks his own probably did too. For a moment they looked at each other. If they weren’t in public-

Jack flipped him over with a speed that left him a bit breathless.

Damn it.

Jack laughed and got up. He offered him a hand. Frank stood up.

Jack changed his stance and Frank followed suit.

They would explore that later.

Right now it was about training.

****

The three bullets met their targets in rapid precision. The room’s other occupants barely had a time to register the deaths before a bullet ripped through their skulls or torsos with the same accuracy. A finger tapped across the trigger and muffled words whispered into the darkness as the next barrage met the morons running into the room in response to the sounds.

A shift in direction, an account of wind, and one final bullet met the escaping woman who held more blood on her hands than some career soldiers saw in their entire service. He waited one more moment and stood up. A bead of sweat made its way down the side of his face before being absorbed by the cloth.

He made his way down and carried his guns at a ready. He raided the safe and left the building Nothing here but another dead end. But the drugs were at least going to meet another problem. He thought as the building began to smoke from the incendiaries he had left in place of the money.

A reflection caught his attention and Frank grinned. Even if the camera record to a remote location his appearance was shrouded by the black mask.

It could use a few improvements though but it wasn’t bad for a start.

****

“Hey, Frank.” Frank looked. “Is this red or blue?”

“Blue.” Matt ran his hand over the Lego.

“Says red but it was with the blues.” He muttered.
“Shit.”

“Language.” Matt said with glee.

“Let me fix it.” He said. Matt handed over the piece without preamble. The glue was a bitch to remove but he guess braille label makers were meant to be a bit more permanent and to resist accidental remove better than standard ones.

He printed a new label and placed it on the rectangle with care. Matt took the piece back with a happy hum and went to working on...whatever it was he was building. It was something vaguely familiar but it was still taking shape.

Frank went back to labelling the yellow blocks. The single pieces were a bitch to label correctly when thin. He cursed when the label lost its adhesive after the third time of getting it on and not sticking off the damn square.

“You cursed again.” Matt repeated. Frank glared in his direction. Jack was getting on about his language, at least around the kid. The damn glue lost its adhesiveness again. Frank gave up. He’d try later. After the fight. He could get dinner started at least.

“Can you give me three yellow ones?”

Frank headed him the ones requested and headed to the kitchen. He listened to the radio on low. The news spoke about a recent string of arson occurrences related to drug dens or suspected drug operations.

He smiled. Control burns were difficult but leaving DNA behind was not worth it anymore.

Frank glanced at the kid building his...something with a tongue sticking out in concentration...

He had to be careful.

For the kid.

For Jack.

Speaking of Jack, Frank made sure he had the first aid kid prepped.

“Give me a shot and some thread.” - Jack had said after a cut had bled through the butterfly bandages. The was just asking for an infection. Not to mention the kid’s eagerness of “I can do it!” had Frank even shaking his head at the cavalier attitude.

“I don’t want onions in my sandwich!” Matt yelled as Frank opened the fridge.

“You don’t know what I'm making.”

“You always make sandwiches! I don’t want onions. You don’t cook them long enough!”

“I can make more than a sandwich!” Frank retorted and placed back the bread he had grabbed.

“Liar!” Matt sing-songed. Frank looked at the fridge. There was food and time. He glared at the younger Murdock’s direction.

Maybe pasta? He thought and grabbed a tomato. Okay that wasn’t enough for sauce…

“How long should I cook your damn onions?” Frank grumbled and returned the tomato. Matt ran
into the room, almost hitting the counter.

“You cursed again and I’ll help.” Frank sighed and handed the kid the bread.

The onion did taste better cooked longer. He wasn’t telling the kid that though.

Not yet at least.

If only because his dad’s fight had started.

*****

Only an idiot brought a knife to a gunfight.

Frank took a sip from his coffee and watched the man get taken down by the remaining thugs.

He had come to scout the Dogs’ place but had seen them accosted by some Cartel men. So far the Cartel was winning. He watched them ransack the place.

They seemed to think his previous hits were the work of the other.

Interesting.

Still, he sees one of the men shoot a fleeing car.

Frank might have to rethink his strategy. Those bullets were hitting more than just those pigs.

There was never a real thing as acceptable casualties.

He unpacked his gun and aimed it at the shooters.

The men stumbled and fell.

One penny...

He tapped the trigger.

Such shame too. They were starting to get more loosed lipped and the information he had found last week had been...they had mentioned his family. The context was vague enough that it wasn’t enough but…

He had needed them alive.

He placed the gun away. He saw one of them try to crawl away. He pulled on his mask.

He wasn’t dumb enough to bring a knife to a gunfight.

Well, not alone at least.

*****

“Can I have that?” Matt called from behind them. Frank looked up and nodded. Jack shot him a look.

“Uh I just nodded.” He added quickly. Matt put out a hand and Frank passed him the chocolate bar he had just opened.
“Thank you, Frank.” Matt said with a smile and walked back to his room. Jack gave a huff.

“Frank, it’s his second bar.” Frank realized that the look was for a different reason.

“Sorry.” Though how had he had known? He remembered Matt vaguely dropping something in the kitchen’s garbage can. Had that been a wrapper? His train of thought shifted as Jack stood with a wince from the dinner table. He braced himself against it. Frank stood up and helped. “You going to tell me where to you got those ‘fight’ bruises now?.” Jack glared at him.

“It is from last night.”

“Yeah, but not your match. I’m not stupid, Jack, and I watched it with the kid.”

“It’s nothing.”


“Drop it.”

“You’re hurt.” He insisted and felt the need to put an end to it with a bullet.

“Drop it.” Jack snapped. “Or are you going to tell me where you go during the day? I’m not asking for accounting but you don’t work.” Frank stayed quiet. “It’s fine. I get you’re working things out but it’s nothing, okay?”

Well it was sort of a valid question, he thought while he helped Jack sort his bills and checks into the right envelopes. These past few weeks had been good until yesterday when Jack had appeared with more bruises than he had gained in his last fight. Frank realized he had been a bit sort of floating in a lull.

He still went out and hunted, maybe spending three full days with Jack and Matt and sparring on a forth with Jack. He should’ve thought that Jack would wonder where the hell he went. He did keep insisting he didn’t work for God’s sake. After the last envelope was stamped and placed near the entry for drop off tomorrow Frank spoke.

“I spend it alone and in the city. I just have to get my head straight. Sometimes I look to see if I can get any answers. Some nights I can’t sleep.” Not a lie. Half of one maybe.

“That’s it?”

“What do you expect?”

“That doesn’t seem good.” He said then frowned. “I’m not one to say though. I don’t know what you’ve been through but you’re not alone anymore, Frank.” Frank shrugged and looked away.

“You’re right though. I should do more...normal things...like volunteer.” Which was more flexible at least and he could lie...

“The Church provides a few opportunities. You haven’t gone with us to Mass yet. We could talk to the charity organizer.” Unless Jack took him somewhere he could track.

“Jack, I’m not really comfortable with the God thing.” He earned a look at that. Fuck that was reminding him of his mother and Maria. It was the one that said he was full of bullshit.

“Frank, I’m not going to force you to Mass but we can still talk to the coordinator. We have lots of non-religious and lapsed people come to our non-religious events.” he shrugged. “I don’t go to as
many as I’d like but they’re good. They do good work.”

Jack would drop this if he insisted on it, Frank had the feeling he would. There was a reason he and Jack got on so quickly and loneliness was just part of it. Yet they had to compromise, it was kind of the whole relationship bit.

But Frank planned on following some dealers Sunday. He had bugs to pick up and switch out. Listen and sort through for data. He was on the right track but- At his hesitation Jack’s expression turned sharp.

“Fine.”

“Jack-”

“I’ll drop it. It’s fine.”

“Jesus, Jack. Let me think about it.” Jack sighed and nodded. They headed to the couch and sat in silence.

Matt padded out a few minutes later and into the kitchen. His posture stiff. Right the kid. He wasn’t wearing his glasses. Frank realized.

He doesn’t remember when Matt took them off.

Kid scurried past them, bumping into the hallway wall. Frank sighed. Jack nursed a bruise and said lowly.

“It’s nothing Frank. Just some people who want me to lose.”

“They lose money? I can-”

“You can’t rough them up. They want to fix fights and I’m not exactly A grade material but I’m not terrible. I’m in the way of their prize fighters. I can’t turn down fights with Matt.”

“So you’ll fight hurt.”

“Yeah.” It was truth but it felt like a lie. Jack knew who it was. Maybe that’s why.

“I can’t do this Sunday.”

“But you’ll try the next?”


“Okay.” He reached out to him. Frank took it.

They were still tense.

“What do you think of the upcoming matches?” Jack shrugged.

“Okay. Hoping I can get some decent fights. Maybe win our division at some point. I came close when Matt was a baby and Mom was alive.”

“You mean like Creel?”

“Yeah. That’d be a good fight.” Jack said. Frank agreed.
It wasn’t easy with this, but Frank didn’t want this gone.

*****

Frank resisted the urge to curse. One of his bugs had been found. Luckily for him they thought it was the FBI. The Irish were not happy and were talking about bringing back up.

This was going to make his job harder.

Not that he thought he was wasting his time. Frank looked at his scanner on his studio table. The scanner was always oddly silent when he finished a job.

He needed something to get him secured lines. Something better.

There was a bit too little in the papers about the amount of people he was killing. Just little stories. Enough to detract the news as a ‘developing issue’ only to have it fade.

Just drugs.

Just junkies.

Just gang violence.

With military precision kills.

Someone was covering this up.

Maybe suspected him.

No. He didn’t think that deep. He was sure he was AWOL right now for anyone.

He had to pull back for a bit.

He wasn’t seeing something.

He couldn’t risk it.

He needed perspective and sometimes pulling away was the best.

He smiled. Oh maybe it was good.

The fools would gather tighter and fight each other. Cut their numbers on their own. Let them think it was themselves gutting each other in bars and wearing masks.

He touched the scar on his head. He couldn’t drop this but this wasn’t the only thing keeping him going anymore.

Maybe this was God giving him some perspective.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

A day later than expected but I had an impromptu outing but hope you enjoy this.
also obligatory porn-tie in : http://archiveofourown.org/works/9651845/

“I’m just saying - you don’t have to-”

“Jack I will turn up the volume if you repeat yourself.” Jack huffed and tightened the grip on his hand for a moment before releasing it. Frank kissed the man. Jack exhaled softly when he pulled away.

“It’s just a big deal. No one’s ever- I’ve never-”

“I know.” Frank replied. “I’ll pick up the kid from school. Fuck, I’ll even do chaperone duty for Sunday School.” Jack his hand over a scabbed over line of red on his arm.

“You sure this doesn’t need a doctor? It looks pretty angry.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go if I need to but it was just a nail and I’ve got my tetanus shot”

“Okay. Just remember to take care of yourself too.”

“I know.” He gazed at the man’s bruised face. He didn’t spot any non-match bruises or cuts. It was good but it made Frank wonder if something bigger was planned or if Jack’s recent losses from the previous set were enough for the bastards. He hoped it was enough.

“How’s the shelter gig?” Jack asked and it was a clear pry. He smiled.

“Good. Dogs like me. I want to take them all. I got a kitten to sleep in my pocket. I didn’t even notice it until one of the other people told me not to take it out. That made me look like an idiot but damn was that cute.”

“Yeah? You sure it was an accident.”

“I wouldn’t have minded per se but you know I don’t think I’d be let back if I kept it.” Jack laughed. “You think about getting the kid a dog?”

“Landlord doesn’t allow pets.”

“Wouldn’t be a pet.”

“Matt wouldn’t treat the dog like a tool. He’s wanted a dog forever. He’d completely untrain it.” Jack said with a laugh. “I mean we’ve thought about it but Matt doesn’t really want one. He wants a pet dog.”

“I’ll see if I can get him to volunteer with me then. Kids have to come with someone. He might be too young though.”
“He’d like that.” Jack replied and hummed at the show. “This is boring. Want to go for a run?”

“In this humidity?”

“What are you, a snowflake, Castle? I thought you served in hellish climates.”

“Just because I can doesn’t mean I enjoy it.” But he got up. “Do I even have anything here?”

“Yes, like two outfits. I washed them recently.” He moved to his tiny bedroom. Frank took the clothes tossed to him and changed.

*****

“What’s his name?” Matt asked as he pet the scarred and sturdy body of the dog next to him.

“I’ve been calling him Max.”

“Max is a good name.” Matt said and said dog wagged his tail in appreciation of the comment. He was so appreciative that he raised himself, placed his two front paws on the shoulders of said boy and began to enthusiastically lick his face. “Ew!” Matt uttered while laughing but didn’t move away.


“What kind of dog is he?” Matt asked as he began to pet the rump of the dog again. The tail began to wag again with such enthusiasm that Frank worried it was going to hit Matt.

“Bully dog.” Matt shrugged, clearly not being able to tell what that meant. “Pit Bull.”

“Got it.” He replied and smiled. He ran his hand over Max’s ears. “Why are his ears like this? It doesn’t feel natural.”

“They used him for fighting.”

“That’s horrible.” Matt gave Max a very intense pet. “I like him. I wish our landlord let us have a pet but I can’t even have a fish.” He grumbled. “I mean, I can’t see it now. We could have had a fish at least but the landlord doesn’t even allow that. Dad asked.”

“A pet is a lot of responsibility.” Frank said after a moment. “It is a bit of work. I have to walk him and make sure he eats when I’m with him. If he were mine I wouldn’t be able to stay out at all hours.” He said. Which was not quite true, a walker, minder and other arrangements could take care of the dog while he was away on business.

“You don’t do anything though. You could adopt him and I could play with him when we visit you.”

“My landlord doesn’t let me have one either.” Matt grumbled about boring adults

“I could have a seeing eye dog.” Matt said but shrugged. “But they’re not really a pet. Maybe one day.” The dog licked his face. “Ew. Maybe it would be nice.” he wrinkled his nose. “But then there’s the poop.” Frank snorted.

“Can’t argue there.” Max got extremely happy as he stood. He wanted a walk. Dog seemed to know ‘poop’ was part of that routine. Smart dog and smart kid. “I gotta take Max for a walk.” Kid perked up again.
“Can I come?” He asked.

“Yeah. Your dad wants me to watch you and the shelter says we gotta stick together. Seems like a bad move if I don’t.” Matt scowled.

“Not a baby.”

“Didn’t say you were, Red.” Matt frowned.

“Why Red?”

“Your hair is kind of red. Anyone tell you that?” Matt shrugged.

“Maybe? I don’t know. I guess.” He ran his head through his hair. “Still isn’t really red.”

“Prefer I call you kid all the time?” Matt stuck his tongue out. Frank clipped the leash to Max’s collar.

“I have a name.” He puffed out his chest. “Matthew Michael Murdock. My dad named me. Told me how he chose each one of my names.” Max pulled at his leash.

"While I’m sure that’s a story, this little dog has to pee.” Max wolfed. Franked snorted. Matt grabbed his cane. They went out. Matt followed well. The clip clap of Max’s nails helped steer Matt toward them if the dog pulled a bit too enthusiastically forward before Frank settled him.

It made Frank sad and angry to think that this was probably the first time someone showed him some affection without violence. Max’s pulling had increased since he had gotten him. It wasn’t wild, just enthusiasm at being able to be a dog. Frank knew dogs and this was just excitement, it was clear inasmuch as the little stump could show at least. Max whined as he tugged and looked back at Frank.

Frank redirected the dog. Max whined. Matt paused. He cocked his head and ‘looked’ in the direction of the park.

“Can we go into the park? I know he wants to.” Frank frowned and looked. The park was small and the green space was miniscule. “I don’t mind.” Matt said.

“Wish he could kid but we gotta go back. More dogs need walking.”

“I guess.” Matt listened as the dog pooped. “How’d you find him anyways?”

“There’s a reason I got a cut on my arm. Don’t tell your dad.” Matt grinned.

“You saved him! Also I won’t tell. Can we walk him a bit longer? I don’t mind staying longer.”

“Yeah. Why not.” The dogs were happy with their choices so he can’t say he’s annoyed by it, even if they smelled like dog when they got back home.

*****

Frank listened to his new scanner. This one was able to pick up more secure frequencies. It was expensive but damn was it worth it. He had no idea what he had been missing. This was good. He’d been staying away except when he’d stumbled across Max. He couldn’t not do something. Soon. He thinks. Just not this week.

He sighed and took more notes. He needed to plan this better.
He turned off the scanner. It would draw too much attention if it chattered on and on.

*****

Frank stared at his funds. He had a good stash still. He packed his bag and secured the stash again. He sighed and went to clean his weapons again. He needed to move them. He thinks someone is starting to get suspicious why he was coming to his storage unit. There was only so much the shitty furniture would detract from the cases behind them under the tarps and it definitely didn’t smell like dust.

Maybe it was time for another safe house in Hell’s Kitchen.

*****

“It smells funny.” Matt complained as the popcorn went between them but he took some. “Tastes weird too.”

“Then don’t eat it.” Jack reprimanded. Kid looked nervous and ran his hand down his pants in a repeated motion.

Frank took a sip from his soda and knew they were both anxious. This was their first time back to the movies since the accident. The audio description may not be enough for them. Still he’d eat the money to see if the kid could enjoy it.

“Movies going to start.” Matt’s glasses gleamed in the dim lights. “Just let us know if you don’t like it. It’ll be fine.” Matt bit his lip and nodded.

It wasn’t the worst experience and the audio was lacking a bit because Matt asked his dad a few things but it wasn’t the worst.

Kid seemed to want to try it again at least.

*****


“No. Also a bit. I’m fighting Creel, Frank! If I can beat him…it would help a lot.”

“Ah so you’re nervous for other reasons. You worried you won’t beat him?”

Frank had seen the other fighter. He was good but he thinks Jack has the advantage. Man was good and with their sparring he thinks the had gained some speed.

“Yeah.” Jack smiled, a tight thing. “I mean you see the odds? People aren’t betting in my favor.”

“That’s not your fault. The ratios are off because of those bastards.” Jack swallowed and nodded.

“You can beat him.”

“You looking to bet on it?”


“Those are mine to begin with.”

“Hey if we go by betting standards you’d get a lot back.”
“I’m not betting with you on that Frank.” He coughed. “I do know a bookie though if you want…” Frank laughed.

“You know what? Yeah. I do. I ain’t afraid to put my money where your mouth is.”

“My mouth?”

“I’m not the one who’s going to get punched.”

“I’ll block.”

“I hope so or else I’m afraid our sparring is probably lacking.”

“Already tired of me?” Jack joked.

“Never.” Jack snorted.

“Matt still goading you about not beating me in a match yet?”

“Yep. Gotta win. I will win...eventually.” Jack laughed but he didn’t seem to relax.

Yeah they’d up their training. Jack wasn’t going down and he was going to trail him for a bit. If anything he would win a fair fight. No idiots were going to punch him into a loss unless that idiot was Creel.

*****

The carrots wanted to slide off the cutting board with each slice. Frank needed to sharpen the blade. This was just ridiculous. He shouldn’t have to play catch with produce. With a last thump against the cutting board he surveyed his work and grimaced. He needed more according to the recipe book but he didn’t think it would be ruined without the right amount.

He wiped an emerging bead of sweat from his brow. The apartment had gradually turned into a sweatbox as the season progressed. The humidity and heat settled in the home, thick and stagnant.

A tug on his shirt had him looking down and behind him. Matt held up a can of soda. Condensation ran down the can and Frank licked his chapped lips. Why did he even bother to buy chapstick? It was just a waste of money.

“Is this coke?” Matt asked. Frank nodded.

“Yes.” He replied, then took the can. “Not until dinner.” Matt made a face. “How about some water with ice?” Matt nodded. Frank gave him a cup, Matt could do it himself but Frank didn’t trust him to not make off with another can. He was a good kid but still a kid.

“Thanks, Pop.” Matt said and headed to the living room. He paused for a moment at the doorway checked the frame was where he expected it to be and continued.

“You’re welcome.’ He turned back to the carrots. There was a bodega down the street they could pick some up quickly-

He froze.

Pop.

Matt had called him Pop.
Frank had acted like it was the most natural thing ever. He hadn’t reacted to it like he thought he would.

When had that happened? What had happened? He looked at the carrots. He was making dinner in some box cutter apartment in Hell’s Kitchen and waiting for Jack to come home from a doctor’s appointment for his match.

What the actual fuck was he doing? He turned off the stove. The din of the street filled his senses for a moment, called to him.

He could just leave. Say he was going for carrots and get back on track. Pretend this never happened.

He had a new safe house where his guns were now stashed.

He could go and pretend he wasn’t playing house.

It wouldn’t be fair to Jack to suddenly drop out like nothing. Jack could hold his own. He had before Frank arrived. He could leave some money to help him out until they adjusted again.

He glanced at the door. He wanted his gun and an empty rooftop.

Then what? Another empty night in a shitty apartment? Training to take out the filth that had killed Maria, Lisa and Frankie?

And then…what would he do after that?

He wanted this. Whatever ‘this’ was with Matt and Jack.

Pop.

Matt had made the choice to call him that, maybe he didn’t even mean to say it out loud but…Shit.

Frank put the carrots away.

Maybe it was too soon but he knew he had the kid in his life. Whether he liked it or not he had another kid. It wasn’t the same as Lisa and Frankie but that didn’t make it bad.

The door was right there. He could just leave. Matt would wait for him.

One penny…

Frank slid down the counter and sat on the floor.

Max was still at the shelter. They were going back this weekend.

He couldn’t just let him go.

Who was he talking about?

Max…no Matt…Jack?

He wasn’t sure.

Frank couldn’t let them go.

He took a deep breath. Steady. Steady. He was Marine, damn it.
He could see Matt in the living room. He looked bored. He always got his homework done as quickly as possible. He was a good student but a kid. His fingers were trailing over his textbook at a steadfast pace. He’d gotten better since they’d met.

Frank was able to read a bit of braille now too.

“What do you think about eating out, Matt?” He asked, his voice sounded off to him. Matt answered immediately.

“Yes! What are eating? Can I choose?” He begged as a bead of sweat made its way into his sightless eyes. He wiped it away.

“Yes.” Frank said. Another bead of sweat made it’s way down Matt’s face as he argued that they should have hamburgers at a nearby join with AC. Matt whooped in excitement when Frank agreed, pending approval from Jack.

His retirement, Frank thought vaguely. He still had his retirement. It was paying for the mortgage on the house. Still there was a lot untouched without living expenses and he didn’t think all the insurance money had been eaten by the funerals.

He could use some of that and buy an AC for the apartment. A few window units.

He had legitimate funds. If he got caught with a gun or in a raid he didn’t want Jack implicated- A hysteria roared in his ears and he sat on the sofa. Matt didn’t notice or care as he finished his homework.

AC was a good start. He grabbed onto that train of thought.

He could leave. He took a steadying breath.

Frank tried to keep busy. It was hard now. There wasn’t much to do in the apartment that wasn’t just mundane. He should have been cooking dinner. Instead he couldn’t help but think back to his previously lost thread of thought from weeks - months?- before, the way he almost obsessively planned tomorrow’s routine, focused on tracking down information and making his next moves. That had slowly been pushed aside.

He and Jack had dates.

They sparred.

He took care of Matt.

All of them hung out together.

He couldn’t go and track down information like he wanted..

They had Church. He had started attending recently.

Jack and Matt were Irish Catholics, Mass at least once a month kind of boys. He’d gone along with it just like he’d done with Maria and the kids.

Frank waited for Jack to get home. He felt thankful when Matt asked for his help in reading a book he didn’t have in Braille. Frank didn’t know if he would be called Pop again, half expecting it and feeling disappointed when it didn’t happen.

Jack came home around five. He was tired and immediately hit the showers. When Jack emerged

“Hey, Matty.” He glanced at him. “Hey Frank.” The smile shifted a bit when turned to him. Frank nodded, expression gruff. Jack’s attention turned back to Matt when the boy tugged at his shirt.

“Dad, Pop said we could go out for dinner if you said it was okay. Can we?” Jack looked He looked at Frank. Frank shook his head and mouthed ‘later’.

“That okay with you, Jack?”

“Uh yeah. That’s fine. I could eat a horse right now.” Matt gave an excited cry and went to get his glasses and cane. Frank watched him go to his room before turning to Jack. “Pop?” Jack muttered.

“I didn’t tell him anything. He just called me that.” Frank said.

“You okay with it?”

“Are you?” Before either could really answer.

“Where are my shoes?” Matt asked. Jack grabbed the small sneakers next to the door and handed them to Matt. Matt passed him his cane and started putting on his shoes. Jack eyed the movement and nodded to himself.

To what, Frank didn’t know.

They ate dinner. Matt was chatting enough to make up for the awkward silence between Frank and Jack. There was too much to talk about but not in front of Matt. For once Frank was thankful children could just talk without preamble or reason.

If one good thing came from the heat it was that it tired the kid out. He took a shower and went to bed. Fans were surrounding his room in an attempt to keep him cooler when the humidity was really the pain in the ass.

He had all the fans except for one shitty one in the bedroom. They had moved them all in there. Frank had brought two. Jesus he hadn’t known what he was doing and it just seemed right

Frank and Jack were left alone. Jack went to the kitchen, popped open a beer and offered Frank one silently. He took it. They sat at the kitchen table for a moment before Jack said.

“So...Pop.” He didn’t sound irritated just bland it set Frank on the defensive. He didn’t like uncertainty and he couldn’t punch his way out of this. If Jack didn’t like it, well Matt was his boy.

“Yeah.” He replied instead. “Pop. He just called me that.”

“Is this the first time?”

“Today is the first.” He confirmed.

“Do you—Look Frank, I don’t know what we’re doing.” He sighed. “This is, and I am not ashamed to say this, the longest relationship I had with anyone since Matt’s mom left. I definitely didn’t bring any of my girlfriends over either.”

“You with girlfriends?” He teased trying to lighten the subject. Jack snorted, took a swig and nodded.

“Yeah, I managed that a few times but it never panned out. Matt met a few but more as friends. You
remember Merry?” Frank frowned, then nodded. “We dated a bit. We’re better friends though.” He shook his head. “Matt’s not dumb and you’re staying here a lot more than you’re not.” Yeah that was true. “So what’s it to you?”

“I’m not saying no.” Frank replied.

“To us or Matt?”

“Both. I like the kid. He likes me for some reason.” He looked at Jack. “I like you, for all that I sound like a seven year old.” He sighed. “I don’t know what I’m doing either Jack.” He waved his beer between them. “We made it clear we’re both the first men we’ve been with.”

“So you’re saying we’re just kind of going along with it?” Jack said amused.

“Looks like it. I can’t remember how I got a drawer in your room. It’s just there. I can’t tell you why I stopped-” don’t say ‘hunting down the people who killed your family’. “just meandering. I had plans but this is here and now.”

“I guess we should just keep going with it then.” Jack said and ran a hand along the beer’s neck.

“Yes.” Frank agreed. Jack didn’t mention anything more and dragged him to the living room where they watched crappy television. The droning of the fan’s in Matt’s room in the foreground eased him further. The beer went down easier after that.

They sat on the old sofa, Frank had one hand on his drink and one on Jack’s thigh. The beer settled in his stomach a warm filling.

And he sure as hell was getting it AC.

He tried to calm his heart. “You excited about this weekend?”

“Yes.” Jack said his expression stony. “I’m going to beat Creel.”

“Damn straight.” Jack nodded and smiled. It eased the small tension in his gut.

“I’m glad you’re here, Frank. For us.”

“Me too.” Jack kissed him.

“I’m really glad you’re here for him.” Then there wasn’t much to discuss as Jack pulled him to the bedroom.

*****

The kid was practically bouncing in his seat as the fight played. It was a good fight and yeah, even the commenters were not rooting for Jack.

The victory came as sweet and deserved. Matt was cheering and talking a mile a minute. Frank couldn’t keep his smile off his face.

This was definitely good. It meant Jack could move up in league - the commenters were discussing the odds that Jack had overcome when he switched it off.

The kid and him cleaned up while they waited for Jack to come back home. Frank puttered a bit more in the kitchen, dinner was messy but good.
When the knock at the door came he thought Jack didn’t want to fiddle with the keys, maybe go out and celebrate. He was barefoot and dressed in house clothes but he was willing to change for a victory win. He opened the door.

The men on the other side were not Jack.

He was able to block the first punch but not the second nor keep the other men out.

The kid screamed.

A punch to the solar plexus winded him and a kick to the head made the world go black.
Chapter 16

Head wounds were a funny thing. During the time in the service and from the works of his own crusade Frank was all too familiar with the repercussions. Anything that knocked you out meant your brain had taken a bit of damage. Usually a concussion and maybe a shit ton of bleeding but most were survivable.

The real concern was damage. Damage meant a lot of things and one thing that Frank learned was that he could take a lot of it. If he had been conscious he would have toled that a small kick to the head was a walk in the park compared to a bullet to the head. If only it were that.

Frank woke up to a silent apartment.

Silence set him on edge. It was one thing he never thinks he'll ever be glad to greet. It reminded him behind the aftermath of an event he was no longer considered privy to. Silence was different from the quiet sounds of living.

He stood up, aware of his injury. It took a moment for him to get his bearings. He was in Jack's apartment.

It was a mess.

That wasn't right. There was a place for everything. He pushed himself and went deeper into the apartment. The kitchen was ruined with broken dishes everywhere and the microwave even busted. Frank ignored it.

The bathroom was in a similar state. Someone had cracked the toilet and smashed the mirror over the sink. Nothing was leaking though.

Jack’s bedroom was ransacked but nothing in there was really breakable. Things had been tossed and the bed overturned. A few feet down the sight had him freezing.

The kid's room spoke of a different story. Frank knew what the tell tale marks of a struggle entailed. He could see that this had happened. This room hadn't been ransacked, it was just the aftermath of a fight. A fight someone had lost.

He caught sight of a small smear on the wall near the doorframe. Blood, he looked down and noticed a trail now, leading out to the door. Had someone smashed the kid's face or had he kicked someone hard enough for the to bleed?

There was something missing and Frank didn't know if he would get that back. That was the funny thing about head wounds sometimes they made you forget. It was the brain's way of protecting itself - forget about the immediate trauma and conserve the rest.

It didn't always work. Frank would never forget Lisa's face - the lack thereof - and the blood pooling out of Frankie's body while he was blown to the floor. Maria had slumped forward, one hand blown partly off as she reached for the kids.

He wouldn't trade that because he needed to know the truth to what happened, to avoid the coverup they tried to feed him. To know how he got the bullet in his head.

Now he wishes he had that too. He figures someone hit him and he had blocked something. His arm hurt and he knew the signs. It didn't help.
"Jesus!" A voice gasped from the door. Frank readied for a fight and charged into the room. He stopped. It was Jack. He looked like shit.

That wasn't quite accurate - the man's face was beaten black and blue. Jack was holding himself in a way that made Frank know he had injured ribs, even if just bruised. His hands were worse than they should be from a fight.

Fight. Frank knew he was here because Jack had a fight. He couldn't have been injured so badly in regulation boxing. Jack looked up at him, his expression was one of worry and horror.

"Frank. Where's Matt?"

"I don't know. I got hit in the head." The blood. "Someone took him."


"What happened?" Jack knew something or suspected something. He needed to know.

"It's Roscoe."

"Who?" Jack knew head wounds as a boxer. It was a risk in his profession. It was part of the reason that Frank liked him. He wasn't dumb.

"The man who fixed tonight's fight. Or he tried to, I refused to lose. They kicked the shit out of me. I thought that was it. They said they'd get their money back. I thought- Why have they taken Matt?" Jack's voice was shaking during his explanation and pleading at the end.

Frank knew many possibilities existed. The best case scenario was that Matt was collateral for Jack to make it or get it to them however he could. The worst case- Frank didn't want to to think more about that.

Roscoe.

The name rang in his mind and he wonders if this is how synesthesia worked because he perceived it as red and as loud as gunshot. The red of blood. The man was as good as dead. He just needed to get the kid back first.

Get him safe.

Keep Jack safe.

His mind already formed a game plan.

He itched for his gun.

"We need to call the cops. They can find Matty." Funny how quickly the mind could work because the last second felt like forever.

"No."

"What? Frank, yes. They can help." Jack thought he was suffering from his head wound. He was but not in the way that he probably suspected. Frank's thinking wasn't clouded or not like it could've been if his injury were worse. It was clear. He was missing things but is thinking was clear as day.

"No. We're not calling them. I'll fix it."
"Frank, yes. Sit down. We'll call the cops."

"They won't help. They never help."

"They will." Jack sounded tired. On some level he didn't believe it. Frank was sure of it. Jack thought Matty was a lost cause.

"No. I'll get him. They're probably in on it too." Because corruption was like a infection in Hell's Kitchen; it was prevalent in all of New York City. The Mayor could try to clear the city of crime but it just went down deeper. It hid in finer clothing, in nicer attire, behind legitimate ventures. Corruption kept his family in the dark and kept people like Jack from moving forward for refusing to lose a fight.

"Frank-"

"I'll take care of it."

"Frank-"

"It'll be easier if you come with me now." Jack gave him a look. He was bewildered and worried, a different kind of worried. He was looking at him like Frank was an unfamiliar person.

"Frank. This is New York. You're not back in the military."

"I know. I have a safe house. You're going there. Now." The bark in his voice and the clarity of his face must have made Jack realize that he was there. Frank was fully cognizant and he knew exactly what he was saying.

"Frank-" Frank grabbed him and shoved him out the door. He pulled the door closed behind him. It closed with a click. They hadn't kicked it in. He must have answered.

Jack stumbled in the hall. He gasped as he reached to steady himself against the wall.

The hall was quiet.

He doubts anyone called the police. People tended to mind their own business in the Kitchen. It was part of the reason he had ended up there as a base of operations. Still, better safe than sorry.

Frank looped his arm around Jack's shoulders. Jack gasped at the discomfort and tried to shove him off. Frank used the move to propel him down the hall. Down the stairs and out into the streets. Despite the darkness and humidity, it wasn't quiet.

Real life never worked like the movies There was no rain nor were the streets mysteriously empty. In the distance a siren rang. He wondered if the kid could hear it.

"Frank, stop."

"It's close." He replied and pushed Jack harder than he probably should be moving but time was of the essence.

Jack wasn't having it. He pulled away and looked at him through bruised eyes. "Stop it. We need to call the police." He snapped. "We're wasting time."

"Don't I know it." He replied. "I can get Matty back quicker and without any strings attached. Just come with me. Give me ten minutes. I'll show you I can do it."
"Fine. I need a phone." Frank pushed them on. The safe house was honestly too close for comfort. His training dictated he choose a more strategic location but familiarity bred complacency. Tonight proved it was a good choice, even though he wished it weren't needed.

It took about five minutes for Frank to get them there. When they arrived at his safe house Jack collapsed against a chair. "Frank, where are we?"

"I told you, my safe house. I need you safe while I get the kid." He went to a nearby case and opened it.

"Where is your phone? Frank!" He stopped and stared. "What is that!"

"A gun." He pulled out his rifle in its entirety. "Like I said I'm going to take care of it."

"Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. I- This can't be going on." Frank almost laughed. This wasn't what he wanted at all either. The future he might have had with Jack was dead now. Burnt with the revelation that he had guns and was ready to use them. Jack could piece together than he probably had already used them.

it was probably for the best. He couldn't keep lying to Jack. And the kid. He wouldn't be Pop and Jack's boyfriend. It wasn't real. Not in the way it should've been.

It had been a nice lie while it lasted.

He closed his eyes. Not all of it had been a lie. Just him.

He took a breath and began to assemble his kit.

"Tell me what you know about Roscoe. Tell me where to start."

"Frank-"

"I'll end up killing a lot less people if you help."

"Jesus Christ! Frank. Listen to yourself!" He half yelled, aware on some part that he couldn't be too loud. Maybe someone *was* listening to the disturbances in Hell's Kitchen. Being found in a room full of guns wouldn't bode well even if he was innocent.

Frank took a breath and shook his head. "No, I know what I'm doing. I've been doing this pretty much the entire time we've been dating."

"Frank-"

"We can talk about it later, if you want. I'll bring back Matt first. You can even call the cops on me if you want." he smiled out of reflex to try and reassure Jack it was okay.

"Frank!" Jack hauled himself up and toward him. "We don't have to do this."

"I do. The police have done NOTHING for my family. There is no justice. I can give it though. I can give it with my gun. I'm closer to the truth but -" He shook his head. "You came along. I guess it was for a reason."

"I don't think you are thinking straight - We don't. We can get Matty back just-"

"I'll get him back. Don't worry." He closed his eyes. "I think I love you or could have loved you. Thank you." He pulled out another case and opened it. "I care for the kid too. I think you should
know that. I care too much about you two to let this happen again.” Jack stared.

Frank got his attention. For all that Jack was a fighter he had never been in something like this. He was weary from the fight before the attack, right now he was probably running on reserves he didn't have. That was okay. Frank just needed him to go on a bit more.

"Tell me what you know."

*****

The man moved the book to the back pocket of his pants. The nearby doorway failed to provided much shelter from the wind as the lighter died again repeatedly to keep a flame. Success! The cigarette lit. He put the lighter away and brought out the book.

He took another drag from the cigarette as he turned the page. A drop of blood fell onto the page. Annoyed, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. After a moment he pulled away. It didn't look it would start bleeding.

He wiped the blood from page and took another drag.

A gunshot rang in the night.

He slumped forward, the book and cigarette following to the ground to his left.

It didn't take long for someone to rush out of the doorway the first man had used to help light his cigarette. One. Two. Three.

One dropped next to the fallen figure. The second scanned to the left and third to the right, each with a gun in hand.

The first bullet hit the man in the right. The man on the left spun just as another bullet tore through his skull. The final man barely stood before a bullet greeted him and he fell over his fallen comrade.

No one else came out out of the doorway.

The power of strong night breeze drowned the sounds of the city.

Frank pulled back from his scope and gazed. He grabbed his kit and wished he could fill the place with bullets but the kid could be inside. Frank walked over. His steps were soft but they felt like they thunder on the ground as he made his way to the building.

He opened the door, gun ready to fire. It was a three roomed building. He moved through the rooms with a fine precision he hadn't attained since he had met Jack. The rooms were empty of any other people. That was good and bad.

The kid wasn't there. He looked over the papers on the desks, moved around items, uncaring if they remained in order. He needed something to follow. This was the only place Jack knew Roscoe had, his place of business.

Frank knew they had the kid though. He saw figures. Numbers run against Jack's last fight. Set sums of money were to move into various hands - aliases no doubt but he didn't care about those. He spotted something in trash. He moved it aside with a pen from the table.

Someone had bled. A ton of tissues were in the bin but otherwise nothing. He wished he had kept one alive. He would bleed him as he got information to where the kid was.
He went over the papers again. He saw another address repeated again and again. Maybe another front. If it was he'd keep one alive next time. This needed to end tonight - with the kid back home with Jack.

Frank tapped his finger against the table. He took a breath and memorized the addressed.

He turned back to the papers with the sums against Jack's fight. Pledges, no doubt. Deception in a sport based off ability. The bruises on Jack's face came to mind. Frank took the papers and placed them in his kit.

He needed to find Matty.

The building burned behind as he left.
Chapter 17

As the hour drew to a close Frank drove out of Hell’s Kitchen, heading Uptown toward Harlem. The traffic was moderate. It irked at him. It wasn't even rush hour. He glanced at his gloved hands. It was too warm for them but he couldn't risk the fingerprints.

He glared at the fuel gage, willing that the car had enough fuel to reach the destination. He didn’t want to stop. He didn’t know how much time he had lost exactly but it wouldn’t be impossible for Matt to have arrived, bleeding and scared. God knows what else they could’ve done to him.

Every moment without the kid brought new images of the way he would kill this Roscoe. A bullet was too quick for the fucker. A knife was too inaccurate if applied wrong. A bat - he took in a breath.

Now was not the time. It didn’t matter because if the man was there he would just shoot him. His concern was Matt and to return him home. Frank would save him, he would.

Failure was not an option.

The drive passed in a muted urgency. Frank had to blend in. He did it well. He couldn’t tricks being pulled over or drawing attention. The subterfuge felt like a sort of Hell.

Soon enough, though, the building loomed in his sight. He parked away and took out his kit. Frank observed the building. It took him twenty minutes before he moved after confirming the building was occupied.

The building was easy to enter. No one expected anyone with his competence to break in like most places. He moved in, keeping an ear out for anything that indicated the kid was here.

Down one hallway and into a dimly lit room from security lighting. There were people in the upcoming rooms. He’d seen three but there could be more.

It was easy to ambush someone who wasn’t expecting it with the right training. It was easier to kill them without making a sound because of it. Frank couldn’t risk killing them because if they’d moved the kid he needed to know. He was prepared for that though.

The first man’s absence brought another, irritated that his compatriot was taking too long in the bathroom. He fell just as quickly. He charged the third and the scuffle was loud but no one else came. Good.

He left them tied. He knew his mask wasn’t perfect but it wouldn’t identify him if he couldn't end them if he found the kid. Frank didn’t gag this man but restrained him only.

“Who the fuck are you?” The man growled.

“You know why I’m here.” He retorted. His mask distorted his voice only a bit.

“ We ain’t got any money. Even if Murdock fucked up we don’t actually keep the shit here.” The man spat.

“So you do work for Roscoe.” He was pleased with the clarification. If he had had the wrong place that would fuck everything up more.
“Yeah. No shit. Look you’ll get your money soon. Though you think we won’t look into this?” It was a placation and a threat. It was meant to show power - the power to complete a promise and power to defend it.

“Murdock was meant to lose.”

“Yeah, I told you he fucked up.” The man groaned and tried to move away from him. Frank kicked him and the man stilled. He looked at the man who didn’t know why he was there except for money.

“My money..”

“Look I don’t work the books. I can’t tell you anything about when you’ll get it exactly. We don’t have any money here. We’re not stupid to hold cash in a place of business.”

“Yet I’m still out of money.”

“Look. I can’t tell you much but you’ll get it. I don’t know the plan but you’ll get it.” The conversation was not going where he wanted.

“Does this plan involve Murdock’s son?” That startled the man.

“How do you know about that?”

“Does it?” He growled.

“Yes but I don’t know how.”

“I don’t really care about the specifications.” He pulled out a knife. “I’m not here about money.”

“Then why are you here? You want the kid?” The man looked disgusted and defiant but not for the reasons Frank knew were right. “We can get more than you for-” Frank kicked him again.

“The kid. Where is he?”

“I don’t-”

“You lie and I’ll start cutting off fingers.”

“I-Look I was just hired to grab him. We didn’t do anything.”

“Where. Is. He.” He slammed the knife near his head.

“You’ll get killed for th-ugh” The knife moved into his leg. Frank didn’t bother muffling the scream.

“Where. Is. He.” Frank seethed and debated killing him just there. There were two others.

“Backroom! Backroom! He was going to be picked up in the morning but that’s all I know.”

“Where’s Roscoe?”

“At his home. I don’t know where. I swear.” Low level muscle. Coward. He twisted the knife.

“I’m teling the truth!”

“I’ll make you regret all of this more if you’re lying.” He kicked him once more and moved to the backroom. He was cautious for any other potential intruders. Nothing.
The lights were off. He found them quickly. What the sight he saw that made his eyes water from rage. It took everything in him to not grab the metal rod or the weights in the room or anything and not turning back around to beat those motherfuckers to death.

Matt was in the corner of the room. His hands and legs were bound. A bit of dried blood stained his face and shirt. One of his eyes held a shiner than hadn’t been there earlier. Matt turned towards the door and tried to scoot away at the sound of Frank stepping forward. He stopped

“Matty?” He called softly.

“Pop?” Matt was so hopeful.

“Yeah, Matt. It’s me.”

“Dad- they were going to get-”

“He’s safe.” Frank assured him and moved to him again. Matt didn’t move away but tried to get up.

“Don't move, kid. I’ll get you out of that.” Matt stilled. He cut the ropes away quickly. There would be bruising where he’d been tied. Matt stood and burst into tears. He wiped at his face, wincing as he touched his black eye.

“Hey, don’t.” Matt’s lips shook.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Come on. I’m going to get you out of here. Don’t make a sound okay?” Matt nodded and Frank picked him up. It wasn’t easy but he wasn’t wearing shoes and didn’t have his cane. Frank wasn’t risking him getting tetanus or hurting himself more.

He passed the men. They were struggling to get free. He returned to the car. Matt groped the interior.

“I need you to stay here, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“No! Don’t leave me.” He reached toward him, missing his sleeve by an inch.

“Matty, please. I promise I’ll be quick. I just need to make sure they don’t follow us.” Matt burst into tears again but sat in the car with his arms wrapped around his knees. “I’ll be back.” Frank said and all but ran back to the building.

He didn’t bother with subterfuge now. He knew how to draw out his prey too. Three shots disposed of the men and a fire would burn his gear and any evidence of his and Matt’s presence. This wreckage would draw Roscoe out. He’d look for Jack and the kid.

He’d want blood and not just money.

Frank would meet him and his men. He would kill them and make sure the danger was gone.

He returned. Matt turned toward him. “Pop?”

“Hey Matt.” He said. He turned on the car and started to drive. Matt was silent for several blocks. They were on the highway before he spoke.

“Did you kill those men?”

“No.” He lied.

“I smelled smoke. You set the building on fire, didn’t you?”
“Matt -” Would the kid be afraid of him if he told the truth? “I did what I had to do.” He said instead. Matt was silent.

“Does dad know?” He asked after a pause.

“He knows I came for you.” Was all he replied with. Matt burst into tears again, from this or the ordeal he didn’t know. The kid didn’t cry though. Just kept his face resting against his knees.

“Matty, I needed to get you back.” He said softly. The boy was quiet.

“You saved me.”

“Yeah and I’d do it again if I had to.”

“They were angry at Dad winning.”

“I know.”

“They know where we live.”

“I know.”

“Are you- are you going to kill more people?”

“I’ll do what I have to do to keep you safe.” He replied instead.

“I want Dad.” He said softly.

“We’re almost there.”

He drove and ditched the car a few blocks from the safe house. The perks of a shit neighborhood. The theft would be unremarkable. He pulled Matt out of the car and carried him to the safehouse. He was tired and feeling it now. Matt didn’t protest his action and it made the trip easier.

He entered the safehouse. Jack was standing when they entered. His eyes fell on Matt immediately. “Matty!” He called. The man looked tired, like he hadn’t rested since Frank left.

“Dad!” Frank let Matt go. The kid met his father halfway. The two hugged. Frank stood by the door. He didn’t move forward.

“Frank saved me.” Matt said.

“He told me he would.” Jack replied and they started speaking softly with each other.

Frank looked away from them. The pain in his head which was a pounding in the back of his head before now came back full front in center. God he was tired and hurt. He wanted to sleep and just forgot he existed.

“Frank,” he winced as he turned to Jack. “can you bring your first aid kit?” Frank nodded and brought it to them. Matt seemed to track his approach but really he knew it was just the sound of his footsteps. Jack took it with a nod.

“Thank you, Pop.” Matt replied. Frank nodded before correcting himself.
“Don’t mention it kid.” Jack was tired but he cleaned Matt’s eye and nose. Frank threw out the soiled items. Jack looked at him, hand on Matt’s shoulder. Frank ached.

“What now?” Jack asked. “Do we go home?” He seemed uneasy.

“They know where we live.” Matt said. “They might come back.” He sounded afraid.

“I know.” Frank replied. “I’ll take care of them.”

“They know where we live Frank. We can’t just stay here. There’s too many - there’s too much.” He motioned the weapons. He was worried for Matt, himself.

“Yeah, I know. I got that taken care of too.”

“Oh? What?” Jack demanded he was definitely less tired than when Frank left so maybe he had rested some, even if from sheer exhaustion. Frank earned that suspicion even if it hurt.

“I’m going to take you to my house.”

“Another safe house?” Jack sounded tired. “It’ll be the same.”

“No.” Frank said. “My house. The one I lived in with Maria and the kids. The only guns there are in a gun safe.” Matt tilted his head almost as if he were trying to sense the guns Frank had implied were in the safehouse.

“Frank...you don’t have to go back there if you don’t want too. We can get a motel.”

“No. That’s dangerous. I also live-lived out in Queens. I have less neighbors and they keep to themselves. If anyone asks you’re renting the place.”

“Frank.”

“I just gotta rest a bit. We’ll go. I’ll bring you some things from your place. Then I’ll take care of it.” He sighed. “Then I’ll get out of your hair.” He looked straight at Jack’s eyes. “I just need to make sure you’re safe.”

Jack looked at Matt then back at him.

And he nodded.
Chapter 18

The grass wasn’t overgrown. Someone had kept it trim; maybe one of Maria’s friends or a maintenance crew - he could also owe the city a lot of money if so. Frank walked to the backyard and searched for the false rock with the emergency key. Maria had spent ages painting it to match. He went to the backdoor and entered.

The utilities worked. He doesn’t remember stopping the autopay. He put the bag he down next to him. He stared at living room visible clear from the kitchen. He didn’t want to go but he had too. He took off his shoes before he realized it and closed his eyes.

His sinuses burned. He took a breath and searched for the keys he’d left behind. Frank tested the lock, put on his shoes and exited. By habit he hoped forgotten, Frank checked the mailbox - nothing but letters and a note from the post office that his delivery had been suspended until he contacted them.

He dumped the letters on the passenger's seat of Maria’s -the car. The engine didn’t start. A trip to the garage and a set of jumper cables to the battery fixed that. For a moment he could believe that Maria and the kid were going to come out and join him. Everything looked perfectly normal.

From his pocket, Frank pulled out a single yellow Lego. It was part of the set he’d gotten Matt. He’d brought some for the kid. He should’ve left it but he felt compelled to take it. He ran his finger over the Braille ‘Y’.

He put the car in reverse and set off to his safehouse.

His trip back to Hell’s Kitchen had him on edge. They were safe at his place but being away made him wary. He didn’t dare take them to the apartment when he picked things up for them. Even if anyone knew he was around Jack his trip outside the borough and across many side streets would throw anyone off his trail.

He parked close, illegally, and went to get Jack. The man followed him with Matt in his arms. The kid was uncomfortable, his head kept tilting like he was trying to hear every detail in the world he was no longer privy to. They went into the car. Jack hissed in pain when he settled into the seat.

Frank had seen him in better light after the adrenaline died, Jack was bruised head to toe. Matt looked worse too, his face was black and blue. Well, he thought as he set the car off, at least the two looked like they had been victimized rather than Jack attacking Matt or something equally as bad.

The drive was silent for almost ten minutes before Matt broke the silence. “We’re going to your home?”

Frank glanced at the mirror, Matt was facing toward him.

“Yeah. I used to live there with my wife and kids.”

“How come we’ve never been there before?”

“I-I don’t like going there. It makes me sad.” He replied. Matt frowned but nodded to himself. “But you’ll be safe there.”

“When you come back will we live there?” Matt asked. Jack looked surprised and glanced back. “I heard them break things in the apartment. They took me from there and said they’d kill Dad. I don’t
want to go back there.”

“No, Matt. We’ll go back home. Maybe look for a new place.”

“I don’t want to go back.” Matt muttered, but with no real fight.

“I know, Matt but we can’t stay at Frank’s place forever.” Frank didn’t comment. He didn’t think he was going to go back before the attack, honestly. It was all just bad memories now.

“Do you have a yard?”

“Yeah, front and back.”

“Did you have a dog?”

“No, Maria didn’t like dogs.”

“You could bring Max there.” Frank paused and blinked away some tears he hadn’t realized he sprung.

“Yeah, he’d have liked it.”

“We should visit him again when you come back. If he hasn’t been adopted. I liked that. Except the poop.” He made a face. Frank smiled at the memory and licked his lips.

“Let’s wait until it’s over before making any plans.” Frank replied. Jack glanced at him, expression unreadable. Frank focused on traffic as they fell into silence again.

When they arrived to his home, Frank pulled into the garage. As much as his neighbors kept to themselves Frank still wanted the barrier there. Besides, a kid beat to shit would raise alarms from decent folks. It didn’t have to be a busybody to get the police to them from one look at Matt.

He gave them a quick tour, which areas to stay out - the kids’ rooms really. Frank had slept and disturbed the master bedroom when preparing for for the funerals and until the day he left. The rest was...he didn’t want it disturbed but couldn’t deny them the use.

He gave them the bag he had filled from stuff from the apartment, clothing, toys and Matt’s glasses and cane. Then he grabbed another bag he had brought from his hideout, it wasn’t much but he didn’t think it right to just leave.

“Jack, could I see you in the kitchen? Alone?” He asked. The kid frowned but didn’t question it just felt over his option toys and clothing.

“What is it?” Jack whispered.

“Nothing bad. Here.” He gave him the bag. Jack took it cautiously. He opened it.

“Frank. What is this? This is-” He was speechless.

“Use it. Don’t use cards if you have any with you. You can keep it if anything is left when I come back. I’ll give you more for anything from your apartment that needs fixing or replacement but until then use that.” He motioned the pile of bills.

“How much is in here?”

“Couple grand.” He said.
“I don’t-” Jack took a breath. “Thank you.” He glanced at the kitchen and back to the living room where Matt was. “For it all.” He moved an arm forward and pulled it back. Frank wondered if Jack had been going to reach out. Frank itched to touch the other man. Neither man made a move to each other.

“Okay. I should get going.” Frank said. “The quicker I get it over with the sooner you can go home.” Jack nodded. He was quiet. He jingled the keys to the car in his hand. “Can you drive?”

Jack smiled. “I’m a New Yorker, Frank. No. I can’t.” Frank pocketed them. He’d park it where it was safe and go back home in it.

“You can still get places walking here. Just a bit farther.”

“Frank, I’ve been to Queens before. I know.” he nodded. God this was awkward.

His skin itched from discomfort. “Yeah. Okay then.” He said goodbye to Matt and headed out.
Chapter 19

Two burned buildings after a failed fixed fight would put them on edge. Men like Roscoe got extra paranoid; might have losses they couldn’t cover. If he was a piece of shit that sold kids then Frank could almost believe it true rather than speculation. Thankfully there would be little to tell why the buildings and men were targeted.

Jack was skilled in using his fists, not a gun. Frank also doubted anyone knew he even existed in any real detail. Despite of not hiding their relationship-former relationship they weren’t really open. There just hadn’t been enough time for that to be an issue.

Now, observing the apartment building for thugs, he wondered if there ever would’ve been enough time for anything real. He finished his coffee. In one hand he ran his finger over the Braille ‘y’ on the toy he refused to leave behind. Soon it would join the words the Lisa’s favorite book and Frankie’s favorite lullaby.

The first day ended without any results. That was expected. Frank had skills. He confirmed that Roscoe’s known network was spooked. Frank reviewed the information he had from Jack at his safehouse. He tapped finger on a tabletop. Jack’s description and inquiries on seedy betting places gave him a rough description of his target but no one he’d observed matched it.

It was a start at least. The papers running the numbers on Jack’s fight had been very high. It wasn’t just the match that had been at the chopping block. Jack was good but nowhere near the top levels to command those sums.

It might complicate things. Frank hoped it was simpler. He sat at his table and stared at the weapons stored to the side of the room and the map. The silence of the room bothered him. He picked up his sidearm and headed out into the city. The cacophony of the streets did little unsettle the discomfort.

A day turned into a week that turned into two and turned into three. Each moment not spent on the mission had his thoughts turning back to Jack and Matt. He dreamt muddled messes that left him panicked and mournful. He found himself bitter after it all.

Frank searched public records, looked up the addresses, tracked down LLCs, Roscoe Sweeney had new money and had more of it than sense. Roscoe Sweeney flaunted his ill gotten wealth. Still he didn’t appear to be at any of the properties or the hideouts he found following the guards. He would burn through those in due time.

It was all worth it when Frank managed to gain access to Roscoe’s schedule. The man had been out of state until recently. The return was good news. It made the logistics of planning the hit easier. It also explained why Frank hadn’t spotted him.

It was very good news. The series of what-ifs that Frank brewed over the past few weeks were set into motion. Frank had his final game plan.

Three weeks, three days since the world had fallen apart him for all the wrong reasons. (Again.) It wouldn’t fix it but it would make something right.

He was looking forward to it.

Frank parked a quarter mile from the house. The home was big, not the swankiest but definitely belonged to someone with money. New money. More importantly, the home was semi-isolated place along the coast.
He took out a set of binoculars, ready to scout the place. There was no way in hell there was no security with the man there, maybe even a security system. After several minutes, he identified a small patrol, following a predictable routine and composed of only two people.

He could practically taste and smell their blood. Frank closed his eyes and breathed. He needed to distant himself when analyzing the situation. He couldn’t go in there blinded by rage. It wasn’t difficult. He had the training.

It was almost disappointing how easy it went down. The crooks were nothing to what Frank was used to. Two bullets took out the patrol. There were four more in the building, each fell with little to no fight as Frank got the drop on all of them.

All that left was Sweeney, who was oddly absent when Frank went through. He was here. He’d seen him. Seen the man he planned beating to death rather than using his gun. This was one death that would not be easy.

Really, he should have known that something was amiss when he stepped out of the shadows and a gun fired his way, missing him by a few feet. He ducked and took cover.

“Who the fuck are you!” Sweeney demanded from the shadows. Piece of shit couldn't even die like he was supposed to. Frank felt the rage make its way to the forefront. “I don’t have your money! Murdock vanished.”

“I’m not here for the money.” Frank snarled.

“Then why the fuck are you?” Frank smiled. He’d know. He’d know soon enough,

“Murdock.”

“I told you Murdock is gone! I don’t even have his brat to cover the losses!” Frank felt the rage simmer and the calm of it was a precursor to a fury that hadn’t felt release since the day at the park. First he had to get the little shit.

It didn’t take long. Sweeney, for all his bravado, for all his poorly planned attacks, and stack of weapons, was about as skilled as your average idiot. Frank was able to maneuver to him. The man got a punch and a kick in but it hardly phased him.

“Look, I have money. I can cover you. Who did you book through?”

“I told you. I’m not here about money.”

“I can find Murdock. I just need more time. He’s left New York or something. We can’t find him. He doesn’t have family -”

“I know where he is.” Frank replied as he punched the man. Sweeney snarled a demand and Frank ignored it.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because you tried to kill my kid and fellow.”

“What?” Frank smiled, a rueful thing.

“Jack and I made got together. Kid calls me pop. You tried to take them away from me.”

“Jack’s a fa-?” The incredulousness of it almost was funny. Frank hit him again. It wasn’t really
necessary to talk about this any longer and defending Jack’s honor would be wasted in words but blood...he could do it in blood.

Roscoe Sweeney did not die an easy death. It was messy and painful. Frank made sure it was painful. Frank got information and planned to burn his fledgling empire to the ground. Mostly, though, the pain did not aim to get information.

It took another week to burn through the remnants of what Frank knew were Sweeney’s pathetic kingdom. The grunts proved more of a challenged but fell in the end.

As the last building burned, Frank headed home.

Frank tried not to think when he entered the home. He closed the back door quietly. He must have made some noise because a “Pop?” came from the living room. Frank wanted to answer but as Matt came into the kitchen his mouth went dry. Matt looked worried. “Frank?” he called when he didn’t answer. He inched away.

“Yeah, kid. It’s me.” Matt’s expression changed in an instant and he ran to him. Kid had pretty good accuracy. Had to learn the new layout of the house pretty quickly, probably.

“Dad! Pop’s back!” Frank winced when Matt hugged him. He returned the hug. The pain was worth it. Looking at the kid reminded him it would soon be over and he might not get the chance again.

Jack entered the room a moment later. He held a bat in his hands. He put it down when he saw him. He looked pissed. Frank looked at Matt. ‘Not now’ he mouthed.

‘Fine.’ Jack mouthed back.

“Matty, leave Frank alone.”

“But Dad-“‘ Matt’s brow furrowed.

“He’s beat up, Matt. You’re probably not helping.”

“It’s fine.” Frank said. Matt didn’t let go but his grip became softer.

“Are you staying?”

“Yeah. I’m done.” He didn’t elaborate. He didn’t need to. Matt refused to let him go for a few minutes. After that he managed to convince him that he needed to clean up. Matt grumbled but agreed.

“Can you wait in the living room, Matty?” Jack asked. Matt frowned.

“Go on, kid. I’m not going anywhere.” Matt walked to him again and hugged him.

“Glad you’re back, Pop. Love you.” Frank smiled. It felt brittle.

“Love you too.” He said softly. Matt smiled and walked away. Jack’s face was blank. Frank walked to the bathroom. Frank winced as he undressed. He needed a few stitches. He brought out his kit and began to clean himself. He winced as he lifted his arm. Fuck he was tired.


“Jesus, Frank.” He didn’t add more and took over cleaning his wounds. He wasn’t gentle but he
wasn’t rough. He stitched his wounds and placed the things away. Frank resisted the urge to lean against him when came forward.

“I’m so mad at you. But we’ll yell at each other when you’re not half dead.” Jack said and helped him up. Frank leaned against him. Jack pulled him to the guest bedroom. “Sleep.” Jack ordered.

Frank fell into the bed. He didn’t remember anymore after that.

When Frank woke up it was near noon. The house was quiet. He pushed himself up. He took a deep breath as the pain that registered. He looked to the right of him. Of course Jack wasn’t there. However the bed was unmade.

He waited a moment. The house was still quiet. Frank went to the bathroom. He risked the shower and came out cleaner, but feeling his bruises all the more. The house was still quiet when he exited.

Had they gone? He wondered. He looked around the house. It was odd. Here and there was the things from Maria and the kids - pictures, toys and furniture left in the same position from before they left– then of what seemed like pockets of Jack and Matt’s things – clothes, books and a few magazines Jack liked to read.

He noted things that had changed. The wreaths were gone. Gone who knows where, the chairs were rearranged in the dining room and he knew the living room was in a semi occupied state. He headed to the kitchen.

Maria’s organization was broken. There were two plates, cups and utensils on the counter, neatly arranged. No doubt for Matt. Things were cleaner than he had expected. Jack had cleaned.


He sighed and eyed the fridge. God he was hungry but tired. He didn’t want to cook.

He opened the fridge, expecting an unpleasant smell. He was met with the vaguest odor and an almost empty interior. But there was food, clean food. God bless Jack. He took a banana.

He sat down, by habit he took the seat closest to the back door. He started to eat. Halfway through eating it he realized he was crying. He wiped his face. Fuck. He didn’t know why he was crying.

He finished the banana. Drank some water and went back to bed. He woke up to the sound of a door slamming. He groaned as he stood and reached for a gun. It wasn’t there. Oh right he hadn’t packed it near his bed. He heard movement from the kitchen.

Frank walked towards it, careful to stay out of the sight line. He saw Jack unpacking groceries. Jack turned around and stared at him. His expression turned cold. The fire in his eyes reminded Frank that the Murdock boys had the Devil in them.

Frank leaned against the doorframe. He was about to enter a fight, like it or not. Thankfully the fight wouldn’t be physical. That was really the only consolation he thought as Jack crossed his arm against his chest.

Jack motioned to the table. “Sit.” Frank sat down. To his surprise Jack didn’t join him. He finished pulling out the groceries. He sat in silence and watched the man turn on the stove. Then he got a few items.

“Are you making a grilled cheese sandwich?” He asked surprised. Jack glared at him and didn’t answer. He made two sandwiches and poured something into a bowl. Then he set them in front of
“Eat.” It was indeed grilled cheese and red soup. He took a spoonful. It burned his mouth a bit but he confirmed it was tomato soup. He glanced at the other man.

“We’re not going to fight?”

“We are. Just not now. You saved Matt, Frank. You saved our son. You look like shit. I don’t know what happened but I can tell you’re exhausted. I’m not going to—I’m going to wait.” He huffed. “It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t.”

Frank choked down his bite. “You said ‘our son’.”

Jack gave him a look. “Yeah.” He didn’t add more. Frank looked at the food. It was- It had to be a good sign. Right? He still had his kid. Did he still have Jack?

“Thank you for the food.”

“You’re welcome.” he replied. Frank ate in silence.

“Where’s Matt?”

“In the backyard.” Jack answered. God this was awkward. It wasn’t what he wanted for either of them.

“Jack.”

“I don’t want to talk right now, Frank.” He sighed. “I-It’s just been a lot. We still have to talk a lot about. I’m glad you’re here. Don’t think I didn’t want to see you back, okay?” Jack said.

Frank nodded. He understood it was a lot with his murdering and the whole fiasco with Roscoe. Two separate but fucked up issues.

Frank was surprised by Jack’s hand on his own. Both their knuckles were bruised, in different stages of healing. Jack gave his hand a brief squeeze and let go, lingering for a moment.

“I prayed you’d come back safe.” Jack finished earnestly.

It eased something within him. Frank let out a sigh he hadn’t realized he held and turned back to his food, suddenly feeling famished. Jack was looking at him intently.

The back door opened. Frank looked up. Matt’s head turned as he listened for them. He looked toward him. “Dad. Pop.” He said with a hesitant smile.

“Hey, Matty.” Frank replied.

“I’m hungry.”

“I’ll get you something. Have a seat with Frank.” Matt followed the sound of Jack pulling the chair out of the table and taking the seat for himself.

He sniffed the air. “What are you eating, Pop?”

“Soup and sandwich.” Matt nodded.

“Can I have some?”
“Matt, let Frank eat.” Jack snapped, the tentative good mood he had cracking.

“I want that too. Smells good.”

“I know, Matt, but Frank needs to gain back his strength.” The boy sighed and he nodded. The blank gaze turned toward him.

“Pop, are you okay?” The question was loaded.

“I am for now.” Matt frowned.

“Are you leaving?”

“Matt-”

“I don’t want him to leave.”

“Matty, your dad and I need to talk but I promise I’ll stay in your life while I can.”

“You’re just going to leave then.”

“Matt, Frank and I do need to talk but I promise you, Frank is still your Pop.”

“You’re breaking up though.” It wasn’t a question.

“Relationships can’t be based on lies.” Frank replied. “I lied to you and your dad, kid. Lies of omission are still lies.” Kid looked like he wanted to cry but sat with him without further argument. Jack looked awkward before went on to make the kid something.

The talk would occur later, when the kid wasn’t privy to it. Until then, Frank was going to take this in and cherish it. He had gained a lot more blood on his hands since the last time he saw them but this, this right here and what was to come was worth it.
God, it had been a while since he had seen these pictures. Maria’s pregnancies. Lisa and Frankie’s first days at school. He hadn’t wanted to look at them again. He hadn’t wanted a lot of things. Frank took a steadying breath.

“I wish I could still see.” Matt’s voice came from behind. Frank turned. He hadn’t realized the kid was awake. He smiled at the sight. Matt was in his pjs and his hair askew.

“I’m sorry, Matt.” Frank wanting to know what the precursor was to his statement. Surely the kid didn’t known what he had been doing?

“I want to know what they look like.” He pointed to the pictures on the wall. “Dad described them to me a bit but he didn’t want to get into too much detail and it’s not the same. You know?”

“Yeah, kid, I know.” Matt looked unsure.

“Can-are they?”

“What?” Matt’s eyes roamed blankly everywhere but his general direction. It’s odd how he got used to that so easily too. “Matty-”

“Are they my brother and sister or is it- you’re my pop now right? That means you’re family is also mine too? Am I doing it wrong?

I don’t know. I knew you had them but being here and I don’t know what’s going to happen. You and dad said you’d let me call you pop but are you? Are you going to go away again but like forever? I don’t want you too. I don’t want you sad more than you are. I-I- I’m sorry I can hear-” He covered his ears. “I’m sorry.” He muttered. Frank moved to him.

Jesus. He was wallowing in his pity party he forgot about his kid. Like the real impact of the shit he’d gone through or what his return might dredge up.

“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” Matt muttered and rocked in his arms as he pulled him to sit on the couch. Frank took in a breath. All three children had been held here. If only he hadn’t been so stern with-

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He muttered and waited for the episode to pass. Thankfully it was less intense than his night episodes.

“I hate it.” Matt said as he settled. “I hate it when that happens. I don’t regret saving that man but I wish I could see you, even just once.”

“Well, tough, shit happens. We just have to deal with it sometimes. I know that kid. Woke up from a coma, didn’t I?” It wasn’t the best words but it made Matt smile a bit. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think a lot about this either, just had to keep you safe.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t fight better.”

“Is Frankie, really Frankie?” Matt asked. Frank smiled.

“Frank Jr.”

“That’s stupid. Should’ve given him his own name.”

“I’m a Jarhead. Miracle I didn’t name Lisa Frankie too.” Matt smiled.

“You’re not stupid, Pop.”

“Maybe but definitely not the same smart brain as you. Maybe Lisa was as far as my imagination went.”

“I’m smart.” He preened.

“Yeah, smarter than either of us.” Jack’s voice called from the entrance. They both jumped. Frank saw the other man with a bag of food. “I take it I missed something.”

“Just Pop being dumb.” Matt said.

“Liar.” Frank added. Jack just shook his head at them. “What we eating?”

“Sure you know it, but a bit of Cuban. Matt liked it and you could use the veggies.” It was a bit awkward. They needed to rebuild the rapport again. Jack was trying. Matt was trying. Frank had to try too.

“Thank you. Sure I’ll like it.” he said with a smile. Matt grabbed his form and found his arm.

“Come on, Pop. Hope it’s better than breakfast yesterday. You burnt it, Dad.” Frank smirked as Jack grumbled but didn’t have any fire in his complaints. Frank sighed as they walked to the kitchen.

Jack insisted on having him heal properly before they yelled at each other. It set Frank on edge as he knew it was a walk to a precipice with a steep fall. Love was only so much at the end of the day.

It’d been almost a week. He spent it resting, hanging with Matty...cleaning the house of his old life’s things in a way. Jack hovered, unsure where to go or if he was welcome at some parts of the house. Jack and Matt would never push the others out of his life but he couldn’t keep them in the fringe either.

He liked both of them here even as the memories haunted him. If this was to continue then the house could not serve as a memorial. It wasn’t fair. Then again, when was it ever, he thought, as he set one of Maria’s dresses in the pile of things to be donated. His hand shook as he sniffed one of her dresses. It still smelled like her.

He didn’t know when he had started crying or when Jack had come in but he was thankful for it.

Jack took him to bed and let him rest.

He woke up with a start.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Frank gritted as his muscles spasmed in his calf. God damn. The contraction was unexpected. He hissed and tried to push through it. He must have made more noise than he expected as Jack rushed in, looking worried and then concerned.

“Frank?”
“Sorry. It’s just a cramp.” He hissed as it contracted again. Jack pulled back the sheets. Frank bit his lip to mute the next curse.

“That looks like it hurts.” Jack muttered and helped him in a sitting position. His muscle stopped spasming and relaxed. It felt like he’d pulled it but knew that was ridiculous.

“It did.” He moved to massage his calf. Jack huffed and dragged his leg to his lap. Frank huffed. “I can-”

“I know, Frank. You’re not alone though.” Jack grabbed his calf and muttered about this bruises. “I don’t have to do this. I don’t have to do anything with you really.” He looked at him. “I want to.” His expression softened.

“Thanks.” Frank replied and ached to kiss the other man. He’d been away a month and able to focus on the mission. Now he just had this, remnants of the past. He had to rebuild with Jack and Matt. They started as friends and they could still remain that. He lied back down and hissed as strong hand worked his leg.

He knew the fall would come soon when the bruises on his face faded and Jack got his life back to order. Frank gave money for the repair bills that the landlord wanted and for a new security deposit. Jack didn’t ask or rebuff them. Matt had missed a lot of school but the kid was happy to go back.

Thanks to Roscoe, Frank had a new stash again. Six grand was an easy choice too. If Jack wanted Frank to serve as Matt’s other parent (and God help Jack if he decided against that one day, because Frank would fight for it) then he had to provided for him to. Except he wouldn’t take more blood money than he had too.

So Frank got some of his life together. He settled insurance and paid bills. He paid the city for lawn maintenance and made sure his retirement pay was good. He updated his beneficiaries for his stuff to list Matt and Jack.

A week before Jack and Matt were to move into a new apartment Jack met up with him with fire in his eyes and said the words that pushed him into unfamiliarity:

“We need to talk. So let’s talk.”
“Matt’s asleep. We should head wherever there is good insulation.”

“We’re going to yell?” Frank said, already feeling a headache building behind his eyes at the thought.

“I don’t want to but if we do I make sure if we talk about it...in detail that it’s safe.” Frank understood.

“Basement.” They went downstairs. This was, despite it all, one of the few places he hadn’t entered during his stay there. The Murdocks had made the least impact possible on the house until Frank had directed them otherwise. He thinks he loves them more for the consideration whenever he thinks about it.

Even now Jack didn’t move beyond the area he had occupied. Frank shoved aside a few things and pulled out some lawn chairs from under a stack of boxes. Jack took one of the seats.

“Frank-” Jack began very quietly. He paused. Looking unsure but determined.

“Jack, I know we can’t really go somewhere and scream at each other but you don’t have to whisper like a mouse either.” Frank said, trying to get the man to push past his hesitance. They needed to have this talk as much as he did not want to.

“I’m not a mouse.” Jack replied in his normal tone. Stubborn bastard. He thought fondly. “Okay. You’re right, but Matt’s asleep and you know about his issues.”

“Yeah, I know.” He conceded it was something to consider.

“Okay. Okay.” Jack tapped his foot. “I don’t know where to start. I had this argument all planned but it’s just gone.” He complained.

Frank took a breath. “I’ll start. I kill people.” He put that in the open even if it was known already. “Before and after Matt was kidnapped.”

“Yeah, I figured that out from the guns and kevlar...and the guns.” Jack sighed. “What have you been up to, Frank?”

“Nothing I want you knowing about in case I get caught. You don’t need to be an accessory.”

“Are you a mercenary?” Jack out flatly.

“No.” Jack didn’t look like he believed him. “I know. The money is kind of suspicious.” Jack’s look had him laughing. “I know, but no I don’t kill people for money. Not anymore at least, if you count my time in the Marines.

I was looking for the people who killed my family. I was building stockpiles and such. Cash is king in the underworld. I wasn’t in any condition to do that straight away from the coma.” Jack nodded. Well that was one worry out of the way.

“Right, so that activity and my coma meant I needed to be stronger. I was rebuilding my conditioning and I hit a few places as I got better.”

“That’s how we met.” Jack muttered. “The gym. You were getting back into shape. You didn’t hide
“Yeah.” God it was awkward. “I wasn’t lying about that part.”

“So, what, when you took me up on going out? What was that then?”

“Cover. I thought, people would remember me if I stayed alone. The weird loner but if I had a friend then it’d be less suspicious.” He looked at him.

“Oh.” Jack looked like he’d just took one straight to the gut.

“It was bullshit.” Frank stared at him. “I liked you even then. I liked you and your kid and I needed a reason to keep hanging out. Maybe-maybe part of me rationalized it as such but really I liked you and I was lonely. It wasn’t hard to keep saying yes. I- we got along well. Really well.”

“I believe you.” Jack replied but he sounded gutted.

“I didn’t plan it.” He defended himself because the man looked so god-damn hurt. “I was...look I was selfish.” There was no other way. Jack nodded and hesitistated at his next question.

“Were we just replacements?” Jack gestured to the house above them.

“No!” He said a bit louder than he meant. “Never. Never.” He grabbed Jack’s hand. “I thought about leaving so many times. I couldn’t do me to you two. I could not leave you wondering. I know what it’s like to lose...to lose someone without reason. I couldn’t hurt you two like that. Then we started going out and Matt started calling Pop.” He felt the same manic energy he had when Matt had called him Pop and Jack had first kissed him.

“I didn’t want it to end.” He almost shouted at the end. Fuck that was hard to say.

“God.” Jack took a breath. “That’s a relief to feel.” He looked down. “I had my doubts even though we became family.” Jack said, looking like he might cry. Frank nodded.

“Thank you for that, by the way. Not leaving. Even if just for Matt. He’s never known anyone like you; I don’t even mean you’re just the only man I’ve ever felt anything for.

I just never had dated anyone long enough for...anything.” Jack sounded lonelier than he’d ever heard. It made Frank feel like a complete tool. He’d lost his family but he’d had them. Jack had been alone with Matt for a while. No ex in the shadows, no siblings for either, just the last two Murdocks in Hell’s Kitchen.

He couldn’t really fix as well as he wanted. He knows his words mean little to Jack in some ways but that they could also destroy him.

“I never dated a man before either. That was true. I tried not lying to you about important things, either of you. I may have left a lot of things out that don’t make me one-hundred percent honest, but this,” he pointed to himself and Jack. “was not planned nor did I intend to manipulate you. I liked you and everything that came from it was real.” Jack smiled, ruefully but some some of the tension slipped from him.

“I love you.” Jack said. Frank felt like he’d been punched in the solar plexus and the joy of the statement was drowned by their reality. “When you went to get Matt, you said you thought you might love me.” He smiled sadly. “I’ve had a month to think about it. I’m pretty sure I love you, even
if you’re not about me. I know you love Matt at least.”

“I do, love you, I mean.” Frank said. Jack gave a watery laugh and closed his eyes, trying to compose himself. “God. I wish it were a fairy tale.”

“They’re not happy.”


“Matt likes to read. Checked out a lot of books because of him. Had a librarian or two stop me from checking out a few darker ones.” Jack said with a smile. “I just saw Fairy Tales and didn’t think twice.” He shrugged. “Already told you I was dumb though so no surprised.”

“You’re not dumb.” Frank said. Jack gave him a look. “You’re not.”

“I am. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I’m a complete idiot.” Jack said.

“Jack-”

“No, I need to tell you this before I can’t.” He sighed. “You’re not the only one who had secrets.”

“Jack, what are you-”

“I did work for the mob.” Frank shut up and felt cold. “It wasn’t... It was bad. I beat people up. Like badly. Really badly.” He looked away. “It was just a few jobs. I needed the money for Matt, when my mom died.”

“When did you last-” Jack couldn’t be scum. He couldn’t be scum. He couldn’t think. His Jack-

“Not in a while. Not since we’ve known each other at least. You helped so much but I was trying to stay clean for Matt at least. Wouldn’t be good if his dad was in jail.” He laughed.

“Something happened.”

“Yeah, I got the shit beaten out of me when I didn’t find their guy. Guy I knew through there also got arrested about the same time. It wasn’t the life I wanted to be in.”

“You’re clean now?” Frank couldn’t quite see his Jack in that. His Jack was a fighter but there was a difference between a good match and beating the shit out of someone innocent. Okay maybe not so innocent if they had the mob after them but- a man in chains in an Afghani basement- he shook pushed the thought away.

“Yeah, I swear, like I said. I wasn’t involved for a long time but Roscoe knew.”

“He used it against you.”

“He tried.” Jack replied. “I said no.” Jack laughed. “And look where we are now.”

“He wanted to kill you.” Jack nodded.

“Yeah, I think they would’ve once I saw they’d taken Matt. I would be dead and Matt who knows where.” Frank wished he’d beaten the man longer before killing him. “Thank God, you were here thought.” Jack muttered in honest thanks.

“Jesus.” Frank whispered, unsure if in prayer or frustration at the ugly news.
“Yeah.” Jack agreed.

They sat in an awkward silence. The moments passed by. Frank refused to fidget. Jack was looking at the ground.

“I meant what I said, Frank.” Jack broke the silence this time. “You’re Matt’s Pop and as long as you’re willing I’ll let him be with you.” Jack added after a moment. There was no defense in his actions. No excuses. Jack was laying everything out and not asking for anything.

Frank closed his eyes. Jack said he’d had his kid and he was sticking to it.

“I’d like that. Yeah.”

“This thing between us though probably shouldn’t continue. Not just because of your uh activities.” He snorted at the innocuous description. “I lied too. It’s just not -” Jack floundered, eyes wet and voice sounding wet but firm.

“Good?” Such a simple words seem to describe everything they thought they had. Lies between them formed the foundation.

“Yeah.” Jack looked like he wanted to say more but stopped.

“Okay.” Frank took a sigh wishing he hadn’t known but grateful Jack had told him.

“Maybe we can try again. As friends.” Frank nodded. They were quiet again. It should’ve been a relief.

Still he wasn’t sure why it made him feel like this.

It felt like defeat.
They were quiet.

Jack shifted on his seat. Anxious and unbound as he was, Frank noted. It didn’t help him feel they were on even footing. He felt thrown off from the previous revelation and left with a sense of disorientation. He had had this argument in his head a thousand times, imagined it all so many ways but never with that claim thrown in.

“So how do we-?” Jack began and made a rolling gesture with his hands. Frank understood.

“Move forward?”

“Yeah. I mean we can’t just start again. Doesn’t quite work with Matt calling us Pop and Dad. Be kind of weird.”

“No, ‘Hello, Mr. Murdock, I’m Frank Castle.’, then.” Jack snorted and started to laugh. It was a reedy thing, not what he was used to from the man. “Well, if we were to start over I thought we might as well do it over properly. You didn’t know my name for a while.”

“Yeah, I didn’t.” Frank sighed at the tone of Jack’s reply. It was clear it was something that had bothered.

“It was to keep you safe.”

“I can guess that on my own, Frank. I’m not that stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” Frank snarled. Surprised by the amount of ire the statement brought up in him. Jack was many things but stupid was not one of them, maybe waylaid in circumstances but not dumb. Dumb was plowing through a life of crime when you had an out. Jack had stopped.

“Yes, I am. My stupidity led to our son being kidnapped!” Jack snapped. “Shit. I’m sorry.” Jack shook his head. “We’re meant to move forward.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t you though. It was me and my ‘activities’ that left us here kind of too.” Jack had paused at the word as if he couldn’t believe such an innocuous word was now a euphemism for murder and illegal weaponry but he shook his head.

“You saved him though.” Jack looked at Frank, eyes unfocused. “I was so mad at you. I was mad because you hid and I trusted you.” He smiled ruefully. “But you still saved him. That’s really part of the reason I’m not just yelling at you. A month is a long time to think.”

“You said you were mad, when I came back.” Jack snorted.

“Yeah, I was because it scared me too. I’m not used to it - guns and everything. Seeing you brought it back for a moment but mostly I was just relieved. You were okay. We were okay. I’m still not okay with it, really.”

“So…” They were back to the awkward pause of silence, the uncertainty. It was nothing like the fumble kisses and groping of before, of untried paths where things were awkward, uncertain but right. This silence belied hidden anxiety and tension.

“I’m going to give you four hundred dollars a month.”

“For?” Jack was confused by the sudden change.

“Matt. He’s my kid too. I guess like child support.” He snorted.

God, how he’d heard the gripes of some men about that topic in the service. But it was still true. Had to care for his kid.

“It’s fine, Frank.”

“It’s not blood money.” Frank said. “I’m getting a retirement, after my twenty I got that coming in. And the mortgage is actually paid off from...the insurance.” He and Maria had each taken the same policy, for the kids, thinking if he died then at least that wouldn’t be a worry. Maria had been a ‘just in case’. Except the kids were gone too.

But Matt was here now.

“Frank-” Jack was still unconvinced.

“You said I am still his parent, Jack. Let me parent.” Jack nodded.

“Sorry, it’s just hard sometimes. Talking about what we will do. Should do.” He cleared his throat. “If we are going to do this- I want to do it right Like not half ass it. Set up times and stuff so Matty isn’t feeling weird going between us.”

“You mean find a way to set-up like custody or something?”

“I guess. Yeah.” Okay that was good, they were in agreement on that at least this. They might still need to work on their relationship but they couldn’t take the same luxuries with Matt.

Blinded and kidnapped.

Kid was strong but he was still a kid.

“Yeah. I think-I know someone who can help too if he wants to talk. Won’t say anything to cops. He’s an old buddy of mine. He reached out to me after-“ he paused. Jack nodded at him in understanding. “He give Matt someone to listen to or you. For everything.”

“Okay.”

“Good. At the least Curtis will like to see me stop by to say hi.”

Maybe that would be their new foundation: Matt.

Helping Jack and Matt move into their new place came as both a relief and an ache. It would take a few days to move things from his place, the old apartment and meeting up with movers with replacement furniture. Most of the items had been unsalvageable from the night Matt had been taken.

Frank had been ready to buy everything for the new apartment. Jack had protested, proud and stubborn. Frank loved them man but he’d eat his gun before let pride keep him from providing for his family.

He wasn’t as descriptive but Jack had folded at that point. It wasn’t charity. Frank was family.
The blissful cool air in the place made Matt excited as he entered his apartment after they had stopped for the first night. The AC units Frank had lugged in seemed worth it as he sat and cooled rather than continue to sweat in the humid night. Matt demanded to be shown exactly where the settings were on the unit that had been set in his room.

Kid was going to run up the electric bill. Frank may have to actually get a real job to supplement to pay for it. He doesn’t think he’d mind if were an actual thing he’d need to follow up on.

Still, he made a note to get the braille label maker and mark the unit in the kid’s room and living room.

Everything was going well until after dinner. The plates had been washed and the leftovers stored for the next day. Frank went to leave.

Matt waited for him by the door, clad in new pajamas and slippers. He played with the hem of his shirt as he looked toward Frank. Jack hovered after Frank, unsure if he should leave them be or stay.

“I don’t want you to leave.” Matt said as Frank approached, sounding so very vulnerable.

“Matt.” He didn’t know how to continue because he thought the kid was okay, or dealing well.

“I don’t feel- I know that you said we’re safe but I just-” Jack took the kid’s shoulder to steer him out of the way, but Matt shrugged him off.

“You’re safe, Matt. I promise.” Jack was sure of it from his tone. “Frank made sure of it.”

“Can’t-Can’t Pop just stay tonight? Just to make sure we’re safe?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Matty.” Frank replied. There was Jack and Matt’s bed, the sofa was still not delivered.

“I know you’re not together anymore-But I can’t-Please?”

Jack looked unsure. They were both on unfamiliar grounds. Frank had dealt with civilians before, shocked and unwound from trauma but this wasn’t a warzone. It wasn’t the initial panic either. This was a long seated thing that had wormed its way out.

Frank had no clue what to say.

Matt’s lip trembled and the kid looked ready to dash to his room.

“Frank can you stay? Stay with Matty for tonight. We have some clothes for you. Shower, change. You need it.” Jack tried at humor.

“Yeah, I’ll stay. How’s that Matt? You okay with sharing a bed with your old man?”

“You’re both old.” Matt muttered but he looked less nervous. “And you both smell.”

“So do you, kid. You just have the luck of not hitting puberty yet. You’ll need deodorant soon enough.” Frank said grasping at the parenting straw. Matt sniffed himself. His nose wrinkled.

It eased the tension, but it didn’t dissipate. The three showered as the night went on, slowly now. The kid’s bed was hardly big but Frank had slept in worse places. He’d take the crick in his neck if it meant the kid felt safe.
He woke up wrapped around the kid. Matt tucked against him like he was younger. Frank felt a lump in his throat. Matt looked innocent and so young. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths.

“Pop?”
“Hey Matty?”
“Are you sad?”
“No, just—it’s hard to describe.” He tried to move away from the subject. “It’s morning.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah, probably about four in the morning but we’re safe.”
“I was being dumb.” Matt said, looking a bit embarrassed.
“No, it’s not dumb.” He reassured.
“You’re staying?”
“Just for tonight.”
“I mean as my other dad?”
“Yeah, Matty. I promised.” Kid looked content and sighed, once again sleepy.
“Good.” Kid drifted off. Frank didn’t. He just waited as the hours passed. As dawn came he didn’t think this was a wrong choice.

Jack knocked on the door to rouse them. Breakfast. Unpacking. Going home.
Frank had thought closure was at the end of a rifle.
He didn’t think that would change.
Maybe he had been trying to justify staring at the dark end of a barrel.

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Frank wiped the sweat off his brow. He had no idea why he thought opening the windows would be a good idea. The weather had turned hot and humid, his shirt stuck to him. He could turn on the AC but he was too stubborn.

He looked at the empty room and sighed. The master bedroom had been a pain to clean out. It stood empty as the day he and Maria had moved in.

“Why am I carrying this again?” Matt grumbled as he shifted a box down the hall.

“You need a room when you stay here. We got to clean up first though.”

“I could stay on the sofa.”

“For how long?”

“Forever.” Matt muttered and set the box down. He felt forward and shifted the box closer to the others.
“You say that now but take it from me that couch is killer.”

“My back can take it.”

“You’re complaining about a few boxes.” Matt muttered something he couldn’t hear.

The doors to Frankie and Lisa’s rooms were closed.

Frank heaved a box down the stairs. Matt muttered above him.

Progress was slow.

But it was progress.
Finding Curtis wasn’t difficult. After funeral, the man had left a phone number and an address with him. The address led to an old building that ran veteran meeting. Frank could do without the things but he knew others appreciated them. Curtis ran them so at least they were worth something.

Frank strolled to the basement. Men, talking to each other in hushed voices or looking familiarly blank, moved past him like ghosts. Frank knew which he would be if he had had no other alternative. Maybe he’d not even be here at all.

He moved toward the end of the hallway, he heard furniture moving and the smell of cheap coffee and cookies greeted him first. He knocked on the frame. Curtis was packing the chairs away again.

“Meetings over tonight but we meet every week and I’m always willing to lend an ear if you really need it.” Curtis spoke without looking up. Frank leaned against the doorframe.

“I’ll take the offer to the second one. I don’t think I’ll come to next week.” Curtis’ head snapped up. The look of recognition, shock and sympathy passed almost too fast for Frank to catch.

“Jesus, Frank. God, come here. I’d say it’s good to see you but I heard what happened.” Frank moved forward and welcomed the hug that Curtis pulled him in. “God, I’m so sorry. I wish I’d been there for you but then you’d disappeared when I looked for you.”

“Thanks man, I appreciate it.” He meant it.

“What can I do for you, Frank?”

“We can talk?”

“Yeah, I meant that, whether it’s you or another brother I’m always open.” Frank felt himself relax minutely. He trusted Curtis but this was like stepping back into part of his old life again and it felt itchy.

“Is this place safe?” Curtis nodded and motioned for him to close the door behind him. Frank did. He peered into the hallway leading to the room, it was silent and empty.

“Let me clean up a bit and I can listened.”

“Thanks, brother.” Frank helped him clean up. Curtis set up the last chair away and gave him a serious look.

“Now, what can I help you with Frank?”

“I trust you, Curt. Can I trust you to keep this between us?”


“You know I lost my family.” Curtis nodded. “I wanted to do something about it.”

“What happened?” Curtis asked simply.

Frank began to speak. Curtis didn’t say anything, simply listened. He seemed surprised by Jack and his relationship but aside from his expression kept mum.
“Shit, man, you’ve been busy.” Curtis said when he finished. Frank grinned morosely. “Still, I don’t see why you need me unless it’s to help to find the people who took your family.”

“No, at least not yet. It’s Matty.” Frank said. “He’s a good kid but he’s been through a lot and I think it’d be good for him to talk to someone. We can’t go to a professional psychologist or whatever, they’d report us in a minute.”

“So you want me to talk to him?” Curtis didn’t seem opposed to the idea. “I can do it but you sure? I’m not used to kids.”

“You’re one of the few people I trust to listen and actually want to help people.” Frank sighed. “I think you would help. He heard me kill people and people threaten his dad. Hell kid didn’t go down without a fight either. I think you experience will be able to come in handy.”

“I’m honored. Yeah, I can do that. It’s the least I can do.” Frank felt himself relax.

“So you don’t have a problem with me and Jack?” He asked to reassure himself.

“Hell man, I trust you to protect my back. Who you love is your own business.”

“Good, good.” Frank said with a smile. Curtis returned it.

“Anything else? You gain superpowers? Decided to convert to Protestantism?”

“No, no. Still very much Catholic despite it.”

“Not sure how that works but whatever. I’ll help.” Frank smiled and motioned that they should leave. He paused at the door.

“Great. Matt’s a good kid. Top of his class. Getting him a braille copy of things is a pain in the ass though. Books are like twenty times bigger.”

“Braille?”

“I did mention Matt’s blind right?”

“No, somehow that slipped.” Curtis said sounding a bit amused.

“Yeah, accident saving a guy.” Curtis shot him a look

“You don’t enter anything simple do you, Castle.”

“Nah. Be too boring.” Curtis laughed.

“I think I can help with that too. Might not be my sight but losing a leg is kind of traumatic.”

“I’d say good but I feel kind of like a jerk saying that.”

“I know what you mean, Castle.”

“When do you want to come over?”

“Depends, when you got the kid?”

“I got him this weekend.” Curtis shot him a curious look at the certainty. It seemed to cement the fact that he was a permanent fixture in the kid’s life.
At least Frank prayed that was true.

Curtis came over early in the day. Matt was playing in the backyard doing...hell if he knew, kid was cocking his head and groping the grass. Seemed to be having fun so whatever. Frank had let the kid know he was coming over but not what for.

“Matt this is Curtis, Curtis this is Matt.” He started. Matt stood behind him, an almost shy gesture before Matt reached out a hand. Curtis moved forward and took it.

“Nice to meet you, Matt.”

“Yeah.” Matt replied.

“Matty.” Frank warned.

“Nice to meet you too.” Matt corrected. He cocked his head. “Why does one of your footsteps sound different than the other?” Curtis looked a bit surprised.

“I lost a leg in service.”

“So it’s fake?”

“Yeah, they’re called prosthetics. They’re really advanced now. It’s not like a peg or anything.”

“I can’t see.” Matt said and waved to his face. “It hurt.”

“Yeah, my accident did too.” Matt hhmmed and seemed to relax a bit at that common ground they’d found. They let the kid go play again. They’d ease him slowly into this. If Matt didn’t want to talk then it wouldn’t be worth it at all to force him.

They broke the news at lunch. Thank God, the kid seemed to want to talk to Curtis.

“You won’t tell Pop or Dad?”

“Not unless you’re planning on hurting yourself or anything like that.” Kid shook his head.

“I don’t.”

“Then I won’t.” He seemed comforted by that.

“I’ll talk to your dad kid about setting times up but he agrees with me that having someone to talk to is good.”

“I don’t know if I have a lot to say.” Matt muttered.

“You won’t have to, kid. If you want to just talk or play a game we can do that too. Just good to have a few times you’ll know you can talk if you want.”

“Okay.” Kid seemed relieved by that. No pressure. “Can I have more juice?” Matt asked, seemingly satisfied with the topic.

“Yeah, kid.”

“Thanks, Pop.”

“So, why do you call Frank ‘Pop’ and not ‘Dad’?” Curtis asked, changing the subject as well.
“I don’t know. I already have a Dad. Seems weird to have two.” Matt frowned. “Like I have two dads but calling both of them it is weird. I can’t call him Frank anymore. He’s my dad.” Kid explained like it was obvious. Frank smiled and gave the kid his new glass.

“Ten o’clock.” Kid nodded.

“I called my step-Dad by his first name.”

“He’s not my step dad though.” Matt explained. “I never had a mom. He’s my other parent.”

“Okay that makes sense.” Curtis said, submitting to the childish logic. Frank shrugged but knew he looked pleased. Curtis smiled at him. His friend was happy for him. As much shit as had gone down this was something he knew was good.

When Curtis made to leave he smiled at Frank.

“I’m sorry for what you went through but glad you found something else as important.”

“Thanks, brother. I know what you mean.”

“If you ever want to introduce me to Jack I wouldn’t say no. He raised a good kid.”

“I’ll let him know. He’s probably ous about you too.”

“Alright, man. Let me know when I can meet up with the kid. I’m pretty flexible. Insurance isn’t exactly exciting or unpredictable.”

“Definitely. Thanks for doing this. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it. Just let me know when.” They parted.

Matt was in the kitchen doing homework. Frank looked at him.

“Curtis leave?”

“Yeah.”

“I like him.”

“I’m glad.”

“Are we going to meet more of your old friends?”

“Probably not, kid.”

“Why?”

“We didn’t keep in touch. Curtis was the only one who tried to keep in touch.” Even Billy hadn’t reached out to Frank and the kids had called him uncle. The bitterness washed over him for a moment before he shook the mood off.

He could play pity party another day. Right now, he was going to spend it with the kid.

God knows he knew how precious and fragile those moments were.

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“Curtis likes Matt.” Jack looked at him from where he was swinging Matt into his arms. The sleeping form was held securely in the other man’s arms.

“Yeah? That’s great.”

“He’d like to meet you.” Jack paused.

“Maybe later. Let him focus on Matt.” Frank wanted to kiss the man instead nodded and walked him back to the apartment. Matt was out to the world and didn’t stir when put to bed.

Jack smiled and bid him goodbye. Frank got back into the minivan and stared at the streets of New York.

He smiled.

This was something.

Something new but it wasn’t bad.

He sent God a thanks.

For the first time in a long time he felt okay. He wasn’t living a half life anymore. The grief was there but wasn’t pressing, coiling in the back of his mind for vengeance. He wasn’t hiding anything.

It felt like he could rebuild for real. It was just a matter of time.
“Matt! Come on, we gotta get going!” Frank jingled the car keys for emphasis.

“I’m coming!” Matt yelled. There weren’t any approaching footsteps just the thumps from upstairs of his kid doing God-knows-what.

“You find Narnia or something?” Frank grumbled as he waited. He looked at his watch. Jack was going to kill them. “Matthew! Now!”

“I said I’m coming!” Matt griped but appeared at the top of the stairs in a flurry of footsteps.

“Walk. Don’t run.” He ordered. Matt grumbled but did as he was told. “What were you doing?”

“Nothing.” Matt said with a smile. Frank was suspicious but kept mum. He steered the kid into the car, cane and all shunted to the front seat. Frank rushed into the driver’s seat.

“We gotta rush now. If your dad says anything we’re saying it’s your fault we’re late.”

“It’s just a movie.”

“A movie your dad wants good seats to.”

“They’re all the same to me.”

“Smart ass.” Matt grinned. They wouldn’t be too late but Jack would probably not be happy if the venue was packed.

“We didn’t use to go to the movies this much before. It's nice.” Matt said. “Even if I can’t see it, I like that I can still go.”

“Yeah, we just have to make sure audio options are there if you want to see something.”

“The popcorn now tastes like chemicals though. I don’t like that part.”

“I got you covered, Red.” Frank glanced at the blind spot and moved into a different lane.

“Dad’s sneaking in things too.” Matt replied, sounding pleased. “I know what you have too.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. I can tell you.”

“Well?” Matt giggled and let him know with surprising accuracy. “How’d you guess that?”

“I didn’t guess.” Matt preened. Frank spent the rest of the trip trying to learn how the kid did it. When they met up with Jack, Frank was distracted enough not to be bothered by the other man’s annoyed look at their tardiness. They managed to miss the best seats but the ones they chose weren’t they worst either. Matt complained the audio description in this one was ‘lamer than last one’ because of a poorer narration but still liked the movie

Frank dropped Matt and Jack off at their apartment. They chatted about the film on the way. Jack hugged him when bidding him goodbye along with their kid. It was nice. He didn’t feel lonely even as drove home alone.
He searched Matt’s room with a cursory glance. He didn’t find anything the kid could’ve been hiding or god knows what. Still he had his suspicions the kid had hidden something. He closed the door. He glanced at the two others in the hallway. He let his fingers graze them as he headed downstairs.

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“You able to come over for Saturday? I can make things for the game. It’s set to be a good game.” Frank jammed the phone against his ear and shoulder. He paused in thought.

“I don’t know. I have to see my schedule though.”

“You seeing your kid? He can come over. Not like I want to talk about war stories.”

“No, not this weekend. He’s got some school stuff he’s gotta do. I’m volunteering. I think I can do the morning shift then meet up with you.”

“Where do you volunteer?”

“Animal shelter and a few other places. Not as much in those place, but Jack kind of got me to doing it.”

“Yeah? He big into volunteering?”

“Sort of. Mostly he didn’t think me saying about what I did during the day was ...good. That was before he knew, you know, but it kind of stuck.”

“You liked it then?” Curtis’ tone was approving.

“Yeah. Besides it keeps me social. Can’t be the creepy ex military guy.”

“Coming back is different for each of us “ It wasn’t even a rote phrase from Curtis. He meant it whenever he said it.

“I know. I wasn’t that good at ...before. Li-Lisa wanted me to do things with her but I was always tired and I would just say later. There was always later. Now it’s too late for that.”

“Frank…” Curtis sounded worried and Frank realized he sounded weepy.

“I’m fine. I gotta learn to deal with it. Talking is hard but it helps right?” He didn’t wait for Curtis to answer. “Matt can’t ever think he’s some kind of replacement. Both he and Jack are not second best. Jack already asked me that. I can’t stand that.”

“You’re not alone, man. Even if it’s not ideal. We’re here for you.”

“I know. Just harder some days than others.” He looked at the empty living room and photos adoring the wall. He’d taken down medals and replaced them with a photo of a beaming Matt in the backyard. His eyes were unfocused but he was happy. By contrast Jack’s surly mug sat beneath it. It made him smile. “Just gotta get on living.”

“Frank, Saturday?”

“Right, sorry. Got distracted.”

“As long as you’re okay.”
“Yeah uh I think I’ll see you on Saturday. I can definitely make it just might be a bit late.”

“That’s fine. And Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe think about picking up Moby Dick.”

“The book?”

“Yeah, I think you’ll appreciate it.”

“I’ll pick up a copy.”

“See you Saturday.”

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“This is annoying.” Jack muttered to himself as he came back into the living room after a phone call. Frank sucked on the piece of ice in his mouth.

“Everything okay?” He garbled out. Jack sighed and sat next to him. He took a sip from Frank’s water.

“No. Just harder booking fights. Dropping off after winning with Creel and there’s the fact that Rosco uh died means I’m a bit of no man’s land. Some people were hoping on Creel winning too so it isn’t making things easier.” Frank took back his water.

“You need any help from me? If you need help making rent let me know. I know I gave you money for Matt this month but-” Jack cut him off with a shake of his head.

“Thanks but it’s fine. I got a few scheduled but no one wants to become my manager right for obvious reasons. Just a bit more work on my end.” Frank nodded, pleased at that news. He didn’t press the issue either. Jack had relaxed a bit about money around Frank but still had his pride. Jack’d ask for help if he needed it. “Actually-” He stopped. Jack looked a bit embarrassed. Frank frowned.

“What?” Jack let out a huff.

“So uh I kind of bet on myself. Not with Roscoe, with someone I knew was legit, well for a bookie.”

“Yeah?” Frank could feel his temper at the mention of Jack’s less than legal associations.

“Yeah.”

“How much you make?”


“Jack-”

“It’s under Matt’s name. I haven’t touched it. Didn’t seem right yet. Guy’s holding it for me - Like I said he’s as legit as it’s going to get and I trust him.”

“So you’re telling me that you have a lot of money.”

“Matt’s got a lot of money.” Frank saw Jack look lost for a moment.
“I don’t know what to do with it. I knew I was going to win the fight- I didn’t know the other stuff but now after everything it doesn’t feel right. I just wanted something for our son. He wants to go to college. That’s expensive.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Frank said and let out an irritated sigh. “You should’ve told me about it.”

“I know. Just never seemed like a good time. I didn’t even know if I’d be able to pick it up until lately. It wasn’t something I really had high on my list of priorities.”

“I’m coming with you when you pick it up. It’s not up for talks.” He growled. His fingers itching for a gun and a plan. Jack nodded.

Jack might not be happy about it but they’d deal with it together. Right now he was going to pick at Jack’s brain and what he knew about the bookie. He’d scout out the guy out. Jack didn’t begrudge him about it.

---

“Gah!” Frank laughed at Jack’s harried expression. “Get him off!” He squaked while backing into the wall.

“Max! Down!” Max pulled back and wagged his tail.

“You gotta tell him to go down, not ask me.” Frank said. Jack glared and grimaced at the slobber on his face.

“I never had a dog.” Jack replied, looking embarrassed.

“Well first time for everything.” Frank said with a smile. “You have to be direct with the dog. Show him who is boss. No hitting or anything. Training takes them a while but most dogs get it. Luckily he likes food so he’s really easy to train.”

“Don’t most dogs like food?” Jack asked as he eased away from the wall.

“Yes but not all of them take to it combined with training.”

“Matt will love him being here. I know he mentioned him,” he pointed to the dog. “a lot. He says you helped him?”

“Yeah, kid’s good with dogs in general. One just got a little extra help from me than usual.” He rubbed the dogs flank.

“That’s good, I guess. How’d you meet him anyway?” Frank shrugged and Jack gave him a look that made it clear he knew it was probably during illegal activity. Still he didn’t say anything.

“Not my intention but if no one adopts him, maybe.” Frank admitted.

“Matt’ll definitely love that.” Jack looked at him fondly. “I’ll get used to him if that’s the case. God knows Matt’s wanted a pet forever.”
“We’ll work it out if I do.”

“I know we’ll figure it out, keep Matt and Max happy.” The dog wagged his tail at the mention of his name again.

“They almost match.”

“Matt does not drool like that.”

“He does in his sleep.” Jack rolled his eyes but smiled. Then he tentatively reached out to pet Max. Max allowed himself to be pet without jumping.

“This is...nice. Even if he doesn’t stay, he’ll definitely will appreciate staying with us for a bit.”

“Your place allows pets.” Frank added.

“I know, Matt was insistent on that when we moved.” Jack smiled at him. “Thank you for that. I don’t think I said it before.”

“Don’t mention it.” Frank said and meant it. “Least I could do after everything.”

“You doing okay?” Jack asked. He motioned the house behind them. “You’ve been living here right? Not just staying when Matt’s over.” Jack’s tone was inquisitive but not accusatory.

“Yeah. I’m...okay. It’s hard but I’m alive.” Jack laid a hand on his arm, squeezing softly.

“That’s not the same thing, you know.” Frank grabbed the hand and returned the gesture.

“I know, but I’m not doing worse. I got you, Matt and hell even Curtis now. It’s something.”

“You need anything, I’m here. You can even stay with us, you know. You don’t have to head all the way back here every time you drop-off Matt.” Jack said then waved at Max who was chewing on a stick. “Now, help me learn how to...be with a dog. I don’t want to do anything wrong. If he’s going to stay with us too then I need some basics.”

“Yeah, I’ll show you what I know.”

Matt reacted just as Jack said he would. He did love the dog and didn’t even care if it was for fostering. Matt cajoled Jack into letting him stay with Frank, even though it wasn’t Frank’s time with him. Jack agreed.

It was good to have the kid even if he was just there for Max.

----

“POP!” Frank snapped to attention

“What?” he asked dazed. Matt was glaring at him, Max was at his side.

“I’ve been calling you forever.” Matt growled. “Max has one more walk, remember? You told me to tell you when it was six.”

“Yeah, sorry I guess I just zoned out.” He rose feeling dizzy for a moment. He shook his head and made for the door. Max followed, Matt grumbled too low for Frank to hear and grabbed his cane and glasses. Frank leashed Max and waited for Matt to join them. Soon they were out for a walk. Max did his business and half an hour later they went home, Frank feeling like he’d just had a round at boot camp.
He fed Matt and Max then turned in early. He planned to wake up early only to wake up at a cool hand at his forehead murmuring nonsense to him. He tried to respond but fell back asleep.

The next time he woke up he was confused and felt like shit. The light in the room let him know it was far later than he had originally planned to wake up at. The house wasn’t silent, which was good. He tried to get up, stumbled and braced himself against the wall.

He shook his head and regretted doing so immediately. Someone came in the room. He turned and was surprised to see Jack.

“You’re awake.” Jack said and went to him. “How’re you feeling?”

“Bad.” He said and regretted it immediately. His throat hurt and talking left it feeling scratchy. “What are you-” He coughed.

“Matt called me. He said you weren’t getting up and had a fever. Worried him. I think you have the flu.” That would explain why he felt so bad.

“Bathroom.” He managed to get out because he had the urge quite strongly now. Jack helped him to the bathroom. He managed to use it alone and stumbled out. Jack ushered him back to bed.

“Thanks.” He said. Jack came back with some toast, water, orange juice and a few pills. “Not hungry.” he said.

“Don’t care. You have to take some medicine. Drink the water, eat a bit of toast, take the medicine and then you can go back to sleep.” Jack replied gently. It took him twenty minutes but he got the majority of the toast and water down. He drank half of the OJ and pills then slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

The next time he woke up he was alone. The house was quiet. He stumbled to the bathroom by himself and managed to shower. When he came out he heard a door unlock, the murmur of two Murdocks and the clip-clap of Max’s nails.

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So they’d gone for a walk. Jack saw him and helped him to the bedroom. He got dressed as Jack stripped and changed the bedding. He fell asleep again, meaning to protest Jack’s presence but unable to do so without feeling ungrateful.

On the third day he finally felt less like he was going to die like an invalid in bed and more like something vaguely resembling himself. He found Jack and Matt in the kitchen in the morning. Max wagged his stump when he saw him and walked to him. “Down.” he ordered when the dog tried to jump up at him.

Jack smiled at him and made him a simple meal again.

“You feeling better, Pop?”


“We gotta head home today. Matt’s got school tomorrow.” Frank nodded, thankful he had had help. “You’re coming with us.”

“I can care for myself.” Which was true, he could now that he felt a little more alive.

“Yes, and you’re feeling down. I rather take care of you than worry you’re falling down while walking Max.” Max walked to Jack at that. The man pet the dog absentmindedly.
“Come on, Pop. It’ll be only a little while.” Matt smiled sweetly at him. Frank nibbled at toast and sighed. He could accept the offer or reject it and hang alone and struggle with Max and then try to mend the insult against Jack. He was too tired to really want to even argue.

He agreed.

Jack didn’t know how to drive but Frank was well enough to drive them back to Hell’s Kitchen. He slept when he got to the apartment. Max joined him. It was nice, all things considered.

---

“Hello again, Frank.”

“Hello, Father.”

“It’s been a while since you have come to Church.” The priest had greeted him with an ease that let him no he wasn’t being judged.

“Yeah, things came up.” The man nodded.

“How are you and Jack?” The man knew their relationship, or what it had been. When the two had said they wouldn’t hide they had meant it. The priest has not preached to them against. It would’ve been a lost cause.

“Oh.” He replied instead. He thumbed the rosary in his hand. He needed to make confession. Frank didn’t regret killing them men he had. He would still confess to their deaths though. Let God judge him for it but so far God seemed to have approved.

Guilt did not weigh on him for them. The cloistering confessional felt less confining than he expected. The priest had expressed surprise at his confession and offered the usual spiel. Frank had confessed when killing men in the Marines at first, eventually he had stopped. It was familiar but he felt he had wasted the Priest’s time.

Frank exited the confessional, declining any offers to talk with the man. There had no risk of the priest going to the cops but he could tell the priest worried: for him, his soul, the filth of Hell’s Kitchen, Frank didn’t know. Frank wasn’t too concerned.

He exited the Church. Jack was waiting for him outside. The man had gone in to pray - for him, for Matt, for himself, for them all. He knew it had been honest at least.

He breathed in the air of the city and felt right so maybe it hadn’t been quite a waste of time.

---

“You sure you want me to wear this?” Jack looked from the punching bag to Frank, who was looking at the new gloves with disdain.

“If you don’t want to break your hands, yes.”

“I wouldn’t break them. I’ve punched enough people to know how to do it right.”

“While I’m sure the Marines taught you well, put on the damn gloves, Frank. You want to learn regulation boxing then you have to wear the gloves.”

“I should’ve bought a damn book.”

“Like you’d absorb any of it.”

“Good for you. Put on the damn gloves.” Jack groused and hit the punching bag once more before glowering at him.

“Should’ve kept my mouth shut.” Frank grumbled and put on the gloves.

“Come on now, Frank. You used to be so up for it before.”

“I was up for a lot of things.” Frank made an overly lecherous look that had Jack laughing.

“Cool it, Castle.” He got out between guffaws.

“Right, after you’re the one that said I was getting soft again so come on.” Frank pumped his fists together.

“I did not say you were getting soft. I said you were getting fat. Big difference.”

“I’m not fat.” Frank said petulantly but knew Jack was kidding.

“Yet.”

“Well, regulation boxing. How do we start?” Jack grinned and called him over to him. ‘Real’ boxing wasn’t as fun as their sparring, but it was good to get back into things with Jack. It made him long for sparring later in the night and the kid in the corner insulting him but he’d take this too.

--

Things slowly fell into place again.

He rebuilt a life, a real life. He maintained his weapon stash. Something had him keep it. It kept telling him to not let it go yet.

Monotony began to fill the void he had fought so hard against with the promise of violence - church, volunteering, friendship with Curtis and Jack, days with Matty. It didn’t feel meaningless.

It still wasn’t easy though.

Max ended up adopted by someone who had seen him with Frank and Matt. The dog’s departure left them gutted but happy.

Jack and Frank were still them, just a little bit different than last time.

Matt still had issues with his senses. That was a pressing issue most days.

--

“Sometimes I think I made the wrong decision.” Jack said as he set the plate down in the sink. Frank frowned and glanced at Jack.

“What?” He asked cautiously as he stood up and held his own plate. Jack turned to him and there was no hostility in his expression. He waved between the two of them.

“This. We keep doing this. Playing house.” He said in a passive tone. “We’re supposed to be exes but we’ve started living together on the weekend. We’ve slept in the same bed when we do it.”
“We didn’t have sex.” Jack laughed.

“No, we didn’t but that’s not the point and you know it.”

“Yeah, well I can head out if you’d like.” He felt awkward. He’d noticed it too and like it. He wasn’t going to push and thought their first choice was probably best. Matt needed them but he also missed Jack.

Jack didn’t jump on the idea instead he walked over, took the plate from Frank and said, “I think we should try again.” as he headed to the sink again. Frank was surprised and hesitated.

“You sure?” He wanted it. Was it a good idea? It wasn’t a good idea. “I don’t know if-if I’ll need to-my guns.” He stuttered. Jack nodded. He seemed to understand.

“Are you planning on doing that for good? I know why you did it, Frank. After you helped us, I can’t deny you probably know what you’re doing.”

“No. I haven’t picked up since either. Just haven’t had the time. It hasn’t seemed right.” Vengeance would always be a thing he’d turn to but right now this was important, the dead waited.

“But you want to.” It wasn’t a question. Frank took a breath. “Keep us safe, Frank.” Jack added and walked over to him. “I trust you.” It wasn’t a demand he didn't do it but it wasn’t permission. It wasn’t anything. It was choice.

Jack kissed him. A slow soft thing that was barely a kiss. A juxtaposition in his mind came forth, violence and mundanity, leading to his hesitation.

“Ah.” Jack uttered as he pulled back. Disappointed.

Frank grabbed him by the back of his head and pulled him forward. Their lips would bruise more from the force of the impact than the quality. Jack grunted in both pain and surprised but returned it, a tension fading from him.

“I love you.” Jack said against him.

“I love you too.” Frank growled.

“We’ll go slow again.” Jack said.

“I don’t think we ever went slow.” Frank said and picked up the other man. Jack looked surprised. Frank doubts he’d ever been picked up like this as an adult.

“Frank-” Frank pushed Jack against the wall, unsurprised the other man lined up with him just right. Jack’s eyes were dark and he looked like everything he’d tried to forget. He’d missed this.

“But I’ll definitely try.” Frank set the other man down. “I’ll go as slow as we need.” Jack smiled.

“That was pretty corny.”

“But it worked.” Jack snorted a laugh.

“It did.”

“Hope you didn’t mind me picking you up.”

“Nope.” Jack said. “I definitely liked it. We’ll have to explore that later.”
“Yes, but much much later. First- Will you go out with me Jack Murdock?”

“Depends on where. Sometimes a nice beer at home is good.”

“I’m sure I can work with that.” Frank replied and started to laugh. Jack joined him.

End Notes

Please review. Let me know what you think!

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